Wait...Why do We Do That?

Jayanti Roy and Marx Gomez-Liendo

De Anza College

Social Sciences





An everyday scene of caregiving, housing, work, and public space invites us to connect personal routines with wider social structures, inequalities, and cultural expectations. That is what sociological imagination is all about. (CC BY 4.0; Jayanti Roy)

Wait...Why do We Do That?

An Understanding of Sociology

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Program Page

De Anza College sits in the heart of Silicon Valley, where innovation and opportunity are part of daily life, and also has one of the highest costs of living in the country. For our students, that makes every dollar count, and the price of a textbook can be the difference between staying enrolled or dropping a class. Our Zero Textbook Cost (ZTC) program closes that gap by giving students full access to high-quality, faculty-created course materials at no cost from the first day of class.

De Anza is proud of its diverse student community, and we hold our ZTC materials to the same standard of excellence that defines the college. Faculty across departments write, adapt, and review these resources themselves, keeping them accurate, current, and grounded in the perspectives of the students who use them, with accessibility and inclusive design built in from the start.

This program reflects the time and care our faculty invest in their students. If you have questions, feedback, or come across any issues with a ZTC resource, contact De Anza College's ZTC Grants Coordinator, Shagun Kaur.

Learn more about De Anza ZTC Program [www.deanza.edu/academic-services/oer/]

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Glossary

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Accessibility Statement

Accessibility

De Anza College is dedicated to creating learning materials that are accessible and benefit all students. Our materials follow the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 Level AA. Our authors and contracted accessibility specialists checked all resources using this ASCCC OERI checklist, the accessibility tool in LibreTexts, WAVE, JAWS, and other more detailed checks for complex materials such as interactive components.

We selected LibreTexts as our preferred platform because of its commitment to accessibility. In addition to the platform's inherent accessibility, we collaborated with the LibreTexts team to fix any accessibility issues we found.

Our Accessibility Review Process

Accessibility was built into the resource as it was written. This resource went through the following stages of review:

1. **Template check.** The project coordinator and instructional designers checked the first chapter for accessibility as a model to ensure later chapters meet accessibility standards.
2. **Progress checks.** The manuscript was checked at approximately 40%, 60%, and 80% completion to catch and correct accessibility issues in production.
3. **Specialist review.** Once the manuscript was complete, an accessibility expert conducted an accessibility check.
4. **Remediation.** The author and the project manager who conducted the earlier progress checks worked together to remediate the issues identified by the accessibility expert.
5. **Final check.** The resource underwent another full check by the accessibility expert before the book was deemed ready for publication.

This process combines ongoing checks during writing with a final specialist review, so issues are caught early and confirmed fixed before publication.

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- The device, browser, and any assistive technology you were using (e.g., Windows 11, Google Chrome, JAWS screen reader)

Contact us: De Anza ZTC team

This statement was last updated August 2026

This resource was project-managed by **Shagun Kaur**, overseeing scope, budget, and schedule; stakeholder coordination via monthly meetings; training and platform support (LibreTexts, troubleshooting, technical support); QA/accessibility check scheduling; and licensing and copyright governance.

A Note on Known Limitations

No accessibility check is perfect. We've made a genuine, sustained effort to catch and fix issues throughout the writing and review process described above, but some barriers may remain, especially in complex or interactive content. We'd rather be upfront about that than claim a standard of perfection we can't guarantee.

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AI Usage

AI Use in Course Development – Transparency & Standards

As part of the development process for this sociology textbook and its accompanying course materials, we utilized artificial intelligence (AI) as a supportive educational technology to assist with idea generation, content organization, and early stage drafting. Our use of AI was guided by principles of transparency, academic integrity, accessibility, and human oversight. At no point was AI used as a substitute for faculty expertise, sociological scholarship, or pedagogical decision making.

Specifically, we deployed a custom, equity aware chatbot that was prompt engineered to align with our educational goals and informed by Open Educational Resources (OER), sociological scholarship, and other openly available educational content. The purpose of this tool was to assist with brainstorming, generating potential examples of social phenomena and case studies, identifying organizational structures for units on topics such as socialization, stratification, social institutions, and group behavior, suggesting learning activities that help students apply sociological theories and concepts, and helping authors overcome common challenges associated with drafting and revising educational materials.

The AI's role was limited to ideation and preliminary content generation. All AI generated material underwent extensive review, revision, verification, and editing by the course authors. Faculty members evaluated content for accuracy, clarity, inclusivity, accessibility, relevance, and alignment with sociology course learning outcomes. In many cases, AI generated text served only as a starting point and was substantially modified, expanded, reorganized, or rewritten during the development process to reflect current sociological research and disciplinary standards.

We also recognized that AI systems can reflect biases, inaccuracies, omissions, or outdated information, a concern of particular importance in a discipline like sociology that examines social inequality, power, and representation. For this reason, no content was accepted without human review and independent verification. All factual claims, educational recommendations, examples, and references were evaluated against current sociological evidence, professional standards, and the authors' subject matter expertise. Responsibility for the content ultimately rests with the human authors, not the technology used during development.

Our use of AI mirrors how many professionals increasingly use emerging technologies in education and the workplace: as tools that can enhance efficiency, creativity, and productivity while still requiring critical thinking, ethical judgment, and expert oversight. By incorporating AI transparently and responsibly, we sought not only to improve the development process but also to model thoughtful technology use for sociology students navigating an increasingly digital and AI assisted world, one they will study as part of the very social systems this discipline examines.

Finally, we believe that innovation must be balanced with a commitment to equity and accessibility. Throughout the development process, all content was reviewed to ensure it met accessibility standards and supported diverse learners. AI assisted drafting was only one component of a much larger process that included faculty collaboration, scholarly review, accessibility evaluation, and continuous revision. The result is a resource that reflects both the opportunities offered by emerging technologies and the enduring importance of human expertise in the teaching and learning of sociology.

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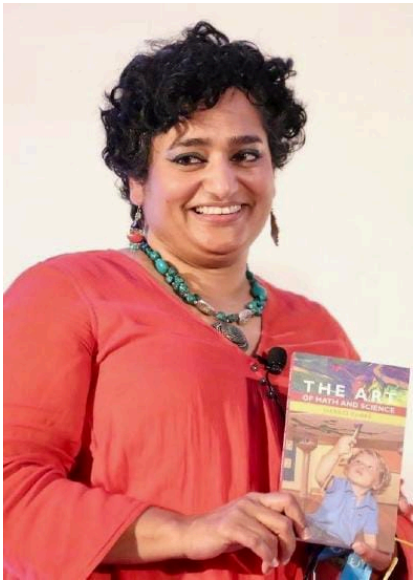
We aligned with evolving IP policy frameworks, especially insights from the U.S. Copyright Office:

- The Office's Part 3 report on AI model training highlights the importance of fair use analysis and restricts reliance on generative AI when it could replicate copyrighted works, our use was limited to non protected, openly licensed sociological materials.
- This cautious approach is consistent with guidance. that encourages transformative use, transparency, and limiting output that could inadvertently mirror protected content.

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About the Authors

Jayanti Roy



Jayanti Roy standing holding a copy of her book, "*The Art of Math and Science*"

Jayanti Tambe Roy is a faculty member in the sociology department at De Anza College. She has just completed her Ph.D in Transformative Social Change from Saybrook University. She holds a master's degree in Human Development, along with a Director-Level California Child Development Permit. She also earned an Executive Certificate in Social Impact from the University of Pennsylvania (UPenn). With over 15 years of experience teaching adults and nearly 40 years in the field of education, Jayanti brings a wealth of expertise in educational leadership and curriculum development. She has held executive director roles at UCLA's Early Learning Program, Pacific Oaks Children's School, and Rainbow School at Stanford University. Her research and passion focus on gender issues, social impact, and transformative social change. She has authored two books that offer creative strategies for engaging young learners, providing valuable guidance to both parents and educators. Jayanti has also contributed significantly to community outreach and research, notably as director of CORE (Community Outreach and Research) at Pacific Oaks College and child family resource coordinator at Stanford University. In these roles, she fostered partnerships to support faculty, students, staff, and the broader community.

Marx Gomez-Liendo



Marx Gomez-Liendo standing in a formal garden near civic buildings in Brussels, Belgium.

Marx Gomez-Liendo is a faculty member in the sociology department at De Anza College. He holds a bachelor's degree in sociology from the Central University of Venezuela (UCV) and a master's in social studies of science from the Venezuelan Institute of Scientific Research (IVIC). His teaching philosophy centers on education as an ongoing dialogue within a learning community where all participants learn from one another. With over 10 years of teaching experience in Venezuela and the United States, Marx integrates his professional expertise, activist experience, and advocacy for open access to knowledge, grounded in his belief that education is a fundamental human right. Beyond teaching, Marx has worked as a policy analyst and research associate, bringing a critical, policy-oriented approach to his pedagogy. His primary research interests span interdisciplinary fields and schools of thought, including political ecology, science and technology studies, and decolonial theory.

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About the Book

Why and How We Did This

Wait...Why Do We Do That? An Understanding of Sociology began with a simple idea: rather than creating an introductory sociology textbook entirely from scratch, why not build on existing work, revise it for our students and our teaching context, and take seriously what the "open" in Open Educational Resources makes possible?

We used *Introduction to Sociology 3e* by OpenStax as the foundation for this textbook. Because the OpenStax text is openly licensed, we were able to take advantage of the freedoms that Creative Commons licensing provides to retain, revise, remix, and reorganize existing educational materials while, importantly, recognizing and properly attributing the work on which ours is built. This book is therefore both an adaptation and a continuation: it preserves much of the intellectual and pedagogical foundation of the original text while reorganizing, revising, and adding material to reflect the way we want to introduce students to sociology.

Some of those changes are structural. We combined Chapters 1 and 2 of the original OpenStax textbook into a single chapter, "Theories and Methods," bringing together the foundations of sociological thinking, theoretical perspectives, and the methods sociologists use to study the social world. We also combined material from Chapters 9, 10, and 18 into "Stratification, Work, and Global Inequality," allowing us to examine economic inequality, labor, social class, and global stratification within a more integrated framework.

Each chapter has also been reorganized around a common structure. Chapters begin with an introduction and a set of learning objectives that identify some of the central questions and concepts students will encounter. Near the beginning of each chapter, we include a brief Why, Who, and How reflection: Why do sociologists study this topic? Who is affected by the social processes we are examining? And how do sociologists investigate and make sense of them? These questions are intentionally simple, but they reflect something central to sociological thinking. Sociology asks us to describe what happens in society, to consider why social patterns exist, whose lives are shaped by them, and how we can study those patterns systematically.

Each chapter also includes case studies and vignettes intended to bring sociological ideas closer to everyday life. Some focus on individuals or communities; others explore contemporary events, institutions, conflicts, or social transformations. These examples do not capture everything a chapter has to say. Instead, they offer a point of entry into some of the larger sociological questions at its core and invite students to connect concepts and theories to situations that people actually experience.

We also revised the book's visual presentation. Most of the original images were replaced with new ones chosen to better complement the revised content, examples, and themes of each chapter. Whenever possible, we selected openly licensed or public-domain materials and provided attribution using the TASL approach—Title, Author, Source, and License. Accessibility was another important consideration throughout the revision process. Images include alternative text, and captions were revised or expanded when additional context could help students understand what an image contributes to the discussion.

Several of the recurring end-of-chapter sections were also reformatted. Key Terms, Short Answer Questions, Further Research, and References were reorganized to create a cleaner and more consistent reading experience. We removed many of the smaller subheadings inherited from the original organization and made additional minor revisions throughout the text for clarity, consistency, accessibility, and alignment with the structure of this edition.

A brief note about generative artificial intelligence is also important. Generative AI tools were used during the production of this book, but primarily for mechanical and editorial support tasks. For example, they assisted with reorganizing reference lists alphabetically after section subheadings were removed, supported some accessibility work such as drafting alternative text and, in some cases, captions, and helped standardize the structure and wording of chapter introductions. That standardization was intentional: we wanted students to encounter a familiar framework as they moved from one chapter to another.

Generative AI did not determine the scholarly direction of this adaptation. Responsibility for reviewing the material, deciding what needed to be changed, selecting and developing case studies, identifying what to retain or remove from the source material, checking the accuracy and appropriateness of revisions, and making the broader pedagogical and scholarly decisions behind this textbook remains entirely ours. AI tools assisted with parts of the production process; they did not replace the intellectual, editorial, or teaching work involved in creating the book. And, in that sense, neither could this textbook exist without the work that came before it.

A Note of Gratitude

The OpenStax authors, editors, researchers, educators, and contributors whose work provided the foundation for this adaptation made possible much of what appears here. Their choices about concepts, theories, examples, organization, scholarship, and pedagogy created something on which others could continue building. One of the things we value most about Open Education in general, and Open Educational Resources in particular, is precisely this possibility. Knowledge does not emerge from nowhere, and educational materials do not have to remain frozen once they are published. Open licensing allows us to build on what already exists, acknowledge those previous efforts, adapt materials to new contexts and students, and continue nurturing the social production of knowledge.

We also want to offer a very special note of appreciation to Shagun Kaur, ZTC Grants Coordinator at De Anza College. So much of the work behind an open textbook happens quietly and often remains invisible once the finished book reaches students. Shagun, thank you for having faith in us, for trusting us to do this work, and for your understanding, guidance, and support throughout our sociology OER projects. We know how much work goes into producing even one textbook, and it is difficult to imagine how many hours you have devoted to coordinating and supporting the many open textbook projects across our campus. With every book that is published, there is a little bit of you in the background—with the cape and magic wand temporarily set aside—helping make it possible. This work is meaningful for De Anza students, and we are grateful to have been trusted to be part of it and for everything we continue learning through the process. We are also grateful to Kim Saccio for her careful accessibility review and for helping us identify and address issues that made this book more accessible and usable for our students.

There is something very sociological about this process. Sociology itself is a collective intellectual project. The concepts you will encounter in these pages come from generations of scholars attempting to understand societies very different from, and sometimes surprisingly similar to, our own. Contemporary sociologists continue questioning, revising, challenging, and expanding those ideas. Students enter that conversation as well. Every time we ask why something that appears “normal” exists, why people experience society differently, how institutions shape our opportunities, or how our individual biographies connect to larger histories and social structures, we are participating in that same process of inquiry.

That brings us back to the title of this book: *Wait…Why do We Do That?* The question is intentionally playful, but it captures an important sociological impulse. Much of everyday life becomes familiar enough that we stop asking why it works the way it does. We follow norms, participate in institutions, occupy social roles, reproduce traditions, use technologies, encounter inequalities, form relationships, and make countless decisions within social worlds that existed before us and that we continually help recreate. Sociology asks us to make the familiar unfamiliar—to pause, look again, and wonder how things came to be this way and whether they could be otherwise.

So, in a way, this About the Book page is also our answer to the why and how behind this project. We revised, remixed, reorganized, and expanded this textbook because we wanted to create something meaningful and accessible for you, our dearest students, while remaining part of a larger community of educators and scholars who share and build knowledge together.

Sociology is a scientific discipline, but we also hope you come to see it as something more: a way of moving through the world with greater awareness of ourselves, the people around us, the communities we belong to, and the world we all inhabit. If this book encourages you to occasionally stop and ask, *“Wait…why do we do that?”*—and then gives you some sociological tools to begin answering the question—it will have accomplished much of what we hoped it would do.

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1: THEORIES AND METHODS

Introduction

Sociology begins with a simple but powerful idea: our personal experiences are connected to the larger social world. The choices we make, the opportunities we have, the identities we develop, and the challenges we face are shaped not only by individual decisions but also by families, schools, workplaces, governments, media, cultures, economies, and systems of inequality. Learning sociology means learning to see these connections. It invites us to move beyond "common sense" explanations and ask deeper questions about how society is organized, who benefits from that organization, and how social life changes over time.

This chapter introduces sociology as both a way of seeing and a way of studying society. You will learn how sociologists use the sociological imagination to connect personal troubles with public issues, how major theoretical perspectives help explain social patterns, and how research methods allow sociologists to gather evidence about the social world. Rather than treating sociology as a collection of opinions about society, this chapter presents it as an evidence-based discipline that uses theory, research, and ethical inquiry to better understand human behavior, social institutions, inequality, and change.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- Define sociology and explain how it differs from individualistic or "common sense" explanations of human behavior.
- Describe the sociological imagination and apply it to examples from everyday life.
- Compare major sociological perspectives, including structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism.
- Identify common sociological research methods and explain how they help sociologists study society systematically.
- Evaluate why ethical considerations are important when conducting sociological research with individuals, groups, and communities.

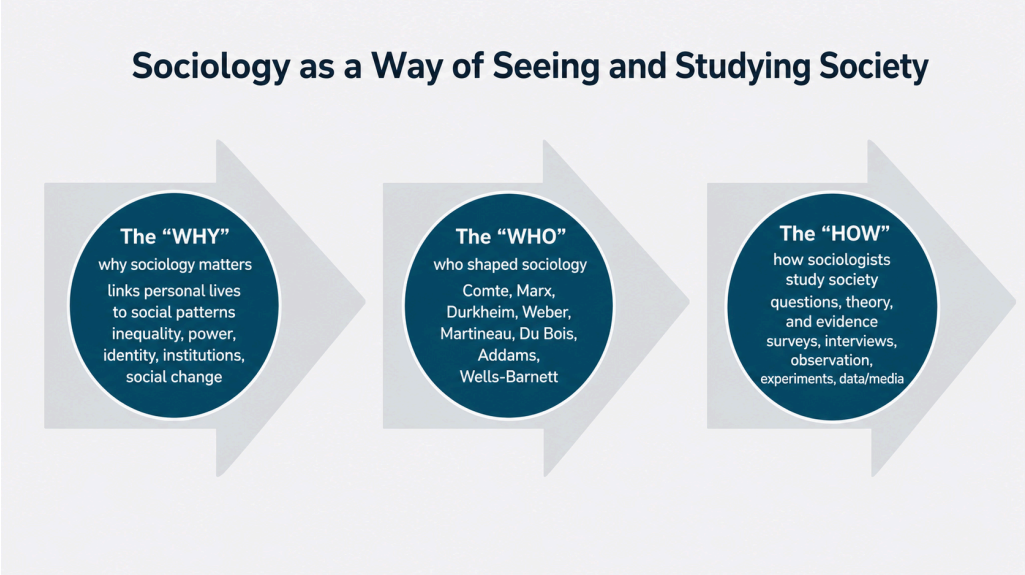


Figure 1.1: Sociology helps us see how individual experiences connect to broader social patterns, how major thinkers shaped the field, and how sociologists use systematic methods to study society. (Marx Gomez-Liendo via ChatGPT). Access alternative description for Figure 1.1.

Why, Who, and How

This chapter asks why sociology matters, how sociologists study society, and who has contributed to sociological thinking.

Sociology matters because it helps us understand the connections between individual experiences and broader social patterns, especially in relation to inequality, power, identity, institutions, and social change. Sociologists study society by asking careful questions, using theories to guide their analysis, and gathering evidence through methods such as surveys, interviews, observation, experiments, and analysis of existing data or media. The chapter also introduces some of the thinkers who helped shape sociology, including classical figures such as Auguste Comte, Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, and Max Weber, while also emphasizing the contributions of scholars such as Harriet Martineau, W. E. B. Du Bois, Jane Addams, and Ida B. Wells-Barnett, whose work reminds us that sociology has always been connected to public debate, social justice, and efforts to understand and transform society.

1.1: Case Study and Vignette

1.2: What Is Sociology?

1.3: The Development of Sociology

1.4: Major Theoretical Perspectives

1.5: Approaches to Sociological Research

1.6: Research Methods in Sociology

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1.1: Case Study and Vignette

The Train Station as a Social World

At first glance, a busy commuter train station may seem like one of the most individualized places in modern life. Thousands of people move quickly through doors, platforms, tunnels, stairways, and escalators, each focused on getting somewhere else. During rush hour, the station can feel like a balloon being pumped too full: people cluster in bottlenecks, then spill into corridors, trains, and exits. Walking against the crowd can be difficult, and cutting across a stream of commuters can feel almost risky. Everything seems fast, crowded, and practical.

But from a sociological perspective, this apparently individualized space is also deeply social. Even strangers often move in patterned ways. Regular commuters may use the same doors, stand in the same places, follow the same routes, and recognize familiar faces without ever learning one another's names. In some of the world's busiest stations, such as Tokyo's Shinjuku Station, millions of passengers pass through each day, making the station an especially vivid example of how large numbers of strangers can still produce social order.

Morning Rush Hour

Imagine arriving at a major train station at 8:15 a.m. The platform is crowded, but people do not move randomly. Some stand to the side of the escalator while others walk. A person slowing down to check their phone is quietly avoided by others. A commuter hears an announcement and immediately changes direction, and several people follow. Someone holds a door for a person rushing behind them, but only for a second. Another person talks loudly on speakerphone, and nearby passengers respond with annoyed looks rather than direct confrontation.

None of these rules are posted on the wall. Most people were never formally taught them. Yet the crowd still follows a set of informal expectations about speed, space, politeness, risk, and cooperation. The station becomes more than a place of transportation. It becomes a small social world.

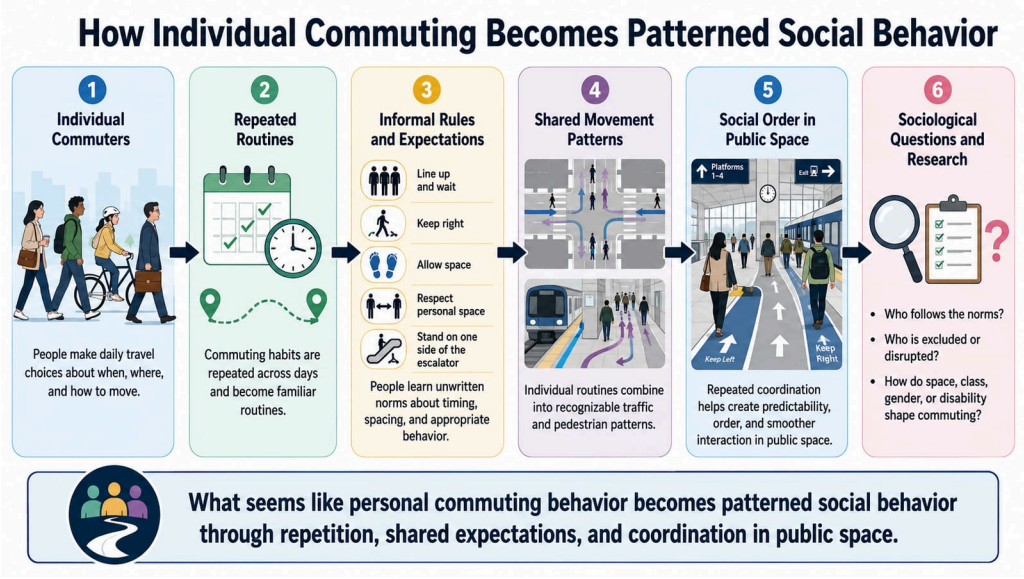


Figure 1.1.1: Individual commuting choices become patterned social behavior through repetition, informal norms, shared movement patterns, and coordination in public space. (Marx Gomez-Liendo via ChatGPT; Access alternative description for Figure 1.1.1.)

Introducing Sociology

A train station is useful for introducing sociology because it shows that society exists not only in formal institutions such as

schools, governments, and workplaces, but also in everyday interactions. Commuters participate in unwritten customs: which side to walk on, how close to stand to strangers, when to make eye contact, when to offer help, and when to avoid conflict. These customs may vary by city, country, class position, age, disability, gender, and access to transportation. What looks like ordinary commuting can therefore reveal larger social patterns involving culture, inequality, infrastructure, work schedules, urban planning, public safety, and social trust.

Sociologists might study a train station in many different ways. A symbolic interactionist might observe how commuters use gestures, glances, silence, and body language to avoid collisions and negotiate space. A conflict theorist might ask who has reliable access to public transportation, who is policed or treated as suspicious in transit spaces, and whose neighborhoods receive better service. A structural functionalist might examine how transportation systems help cities operate by moving workers, students, consumers, and families across urban space. Each perspective asks different questions, but all begin with the same sociological insight: individual behavior is connected to broader social organization.

This is also where sociological research becomes important. Our first impressions of a crowded station may be shaped by personal experience, frustration, habit, or bias. One person may describe the station as efficient, another as stressful, and another as unsafe. Sociologists move beyond first impressions by gathering and analyzing evidence. They may conduct observations of commuter behavior, interview riders about their experiences, survey people about commute time and stress, or use transportation data to study delays, crowding, accessibility, or patterns of movement.

Sociology developed as a discipline by combining careful observation with systematic research. Rather than relying only on personal opinions or assumptions, sociologists collect data and use scientific or interpretive methods to better understand social life. In some studies, researchers use quantitative data and statistical analysis. In others, they use interviews, field notes, historical records, or visual and textual materials. In all cases, sociological research asks us to slow down and examine how everyday life is shaped by patterns that may not be immediately visible.

For example, researchers studying the relationship between COVID-19 restrictions and crime rates in Sweden used police-reported crime data to compare observed crime levels with expected levels. They found that total crime, assaults, pickpocketing, and burglary decreased significantly, while some other categories, such as personal robbery and narcotics crime, did not show the same kind of change. This study illustrates how sociologists and criminologists can use empirical evidence to examine how major social disruptions affect behavior, institutions, and public life.

The same general lesson applies to the train station. A crowded platform is not just a crowded platform. It is a place where social norms, institutions, technologies, inequalities, and individual choices come together. By studying these everyday spaces, sociologists can produce knowledge that matters beyond the classroom. Their findings can influence public policy, transportation planning, workplace practices, health research, safety interventions, and debates about how people share public space. Sociology helps us see that even when people appear to be acting alone, they are often participating in social patterns larger than themselves.

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1.2: What Is Sociology?

What Are Society and Culture?

Sociology is the scientific and systematic study of groups and group interactions, societies and social interactions, from small and personal groups to very large groups. A group of people who live in a defined geographic area, who interact with one another, and who share a common culture is what sociologists call a society.

Sociologists study all aspects and levels of society. Sociologists working from the micro-level study small groups and individual interactions, while those using macro-level analysis look at trends among and between large groups and societies. For example, a micro-level study might look at the accepted rules of conversation in various groups such as among teenagers or business professionals. In contrast, a macro-level analysis might research the ways that language use has changed over time or in social media outlets.

The term culture refers to the group's shared practices, values, and beliefs. Culture encompasses a group's way of life, from routine, everyday interactions to the most important parts of group members' lives. It includes everything produced by a society, including all the social rules.

Sociologists often study culture using the sociological imagination, which pioneer sociologist C. Wright Mills described as an awareness of the relationship between a person's behavior and experience and the wider culture that shaped the person's choices and perceptions. It's a way of seeing our own and other people's behavior in relationship to history and social structure (1959). One illustration of this is a person's decision to marry. In the United States, this choice is heavily influenced by individual feelings. However, the social acceptability of marriage relative to the person's circumstances also plays a part.

Remember, though, that culture is a product of the people in a society. Sociologists take care not to treat the concept of "culture" as though it were alive and real. The error of treating an abstract concept as though it has a real, material existence is known as reification (Sahn, 2013).

Studying Patterns: How Sociologists View Society

All sociologists are interested in the experiences of individuals and how those experiences are shaped by interactions with social groups and society. To a sociologist, the personal decisions an individual makes do not exist in a vacuum. Cultural patterns, social forces and influences put pressure on people to select one choice over another. Sociologists try to identify these general patterns by examining the behavior of large groups of people living in the same society and experiencing the same societal pressures.

Consider the changes in U.S. families. The "typical" family in past decades consisted of married parents living in a home with their unmarried children. Today, the percent of unmarried couples, same-sex couples, single-parent and single-adult households is increasing, as well as is the number of expanded households, in which extended family members such as grandparents, cousins, or adult children live together in the family home. While 15 million mothers still make up the majority of single parents, 3.5 million fathers are also raising their children alone (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Increasingly, single people and cohabitating couples are choosing to raise children outside of marriage through surrogates or adoption.



Figure 1.2.1: Modern U.S. families are diverse, socially recognized, and shaped by changing laws, public attitudes, and struggles over equality. Family is a social institution connected to rights, belonging, and public recognition. (Marriage Equality USA - Seattle Rally by Richard Wood via Flickr is licensed under CC BY 4.0)

Some sociologists study social facts—the laws, morals, values, religious beliefs, customs, fashions, rituals, and cultural rules that govern social life—that may contribute to these changes in the family. Do people in the United States view marriage and family differently over the years? Do they view them differently than Peruvians? Do employment and economic conditions play a role in families? Other sociologists are studying the consequences of these new patterns, such as the ways children influence and are influenced by them and/or the changing needs for education, housing, and healthcare.

Sociologists identify and study patterns related to all kinds of contemporary social issues. The “Stop and Frisk” policy, the emergence of new political factions, how Twitter influences everyday communication—these are all examples of topics that sociologists might explore.

Studying Part and Whole: How Sociologists View Social Structures

A key component of the sociological perspective is the idea that the individual and society are inseparable. It is impossible to study one without the other. German sociologist Norbert Elias called the process of simultaneously analyzing the behavior of individuals and the society that shapes that behavior figuration.

Consider religion. While people experience religion in a distinctly individual manner, religion exists in a larger social context as a social institution. For instance, an individual’s religious practice may be influenced by what government dictates, holidays, teachers, places of worship, rituals, and so on. These influences underscore the important relationship between individual practices of religion and social pressures that influence that religious experience (Elias, 1978). In simpler terms, figuration means that as one analyzes the social institutions in a society, the individuals using that institution in any fashion need to be ‘figured’ in to the analysis.

Sociology in the Real World: Individual-Society Connections

When sociologist Nathan Kierns spoke to his friend Ashley (a pseudonym) about the move she and her partner had made from an urban center to a small Midwestern town, he was curious about how the social pressures placed on a lesbian couple differed from one community to the other. Ashley said that in the city they had been accustomed to getting looks and hearing comments when she and her partner walked hand in hand. Otherwise, she felt that they were at least being tolerated. There had been little to no outright discrimination.

Things changed when they moved to the small town for her partner’s job. For the first time, Ashley found herself experiencing direct discrimination because of her sexual orientation. Some of it was particularly hurtful. Landlords would not rent to them. Ashley, who is a highly trained professional, had a great deal of difficulty finding a new job.

When Nathan asked Ashley if she and her partner became discouraged or bitter about this new situation, Ashley said that rather than letting it get to them, they decided to do something about it. Ashley approached groups at a local college and several churches in the area. Together they decided to form the town's first Gay-Straight Alliance.

The alliance has worked successfully to educate their community about same-sex couples. It also worked to raise awareness about the kinds of discrimination that Ashley and her partner experienced in the town and how those could be eliminated. The alliance has become a strong advocacy group, and it is working to attain equal rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, or LGBTQ individuals.

Kierns observed that this is an excellent example of how negative social forces can result in a positive response from individuals to bring about social change (Kierns, 2011).

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1.3: The Development of Sociology

Overview

For millennia, people have been fascinated by the relationships between individuals and societies. Many topics studied by ancient philosophers in their desire to describe an ideal society are still studied in modern sociology, including theories of social conflict, economics, social cohesion, and power in a continued attempt to describe an ideal society (Hannoum, 2003). Although we are more familiar with western philosophers like Plato and his student, Aristotle, eastern philosophers also thought about social issues.

Until recently, we have very few texts that are non-religious in nature that theorize about social life. From 4th century through the 19th century, the Catholic Church was the seat of power from today's Turkey in the east to western and northern Europe, including the British Isles. Only monks who were charged with rewriting holy texts by hand and the aristocracy were literate. Moreover, the Church consolidated power. In the year 800, Pope Leo III named Charlemagne, the king of Francia (today's France, Belgium, Netherlands and Germany) emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, giving one individual control over most of Europe. Doing so gave the Catholic Church the power to maintain its own traditions safeguard them from the influence of people practicing other religions. If any social patterns challenged any belief of the Church, those practitioners were massacred, burned at the stake, or labeled heretics. As a result, the records that we have are extremely subjective and do not offer an unbiased view of social practice.

In the 13th century, Ma Tuan-Lin, a Chinese historian, was the first to record, in his seminal encyclopedia titled *General Study of Literary Remains*, the social dynamics underlying and generating historical development.

In the 14th century, the Tunisian historian Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) set the foundation for both modern sociology and economics. Khaldun proposed a theory of social conflict and provided a comparison of nomadic and sedentary life, an analysis of political economy, and a study connecting a tribe's social cohesion to its capacity for power (Hannoum, 2003). Khaldun often challenged authorities. As sociologists continue to study and report on social issues and problems, they often find themselves in the center of controversy.

From 1347 to 1522, the bubonic plague ravaged Europe, killing up to 35% of population (Armstrong, 2019). The plague dealt a major blow to the credibility of the Catholic Church. Out of this chaos emerged the the work of Copernicus, Galileo, Leonardo, Newton, Linnaeus, and other philosophers whose work sometimes contradicted church teachings. Events once held to be the product of the divine hand could be analyzed by human reason and observation and could be explained by scientific, testable, and retestable hypotheses. As literacy spread through conquests and colonization, more records and literature became available for sociologists and historians to put social puzzles together.

In the 18th century, Enlightenment philosophers developed general principles that could be used to explain social life. Thinkers such as John Locke, François-Marie Arouet (Voltaire), Immanuel Kant, and Thomas Hobbes responded to what they saw as social ills by writing on topics that they hoped would lead to social reform. Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797) wrote about women's conditions in society. Like Harriet Martineau and Jane Addams, her works were long ignored by the male academic structure, but since the 1970s, Wollstonecraft has been widely considered the first feminist thinker of consequence. Ideas about economic systems, the family, health and hygiene, national offense and defense, were among the many concerns of social life.

The early 19th century saw great changes with the Industrial Revolution, increased mobility, and new kinds of employment. It was also a period of increased trade, travel, and globalization that exposed many people — for the first time—to societies and cultures other than their own. Millions of people moved into cities and many people turned away from their traditional religious beliefs. Ideas spread rapidly, groups were created, political decisions became public decisions. Among a new generation of philosophers, there were some who believed they could make sense of it all.

The following list of sociologists is not exhaustive.

Creating a Discipline: European Theorists

Auguste Comte (1798 – 1857)

The term sociology was first coined in 1780 by the French essayist Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès (1748–1836) in an unpublished manuscript (Fauré et al. 1999). In 1838, the term was reintroduced by Auguste Comte (1798–1857). Comte originally studied to be an engineer, but later became a pupil of social philosopher Claude Henri de Rouvroy Comte de Saint-Simon (1760–1825). They both thought that social scientists could study society using the same scientific methods utilized in natural sciences. Comte also believed in the potential of social scientists to work toward the betterment of society. He held that once scholars identified the laws that governed society, sociologists could address problems such as poor education and poverty (Abercrombie et al. 2000).

Comte named the scientific study of social patterns positivism. He described his philosophy in a series of books called *The Course in Positive Philosophy* (1830–1842) and *A General View of Positivism* (1848). He believed that revealing the laws by which societies and individuals interact would usher in a new "positivist" age of history. While the field and its terminology have grown, sociologists still believe in the positive impact of their work.

Harriet Martineau (1802 – 1876)

Harriet Martineau introduced sociology to English speaking scholars through her translation of Comte's writing from French to English. She was an early analyst of social practices, including economics, social class, religion, suicide, government, and women's rights. Her career began with *Illustrations of Political Economy*, a work educating ordinary people about the principles of economics (Johnson, 2003). She later developed the first systematic methodological international comparisons of social institutions in two of her most famous sociological works: *Society in America* (1837) and *Retrospect of Western Travel* (1838).

Martineau found the workings of capitalism at odds with the professed moral principles of people in the United States. She pointed out the faults with the free enterprise system in which workers were exploited and impoverished while business owners became wealthy. She further noted that the belief that all are created equal was inconsistent with the lack of women's rights. Much like Mary Wollstonecraft, Martineau was often discounted in her own time because academic sociology was a male-dominated profession.

Karl Marx (1818-1883)

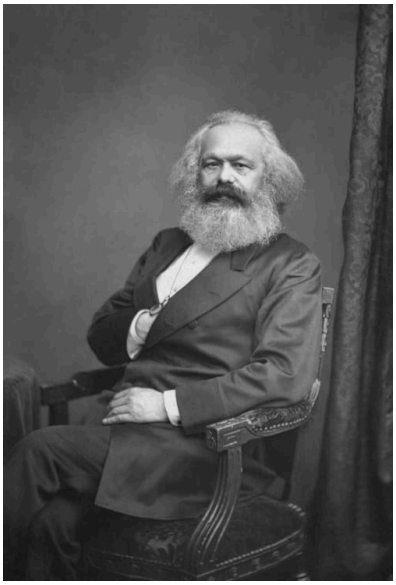


Figure 1.3.1: Karl Marx, German philosopher, economist, and social theorist whose work examined capitalism, class conflict, inequality, and the relationship between economic systems and social change. (Karl Marx by John Jabez Edwin Mayall via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under PDM 1.0)

Karl Marx was a German philosopher and economist. In 1848, he and Friedrich Engels (1820–1895) coauthored the *Communist Manifesto*. This book is one of the most influential political manuscripts in history. It also presents Marx's theory of society, which

differed from what Comte proposed.

Marx rejected Comte's positivism. He believed that societies grew and changed as a result of the struggles of different social classes over the means of production. At the time he was developing his theories, the Industrial Revolution and the rise of capitalism led to great disparities in wealth between the owners of the factories and workers. Capitalism, an economic system characterized by private or corporate ownership of goods and the means to produce them, had developed in many nations.

Marx predicted that inequalities of capitalism would become so extreme that workers would eventually revolt. This would lead to the collapse of capitalism, which would be replaced by communism. Communism is an economic system under which there is no private or corporate ownership: everything is owned communally and distributed as needed. Marx believed that communism was a more equitable system than capitalism.

While his economic predictions did not materialize in the time frame he predicted, Marx's idea that social conflict leads to change in society is still one of the major theories used in modern sociology.

Herbert Spencer (1820–1903)

In 1873, the English philosopher Herbert Spencer published *The Study of Sociology*, the first book with the term "sociology" in the title. Spencer rejected much of Comte's philosophy as well as Marx's theory of class struggle and his support of communism. Instead, he favored a form of government that allowed market forces to control capitalism. His work influenced many early sociologists including Émile Durkheim (1858–1917). Spencer, using Charles Darwin's work as a comparison said, "This survival of the fittest, which I have here sought to express in mechanical terms, is that which Mr. Darwin has called 'natural selection,' or the preservation of favoured races in the struggle for life." (Spencer, 1864) The statement is often misinterpreted and adopted by those who believe in the superiority of one race over another.

Georg Simmel (1858–1918)

Georg Simmel was a German art critic who wrote widely on social and political issues as well. Simmel took an anti-positivism stance and addressed topics such as social conflict, the function of money, individual identity in city life, and the European fear of outsiders (Stapley 2010). Much of his work focused on micro-level theories and analyzed the dynamics of two-person and three-person groups. His work also emphasized individual culture as the creative capacities of individuals (Ritzer and Goodman 2004).

Émile Durkheim (1858–1917)

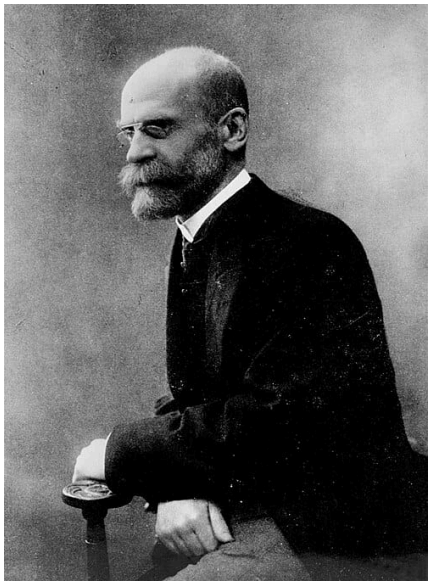


Figure 1.3.2: Émile Durkheim, French sociologist and a foundational figure in the development of sociology as an academic discipline. (Émile Durkheim by unknown author via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under PDM 1.0)

Émile Durkheim helped establish sociology as a formal academic discipline by establishing the first European department of sociology at the University of Bordeaux in 1895 and by publishing his *Rules of the Sociological Method* in 1895. In *Division of*

Labour in Society (1893), Durkheim further laid out his theory on how societies transformed from a primitive state into a capitalist, industrial society. According to Durkheim, people rise to their proper levels in society based on merit.

Durkheim believed that sociologists could study objective social facts (Poggi, 2000). He also believed that through such studies it would be possible to determine if a society was "healthy" or "pathological." Healthy societies were stable while pathological societies experienced a breakdown in social norms.

In 1897, Durkheim attempted to demonstrate the effectiveness of his rules of social research when he published a work titled *Suicide*. Durkheim examined suicide statistics in different police districts to research differences between Catholic and Protestant communities. He attributed the differences to socio-religious forces rather than to individual or psychological causes.

Max Weber (1864–1920)



Figure 1.3.3: Max Weber, German sociologist and political economist whose work examined authority, bureaucracy, social action, and the relationship between culture and economic life. (Max Weber by Ernst Gottmann via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under PDM 1.0)

Prominent sociologist Max Weber established a sociology department in Germany at the Ludwig Maximilians University of Munich in 1919. Weber wrote on many topics related to sociology including political change in Russia and social forces that affect factory workers. He is known best for his 1904 book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. The theory that Weber sets forth in this book is still controversial. Some believe that Weber argued that the beliefs of many Protestants, especially Calvinists, led to the rise of capitalism. Others interpret it as simply claiming that the ideologies of capitalism and Protestantism are complementary.

Weber believed that it was difficult, if not impossible, to use standard scientific methods to accurately predict the behavior of groups as some sociologists hoped to do. Weber argued that the influence of culture on human behavior had to be taken into account. This even applied to the researchers themselves, who should be aware of how their own cultural biases could influence their research. To deal with this problem, Weber and Wilhelm Dilthey introduced the concept of *verstehen*, a German word that means to understand in a deep way. In seeking *verstehen*, outside observers of a social world—an entire culture or a small setting—attempt to understand it from an insider's point of view.

In *The Nature of Social Action*, Weber described sociology as striving to "... interpret the meaning of social action and thereby give a causal explanation of the way in which action proceeds and the effects it produces." He and other like-minded sociologists proposed a philosophy of anti-positivism whereby social researchers would strive for subjectivity as they worked to represent social processes, cultural norms, and societal values. This approach led to some research methods whose aim was not to generalize or predict (traditional in science), but to systematically gain an in-depth understanding of social worlds.

The different approaches to research based on positivism or anti-positivism are often considered the foundation for the differences found today between quantitative sociology and qualitative sociology. Quantitative sociology uses statistical methods such as surveys with large numbers of participants. Researchers analyze data using statistical techniques to see if they can uncover patterns of human behavior. Qualitative sociology seeks to understand human behavior by learning about it through in-

depth interviews, focus groups, and analysis of content sources (like books, magazines, journals, and popular media).

Social Policy and Debate: Should We Raise the Minimum Wage?

During his hard-fought 2020 campaign, President Joe Biden promised Americans that he would raise the federal minimum wage. Opponents of raising the minimum wage argue that some workers would get larger paychecks while others would lose their jobs, and companies would be less likely to hire new workers because of the increased cost of paying them. Biden and other proponents of raising the minimum wage contend that some job loss would be greatly offset by the positive effects on the standard of living of low-wage workers and reducing the income gap between the rich and poor.

Sociologists may consider the minimum wage issue from differing perspectives as well. How much of an impact would a minimum wage raise have for a single mother? Some might study the economic effects, such as her ability to pay bills and keep food on the table. Others might look at how reduced economic stress could improve family relationships. Some sociologists might research the impact on the status of small business owners. These could all be examples of public sociology, a branch of sociology that strives to bring sociological dialogue to public forums. The goals of public sociology are to increase understanding of the social factors that underlie social problems and assist in finding solutions. According to Michael Burawoy (2005), the challenge of public sociology is to engage multiple publics in multiple ways.

Applying the Discipline: American Theorists and Practitioners

Ida B. Wells-Barnett (1862–1931)



Figure 1.3.4: Ida B. Wells-Barnett, American journalist, sociologist, and civil rights activist whose research and advocacy exposed lynching, racial violence, and systemic inequality in the United States. (Ida B. Wells-Barnett by Mary Garrity via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under PDM 1.0)

Ida B. Wells-Barnett was a journalist, educator, anti-lynching activist, and one of the most important early contributors to the sociological study of race, violence, and power in the United States. Although she is not always included in traditional lists of early sociologists, her work used evidence, documentation, and public analysis in ways that closely resemble sociological research. After three of her friends were lynched in Memphis in 1892, Wells-Barnett began investigating lynching as a social and political practice rather than as a collection of isolated acts of violence.

In works such as *Southern Horrors* and *A Red Record*, Wells-Barnett collected reports, statistics, and public records to challenge the racist claim that lynching was a response to crime. Instead, she showed that lynching functioned as a tool of racial terror, political intimidation, economic control, and social domination. Her work connected individual acts of violence to larger structures of white supremacy, law, gender, and economic competition. In this sense, Wells-Barnett's work anticipated later sociological approaches to race, state violence, intersectionality, and public sociology. Like Du Bois, she used empirical evidence to challenge

racist “common sense” and to show that social research could be a tool for justice. Wells-Barnett’s *A Red Record* documented lynching through a history and statistical record, making her work an important example of data-based anti-racist research.

W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963)



Figure 1.3.5: W. E. B. Du Bois, American sociologist, historian, and civil rights scholar whose work examined race, inequality, and the social conditions shaping Black life in the United States. (W.E.B. Du Bois by James E. Purdy via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under PDM 1.0)

William Edward Burghardt (W.E.B.) Du Bois, a Harvard-trained historian, pioneered the use of rigorous empirical methodology into sociology. His groundbreaking 1896-1897 study of the African American community in Philadelphia incorporated hundreds of interviews Du Bois conducted in order to document the familial and employment structures and assess the chief challenges of the community. These new, comprehensive research methods stood in stark contrast to the less scientific practices of the time, which Du Bois critiqued as being similar to doing research as if through the window of a moving car. His scientific approach became highly influential to entire schools of sociological study, and is considered a forerunner to contemporary practices. Additionally, Du Bois’ 1899 publication provided empirical evidence to challenge pseudoscientific ideas of biological racism (Morris, 2015; Green & Wortham, 2018), which had been used as justification to oppress people of different races.

Du Bois also played a prominent role in the effort to increase rights for Black people. Concerned at the slow pace of progress and advice from some Black leaders to be more accommodating of racism, Du Bois became a leader in what would later be known as the Niagara Movement. In 1905, he and others drafted a declaration that called for immediate political, economic, and social equality for African Americans. A few years later, he helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and served as its director of publications.

Thorstein Veblen (1857 – 1929)

After a brief stint as an unemployed college graduate, Thorstein Veblen began to study the economy through a social lens, writing about the leisure class, the business class, and other areas that touched on the idea of ‘working’ itself. He researched the chronically unemployed, the currently unemployed, the working classes, and the impact of technology and business within society. Veblen is known as a co-founder of the branch (or school) of institutional economics.

Jane Addams (1860-1935)

Jane Addams founded *Hull House*, a center that served needy immigrants through social and educational programs while providing extensive opportunities for sociological research. Founded in Chicago, Addams worked closely with University of Chicago’s Chicago School of Sociology. This school of thought places much importance on environment in which relationships and behaviors develop. Research conducted at Hull House informed child labor, immigration, health care, and other areas of public policy.

Charles Horton Cooley (1864-1929)

Charles Horton Cooley posited that individuals compare themselves to others in order to check themselves against social standards and remain part of the group. Calling this idea 'the looking-glass self,' Cooley argued that we 'see' ourselves by the reactions of others with whom we interact. If someone reacts positively to our behavior, theoretically we will continue that behavior. He wrote substantially on what he saw as the order of life in *Human Nature and the Social Order* (1902) followed by *Social Organization* in 1909. He was very concerned with the increasing individualism and competitiveness of US society, fearing it would disrupt families as primary groups lost their importance.

George Herbert Mead (1863–1931)

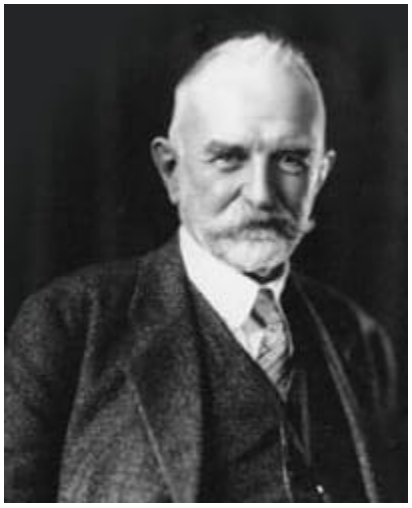


Figure 1.3.6: George Herbert Mead, American philosopher and social theorist whose work on the self, social interaction, and meaning helped shape symbolic interactionism. (George Herbert Mead by unknown via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under PDM 1.0)

George Herbert Mead was a philosopher and sociologist whose work focused on the ways in which the mind and the self were developed as a result of social processes (Cronk, n.d.). He argued that how an individual comes to view himself or herself is based to a very large extent on interactions with others. Though Mead adopted Cooley's concept of 'looking-glasses,' Mead felt that an individual's reaction to a positive or negative reflection depended on who the 'other' was. Individuals that had the greatest impact on a person's life were significant others while generalized others were the organized and generalized attitude of a social group. Mead often shares the title of father of symbolic interactionism with Cooley and Erving Goffman.

Robert E. Park (1864-1944)

Robert E. Park is best known as the founder of social ecology. Attached to the Chicago School, Park focused on how individuals lived within their environment. One of the first sociologists to focus on ethnic minorities, he wrote on the Belgian oppression of the Congolese. When he returned to the US, he and Ernest Burgess researched the inner city to show that no matter who lived there, social chaos was prevalent. As such, it was not the residents who caused the chaos but the environment.

Expanding the Discipline: Global and Contemporary Sociology

Aníbal Quijano (1928–2018)



Figure 1.3.7: Aníbal Quijano, Peruvian sociologist whose work developed the concept of the coloniality of power and examined the enduring relationships among colonialism, race, capitalism, knowledge, and global inequality. (Anibal Quijano by Cancillería del Ecuador via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0)

Aníbal Quijano was a Peruvian sociologist and one of the most influential Latin American social theorists of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. His work contributed to dependency theory, critical development studies, and decolonial thought. Quijano argued that colonialism did not simply end when former colonies became politically independent. Instead, colonial forms of power continued to shape race, labor, knowledge, culture, and global inequality.

Quijano is best known for the concept of the "coloniality of power." This idea helps explain how modern global inequalities are connected to the history of European colonialism and to the classification of people through racial categories. His work challenges sociology to examine how knowledge itself can become Eurocentric, treating European and North American experiences as universal while marginalizing theories and histories from the Global South.

Fatou Sow (1941–)

Fatou Sow is a Senegalese feminist sociologist and one of the major figures in African gender studies. Her work has focused on women, family, gender relations, development, and feminist social science in Africa. She studied sociology in Senegal and France and has taught and conducted research across African, European, and North American academic settings.

Sow helped expand feminist sociology by centering African women's experiences and by challenging the idea that theories of gender developed in Europe or North America could simply be applied everywhere else. Her work reminds students that gender inequality must be studied in relation to colonial history, development, family structures, religion, labor, and political change. She also helped institutionalize gender studies in African social science through her teaching, organizing, and work with research networks.

Chua Beng Huat (1946–)

Chua Beng Huat is a Singaporean sociologist known for his work on urban studies, public housing, political economy, cultural studies, and Asian popular culture. He has taught at the National University of Singapore and Yale-NUS College, and his research has examined how cities, states, markets, and cultural practices shape everyday life in Singapore and across Asia.

Chua's work is especially important for challenging the assumption that concepts developed from European or U.S. experiences automatically explain Asian societies. His studies of housing, consumer culture, communitarian politics, and popular culture show

how sociology can analyze modernity, state power, and identity from within Asian contexts. His work helps students see that globalization does not make all societies the same; instead, global forces are interpreted and reorganized through local histories and institutions.

Patricia Hill Collins (1948–)



Figure 1.3.8: Patricia Hill Collins, American sociologist whose work examines race, gender, class, power, and intersectionality, including the distinctive knowledge produced through Black women's experiences. (Patricia Hill Collins by Valter Campanato via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY 4.0)

Patricia Hill Collins is a major contemporary U.S. sociologist whose work transformed the study of race, gender, class, sexuality, and power. She is especially known for developing Black feminist thought as a sociological perspective that takes seriously the knowledge produced by Black women's lived experiences, activism, families, communities, and intellectual traditions.

One of Collins's most influential concepts is the "matrix of domination," which describes how systems of oppression—such as racism, sexism, class inequality, and heterosexism—work together rather than separately. Her work helps students understand that inequality is intersectional: people experience power and disadvantage through multiple, connected social locations. Collins was also the first African American woman to serve as president of the American Sociological Association.

Duane Champagne (1951–)

Duane Champagne is a Native American sociologist and a citizen of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa from North Dakota. His work focuses on Native nations, social change, cultural continuity, governance, law, and the effects of colonialism on Indigenous communities. He has taught sociology, American Indian studies, and law, and his research helps connect sociology with Indigenous studies and Native nation-building.

Champagne's work is important because it shifts attention away from studying Indigenous peoples only as marginalized populations within the United States. Instead, he emphasizes Native nations as political, cultural, and institutional communities with their own histories, forms of governance, and strategies for survival. His scholarship helps students understand that sociology can examine colonial domination while also recognizing Indigenous sovereignty, resistance, adaptation, and continuity.

Maristella Svampa (1961–)

Maristella Svampa is an Argentine sociologist whose work focuses on social movements, environmental conflict, extractivism, and debates over development in Latin America. She has written extensively about how communities respond to mining, agribusiness, energy projects, and other forms of large-scale resource extraction. Her work is especially useful for connecting sociology to climate change, Indigenous and community resistance, and struggles over land and territory.

Svampa is known for her analysis of "neo-extractivism," a development model based on the intensified extraction of natural

resources for global markets. She argues that extractivism is not only an economic process but also a political and social one, because it affects communities, ecosystems, governments, and ideas about progress. Her work helps students see how environmental issues are also social issues involving power, inequality, and competing visions of the future.

Syed Farid Alatas (1961–)

Syed Farid Alatas is a Malaysian sociologist based at the National University of Singapore. His work focuses on social theory, the sociology of Islam, religion, development, and the critique of Eurocentrism in the social sciences. He is especially known for arguing that sociology should take seriously intellectual traditions from Asia, the Islamic world, and other regions often treated as peripheral to “mainstream” theory.

Alatas has written about “alternative discourses” in Asian social science, calling for approaches that are neither simply Western nor narrowly nationalist. His work encourages sociologists to recover and engage thinkers such as Ibn Khaldun and to question why some theorists become central to the discipline while others are ignored. For students, Alatas’s work shows that sociology is not only about applying established theories but also about asking whose theories count, whose histories matter, and how knowledge can become more global and inclusive.

Sari Hanafi (1962–)



Figure 1.3.9: Sari Hanafi, former president of the International Sociological Association, whose work examines knowledge production, migration, refugee studies, civil society, and the inequalities shaping sociology in the Arab world and globally. (Sari Hanafi by AzzamMTomeh via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0)

Sari Hanafi is a Syrian-Palestinian sociologist based at the American University of Beirut. His work focuses on migration, refugees, knowledge production, civil society, religion, and the role of sociology in the Arab world. He served as president of the International Sociological Association from 2018 to 2023, making him an important figure in global sociology.

Hanafi’s research asks how social science knowledge is produced, circulated, and valued in different regions of the world. He has written about Palestinian refugees, Arab social sciences, and the need for dialogue between different intellectual traditions. His work is useful for showing students that sociology is not only about studying society but also about studying the institutions, languages, and inequalities that shape academic knowledge.

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1.4: Major Theoretical Perspectives

About Theories

Sociologists study social events, interactions, and patterns, and they develop theories to explain why things work as they do. In sociology, a theory is a way to explain different aspects of social interactions and to create a testable proposition, called a hypothesis, about society (Allan 2006).

For example, although suicide is generally considered an individual phenomenon, Émile Durkheim was interested in studying the social factors that affect it. He studied social solidarity, social ties within a group, and hypothesized that differences in suicide rates might be explained by religious differences. Durkheim gathered a large amount of data about Europeans and found that Protestants were more likely to commit suicide than Catholics. His work supports the utility of theory in sociological research.

Theories vary in scope depending on the scale of the issues that they are meant to explain. Macro-level theories relate to large-scale issues and large groups of people, while micro-level theories look at very specific relationships between individuals or small groups. Grand theories attempt to explain large-scale relationships and answer fundamental questions such as why societies form and why they change. Sociological theory is constantly evolving and should never be considered complete. Classic sociological theories are still considered important and current, but new sociological theories build upon the work of their predecessors and add to them (Calhoun, 2002).

In sociology, a few theories provide broad perspectives that help explain many different aspects of social life, and these are called paradigms. Paradigms are philosophical and theoretical frameworks used within a discipline to formulate theories, generalizations, and the experiments performed in support of them. Three paradigms have come to dominate sociological thinking because they provide useful explanations: structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism.

Table 1.4.1 Sociological Theories or Perspectives: Different sociological perspectives enable sociologists to view social issues through a variety of useful lenses.

Sociological Theories/ Paradigms	Level of Analysis	Focus	Analogies	Questions that might be asked
Structural Functionalism	Macro or Mid	The way each part of society functions together to contribute to the functioning of the whole.	How each organ works to keep your body healthy (or not.)	How does education work to transmit culture?
Conflict Theory	Macro	The way inequities and inequalities contribute to social, political, and power differences and how they perpetuate power.	The ones with the most toys wins and they will change the rules to the games to keep winning.	Does education transmit only the values of the most dominant groups?
Symbolic Interactionism	Micro	The way one-on-one interactions and communications behave.	What's it mean to be an X?	How do students react to cultural messages in school?

Functionalism

Functionalism, also called structural-functional theory, sees society as a structure with interrelated parts designed to meet the biological and social needs of the individuals in that society. Functionalism grew out of the writings of English philosopher and biologist, Herbert Spencer, who saw similarities between society and the human body. He argued that just as the various organs of the body work together to keep the body functioning, the various parts of society work together to keep society functioning (Spencer, 1898). The parts of society that Spencer referred to were the social institutions, or patterns of beliefs and behaviors focused on meeting social needs, such as government, education, family, healthcare, religion, and the economy.

Émile Durkheim applied Spencer's theory to explain how societies change and survive over time. Durkheim believed that society is a complex system of interrelated and interdependent parts that work together to maintain stability (Durkheim, 1893), and that

society is held together by shared values, languages, and symbols. He believed that to study society, a sociologist must look beyond individuals to social facts such as laws, morals, values, religious beliefs, customs, fashion, and rituals, which all serve to govern social life (Durkheim, 1895). Alfred Radcliff-Brown (1881–1955) defined the function of any recurrent activity as the part it played in social life as a whole, and therefore the contribution it makes to social stability and continuity (Radcliff-Brown 1952). In a healthy society, all parts work together to maintain stability, a state called dynamic equilibrium by later sociologists such as Parsons (1961).

Durkheim believed that individuals may make up society, but in order to study society, sociologists have to look beyond individuals to social facts. . Each of these social facts serves one or more functions within a society. For example, one function of a society's laws may be to protect society from violence, while another is to punish criminal behavior, while another is to preserve public health.

Another noted structural functionalist, Robert Merton (1910–2003), pointed out that social processes often have many functions. Manifest functions are the consequences of a social process that are sought or anticipated, while latent functions are the unsought consequences of a social process. A manifest function of a college education, for example, includes gaining knowledge, preparing for a career, and finding a good job that utilizes that education. Latent functions of your college years include meeting new people, participating in extracurricular activities, or even finding a spouse or partner. Another latent function of education is creating a hierarchy of employment based on the level of education attained. Latent functions can be beneficial, neutral, or harmful. Social processes that have undesirable consequences for the operation of society are called dysfunctions. In education, examples of dysfunction include getting bad grades, truancy, dropping out, not graduating, and not finding suitable employment.

Criticism

One criticism of the structural-functional theory is that it can't adequately explain social change even though the functions are processes. Also problematic is the somewhat circular nature of this theory: repetitive behavior patterns are assumed to have a function, yet we profess to know that they have a function only because they are repeated. Furthermore, dysfunctions may continue, even though they don't serve a function, which seemingly contradicts the basic premise of the theory. Many sociologists now believe that functionalism is no longer useful as a macro-level theory, but that it does serve a useful purpose in some mid-level analyses.

Big Picture: A Global Culture?

Sociologists around the world look closely for signs of what would be an unprecedented event: the emergence of a global culture. In the past, empires such as those that existed in China, Europe, Africa, and Central and South America linked people from many different countries, but those people rarely became part of a common culture. They lived too far from each other, spoke different languages, practiced different religions, and traded few goods. Today, increases in communication, travel, and trade have made the world a much smaller place. More and more people are able to communicate with each other instantly—wherever they are located—by telephone, video, and text. They share movies, television shows, music, games, and information over the Internet. Students can study with teachers and pupils from the other side of the globe. Governments find it harder to hide conditions inside their countries from the rest of the world.

Sociologists research many different aspects of this potential global culture. Some explore the dynamics involved in the social interactions of global online communities, such as when members feel a closer kinship to other group members than to people residing in their own countries. Other sociologists study the impact this growing international culture has on smaller, less-powerful local cultures. Yet other researchers explore how international markets and the outsourcing of labor impact social inequalities. Sociology can play a key role in people's abilities to understand the nature of this emerging global culture and how to respond to it.

Conflict Theory

Conflict theory looks at society as a competition for limited resources. This perspective is a macro-level approach most identified with the writings of German philosopher and economist Karl Marx, who saw society as being made up of individuals in different social classes who must compete for social, material, and political resources such as food and housing, employment, education, and leisure time. Social institutions like government, education, and religion reflect this competition in their inherent inequalities and help maintain the unequal social structure. Some individuals and organizations are able to obtain and keep more resources than others, and these "winners" use their power and influence to maintain social institutions. The perpetuation of power results

in the perpetuation of oppression.

Several theorists suggested variations on this basic theme like Polish-Austrian sociologist Ludwig Gumplowicz (1838–1909) who expanded on Marx's ideas by arguing that war and conquest are the bases of civilizations. He believed that cultural and ethnic conflicts led to states being identified and defined by a dominant group that had power over other groups (Irving, 2007).

German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) agreed with Marx but also believed that, in addition to economic inequalities, inequalities of political power and social structure cause conflict. Weber noted that different groups were affected differently based on education, race, and gender, and that people's reactions to inequality were moderated by class differences and rates of social mobility, as well as by perceptions about the legitimacy of those in power. A reader of Marx, Georg Simmel believed that conflict can help integrate and stabilize a society. He said that the intensity of the conflict varies depending on the emotional involvement of the parties, the degree of solidarity within the opposing groups, and the clarity and limited nature of the goals. Simmel also showed that groups work to create internal solidarity, centralize power, and reduce dissent. The stronger the bond, the weaker the discord. Resolving conflicts can reduce tension and hostility and can pave the way for future agreements.

In the 1930s and 1940s, German philosophers, known as the Frankfurt School, developed critical theory as an elaboration on Marxist principles. Critical theory is an expansion of conflict theory and is broader than just sociology, incorporating other social sciences and philosophy. A critical theory is a holistic theory and attempts to address structural issues causing inequality. It must explain what's wrong in current social reality, identify the people who can make changes, and provide practical goals for social transformation (Horkeimer, 1982).

More recently, inequality based on gender or race has been explained in a similar manner and has identified institutionalized power structures that help to maintain inequality between groups. Janet Saltzman Chafetz (1941–2006) presented a model of feminist theory that attempts to explain the forces that maintain gender inequality as well as a theory of how such a system can be changed (Turner, 2003). Similarly, critical race theory grew out of a critical analysis of race and racism from a legal point of view. Critical race theory looks at structural inequality based on white privilege and associated wealth, power, and prestige.

Sociology in the Real World: Farming and Locavores: How Sociological Perspectives Might View Food Consumption



Figure 1.4.1: An outdoor farmers' market where vendors display fruits and vegetables while shoppers move among the stalls, illustrating everyday economic exchange and social interaction in a shared public space. (Marylebone Farmers Market by Justinc via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0)

The consumption of food is a commonplace, daily occurrence. Yet, it can also be associated with important moments in our lives. Eating can be an individual or a group action, and eating habits and customs are influenced by our cultures. In the context of society, our nation's food system is at the core of numerous social movements, political issues, and economic debates. Any of these factors might become a topic of sociological study.

A structural-functional approach to the topic of food consumption might analyze the role of the agriculture industry within the nation's economy and how this has changed from the early days of manual-labor farming to modern mechanized production. Another might study the different functions of processes in food production, from farming and harvesting to flashy packaging and mass consumerism.

A conflict theorist might be interested in the power differentials present in the regulation of food, by exploring where people's right to information intersects with corporations' drive for profit and how the government mediates those interests. Or a conflict theorist might examine the power and powerlessness experienced by local farmers versus large farming conglomerates, such as the documentary Food Inc., which depicts as resulting from Monsanto's patenting of seed technology. Another topic of study might be how nutrition varies between different social classes.

A sociologist viewing food consumption through a symbolic interactionist lens would be more interested in microlevel topics, such as the symbolic use of food in religious rituals, or the role it plays in the social interaction of a family dinner. This perspective might also explore the interactions among group members who identify themselves based on their sharing a particular diet, such as vegetarians (people who don't eat meat) or locavores (people who strive to eat locally produced food).

Criticism

Just as structural functionalism was criticized for focusing too much on the stability of societies, conflict theory has been criticized because it tends to focus on conflict to the exclusion of recognizing stability. Many social structures are extremely stable or have gradually progressed over time rather than changing abruptly as conflict theory would suggest.

Symbolic Interactionist Theory

Symbolic interactionism is a micro-level theory that focuses on the relationships among individuals within a society. Communication—the exchange of meaning through language and symbols—is believed to be the way in which people make sense of their social worlds. Theorists Herman and Reynolds (1994) note that this perspective sees people as being active in shaping the social world rather than simply being acted upon.

George Herbert Mead is considered a founder of symbolic interactionism though he never published his work on it (LaRossa and Reitzes, 1993). Mead's student, Herbert Blumer (1900-1987), coined the term "symbolic interactionism" and outlined these basic premises: humans interact with things based on meanings ascribed to those things; the ascribed meaning of things comes from our interactions with others and society; the meanings of things are interpreted by a person when dealing with things in specific circumstances (Blumer 1969). If you love books, for example, a symbolic interactionist might propose that you learned that books are good or important in the interactions you had with family, friends, school, or church. Maybe your family had a special reading time each week, getting your library card was treated as a special event, or bedtime stories were associated with warmth and comfort.

Social scientists who apply symbolic-interactionist thinking look for patterns of interaction between individuals. Their studies often involve observation of one-on-one interactions. For example, while a conflict theorist studying a political protest might focus on class difference, a symbolic interactionist would be more interested in how individuals in the protesting group interact, as well as the signs and symbols protesters use to communicate their message.

The focus on the importance of symbols in building a society led sociologists like Erving Goffman (1922-1982) to develop a technique called dramaturgical analysis. Goffman used theater as an analogy for social interaction and recognized that people's interactions showed patterns of cultural "scripts." He argued that individuals were actors in a play. We switched roles, sometimes minute to minute—for example, from student or daughter to dog walker. Because it can be unclear what part a person may play in a given situation, he or she has to improvise his or her role as the situation unfolds (Goffman, 1958).

Studies that use the symbolic interactionist perspective are more likely to use qualitative research methods, such as in-depth interviews or participant observation, because they seek to understand the symbolic worlds in which research subjects live.

Constructivism is an extension of symbolic interaction theory which proposes that reality is what humans cognitively construct it to be. We develop social constructs based on interactions with others, and those constructs that last over time are those that have meanings which are widely agreed-upon or generally accepted by most within the society. This approach is often used to examine what's defined as deviant within a society. There is no absolute definition of deviance, and different societies have constructed different meanings for deviance, as well as associating different behaviors with deviance.

One situation that illustrates this is what you believe you're to do if you find a wallet in the street. In the United States, turning the wallet in to local authorities would be considered the appropriate action, and to keep the wallet would be seen as deviant. In contrast, many Eastern societies would consider it much more appropriate to keep the wallet and search for the owner yourself. Turning it over to someone else, even the authorities, would be considered deviant behavior.

Criticism

Research done from this perspective is often scrutinized because of the difficulty of remaining objective. Others criticize the extremely narrow focus on symbolic interaction. Proponents, of course, consider this one of its greatest strengths.

Sociological Theory Today

These three approaches still provide the main foundation of modern sociological theory though they have evolved. Structural-functionalism was a dominant force after World War II and until the 1960s and 1970s. At that time, sociologists began to feel that structural-functionalism did not sufficiently explain the rapid social changes happening in the United States at that time. The women's movement and the Civil Rights movement forced academics to develop approaches to study these emerging social practices.

Conflict theory then gained prominence, with its emphasis on institutionalized social inequality. Critical theory, and the particular aspects of feminist theory and critical race theory, focused on creating social change through the application of sociological principles. The field saw a renewed emphasis on helping ordinary people understand sociology principles, in the form of public sociology.

Gaining prominence in the wake of Mead's work in the 1920s and 1930s, symbolic interactionism declined in influence during the 1960s and 1970s only to be revitalized at the turn of the twenty-first century (Stryker, 1987). Postmodern social theory developed in the 1980s to look at society through an entirely new lens by rejecting previous macro-level attempts to explain social phenomena. Its growth in popularity coincides with the rise of constructivist views of symbolic interactionism.

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1.5: Approaches to Sociological Research

The Scientific Method

When sociologists apply the sociological perspective and begin to ask questions, no topic is off limits. Every aspect of human behavior is a source of possible investigation. Sociologists question the world that humans have created and live in. They notice patterns of behavior as people move through that world. Using sociological methods and systematic research within the framework of the scientific method and a scholarly interpretive perspective, sociologists have discovered social patterns in the workplace that have transformed industries, in families that have enlightened family members, and in education that have aided structural changes in classrooms.

Sociologists often begin the research process by asking a question about how or why things happen in this world. It might be a unique question about a new trend or an old question about a common aspect of life. Once the question is formed, the sociologist proceeds through an in-depth process to answer it. In deciding how to design that process, the researcher may adopt a scientific approach or an interpretive framework. The following sections describe these approaches to knowledge.

Sociologists make use of tried and true methods of research, such as experiments, surveys, and field research. But humans and their social interactions are so diverse that these interactions can seem impossible to chart or explain. It might seem that science is about discoveries and chemical reactions or about proving ideas right or wrong rather than about exploring the nuances of human behavior.

However, this is exactly why scientific models work for studying human behavior. A scientific process of research establishes parameters that help make sure results are objective and accurate. Scientific methods provide limitations and boundaries that focus a study and organize its results.

The scientific method involves developing and testing theories about the social world based on empirical evidence. It is defined by its commitment to systematic observation of the empirical world and strives to be objective, critical, skeptical, and logical. It involves a series of six prescribed steps that have been established over centuries of scientific scholarship.

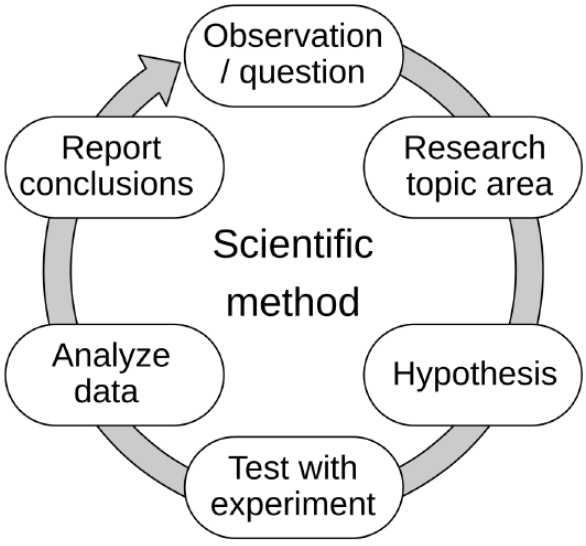


Figure 1.5.1: The scientific method is a structured process of asking questions, developing hypotheses, testing ideas, analyzing results, and drawing conclusions. In sociology, this process helps researchers move beyond personal opinion and study social life using evidence. (Diagram showing the steps of the scientific method by Efbrazil via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY 4.0). Access alternative description for Figure 1.5.1.

Sociological research does not reduce knowledge to right or wrong facts. Results of studies tend to provide people with insights they did not have before—explanations of human behaviors and social practices and access to knowledge of other cultures, rituals

and beliefs, or trends and attitudes.

In general, sociologists tackle questions about the role of social characteristics in outcomes or results. For example, how do different communities fare in terms of psychological well-being, community cohesiveness, range of vocation, wealth, crime rates, and so on? Are communities functioning smoothly? Sociologists often look between the cracks to discover obstacles to meeting basic human needs. They might also study environmental influences and patterns of behavior that lead to crime, substance abuse, divorce, poverty, unplanned pregnancies, or illness. And, because sociological studies are not all focused on negative behaviors or challenging situations, social researchers might study vacation trends, healthy eating habits, neighborhood organizations, higher education patterns, games, parks, and exercise habits.

Sociologists can use the scientific method not only to collect but also to interpret and analyze data. They deliberately apply scientific logic and objectivity. They are interested in—but not attached to—the results. They work outside of their own political or social agendas. This does not mean researchers do not have their own personalities, complete with preferences and opinions. But sociologists deliberately use the scientific method to maintain as much objectivity, focus, and consistency as possible in collecting and analyzing data in research studies.

With its systematic approach, the scientific method has proven useful in shaping sociological studies. The scientific method provides a systematic, organized series of steps that help ensure objectivity and consistency in exploring a social problem. They provide the means for accuracy, reliability, and validity. In the end, the scientific method provides a shared basis for discussion and analysis (Merton 1963). Typically, the scientific method has 6 steps which are described below.

Step 1: Ask a Question or Find a Research Topic

The first step of the scientific method is to ask a question, select a problem, and identify the specific area of interest. The topic should be narrow enough to study within a geographic location and time frame. “Are societies capable of sustained happiness?” would be too vague. The question should also be broad enough to have universal merit. “What do personal hygiene habits reveal about the values of students at XYZ High School?” would be too narrow. Sociologists strive to frame questions that examine well-defined patterns and relationships.

In a hygiene study, for instance, hygiene could be defined as “personal habits to maintain physical appearance (as opposed to health),” and a researcher might ask, “How do differing personal hygiene habits reflect the cultural value placed on appearance?”

Step 2: Review the Literature/Research Existing Sources

The next step researchers undertake is to conduct background research through a literature review, which is a review of any existing similar or related studies. A visit to the library, a thorough online search, and a survey of academic journals will uncover existing research about the topic of study. This step helps researchers gain a broad understanding of work previously conducted, identify gaps in understanding of the topic, and position their own research to build on prior knowledge. Researchers—including student researchers—are responsible for correctly citing existing sources they use in a study or that inform their work. While it is fine to borrow previously published material (as long as it enhances a unique viewpoint), it must be referenced properly and never plagiarized.

To study crime, a researcher might also sort through existing data from the court system, police database, prison information, interviews with criminals, guards, wardens, etc. It’s important to examine this information in addition to existing research to determine how these resources might be used to fill holes in existing knowledge. Reviewing existing sources educates researchers and helps refine and improve a research study design.

Step 3: Formulate a Hypothesis

A hypothesis is an explanation for a phenomenon based on a conjecture about the relationship between the phenomenon and one or more causal factors. In sociology, the hypothesis will often predict how one form of human behavior influences another. For example, a hypothesis might be in the form of an “if, then statement.” Let’s relate this to our topic of crime: If unemployment increases, then the crime rate will increase.

In scientific research, we formulate hypotheses to include an independent variables (IV), which are the *cause* of the change, and a dependent variable (DV), which is the *effect*, or thing that is changed. In the example above, unemployment is the independent variable and the crime rate is the dependent variable.

In a sociological study, the researcher would establish one form of human behavior as the independent variable and observe the influence it has on a dependent variable. How does gender (the independent variable) affect rate of income (the dependent variable)? How does one's religion (the independent variable) affect family size (the dependent variable)? How is social class (the dependent variable) affected by level of education (the independent variable)?

Table 1.5.1 Examples of Dependent and Independent Variables: Typically, the independent variable causes the dependent variable to change in some way.

Hypothesis	Independent Variable	Dependent Variable
The greater the availability of affordable housing, the lower the homeless rate.	Affordable Housing	Homeless Rate
The greater the availability of math tutoring, the higher the math grades.	Math Tutoring	Math Grades
The greater the police patrol presence, the safer the neighborhood.	Police Patrol Presence	Safer Neighborhood
The greater the factory lighting, the higher the productivity.	Factory Lighting	Productivity
The greater the amount of media coverage, the higher the public awareness.	Observation	Public Awareness

Step 4: Design and Conduct a Study

Researchers design studies to maximize reliability, which refers to how likely research results are to be replicated if the study is reproduced. Reliability increases the likelihood that what happens to one person will happen to all people in a group or what will happen in one situation will happen in another. Cooking is a science. When you follow a recipe and measure ingredients with a cooking tool, such as a measuring cup, the same results is obtained as long as the cook follows the same recipe and uses the same type of tool. The measuring cup introduces accuracy into the process. If a person uses a less accurate tool, such as their hand, to measure ingredients rather than a cup, the same result may not be replicated. Accurate tools and methods increase reliability.

Researchers also strive for validity, which refers to how well the study measures what it was designed to measure. To produce reliable and valid results, sociologists develop an operational definition, that is, they define each concept, or variable, in terms of the physical or concrete steps it takes to objectively measure it. The operational definition identifies an observable condition of the concept. By operationalizing the concept, all researchers can collect data in a systematic or replicable manner. Moreover, researchers can determine whether the experiment or method validly represent the phenomenon they intended to study.

A study asking how tutoring improves grades, for instance, might define "tutoring" as "one-on-one assistance by an expert in the field, hired by an educational institution." However, one researcher might define a "good" grade as a C or better, while another uses a B+ as a starting point for "good." For the results to be replicated and gain acceptance within the broader scientific community, researchers would have to use a standard operational definition. These definitions set limits and establish cut-off points that ensure consistency and replicability in a study.

We will explore research methods in greater detail in the next section of this chapter.

Step 5: Draw Conclusions

After constructing the research design, sociologists collect, tabulate or categorize, and analyze data to formulate conclusions. If the analysis supports the hypothesis, researchers can discuss the implications of the results for the theory or policy solution that they were addressing. If the analysis does not support the hypothesis, researchers may consider repeating the experiment or think of ways to improve their procedure.

However, even when results contradict a sociologist's prediction of a study's outcome, these results still contribute to sociological understanding. Sociologists analyze general patterns in response to a study, but they are equally interested in exceptions to patterns. In a study of education, a researcher might predict that high school dropouts have a hard time finding rewarding careers. While many assume that the higher the education, the higher the salary and degree of career happiness, there are certainly exceptions. People with little education have had stunning careers, and people with advanced degrees have had trouble finding work. A sociologist prepares a hypothesis knowing that results may substantiate or contradict it.

Sociologists carefully keep in mind how operational definitions and research designs impact the results as they draw conclusions. Consider the concept of "increase of crime," which might be defined as the percent increase in crime from last week to this week,

as in the study of Swedish crime discussed above. Yet the data used to evaluate "increase of crime" might be limited by many factors: who commits the crime, where the crimes are committed, or what type of crime is committed. If the data is gathered for "crimes committed in Houston, Texas in zip code 77021," then it may not be generalizable to crimes committed in rural areas outside of major cities like Houston. If data is collected about vandalism, it may not be generalizable to assault.

Step 6: Report Results

Researchers report their results at conferences and in academic journals. These results are then subjected to the scrutiny of other sociologists in the field. Before the conclusions of a study become widely accepted, the studies are often repeated in the same or different environments. In this way, sociological theories and knowledge develops as the relationships between social phenomenon are established in broader contexts and different circumstances.

Interpretive Framework

While many sociologists rely on empirical data and the scientific method as a research approach, others operate from an interpretive framework. While systematic, this approach doesn't follow the hypothesis-testing model that seeks to find generalizable results. Instead, an interpretive framework, sometimes referred to as an *interpretive perspective*, seeks to understand social worlds from the point of view of participants, which leads to in-depth knowledge or understanding about the human experience.

Interpretive research is generally more descriptive or narrative in its findings. Rather than formulating a hypothesis and method for testing it, an interpretive researcher will develop approaches to explore the topic at hand that may involve a significant amount of direct observation or interaction with subjects including storytelling. This type of researcher learns through the process and sometimes adjusts the research methods or processes midway to optimize findings as they evolve.

Critical Sociology

Critical sociology focuses on deconstruction of existing sociological research and theory. Informed by the work of Karl Marx, scholars known collectively as the Frankfurt School proposed that social science, as much as any academic pursuit, is embedded in the system of power constituted by the set of class, caste, race, gender, and other relationships that exist in the society. Consequently, it cannot be treated as purely objective. Critical sociologists view theories, methods, and the conclusions as serving one of two purposes: they can either legitimate and rationalize systems of social power and oppression or liberate humans from inequality and restriction on human freedom. Deconstruction can involve data collection, but the analysis of this data is not empirical or positivist.



Figure 1.5.2: This image shows researchers conducting a household interview in rural Gujarat, India. The scientific method in sociology often involves gathering evidence through conversations, observations, and fieldwork rather than laboratory experiments. (Daniel Oerther and students conducting a household interview by Oertherdb via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY 4.0)

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1.6: Research Methods in Sociology

Primary Data Collection

Sociologists examine the social world, see a problem or interesting pattern, and set out to study it. They use research methods to design a study. Planning the research design is a key step in any sociological study. Sociologists generally choose from widely used methods of social investigation: primary source data collection such as survey, participant observation, ethnography, case study, unobtrusive observations, experiment, and secondary data analysis, or use of existing sources. Every research method comes with plusses and minuses, and the topic of study strongly influences which method or methods are put to use. When you are conducting research think about the best way to gather or obtain knowledge about your topic, think of yourself as an architect. An architect needs a blueprint to build a house, as a sociologist your blueprint is your research design including your data collection method.

When entering a particular social environment, a researcher must be careful. There are times to remain anonymous and times to be overt. There are times to conduct interviews and times to simply observe. Some participants need to be thoroughly informed; others should not know they are being observed. A researcher wouldn't stroll into a crime-ridden neighborhood at midnight, calling out, "Any gang members around?"

Making sociologists' presence invisible is not always realistic for other reasons. That option is not available to a researcher studying prison behaviors, early education, or the Ku Klux Klan. Researchers can't just stroll into prisons, kindergarten classrooms, or Klan meetings and unobtrusively observe behaviors or attract attention. In situations like these, other methods are needed. Researchers choose methods that best suit their study topics, protect research participants or subjects, and that fit with their overall approaches to research.

Surveys

As a research method, a survey collects data from subjects who respond to a series of questions about behaviors and opinions, often in the form of a questionnaire or an interview. The survey is one of the most widely used scientific research methods. The standard survey format allows individuals a level of anonymity in which they can express personal ideas.

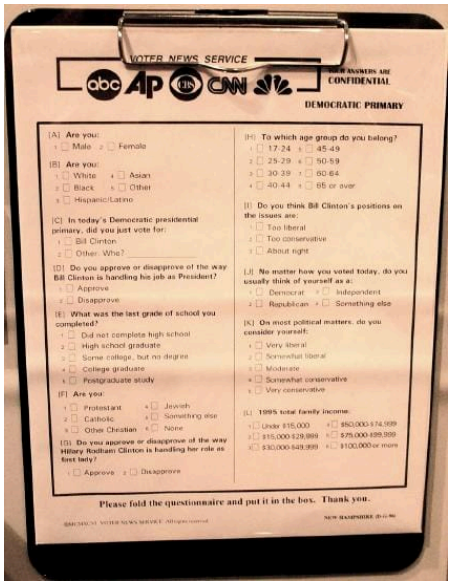


Figure 1.6.1: This image shows a voter polling sheet, a simple example of how survey questions can be used to gather structured information about people's opinions. In sociology, surveys and polls help researchers identify patterns in attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors across groups. (Voter poll by RadioFan via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0)

At some point, most people in the United States respond to some type of survey. The 2020 U.S. Census is an excellent example of a large-scale survey intended to gather sociological data. Since 1790, United States has conducted a survey consisting of six

questions to received demographical data pertaining to residents. The questions pertain to the demographics of the residents who live in the United States. Currently, the Census is received by residents in the United Stated and five territories and consists of 12 questions.

Not all surveys are considered sociological research, however, and many surveys people commonly encounter focus on identifying marketing needs and strategies rather than testing a hypothesis or contributing to social science knowledge. Questions such as, "How many hot dogs do you eat in a month?" or "Were the staff helpful?" are not usually designed as scientific research. The Nielsen Ratings determine the popularity of television programming through scientific market research. However, polls conducted by television programs such as *American Idol* or *So You Think You Can Dance* cannot be generalized, because they are administered to an unrepresentative population, a specific show's audience. You might receive polls through your cell phones or emails, from grocery stores, restaurants, and retail stores. They often provide you incentives for completing the survey.

Sociologists conduct surveys under controlled conditions for specific purposes. Surveys gather different types of information from people. While surveys are not great at capturing the ways people really behave in social situations, they are a great method for discovering how people feel, think, and act—or at least how they say they feel, think, and act. Surveys can track preferences for presidential candidates or reported individual behaviors (such as sleeping, driving, or texting habits) or information such as employment status, income, and education levels.

A survey targets a specific population, people who are the focus of a study, such as college athletes, international students, or teenagers living with type 1 (juvenile-onset) diabetes. Most researchers choose to survey a small sector of the population, or a sample, a manageable number of subjects who *represent* a larger population. The success of a study depends on how well a population is represented by the sample. In a random sample, every person in a population has the same chance of being chosen for the study. As a result, a Gallup Poll, if conducted as a nationwide random sampling, should be able to provide an accurate estimate of public opinion whether it contacts 2,000 or 10,000 people.

After selecting subjects, the researcher develops a specific plan to ask questions and record responses. It is important to inform subjects of the nature and purpose of the survey up front. If they agree to participate, researchers thank subjects and offer them a chance to see the results of the study if they are interested. The researcher presents the subjects with an instrument, which is a means of gathering the information.

A common instrument is a questionnaire. Subjects often answer a series of closed-ended questions. The researcher might ask yes-or-no or multiple-choice questions, allowing subjects to choose possible responses to each question. This kind of questionnaire collects quantitative data—data in numerical form that can be counted and statistically analyzed. Just count up the number of "yes" and "no" responses or correct answers, and chart them into percentages.

Questionnaires can also ask more complex questions with more complex answers—beyond "yes," "no," or checkbox options. These types of inquiries use open-ended questions that require short essay responses. Participants willing to take the time to write those answers might convey personal religious beliefs, political views, goals, or morals. The answers are subjective and vary from person to person. *How do plan to use your college education?*

Some topics that investigate internal thought processes are impossible to observe directly and are difficult to discuss honestly in a public forum. People are more likely to share honest answers if they can respond to questions anonymously. This type of personal explanation is qualitative data—conveyed through words. Qualitative information is harder to organize and tabulate. The researcher will end up with a wide range of responses, some of which may be surprising. The benefit of written opinions, though, is the wealth of in-depth material that they provide.

An interview is a one-on-one conversation between the researcher and the subject, and it is a way of conducting surveys on a topic. However, participants are free to respond as they wish, without being limited by predetermined choices. In the back-and-forth conversation of an interview, a researcher can ask for clarification, spend more time on a subtopic, or ask additional questions. In an interview, a subject will ideally feel free to open up and answer questions that are often complex. There are no right or wrong answers. The subject might not even know how to answer the questions honestly.

Questions such as "How does society's view of alcohol consumption influence your decision whether or not to take your first sip of alcohol?" or "Did you feel that the divorce of your parents would put a social stigma on your family?" involve so many factors that the answers are difficult to categorize. A researcher needs to avoid steering or prompting the subject to respond in a specific way; otherwise, the results will prove to be unreliable. The researcher will also benefit from gaining a subject's trust, from empathizing or commiserating with a subject, and from listening without judgment.

Surveys often collect both quantitative and qualitative data. For example, a researcher interviewing people who are incarcerated

might receive quantitative data, such as demographics – race, age, sex, that can be analyzed statistically. For example, the researcher might discover that 20 percent of incarcerated people are above the age of 50. The researcher might also collect qualitative data, such as why people take advantage of educational opportunities during their sentence and other explanatory information.

The survey can be carried out online, over the phone, by mail, or face-to-face. When researchers collect data outside a laboratory, library, or workplace setting, they are conducting field research, which is our next topic.

Field Research

The work of sociology rarely happens in limited, confined spaces. Rather, sociologists go out into the world. They meet subjects where they live, work, and play. Field research refers to gathering primary data from a natural environment. To conduct field research, the sociologist must be willing to step into new environments and observe, participate, or experience those worlds. In field work, the sociologists, rather than the subjects, are the ones out of their element.

The researcher interacts with or observes people and gathers data along the way. The key point in field research is that it takes place in the subject's natural environment, whether it's a coffee shop or tribal village, a homeless shelter or the DMV, a hospital, airport, mall, or beach resort.



Figure 1.6.2: Field research is a sociological method based on direct interaction, observation, and listening to people's lived experiences in the places where social life happens. (Talking to Villagers by Damauli via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0)

While field research often begins in a specific *setting*, the study's purpose is to observe specific *behaviors* in that setting. Field work is optimal for observing *how* people think and behave. It seeks to understand *why* they behave that way. However, researchers may struggle to narrow down cause and effect when there are so many variables floating around in a natural environment. And while field research looks for correlation, its small sample size does not allow for establishing a causal relationship between two variables. Indeed, much of the data gathered in sociology do not identify a cause and effect but a correlation.

Sociology in the Real World: Beyoncé and Lady Gaga as Sociological Subjects

Sociologist have studied Lady Gaga and Beyoncé and their impact on music, movies, social media, fan participation, and social equality. In their studies, researchers have used several research methods including secondary analysis, participant observation, and surveys from concert participants.

> In their study, Click, Lee & Holiday (2013) interviewed 45 Lady Gaga fans who utilized social media to communicate with the artist. These fans viewed Lady Gaga as a mirror of themselves and a source of inspiration. Like her, they embrace not being a part of mainstream culture. Many of Lady Gaga's fans are members of the LGBTQ community. They see the "song "Born This Way" as a rallying cry and answer her calls for "Paws Up" with a physical expression of solidarity—outstretched arms and fingers bent and curled to resemble monster claws."
>
> Sascha Buchanan (2019) made use of participant observation to study the relationship between two fan groups, that of Beyoncé and that of Rihanna. She observed award shows sponsored by iHeartRadio, MTV EMA, and BET that pit one group against another as they competed for Best Fan Army, Biggest Fans, and FANdemonium. Buchanan argues that the media thus sustains a myth of rivalry between the two most commercially successful Black women vocal artists.

Participant Observation

In 2000, a comic writer named Rodney Rothman wanted an insider's view of white-collar work. He slipped into the sterile, high-rise offices of a New York "dot com" agency. Every day for two weeks, he pretended to work there. His main purpose was simply to see whether anyone would notice him or challenge his presence. No one did. The receptionist greeted him. The employees smiled and said good morning. Rothman was accepted as part of the team. He even went so far as to claim a desk, inform the receptionist of his whereabouts, and attend a meeting. He published an article about his experience in *The New Yorker* called "My Fake Job" (2000). Later, he was discredited for allegedly fabricating some details of the story and *The New Yorker* issued an apology. However, Rothman's entertaining article still offered fascinating descriptions of the inside workings of a "dot com" company and exemplified the lengths to which a writer, or a sociologist, will go to uncover material.

Rothman had conducted a form of study called participant observation, in which researchers join people and participate in a group's routine activities for the purpose of observing them within that context. This method lets researchers experience a specific aspect of social life. A researcher might go to great lengths to get a firsthand look into a trend, institution, or behavior. A researcher might work as a waitress in a diner, experience homelessness for several weeks, or ride along with police officers as they patrol their regular beat. Often, these researchers try to blend in seamlessly with the population they study, and they may not disclose their true identity or purpose if they feel it would compromise the results of their research.

At the beginning of a field study, researchers might have a question: "What really goes on in the kitchen of the most popular diner on campus?" or "What is it like to be homeless?" Participant observation is a useful method if the researcher wants to explore a certain environment from the inside.

Field researchers simply want to observe and learn. In such a setting, the researcher will be alert and open minded to whatever happens, recording all observations accurately. Soon, as patterns emerge, questions will become more specific, observations will lead to hypotheses, and hypotheses will guide the researcher in analyzing data and generating results.

In a study of small towns in the United States conducted by sociological researchers John S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, the team altered their purpose as they gathered data. They initially planned to focus their study on the role of religion in U.S. towns. As they gathered observations, they realized that the effect of industrialization and urbanization was the more relevant topic of this social group. The Lynds did not change their methods, but they revised the purpose of their study.

This shaped the structure of *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture*, their published results (Lynd & Lynd, 1929). The Lynds were upfront about their mission. The townspeople of Muncie, Indiana, knew why the researchers were in their midst. But some sociologists prefer not to alert people to their presence. The main advantage of covert participant observation is that it allows the researcher access to authentic, natural behaviors of a group's members. The challenge, however, is gaining access to a setting without disrupting the pattern of others' behavior. Becoming an inside member of a group, organization, or subculture takes time and effort. Researchers must pretend to be something they are not. The process could involve role playing, making contacts, networking, or applying for a job.

Once inside a group, some researchers spend months or even years pretending to be one of the people they are observing. However, as observers, they cannot get too involved. They must keep their purpose in mind and apply the sociological perspective. That way, they illuminate social patterns that are often unrecognized. Because information gathered during participant observation is mostly qualitative, rather than quantitative, the end results are often descriptive or interpretive. The researcher might present findings in an article or book and describe what he or she witnessed and experienced.

This type of research is what journalist Barbara Ehrenreich conducted for her book *Nickel and Dimed*. One day over lunch with her

editor, Ehrenreich mentioned an idea. *How can people exist on minimum-wage work? How do low-income workers get by?* she wondered. *Someone should do a study*. To her surprise, her editor responded, *Why don't you do it?*

That's how Ehrenreich found herself joining the ranks of the working class. For several months, she left her comfortable home and lived and worked among people who lacked, for the most part, higher education and marketable job skills. Undercover, she applied for and worked minimum wage jobs as a waitress, a cleaning woman, a nursing home aide, and a retail chain employee. During her participant observation, she used only her income from those jobs to pay for food, clothing, transportation, and shelter.

She discovered the obvious, that it's almost impossible to get by on minimum wage work. She also experienced and observed attitudes many middle and upper-class people never think about. She witnessed firsthand the treatment of working class employees. She saw the extreme measures people take to make ends meet and to survive. She described fellow employees who held two or three jobs, worked seven days a week, lived in cars, could not pay to treat chronic health conditions, got randomly fired, submitted to drug tests, and moved in and out of homeless shelters. She brought aspects of that life to light, describing difficult working conditions and the poor treatment that low-wage workers suffer.

The book she wrote upon her return to her real life as a well-paid writer, has been widely read and used in many college classrooms.

Ethnography

Ethnography is the immersion of the researcher in the natural setting of an entire social community to observe and experience their everyday life and culture. The heart of an ethnographic study focuses on how subjects view their own social standing and how they understand themselves in relation to a social group.

An ethnographic study might observe, for example, a small U.S. fishing town, an Inuit community, a village in Thailand, a Buddhist monastery, a private boarding school, or an amusement park. These places all have borders. People live, work, study, or vacation within those borders. People are there for a certain reason and therefore behave in certain ways and respect certain cultural norms. An ethnographer would commit to spending a determined amount of time studying every aspect of the chosen place, taking in as much as possible.

A sociologist studying a tribe in the Amazon might watch the way villagers go about their daily lives and then write a paper about it. To observe a spiritual retreat center, an ethnographer might sign up for a retreat and attend as a guest for an extended stay, observe and record data, and collate the material into results.



Figure 1.6.3: In ethnography, spaces like kitchens can be studied as part of everyday social life because they reveal patterns of labor, family organization, material culture, memory, and the social meanings attached to ordinary objects. (La vecchia cucina di Casa d'Erci by Silvia Cassanelli via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0)

Institutional Ethnography

Institutional ethnography is an extension of basic ethnographic research principles that focuses intentionally on everyday concrete social relationships. Developed by Canadian sociologist Dorothy E. Smith (1990), institutional ethnography is often considered a feminist-inspired approach to social analysis and primarily considers women's experiences within male- dominated societies and power structures. Smith's work is seen to challenge sociology's exclusion of women, both academically and in the study of women's lives (Fenstermaker, n.d.).

Historically, social science research tended to objectify women and ignore their experiences except as viewed from the male perspective. Modern feminists note that describing women, and other marginalized groups, as subordinates helps those in authority maintain their own dominant positions (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada n.d.). Smith's three major works explored what she called "the conceptual practices of power" and are still considered seminal works in feminist theory and ethnography (Fensternmaker n.d.).

Sociological Research: The Making of Middletown: A Study in Modern U.S. Culture

In 1924, a young married couple named Robert and Helen Lynd undertook an unprecedented ethnography: to apply sociological methods to the study of one U.S. city in order to discover what "ordinary" people in the United States did and believed. Choosing Muncie, Indiana (population about 30,000) as their subject, they moved to the small town and lived there for eighteen months.

Ethnographers had been examining other cultures for decades—groups considered minorities or outsiders—like gangs, immigrants, and the poor. But no one had studied the so-called average American.

Recording interviews and using surveys to gather data, the Lynds objectively described what they observed. Researching existing sources, they compared Muncie in 1890 to the Muncie they observed in 1924. Most Muncie adults, they found, had grown up on farms but now lived in homes inside the city. As a result, the Lynds focused their study on the impact of industrialization and urbanization.

They observed that Muncie was divided into business and working class groups. They defined business class as dealing with abstract concepts and symbols, while working class people used tools to create concrete objects. The two classes led different lives with different goals and hopes. However, the Lynds observed, mass production offered both classes the same amenities. Like wealthy families, the working class was now able to own radios, cars, washing machines, telephones, vacuum cleaners, and refrigerators. This was an emerging material reality of the 1920s.

As the Lynds worked, they divided their manuscript into six chapters: Getting a Living, Making a Home, Training the Young, Using Leisure, Engaging in Religious Practices, and Engaging in Community Activities.

When the study was completed, the Lynds encountered a big problem. The Rockefeller Foundation, which had commissioned the book, claimed it was useless and refused to publish it. The Lynds asked if they could seek a publisher themselves.

Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture was not only published in 1929 but also became an instant bestseller, a status unheard of for a sociological study. The book sold out six printings in its first year of publication, and has never gone out of print (Caplow, Hicks, & Wattenberg. 2000).

Nothing like it had ever been done before. Middletown was reviewed on the front page of the New York Times. Readers in the 1920s and 1930s identified with the citizens of Muncie, Indiana, but they were equally fascinated by the sociological methods and the use of scientific data to define ordinary people in the United States. The book was proof that social data was important—and interesting—to the U.S. public.

Case Study

Sometimes a researcher wants to study one specific person or event. A case study is an in-depth analysis of a single event, situation, or individual. To conduct a case study, a researcher examines existing sources like documents and archival records, conducts interviews, engages in direct observation and even participant observation, if possible.

Researchers might use this method to study a single case of a foster child, drug lord, cancer patient, criminal, or rape victim.

However, a major criticism of the case study as a method is that while offering depth on a topic, it does not provide enough evidence to form a generalized conclusion. In other words, it is difficult to make universal claims based on just one person, since one person does not verify a pattern. This is why most sociologists do not use case studies as a primary research method.

However, case studies are useful when the single case is unique. In these instances, a single case study can contribute tremendous incite. For example, a feral child, also called "wild child," is one who grows up isolated from human beings. Feral children grow up without social contact and language, which are elements crucial to a "civilized" child's development. These children mimic the behaviors and movements of animals, and often invent their own language. There are only about one hundred cases of "feral children" in the world.

As you may imagine, a feral child is a subject of great interest to researchers. Feral children provide unique information about child development because they have grown up outside of the parameters of "normal" growth and nurturing. And since there are very few feral children, the case study is the most appropriate method for researchers to use in studying the subject.

At age three, a Ukranian girl named Oxana Malaya suffered severe parental neglect. She lived in a shed with dogs, and she ate raw meat and scraps. Five years later, a neighbor called authorities and reported seeing a girl who ran on all fours, barking. Officials brought Oxana into society, where she was cared for and taught some human behaviors, but she never became fully socialized. She has been designated as unable to support herself and now lives in a mental institution (Grice 2011). Case studies like this offer a way for sociologists to collect data that may not be obtained by any other method.

Experiments

You have probably tested some of your own personal social theories. "If I study at night and review in the morning, I'll improve my retention skills." Or, "If I stop drinking soda, I'll feel better." Cause and effect. If this, then that. When you test the theory, your results either prove or disprove your hypothesis.

One way researchers test social theories is by conducting an experiment, meaning they investigate relationships to test a hypothesis—a scientific approach.

There are two main types of experiments: lab-based experiments and natural or field experiments. In a lab setting, the research can be controlled so that more data can be recorded in a limited amount of time. In a natural or field- based experiment, the time it takes to gather the data cannot be controlled but the information might be considered more accurate since it was collected without interference or intervention by the researcher.

As a research method, either type of sociological experiment is useful for testing *if-then* statements: *if* a particular thing happens (cause), *then* another particular thing will result (effect). To set up a lab-based experiment, sociologists create artificial situations that allow them to manipulate variables.

Classically, the sociologist selects a set of people with similar characteristics, such as age, class, race, or education. Those people are divided into two groups. One is the experimental group and the other is the control group. The experimental group is exposed to the independent variable(s) and the control group is not. To test the benefits of tutoring, for example, the sociologist might provide tutoring to the experimental group of students but not to the control group. Then both groups would be tested for differences in performance to see if tutoring had an effect on the experimental group of students. As you can imagine, in a case like this, the researcher would not want to jeopardize the accomplishments of either group of students, so the setting would be somewhat artificial. The test would not be for a grade reflected on their permanent record of a student, for example.

And if a researcher told the students they would be observed as part of a study on measuring the effectiveness of tutoring, the students might not behave naturally. This is called the Hawthorne effect—which occurs when people change their behavior because they know they are being watched as part of a study. The Hawthorne effect is unavoidable in some research studies because sociologists have to make the purpose of the study known. Subjects must be aware that they are being observed, and a certain amount of artificiality may result (Sonnenfeld 1985).

Sociological Research: An Experiment in Action

A real-life example will help illustrate the experiment process. In 1971, Frances Heussenstamm, a sociology professor at California State University at Los Angeles, had a theory about police prejudice. To test her theory, she conducted an experiment. She chose fifteen students from three ethnic backgrounds: Black, White, and Hispanic. She chose students who routinely drove to and from campus along Los Angeles freeway routes, and who had had perfect driving records for longer than a year.

Next, she placed a Black Panther bumper sticker on each car. That sticker, a representation of a social value, was the independent variable. In the 1970s, the Black Panthers were a revolutionary group actively fighting racism. Heussenstamm asked the students to follow their normal driving patterns. She wanted to see whether seeming support for the Black Panthers would change how these good drivers were treated by the police patrolling the highways. The dependent variable would be the number of traffic stops/citations.

The first arrest, for an incorrect lane change, was made two hours after the experiment began. One participant was pulled over three times in three days. He quit the study. After seventeen days, the fifteen drivers had collected a total of thirty-three traffic citations. The experiment was halted. The funding to pay traffic fines had run out, and so had the enthusiasm of the participants (Heussenstamm, 1971).

Secondary Data Analysis

While sociologists often engage in original research studies, they also contribute knowledge to the discipline through secondary data analysis. Secondary data does not result from firsthand research collected from primary sources, but are the already completed work of other researchers or data collected by an agency or organization. Sociologists might study works written by historians, economists, teachers, or early sociologists. They might search through periodicals, newspapers, or magazines, or organizational data from any period in history.

Using available information not only saves time and money but can also add depth to a study. Sociologists often interpret findings in a new way, a way that was not part of an author's original purpose or intention. To study how women were encouraged to act and behave in the 1960s, for example, a researcher might watch movies, televisions shows, and situation comedies from that period. Or to research changes in behavior and attitudes due to the emergence of television in the late 1950s and early 1960s, a sociologist would rely on new interpretations of secondary data. Decades from now, researchers will most likely conduct similar studies on the advent of mobile phones, the Internet, or social media.

Social scientists also learn by analyzing the research of a variety of agencies. Governmental departments and global groups, like the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics or the World Health Organization (WHO), publish studies with findings that are useful to sociologists. A public statistic like the foreclosure rate might be useful for studying the effects of a recession. A racial demographic profile might be compared with data on education funding to examine the resources accessible by different groups.

One of the advantages of secondary data like old movies or WHO statistics is that it is nonreactive research (or unobtrusive research), meaning that it does not involve direct contact with subjects and will not alter or influence people's behaviors. Unlike studies requiring direct contact with people, using previously published data does not require entering a population and the investment and risks inherent in that research process.

Using available data does have its challenges. Public records are not always easy to access. A researcher will need to do some legwork to track them down and gain access to records. To guide the search through a vast library of materials and avoid wasting time reading unrelated sources, sociologists employ content analysis, applying a systematic approach to record and value information gleaned from secondary data as they relate to the study at hand.

Also, in some cases, there is no way to verify the accuracy of existing data. It is easy to count how many drunk drivers, for example, are pulled over by the police. But how many are not? While it's possible to discover the percentage of teenage students who drop out of high school, it might be more challenging to determine the number who return to school or get their GED later.

Another problem arises when data are unavailable in the exact form needed or do not survey the topic from the precise angle the researcher seeks. For example, the average salaries paid to professors at a public school is public record. But these figures do not necessarily reveal how long it took each professor to reach the salary range, what their educational backgrounds are, or how

long they've been teaching.

When conducting content analysis, it is important to consider the date of publication of an existing source and to take into account attitudes and common cultural ideals that may have influenced the research. For example, when Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd gathered research in the 1920s, attitudes and cultural norms were vastly different then than they are now. Beliefs about gender roles, race, education, and work have changed significantly since then. At the time, the study's purpose was to reveal insights about small U.S. communities. Today, it is an illustration of 1920s attitudes and values.

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1.7: Ethics in Sociological Research

Why Ethics Matter?

Sociologists conduct studies to shed light on human behaviors. Knowledge is a powerful tool that can be used to achieve positive change. As a result, conducting a sociological study comes with a tremendous amount of responsibility. Like all researchers, sociologists must consider their ethical obligation to avoid harming human subjects or groups while conducting research.

Pioneer German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) identified another crucial ethical concern. Weber understood that personal values could distort the framework for disclosing study results. While he accepted that some aspects of research design might be influenced by personal values, he declared it was entirely inappropriate to allow personal values to shape the interpretation of the responses. Sociologists, he stated, must establish value neutrality, a practice of remaining impartial, without bias or judgment, during the course of a study and in publishing results (Weber, 1949). Sociologists are obligated to disclose research findings without omitting or distorting significant data.

Is value neutrality possible? Many sociologists believe it is impossible to retain complete objectivity. They caution readers, rather, to understand that sociological studies may contain a certain amount of value bias. This does not discredit the results, but allows readers to view them as one form of truth—one fact-based perspective. Some sociologists attempt to remain uncritical and as objective as possible when studying social institutions. They strive to overcome personal biases, particularly subconscious biases, when collecting and analyzing data. They avoid skewing data in order to match a predetermined outcome that aligns with a particular agenda, such as a political or moral point of view. Investigators are ethically obligated to report results, even when they contradict personal views, predicted outcomes, or widely accepted beliefs.

The American Sociological Association, or ASA, is the major professional organization of sociologists in North America. The ASA is a great resource for students of sociology as well. The ASA maintains a code of ethics—formal guidelines for conducting sociological research—consisting of principles and ethical standards to be used in the discipline. These formal guidelines were established by practitioners in 1905 at John Hopkins University, and revised in 1997. When working with human subjects, these codes of ethics require researchers' to do the following:

1. Maintain objectivity and integrity in research
2. Respect subjects' rights to privacy and dignity
3. Protect subject from personal harm
4. Preserve confidentially
5. Seek informed consent
6. Acknowledge collaboration and assistance
7. Disclose sources of financial support

Some Unfortunate Cases

Unfortunately, when these codes of ethics are ignored, it creates an unethical environment for humans being involved in a sociological study. Throughout history, there have been numerous unethical studies, some of which are summarized below.

- The Tuskegee Experiment: This study was conducted 1932 in Macon County, Alabama, and included 600 African American men, including 399 diagnosed with syphilis. The participants were told they were diagnosed with a disease of "bad blood." Penicillin was distributed in the 1940s as the cure for the disease, but unfortunately, the African American men were not given the treatment because the objective of the study was to see "how untreated syphilis would affect the African American male" (Caplan, 2007)
- Henrietta Lacks: Ironically, this study was conducted at the hospital associated with Johns Hopkins University, where codes of the ethics originated. In 1951, Henrietta Lacks was receiving treatment for cervical cancer at John Hopkins Hospital, and doctors discovered that she had "immortal" cells, which could reproduce rapidly and indefinitely, making them extremely valuable for medical research. Without her consent, doctors collected and shared her cells to produce extensive cell lines. Lacks' cells were widely used for experiments and treatments, including the polio vaccine, and were put into mass production. Today, these cells are known worldwide as HeLa cells (Shah, 2010).
- Milgram Experiment: In 1961, psychologist Stanley Milgram conducted an experiment at Yale University. Its purpose was to

measure the willingness of study subjects to obey an authority figure who instructed them to perform acts that conflicted with their personal conscience. People in the role of teacher believed they were administering electric shocks to students who gave incorrect answers to word-pair questions. No matter how concerned they were about administering the progressively more intense shocks, the teachers were told to keep going. The ethical concerns involve the extreme emotional distress faced by the teachers, who believed they were hurting other people. (Vogel 2014).

- Philip Zimbardo and the Stanford prison experiment: In 1971, psychologist Phillip Zimbardo conducted a study involving students from Stanford University. The students were put in the roles of prisoners and guards, and were required to play their assigned role accordingly. The experiment was intended to last two weeks, but it only last six days due to the negative outcome and treatment of the "prisoners." Beyond the ethical concerns, the study's validity has been questioned after participants revealed they had been coached to behave in specific ways.
- Laud Humphreys: In the 1960s, Laud Humphreys conducted an experiment at a restroom in a park known for same-sex sexual encounters. His objective was to understand the diversity of backgrounds and motivations of people seeking same-sex relationships. His ethics were questioned because he misrepresented his identity and intent while observing and questioning the men he interviewed (Nardi, 1995).

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1.8: Why Study Sociology?

Sociology and a Better Society

When Elizabeth Eckford tried to enter Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, in September 1957, she was met by an angry crowd and was turned away by authorities. But she knew she had the law on her side. Three years earlier in the landmark *Brown vs. the Board of Education* decision, the U.S. Supreme Court had overturned twenty-one state laws that allowed Black and White people to be taught in separate school systems as long as the school systems were "equal." The decision was nothing short of momentous, not only for education, but for a number of other segregation and discrimination issues that have lasted into this decade. And in that momentous decision, the Supreme Court cited the research of the husband-and-wife team of social scientists, Kenneth and Mamie Clark, as evidence that segregation generates in minority students a feeling of inferiority. In the 'doll test,' for example, the Clarks showed children four dolls, two with white skin and yellow hair and two with brown skin and black hair. When asked which doll they preferred, the majority of Black children chose the doll with the light skin doll, and they assigned positive characteristics to it. Most of the Black children discarded the doll with the brown skin—the one that had a closer resemblance to themselves.

When asked to choose the doll that looked like them, many children left the room, started to cry, and/or became depressed. The Clarks' research contributed to the Supreme Court's conclusion that separate but equal was damaging to students, and that separate facilities are unequal.

Since it was first founded, many people interested in sociology have been driven by the scholarly desire to contribute knowledge to this field, while others have seen it as way not only to study society but also to improve it. Besides desegregation, sociology has played a crucial role in many important social reforms, such as equal opportunity for women in the workplace, improved treatment for individuals with mental illnesses or learning disabilities, increased accessibility and accommodation for people with physical disabilities, the right of native populations to preserve their land and culture, and prison system reforms.

The predominant American sociologist, the late Peter L. Berger (1929–2017), in his 1963 book, *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective*, describes a sociologist as "someone concerned with understanding society in a disciplined way." He asserts that sociologists have a natural interest in the monumental moments of people's lives, as well as a fascination with banal, everyday occurrences. Berger also describes the "aha" moment when a sociological theory becomes applicable and understood: "[T]here is a deceptive simplicity and obviousness about some sociological investigations. One reads them, nods at the familiar scene, remarks that one has heard all this before and don't people have better things to do than to waste their time on truisms—until one is suddenly brought up against an insight that radically questions everything one had previously assumed about this familiar scene. This is the point at which one begins to sense the excitement of sociology." (Berger, 1963)

Sociology can be exciting because it teaches people ways to recognize how they fit into the world and how others perceive them. Looking at themselves and society from a sociological perspective helps people see where they connect to different groups based on the many different ways they classify themselves and how society classifies them in turn. It raises awareness of how those classifications—such as economic and status levels, education, ethnicity, or sexual orientation—affect perceptions.

Sociology teaches people not to accept easy explanations. It teaches them a way to organize their thinking so that they can ask better questions and formulate better answers. It makes people more aware that there are many different kinds of people in the world who do not necessarily think the way they do. It increases their willingness and ability to try to see the world from other people's perspectives. This prepares them to live and work in an increasingly diverse and integrated world.

Sociology in the Workplace

Employers continue to seek people with what are called "transferable skills." This means that they want to hire people whose knowledge and education can be applied in a variety of settings and whose skills will contribute to various tasks.

Studying sociology can provide people with this wide knowledge and a skill set that can contribute to many workplaces, including

- an understanding of social systems and large bureaucracies;
- the ability to devise and carry out research projects to assess whether a program or policy is working;

- the ability to collect, read, and analyze statistical information from polls or surveys;
- the ability to recognize important differences in people's social, cultural, and economic backgrounds;
- skills in preparing reports and communicating complex ideas; and
- the capacity for critical thinking about social issues and problems that confront modern society. (Department of Sociology, University of Alabama-Huntsville)

Sociology prepares people for a wide variety of careers. Besides actually conducting social research or training others in the field, people who graduate from college with a degree in sociology are hired by government agencies and corporations in fields such as social services, counseling (e.g., family planning, career, substance abuse), community planning, health services, marketing, market research, and human resources. Even a small amount of training in sociology can be an asset in careers like sales, public relations, journalism, teaching, law, and criminal justice.

Sociology in the Real World: Social Networking Consequences

You've probably heard a cautionary story that goes something like this: A high school student spent years working hard, engaging in their community, helping others, and generally growing into a positive and promising young adult. During senior year, they start the college application process, and after a couple of interviews and other interactions, things are looking bright at several of their top choices. But when the time arrives for those fateful notifications about acceptance or rejection, the student and their family are shocked to get rejected from all schools but one. Inquiries from family members and guidance counselors had no results. The only news came in the form of a letter three weeks later from the one school that had accepted the student.

"...After an initial investigation, the University has determined that several posts attributed to you violate our policies, and are offensive and troubling..."

The letter's remaining two pages detailed the ongoing investigation and outlined the potential outcomes. But that one statement said it all: The student had posted something offensive on social media, and their prospective colleges had found it.

Two years earlier, at the beginning of sophomore year, the student had posted two comments and a meme that mocked a classmate who had been assaulted at a party. Even thought the student had removed them within a few days, the posts lived on in other forums and on a few friends' pages; there was also the possibility that someone had screen-grabbed them. While social media posts are protected forms of speech in relation to the government, colleges can review them as they evaluate applicants. Employers can do the same, as can romantic partners or even volunteer organizations.

You may believe that a 15-year-old's social media comments should not impact them years later. Or you may feel that someone who jokes about assault may be a risk to commit a similar act or fail to stop or report one. Sociologists may consider all of those assumptions, and may seek answers or information through research to uncover the impacts, risks, tendencies, and outcomes on the different groups involved. For example, a sociologist might work to discover answers to the following questions:

- Is abusive speech or assault less likely to occur at colleges that screen applicants' social media posts?
- Do sensitivity trainings or cultural competency programs have an effect on online speech?
- Do colleges treat all community members equally when they discover someone has posted offensive comments or other content?
- Are algorithms and artificial intelligence used to detect problematic comments biased against certain people or communities?

None of these questions could be answered by a single study or even a group of them. But like the Supreme Court's use of Mamie and Kenneth Clarke's research, college administrators, high school counselors, and technology companies can use the outcomes of research and analysis to make decisions or implement programs.

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1.9: Key Terms

Glossary

- **accuracy** | using a tool makes the measuring more precise
- **antipositivism** | the view that social researchers should strive for subjectivity as they work to represent social processes, cultural norms, and societal values
- **case study** | in-depth analysis of a single event, situation, or individual
- **code of ethics** | a set of guidelines that the American Sociological Association has established to foster ethical research and professionally responsible scholarship in sociology
- **conflict theory** | a theory that looks at society as a competition for limited resources
- **constructivism** | an extension of symbolic interaction theory which proposes that reality is what humans cognitively construct it to be
- **content analysis** | applying a systematic approach to record and evaluate information gleaned from secondary data as it relates to the study at hand
- **correlation** | when a change in one variable coincides with a change in another variable, but does not necessarily indicate causation
- **culture** | a group's shared practices, values, and beliefs
- **debunking** | looking beyond the obvious to expose falseness by examining merit, logic, and evidence
- **dependent variables** | variables changed by other variables
- **dramaturgical analysis** | a technique sociologists use in which they view society through the metaphor of theatrical performance
- **dynamic equilibrium** | a stable state in which all parts of a healthy society work together properly
- **dysfunctions** | social patterns that have undesirable consequences for the operation of society
- **empirical evidence** | evidence that comes from direct observations, scientifically gathered data, or experimentation
- **ethnography** | participating in and observing thinking and behavior in a social setting
- **experiment** | the testing of a hypothesis under controlled conditions
- **field research** | gathering data from a natural environment without doing a lab experiment or a survey
- **figuration** | the process of simultaneously analyzing the behavior of an individual and the society that shapes that behavior
- **function** | the part a recurrent activity plays in social life as a whole and the contribution it makes to structural continuity
- **functionalism** | a theoretical approach that sees society as a structure with interrelated parts designed to meet the biological and social needs of the individuals that make up that society
- **generalized others** | the organized and generalized attitude of a social group
- **grand theories** | attempts to explain large-scale relationships and answer fundamental questions such as why societies form and why they change
- **Hawthorne effect** | when study subjects behave in a certain manner due to their awareness of being observed by a researcher
- **hypothesis** | a testable educated guess or proposition about predicted outcomes between two or more variables
- **independent variables** | variables that cause changes in dependent variables
- **interpretive framework** | a sociological research approach that seeks in-depth understanding of a topic or subject through observation or interaction; this approach is not based on hypothesis testing
- **interview** | a one-on-one conversation between the researcher and the subject
- **latent functions** | the unrecognized or unintended consequences of a social process
- **literature review** | a scholarly research step that entails identifying and studying existing research on a topic to create a basis for new research
- **macro-level** | a wide-scale view of the role of social structures within a society
- **manifest functions** | sought consequences of a social process
- **micro-level theories** | the study of specific relationships between individuals or small groups
- **nonreactive research** | research using secondary data that does not include direct contact with research subjects and does not alter or influence people's behaviors
- **operational definitions** | specific explanations of abstract concepts that a researcher plans to study
- **paradigms** | philosophical and theoretical frameworks used within a discipline to formulate theories, generalizations, and the experiments performed in support of them
- **participant observation** | when a researcher immerses herself in a group or social setting in order to make observations from an "insider" perspective

- **population** | a defined group serving as the subject of a study
- **positivism** | the scientific study of social patterns
- **primary data** | data that are collected directly from firsthand experience
- **qualitative data** | non-numerical, descriptive data that is often subjective and based on what is experienced in a natural setting
- **qualitative sociology** | sociology that uses in-depth interviews, focus groups, and/or analysis of content sources as the source of its data
- **quantitative data** | data collected in numerical form that can be counted and analyzed using statistics
- **quantitative sociology** | sociology that uses statistical methods, such as surveys with large numbers of participants
- **random sample** | a study's participants being randomly selected to serve as a representation of a larger population
- **reification** | an error of treating an abstract concept as though it has a real, material existence
- **reliability** | a measure of a study's consistency that considers how likely results are to be replicated if a study is reproduced
- **samples** | small, manageable numbers of subjects that represent the population
- **scientific method** | an established scholarly research process that involves asking a question, researching existing sources, forming a hypothesis, designing a data collection method, gathering data, and drawing conclusions
- **secondary data analysis** | using data collected by others and applying new interpretations
- **significant others** | specific individuals that impact a person's life
- **social facts** | the laws, morals, values, religious beliefs, customs, fashions, rituals, and cultural rules that govern social life
- **social institutions** | patterns of beliefs and behaviors focused on meeting social needs
- **social solidarity** | the social ties that bind a group of people together, such as kinship, shared location, and religion
- **society** | a group of people who live in a defined geographical area, interact with one another, and share a common culture
- **sociological imagination** | the ability to understand how your own past relates to that of other people, as well as to history in general and societal structures in particular
- **sociology** | the systematic study of society and social interaction
- **surveys** | research tools that collect data from subjects who respond to a series of questions about thinking, behaviors, and opinions, often in the form of a questionnaire
- **symbolic interactionism** | a theoretical perspective through which scholars examine the relationship of individuals within their society by studying their communication through language and symbols
- **theory** | a proposed explanation about social interactions or society
- **validity** | the degree to which a sociological measure accurately reflects the topic of study
- **value neutrality** | a practice of remaining impartial, without bias or judgment, during the course of a study and in publishing results
- **verstehen** | a German word that means to understand in a deep way

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1.10: Short Answer

Critical Thinking Questions

1. What do you think C. Wright Mills meant when he said that to be a sociologist, one had to develop a sociological imagination?
2. Describe a situation in which a choice you made was influenced by societal pressures.
3. What do you make of Karl Marx's contributions to sociology? What perceptions of Marx have you been exposed to in your society, and how do those perceptions influence your views?
4. Do you tend to place more value on qualitative or quantitative research? Why? Does it matter what topic you are studying?
5. Which theory do you think better explains how societies operate—structural functionalism or conflict theory? Why?Do you think the way people behave in social interactions is more like the behavior of animals or more like actors playing a role in a theatrical production? Why?How do you think taking a sociology course might affect your social interactions?
6. What sort of career are you interested in? How could studying sociology help you in this career?
7. Write down the first three steps of the scientific method. Think of a broad topic that you are interested in and which would make a good sociological study—for example, ethnic diversity in a college, homecoming rituals, athletic scholarships, or teen driving. Now, take that topic through the first steps of the process. For each step, write a few sentences or a paragraph: 1) Develop a research question about the topic. 2) Do some research and write down the titles of some articles or books you'd want to read about the topic. 3) Formulate a hypothesis.
8. Explain the correlation between accuracy, validity, and reliability in the research method.
9. What type of data do surveys gather? For what topics would surveys be the best research method? What drawbacks might you expect to encounter when using a survey? To explore further, ask a research question and write a hypothesis. Then create a survey of about six questions relevant to the topic. Provide a rationale for each question. Now define your population and create a plan for recruiting a random sample and administering the survey.
10. Imagine you are about to do field research in a specific place for a set time. Instead of thinking about the topic of study itself, consider how you, as the researcher, will have to prepare for the study. What personal, social, and physical sacrifices will you have to make? How will you manage your personal effects? What organizational equipment and systems will you need to collect the data?
11. Create a brief research design about a topic in which you are passionately interested. Now write a letter to a philanthropic or grant organization requesting funding for your study. How can you describe the project in a convincing yet realistic and objective way? Explain how the results of your study will be a relevant contribution to the body of sociological work already in existence.
12. Why do you think the American Sociological Association (ASA) crafted such a detailed set of ethical principles? What type of study could put human participants at risk? Think of some examples of studies that might be harmful. Do you think that, in the name of sociology, some researchers might be tempted to cross boundaries that threaten human rights? Why?
13. Would you willingly participate in a sociological study that could potentially put your health and safety at risk, but had the potential to help thousands or even hundreds of thousands of people? For example, would you participate in a study of a new drug that could cure diabetes or cancer, even if it meant great inconvenience and physical discomfort for you or possible permanent damage?

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1.11: Further Research

Additional Learning Resources

- Sociology is a broad discipline. Different kinds of sociologists employ various methods for exploring the relationship between individuals and society. Check out a digital guide to learn more about sociology.
- Many sociologists helped shape the discipline. To learn more, check out a website featuring prominent sociologists and how they changed sociology.
- People often think of all conflict as violent, but many conflicts can be resolved nonviolently. To learn more about nonviolent methods of conflict resolution, check out the Albert Einstein Institution.
- Social communication is rapidly evolving due to ever-improving technologies. Check out the sociology guide to learn more about how sociologists study the impact of these changes.
- For a historical perspective on the scientific method in sociology, read "The Elements of Scientific Method in Sociology" by F. Stuart Chapin (1914) in the *American Journal of Sociology*.
- For information on current real-world sociology experiments, visit the Everyday Sociology Blog.
- Founded in 1905, the American Sociological Association is a nonprofit organization located in Washington, DC, with a membership of 14,000 researchers, faculty members, students, and practitioners of sociology. Its mission is "to articulate policy and implement programs likely to have the broadest possible impact for sociology now and in the future." Learn more about this organization through its official website.

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1.13: Accessible Text Descriptions

Figure 1.1: Road Map

A horizontal instructional diagram titled “Sociology as a Way of Seeing and Studying Society.” Beneath the title, three large light-gray arrows point from left to right, suggesting a progression through three guiding questions: why, who, and how. Each arrow contains a dark teal circle with white text.

The first circle is labeled “The ‘WHY’” and explains why sociology matters. It emphasizes that sociology connects personal lives to broader social patterns, including inequality, power, identity, institutions, and social change.

The second circle is labeled “The ‘WHO’” and identifies scholars who helped shape sociology: Auguste Comte, Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, Harriet Martineau, W. E. B. Du Bois, Jane Addams, and Ida B. Wells-Barnett.

The third circle is labeled “The ‘HOW’” and describes how sociologists study society. Sociologists develop questions, use theory, and gather evidence through methods such as surveys, interviews, observation, experiments, and the analysis of data and media.

Overall, the diagram presents sociology as a process of understanding why the discipline matters, recognizing the thinkers who shaped it, and learning the methods sociologists use to investigate society.

Figure 1.1.1: Individual Commuting Choices

The infographic is titled “How Individual Commuting Becomes Patterned Social Behavior.” It presents a left-to-right sequence of six numbered panels connected by arrows, showing how personal travel choices develop into broader social patterns and become subjects of sociological research.

1. Individual Commuters: Four people walk or travel with a bicycle in an urban setting. The text explains that people make daily travel choices about when, where, and how to move.
2. Repeated Routines: A calendar, clock, and route markers symbolize repetition over time. The text states that commuting habits are repeated across days and become familiar routines.
3. Informal Rules and Expectations: Five examples of unwritten commuting norms are listed with icons: line up and wait, keep right, allow space, respect personal space, and stand on one side of the escalator. The panel explains that people learn informal expectations concerning timing, spacing, and appropriate behavior.
4. Shared Movement Patterns: Overhead illustrations of pedestrians moving through an intersection and a transit station show colored paths converging, separating, and turning. The text explains that individual routines combine into recognizable pedestrian and traffic patterns.
5. Social Order in Public Space: A transit station scene shows commuters following signs, directional arrows, lanes, and platform guidance. Repeated coordination creates predictability, order, and smoother interaction in shared public spaces.
6. Sociological Questions and Research: A magnifying glass, checklist, and question mark represent investigation. The panel asks who follows commuting norms, who may be excluded or disrupted, and how space, class, gender, or disability shape commuting experiences.

A concluding statement across the bottom summarizes the main idea: behavior that appears personal becomes patterned social behavior through repetition, shared expectations, and coordination in public space.

Figure 1.5.1: The Scientific Method

A circular flowchart labeled “Scientific method” in the center presents six connected stages arranged clockwise. Gray arrows indicate that the process is cyclical rather than strictly linear.

The sequence begins at the top with “Observation/question,” where a researcher notices a phenomenon or identifies a question. The next stage, moving clockwise, is “Research topic area,” which involves reviewing or defining the broader subject of investigation. This leads to “Hypothesis,” where the researcher develops a testable explanation or prediction.

The next stage is “Test with experiment,” in which evidence is gathered by testing the hypothesis. The process then moves to “Analyze data,” where the collected information is examined and interpreted. The final stage is “Report conclusions,” where the researcher communicates the findings and explains whether the evidence supports the hypothesis.

An arrow returns from “Report conclusions” to “Observation/question,” showing that conclusions may produce new observations, questions, or areas for further research.

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2: CULTURE

Introduction

Culture shapes how people make meaning, communicate, build communities, and understand the world around them. It includes visible elements such as language, food, clothing, music, symbols, and rituals, but it also includes less visible elements such as values, beliefs, norms, assumptions, and ideas about what is considered "normal." Because culture is learned and shared, it helps people feel connected to others, but it can also create boundaries between groups.

In this chapter, we will examine culture as a central part of social life. We will explore how culture is created, transmitted, challenged, and changed over time. We will also consider how sociologists study culture not as something fixed or natural, but as something shaped by history, power, social interaction, institutions, media, migration, and inequality.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- Define culture and identify its major components, including symbols, language, norms, values, and beliefs.
- Distinguish between different forms of culture, including high culture, popular culture, subculture, and counterculture.
- Explain how culture is learned, shared, and transmitted through social interaction and institutions.
- Analyze examples of cultural change, cultural conflict, ethnocentrism, and cultural relativism.
- Compare major sociological perspectives on culture, including functionalist, conflict, and symbolic interactionist approaches.

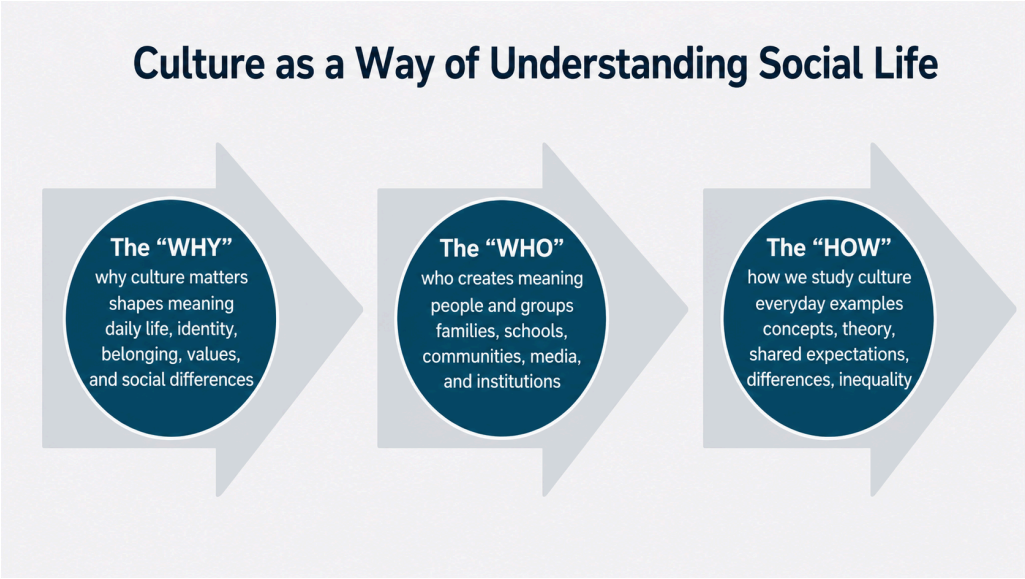


Figure 2.1: Culture shapes meaning, identity, belonging, and shared expectations, helping us understand how social life is organized. (Marx Gomez-Liendo via ChatGPT). Access alternative description for Figure 2.1.

Why, Who, and How

Culture influences nearly every part of our lives, from how we greet others to how we understand family, work, education, identity, religion, gender, race, politics, and belonging. We will study culture by looking at everyday examples, sociological concepts, and theoretical perspectives that help us move beyond simple judgments of "right" or "wrong" ways of living. This chapter is for anyone who wants to better understand how people create meaning, how societies organize shared expectations, and how cultural differences and inequalities shape social life.

2.1: Case Study and Vignette
2.2: What Is Culture?
2.3: A Conceptual Network
2.4: High, Low, Pop, Sub, Counter-culture and Cultural Change
2.5: Perspectives on Culture
2.6: Key Terms
2.7: Short Answer
2.8: Further Research
2.9: References
2.10: Accessible Text Descriptions

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2.1: Case Study and Vignette

The Importance of Social Contexts

Culture is not only found in museums, traditions, music, holidays, food, or national symbols. It is also present in the ordinary interactions we move through every day, including the small greetings we often use without thinking carefully about them. Sociologists pay attention to these everyday moments because they reveal shared expectations about politeness, communication, emotion, time, and relationships. The following vignette illustrates how a simple question, “How are you?”, can carry different meanings depending on the social context.

"Hi, How Are You?"

Imagine walking down a hallway on campus, joining a Zoom meeting, or stepping into your workplace at the beginning of the day. Someone smiles and asks, “Hi, how are you?” Without thinking much about it, you probably respond with something like, “Good, how are you?” or “I’m fine, thanks.” The exchange may last only a few seconds, but it follows a familiar cultural pattern. In many everyday situations in the United States, “How are you?” is not always a request for a full emotional report. It often functions as a greeting, a small ritual that signals friendliness, recognition, and social politeness.

Now imagine responding differently. What if every time someone asked, “How are you?” you stopped, took a deep breath, and gave a detailed account of your stress, family concerns, financial worries, health issues, and hopes for the future? In some contexts, that response might be welcomed. A close friend over coffee, a therapist, or a family member might expect and appreciate a more honest and detailed answer. But in a quick hallway exchange, a workplace check-in, or the first few minutes of a video conference, the same response might feel unexpected or uncomfortable. The other person may pause awkwardly, change their tone, or look for a way to exit the conversation. You may not have broken a law, but you likely violated a norm.

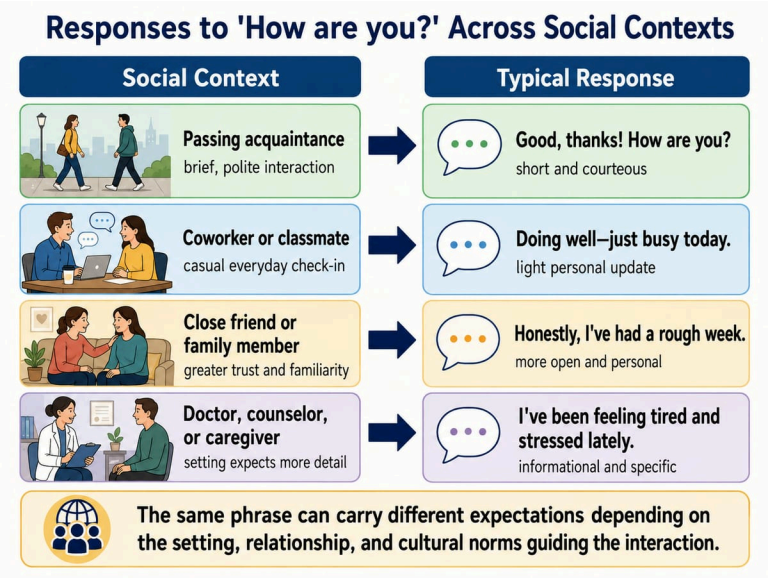


Figure 2.1.1: Responses to “How are you?” vary according to the relationship, setting, and cultural expectations surrounding an interaction. (Marx Gomez-Liendo via ChatGPT). Access alternative description for Figure 2.1.1.

Studying Patterns

This small example shows how culture operates in everyday life. A greeting is not “just” a greeting. It carries shared meanings about politeness, emotional boundaries, time, intimacy, and the relationship between the people involved. The same words can mean different things depending on the context, the setting, and the relationship between speakers.

Sociologists are interested in these patterns. They ask: Why is a brief answer expected in one situation but not another? Who decides what counts as polite, awkward, rude, respectful, or inappropriate? How do people learn these expectations? What happens when someone does not follow them? These questions help us see that culture is created, maintained, and enforced through social interaction. When people follow cultural expectations, the interaction usually feels smooth and "normal." When they do not, others may respond with confusion, laughter, correction, discomfort, or disapproval.

This vignette also helps clarify the difference between culture and society. Culture refers to the shared values, beliefs, norms, language, symbols, practices, and meanings that guide people's lives. Society refers to the people who share, reproduce, and organize those cultural patterns. The two are deeply connected. Culture cannot exist without people who practice and transmit it, and society cannot exist without shared meanings and expectations that help people interact.

Within any society, however, culture is not always uniform. In the United States, people may share some broad cultural expectations, but there are also many communities, subcultures, regional differences, and group-specific practices. A greeting in one neighborhood, workplace, religious community, online space, or family setting may not mean exactly the same thing in another. What feels polite in one context may feel distant, overly formal, too personal, or even disrespectful in another.

Throughout this chapter, we will use examples like this to examine how culture shapes social life. We will explore how values, beliefs, norms, language, symbols, arts, artifacts, collective memories, and identities help organize human behavior. We will also consider how culture changes, how cultural differences can produce misunderstanding or conflict, and how sociologists use different theoretical perspectives to study the relationship between culture and society.

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2.2: What Is Culture?

One World, Many Cultures

Humans are social creatures. According to Smithsonian Institution research, humans have been forming groups for almost 3 million years in order to survive. Living together, people formed common habits and behaviors, from specific methods of childrearing to preferred techniques for obtaining food.

Almost every human behavior, from shopping to marriage, is learned. In the U.S., marriage is generally seen as an individual choice made by two adults, based on mutual feelings of love. In other nations and in other times, marriages have been arranged through an intricate process of interviews and negotiations between entire families. In Papua New Guinea, almost 30 percent of women marry before the age of 18, and 8 percent of men have more than one wife (National Statistical Office, 2019). To people who are not from such a culture, arranged marriages may seem to have risks of incompatibility or the absence of romantic love. But many people from cultures where marriages are arranged, which includes a number of highly populated and modern countries, often prefer the approach because it reduces stress and increases stability (Jankowiak 2021).

Being familiar with unwritten rules helps people feel secure and at ease. Knowing to look left instead of right for oncoming traffic while crossing the street can help avoid serious injury and even death. Knowing unwritten rules is also fundamental in understanding humor in different cultures. Humor is common to all societies, but what makes something funny is not. Americans may laugh at a scene in which an actor falls; in other cultures, falling is never funny. Most people want to live their daily lives confident that their behaviors will not be challenged or disrupted. But even an action as seemingly simple as commuting to work evidences a great deal of cultural propriety, that is, there are a lot of expected behaviors. And many interpretations of them.



Figure 2.2.1: How would a visitor from a rural region act and feel on this crowded Hong Kong train? (Crowded subway by Eric Chan via flickr is licensed under CC BY 4.0)

Take the case of going to work on public transportation. Whether people are commuting in Egypt, Ireland, India, Japan, and the U.S., many behaviors will be the same and may reveal patterns. Others will be different. In many societies that enjoy public transportation, a passenger will find a marked bus stop or station, wait for the bus or train, pay an agent before or after boarding, and quietly take a seat if one is available. But when boarding a bus in Cairo, Egypt, passengers might board while the bus is moving, because buses often do not come to a full stop to take on patrons. In Dublin, Ireland, bus riders would be expected to extend an arm to indicate that they want the bus to stop for them. And when boarding a commuter train in Mumbai, India, passengers must squeeze into overstuffed cars amid a lot of pushing and shoving on the crowded platforms. That kind of behavior might be considered rude in other societies, but in Mumbai it reflects the daily challenges of getting around on a train system that is taxed to capacity.

Culture can be material or nonmaterial. Metro passes and bus tokens are part of material culture, as are the buses, subway cars, and the physical structures of the bus stop. Think of material culture as items you can touch-they are *tangible*. Nonmaterial culture, in contrast, consists of the ideas, attitudes, and beliefs of a society. These are things you cannot touch. They are *intangible*. You may *believe* that a line should be formed to enter the subway car or that other passengers should not stand so close to you. Those *beliefs* are intangible because they do not have physical properties and can be touched.

Material and nonmaterial aspects of culture are linked, and physical objects often symbolize cultural ideas. A metro pass is a material object, but it represents a form of nonmaterial culture, namely, capitalism, and the acceptance of paying for transportation. Clothing, hairstyles, and jewelry are part of material culture, but the appropriateness of wearing certain clothing for specific events reflects nonmaterial culture. A school building belongs to material culture symbolizing education, but the teaching methods and educational standards are part of education's nonmaterial culture.

As people travel from different regions to entirely different parts of the world, certain material and nonmaterial aspects of culture become dramatically unfamiliar. What happens when we encounter different cultures? As we interact with cultures other than our own, we become more aware of the differences and commonalities between others and our own. If we keep our sociological imagination awake, we can begin to understand and accept the differences. Body language and hand gestures vary around the world, but some body language seems to be shared across cultures: When someone arrives home later than permitted, a parent or guardian meeting them at the door with crossed arms and a frown on their face means the same in Russia as it does in the U.S. as it does in Ghana.

Cultural Universals

Although cultures vary, they also share common elements. Cultural universals are patterns or traits that are globally common to all societies. One example of a cultural universal is the family unit: every human society recognizes a family structure that regulates sexual reproduction and the care of children. Even so, how that family unit is defined and how it functions vary. In many Asian cultures, for example, family members from all generations commonly live together in one household. In these cultures, young adults continue to live in the extended household family structure until they marry and join their spouse's household, or they may remain and raise their nuclear family within the extended family's homestead. In the U.S., by contrast, individuals are expected to leave home and live independently for a period before forming a family unit that consists of parents and their offspring. Other cultural universals include customs like funeral rites, weddings, and celebrations of births. However, each culture may view and conduct the ceremonies quite differently.

Anthropologist George Murdock first investigated the existence of cultural universals while studying systems of kinship around the world. Murdock found that cultural universals often revolve around basic human survival, such as finding food, clothing, and shelter, or around shared human experiences, such as birth and death or illness and healing. Through his research, Murdock identified other universals including language, the concept of personal names, and, interestingly, jokes. Humor seems to be a universal way to release tensions and create a sense of unity among people (Murdock, 1949). Sociologists consider humor necessary to human interaction because it helps individuals navigate otherwise tense situations.

Sociological Research: Is Music a Cultural Universal?

Imagine that you are sitting in a theater, watching a film. The movie opens with the protagonist sitting on a park bench with a grim expression on their face. The music starts to come in. The first slow and mournful notes play in a minor key. As the melody continues, the heroine turns her head and sees a man walking toward her. The music gets louder, and the sounds don't seem to go together – as if the orchestra is intentionally playing the wrong notes. You tense up as you watch, almost hoping to stop. The character is clearly in danger.

Now imagine that you are watching the same movie – the exact same footage – but with a different soundtrack. As the scene opens, the music is soft and soothing, with a hint of sadness. You see the protagonist sitting on the park bench with a grim expression. Suddenly, the music swells. The woman looks up and sees a man walking toward her. The notes are high and bright, and the pace is bouncy. You feel your heart rise in your chest. This is a happy moment.

Music has the ability to evoke emotional responses. In television shows, movies, commercials, and even the background music in a store, music has a message and seems to easily draw a response from those who hear it – joy, sadness, fear, victory. Are these types of musical cues cultural universals?

In 2009, a team of psychologists, led by Thomas Fritz of the Max Planck Institute for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences in Leipzig, Germany, studied people's reactions to music that they'd never heard (Fritz et al., 2009). The research team traveled to Cameroon, Africa, and asked Mafa tribal members to listen to Western music. The tribe, isolated from Western culture, had never been exposed to Western culture and had no context or experience within which to interpret its music. Even so, as the tribal members listened to a Western piano piece, they were able to recognize three basic emotions: happiness, sadness, and fear. Music, the study suggested, is a sort of universal language.

Researchers also found that music can foster a sense of wholeness within a group. In fact, scientists who study the evolution of language have concluded that originally language (an established component of group identity) and music were one (Darwin, 1871). Additionally, since music is largely nonverbal, the sounds of music can cross societal boundaries more easily than words. Music allows people to make connections, where language might be a more difficult barricade. As Fritz and his team found, music and the emotions it conveys are cultural universals.

Ethnocentrism and Cultural Relativism

Although human societies have much in common, cultural differences are far more prevalent than cultural universals. For example, while all cultures have language, analysis of conversational etiquette reveals tremendous differences. In some Middle Eastern cultures, it is common to stand close to others in conversation. Americans keep more distance and maintain a large "personal space." Additionally, behaviors as simple as eating and drinking vary greatly from culture to culture. Some cultures use tools to put the food in the mouth while others use their fingers. If your professor comes into an early morning class holding a mug of liquid, what do you assume they are drinking? In the U.S., it's most likely filled with coffee, not Earl Grey tea, a favorite in England, or Yak Butter tea, a staple in Tibet.

Some travelers pride themselves on their willingness to try unfamiliar foods, like the late celebrated food writer Anthony Bourdain (1956-2017). Often, however, people express disgust at another culture's cuisine. They might think that it's gross to eat raw meat from a donkey or parts of a rodent, while they don't question their own habit of eating cows or pigs.

Such attitudes are examples of ethnocentrism, which means to evaluate and judge another culture based on one's own cultural norms. Ethnocentrism is believing your group is the correct measuring standard and if other cultures do not measure up to it, they are wrong. As sociologist William Graham Sumner (1906) described the term, it is a belief or attitude that one's own culture is better than all others. Almost everyone is a little bit ethnocentric.

A high level of appreciation for one's own culture can be healthy. A shared sense of community pride, for example, connects people in a society. But ethnocentrism can lead to disdain or dislike of other cultures and could cause misunderstanding, stereotyping, and conflict. Individuals, government, non-government, private, and religious institutions with the best intentions sometimes travel to a society to "help" its people, because they see them as uneducated, backward, or even inferior. Cultural imperialism is the deliberate imposition of one's own cultural values on another culture.

Colonial expansion by Portugal, Spain, Netherlands, and England grew quickly in the fifteenth century was accompanied by severe cultural imperialism. European colonizers often viewed the people in these new lands as uncultured savages who needed to adopt Catholic governance, Christianity, European dress, and other cultural practices.

A modern example of cultural imperialism may include the work of international aid agencies who introduce agricultural methods and plant species from developed countries into areas that are better served by indigenous varieties and agricultural approaches to the particular region. Another example would be the deforestation of the Amazon Basin as indigenous cultures lose land to timber corporations.



Figure 2.2.2: Experiencing an entirely new practice may lead to a high degree of interest or a level of criticism. The Indegenous people of Sagada, in the Philippines, have for thousands of years placed the bodies of deceased people into coffins hung on the cliffs near their villages. Some visitors may find this practice admirable, while others may think it's inappropriate. (Hanging coffins by Arian Zwegers via flickr is licensed under CC BY 4.0)

When people find themselves in a new culture, they may experience disorientation and frustration. In sociology, we call this culture shock. In addition to the traveler's biological clock being 'off', a traveler from Chicago might find the nightly silence of rural Montana unsettling, not peaceful. Now, imagine that the 'difference' is cultural. An exchange student from China to the U.S. might be annoyed by the constant interruptions in class as other students ask questions—a practice that is considered rude in China. Perhaps the Chicago traveler was initially captivated with Montana's quiet beauty and the Chinese student was originally excited to see a U.S.- style classroom firsthand. But as they experience unanticipated differences from their own culture, they may experience ethnocentrism as their excitement gives way to discomfort and doubts about how to behave appropriately in the new situation. According to many authors, international students studying in the U.S. report that there are personality traits and behaviors expected of them. Black African students report having to learn to 'be Black in the U.S.' and Chinese students report that they are naturally expected to be good at math. In African countries, people are identified by country or kin, not color. Eventually, as people learn more about a culture, they adapt to the new culture for a variety of reasons.

Culture shock may appear because people aren't always expecting cultural differences. Anthropologist Ken Barger (1971) discovered this when he conducted a participatory observation in an Inuit community in the Canadian Arctic. Originally from Indiana, Barger hesitated when invited to join a local snowshoe race. He knew he would never hold his own against these experts. Sure enough, he finished last, to his mortification. But the tribal members congratulated him, saying, "You really tried!" In Barger's own culture, he had learned to value victory. To the Inuit people, winning was enjoyable, but their culture valued survival skills essential to their environment: how hard someone tried could mean the difference between life and death. Over the course of his stay, Barger participated in caribou hunts, learned how to take shelter in winter storms, and sometimes went days with little or no food to share among tribal members. Trying hard and working together, two nonmaterial values, were indeed much more important than winning.

During his time with the Inuit tribe, Barger learned to engage in cultural relativism. Cultural relativism is the practice of assessing a culture by its own standards rather than viewing it through the lens of one's own culture. Practicing cultural relativism requires an open mind and a willingness to consider, and even adapt to, new values, norms, and practices.

However, indiscriminately embracing everything about a new culture is not always possible. Even the most culturally relativist people from egalitarian societies—ones in which women have political rights and control over their own bodies—question whether the widespread practice of female genital mutilation in countries such as Ethiopia and Sudan should be accepted as a part of cultural tradition. Sociologists attempting to engage in cultural relativism, then, may struggle to reconcile aspects of their own culture with aspects of a culture that they are studying. Sociologists may take issue with the practices of female genital mutilation in many countries to ensure virginity at marriage just as some male sociologists might take issue with scarring of the flesh to show membership. Sociologists work diligently to keep personal biases out of research analysis.

Sometimes when people attempt to address feelings of ethnocentrism and develop cultural relativism, they swing too far to the

other end of the spectrum. Xenocentrism is the opposite of ethnocentrism, and refers to the belief that another culture is superior to one's own. (The Greek root word xeno-, pronounced "ZEE-no," means "stranger" or "foreign guest.") An exchange student who goes home after a semester abroad or a sociologist who returns from the field may find it difficult to associate with the values of their own culture after having experienced what they deem a more upright or nobler way of living. An opposite reaction is xenophobia, an irrational fear or hatred of different cultures.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for sociologists studying different cultures is the matter of keeping a perspective. It is impossible for anyone to overcome all cultural biases. The best we can do is strive to be aware of them. Pride in one's own culture doesn't have to lead to imposing its values or ideas on others. And an appreciation for another culture shouldn't preclude individuals from studying it with a critical eye. This practice is perhaps the most difficult for all social scientists.

Sociology in the Real World: Overcoming Culture Shock

During her summer vacation, Caitlin flew from Chicago, Illinois to Madrid, Spain to visit Maria, the exchange student she had befriended the previous semester. In the airport, she heard rapid, musical Spanish being spoken all around her.

Exciting as it was, she felt isolated and disconnected. Maria's mother kissed Caitlin on both cheeks when she greeted her. Her imposing father kept his distance. Caitlin was half asleep by the time supper was served—at 10 p.m. Maria's family sat at the table for hours, speaking loudly, gesturing, and arguing about politics, a taboo dinner subject in Caitlin's house. They served wine and toasted their honored guest. Caitlin had trouble interpreting her hosts' facial expressions, and did not realize she should make the next toast. That night, Caitlin crawled into a strange bed, wishing she had not come. She missed her home and felt overwhelmed by the new customs, language, and surroundings. She'd studied Spanish in school for years—why hadn't it prepared her for this?

What Caitlin did not realize was that people depend not only on spoken words but also on body language, like gestures and facial expressions, to communicate. Cultural norms and practices accompany even the smallest nonverbal signals (DuBois, 1951). They help people know when to shake hands, where to sit, how to converse, and even when to laugh. We relate to others through a shared set of cultural norms, and ordinarily, we take them for granted.

For this reason, culture shock is often associated with traveling abroad, although it can happen in one's own country, state, or even hometown. Anthropologist Kalervo Oberg (1960) is credited with first coining the term "culture shock." In his studies, Oberg found that most people are excited at first to encounter a new culture. But bit by bit, they become stressed by interacting with people from a different culture who speak another language and use different regional expressions. There is new food to digest, new daily schedules to follow, and new rules of etiquette to learn. Living with this constant stress can make people feel incompetent and insecure. People react to frustration in a new culture, Oberg found, by initially rejecting it and glorifying one's own culture. An American visiting Italy might long for a "real" pizza or complain about the unsafe driving habits of Italians.

It helps to remember that culture is learned. Everyone is ethnocentric to an extent, and identifying with one's own country is natural. Caitlin's shock was minor compared to that of her friends Dayar and Mahlika, a Turkish couple living in married student housing on campus. And it was nothing like that of her classmate Sanai. Sanai had been forced to flee war-torn Bosnia with her family when she was fifteen. After two weeks in Spain, Caitlin had developed more compassion and understanding for what those people had gone through. She understood that adjusting to a new culture takes time. It can take weeks or months to recover from culture shock, and it can take years to fully adjust to living in a new culture.

By the end of Caitlin's trip, she had made new lifelong friends. Caitlin stepped out of her comfort zone. She had learned a lot about Spain, but discovered a lot about herself and her own culture.

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2.3: A Conceptual Network

Values and Beliefs

The first, and perhaps most crucial, elements of culture we will discuss are values and beliefs. Value does not mean monetary worth in sociology, but rather ideals, or principles and standards members of a culture hold in high regard. Most cultures in any society hold "knowledge" (education) in high regard. *Values* are deeply embedded and are critical for learning a culture's *beliefs*, which are the tenets or convictions that people hold to be true. Individual cultures in a society have personal beliefs, but they also shared collective values. To illustrate the difference, U.S. citizens may believe in the American Dream—that anyone who works hard enough will be successful and wealthy. Underlying this belief is the American value that wealth is important. In other cultures, success may be tied less to wealth and more to having many healthy children. Values shape a society by suggesting what is good and bad, beautiful and ugly, sought or avoided.

Consider the value that the U.S. places upon youth. Children represent innocence and purity, while a youthful adult appearance signifies sexuality. Shaped by this value, individuals spend millions of dollars each year on cosmetic products and surgeries to look young and beautiful. The U.S. also has an individualistic culture, meaning people place a high value on individuality and independence. In contrast, many other cultures are collectivist, meaning the welfare of the group takes priority over that of the individual. Fulfilling a society's values can be difficult. Marital monogamy is valued, but many spouses engage in infidelity. Cultural diversity and equal opportunities for all people are valued in the U.S., yet the country's highest political offices have been dominated by white men.

Values often suggest how people should behave, but they don't accurately reflect how people do behave. Values portray an ideal culture, the standards society would like to embrace and live up to. But ideal culture differs from real culture. In an ideal culture, there would be no traffic accidents, murders, poverty, or racial tension. But in real culture, police officers, lawmakers, educators, and social workers constantly strive to prevent or address these issues. American teenagers are encouraged to value celibacy. However, the number of unplanned pregnancies among teens reveals that the ideal alone is not enough to spare teenagers the potential consequences of having sex.

One of the ways societies strive to maintain its values is through rewards and punishments. When people observe the norms of society and uphold its values, they are often rewarded. A boy who helps an elderly woman board a bus may receive a smile and a "thank you." A business manager who raises profit margins may receive a quarterly bonus. People sanction unwanted or inappropriate behaviors by withholding support, approval, or permission, or by implementing sanctions. We may think of 'sanction' as a negative term, but sanctions are forms of social control, ways to encourage conformity to cultural norms or rules. Sometimes people conform to norms in anticipation or expectation of positive sanctions. Receiving good grades, for instance, may mean praise from parents and teachers. Sanctions can also be negative. . A boy who shoves an elderly woman aside to board the bus first may receive frowns or even a scolding from other passengers. A business manager who drives away customers will likely be fired. Breaking norms and rejecting values can lead to cultural sanctions such as earning a negative label like 'lazy' or to legal sanctions, such as traffic tickets, fines, or imprisonment. Utilizing social control encourages most people to conform regardless of whether authority figures (such as law enforcement) are present.

Values are not static. They change across time and between groups as people evaluate, debate, and change collective social beliefs. Values also vary from culture to culture. For example, cultures differ in their values about what kinds of physical closeness are appropriate in public. It's rare to see two male friends or coworkers holding hands in the U.S. where that behavior often symbolizes romantic feelings. But in many nations, masculine physical intimacy is considered natural in public. This difference in cultural values came to light when people reacted to photos of former president G.W. Bush holding hands with the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia in 2005. Simple gestures, such as hand-holding, carry great symbolic differences across cultures.



Figure 2.3.1: In many parts of Africa and the Middle East, it is considered normal for men to hold hands in friendship. How would US citizens react to these two soldiers? (Soldiers holding hands by Geordie Mott via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY 4.0)

Norms

So far, many of the examples in this chapter have described how people are *expected* to behave in certain situations—for example, buying food or boarding a bus. These examples describe the visible and invisible rules of conduct through which societies are structured, or what sociologists call norms. Norms are behaviors that reflect compliance with what cultures and societies have defined as good, right, and important. Most members adhere to them.

Formal norms are established, written rules existing in all societies. They support many social institutions, such as the military, criminal justice and healthcare systems, and public schools. Functionalists may question what *purpose* these norms serve, conflict theorists might be interested in *who* creates, benefits, and suffers under these formal norms, and symbolic interactionists wonder about how a group that benefits interacts. Laws are formal norms, but so are employee manuals, college entrance exam requirements, and “no running” signs at swimming pools. Formal norms are the most specific and clearly stated of the various types of norms, and they are the most strictly enforced. But they are enforced to varying degrees.

For example, private property is highly valued in the U.S. Thieves can be fined, imprisoned, or both. People safeguard valuable possessions by locking their doors, buying a safe, and installing alarm systems on homes and cars. A less strictly enforced social norm is driving while intoxicated. While it’s against the law to drive drunk, drinking is for the most part an acceptable social behavior. And though there are laws to punish drunk driving, there are few systems in place to prevent the crime.

There are plenty of formal norms, but the list of informal norms—casual behaviors that are generally and widely conformed to—is longer. People learn informal norms by observation, imitation, and general socialization. Some informal norms are taught directly— “Kiss your Aunt Edna” or “Use your napkin”—while others are learned by observation, including understanding consequences when someone else violates a norm. Informal norms dictate appropriate behaviors without the need of written rules and so may be difficult to learn when you are new to or not familiar with the culture.

Although informal norms define personal interactions, they extend into other systems as well. In the U.S., there are informal norms regarding behavior at fast food restaurants. Customers line up to order their food and leave when they are done. They don’t sit down at a table with strangers, sing loudly as they prepare their condiments, or nap in a booth. Most people don’t commit even harmless breaches of informal norms.

Sociological Research: Breaching Experiments

Sociologist Harold Garfinkel (1917–2011) studied people's customs in order to find out how societal rules and norms not only influence behavior but also shape social order. He believed that members of society together create a social order (Weber, 2011). His resulting book, *Studies in Ethno-methodology* (1967) discusses people's assumptions about the social makeup of their communities.

One of Garfinkel's research methods was known as a "breaching experiment," in which the researcher behaves in a socially awkward manner in order to test the sociological concepts of social norms and conformity. The participants are not aware an experiment is in progress, but their response is recorded. For example, if the experimenter is, say, a man in a business suit, and he skips down the sidewalk or hops on one foot, a passersby is likely to stare at him with surprised expressions. But the experimenter does not simply "act weird" in public. Rather, the point is to deviate from a specific social norm in a small way, to subtly break some form of social etiquette, and see what happens.

For example, he set up a simple game of tic-tac-toe. One player was asked beforehand to mark Xs and Os not in the boxes but on the lines dividing the spaces instead. The other player, in the dark about the study, was flabbergasted and did not know how to continue. The second player's outrage, anger, puzzlement, or other emotion suggested that a cultural norms had been violated.

There are many rules about speaking with strangers in public. It is okay to tell a woman you like her shoes. It is not okay to ask if you can try them on. It is okay to stand in line behind someone at the ATM. It is not okay to look over his shoulder as he makes a transaction. It is okay to sit beside someone on a crowded bus. It's weird to sit beside a stranger in a half-empty bus.

For some breaches, the researcher directly engages with innocent bystanders. An experimenter might strike up a conversation in a public bathroom, where it's common to respect each other's privacy. In a grocery store, an experimenter might take a food item out of another person's grocery cart, saying, "That looks good! I think I'll try it." An experimenter might sit down at a table with others in a fast-food restaurant or follow someone around a museum and study the same paintings. In those cases, the bystanders are pressured to respond, and their discomfort illustrates how much we depend on social norms. Breaching experiments uncover and explore the many unwritten social rules we live by.

Norms may be further classified as either mores or folkways. Mores (mor-ays) are norms that embody the moral views and principles of a group. They often have a religious foundation. Violating them can have serious consequences. The strongest mores are protected with laws and other formal sanctions. In most societies, for instance, homicide is considered immoral, and it's punishable by law (a formal norm). But more often, mores are judged and guarded by public sentiment (an informal norm). People who violate mores are seen as shameful. They can even be shunned or banned from some groups.

The mores of the U.S. school system require that a student's writing be in the student's own words or use special forms (such as quotation marks and a whole system of citation) for crediting other writers. Submitting or publishing another person's words as if they are one's own has a name—plagiarism. The consequences for violating this norm are often severe and can result in expulsion from school or termination from employment.

Unlike mores, folkways are norms without any moral underpinnings. Rather, folkways direct appropriate behavior in the day-to-day practices and expressions of a culture. We can think of them as 'traditions'—things we do because we 'always have.' They indicate whether to shake hands or kiss on the cheek when greeting another person. They specify whether to wear a tie and blazer or a T-shirt and sandals to an event. In Canada, women can smile and say hello to men on the street. In Egypt, that's not acceptable. In regions in the southern U.S., bumping into an acquaintance means stopping to chat. It's considered rude not to, no matter how busy one is. In other regions, people guard their privacy and value time efficiency. A simple nod of the head is enough. Other accepted folkways in the U.S. may include holding the door open for a stranger or giving someone a gift on their birthday. The rules regarding these folkways may change from culture to culture. A folkway in one culture could be extremely rude in another.

Folkways are actions that people everywhere take for granted. People need to act without thinking in order to get seamlessly through daily routines. They can't stop and analyze every action (Sumner, 1906). Folkways might be small actions, learned by observation and imitated, but they are by no means trivial. An important folkway in many cultures is kissing Grandmother on the cheek. Fail to do so and you will likely be scolded.

Symbols and Culture

Humans, consciously and subconsciously, are always striving to make sense of their surrounding world. Symbols—such as gestures, signs, objects, signals, and words—help people understand that world. They provide communication methods to understanding experiences by conveying recognizable meanings that are shared by societies.

The world is filled with symbols. Sports uniforms, company logos, and traffic signs are symbols. In some cultures, a gold ring is a symbol of marriage. Some symbols are highly functional; stop signs, for instance, provide useful instruction. As physical objects, they belong to material culture, but because they function as symbols, they also convey nonmaterial cultural meanings. Some symbols are valuable only in what they represent. Trophies, blue ribbons, or gold medals, for example, represent accomplishments. But many objects have both material and nonmaterial symbolic value.

Symbols often get noticed when they are out of context. Used unconventionally, they convey strong messages. A stop sign placed on the door of a college building makes a political statement, as does a camouflage military jacket worn in an antiwar protest. Together, the semaphore signals for "N" and "D" represent nuclear disarmament—and form the well-known peace sign (Westcott, 2008). Some college students wear pajamas and bedroom slippers to class, clothing that was formerly associated only with privacy and bedtime. By wearing the outfit, students are defying traditional cultural norms.

Some symbols represent only one side of the story and elicit strong emotions, which can lead to social unrest. Their presence is a reminder of a nation's worst times and not something to celebrate. Many of these symbols are targets of vandalism as the destruction of these representations is symbolic. Effigies representing public figures are burned to demonstrate anger at certain leaders. In 1989, crowds tore down the Berlin Wall, a decades-old symbol of the division between East and West Germany, communism, and capitalism. In the U.S. beginning in 2019, statues associated with slavery and the Civil War were removed from state capitols, college campuses, and public parks. In Germany, any display of Hitler or Nazi memorabilia or to deny the Holocaust is illegal.

While different cultures have varying systems of symbols, one system is common to all: language. Whatever its form, people learn social and cultural norms through it.

Language and Symbols

Language is a system that uses symbols with which people communicate and through which culture is transmitted. Letters (which make up words), pictographs, and hand gestures are all symbols that create a language used for communication. Sign language, for example, requires an intimate knowledge not only of an alphabet but also of signs that represent entire words and the meaning indicated by certain facial expressions or postures. Its grammar differs from the spoken language. As spoken language is different across regions, nations and cultures, and can even differ by the age of the person, so too does sign language.

All language systems contain the same basic elements that are effective in communicating ideas - object, subject, action. A written language system consists of symbols that refer to spoken sound. Taken together, these symbols convey specific meanings. The English language uses a combination of twenty-six letters to create words. These twenty-six letters make up over 600,000 recognized words (OED Online, 2011). We can compare the reliance on tone and inflection to Mandarin Chinese. It contains over 8,000 characters, but the same character may symbolize different concepts depending on the tone used.

English today contains an English and French version for the same concept. For example, in the English version, one eats, but in French version, one dines. In the English version, we meet someone. In the French version, we encounter someone. Readers of American English may be surprised by the inclusion of a 'u' in some spellings of words like 'behaviour' or 'flavour.' Americans have dropped that 'u' that writers of British English include. Billions of people speak English, and there are almost as many pronunciations of it.

Rules for speaking and writing vary even within cultures, most notably by region. Do you eat a grinder, a sub, or a hero/gyro? Do you refer to a can of carbonated liquid as "soda" or "pop"? Is a household entertainment room a "family room," "rec room," or "den"? When leaving a restaurant, do you ask your server for a "check," the "ticket," or your "bill"? Language is constantly evolving and adding new words as societies create new ideas. In this age of technology, many cultures have adapted almost instantly to new nouns such as "e-mail" and "Internet," and verbs such as "downloading," "texting," and "blogging." These would have considered nonsense words just the world twenty-five years ago.

Language and Culture

Even while it constantly evolves, language shapes our perception of reality and our behavior. In the 1920s, linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf advanced this idea which became known as Sapir-Whorf hypothesis or linguistic relativity. It is based on the idea that people experience their world through their language, and therefore understand their world through the cultural meanings embedded in their language. The hypothesis suggests that language shapes thought and thus behavior (Swoyer, 2003). For example, words have attached meanings beyond their definition that can influence thought and behavior. In the U.S. where the number thirteen is associated with bad luck, many high-rise buildings do not have a 13^{th} floor. In Japan, however, the number four is considered unlucky, since it is pronounced similarly to the Japanese word for "death."

Many sociologists believe that language can have a broad and lasting impact on perception. In 2002, Lera Boroditsky and her colleagues conducted experiments on native German and Spanish speakers in English. Unlike English, these languages assign genders to nouns. In German, for example, the word for sun, die Sonne, is feminine, but the word for moon, der Mond, is masculine. The team chose a set of nouns with opposite genders in German and Spanish and asked participants to provide adjectives to describe them. They found that German speakers used more masculine adjectives than Spanish speakers when describing a noun that was grammatically masculine in German but feminine in Spanish. For example, the word for key is masculine in German and feminine in Spanish. German speakers described keys as hard, heavy, jagged, metal, serrated, and useful, while Spanish speakers used the adjectives, golden, intricate, little, lovely, shiny, and tiny. The team concluded that gender perceptions acquired in a person's native language carry forward to how they see the world even when they switch to a language without grammatical genders (Boroditsky, Schmidt, and Phillips, 2002).

Some sociologists also believe the structure of language can have consequences on both individual and group behavior. For example, a series of studies have found that Finland has a significantly higher rate of workplace accidents than Sweden despite the fact that the languages have similar workplace regulations (Salminen & Johansson, 2000). John A. Lucy explained this discrepancy through differences in the structure of these languages. Swedish places a greater emphasis on the timing of movement in three-dimensional space. Consequently, Lucy argued, the Swedish factories are physically arranged in a manner that supports the smooth running of the product process. Finnish factors experience frequent disruptions, so that workers must rush and have more accidents (Lucy, 1997).

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis has been interpreted to suggest that if a word does not exist in a language then users of that language cannot have the experience. Studies have shown, for instance, that unless people have access to the word "ambivalent," they don't *recognize* having conflicting positive and negative feelings about an issue as 'ambivalence.' However, the hypothesis should not suggest that people do not have conflicting feelings but rather that they interpret the feelings differently.

In addition to using spoken language, people communicate without words. Nonverbal communication is symbolic, and, as in the case of language, is learned through one's culture. Some gestures are nearly universal; some are not. Smiles often indicate positive reinforcement in the U.S., whereas in some cultures it is rude as you do not know the person. A thumbs-up in Russia and Australia is an offensive curse (Passero, 2002). Other gestures vary in meaning depending on the situation and the person. A wave of the hand can mean many things, depending on how it's done and for whom. It may mean "hello," "goodbye," "no thank you," or "I'm royalty." Winks convey a variety of messages, including "We have a secret," "I'm only kidding," or "I'm attracted to you." From a distance, a person may "read" the emotional situation of people just by watching their body language and facial expressions. However, many cultures communicate with lots of physicality, which people outside that culture may interpret as an argument. So, for example, you might believe two people are arguing when, in fact, they are simply having a regular conversation.

Social Policy and Debate: Is the U.S. Bilingual?

When she was six, Lucy and her family immigrated to the United States and attended a school that allowed for the use of both English and Spanish. Lucy's teacher and many staff were bilingual (fluent in English and Spanish), and the district offered books in both languages. While she was being driven to learn English, the dual-language option helped to ensure that she did not become lost and get behind in her learning of all subjects. Having math, science, and computing taught in both languages helped her understand those concepts and skills. Within two years of enrolling in the school, Lucy was getting nearly all of her instruction in English, and rarely used the Spanish-language books or resources. While she still had trouble with some intricacies of English, her math progress was above grade level and she did well in other subjects as well.

Some people might believe that Lucy would have learned faster had she been instructed only in English. But research indicates that is not the case. Johns Hopkins University researchers conducted a series of studies on the effects of bilingual education across multiple subjects (Slavin et al. 2008). They found that students taught in both their native tongue and English make better progress than those taught only in English.

Legally, the U.S. has no official language. But many believe English to be the rightful language of the U.S., and over thirty states have passed laws specifying English as their official tongue. Proponents of English-only laws suggest that a national ruling will save money on translation, printing, and human resource costs, including funding for bilingual teachers. They argue that setting English as the official language will encourage non-English speakers to learn English faster and adapt to the culture of the U.S. more easily (Mount 2010). Groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) oppose making English the official language and claim that it violates the rights of non-English speakers. English-only laws, they believe, deny the reality of our nation's diversity and unfairly target non-English speakers. They point to the fact that much of the debate on this topic has risen since 1970, a period during which the U.S. has experienced new waves of immigration from Asia and Mexico.

Today, a lot of product information gets written in multiple languages. Enter a store like Home Depot and you'll find signs in both English and Spanish. Buy a children's product and the safety warnings could be presented in multiple languages. While marketers are financially motivated to reach the largest number of consumers possible, this trend also may help people become accustomed to a culture of bilingualism.

Studies show that most US immigrants eventually abandon their native tongues and become fluent in English. Bilingual education helps with that transition. Today, Lucy is an ambitious and high-achieving college student. Fluent in both English and Spanish, Lucy is studying law enforcement—a field that seeks bilingual employees. The same bilingualism that contributed to her success in grade school will help her thrive professionally as a law officer serving her community.

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2.4: High, Low, Pop, Sub, Counter-culture and Cultural Change

Types of Culture

It may seem obvious that there are a multitude of cultural differences between societies in the world. After all, we can easily see that people vary from one society to the next. It's natural to think that a young woman from a village in rural Kenya in Eastern Africa would have a different view of the world from a young woman from urban Mumbai, India—one of the most populated cities in the world.

Additionally, each culture has its own internal variations. Sometimes the differences between cultures are not as large as the differences within cultures. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu wrote about *cultural capital*, which consists of material goods, non-material attitudes, and knowledge that are specific to a certain economic class. Bourdieu grouped cultural capital into three categories: *embodied* (a regional dialect), *objectified* (possessions), and *institutionalized* (academic credentials). In the U.S., some group culture into three categories as well: high, low, and pop (for popular).

High, Low, and Popular Culture

Can you identify the Chief Financial Officer of three major corporations? How about the name of the server at three local hangouts? How many books do you own? How many social media sites do you visit? Is your family listed on the Social Register©? Have you ever heard of the Social Register©? In each pair, one type of knowledge is considered high culture and the other low culture.

This could be considered stereotyping by economic class rather than by race or gender, but sociologists use the term high culture to describe the *pattern* of cultural experiences and attitudes that exist in the highest or elite class segments of a society. People often associate high culture with intellectualism, political power, and prestige. In America, high culture also tends to be associated with wealth. Events considered high culture can be expensive, formal, and exclusive – attending a ballet, seeing a play, listening to a live symphony performance, or attending a prestigious university. Similarly, low culture is associated with the pattern of cultural experiences and attitudes that exist in the lowest class segments of a society.

The term popular culture refers to the pattern of cultural experiences and attitudes that exist in mainstream society. Popular culture events might include a parade, a baseball game, or the season finale of a television show. Music, anime, and cosplay are pieces of popular culture. Popular culture is accessible by most and is expressed and spread via commercial and social media outlets such as radio, television, movies, the music industry, publishers, and corporate-run websites. You can share a discussion of favorite football teams with a new coworker or comment on a reality show when making small talk in line at the grocery store. But if you tried to launch into a deep discussion on the classical Greek play *Antigone*, few members of U.S. society today would be familiar with it. Although high culture may be considered by some as superior to popular culture, the lines between high culture and popular culture vary over time and place. Shakespearean plays, considered to be popular culture when they were written, are now part of our society's high culture. Five hundred years from now, will our descendants consider *Dancing with the Stars* as fine performance art?

Subculture and Counterculture



Figure 2.4.1: Cosplayers are a distinct subculture (a smaller cultural group within the larger culture) in the United States. And within the larger subculture are subgroups, such as this one emulating D.C. Comics characters. (Comic-Con 2013 by Pat Loika via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY 4.0)

A subculture is just what it sounds like—a smaller cultural group within a larger culture. People of a subculture are part of the larger culture but also share a specific identity within a smaller group.*

Thousands of subcultures exist within the U.S. Ethnic and racial groups share the language, food, and customs of their heritage. Other subcultures are formed through shared experiences. Biker culture revolves around an interest in motorcycles. Some subcultures are formed by people who possess traits or preferences that differ from the majority of a society's population. The body modification community embraces aesthetic additions to the human body, such as tattoos, piercings, and certain forms of plastic surgery. But even as members of a subculture band together, they still identify with and participate in the larger society.

Sociologists distinguish subcultures from countercultures, which reject some of the larger culture's norms and values. In contrast to subcultures, which operate relatively smoothly within the larger society, countercultures might actively defy larger society by developing their own set of rules and norms to live by, sometimes even creating communities that operate outside of greater society. Counterculture members are 'against' the dominant ruling culture and want to install their own values. Sub-culture members may want to change some things but established procedures are followed.

Cults, a word derived from culture, are also considered counterculture groups. The group "Yearning for Zion" (YFZ) in Eldorado, Texas, existed outside the mainstream and the limelight, until its leader was accused of statutory rape and underage marriage. The sect's formal norms clashed too severely to be tolerated by US law, and in 2008, authorities raided the compound and removed more than two hundred women and children from the property. Many cults claim to be spiritual, often establishing themselves as a religion. When each of the three Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Islam, and Judaism) in the world began, they were treated as cults and suffered much oppression because of it.

Cultural Change

Cultures continually change because new items are added to material culture every day and in turn, meanings are assigned to them (non-material), which affects other cultural components. For example, a new technology, such as railroads or smartphones, might introduce new ways of traveling or communicating. New ideas, such as flash mobs or crowdfunding, enter a culture . Sociologists identify two broad categories of change as innovation (meaning new) and diffusion (to spread out). Material cultural change happens when new items are *discovered* or *invented* or enter a culture as a result of *globalization*.

Innovation: Discovery and Invention

An innovation refers to an object or concept's initial appearance in society—it is innovative because it is new. Innovations are

discovered or invented. *Discoveries* make known previously unknown but existing aspects of reality. In 1610, when Galileo looked through his telescope and discovered Saturn, the planet was already there, but until then, no one had known about it. When Christopher Columbus encountered Hispaniola, the island was, of course, already well known to its inhabitants. However, his discovery was new knowledge for Europeans, and it opened the way to changes in European culture, as well as to the cultures of the discovered lands. For example, new foods such as potatoes and tomatoes transformed the European diet, and horses brought from Europe changed hunting practices of Great Plains Native Americans.

Inventions result when something new is formed from existing objects or concepts—when things are put together in an entirely new manner. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, electric appliances were invented at an astonishing pace. Cars, airplanes, vacuum cleaners, lamps, radios, telephones, and televisions were all new inventions. Inventions may shape a culture by replacing older ways of carrying out tasks, being integrated into current practices, or creating new activities. Their adoption reflects (and may shape) cultural values, and their use may introduce new norms and practices.

Consider the rise of mobile phones. As more and more people began carrying these devices, phone conversations no longer were restricted to homes, offices, and phone booths. People on trains, in restaurants, and in other public places became annoyed by listening to one-sided conversations. New norms and behaviors were needed for cell phone use. Some people pushed for the idea that those who are out in the world should pay attention to their companions and surroundings. Fortunately, technology found a workaround: texting, which enables quiet communication surpassed phone conversations as the primary way to communicate anywhere, everywhere.

When the pace of innovation increases, it can lead to generation gaps. Technological gadgets that catch on quickly with one generation are sometimes dismissed by an older generation that is skeptical or struggles to adopt them. The older generation might tune into a musician performing on public television while the younger generation prefers a livestream. A culture's objects and ideas can cause not just generational but cultural gaps. Material culture tends to diffuse more quickly than nonmaterial culture; technology can spread through society in a matter of months, but it can take generations for the ideas and beliefs of society to change including methods for researching or learning information (e.g., library versus Internet search).

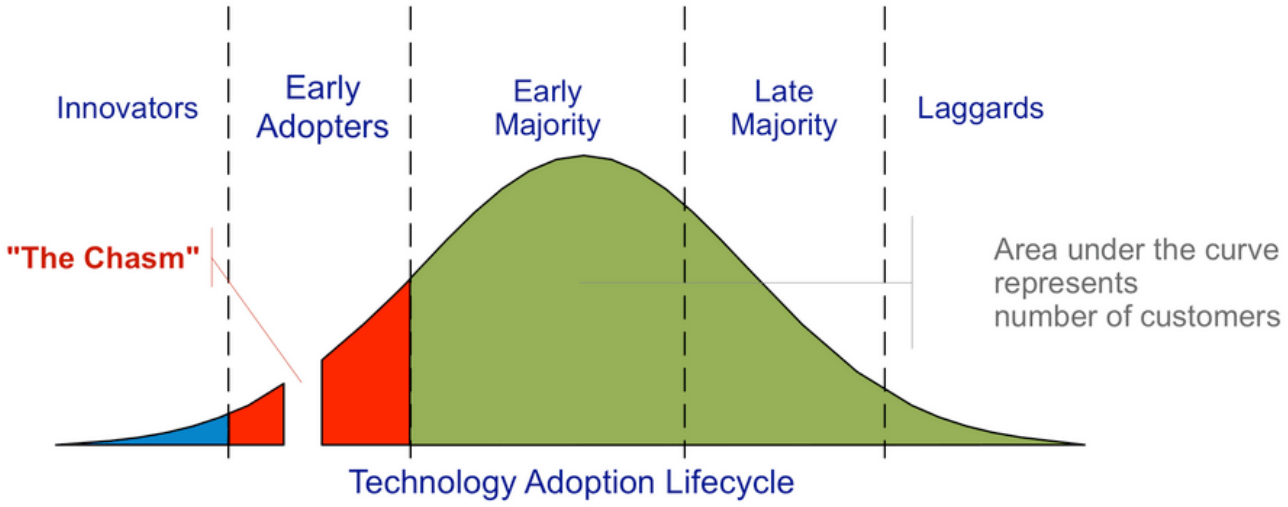


Figure 2.4.2: The technology adoption lifecycle groups customers as innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards, with a "chasm" separating early adopters from the mainstream market. (Technology adoption lifecycle by Craig Chelius via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY 4.0). Access alternative description for Figure 2.4.2.

Coined by sociologist William F. Ogburn (1957), the term culture lag refers to the time that passes between the introduction of a new item of material culture and its social acceptance. Culture lag can also cause tangible problems. The infrastructure of the U.S., built a hundred years ago or more, is having trouble supporting today's more heavily populated and fast-paced life. Yet there is a lag in conceptualizing solutions to infrastructure problems. Municipalities struggle with traffic control, increased air pollution, and limited parking, which are all symptoms of culture lag. Although people are becoming aware of the consequences, overuse, or lack of resources, addressing these needs takes time.

Diffusion and Globalization

Another way material and nonmaterial culture crosses borders is through diffusion. Like a gas in a laboratory experiment, the item or idea spreads throughout. Diffusion relates to the process of the integration of cultures into the mainstream while globalization refers to the promotion and increase of interactions between different regions and populations around the globe resulting in the integration of markets and interdependence of nations fostered through trade.

Ideas concepts, or artifacts are often diffused, or spread, to individuals and groups, resulting in new social practices. People might develop a new appreciation of Thai noodles or Italian gelato (ice cream). Access to television and the Internet has brought the lifestyles and values portrayed in U.S. sitcoms into homes around the globe and vice versa. Twitter feeds from public demonstrations in one nation have encouraged political protesters in other countries. When this kind of diffusion occurs, ideas from one culture are introduced into another, often before the associated material objects. The graph above displays when diffusion typically occurs, essentially driving an innovation to spread beyond its earliest adopters to the wider majority of people.

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2.5: Perspectives on Culture

Theoretical Approaches

Music, fashion, technology, and values—all are products of culture. But what do they mean? How do sociologists perceive and interpret culture based on these material and nonmaterial items? Let's finish our analysis of culture by reviewing them in the context of three theoretical perspectives: functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism.

Functionalism

Functionalists view society as a system in which all parts work—or function—together to create society as a whole. They often use the human body as an analogy. Looking at life in this way, *societies need culture to exist*. Cultural norms function to support the fluid operation of society, and cultural values guide people in making choices. Just as members of a society work together to fulfill a society's needs, culture exists to meet its members' social and personal needs.

Functionalists also study culture in terms of values. For example, education is highly valued in the U.S. The culture of education—including material culture such as classrooms, textbooks, libraries, educational technology, dormitories and non-material culture such as specific teaching approaches—demonstrates how much emphasis is placed on the value of educating a society's members. In contrast, if education consisted of only providing guidelines and some study material without the other elements, that would demonstrate that the culture places a lower value on education.



Figure 2.5.1: This statue of Superman stands in the center of Metropolis, Illinois. His pedestal reads "Truth—Justice—The American Way." How would a functionalist interpret this statue? What does it reveal about the values of American culture? (Massac County Courthouse by Antony-22 via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0)

Functionalists view the different categories of culture as serving many functions. Having membership in a culture, a subculture, or a counterculture brings camaraderie and social cohesion and benefits the larger society by providing places for people who share similar ideas.

Conflict Theory

Conflict theorists, however, view social structure as inherently unequal, based on power differentials related to issues like class, gender, race, and age. For a conflict theorist, established educational methods are seen as reinforcing the dominant societal culture and issues of privilege. The historical experiences of certain groups— those based upon race, sex, or class, for instance, or those that portray a negative narrative about the dominant culture—are excluded from history books. For a long time, U.S. History

education omitted the assaults on Native American people and society that were part of the colonization of the land that became the United States. A more recent example is the recognition of historical events like race riots and racially based massacres like the Tulsa Massacre, which was widely reported when it occurred in 1921 but was omitted from many national historical accounts of that period of time. When an episode of HBO's *Watchmen* showcased the event in stunning and horrific detail, many people expressed surprise that it had occurred and it hadn't been taught or discussed (Ware 2019).

Historical omission is not restricted to the U.S. North Korean students learn of their benevolent leader without information about his mistreatment of large portions of the population. According to defectors and North Korea experts, while famines and dire economic conditions are obvious, state media and educational agencies work to ensure that North Koreans do not understand how different their country is from others (Jacobs 2019).

Inequities exist within a culture's value system and become embedded in laws, policies, and procedures. This inclusion leads to the oppression of the powerless by the powerful. A society's cultural norms benefit some people but hurt others. Women were not allowed to vote in the U.S. until 1920, making it hard for them to get laws passed that protected their rights in the home and in the workplace. Same-sex couples were denied the right to marry in the U.S. until 2015. Elsewhere around the world, same-sex marriage is only legal in 31 of the planet's 195 countries.

At the core of conflict theory is the effect of economic production and materialism. Dependence on technology in rich nations *versus* a lack of technology and education in poor nations. Conflict theorists believe that a society's system of material production has an effect on the rest of culture. People who have less power also have fewer opportunities to adapt to cultural change. This view contrasts with the perspective of functionalism. Where functionalists would see the purpose of culture—traditions, folkways, values—as helping individuals navigate through life and societies run smoothly, conflict theorists examine socio-cultural struggles, including the power and privilege created for some by using and reinforcing a dominant culture that sustains their position in society.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is the sociological perspective that is most concerned with the face-to-face interactions and cultural meanings between members of society. It is considered a micro-level analysis. Instead of looking how access is different between the rich and poor, interactionists see culture as being created and maintained by the ways people interact and in how individuals interpret each other's actions. In this perspective, people perpetuate cultural ways. Proponents of this theory conceptualize human interaction as a continuous process of deriving meaning from both objects in the environment and the actions of others. Every object and action has a symbolic meaning, and language serves as a means for people to represent and communicate interpretations of these meanings to others. Symbolic interactionists perceive culture as highly dynamic and fluid, as it is dependent on how meaning is interpreted and how individuals interact when conveying these meanings. Interactionists research changes in language. They study additions and deletions of words, the changing meaning of words, and the transmission of words in an original language into different ones.

We began this chapter by asking, "What is culture?" Culture is comprised of values, beliefs, norms, language, practices, and artifacts of a society. Because culture is learned, it includes how people think and express themselves. While we may like to consider ourselves individuals, we must acknowledge the impact of culture on us and our way of life. We inherit language that shapes our perceptions and patterned behavior, including those of family, friends, faith, and politics.

To an extent, culture is a social comfort. After all, sharing a similar culture with others is precisely what defines societies. Nations would not exist if people did not coexist culturally. There could be no societies if people did not share heritage and language, and civilization would cease to function if people did not agree on similar values and systems of social control.

Culture is preserved through transmission from one generation to the next, but it also evolves through processes of innovation, discovery, and cultural diffusion. As such, cultures are social constructions. The society approves or disapproves of items or ideas, which are therefore included or not in the culture. We may be restricted by the confines of our own culture, but as humans we have the ability to question values and make conscious decisions. No better evidence of this freedom exists than the amount of cultural diversity around the world. The more we study another culture, the better we become at understanding our own.

When a River Is Not Just a Resource

In many environmental debates, governments, corporations, and policy experts often describe rivers, forests, land, and minerals as natural resources. From this perspective, the main question is usually how those resources should be used, managed, protected, or developed. But not all communities understand the natural world in this way.

Mario Blaser's research helps us see that some environmental conflicts are not only about land use, economic development, or access to resources. They are also about different ways of understanding what the world is and how humans are connected to it. For example, Blaser discusses Indigenous communities in Latin America who describe rivers, trees, and land not simply as objects or property, but as relatives, living beings, or parts of a larger web of relationships. In one case, an Awajún leader from the Peruvian Amazon describes the river as a "brother" who gives water, protection, and life. In another case, a Yshiro leader from Paraguay explains that his people "grow along with the trees" and understand them as relatives rather than as things separate from human life (Blaser, 2013).

This example connects directly to the study of culture because it shows that culture shapes how people define reality. One group may see a river mainly as water, territory, or an economic resource. Another group may see that same river as a living relation connected to community, memory, responsibility, and survival. The conflict, then, is not only about who gets to use the river. It is also about whose meanings, values, and knowledge are taken seriously.

From a sociological perspective, this case helps us ask deeper questions: Who has the power to define land as a "resource"? Whose worldview is treated as rational or scientific? Whose worldview is dismissed as merely cultural, spiritual, or traditional? Blaser's argument reminds us that culture is not just about customs, food, language, or traditions. Culture also shapes how people understand nature, community, knowledge, and power.

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2.6: Key Terms

Glossary

- **beliefs** | tenets or convictions that people hold to be true
- **countercultures** | groups that reject and oppose society's widely accepted cultural patterns
- **cultural universals** | patterns or traits that are globally common to all societies
- **culture** | shared beliefs, values, and practices
- **culture lag** | the gap of time between the introduction of material culture and nonmaterial culture's acceptance of it
- **diffusion** | the spread of material and nonmaterial culture from one culture to another
- **discoveries** | things and ideas found from what already exists
- **ethnocentrism** | the evaluation and judgment of another culture based on one's own cultural norms
- **folkways** | direct, appropriate behavior in the day-to-day practices and expressions of a culture
- **formal norms** | established, written rules
- **globalization** | the integration of international trade and finance markets
- **high culture** | the cultural patterns of a society's elite
- **ideal culture** | the standards a society would like to embrace and live up to
- **informal norms** | casual behaviors that are generally and widely conformed to
- **innovations** | new objects or ideas introduced to culture for the first time
- **inventions** | a combination of pieces of existing reality into new forms
- **language** | a symbolic system of communication
- **mores** | the moral views and principles of a group
- **norms** | the visible and invisible rules of conduct through which societies are structured
- **popular culture** | mainstream, widespread patterns among a society's population
- **real culture** | the way society really is based on what actually occurs and exists
- **sanctions** | a way to authorize or formally disapprove of certain behaviors
- **Sapir-Whorf hypothesis** | the way that people understand the world based on their form of language
- **social control** | a way to encourage conformity to cultural norms
- **society** | people who live in a definable community and who share a culture
- **subcultures** | groups that share a specific identification, apart from a society's majority, even as the members exist within a larger society
- **symbols** | gestures or objects that have meanings associated with them that are recognized by people who share a culture
- **values** | a culture's standard for discerning what is good and just in society

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2.7: Short Answer

Critical Thinking Questions

1. Examine the difference between material and nonmaterial culture in your world. Identify ten objects that are part of your regular cultural experience. For each, identify the aspects of nonmaterial culture—values, beliefs, norms, language, and practices—that these objects represent. What has this exercise revealed to you about your culture?
2. Do you believe that ethnocentric or xenocentric attitudes and practices are prevalent in U.S. culture? Why do you believe this? What issues or events might influence your ideas about these concepts?
3. What do you think of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis? Do you agree or disagree with it? Cite examples or research to support your point of view.
4. How would the elimination of a social norm influence your culture? Describe the positive and negative effects.
5. Identify several examples of popular culture and describe how they contribute to societal culture. How prevalent is the influence of these examples in your everyday life?
6. Consider some of the specific issues or concerns of your generation. Are any ideas or concepts countercultural? What subcultures have emerged from your generation? How have the issues of your generation been expressed culturally? How has your generation made its mark on society's collective culture?
7. What are some examples of cultural lag in your life? What influence does technology have on culture? Explain.

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2.8: Further Research

Additional Learning Resources

- Ethnocentrism is a problem in many arenas. In the workplace, it can be hurtful and detrimental to an entire organization and especially to those who face mistreatment or feel unwelcome. People who exhibit ethnocentrism in the workplace are not only putting their careers at risk, but missing opportunities to flourish and advance with colleagues and customers of different backgrounds. In other words, curbing ethnocentrism is an important personal and societal goal, and it's important for careers. There is a guide from an executive leadership academy that discusses ways that multicultural teams can create more success if the people and company undertake the correct practices.
- The science-fiction novel, *Babel-17*, by Samuel R. Delaney was based upon the principles of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.
- Many people believe that the time of the counterculture is over. Like many aspects of culture, it could come back at any time. In an interview with Princeton professor German Labrador and director of exhibitions at the Center de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona, he discusses the past, present, and potential future of counterculture.

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2.10: Accessible Text Descriptions

Figure 2.1: Roadmap

A horizontal instructional diagram titled “Culture as a Way of Understanding Social Life.” Beneath the title, three large light-gray arrows point from left to right. Each arrow contains a dark teal circle with white text and presents one guiding question: why, who, and how.

The first circle is labeled “The ‘WHY’” and explains why culture matters. Culture shapes meaning in everyday life and influences identity, belonging, values, and social differences.

The second circle is labeled “The ‘WHO’” and identifies who creates cultural meaning. Meaning is produced by people and groups through families, schools, communities, media, and other social institutions.

The third circle is labeled “The ‘HOW’” and explains how culture is studied. Sociologists examine everyday examples using concepts and theories, paying attention to shared expectations, differences, and inequality.

Overall, the diagram presents culture as a framework for understanding how meaning is created, shared, and connected to social life and unequal social relations.

Figure 2.1.1: "How Are You"?

An infographic titled “Responses to ‘How are you?’ Across Social Contexts” compares four social situations with the kinds of responses typically expected in each. The diagram is arranged in two columns: Social Context on the left and Typical Response on the right. Each row includes an illustration, a description of the relationship or setting, and an arrow pointing to the corresponding response.

In the first row, a passing acquaintance represents a brief, polite interaction. The typical response is “Good, thanks! How are you?” This answer is described as short and courteous.

In the second row, a coworker or classmate represents a casual everyday check-in. The typical response is “Doing well—just busy today.” This response offers a light personal update without much detail.

In the third row, a close friend or family member represents a relationship with greater trust and familiarity. The typical response is “Honestly, I’ve had a rough week.” This answer is more open and personal.

In the fourth row, a doctor, counselor, or caregiver represents a setting where more detailed information is expected. The typical response is “I’ve been feeling tired and stressed lately.” This answer is informational and specific.

A summary statement at the bottom explains the main idea: the same phrase can carry different expectations depending on the setting, the relationship between the people involved, and the cultural norms guiding the interaction.

Figure 2.4.2: Technology Adoption Lifecycle

A bell-shaped diagram titled “Technology Adoption Lifecycle” shows how different groups adopt a new technology over time. The horizontal axis represents progression through the adoption process, while the area under the curve represents the number of customers in each group.

From left to right, the adopter categories are Innovators, Early Adopters, Early Majority, Late Majority, and Laggards. Vertical dashed lines separate the five categories.

The curve begins with a small blue section for innovators, indicating that only a small number of people are among the first to try a new technology. This is followed by a small red section for early adopters. A visible gap labeled “The Chasm” appears between early adopters and the larger mainstream market. The label points to the break in the curve and emphasizes the difficulty of

moving from early enthusiasm to broad adoption.

After the gap, the curve rises steeply through the early majority, reaches its highest point near the transition between the early and late majority, and then gradually declines through the late majority and laggards. These larger green sections show that most customers adopt only after the technology becomes more established, familiar, and widely accepted.

Overall, the diagram emphasizes that adoption is uneven: relatively few people adopt at the beginning, most join during the early- and late-majority stages, and the transition across the “chasm” is a critical challenge for technologies seeking widespread acceptance.

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3: SOCIETY AND SOCIAL INTERACTION

Introduction

Social interaction refers to the dynamic process through which individuals and groups communicate and connect with one another. It involves the sharing of words, gestures, and symbols that help build relationships and give meaning to everyday life. Across societies, these interactions range from simple conversations between two people (dyads) to complex networks within larger social groups and institutions. Social Interaction is the social fabric of a society that allows people to create shared rules, roles, and expectations. These social interactions, over time, form the basis of social structures such as families, schools, and communities. By looking at the bigger picture, the *why*, the *who*, and the *how* of social interaction, sociologists examine how meaning is created and interpreted within society. The *why* explores the motivations, values, and social norms that influence behavior; the *who* focuses on the individuals, groups, and audiences involved in an interaction; and the *how* considers the ways people communicate through language, symbols, gestures, media, and actions

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- Describe the key characteristics of pre-industrial, industrial, and post-industrial societies, noting how they differ in structure, economy, and daily life.
- Explain how environmental factors influence the survival strategies, culture, and social organization of preindustrial societies.
- Interpret how technological advances shape societal growth, influence cultural norms, and transform social structures over time.

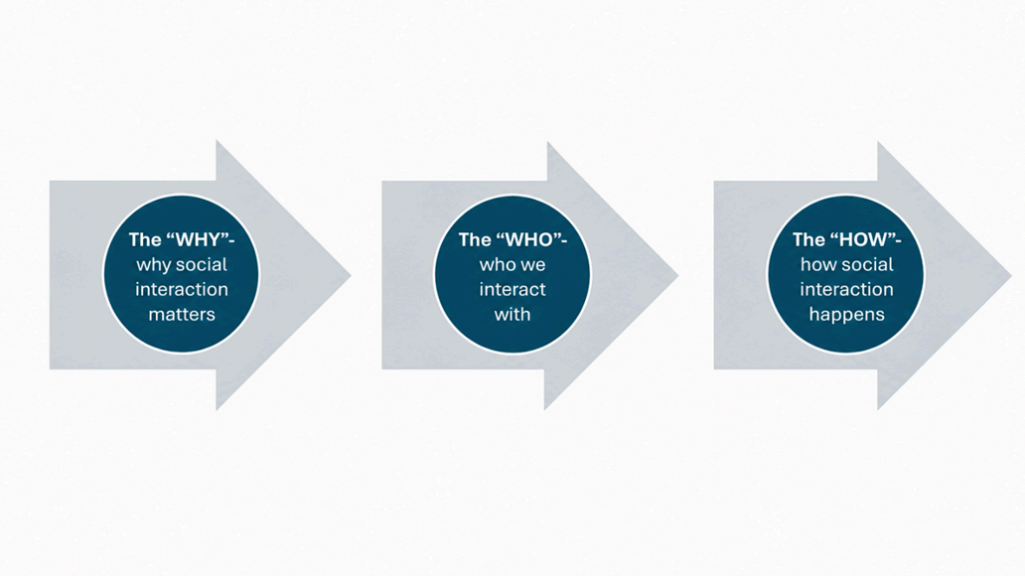


Figure 3.1: Three right-pointing arrows labeled "Why social interaction matters," (theoretical lenses)," Who we interact with," and "How social interaction happens," showing the progression of the chapter topics. (Jayanti Roy via ChatGPT). Access alternative description for Figure 3.1.

Why, Who, and How

The graphic illustrates three key questions that sociologists ask when studying social interaction: Why do we interact? Who do we interact with? How does interaction occur? Together, these questions help explain how individuals create relationships, communicate meaning, and maintain society. Social interaction is essential because it creates meaning and connection in everyday life. It allows individuals to build relationships and develop shared rules, roles, and expectations that make social

life possible. This process occurs through the exchange of words, gestures, and symbols that carry shared meaning. These interactions occur in everyday conversations as well as within larger networks such as groups and institutions. They involve all individuals and groups within a society. It includes people engaging in dyads, small groups, and larger institutions.

Social interaction is the foundation of society. Human beings are social creatures who rely on interaction to survive, learn, and develop a sense of identity. Through interactions with others, we learn language, cultural norms, values, and expectations about appropriate behavior. These everyday exchanges help people build friendships, families, workplaces, and communities.

Social interaction occurs with many different people throughout our lives. It begins with our primary groups such as family members and close friends, who have the greatest influence on our early development. As we grow, we expand our interactions to include classmates, coworkers, neighbors, community members, and even strangers.

Social interaction occurs through communication. People exchange information using language, gestures, facial expressions, body language, tone of voice, symbols and technology. These forms of communication carry shared meanings that allow people to understand one another.

3.1: Case Study/Vignette

3.2: Types of Societies

3.3: Theoretical Perspectives on Society

3.4: Social Constructions of Reality

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3.1: Case Study/Vignette

Socialization during COVID-19

What do you do when you can't go out to see your friends, neighbors, or loved ones? What happens when quarantine and lockdown suddenly cut people off from everyday social interaction? These were some of the questions many people in Italy faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, when strict lockdowns required people to remain physically distant from one another.

Sharing singing in Italy

What happened in Italy will likely become one of the most memorable examples in sociology of human resilience and creativity during a crisis. If people could not gather in public spaces, they found another way to connect — through their balconies. Even though everyone was confined to their homes, many Italians began singing, playing instruments, dancing, applauding healthcare workers, and talking with neighbors from their windows and balconies. Spaces that were once private suddenly became shared community spaces where people could interact during a stressful and uncertain time.



Figure 3.1.1: Sunlight creates striking geometric shadows across the balconies and windows of a residential apartment building. (Coronavirus lockdown in Milan, Italy by MLWatts via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC-BY-SA-4.0)

From a sociological perspective, this demonstrates how strongly humans seek connection, even during moments of crisis. The balconies became small gathering spaces where neighbors could socialize while still remaining physically distant. Sociologists might describe this as an example of collective behavior, symbolic interaction, and community resilience. Simple actions like singing together, waving, or applauding carried deeper meanings of hope, unity, and emotional support. During one of the most uncertain moments in recent history, these shared experiences helped bring people together without physical contact.

It also did not matter whether people previously knew their neighbors. Many individuals who had never spoken before began interacting across balconies, sharing music, laughter, conversation, and encouragement. In many ways, these balcony moments created temporary communities and helped reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation during the lockdown.

When the Script Breaks



Figure 3.1.2:: Will Smith slaps Chris Rock at Oscar's. (Untitled by Unsigned via Kaloud is licensed under CC BY-NC 4.0)

During the Academy Awards 2022, comedian Chris Rock made a joke on stage about Jada Pinkett Smith, the wife of Will Smith. In response, Smith walked onto the stage during the live broadcast and slapped Rock, then returned to his seat and shouted for him to refrain from speaking about his wife. The incident unfolded in real time before a global audience, with viewers and attendees reacting immediately.

As an example of social interaction, this moment illustrates the “why,” “how,” and “who” of interaction:

Why: It demonstrates how social norm, such as humor, respect, and appropriate public behavior, can be challenged.

How: The interaction occurs through multiple forms of communication, including words, gestures, physical action, and tone, each carrying symbolic meaning.

Who: It involves individuals (Will Smith and Chris Rock) as well as a broader audience, both those present at the event and those watching the live broadcast, whose reactions help shape the meaning and interpretation of the event.

What do you think? In what ways can social norms be challenged, reinforced, or redefined through moments like this? How can individuals navigate emotional responses while still adhering to social expectations?

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3.2: Types of Societies

Types of Societies

In sociological terms, society refers to a group of individuals who reside within a defined geographical area and who share common cultural elements, such as language, values, norms, and traditions. It is made up of people, institutions, and social systems that shape everyday life, along with the shared beliefs and customs that bring people together. In many cases, societies are also organized under a unified political system or governing authority, which helps maintain order and regulate collective behavior.

Consider China and the United States. Both are technologically advanced, have dense networks of transportation and communications, rely on foreign trading partners for large portions of their economies, focus on education as a way to advance their citizens, and have large and expensive militaries. Both countries have citizens that may be largely satisfied with their governments and ways of life, while still holding some degree of distrust or discontent regarding their leaders. And both have a rural versus urban disparity that can cause tension and economic inequality among the population. An individual family or even a whole office full of people in one of the countries may look and act very similarly to families or offices in the other country.

But what is different? In China, a far greater percentage of people may be involved in manufacturing than America. Many of China's cities didn't evolve from ports, transit centers, or river confluences hundreds of years ago, but are newly created urban centers inhabited by recent transplants from other locations. While citizens in the U.S. can openly express their dissatisfaction with their government through social activism in person or, especially, online, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube are banned in China, and the press is controlled by the government. Their appearance might be very similar, but the two countries are very different societies.

Sociologist Gerhard Lenski Jr. (1924–2015) defined societies in terms of their technological sophistication. As a society advances, so does its use of technology. Societies with rudimentary technology depend on the fluctuations of their environments, while industrialized societies have more control over the impact of their surroundings and thus develop different cultural features. This distinction is so important that sociologists generally classify societies along a spectrum of their level of industrialization—from preindustrial to industrial to postindustrial.

Preindustrial Societies

Before the Industrial Revolution and the widespread use of machines, societies were small, rural, and dependent largely on local resources. Economic production was limited to the amount of labor a human being could provide and communities produced only what they needed to survive, with little surplus. Production was limited by the physical capabilities of human labor, and there were few specialized occupations. The very first occupation was that of hunter-gatherer.

Hunter-Gatherer

The earliest form of economic and social organization centered around the hunter-gatherer lifestyle, in which people foraged for wild plants and hunted animals. Hunter-gatherer societies demonstrate the strongest dependence on the environment of the various types of preindustrial societies. As the basic structure of human society until about 10,000–12,000 years ago, these groups were based around kinship or tribes. Hunter-gatherers relied on their surroundings for survival—they hunted wild animals and foraged for uncultivated plants for food. When resources became scarce, the group moved to a new area to find sustenance, meaning they were nomadic. These societies were common until several hundred years ago, but today only a few hundred remain in existence, such as some Indigenous Australian communities, commonly referred to as Aboriginal peoples, the Bambuti, a group of pygmy hunter-gatherers residing in the rainforests of the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Onges people of the Andaman Islands in India.



Figure 3.2.1 Statues depicting members of The Onge Tribe from Andaman Islands of India. Hunter-gatherer groups are quickly disappearing as the world's population explodes. (Onge people by Kemylpethe Camp via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0)

Pastoral

Changing conditions and adaptations led some societies to rely on the domestication of animals where circumstances permitted. Roughly 7,500 years ago, human societies began to recognize their ability to tame and breed animals and to grow and cultivate their own plants. Unlike earlier hunter-gatherer groups, who were entirely dependent on naturally available resources, pastoral societies maintained and bred livestock such as sheep, goats, cattle, camels, or horses to meet their dietary, clothing, and transportation needs. Pastoral societies, such as the Maasai villagers, rely on the domestication of animals as a resource for survival. Unlike earlier hunter-gatherers who depended entirely on existing resources to stay alive, pastoral groups were able to breed livestock for food, clothing, and transportation, and they created a surplus of goods. Herding, or pastoral, societies remained nomadic because they were forced to follow their animals to fresh feeding grounds. Around the time that pastoral societies emerged, specialized occupations began to develop, and societies commenced trading with local groups.

Sociology in the Real World: Where Societies Meet—Reintroduction of wolves in Yellowstone National Park

When sociology and the environment collide, remarkable things can happen. One powerful example occurred in the 1990s, when wolves were reintroduced into Yellowstone National Park. This event has become one of the most famous examples of how society, science, environmental knowledge, and human decision-making can work together to dramatically reshape an ecosystem.

Wolves had been eliminated from Yellowstone decades earlier, but environmental scientists and conservationists began to recognize that bringing them back could help restore ecological balance rather than create new problems. Their return triggered unexpected environmental changes throughout the Yellowstone basin. Elk populations decreased, which reduced overgrazing and allowed vegetation to recover. Riverbanks stabilized, new growth emerged, birds returned, rivers changed the way they flowed, and both plant and animal life began to thrive once again.

Yet sociologically, the story was about much more than wildlife conservation. Different groups viewed the reintroduction very differently. Environmentalists celebrated the restoration of balance within the ecosystem. Ranchers worried about livestock safety and potential economic losses. Many Indigenous communities emphasized their long-standing cultural and spiritual relationships with wolves. Tourists and conservation groups often viewed wolves as powerful symbols of wilderness, nature, and environmental preservation.

In many ways, the reintroduction of wolves became far more than an environmental issue. It became a sociological example of how humans, nature, economics, culture, politics, and identity all interact. The return of a single predator forced society to balance competing values surrounding conservation, livelihood, Indigenous perspectives, environmental sustainability, and public land management.



Figure 3.2.2: The reintroduction of wolves to Yellowstone National Park is shaped by ecological science, public policy, economic interests, cultural values, and competing ideas about how humans should relate to nature. (WOLF by Jon Glittenberg via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0)

Horticultural

Around the same time that pastoral societies were on the rise, another type of society developed, based on the newly developed capacity for people to grow and cultivate plants. Previously, the depletion of a region's crops or water supply forced pastoral societies to relocate in search of food sources for their livestock. Horticultural societies formed in areas where rainfall and other conditions allowed them to grow stable crops. Horticultural societies represented a major shift from the nomadic lifestyles of earlier hunter-gatherers and pastoralists. Although they still relied heavily on the natural environment for survival, they were no longer compelled to constantly relocate. They were similar to hunter-gatherers in that they largely depended on the environment for survival, but since they didn't have to abandon their location to follow resources, they were able to start permanent settlements. This created more stability and more material goods and became the basis for the first revolution in human survival. Horticulture played a pivotal role in what is referred to as the first revolution in human survival: the Neolithic Revolution. The Neolithic Period marked human society's transition from a primarily subsistence-based, migratory existence to one characterized by settled agriculture, social complexity, and the eventual rise of more advanced civilizations.

Agricultural

While pastoral and horticultural societies used small, temporary tools such as digging sticks or hoes, agricultural societies relied on permanent tools for survival. Around 3000 B.C.E., an explosion of new technology known as the Agricultural Revolution made farming possible—and profitable. Farmers learned to rotate the types of crops grown on their fields and to reuse waste products such as manure as fertilizer, which led to better harvests and bigger surpluses of food. New tools for digging and harvesting were made of metal, and this made them more effective and longer lasting. Human settlements grew into towns and cities, and particularly bountiful regions became centers of trade and commerce.

This is also the age in which people had the time and comfort to engage in more contemplative and thoughtful activities, such as music, poetry, and philosophy. This period became referred to as the "dawn of civilization" by some because of the development of leisure and humanities. Craftspeople were able to support themselves through the production of creative, decorative, or thought-provoking aesthetic objects and writings. The development of writing systems during this time facilitated record-keeping, communication, and the transmission of cultural knowledge.

As resources became more plentiful, social classes became more divisive. Those who had more resources could afford better living and developed into a class of nobility. Difference in social standing between men and women increased. As cities expanded, ownership and preservation of resources became a pressing concern.

Feudal

The ninth century gave rise to feudal societies. Feudal societies were characterized by a rigid hierarchical structure rooted in land ownership, loyalty, and military service. These societies contained a strict system of power based around land ownership and protection. The nobility, known as lords, placed vassals in charge of pieces of land. In return for the resources that the land provided, vassals promised to fight for their lords.

These individual pieces of land, known as fiefdoms, were cultivated by the lower class. In return for maintaining the land, peasants were guaranteed a place to live and protection from outside enemies. Feudalism was not merely an economic system. It was also a deeply entrenched social and political order in which status, rights, and responsibilities were determined by birth. Power was handed down through family lines, with peasant families serving lords for generations and generations. Ultimately, the social and economic system of feudalism failed and was replaced by capitalism and the technological advances of the industrial era.

Industrial Society

In the eighteenth century, Europe experienced a dramatic rise in technological invention, ushering in an era known as the Industrial Revolution. What made this period remarkable was the number of new inventions that influenced people's daily lives. Within a generation, tasks that had until this point required months of labor became achievable in a matter of days. Before the Industrial Revolution, work was largely person- or animal-based, and relied on human workers or horses to power mills and drive pumps. In 1782, James Watt and Matthew Boulton created a steam engine that could do the work of twelve horses by itself.

Steam power began appearing everywhere. Instead of paying artisans to painstakingly spin wool and weave it into cloth, people turned to textile mills that produced fabric quickly at a better price and often with better quality. Rather than planting and harvesting fields by hand, farmers were able to purchase mechanical seeders and threshing machines that caused agricultural productivity to soar. Products such as paper and glass became available to the average person, and the quality and accessibility of education and health care soared. Gas lights allowed increased visibility in the dark, and towns and cities developed a nightlife.

One of the results of increased productivity and technology was the rise of urban centers. Workers flocked to factories for jobs, and the populations of cities became increasingly diverse. The new generation became less preoccupied with maintaining family land and traditions and more focused on acquiring wealth and achieving upward mobility for themselves and their families. People wanted their children and their children's children to continue to rise to the top, and as capitalism increased, so did social mobility.

It was during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of the Industrial Revolution that sociology was born. Life was changing quickly and the long-established traditions of the agricultural eras did not apply to life in the larger cities. Masses of people were moving to new environments and often found themselves faced with horrendous conditions of filth, overcrowding, and poverty. Social scientists emerged to study the relationship between the individual members of society and society as a whole.

It was during this time that power moved from the hands of the aristocracy and "old money" to business-savvy newcomers who amassed fortunes in their lifetimes. Families such as the Rockefellers and the Vanderbilts became the new power players and used their influence in business to control aspects of government as well. Eventually, concerns over the exploitation of workers led to the formation of labor unions and laws that set mandatory conditions for employees. Although the introduction of new technology at the end of the nineteenth century ended the industrial age, much of our social structure and social ideas—like family, childhood, and time standardization—have a basis in industrial society.

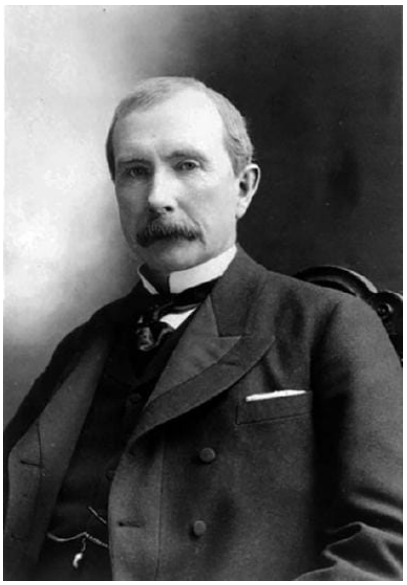


Figure 3.2.3:John D. Rockefeller, cofounder of the Standard Oil Company, came from an unremarkable family of salesmen and menial laborers. By his death at age 98, he was worth $1.4 billion. In industrial societies, business owners such as Rockefeller hold the majority of the power. (Portrait of J. D. Rockefeller by Scientific American Compiling Department via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC0 1.0)

Postindustrial Society

Information societies, sometimes known as postindustrial or digital societies, are a recent development. Unlike industrial societies that are rooted in the production of material goods, information societies are based on the production of information and services.

Digital technology is the steam engine of information societies, and computer moguls such as Steve Jobs and Bill Gates are its John D. Rockefellers and Cornelius Vanderbilts. Since the economy of information societies is driven by knowledge and not material goods, power lies with those in charge of storing and distributing information. In post-industrial economies, most people are employed in service-oriented or knowledge-based roles, such as software developers, data analysts, consultants, and educators, rather than in manufacturing or agriculture.

Social classes are divided by access to education, since without technical skills, people in an information society lack the means for success

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3.3: Theoretical Perspectives on Society

Émile Durkheim and Functionalism

As a functionalist, Émile Durkheim's (1858–1917) perspective on society stressed the necessary interconnectivity of all of its elements. To Durkheim, society was greater than the sum of its parts. He asserted that individual behavior was not the same as collective behavior and that studying collective behavior was quite different from studying an individual's actions.

Central to Durkheim's theory was the concept of the collective conscience—the shared beliefs, values, norms, and moral attitudes that operate as a unifying force within society. He believed that the collective conscience binds individuals together, guiding behavior and ensuring social cohesion. In his quest to understand what causes individuals to act in similar and predictable ways, he wrote, "If I do not submit to the conventions of society, if in my dress I do not conform to the customs observed in my country and in my class, the ridicule I provoke, the social isolation in which I am kept, produce, although in an attenuated form, the same effects as punishment" (Durkheim 1895). Durkheim also believed that social integration, or the strength of ties that people have to their social groups, was a key factor in social life.

Following the ideas of Comte and Spencer, Durkheim likened society to a living organism, in which each organ plays a necessary role in keeping the being alive. Even the socially deviant members of society are necessary, Durkheim argued, as punishments for deviance affirm established cultural values and norms. That is, punishment of a crime reaffirms our moral consciousness. "A crime is a crime because we condemn it," Durkheim wrote in 1893. "An act offends the common consciousness not because it is criminal, but it is criminal because it offends that consciousness" (Durkheim 1893). Durkheim called these elements of society "social facts." By this, he meant that social forces were to be considered real and existed outside the individual.

As an observer of his social world, Durkheim was not entirely satisfied with the direction of society in his day. His primary concern was that the cultural glue that held society together was failing, and people were becoming more divided. In his book *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893), Durkheim argued that as society grew more complex, social order made the transition from mechanical to organic.

Preindustrial societies, Durkheim explained, were held together by mechanical solidarity, a type of social order maintained by the collective conscience of a culture. Societies with mechanical solidarity act in a mechanical fashion; things are done mostly because they have always been done that way. This type of thinking was common in preindustrial societies where strong bonds of kinship and a low division of labor created shared morals and values among people, such as hunter-gatherer groups. When people tend to do the same type of work, Durkheim argued, they tend to think and act alike.

In industrial societies, mechanical solidarity is replaced with organic solidarity, which is social order based around an acceptance of economic and social differences. In capitalist societies, Durkheim wrote, division of labor becomes so specialized that everyone is doing different things. Instead of punishing members of a society for failure to assimilate to common values, organic solidarity allows people with differing values to coexist. Laws exist as formalized morals and are based on restitution rather than revenge.

While the transition from mechanical to organic solidarity is, in the long run, advantageous for a society, Durkheim noted that it can be a time of chaos and "normlessness." Durkheim acknowledged that the shift from mechanical to organic solidarity was both necessary and beneficial, yet he also recognized its inherent dangers. One such danger was anomie, (without law) a term he used to describe a state of normlessness or a breakdown in the social fabric. Anomie occurs when individuals feel disconnected from the collective conscience and lack guidance or shared values, often during periods of rapid social change. In times of anomie, people may experience alienation, purposelessness, and social instability. Collective norms are weakened. People, while more interdependent to accomplish complex tasks, are also alienated from each other. Anomie is experienced in times of social uncertainty, such as war or a great upturn or downturn in the economy. As societies reach an advanced stage of organic solidarity, they avoid anomie by redeveloping a set of shared norms. According to Durkheim, once a society achieves organic solidarity, it has finished its development.

Karl Marx and Conflict Theory

Karl Marx (1818–1883) is certainly among the most significant social thinkers in recent history. While there are many critics of

his work, it is still widely respected and influential. For Marx, society's constructions were predicated upon the idea of "base and superstructure." This term refers to the idea that a society's economic character forms its base, upon which rests the culture and social institutions, the superstructure. For Marx, it is the base (economy) that determines what a society will be like.

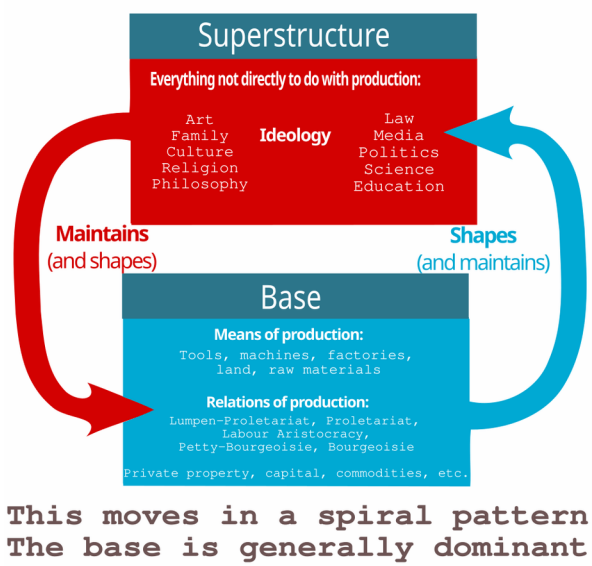


Figure 3.3.1: Karl Marx asserted that all elements of a society's structure depend on its economic structure. (Base-superstructure Dialectic by Satdeep Gill via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC-BY-SA-4.0). Access alternative description for Figure 3.3.1.

Additionally, Marx saw conflict in society as the primary means of change. Economically, he saw conflict existing between the owners of the means of production—the bourgeoisie—and the laborers, called the proletariat.

Marx maintained that these conflicts appeared consistently throughout history during times of social revolution. These revolutions or "class antagonisms" as he called them, were a result of one class dominating another. Most recently, with the end of feudalism, a new revolutionary class he called the bourgeoisie dominated the proletariat laborers. The bourgeoisie were revolutionary in the sense that they represented a radical change in the structure of society. In Marx's words, "Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other—Bourgeoisie and Proletariat" (Marx and Engels 1848).

In the mid-nineteenth century, as industrialization was booming, industrial employers, the "owners of the means of production" in Marx's terms, became more and more exploitative toward the working class. The large manufacturers of steel were particularly ruthless, and their facilities became popularly dubbed "satanic mills" based on a poem by William Blake. Marx's colleague and friend, Frederick Engels, wrote *The Condition of the Working-Class in England* in 1844, which described in detail the horrid conditions:

"Such is the Old Town of Manchester, and on re-reading my description, I am forced to admit that instead of being exaggerated, it is far from black enough to convey a true impression of the filth, ruin, and uninhabitableness, the defiance of all considerations of cleanliness, ventilation, and health which characterise the construction of this single district, containing at least twenty to thirty thousand inhabitants. And such a district exists in the heart of the second city of England, the first manufacturing city of the world."

Add to that the long hours, the use of child labor, and exposure to extreme conditions of heat, cold, and toxic chemicals, and it is no wonder that Marx and Engels referred to capitalism, which is a way of organizing an economy so that the things that are used to make and transport products (such as land, oil, factories, ships, etc.) are owned by individual people and companies rather than by the government, as the "dictatorship of the bourgeoisie."

For Marx, what we do defines who we are. In historical terms, in spite of the persistent nature of one class dominating another, some element of humanity existed. There was at least some connection between the worker and the product, augmented by the natural conditions of seasons and the rise and fall of the sun, such as we see in an agricultural society. But with the bourgeoisie revolution and the rise of industry and capitalism, the worker now worked for wages alone. His relationship to his efforts was no longer of a human nature, but based on artificial conditions.

Marx described modern society in terms of alienation. Alienation refers to the condition in which the individual is isolated and divorced from his or her society, work, or the sense of self. Marx defined four specific types of alienation.

Alienation from the product of one's labor. An industrial worker does not have the opportunity to relate to the product he labors on. Instead of training for years as a watchmaker, an unskilled worker can get a job at a watch factory pressing buttons to seal pieces together. The worker does not care if he is making watches or cars, simply that the job exists. In the same way, a worker may not even know or care what product to which he is contributing. A worker on a Ford assembly line may spend all day installing windows on car doors without ever seeing the rest of the car. A cannery worker can spend a lifetime cleaning fish without ever knowing what product they are used for.

Alienation from the process of one's labor. A worker does not control the conditions of her job because she does not own the means of production. If a person is hired to work in a fast food restaurant, she is expected to make the food the way she is taught. All ingredients must be combined in a particular order and in a particular quantity; there is no room for creativity or change. An employee at Burger King cannot decide to change the spices used on the fries in the same way that an employee on a Ford assembly line cannot decide to place a car's headlights in a different position. Everything is decided by the bourgeoisie who then dictate orders to the laborers.

Alienation from others. Workers compete, rather than cooperate. Employees vie for time slots, bonuses, and job security. Even when a worker clocks out at night and goes home, the competition does not end. As Marx commented in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), "No sooner is the exploitation of the laborer by the manufacturer, so far at an end, that he receives his wages in cash, than he is set upon by the other portion of the bourgeoisie, the landlord, the shopkeeper, the pawnbroker."

Alienation from one's self. A final outcome of industrialization is a loss of connectivity between a worker and her occupation. Because there is nothing that ties a worker to her labor, there is no longer a sense of self. Instead of being able to take pride in an identity such as being a watchmaker, automobile builder, or chef, a person is simply a cog in the machine.

Taken as a whole, then, alienation in modern society means that an individual has no control over his life. Even in feudal societies, a person controlled the manner of his labor as to when and how it was carried out. But why, then, does the modern working class not rise up and rebel? (Indeed, Marx predicted that this would be the ultimate outcome and collapse of capitalism.)

Another idea that Marx developed is the concept of false consciousness. False consciousness is a condition in which the beliefs, ideals, or ideology of a person are not in the person's own best interest. In fact, it is the ideology of the dominant class (here, the bourgeoisie capitalists) that is imposed upon the proletariat. Ideas such as the emphasis of competition over cooperation, or of hard work being its own reward, clearly benefit the owners of industry. Therefore, workers are less likely to question their place in society and assume individual responsibility for existing conditions.

In order for society to overcome false consciousness, Marx proposed that it be replaced with class consciousness, the awareness of one's rank in society. Instead of existing as a "class in itself," the proletariat must become a "class for itself" in order to produce social change (Marx and Engels 1848), meaning that instead of just being an inert strata of society, the class could become an advocate for social improvements. Only once society entered this state of political consciousness would it be ready for a social revolution.

Big Picture: "Stay Six Feet Apart."



Figure 3.3.2: During the pandemic, all kinds of two-meter physical-distancing markers illustrated how public health guidance was communicated through visual symbols that regulate movement and interaction in shared spaces. (Keep your distance 2 meters by publicdomainvectors.org via Free SVG is licensed under PDM 1.0)

Much of the world experienced that mandate during the COVID-19 pandemic, and with it came powerful feelings of separation, isolation, and alienation. Karl Marx would likely have viewed the social distancing and isolation of the pandemic as a striking example of alienation in modern society. Marx argued that under capitalism, people often become disconnected or alienated from their work, from one another, and even from themselves. COVID-19 became a stark reminder of many aspects of this theory.

Physical distancing suddenly cut people off from coworkers, extended family, friends, schools, religious communities, and everyday public life. Ordinary moments of human interaction such as casual conversations, shared meals, coffee breaks, classroom discussions, playdates, celebrations, and social gatherings quickly disappeared. In their place came an increasing dependence on digital technology.

Work, education, and social interaction moved into private spaces and onto digital platforms. Millions of people, adults and children alike, found themselves interacting primarily through screens rather than through face-to-face human connection. Schools and college classrooms shifted online, while office meetings, conferences, and workplace collaboration moved into virtual spaces. From a Marxist perspective, this could be seen as another layer of alienation with people becoming increasingly separated from authentic social relationships and collective human experiences.

At the same time, technology became both a lifeline and a source of tension. Smartphones, tablets, laptops, Zoom meetings, and social media allowed people to remain connected during lockdowns. People could attend classes, work remotely, communicate with loved ones, and maintain some sense of community. Yet Marx and many sociologists today might also argue that technology contributed to new forms of alienation. Despite being constantly digitally connected, many people reported feelings of exhaustion, loneliness, emotional detachment, and “screen fatigue.”

This raises an important sociological question: does technology create genuine human connection, or does it sometimes offer only the illusion of connection while quietly reinforcing isolation?

Max Weber and Symbolic Interactionism

While Karl Marx may be one of the best-known thinkers of the nineteenth century, Max Weber is certainly one of the greatest influences in the field of sociology. Like the other social thinkers discussed here, he was concerned with the important changes taking place in Western society with the advent of industrialization. And, like Marx and Durkheim, he feared that industrialization would have negative effects on individuals.

Weber's primary focus on the structure of society lay in the elements of class, status, and power. Similar to Marx, Weber saw class as economically determined. Society, he believed, was split between owners and laborers. Status, on the other hand, was based on noneconomic factors such as education, kinship, and religion. Both status and class determined an individual's power, or influence over ideas. Unlike Marx, Weber believed that these ideas formed the base of society.

Weber's analysis of modern society centered on the concept of rationalization. A rational society is one built around logic and efficiency rather than morality or tradition. To Weber, capitalism is entirely rational. Although this leads to efficiency and merit-based success, it can have negative effects when taken to the extreme. In some modern societies, this is seen when rigid routines and strict design lead to a mechanized work environment and a focus on producing identical products in every location.

Another example of the extreme conditions of rationality can be found in Charlie Chaplin's classic film *Modern Times* (1936). Chaplin's character performs a routine task to the point where he cannot stop his motions even while away from the job. Indeed, today we even have a recognized medical condition that results from such tasks, known as "repetitive stress syndrome."

Weber was also unlike his predecessors in that he was more interested in how individuals experienced societal divisions than in the divisions themselves. The symbolic interactionism theory, the third of the three most recognized theories of sociology, is based on Weber's early ideas that emphasize the viewpoint of the individual and how that individual relates to society. For Weber, the culmination of industrialization, rationalization, and the like results in what he referred to as the iron cage, in which the individual is trapped by institutions and bureaucracy. This leads to a sense of "disenchantment of the world," a phrase Weber used to describe the final condition of humanity. Indeed a dark prediction, but one that has, at least to some degree, been borne out (Gerth and Mills 1918). In a rationalized, modern society, we have supermarkets instead of family-owned stores. We have chain restaurants instead of local eateries. Superstores that offer a multitude of merchandise have replaced independent businesses that focused on one product line, such as hardware, groceries, automotive repair, or clothing. Shopping malls offer retail stores, restaurants, fitness centers, even condominiums. This change may be rational, but is it universally desirable?

Big Picture: The Protestant Work Ethic

In a series of essays in 1904, Max Weber presented the idea of the *Protestant work ethic*, a new attitude toward work based on the Calvinist principle of predestination. In the sixteenth century, Europe was shaken by the Protestant Revolution. Religious leaders such as Martin Luther and John Calvin argued against the Catholic Church's belief in salvation through obedience. While Catholic leaders emphasized the importance of religious dogma and performing good deeds as a gateway to Heaven, Protestants believed that inner grace, or faith in God, was enough to achieve salvation.

John Calvin in particular popularized the Christian concept of predestination, the idea that all events—including salvation—have already been decided by God. Because followers were never sure whether they had been chosen to enter Heaven or Hell, they looked for signs in their everyday lives. If a person was hard-working and successful, he was likely to be one of the chosen. If a person was lazy or simply indifferent, he was likely to be one of the damned.

Weber argued that this mentality encouraged people to work hard for personal gain; after all, why should one help the unfortunate if they were already damned? Over time, the Protestant work ethic spread and became the foundation for capitalism.

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3.4: Social Constructions of Reality

Who Are We?

Until now, we've primarily discussed the differences between societies. Rather than discuss their problems and configurations, we'll now explore how society came to be and how sociologists view social interaction.

In 1966 sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann wrote a book called The Social Construction of Reality. In it, they argued that society is created by humans and human interaction, which they call habitualization. Habitualization describes how "any action that is repeated frequently becomes cast into a pattern, which can then be ... performed again in the future in the same manner and with the same economical effort" (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Not only do we construct our own society but we also accept it as it is because others have created it before us. Society is, in fact, "habit."

For example, your school exists as a school and not just as a building because you and others agree that it is a school. If your school is older than you are, it was created by the agreement of others before you. In a sense, it exists by consensus, both prior and current. Bear in mind that the institution, while socially constructed, is still quite real.This is an example of the process of institutionalization, the act of implanting a convention or norm into society. Another example is the daily ritual of shaking hands when greeting someone. This ritual is not biologically determined. It is a socially constructed habit that has been repeated, normalized, and passed down until it feels "natural." Once these behaviors are repeated across generations and reinforced through institutions, they become institutionalized. In this way, society becomes a structure of shared habits.

Another way of looking at this concept is through W.I. Thomas's notable Thomas theorem which states, "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas and Thomas 1928). That is, people's behavior can be determined by their subjective construction of reality rather than by objective reality. For example, a teenager who is repeatedly given a label—overachiever, player, bum—might live up to the term even though it initially wasn't a part of his character. Another common example is if a teacher believes a particular student is especially gifted, they might give that student more attention, encouragement, and opportunities. Over time, the student may perform better, not necessarily because they were more capable at the start, but because of the teacher's belief and corresponding actions. In the same way, if someone is repeatedly labeled as a "failure" or "troublemaker," they may internalize this label, influencing their behavior to align with that definition, thus exemplifying the Thomas Theorem: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences"

Like Berger and Luckmann in their description of habitualization, Thomas states that our moral codes and social norms are created by "successive definitions of the situation." This concept is defined by sociologist Robert K. Merton as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Merton explains that with a self-fulfilling prophecy, even a false idea can become true if it is acted upon. One example he gives is of a "bank run." Say for some reason, a number of people falsely fear that their bank is soon to be bankrupt. Because of this false notion, people run to their bank and demand all of their cash at once. As banks rarely, if ever, have that much money on hand, the bank does indeed run out of money, fulfilling the customers' prophecy. Here, reality is constructed by an idea.

Symbolic interactionists offer another lens through which to analyze the social construction of reality. With a theoretical perspective focused on the symbols (like language, gestures, and artifacts) that people use to interact, this approach is interested in how people interpret those symbols in daily interactions. Interactionists also recognize that language and body language reflect our values. Symbolic Interactionists argue that language, for example, doesn't just describe reality, it constructs it. When we think of the significance and meaning attached to a simple metal band, a wedding ring, we realize that over time, it is not merely a piece of metal, but has come to embody a symbol of commitment, love, and legal partnership, meanings that have been socially agreed upon and reinforced.

Similarly gestures can have different connotations and meanings in different languages and cultures. Language and gestures can be described as being "context-dependent". One has only to learn a foreign tongue to know that not every English word can be easily translated into another language. The same is true for gestures. While Americans might recognize a "thumbs up" as meaning "great," in Germany it would mean "one" and in Japan it would mean "five." Thus, our construction of reality is influenced by our symbolic interactions.



Figure 3.4.1: Who are we? What role do we play in society? According to sociologists, we construct reality through our interactions with others. In a way, our day-to-day interactions are like those of actors on a stage. (Le Mime by jan lewandowski via flickr is licensed under CC BY 4.0).

Roles and Status

As you can imagine, people employ many types of behaviors in day-to-day life. Roles are patterns of behavior that we recognize in each other that are representative of a person's social status. Currently, while reading this text, you are playing the role of a student. However, you also play other roles in your life, such as "daughter," "neighbor," or "employee." These various roles are each associated with a different status.

Sociologists use the term status to describe the responsibilities and benefits that a person experiences according to their rank and role in society. Some statuses are ascribed—those you do not select, such as son, elderly person, or female. Others, called achieved statuses, are obtained by choice, such as a high school dropout, self-made millionaire, or nurse. As a daughter or son, you occupy a different status than as a neighbor or employee. One person can be associated with a multitude of roles and statuses. Even a single status such as "student" has a complex role-set, or array of roles, attached to it (Merton 1957). It is important to note that status refers to the rank in social hierarchy, while role is the behavior expected of a person holding a certain status.

If too much is required of a single role, individuals can experience role strain. Consider the duties of a parent: cooking, cleaning, driving, problem-solving, acting as a source of moral guidance—the list goes on. Similarly, a person can experience role conflict when one or more roles are contradictory. A parent who also has a full-time career can experience role conflict on a daily basis. When there is a deadline at the office but a sick child needs to be picked up from school, which comes first? When you are working toward a promotion but your children want you to come to their school play, which do you choose? Being a college student can conflict with being an employee, being an athlete, or even being a friend. Our roles in life have a great effect on our decisions and who we become.

Presentation of Self

Of course, it is impossible to look inside a person's head and study what role they are playing. All we can observe is behavior, or role performance. Role performance is how a person expresses his or her role. Sociologist Erving Goffman presented the idea that a person is like an actor on a stage. Calling his theory dramaturgy, Goffman believed that we use "impression management" to present ourselves to others as we hope to be perceived. Each situation is a new scene, and individuals perform different roles depending on who is present (Goffman 1959). Think about the way you behave around your coworkers versus the way you behave around your grandparents versus the way you behave with a blind date. Even if you're not consciously trying to alter your personality, your grandparents, coworkers, and date probably see different sides of you.

As in a play, the setting matters as well. If you have a group of friends over to your house for dinner, you are playing the role of a host. It is agreed upon that you will provide food and seating and probably be stuck with a lot of the cleanup at the end of the

night. Similarly, your friends are playing the roles of guests, and they are expected to respect your property and any rules you may set forth (“Don’t leave the door open or the cat will get out.”). In any scene, there needs to be a shared reality between players. In this case, if you view yourself as a guest and others view you as a host, there are likely to be problems.

Impression management is a critical component of symbolic interactionism. For example, a judge in a courtroom has many “props” to create an impression of fairness, gravity, and control—like their robe and gavel. Those entering the courtroom are expected to adhere to the scene being set. Just imagine the “impression” that can be made by how a person dresses. This is the reason that attorneys frequently select the hairstyle and apparel for witnesses and defendants in courtroom proceedings.



Figure 3.4.2: In Goffman’s dramaturgical perspective, a judge’s gavel functions as a symbolic prop that supports the formal front-stage performance of authority, legitimacy, and institutional control in a courtroom. (My Trusty Gavel by Brian Turner via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY 4.0)

Goffman’s dramaturgy ideas expand on the ideas of Charles Cooley and the looking-glass self. According to Cooley, we base our image on what we think other people see (Cooley 1902). We imagine how we must appear to others, then react to this speculation. We don certain clothes, prepare our hair in a particular manner, wear makeup, use cologne, and the like—all with the notion that our presentation of ourselves is going to affect how others perceive us. We expect a certain reaction, and, if lucky, we get the one we desire and feel good about it. But more than that, Cooley believed that our sense of self is based upon this idea: we imagine how we look to others, draw conclusions based upon their reactions to us, and then we develop our personal sense of self. In other words, people’s reactions to us are like a mirror in which we are reflected.

Social interaction is the foundation of society, shaping relationships, shared meanings, and social structures through communication, symbols, and cultural practices. These interactions, ranging from simple dyads to complex institutions, establish norms, roles, and customs that guide collective life. Gerhard Lenski’s framework links technological advancement to societal organization, placing societies along a continuum from preindustrial (hunter-gatherer, pastoral, horticultural, agricultural, feudal) to industrial and postindustrial, each defined by its economic base, technology, and social complexity.

Three major theorists offer foundational perspectives: Émile Durkheim’s functionalism emphasizes social cohesion through mechanical and organic solidarity, warning of anomie in times of rapid change; Karl Marx’s conflict theory critiques capitalism, focusing on class struggle, alienation, and the need for class consciousness to challenge inequality; Max Weber highlights the interplay of class, status, and power, the effects of rationalization, and the importance of verstehen in understanding social meaning.

Berger and Luckmann’s theory of the social construction of reality reveals that society is continually created and reinforced through habitualization and institutionalization, with perceptions shaping real outcomes via the Thomas Theorem and self-fulfilling prophecies. Symbolic interactionism underscores that reality is culturally specific, mediated by symbols, language, and shared meanings, reminding us that social life is not fixed but actively constructed.

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3.5: Key Terms

Glossary

- **achieved status** | the status a person chooses, such as a level of education or income
- **agricultural societies** | societies that rely on farming as a way of life
- **alienation** | an individual's isolation from his society, his work, and his sense of self
- **anomie** | a situation in which society no longer has the support of a firm collective consciousness
- **ascribed status** | the status outside of an individual's control, such as sex or race
- **bourgeoisie** | the owners of the means of production in a society
- **capitalism** | a way of organizing an economy so that the things that are used to make and transport products (such as land, oil, factories, ships, etc.) are owned by individual people and companies rather than by the government
- **class consciousness** | the awareness of one's rank in society
- **collective conscience** | the communal beliefs, morals, and attitudes of a society
- **false consciousness** | a condition in which the beliefs, ideals, or ideology of a person are not in the person's own best interest
- **feudal societies** | societies that operate on a strict hierarchical system of power based around land ownership and protection
- **habitualization** | the idea that society is constructed by us and those before us, and it is followed like a habit
- **horticultural societies** | societies based around the cultivation of plants
- **hunter-gatherer societies** | societies that depend on hunting wild animals and gathering uncultivated plants for survival
- **industrial societies** | societies characterized by a reliance on mechanized labor to create material goods
- **information societies** | societies based on the production of nonmaterial goods and services
- **institutionalization** | the act of implanting a convention or norm into society
- **iron cage** | a situation in which an individual is trapped by social institutions
- **looking-glass self** | our reflection of how we think we appear to others
- **mechanical solidarity** | a type of social order maintained by the collective consciousness of a culture
- **organic solidarity** | a type of social order based around an acceptance of economic and social differences
- **pastoral societies** | societies based around the domestication of animals
- **proletariat** | the laborers in a society
- **rationalization** | a belief that modern society should be built around logic and efficiency rather than morality or tradition
- **role conflict** | a situation when one or more of an individual's roles clash
- **role performance** | the expression of a role
- **role strain** | stress that occurs when too much is required of a single role
- **role-set** | an array of roles attached to a particular status
- **roles** | patterns of behavior that are representative of a person's social status
- **self-fulfilling prophecy** | an idea that becomes true when acted upon
- **social integration** | how strongly a person is connected to his or her social group
- **society** | a group of people who live in a definable community and share the same cultural components
- **status** | the responsibilities and benefits that a person experiences according to his or her rank and role in society
- **Thomas theorem** | how a subjective reality can drive events to develop in accordance with that reality, despite being originally unsupported by objective reality

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3.6: Short Answer

Critical Thinking Questions

1. In which type or types of societies do the benefits seem to outweigh the costs? Explain your answer, and cite social and economic reasons.
2. Is Gerhard Lenski right in classifying societies based on technological advances? What other criteria might be appropriate, based on what you have read?
3. Choose two of the three sociologists discussed here (Durkheim, Marx, Weber), and use their arguments to explain a current social event such as the Occupy movement. Do their theories hold up under modern scrutiny?
4. Think of the ways workers are alienated from the product and process of their jobs. How can these concepts be applied to students and their educations?
5. Draw a large circle, and then “slice” the circle into pieces like a pie, labeling each piece with a role or status that you occupy. Add as many statuses, ascribed and achieved, that you have. Don’t forget things like dog owner, gardener, traveler, student, runner, employee. How many statuses do you have? In which ones are there role conflicts?
6. Think of a self-fulfilling prophecy that you’ve experienced. Based on this experience, do you agree with the Thomas theorem? Use examples from current events to support your answer as well.

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3.7: Further Research

Additional Learning Resources

- The Maasai are a modern pastoral society with an economy largely structured around herds of cattle.
- One of the most influential pieces of writing in modern history was Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' *The Communist Manifesto*, a document that spurred revolutions around the world.
- TV Tropes is a website where users identify concepts that are commonly used in literature, film, and other media. Although its tone is for the most part humorous, the site provides a good jumping-off point for research. Browse the list of examples under the entry of "self-fulfilling prophecy." Pay careful attention to the real-life examples. Are there ones that surprised you or that you don't agree with?

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3.9: Accessible Text Description

Figure 3.1: Roadmap

A simple horizontal diagram presents three large light-gray arrows pointing from left to right. Each arrow contains a dark teal circle with white text.

The first circle is labeled “The ‘WHY’” and asks why social interaction matters.

The second circle is labeled “The ‘WHO’” and asks who people interact with.

The third circle is labeled “The ‘HOW’” and asks how social interaction happens.

The arrows suggest a progression from understanding the importance of social interaction, to identifying the people and groups involved, and then examining the processes through which interaction takes place.

Figure 3.3.1: Base and Superstructure

A two-part diagram illustrates the Marxist concept of base and superstructure. The upper section is labeled “Superstructure,” and the lower section is labeled “Base.” Large curved arrows connect the two sections, indicating that each influences the other.

The superstructure is described as everything not directly involved in production. At its center is ideology, surrounded by examples including art, family, culture, religion, philosophy, law, media, politics, science, and education.

The base contains two components. The first is the means of production, including tools, machines, factories, land, and raw materials. The second is the relations of production, including social classes and labor relations such as lumpenproletariat, proletariat, labor aristocracy, petty bourgeoisie, and bourgeoisie, along with private property, capital, and commodities.

A red arrow moves from the superstructure toward the base and is labeled “Maintains (and shapes).” This indicates that institutions, beliefs, laws, and cultural practices can reinforce and influence economic relations.

A blue arrow moves from the base toward the superstructure and is labeled “Shapes (and maintains).” This indicates that the organization of production and class relations strongly influences culture, politics, law, education, and other institutions.

Text at the bottom states that the relationship moves in a spiral pattern and that the base is generally dominant. Overall, the diagram presents the economic base and the superstructure as mutually influential, while emphasizing that material and economic relations usually exert the stronger influence.

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4: SOCIALIZATION

Introduction

In this chapter, we will examine socialization as the lifelong sociological process through which individuals learn to become functioning members of society. Socialization involves the internalization of cultural norms, values, beliefs, behavioral expectations, language patterns, and social roles that guide both our overt behavior: how we act publicly, and our covert processes: how we think, interpret situations, and make meaning of the world. By understanding this foundational process, you will be able to explain how individuals learn to navigate social institutions and occupy multiple roles across the life course.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- Define socialization using sociological terminology.
- Explain major theories of self-development.
- Distinguish between psychological and sociological approaches to identity formation.
- Analyze how agents of socialization influence behavior and worldview.
- Apply theory to real-world examples of identity, morality, and social behavior.



Figure 4.1: The study of socialization can be grouped into three questions: what socialization is, why it matters according to sociological theories, and how it occurs (Jayanti Roy via ChatGPT). Access alternative description for Figure 4.1.

Why, Who, and How

To explore *WHY* we become who we are, we will study major psychological and sociological theories of self-development. From the psychological perspective, we will examine Sigmund Freud's theory of the unconscious mind and the id, ego, and superego; Erik Erikson's psychosocial stages of identity development; Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive growth; and Harry Harlow's research on attachment and emotional bonding. From a sociological perspective, we will explore Charles Horton Cooley's concept of the "Looking-Glass Self" and George Herbert Mead's theory of the "I" and the "Me". We will also consider moral development through the lenses of Lawrence Kohlberg's stages of moral reasoning and Carol Gilligan's ethics of care framework. By the end of this section, you should be able to compare and contrast psychological and sociological explanations of identity formation and the development of the self.

Next, we will look at *HOW* socialization occurs. This includes examining interaction, imitation, reinforcement and punishment, role-taking, and the internalization of norms through symbolic interaction. We will analyze how socialization functions at both the micro level of everyday interactions and the macro level of institutions and social structures.

Finally, we will evaluate the *WHO*- major agents of socialization, including family, education, peer groups, media, religion, government, and the workplace, and consider how these institutions shape identity and behavior.

4.1: Case Studies and Vignettes

4.2: Theories of Self-Development

4.3: Why Socialization Matters

4.4: Agents of Socialization

4.5: Socialization Across the Life Course

4.6: Key Terms

4.7: Short Answer

4.8: Further Research

4.9: References

4.10: Accessible Text Description

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4.1: Case Studies and Vignettes

Socialization and Socializing

Is socialization the same as socializing? No. socialization is distinct from mere socializing. Socializing is what we see at malls, at the cinema, in restaurants: the casual interaction with others, such as spending time with friends, family, or colleagues. This process of socializing is in fact a subset of the process of socialization, but the two are not synonymous. Socialization is deeper. It is a structured process that includes family, values, expectations, norms, education, religious instruction, peer influence, media exposure, and participation in cultural or civic life.

Socialization begins in early childhood and continues across one's lifespan as individuals encounter new environments, experiences, and social roles. Through this ongoing process, people learn to interpret social cues, regulate their behavior according to cultural expectations, and internalize the norms and values necessary to participate in society. In doing so, they not only adapt to existing social structures but also contribute to the reproduction of culture and social order.

Genie's Case



Figure 4.1.1: "Genie" was discovered by welfare authorities at the age of thirteen. (Genie immediately after rescue by UCLA Library is licensed under PDM 1.0)

"Genie" is the pseudonym given to an American child, later identified as Susan Wiley, whose tragic childhood became one of the most well-known cases in the study of human development, language acquisition, and socialization. Genie endured years of severe abuse, neglect, and extreme social isolation while living with her parents in Altadena, California.

From approximately 20 months of age until she was 13 years old, Genie was confined to a small, locked room in her home. During the day, she was often strapped to a potty chair, and at night she was restrained in a small metal crib. Her father strictly forbade anyone from speaking to her and punished her if she made noise, leaving her almost completely deprived of normal human interaction during the critical years of childhood development.

Genie remained in these conditions until 1970, when a social services worker discovered her during a welfare visit. At the time of her rescue, she was severely malnourished, physically weakened, and developmentally delayed. She had almost no language abilities, could not carry on a conversation, and walked with an unusual "bunny-hop" gait due to years of physical confinement.

Following her rescue, Genie became the focus of international attention. Psychologists, linguists, physicians, and child development researchers studied her case in an effort to better understand the effects of extreme isolation on cognitive, emotional, social, and language development. Her experience raised profound questions about the importance of social interaction during early childhood and the role of socialization in shaping what it means to become fully human.

After reading the article *Wild Child "Genie": A Tortured Life*, reflect on the following question: What do you think Genie's case reveals about the role of socialization in becoming "fully human"? Reflect on her experiences demonstrate the importance of interaction with family, caregivers, and society in the development of language, identity, emotions, and social behavior.

Stories like those of Genie and other feral children reveal a simple fact: it is through Socialization, the lifelong sociological process through which individuals learn to become functioning members of a society, or what is described as “fully human." When people socialize, it involves the internalization of cultural norms, values, beliefs, and overt and covert behavioral expectations in everyday life. It is through this process of socialization that people acquire the knowledge, skills, language, and habits necessary to participate effectively in social institutions and to navigate various roles within their communities.

Explanation of the Ecological Systems Model

The lifelong process of socialization can be more fully understood through the nested, concentric-circle framework of Urie Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory. Bronfenbrenner provides one of the most comprehensive models for understanding socialization by situating human development within interconnected layers of environmental influence. He emphasized that individuals are shaped through dynamic, reciprocal interactions with multiple social contexts over time. His framework highlights how immediate relationships, institutional structures, cultural norms, and historical conditions collectively shape identity formation and social behavior.

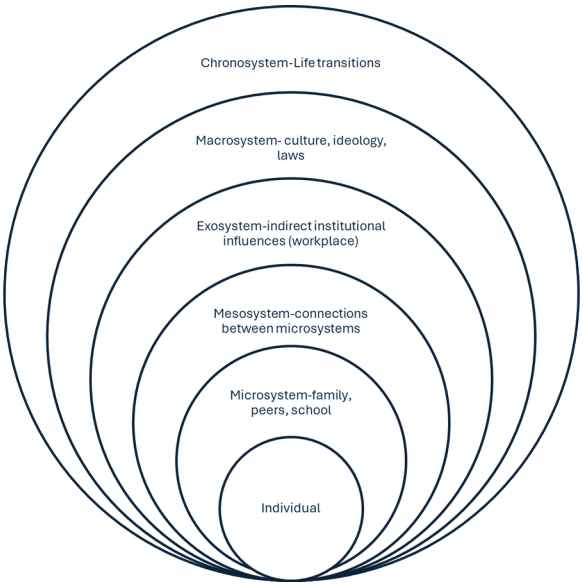


Figure 4.1.1: The ecological systems model shows how individual development is shaped by interconnected layers of family, peers, institutions, culture, laws, and changes over time. (Jayanti Roy via ChatGPT)

(Figure 4.1.1) presents six nested circles arranged around an individual at the center. Each larger circle represents a broader social environment that influences the individual directly or indirectly.

1. Individual (Center): The learner is at the center of the model. Each student brings unique strengths, identities, abilities, experiences, language backgrounds, and needs into the learning environment.
2. Microsystem (Family, Peers, School): These are the environments where learners have direct, daily interactions. Family support, peer relationships, classroom climate, and teacher relationships all influence development and learning.
3. Mesosystem (Connections Between Microsystems): This layer represents how a learner’s immediate environments interact. For example, communication between family and school, peer influence on academic motivation, or community-school partnerships can either strengthen or create barriers to learning.
4. Exosystem (Indirect Institutional Influences): These are systems that affect the learner indirectly. Examples include a

caregiver's workplace schedule, school district policies, access to healthcare, or community resources. Students may not directly participate in these systems, but they experience their impact.
5. Macrosystem (Culture, Ideology, Laws): This layer reflects broader societal forces such as cultural norms, educational policies, economic systems, belief systems, and laws. These factors shape expectations, opportunities, access, and the value placed on different identities and ways of learning.
6. Chronosystem (Life Transitions and Historical Context): The outermost layer represents time. Life events (e.g., moving, family changes), developmental transitions, technological shifts, and broader historical moments all influence how learners experience the other systems over time.

While Genie's story is about a relatively advanced stage of life, socialization is crucial for early childhood. Even the most basic of human activities are learned. Learning to crawl and then walk are major milestones, but as any parent, guardian, or family member of a toddler knows, other minor accomplishments can be life-altering for the child: climbing stairs, safely getting out of bed, sitting in a regular chair, and drinking from a regular cup. Likewise, family behaviors and values must be learned, sometimes through observation and sometimes through active instruction.

In the following sections, we will examine the importance of the complex process of socialization and how it takes place through interaction with many individuals, groups, and social institutions. We will explore how socialization is not only critical to children as they develop but how it is also a lifelong process through which we become prepared for new social environments and expectations in every stage of our lives. But first, we will turn to scholarship about self-development, the process of coming to recognize a sense of self, a "self" that is then able to be socialized.

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4.2: Theories of Self-Development

Psychological Perspectives on Self-Development

When we are born, we have a genetic makeup and biological traits. However, who we are as human beings develops through social interaction. Many scholars, both in the fields of psychology and in sociology, have described the process of self-development as a precursor to understanding how that "self" becomes socialized. As we saw in the example of Genie, at birth, every individual inherits a genetic makeup and a set of biological traits. However, who we become, our identity, personality, values, and worldview, is shaped primarily through social interaction. We saw that Genie, deprived of social interaction was devoid of basic social skills and the use of language as a communication tool. Socialization is essential to understanding how individuals learn to function as members of society. Psychologists and sociologists have studied the emergence of the "self" as a foundational step in process of socialization, looking deeper at how we come to understand ourselves and our place within a social world.

Many psychological perspectives on self-development find their roots in early childhood. Both Freud and Erikson look closely at unresolved issues in early childhood to look deeper at the development of the "self." Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) was one of the most influential modern scientists to put forth a theory about how people develop a sense of self. He divided the maturation process into stages, and posited that people's self-development is closely linked to their early stages of development.

Freud proposed that human personality develops through a series of psychosexual stages, each centered on a different source of pleasure and conflict. According to Freud, unresolved issues or fixations during any of these stages could lead to emotional difficulties in adulthood. This failure to properly engage in or disengage with issues was the crux of personality formation. He believed that early childhood experiences have a profound and lasting effect on personality formation, with the self being a product of the internal struggle between basic biological drives and the demands of society.

Erik Erikson (1902–1994), often referred to as a psycho-social theorist, rested his theories in a more socially oriented framework. He expanded on the work of Freud, and proposed a lifespan theory of psychosocial development that comprises eight stages, from infancy to late adulthood. At each stage, individuals face a specific developmental challenge or "crisis", the successful resolution of which contributes to a healthy personality. Erikson emphasized that self-development continues across the life course, and that social relationships are critical in shaping our evolving sense of identity.

Jean Piaget (1896–1980), a developmental psychologist, examined how children construct a sense of self through cognitive development. He argued that children learn by actively engaging with their environment. Piaget highlighted the role of social experiences in helping children balance their internal worldview (the world as it exists in one's mind) with the external social world. His work underscored the idea that self-development is not purely internal but also shaped by interactions with others.

Psychologist Harry Harlow (1905–1981) is known for studying the role of social relationships in human development by observing the impact of isolation and maternal deprivation on the development of young rhesus monkeys. Harlow found that the monkeys, when subjected to isolation, exhibit disturbed behaviors, including self-harm, and had a difficult time integrating when reconnected with other monkeys. Again, examining this theory in light of the social isolation experienced by feral children, we see those social bonds, involving comfort and attachment, are essential to normal psychological development. Harlow's work demonstrated the critical importance of early social interaction in emotional and social development, and his findings continue to inform research on child development, attachment, and trauma.

Table 4.2.1: Summary of main psychological theories on Self-Development

Theorist	Main ideas
Sigmund Freud	The self is a product of the internal struggle between basic biological drives and the demands of society.
Erik Erikson	Self-development continues across the life course. Social relationships are critical in shaping our evolving sense of identity.
Jean Piaget	Self-development is not purely internal but also shaped by interactions with others.

Theorist	Main ideas
Harry Harlow	Early social interaction is essential for emotional and social development

Sociological Research: Sociology or Psychology: What's the Difference?

You might be wondering: if sociologists and psychologists are both interested in people and their behavior, how are these two disciplines different? What do they agree on, and where do their ideas diverge? The answers are complicated, but the distinction is important to scholars in both fields.

As a general difference, we might say that while both disciplines are interested in human behavior, psychologists are focused on how the mind influences that behavior, while sociologists study the role of society in shaping behavior. Psychologists are interested in people's mental development and how their minds process their world. Sociologists are more likely to focus on how different aspects of society contribute to an individual's relationship with his world. Another way to think of the difference is that psychologists tend to look inward (mental health, emotional processes), while sociologists tend to look outward (social institutions, cultural norms, interactions with others) to understand human behavior.

Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) was the first to make this distinction in research, when he attributed differences in suicide rates among people to social causes (religious differences) rather than to psychological causes (like their mental wellbeing) (Durkheim 1897). Today, we see this same distinction. For example, a sociologist studying how a couple gets to the point of their first kiss on a date might focus her research on cultural norms for dating, social patterns of sexual activity over time, or how this process is different for seniors than for teens. A psychologist would more likely be interested in the person's earliest sexual awareness or the mental processing of sexual desire.

Sometimes sociologists and psychologists have collaborated to increase knowledge. In recent decades, however, their fields have become more clearly separated as sociologists increasingly focus on large societal issues and patterns, while psychologists remain honed in on the human mind. Both disciplines make valuable contributions through different approaches that provide us with different types of useful insights.

Sociological Theories of Self-Development

One of the pioneering contributors to sociological perspectives was Charles Cooley (1864–1929). He asserted that people's self understanding is constructed, in part, by their perception of how others view them, a process termed "the looking glass self" (Cooley 1902).

Later, George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) studied the self, a person's distinct identity that is developed through social interaction. In order to engage in this process of "self," an individual has to be able to view him or herself through the eyes of others. That's not an ability that we are born with (Mead 1934). Through socialization we learn to put ourselves in someone else's shoes and look at the world through their perspective. This assists us in becoming self-aware, as we look at ourselves from the perspective of the "other."

How do we go from being newborns to being humans with "selves?" Mead believed that there is a specific path of development that all people go through. During the preparatory stage, children are only capable of imitation: they have no ability to imagine how others see things. They copy the actions of people with whom they regularly interact, such as their caregivers. This is followed by the play stage, during which children begin to take on the role that one other person might have. Thus, children might try on a parent's point of view by acting out "grownup" behavior, like playing dress-up and acting out the "mom" role, or talking on a toy telephone the way they see adults do.

During the game stage, children learn to consider several roles at the same time and how those roles interact with each other. They learn to understand interactions involving different people with a variety of purposes. For example, a child at this stage is likely to be aware of the different responsibilities of people in a restaurant who together make for a smooth dining experience (someone seats you, another takes your order, someone else cooks the food, while yet another clears away dirty dishes).

Finally, children develop, understand, and learn the idea of the generalized other, the common behavioral expectations of general society. By this stage of development, an individual is able to imagine how he or she is viewed by one or many others, and thus,

from a sociological perspective, to have a "self" (Mead 1934; Mead 1964).

Table 4.2.2: Summary of two symbolic interactionist theorists

Theorist	Main Ideas
Charles Horton Cooley	The "self" is not an internal construct alone; rather, it emerges through soc reflection
George Herbert Mead	To have a "self" is to be able to imagine how one is seen by others and to accordingly.

Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development

Moral development is an important part of the socialization process. The term refers to the way people learn what society considered to be "good" and "bad," which is important for a smoothly functioning society. Moral development prevents people from acting on unchecked urges, instead considering what is right for society and good for others. Lawrence Kohlberg (1927–1987) was interested in how people learn to decide what is right and what is wrong. To understand this topic, he developed a theory of moral development that includes three levels: preconventional, conventional, and postconventional.

1. In the pre-conventional stage, young children base moral decisions on personal pleasure or punishment. Young children lack a higher level of cognitive ability and experience the world around them only through their senses.
2. In the conventional stage, typically reached in adolescence, individuals internalize societal rules and seek approval by conforming to them. They become increasingly aware of others' feelings and take those into consideration when determining what's "good" and "bad."
3. In the post-conventional stage, moral reasoning becomes more abstract and principled, recognizing that laws may conflict with ethical values (such as Americans believing that everyone has the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. At this stage, people also recognize that legality and morality do not always match evenly (Kohlberg 1981). Social protest movements often arise from post-conventional moral reasoning.

Gilligan's Theory of Moral Development and Gender

Another sociologist, Carol Gilligan (1936–), recognized that Kohlberg's theory might show gender bias since his research was only conducted on male subjects. Would females study subjects have responded differently? Would a female social scientist notice different patterns when analyzing the research? To answer the first question, she set out to study differences between how boys and girls developed morality. Gilligan's research suggested that boys and girls do have different understandings of morality. Boys appeared to have a justice perspective, by placing emphasis on rules and laws. Girls, on the other hand, seem to have a care and responsibility perspective; they consider people's reasons behind behavior that seems morally wrong.

While Gilligan is correct that Kohlberg's research should have included both male and female subjects, her study has been scientifically discredited due to its small sample size. The results Gilligan noted in this study also have not been replicated by subsequent researchers. The differences Gilligan observed were not an issue of the development of morality, but an issue of socialization. Differences in behavior between males and females is the result of gender socialization that teaches boys and girls societal norms and behaviors expected of them based on their sex (see "What a Pretty Little Lady").

Gilligan also recognized that Kohlberg's theory rested on the assumption that the justice perspective was the right, or better, perspective. Gilligan, in contrast, theorized that neither perspective was "better": the two norms of justice served different purposes. Ultimately, she explained that boys are socialized for a work environment where rules make operations run smoothly, while girls are socialized for a home environment where flexibility allows for harmony in caretaking and nurturing (Gilligan 1982; Gilligan 1990).

Table 4.2.3: Summary of two moral development theorists

Theorist	Main Ideas
Lawrence Kohlberg	Morality evolves through interaction with broader social and cultural contexts, reinforcing the link between moral development and socialization.

Theorist	Main Ideas
Carol Gilligan	Boys are socialized for a work environment where rules make operations run smoothly, while girls are socialized for a home environment where flexibility all for harmony in caretaking and nurturing

Together, psychological and sociological perspectives reveal that the development of the self is a complex, multifaceted process shaped by biological predispositions, early relationships, cognitive maturation, and, most importantly, social interaction. Through engagement with others, from family and peers to institutions and media, individuals learn not only how to behave, but also who they are. Theories from Freud to Mead, and from Piaget to Gilligan, underscore the foundational role of society in shaping our personal identities, moral values, and social capacities.

Sociology in the Real World: What a Pretty Little Lady!

"What a cute dress!" "I like the ribbons in your hair." "Wow, you look so pretty today."

According to Lisa Bloom, author of *Think: Straight Talk for Women to Stay Smart in a Dumbed Down World*, most of us use pleasantries like these when we first meet little girls. "So what?" you might ask.

Bloom asserts that we are too focused on the appearance of young girls, and as a result, our society is socializing them to believe that how they look is of vital importance. And Bloom may be on to something. How often do you tell a little boy how attractive his outfit is, how nice looking his shoes are, or how handsome he looks today? To support her assertions, Bloom cites, as one example, that about 50 percent of girls ages three to six worry about being fat (Bloom 2011). We're talking about kindergarteners who are concerned about their body image. Sociologists are acutely interested in of this type of gender socialization, by which societal expectations of how boys and girls should *be*—how they should behave, what toys and colors they should like, and how important their attire is—are reinforced.

One solution to this type of gender socialization is being experimented with at the Egalia preschool in Sweden, where children develop in a genderless environment. All the children at Egalia are referred to with neutral terms like "friend" instead of "he" or "she." Play areas and toys are consciously set up to eliminate any reinforcement of gender expectations (Haney 2011). Egalia strives to eliminate all societal gender norms from these children's preschool world.

Extreme? Perhaps. So what is the middle ground? Bloom suggests that we start with simple steps: when introduced to a young girl, ask about her favorite book or what she likes. In short, engage with her mind ... not her outward appearance (Bloom 2011).

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4.3: Why Socialization Matters

Preserving Culture

Socialization is critical both to individuals and to the societies in which they live. It illustrates how completely intertwined human beings and their social worlds are. First, it is through teaching culture to new members that a society perpetuates itself. If new generations of a society don't learn its way of life, it ceases to exist. Whatever is distinctive about a culture must be transmitted to those who join it in order for a society to survive. For U.S. culture to continue, for example, children in the United States must learn about cultural values related to democracy: they have to learn the norms of voting, as well as how to use material objects such as voting machines. They may learn these through watching their parents or guardians vote, or, in some schools, by using real machines in student government elections. Of course, some would argue that it's just as important in U.S. culture for the younger generation to learn the etiquette of eating in a restaurant or the rituals of tailgate parties at football games. In fact, there are many ideas and objects that people in the United States teach children about in hopes of keeping the society's way of life going through another generation.



Figure 4.3.1: food practices organize social interaction, communicate cultural traditions, and reinforce norms of hospitality, family connection, and collective identity. (Vietnamese family daily meal by Hoangkid via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0)

These are questions one ponders when eating food at a restaurant or at home: Can you use your hands to eat? Must I use utensils? Who should pay? Do you stand when someone else gets up, and is that dependent on their gender? The dining manners and customs of different cultures are learned by socialization.

At a societal level, socialization is the mechanism by which culture is transmitted from one generation to the next. This cultural transmission is vital; without it, a society's unique identity, values, and systems would dissolve over time. If new members of a society do not learn its way of life, the society risks losing its cohesion, identity, and continuity. In this sense, culture must be actively taught and learned in order for a society to endure. Look at the example of language. A clear example from today's world is language loss among immigrant families. In many immigrant households in the United States, the first generation speaks their native language fluently (e.g., Spanish, Mandarin, Punjabi, Tagalog), but by the second or third generation, English often becomes dominant. If younger generations stop learning the heritage language, they may also lose access to cultural traditions, stories, values, and ways of understanding the world that are embedded in that language. This kind of language loss also has has its place in our history involving Native American and Indigenous communities in the United States and Canada.For generations, Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and placed in government- and church-run boarding schools such as the Carlisle Indian Industrial School. The explicit goal was assimilation. Children were prohibited from speaking their Native languages. Their hair was cut, traditional clothing was replaced, and cultural practices were suppressed.

What Happened Sociologically?

When children were prevented from learning and speaking their Indigenous languages: Cultural transmission was disrupted. Language carries stories, spiritual beliefs, kinship systems, ecological knowledge, and worldview. Additionally, Intergenerational bonds weakened. Children who lost their language often struggled to communicate deeply with elders. Over time, this can weaken cultural continuity within families and communities. Traditions may fade, intergenerational communication may decline, and aspects of identity may become diluted. Sociologically, this illustrates how cultural transmission through socialization is essential to maintaining group cohesion and shared meaning.

Ultimately, socialization serves as the bridge between the individual and society. It equips people with the knowledge and tools needed to function within their social world, while also ensuring that the cultural fabric of that world is preserved, adapted, and passed forward. Without socialization, there would be no continuity of culture, no shared norms, and no functioning society.

Socialization is essential to us as individuals. Social interaction provides the means via which we gradually become able to see ourselves through the eyes of others, and how we learn who we are and how we fit into the world around us. In addition, to function successfully in society, we have to learn the basics of both material and nonmaterial culture, everything from how to dress ourselves to what's suitable attire for a specific occasion; from when we sleep to what we sleep on; and from what's considered appropriate to eat for dinner to how to use the stove to prepare it. Most importantly, we have to learn language, whether it's the dominant language or one common in a subculture, whether it's verbal or through signs, in order to communicate and to think. As we saw with Genie, without socialization we literally have no self.

Nature versus Nurture

Some experts assert that who we are is a result of nurture—the relationships and caring that surround us. Others argue that who we are is based entirely in genetics. According to this belief, our temperaments, interests, and talents are set before birth. From this perspective, then, who we are depends on nature.

One way researchers attempt to measure the impact of nature is by studying twins. Some studies have followed identical twins who were raised separately. The pairs shared the same genetics but in some cases were socialized in different ways. Instances of this type of situation are rare, but studying the degree to which identical twins raised apart are the same and different can give researchers insight into the way our temperaments, preferences, and abilities are shaped by our genetic makeup versus our social environment.

For example, in 1968, twin girls were put up for adoption, separated from each other, and raised in different households. The adoptive parents, and certainly the babies, did not realize the girls were one of five pairs of twins who were made subjects of a scientific study (Flam 2007).

In 2003, the two women, then age thirty-five, were reunited. Elyse Schein and Paula Bernstein sat together in awe, feeling like they were looking into a mirror. Not only did they look alike but they also behaved alike, using the same hand gestures and facial expressions (Spratling 2007). Studies like these point to the genetic roots of our temperament and behavior.

Though genetics and hormones play an important role in human behavior, sociology's larger concern is the effect society has on human behavior, the "nurture" side of the nature versus nurture debate. What race were the twins? From what social class were their parents? What about gender? Religion? All these factors affected the lives of the twins as much as their genetic makeup and are critical to consider as we look at life through the sociological lens.

Big Picture: The Life of Chris Langan, the Smartest Man You've Never Heard Of

Bouncer. Firefighter. Factory worker. Cowboy. Chris Langan spent the majority of his adult life just getting by with jobs like these. He had no college degree, few resources, and a past filled with much disappointment. Chris Langan also had an IQ of over 195, nearly 100 points higher than the average person (Brabham 2001). So why didn't Chris become a neurosurgeon, professor, or aeronautical engineer? According to Macolm Gladwell (2008) in his book *Outliers: The Story of Success*, Chris didn't possess the set of social skills necessary to succeed on such a high level—skills that aren't innate but learned.

Gladwell looked to a recent study conducted by sociologist Annette Lareau in which she closely shadowed 12 families from various economic backgrounds and examined their parenting techniques. Parents from lower income families followed a strategy of "accomplishment of natural growth," which is to say they let their children develop on their own with a large amount of independence; parents from higher-income families, however, "actively fostered and accessed a child's talents, opinions, and skills" (Gladwell 2008). These parents were more likely to engage in analytical conversation, encourage active questioning of the establishment, and foster development of negotiation skills. The parents were also able to introduce their children to a wide range of activities, from sports to music to accelerated academic programs. When one middle-class child was denied entry to a gifted and talented program, the mother petitioned the school and arranged additional testing until her daughter was admitted. Lower-income parents, however, were more likely to unquestioningly obey authorities such as school boards. Their children were not being socialized to comfortably confront the system and speak up (Gladwell 2008).

What does this have to do with Chris Langan, deemed by some the smartest man in the world (Brabham 2001)? Chris was born in severe poverty, moving across the country with an abusive and alcoholic stepfather. His genius went largely unnoticed. After accepting a full scholarship to Reed College, he lost his funding after his mother failed to fill out necessary paperwork. Unable to successfully make his case to the administration, Chris, who had received straight A's the previous semester, was given F's on his transcript and forced to drop out. After he enrolled in Montana State, an administrator's refusal to rearrange his class schedule left him unable to find the means necessary to travel the 16 miles to attend classes. What Chris had in brilliance, he lacked in practical intelligence, or what psychologist Robert Sternberg defines as "knowing what to say to whom, knowing when to say it, and knowing how to say it for maximum effect" (Sternberg et al. 2000). Such knowledge was never part of his socialization.

Chris gave up on school and began working an array of blue-collar jobs, pursuing his intellectual interests on the side. Though he's recently garnered attention for his "Cognitive Theoretic Model of the Universe," he remains weary of and resistant to the educational system.

As Gladwell concluded, "He'd had to make his way alone, and no one—not rock stars, not professional athletes, not software billionaires, and not even geniuses—ever makes it alone" (2008).



Figure 4.3.2: Identical twins may look alike, but their differences can give us clues to the effects of socialization. These twins chose the same career path, but many twins do not. (Twin sisters by U.S. Navy via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC0 1.0)

Sociologists all recognize the importance of socialization for healthy individual and societal development. But how do scholars working in the three major theoretical paradigms approach this topic? Structural functionalists would say that socialization is essential to society, both because it trains members to operate successfully within it and because it perpetuates culture by transmitting it to new generations. Without socialization, a society's culture would perish as members died off. A conflict theorist might argue that socialization reproduces inequality from generation to generation by conveying different expectations and norms

to those with different social characteristics. For example, individuals are socialized differently by gender, social class, and race. As in Chris Langan's case, this creates different (unequal) opportunities. An interactionist studying socialization is concerned with face-to-face exchanges and symbolic communication. For example, dressing baby boys in blue and baby girls in pink is one small way we convey messages about differences in gender roles.

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4.4: Agents of Socialization

Social Group Agents

Socialization helps people learn to function successfully in their social worlds. How does the process of socialization occur? How do we learn to use the objects of our society's material culture? How do we come to adopt the beliefs, values, and norms that represent its nonmaterial culture? This learning takes place through interaction with various agents of socialization, like peer groups and families, plus both formal and informal social institutions.

Social groups often provide the first experiences of socialization. Families, and later peer groups, communicate expectations and reinforce norms. People first learn to use the tangible objects of material culture in these settings, as well as being introduced to the beliefs and values of society.

Family

Family is the first agent of socialization. Mothers and fathers, siblings and grandparents, plus members of an extended family, all teach a child what he or she needs to know. For example, they show the child how to use objects (such as clothes, computers, eating utensils, books, bikes); how to relate to others (some as "family," others as "friends," still others as "strangers" or "teachers" or "neighbors"); and how the world works (what is "real" and what is "imagined"). As you are aware, either from your own experience as a child or from your role in helping to raise one, socialization includes teaching and learning about an unending array of objects and ideas.

Keep in mind, however, that families do not socialize children in a vacuum. Many social factors affect the way a family raises its children. For example, we can use sociological imagination to recognize that individual behaviors are affected by the historical period in which they take place. Sixty years ago, it would not have been considered especially strict for a father to hit his son with a wooden spoon or a belt if he misbehaved, but today that same action might be considered child abuse.

Sociologists recognize that race, social class, religion, and other societal factors play an important role in socialization. For example, poor families usually emphasize obedience and conformity when raising their children, while wealthy families emphasize judgment and creativity (National Opinion Research Center 2008). This may occur because working-class parents have less education and more repetitive-task jobs for which it is helpful to be able to follow rules and conform. Wealthy parents tend to have better educations and often work in managerial positions or careers that require creative problem solving, so they teach their children behaviors that are beneficial in these positions. This means children are effectively socialized and raised to take the types of jobs their parents already have, thus reproducing the class system (Kohn 1977). Likewise, children are socialized to abide by gender norms, perceptions of race, and class-related behaviors.

In Sweden, for instance, stay-at-home fathers are an accepted part of the social landscape. A government policy provides subsidized time off work—480 days for families with newborns—with the option of the paid leave being shared between mothers and fathers. As one stay-at-home dad says, being home to take care of his baby son "is a real fatherly thing to do. I think that's very masculine" (Associated Press 2011). Close to 90 percent of Swedish fathers use their paternity leave (about 340,000 dads); on average they take seven weeks per birth (The Economist, 2014). How do U.S. policies—and our society's expected gender roles—compare? How will Swedish children raised this way be socialized to parental gender norms? How might that be different from parental gender norms in the United States?



Figure 4.4.1: Two caregivers interact closely with an infant, illustrating how family relationships provide early socialization through touch, attention, emotional attachment, and shared communication. (Parents and their baby by sheldonl via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC0 1.0)

Peer Groups

A peer group is made up of people who are similar in age and social status and who share interests. Peer group socialization begins in the earliest years, such as when kids on a playground teach younger children the norms about taking turns, the rules of a game, or how to shoot a basket. As children grow into teenagers, this process continues. Peer groups are important to adolescents in a new way, as they begin to develop an identity separate from their parents and exert independence. Additionally, peer groups provide their own opportunities for socialization since kids usually engage in different types of activities with their peers than they do with their families. Peer groups provide adolescents' first major socialization experience outside the realm of their families. Interestingly, studies have shown that although friendships rank high in adolescents' priorities, this is balanced by parental influence.

Institutional Agents

The social institutions of our culture also inform our socialization. Formal institutions—like schools, workplaces, and the government—teach people how to behave in and navigate these systems. Other institutions, like the media, contribute to socialization by inundating us with messages about norms and expectations.

School

In the United States, children typically spend 6.5 to 7 hours per day in school, with an average of 178 to 180 days per school year. This amounts to roughly 1,000 to 1,230 hours annually. (2024). Students are not in school only to study math, reading, science, and other subjects. Schools also serve a latent function in society by socializing children into behaviors like practicing teamwork, following a schedule, and using textbooks.



Figure 4.4.2: These kindergarteners aren't just learning to read and write; they are being socialized to norms like keeping their hands to themselves, standing in line, and playing together. (Kindergarten by woodleywonderworks via flickr is licensed under CC BY 4.0)

School and classroom rituals, led by teachers serving as role models and leaders, regularly reinforce what society expects from children. Sociologists describe this aspect of schools as the hidden curriculum, the informal teaching done by schools. For example, in the United States, schools have built a sense of competition into the way grades are awarded and the way teachers evaluate students (Bowles and Gintis 1976). When children participate in a relay race or a math contest, they learn there are winners and losers in society. When children are required to work together on a project, they practice teamwork with other people in cooperative situations. The hidden curriculum prepares children for the adult world. Children learn how to deal with bureaucracy, rules, expectations, waiting their turn, and sitting still for hours during the day. Schools in different cultures socialize children differently in order to prepare them to function well in those cultures. The latent functions of teamwork and dealing with bureaucracy are features of U.S. culture.

Schools also socialize children by teaching them about citizenship and national pride. In the United States, children are taught to say the Pledge of Allegiance. Most districts require classes about U.S. history and geography. As academic understanding of history evolves, textbooks in the United States have been scrutinized and revised to update attitudes toward other cultures as well as perspectives on historical events; thus, children are socialized to a different national or world history than earlier textbooks may have done. For example, information about the mistreatment of African Americans and Native American Indians more accurately reflects those events than in textbooks of the past.

Big Picture: Controversial Textbooks

On August 13, 2001, twenty South Korean men gathered in Seoul. Each chopped off one of his own fingers because of textbooks. These men took drastic measures to protest eight middle school textbooks approved by Tokyo for use in Japanese middle schools. According to the Korean government (and other East Asian nations), the textbooks glossed over negative events in Japan's history at the expense of other Asian countries.

In the early 1900s, Japan was one of Asia's more aggressive nations. For instance, it held Korea as a colony between 1910 and 1945. Today, Koreans argue that the Japanese are whitewashing that colonial history through these textbooks. One major criticism is that they do not mention that, during World War II, the Japanese forced Korean women into sexual slavery. The textbooks describe the women as having been "drafted" to work, a euphemism that downplays the brutality of what actually occurred. Some Japanese textbooks dismiss an important Korean independence demonstration in 1919 as a "riot." In reality, Japanese soldiers attacked peaceful demonstrators, leaving roughly 6,000 dead and 15,000 wounded (Crampton 2002).

> The protest affirms that textbooks are a significant tool of socialization in state-run education systems.

The Workplace

Just as children spend much of their day at school, many U.S. adults at some point invest a significant amount of time at a place of employment. Although socialized into their culture since birth, workers require new socialization into a workplace, in terms of both material culture (such as how to operate the copy machine) and nonmaterial culture (such as whether it's okay to speak directly to the boss or how to share the refrigerator).Organizational behavior and other business experts place responsibility on companies; organizations must have strong onboarding and socialization programs in order to build satisfaction, productivity, and workplace retention (Cebollero 2019).

Different jobs require different types of socialization. In the past, many people worked a single job until retirement. Today, the trend is to switch jobs at least once a decade. Between the ages of eighteen and forty-six, the average Baby Boomer held 11.3 different jobs. People born from 1957 to 1964, the latter years of the baby boom, held an average of 12.7 jobs from ages 18 to 56. Nearly half of these jobs were held before age 25. On average, men held 12.8 jobs and women held 12.5 jobs. (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024). This means that people must become socialized to, and socialized by, a variety of work environments.

Religion

Religion serves as an important avenue of socialization for many individuals and communities. Across the United States, synagogues, temples, churches, mosques, and other religious spaces provide places where people gather not only to worship, but also to learn shared beliefs, values, traditions, and social behaviors.

Like other social institutions, religious organizations teach participants how to interact with the religion's material culture, such as a mezuzah, prayer rug, rosary, communion wafer, or sacred texts. Religious communities also help shape social expectations and identity through rituals, traditions, and ceremonies. For many people, important life events connected to family structure, including birth, marriage, and death, are closely tied to religious practices and celebrations.

In addition, many religious institutions reinforce cultural norms and social expectations related to gender, family, morality, and authority. Through rites of passage, shared rituals, teachings, and community practices, organized religion contributes to the transmission of social values from one generation to the next. In this way, religion plays a significant role in shaping both individual identity and broader social life.

Government

Although we do not think about it, many of the rites of passage people go through today are based on age norms established by the government. To be defined as an "adult" usually means being eighteen years old, the age at which a person becomes legally responsible for him- or herself. And sixty-five years old is the start of "old age" since most people become eligible for senior benefits at that point.

Each time we embark on one of these new categories of senior, adult, taxpayer, we must be socialized into our new role. In the United States, seniors must understand the nuances of Medicare, Social Security benefits, and senior shopping discounts. When U.S. males turn eighteen, they must register with the Selective Service System within thirty days to be entered into a database for possible military service. These government dictates mark the points at which we require socialization into a new category.

Mass Media

Mass media distribute impersonal information to a wide audience, via television, newspapers, radio, and the Internet. With the average person spending over four hours a day in front of the television (and children averaging even more screen time), media greatly influences social norms (Roberts, Foehr, and Rideout 2005). People learn about objects of material culture (like new technology and transportation options), as well as nonmaterial culture—what is true (beliefs), what is important (values), and what is expected (norms).

Socialization is an essential process that enables individuals to become functioning members of society. From early childhood through adulthood, we are continuously shaped by social institutions, relationships, and cultural forces. Whether through family

teachings, peer influence, school rituals, workplace norms, religious traditions, governmental benchmarks, or media messages, the agents of socialization guide our understanding of the world and our place within it. Recognizing these influences allows us to better understand the ways society reproduces itself and how individuals are molded within it.

Sociology in the Real World: Girls and Movies



Figure 4.4.3: Some researchers, parents, and children's advocates are concerned about the effects of raising girls within what they call "princess culture." Many place blame on entertainment companies, such as Disney, for their portrayals of girls in their movies. (Cinderella by Simon Kellogg via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY 4.0)

Movies aimed at young people have featured a host of girls and women leads. *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty* gave way to *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast, and Mulan*. In many of those cases, if the character is not a princess to begin with, she typically ends the movie by marrying a prince or, in the case of Mulan, a military general. Although not all “princesses” in Disney movies play a passive role in their lives, they typically find themselves needing to be rescued by a man, and the happy ending they all search for includes marriage.

Alongside this prevalence of princesses, many parents are expressing concern about the culture of princesses that Disney has created. Peggy Orenstein addresses this problem in her popular book, *Cinderella Ate My Daughter*. Orenstein wonders why every little girl is expected to be a “princess” and why pink has become an all-consuming obsession for many young girls. Another mother wondered what she did wrong when her three-year-old daughter refused to do “nonprincessy” things, including running and jumping. The effects of this princess culture can have negative consequences for girls throughout life. An early emphasis on beauty and can lead to reduced interest in math and science among girls, as well as avoiding educational scenarios that are "typically feminine" (Coyne 2016).

Others acknowledge these issues, but find princess movies and "princess culture" less alarming. Some remind concerned parents that children have an array of media and activities around them, and the children may be happy wearing their princess outfit while digging for worms or going to hockey practice, which run counter to feminine stereotypes (Wagner 2019). Others indicate that rather than disallowing princess movies and merchandise, engaging with the children as they enjoy them might be more effective. And many people acknowledge that girls and women are often currently portrayed differently than they were in years past.

Disney seems to have gotten the message about the concerns. Its 2009 *Tiana and the Frog* was specifically billed as "a princess movie for people who don't like princess movies," and features a talented chef and business owner—who didn't need a man to rescue her—as its main character. *Brave*'s Merida and the title character in *Moana* seem to go out of their way

to separate themselves from traditional princesses, and undertake great acts of bravery to help others. *Frozen* focuses on sisterly love rather than romantic love. And though she was never meant to be a princess, *Star Wars*' Rey was the go-to girls Halloween costume for years after she was introduced in the movies.

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4.5: Socialization Across the Life Course

A Lifelong Process

Socialization isn't a one-time or even a short-term event. We aren't "stamped" by some socialization machine as we move along a conveyor belt and thereby socialized once and for all. In fact, socialization is a lifelong process.

In the United States, socialization throughout the life course is determined greatly by age norms and "time-related rules and regulations" (Settersten 2002). As we grow older, we encounter age-related transition points that require socialization into a new role, such as becoming school age, entering the workforce, or retiring. For example, the U.S. government mandates that all children attend school. Child labor laws, enacted in the early twentieth century, nationally declared that childhood be a time of learning, not of labor. In countries such as Niger and Sierra Leone, however, child labor remains common and socially acceptable, with little legislation to regulate such practices (UNICEF 2012).

Big Picture: Life After High School Around the World

In the United States, recent high school graduates have increasingly been focusing on college attendance. In recent years, about two-thirds of high school graduates are enrolled in college between their teen years and age twenty-four. About one-third of the same population primarily participates in the work force, meaning that they are employed or are looking for employment (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2020). Of those who attend college, most (about 69 percent) are considered immediate enrollers, meaning that they begin college in the first fall academic term immediately after their high school graduation (NCES 2020).

Other countries, especially high-income nations in Western Europe, have similar trends in college education, but fewer students start immediately. Gap years, overseas experiences, or mandatory wait times all lead students to a wide array of pre-college destinations. In Denmark, for example numbers of students who take a "year out" are so high that the government has sought to give students cash bonuses for attending immediately (Anderson 2009). For several decades, only about 25 percent of Denmark's high school graduates enrolled in college right away, and that number continued to drop in the 2010s, with a record low of only 15 percent in 2018 (Ritzau 2019). Compare that to the U.S. numbers mentioned above, where over two thirds of the students enroll in college immediately. And note that in Denmark, college is almost universally free.

In the United States, this life transition point is socialized quite differently. Taking a year off much less common than some other countries, but has certainly picked up in recent years. In most cases, U.S. youth are encouraged to select a few target colleges or potential workforce options by their late teens, and to get started on those pathways soon after high school. As mentioned above, many U.S. students do not attend college, but most of those students are in the workforce (including the military).

Other nations have entirely different approaches based on available educational institutions, financial circumstances, and family needs. In some nations, students often go to college soon after high school, but do so in other countries (including the U.S.). Dozens of nations require military conscription—military service—for men, and a few (such as Sweden, Israel, Norway, Eritrea, and Venezuela) for women as well.

How might your life be different if you lived in one of these other countries? Can you think of similar social norms—related to life age-transition points—that vary from country to country?

Many of life's social expectations are made clear and enforced on a cultural level. Through interacting with others and watching others interact, the expectation to fulfill roles becomes clear. While in elementary or middle school, the prospect of having a boyfriend or girlfriend may have been considered undesirable. The socialization that takes place in high school changes the expectation. By observing the excitement and importance attached to dating and relationships within the high school social scene, it quickly becomes apparent that one is now expected not only to be a child and a student, but also a significant other. Graduation from formal education—high school, vocational school, or college—involves socialization into a new set of expectations.

Educational expectations vary not only from culture to culture, but also from class to class. While middle- or upper-class families may expect their daughter or son to attend a four-year university after graduating from high school, other families may expect their child to immediately begin working full-time, as many within their family have done before.

Sociology in the Real World: The Long Road to Adulthood for Millennials

Socialization differences also vary by generation. As you will see in the chapter on Aging and the Elderly, Millennials (those born from the early 1980's to the middle 1990's) have very different attitudes about when childhood ends, the prime of life begins, and when people become "old." (Preview: Millennials thought childhood ended later and people became old earlier than did Baby Boomers and Gen Xers at the same age.)

Millennials were deeply affected by the financial Recession in 2008. While the recession was in full swing, many were in the process of entering, attending, or graduating from high school and college. With employment prospects at historical lows, large numbers of graduates were unable to find work, sometimes moving back in with their parents and struggling to pay back student loans.

According to the *New York Times*, this economic stall caused the Millennials to postpone what most Americans consider to be adulthood: “The traditional cycle seems to have gone off course, as young people remain untethered to romantic partners or to permanent homes, going back to school for lack of better options, traveling, avoiding commitments, competing ferociously for unpaid internships or temporary (and often grueling) Teach for America jobs, forestalling the beginning of adult life” (Henig 2010). The term Boomerang Generation describes recent college graduates, for whom lack of adequate employment upon college graduation often leads to a return to the parental home (Davidson, 2014).

The five milestones that define adulthood, Henig writes, are “completing school, leaving home, becoming financially independent, marrying, and having a child” (Henig 2010). These social milestones are taking longer for Millennials to attain, if they’re attained at all. Sociologists wonder what long-term impact this generation’s situation may have on society as a whole.

In the process of socialization, adulthood brings a new set of challenges and expectations, as well as new roles to fill. As the aging process moves forward, social roles continue to evolve. Pleasures of youth, such as wild nights out and serial dating, become less acceptable in the eyes of society. Responsibility and commitment are emphasized as pillars of adulthood, and men and women are expected to “settle down.” During this period, many people enter into marriage or a civil union, bring children into their families, and focus on a career path. They become partners or parents instead of students or significant others.

Just as young children pretend to be doctors or lawyers, play house, and dress up, adults also engage in anticipatory socialization, the preparation for future life roles. Examples would include a couple who cohabitate before marriage or soon-to-be parents who read infant care books and prepare their home for the new arrival. As part of anticipatory socialization, adults who are financially able begin planning for their retirement, saving money, and looking into future healthcare options. The transition into any new life role, despite the social structure that supports it, can be difficult.

About a decade after the nation began to recover from the Recession, it was hit by another. Millennials, who had entered a very challenging employment situation, were saddled with debt and had very little in savings. By July 2020, the Millennial unemployment rate was 11.5 percent, which was actually higher than their unemployment rate during the 2008 Recession. Gen Z, the group of people born after the Millennials, fared even worse—with an 18 percent unemployment rate (Hoffower 2020). The cycle of financial insecurity and the potential socialization impacts may happen again in this decade.

Resocialization

In the process of resocialization, old behaviors that were helpful in a previous role are removed because they are no longer of use. Resocialization is necessary when a person moves to a senior care center, goes to boarding school, or serves a sentence in the prison system. In the new environment, the old rules no longer apply. The process of resocialization is typically more stressful than normal socialization because people have to unlearn behaviors that have become customary to them. While resocialization has a specific meaning, many organizations consider their training or retraining processes to embody elements of resocialization.

The most common way resocialization occurs is in a total institution where people are isolated from society and are forced to follow someone else’s rules. A ship at sea is a total institution, as are religious convents, prisons, or some cult organizations. They

are places cut off from a larger society. The 6.9 million Americans who lived in prisons and penitentiaries at the end of 2012 are also members of this type of institution (U.S. Department of Justice 2012).

Many individuals are resocialized into an institution through a two-part process. First, members entering an institution must leave behind their old identity through what is known as a degradation ceremony. In a degradation ceremony, new members lose the aspects of their old identity and are given new identities. The process is sometimes gentle. To enter a senior care home, an elderly person often must leave a family home and give up many belongings which were part of his or her long-standing identity. Though caretakers guide the elderly compassionately, the process can still be one of loss. In many cults, this process is also gentle and happens in an environment of support and caring.

In other situations, the degradation ceremony can be more extreme. New prisoners lose freedom, rights (including the right to privacy), and personal belongings. When entering the military, soldiers have their hair cut short. Their old clothes are removed, and they wear matching uniforms. These individuals must give up any markers of their former identity in order to be resocialized into an identity as a "soldier."



Figure 4.5.1: In basic training, members of the Air Force are taught to walk, move, and look like each other. (Basic Training Parade by USAF public Affairs via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under PDM 1.0)

After new members of an institution are stripped of their old identity, they build a new one that matches the new society. In the military, soldiers go through basic training together, where they learn new rules and bond with one another. They follow structured schedules set by their leaders. Soldiers must keep their areas clean for inspection, learn to march in correct formations, and salute when in the presence of superiors.

Learning to deal with life after having lived in a total institution requires yet another process of resocialization. In the U.S. military, soldiers learn discipline and a capacity for hard work. They set aside personal goals to achieve a mission, and they take pride in the accomplishments of their units. Many soldiers who leave the military transition these skills into excellent careers. Others have significant challenges upon leaving, uncertain about the outside world and what to do next. The process of resocialization to civilian life is not a simple one.

Other types of organizations may utilize or extend the concept of resocialization with regard to changing people's behaviors. Corporate trainers (and training researchers) sometimes emphasize the need for trainees to shed their old behaviors and adopt entirely new ones. When the people return to their jobs after training, they may be called to leave their old behaviors behind. Similarly, if an entire team goes for training, they may be called to leave their culture behind (Weinbauer-Heidel 2019). Not all such training would apply the resocialization metaphor, but behavioral or personal-professional areas such as stress management or priority/project management might borrow from resocialization principles in order to make the training effective.

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4.6: Key Terms

Glossary

- **anticipatory socialization** | the way we prepare for future life roles
- **degradation ceremony** | the process by which new members of a total institution lose aspects of their old identities and are given new ones
- **generalized other** | the common behavioral expectations of general society
- **hidden curriculum** | the informal teaching done in schools that socializes children to societal norms
- **moral development** | the way people learn what is “good” and “bad” in society
- **nature** | the influence of our genetic makeup on self-development
- **nurture** | the role that our social environment plays in self-development
- **peer group** | a group made up of people who are similar in age and social status and who share interests
- **resocialization** | the process by which old behaviors are removed and new behaviors are learned in their place
- **self** | a person’s distinct sense of identity as developed through social interaction
- **socialization** | the process wherein people come to understand societal norms and expectations, to accept society’s beliefs, and to be aware of societal values

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4.7: Short Answer

Critical Thinking Questions

1. Think of a current issue or pattern that a sociologist might study. What types of questions would the sociologist ask, and what research methods might he employ? Now consider the questions and methods a psychologist might use to study the same issue. Comment on their different approaches.
2. Explain why it's important to conduct research using both male and female participants. What sociological topics might show gender differences? Provide some examples to illustrate your ideas.
3. Why are twin studies an important way to learn about the relative effects of genetics and socialization on children? What questions about human development do you believe twin studies are best for answering? For what types of questions would twin studies not be as helpful?
4. Why do you think that people like Chris Langan continue to have difficulty even after they are helped through societal systems? What is it they've missed that prevents them from functioning successfully in the social world?
5. Do you think it is important that parents discuss gender roles with their young children, or is gender a topic better left for later? How do parents consider gender norms when buying their children books, movies, and toys? How do you believe they should consider it?
6. Based on your observations, when are adolescents more likely to listen to their parents or to their peer groups when making decisions? What types of dilemmas lend themselves toward one social agent over another?
7. Consider a person who is joining a sorority or fraternity, attending college or boarding school, or even a child beginning kindergarten. How is the process the student goes through a form of socialization? What new cultural behaviors must the student adapt to?
8. Do you think resocialization requires a total institution? Why, or why not? Can you think of any other ways someone could be resocialized?

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4.8: Further Research

Additional Learning Resources

- Lawrence Kohlberg was most famous for his research using moral dilemmas. He presented dilemmas to boys and asked them how they would judge the situations. Learn about Kohlberg's most famous moral dilemma, known as the Heinz dilemma.
- Read Persell's article about becoming a member of society to better understand why socialization matters.
- Learn more about Emotion-related socialization in the classroom.
- Homelessness is an endemic problem among veterans. Many soldiers leave the military or return from war and have difficulty resocializing into civilian life. Learn more about this problem at the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans' website.

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4.10: Accessible Text Description

Figure 4.1: Roadmap

A horizontal diagram on a black background contains three large light-gray arrows pointing from left to right. Each arrow includes a dark teal circle with white text.

The first circle is labeled “The ‘WHAT’” and asks what socialization is.

The second circle is labeled “The ‘WHY’” and introduces why socialization matters through the lenses of sociological theorists.

The third circle is labeled “The ‘HOW’” and asks how socialization occurs.

The arrows suggest a progression from defining socialization, to explaining its sociological significance, and then examining the processes and relationships through which people learn social norms, roles, identities, and expectations.

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5: GROUPS AND ORGANIZATIONS

Introduction

Throughout U.S. history, people have come together to form groups in order to pursue shared goals and advocate for change. These groups can range from informal networks to highly structured organizations, and they often have a significant impact on culture, society, the economy, and government institutions.

For example, in the late 2000s, a political movement emerged in response to concerns about government spending and perceived overreach. Participants organized public demonstrations and promoted a platform that emphasized limited government, fiscal conservatism, and traditional values. Over time, this grassroots effort gained national influence, with members running for political office and shaping the direction of a major political party.

Similarly, in the mid-2010s, a social movement gained momentum in response to widespread experiences of sexual harassment and assault. Originally initiated by activists to support marginalized communities, the movement drew broader attention when individuals began using a hashtag to share their personal stories. The widespread public response helped raise awareness, encouraged institutional reforms, and empowered others to speak out, leading to accountability across multiple sectors, including media, politics, and academia.

While some movements evolve into formal organizations with tax-exempt status, political affiliations, or legislative representation, others remain decentralized and community-driven. Both approaches have contributed to meaningful dialogue and reform. For instance, one movement transitioned into several nonprofits and formed a political caucus, while the other sparked a global conversation and policy changes without becoming a formal organization.

Groups, whether temporary or long-lasting, play a vital role in shaping society by promoting shared values and addressing collective concerns. Sociologists analyze groups through three primary theoretical lenses: the Functionalist, Conflict, and Interactionist perspectives.

Learning Objectives

By the end of the chapter, students will be able to:

1. Identify the characteristics and purposes of social groups, social movements, and formal organizations within U.S. society.
2. Explain how social movements and organizations influence culture, politics, public policy, and social change.
3. Compare and contrast decentralized grassroots movements with formal organizations using historical and contemporary examples.
4. Analyze social movements and group behavior through the Functionalist, Conflict, and Interactionist sociological perspectives.
5. Evaluate the role of collective action and shared values in shaping institutions, public awareness, and societal reform.

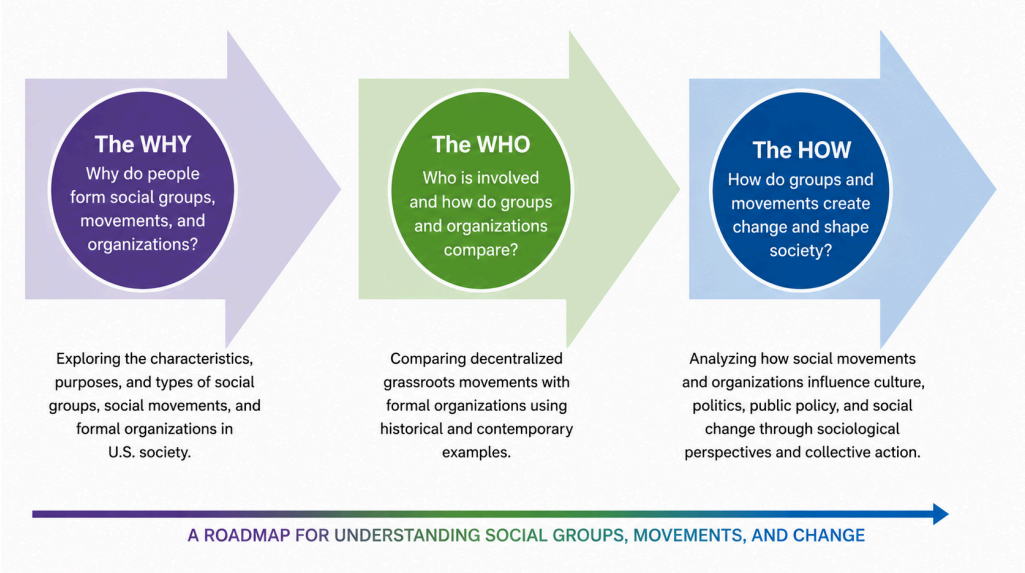


Figure 5.1: A sociological roadmap illustrating how social groups, organizations, and movements form, operate, and create social change within society. (Jayanti Roy via ChatGPT). Access alternative description for Figure 5.1.

Why, Who, and How

Group dynamics and organizations can be examined through three guiding questions: why, who, and how. The “why” asks why people form and join groups and organizations and what needs these collective arrangements fulfill. Groups can provide belonging, identity, emotional support, shared purpose, access to resources, and opportunities for cooperation. They can also establish norms, coordinate behavior, solve problems, and influence how individuals understand themselves and others. The “who” focuses on the people, roles, and structures involved. Sociologists distinguish among primary and secondary groups, in-groups and out-groups, reference groups, networks, bureaucracies, voluntary associations, and other formal organizations. They also examine how leadership, status, conformity, group size, social identity, and unequal access to power shape participation and decision-making. The “how” considers how groups and organizations operate, maintain order, manage conflict, and respond to change. This includes studying communication, authority, rules, division of labor, organizational culture, group pressure, cooperation, exclusion, and collective decision-making. It also asks how organizations use resources, media, technology, advocacy, and public engagement to influence communities, institutions, and public policy. Together, these questions help us understand groups and organizations not simply as collections of individuals, but as social structures that shape behavior, distribute power, create belonging, reproduce inequality, and make coordinated action possible.

5.1: Case Study and Vignettes
5.2: Types of Groups
5.3: Group Size and Structure
5.4: Formal Organizations
5.5: Key Terms
5.6: Short Answer
5.7: Further Research
5.8: References
5.9: Alternative Text Descriptions

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5.1: Case Study and Vignettes

Groups as Social Actors

Throughout U.S. history, people have come together to form groups in order to pursue shared goals and advocate for change. These groups can range from informal networks to highly structured organizations, and they often have a significant impact on culture, society, the economy, and government institutions.

For example, in the late 2000s, a political movement emerged in response to concerns about government spending and perceived overreach. Participants organized public demonstrations and promoted a platform that emphasized limited government, fiscal conservatism, and traditional values. Over time, this grassroots effort gained national influence, with members running for political office and shaping the direction of a major political party.

The Tea Party evolved into an organization. From a loosely associated set of local chapters, it developed into several closely affiliated nonprofits (filed with the IRS), a political faction within the Republican Party, and a caucus within Congress. What about the MeToo movement? Burke started it in 2006 and was working to enact change long before the hashtag sparked more awareness and new policies. The MeToo has brought together people to work in groups, but it has yet to form into a permanent MeToo organization.



Figure 5.1.1: Women march against misogyny holding a sign reading, “Can you hear me now? #MeToo. We were never silent. We were silenced and ignored.” The image reflects collective resistance to gender inequality through the #MeToo movement. (Can You Hear Me Now? -MeToo by Alex Perkins; CC-BY 2.0)

#MeToo

In 2006, activist Tarana Burke launched the #MeToo movement as a grassroots initiative to support survivors of sexual violence. Burke originally created the movement to help young women of color in under-resourced communities find solidarity, healing, and support after experiences of sexual harassment or assault. Her goal was to create a platform where survivors could share their stories and recognize that they were not alone.

As the movement expanded, particularly after the hashtag #MeToo spread globally on social media in 2017, it evolved into a large-scale collective network connecting millions of individuals across workplaces, communities, and countries. From a sociological perspective, the movement illustrates Charles Horton Cooley's concept of a secondary group—a group characterized by larger membership, more formal organization, and relationships oriented toward achieving shared goals rather than intimate personal bonds.

Unlike primary groups such as family or close friends, secondary groups are typically organized around a specific purpose. In this case, participants in the #MeToo movement may not know one another personally, but they are united through a shared objective: confronting sexual harassment, challenging rape culture, and promoting systemic change. Such organizations help coordinate advocacy, connect survivors with resources, and support public awareness campaigns. Through social media engagement, advocacy networks, and institutional reform efforts, members collaborate to hold perpetrators accountable and encourage policy changes in workplaces and legal systems.

Viewed through Cooley's framework, the #MeToo movement demonstrates how a secondary group can mobilize large numbers of people to pursue instrumental goals. While participants may experience personal validation and solidarity, the movement's broader purpose is collective action—raising awareness, influencing legislation, and transforming cultural norms related to sexual and gender-based violence. In doing so, the movement illustrates how organized networks of individuals can transform personal experiences into coordinated efforts for social change.

In what ways do gender, race, class, or immigration status shape who is heard—and who is ignored—within the movement?

Understanding Social Movements Through Sociological Perspectives

The Functionalist perspective examines society as a system where all parts serve a role in maintaining stability. From this view, social movements may be seen as mechanisms for voicing public concerns and promoting balance by addressing unmet societal needs—such as a demand for political representation or greater awareness of workplace equity.

For example, a Structural Functionalist might ask how the Tea Party arose to voice the concerns of a large sector of society that felt politically underrepresented, or how #MeToo drove people to pay attention to sexual harassment and gender inequality. This approach might look at how each group enabled the voicing of discontent and so stabilized society. The Conflict perspective focuses on the dynamics of power and inequality. It highlights how social groups challenge dominant structures, expose injustices, and seek to redistribute power. This lens would interpret movements as efforts to resist systemic disadvantages or to disrupt established hierarchies that benefit the few at the expense of many.

The Interactionist perspective takes a closer, micro-level look at group interactions, communication, and identity. It studies how group members create meaning through shared symbols, language, and rituals. From this view, researchers might explore how leadership develops, how members coordinate actions, or how identity and solidarity are formed within different branches or chapters of a movement.

By applying these sociological perspectives, we gain a deeper understanding of how groups emerge, evolve, and contribute to broader societal transformation.

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5.2: Types of Groups

Defining a Group

Most of us feel comfortable using the word “group” without giving it much thought. Often, we mean different things when using that word. We might say that a group of kids all saw the dog, and it could mean 250 students in a lecture hall or four siblings playing on a front lawn. In everyday use, it can be a generic term, although it carries important clinical and scientific meanings. Moreover, the concept of a group is central to much of how we think about society and human interaction. So how can we hone the meaning more precisely for sociological purposes?

Sociologists use the term more specifically to describe a collection of individuals who interact regularly and share a sense of belonging or identity.

Groups can take many forms. They may include friends who gather weekly, coworkers on a team, or members of a book club. What unites these examples is not just proximity, but interaction and shared identity. People in a group recognize that they are part of something collective and often shape their behaviors, values, or decisions accordingly.

The term group is an amorphous one and can refer to a wide variety of gatherings, from just two people (think about a “group project” in school when you partner with another student), a club, a regular gathering of friends, or people who work together or share a hobby. In short, the term refers to any collection of at least two people who interact with some frequency and who share a sense that their identity is somehow aligned with the group. Of course, every time people are gathered, it is not necessarily a group. A rally is usually a one-time event, for instance, and belonging to a political party doesn’t imply interaction with others. People who happen to be in the same place at the same time but who do not interact or share a sense of identity—such as a bunch of people standing in line at Starbucks—are considered an aggregate, or a crowd.

- Aggregates are people who are in the same place at the same time but do not interact meaningfully or share a group identity like the examples of passengers waiting in an airport or people standing in line at Starbucks. They may be physically close, but they do not form a group.
- Categories refer to people who share a similar characteristic but have no direct connection. For instance, “Millennials”--individuals born roughly between 1980 and 2000, are a category. While they may share experiences and generational traits, they do not necessarily know or interact with one another.

Interestingly, people within an aggregate or category can become a group. During disasters, people in a neighborhood (an aggregate) who did not know each other might become friendly and depend on each other at the local shelter. This shared experience can transform them into a true group—one that may endure over time and even organize around disaster preparedness, community care, or advocacy. After the disaster when people go back to simply living near each other, the feeling of cohesiveness may last since they have all shared an experience. They might remain a group, practicing emergency readiness, coordinating supplies for next time, or taking turns caring for neighbors who need extra help.

Similarly, there may be many groups within a single category. Consider teachers, for example. Within this category, groups may exist like teachers’ unions, teachers who coach, or staff members who are involved with the PTA.

Types of Groups

Sociologist Charles Horton Cooley (1864–1929) suggested that groups can broadly be divided into two categories: primary groups and secondary groups (Cooley 1909).

- Primary Groups are small, close-knit, and emotionally significant. Members interact frequently, usually face-to-face, and form strong emotional bonds. The family is the most common example, but close friends or long-term support networks may also fit this category. These groups fulfill expressive functions—they provide emotional support, love, and a sense of belonging.
- Secondary Groups are larger, more impersonal, and often organized around a specific goal or task. These relationships are usually temporary and formal. Examples include coworkers, committees, or classmates in a college course. These groups serve instrumental functions—they are focused on achieving a purpose or completing a task.

Neither primary nor secondary groups are bound by strict definitions or set limits. In fact, people can move from one group to

another. A group of coworkers, for example, can start as a secondary group, but as the employees work together over the years, they may find common interests and strong ties that transform them into a primary group. As we will discuss in the chapter on Media and Technology, even online networks of people with common interests can sometimes move from secondary to primary group status.

Sociology in the Real World: Best Friends She's Never Met

Writer Allison Levy worked alone. While she liked the freedom and flexibility of working from home, she sometimes missed having a community of coworkers, both for the practical purpose of brainstorming and socializing. Levy did what many do in the Internet age: she found a group of other writers online through a web forum. Over time, a group of approximately twenty writers, who all wrote for a similar audience, broke off from the larger group and started a private invitation-only forum. While writers in general represent all genders, ages, and interests, this group ended up being a collection of twenty- and thirty-something women who all wrote fiction for children and young adults.

At first, the writers' forum was clearly a secondary group united by the members' professions and work situations. As Levy explained, "On the Internet, you can be present or absent as often as you want. No one is expecting you to show up." It was a useful place to research information about publishers, recently-published books and authors, and industry trends. But as time passed, Levy found it served a different purpose. Since the group shared other characteristics beyond their writing (such as age and gender), their conversation naturally turned to matters such as child-rearing, aging parents, health, and exercise. Levy found it was a sympathetic place to talk about any number of subjects, not just writing. Further, when people didn't post for several days, others expressed concern, asking whether anyone had heard from the missing writers. It reached a point where most members would tell the group if they were traveling or needed to be offline for awhile.

The group continued to share. One member on the site who was going through a difficult family illness wrote, "I don't know where I'd be without you women. It is so great to have a place to vent that I know isn't hurting anyone." Others shared similar sentiments.

So is this a primary group? Most of these people have never met each other. They live in Hawaii, Australia, Minnesota, and across the world. They may never meet. Levy wrote recently to the group, saying, "Most of my 'real-life' friends and even my husband don't really get the writing thing. I don't know what I'd do without you." Despite the distance and the lack of physical contact, the group clearly fills an expressive need.

In-Groups and Out-Groups

One of the ways that groups can be powerful is through inclusion, and its inverse, exclusion. The feeling that we belong in an elite or select group is a heady one, while the feeling of not being allowed in, or of being in competition with a group, can be motivating in a different way. Sociologist William Sumner (1840–1910) developed the concepts of in-group and out-group to explain this phenomenon (Sumner 1906). In short, an in-group is the group that an individual feels she belongs to, and she believes it to be an integral part of who she is. An out-group, conversely, is a group someone doesn't belong to; often we may feel disdain or competition in relationship to an out-group. Sports teams, unions, and sororities are examples of in-groups and out-groups. Primary groups consist of both in-groups and out-groups, as do secondary groups.

While group affiliations can be neutral or positive, the concept of in-groups and out-groups can also explain some negative human behavior, such as white supremacist movements. By defining others as "not like us" and inferior, in-groups can end up practicing ethnocentrism, racism, sexism, ageism, and heterosexism—manners of judging others negatively based on their culture, race, sex, age, or sexuality.

Often, in-groups can form within a secondary group. For instance, a workplace can have cliques of people, from senior executives who play golf together, to engineers who write code together, to young singles who socialize after hours. While these in-groups might show favoritism and affinity for other in-group members, the overall organization may be unable or unwilling to acknowledge it. Therefore, it pays to be wary of the politics of in-groups, since members may exclude others as a form of gaining status within the group.



Figure 5.2.1: How do your academic interests define your in- and out-groups? (U.S. Army Corps of Nashville by Defense Visual Information Distribution Service via Picryl is licensed under PDM 1.0)

Big Picture: Bullying and Cyberbullying

Most of us know that the old rhyme "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me" is inaccurate. Words can hurt, and never is that more apparent than in instances of bullying. Bullying often reaches extreme levels of cruelty in children and young adults. People at these stages of life are especially vulnerable to opinions of others and deeply invested in their peer groups. Today, cyberbullying is on the rise. Cyberbullying can involve sending threatening texts, harassing someone in a public forum (such as social media), hacking someone's account and pretending to be them, posting embarrassing images online, and so on. A study by the Cyberbullying Research Center found that 28 percent of teens have been a victim of cyberbullying (Hinduja and Patchin, 2019). Severe bullying can lead to suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts (John, 2018). Researchers noted that students who experienced in-person and online bullying were eleven times more likely to attempt suicide (Hinduja, 2018). Whereas bullying face-to-face requires willingness to interact with your victim, cyberbullying allows bullies to harass others from the privacy of their homes without witnessing the damage firsthand. This form of bullying is particularly dangerous because it's widely accessible and therefore easier to carry out. Cyberbullying can create a feeling of powerlessness and inescapability because victimization is not constrained to physical locations. Many victims report being harassed across multiple platforms or formats at the same time.

Cyberbullying first made international headlines in 2010 when a fifteen-year-old girl, Phoebe Prince, in South Hadley, Massachusetts, died by suicide after being relentlessly bullied by girls at her school. In the aftermath of her death, the bullies were prosecuted and the state passed anti-bullying legislation. This marked a significant change in how bullying, including cyberbullying, is viewed in the United States. Now there are numerous resources for schools, families, and communities to provide education and prevention on this issue. Social media platforms and their parent companies are also taking steps (often under pressure from communities) to improve cyberbullying detection and reporting capabilities.

According to a report released in 2013 by the National Center for Educational Statistics, close to 1 in every 3 (27.8 percent) students report being bullied by their school peers. Seventeen percent of students reported being the victims of cyberbullying. Overall, LGBTQ youth are targeted at a higher rate than other youth, and members of minority populations overall are more likely to be cyberbullying victims (Hinjuda & Patchin, 2020). Finally, adults (particularly college students) are also frequent cyberbullying victims and perpetrators.

Reference Groups

Table 5.2.1: Reference Groups and Social Influence

Reference Group	Description of the Group	How the Group Influences Behavior or Identity	Examples
Peers	Friends, classmates, or slightly older students within one's social circle.	Teens often observe and imitate the styles, attitudes, and behaviors of peers to fit in or gain social acceptance.	Clothing trends at school, slang, music preferences, social media behaviors.
Celebrities and Athletes	Public figures widely recognized through media, sports, or entertainment.	These individuals often become aspirational models whose lifestyles, values, or appearances people try to emulate.	Fashion inspired by musicians, fitness routines modeled after athletes, beauty standards shaped by celebrities.
Coworkers or Professional Peers	Colleagues, supervisors, mentors, or others within a professional environment.	Individuals compare performance, career progress, and lifestyle choices with colleagues, influencing work habits and professional identity.	Adopting workplace norms, striving for promotions similar to coworkers, networking behaviors.
Family and Cultural Communities	Immediate family, extended relatives, and broader cultural or ethnic communities.	These groups shape expectations about life decisions, values, and responsibilities, even when individuals challenge those expectations.	Educational expectations, marriage traditions, career choices influenced by cultural norms.

A reference group is a group that people compare themselves to—it provides a standard of measurement.

A reference group is any group that individuals use as a standard for evaluating themselves—their behavior, appearance, goals, or values. People may not belong to their reference groups, but they look to them for guidance and comparison.

Common reference groups include:

- Peers: Teens often look to their friends—or even older students—for fashion and behavior cues.
- Celebrities and athletes: Media figures can become aspirational models, shaping how people dress, speak, or act.
- Coworkers or professional peers: In the workplace, employees often compare their performance or lifestyle to that of colleagues or mentors.
- Family and cultural communities: These can guide decisions related to education, marriage, or career, even when people want to push back against those norms.

Some other examples of reference groups can be one's cultural center, workplace, family gathering, and even parents. Often, reference groups convey competing messages. For instance, on television and in movies, young adults often have wonderful apartments and cars and lively social lives despite not holding a job. In music videos, young women might dance and sing in a sexually aggressive way that suggests experience beyond their years. At all ages, we use reference groups to help guide our behavior and establish our social norms. So how important is it to surround yourself with positive reference groups? You may not recognize a reference group, but it still influences the way you act. Identifying your reference groups can help you understand the source of the social identities you aspire to or want to distance yourself from.

Groups are fundamental to social life. From intimate family bonds to professional networks and generational cohorts, groups shape our identity, values, and behavior. They provide support, structure, and belonging—but they can also enforce norms, exclude

others, and perpetuate inequalities. Understanding the types, functions, and social consequences of group affiliation is key to analyzing human interaction through a sociological lens.

Sociology in the Real World: A World of In-Groups, Out-Groups, and Reference Groups

For a student entering college, the sociological study of groups takes on an immediate and practical meaning. After all, when we arrive someplace new, most of us glance around to see how well we fit in or stand out in the ways we want. This is a natural response to a reference group, and on a large campus, there can be many competing groups. Say you are a strong athlete who wants to play intramural sports, and your favorite musicians are a local punk band. You may find yourself engaged with two very different reference groups.

These reference groups can also become your in-groups or out-groups. For instance, different groups on campus might solicit you to join. Are there fraternities and sororities at your school? If so, chances are they will try to convince students—that is, students they deem worthy—to join them. And if you love playing soccer and want to play on a campus team, but you're wearing shredded jeans, combat boots, and a local band T-shirt, you might have a hard time convincing the soccer team to give you a chance. While most campus groups refrain from insulting competing groups, there is a definite sense of an in-group versus an out-group. "Them?" a member might say. "They're all right, but their parties are nowhere near as cool as ours." Or, "Only serious engineering geeks join that group." This immediate categorization into in-groups and out-groups means that students must choose carefully, since whatever group they associate with might define their friends for several years to come.

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5.3: Group Size and Structure

Dyads, Triads, and Large Groups

One of the foundational thinkers in this area, Georg Simmel (1858–1918), analyzed the qualitative differences in group dynamics based on size. He made a notable distinction between a dyad and a triad. A small group is typically one where the collection of people is small enough that all members of the group know each other and share simultaneous interaction, such as a nuclear family, a dyad, or a triad. Georg Simmel (1858–1915) wrote extensively about the difference between a dyad, or two-member group, and a triad, which is a three-member group (Simmel 1902). In the former, if one person withdraws, the group can no longer exist. We can think of a divorce, which effectively ends the "group" of the married couple or of two best friends never speaking again. In a triad, however, the dynamic is quite different. If one person withdraws, the group lives on. A triad has a different set of relationships. If there are three in the group, two-against-one dynamics can develop, and a majority opinion may form on any issue.

Small groups generally have strong internal cohesiveness and a sense of connection. Small groups may face challenges when trying to achieve large goals. They can struggle to be heard or to be a force for change if they are pushing against larger groups.

It is difficult to define exactly when a small group becomes a large group. Perhaps it occurs when one group grows so large that there are too many people to join in a simultaneous discussion. Sometimes it occurs when a group joins with other groups as part of a movement. These larger groups may share a geographic space, such as a fraternity or sorority on the same campus, or they might be spread out around the globe. The larger the group, the more attention it can garner, and the more pressure members can put toward whatever goal they wish to achieve. At the same time, the larger the group becomes, the more the risk grows for division and lack of cohesion.

Group Leadership

Often, larger groups require some kind of leadership. In small, primary groups, leadership tends to be informal. After all, most families don't take a vote on who will rule the group, nor do most groups of friends. This is not to say that de facto leaders don't emerge, but formal leadership is rare. In secondary groups, leadership is usually more overt. They often outline roles and responsibilities, with a chain of command to follow. Some secondary groups, like the military, have highly structured and clearly understood chains of command, and sometimes lives depend on those. After all, how well could soldiers function in a battle if different people were calling out orders and if they had no idea whom to listen to? Other secondary groups, like a workplace or a classroom, also have formal leaders, but the styles and functions of leadership can vary significantly.

Instrumental and expressive leadership roles

- An **instrumental leader** is primarily goal-oriented, focused on task completion, efficiency, and achieving measurable outcomes. CEOs, managers, or military commanders often serve in this capacity. Their leadership style centers on productivity and structure.
- An **expressive leader**, by contrast, prioritizes group harmony, emotional well-being, and interpersonal support. Social workers, spiritual leaders, or counselors may adopt this leadership approach, aiming to create a supportive and collaborative environment.

Leadership function refers to the main goal of the leader, which may be instrumental or expressive. An instrumental leader is one who is goal-oriented and largely concerned with accomplishing set tasks. We can imagine that an army general or a Fortune 500 CEO would be an instrumental leader. In contrast, expressive leaders are more concerned with promoting emotional strength and health, and ensuring that people feel supported. Social and religious leaders—rabbis, priests, imams, directors of youth homes and social service programs—are often perceived as expressive leaders. Sometimes people expect men to take on instrumental roles and women to assume expressive roles. Women and men who exhibit the other-gender manner can be seen as deviants and can encounter resistance. Yet, both men and women prefer leaders who use a combination of expressive and instrumental leadership (Boatwright and Forrest, 2000).

Sociologists recognize three leadership styles:

1. Democratic
2. Laissez-Faire
3. Authoritarian

Democratic leaders encourage group participation in all decision making. They work hard to build consensus before choosing a course of action and moving forward. This type of leader is particularly common, for example, in a club where the members vote on which activities or projects to pursue. Democratic leaders can be well liked, but there is often a danger that decisions will proceed slowly since consensus building is time-consuming. A further risk is that group members might pick sides and entrench themselves into opposing factions rather than reaching a solution.

In contrast, a laissez-faire (French for "leave it alone") leader is hands-off, allowing group members to self-manage and make their own decisions. An example of this kind of leader might be an art teacher who opens the art cupboard, leaves materials on the shelves, and tells students to help themselves and make some art. While this style can work well with highly motivated and mature participants who have clear goals and guidelines, it risks group dissolution and a lack of progress.

Finally, authoritarian leaders issue orders and assign tasks with little to no feedback from group members. These leaders are often instrumental leaders with a strong focus on meeting goals. Often, entrepreneurs fall into this mold, like Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg. Not surprisingly, authoritarian leaders risk alienating the workers. When decisions need to made quickly or informed by a high level of expertise, however, this style of leadership can be required.

In different circumstances, each of these leadership styles can be effective and successful. Consider what leadership style you prefer. Why? Do you like the same style in different areas of your life, such as a classroom, a workplace, and a sports team?

Big Picture: Women Political Candidates



Figure 5.3.1: Kamala Harris, like many other women leaders, faces unique and sometimes conflicting expectations. She may want to lead, but some care more about whether she is liked. (Senator Kamala Harris by California National Guard via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY 4.0)

Kamala Harris broke a significant barrier when she became the first woman and first person of Black and South Asian descent to be elected vice president of the United States. A prominent presidential candidate in her own right during the 2020 primary election, Harris was asked by then-candidate Joe Biden to be his running mate in order to secure his electoral victory.

You may be surprised, however, to learn that more than ten other women were on the ballot for president or vice president on November 3, 2020. Many were not on the ballot in every state, and at least one (Ricki Sue King) actually encouraged people not to vote for her. Shirley Chisholm, Lenora Fulani, Jill Stein, Hillary Clinton and many other women have been candidates, but the United States has yet to elect a woman to the presidency.

Researchers and political analysts have long established that gender plays a significant role in how political leaders (both candidates and elected officials) are perceived. As a starting point, research indicates that, even among women, the public prefer masculine qualities in presidents. For example, a study in which subjects completed the Bem Sex-Role Inventory and Implicit Leadership Inventory found that the hypothetical "Ideal" president possessed more masculine qualities than feminine qualities (Powell and Butterfield 2011).

Beyond the implicit preference toward masculine qualities, women candidates face what is sometimes referred to the "likability trap." Essentially, the public expects and prefers certain qualities from its leaders, and also expects and prefers certain qualities based on the candidates' gender. For women presidential candidates, these expectations often conflict. For example, when a male candidate ranks low on feminine qualities, their likeability is not significantly affected. But when a female candidate, like Hillary Clinton, ranks low on feminine qualities, their likability is significantly impacted. Interestingly, the same survey found that Kamala Harris had a much more balanced gender quality rating than Clinton did. The researchers qualified that since Kamala Harris ran for vice president, rather than president, the ratings cannot be directly compared to Clinton's. This difference, though, may indicate why many women are elected to legislative and gubernatorial roles, but not to the presidency (Conroy, Martin, and Nadler, 2020).

These same perceptions present themselves in the workplace. Prescriptive stereotypes—that is, ideas about how men or women should behave—limit women's advancement to leadership positions. Men are often appreciated for being ambitious, while women who exhibit assertive behavior are generally perceived as selfish or overly competitive (Baldoni, 2020). Furthermore, when men help out in the workplace, their contribution is appreciated while the same task carried out by women goes unacknowledged. Scholars observe that women are underrepresented in the top levels of U.S. businesses and Fortune 500 companies (Heilman 2012).

Conformity

We all like to fit in to some degree. Likewise, if we want to stand out, then we want to choose how we stand out and for what reasons. For example, a person who loves cutting-edge fashion might dress in thought-provoking new styles to set a new trend.

Conformity is the extent to which an individual complies with group norms or expectations. As you might recall, we use reference groups to assess and understand how to act, to dress, and to behave. Not surprisingly, young people are particularly aware of who conforms and who does not. A high school boy whose mother makes him wear ironed button-down shirts might protest that everyone else wears T-shirts and he will look stupid. Another high school boy might like wearing those shirts as a way of standing out. How much do you enjoy being noticed? Do you consciously prefer to conform to group norms so as not to be singled out? Are there people in your class who immediately come to mind when you think about those who don't want to conform?

Psychologist Solomon Asch (1907–1996) conducted experiments that illustrated how great the pressure to conform is, specifically within a small group (1956). Read about his work in the Sociological Research feature and consider what you would do in Asch's experiment. Would you speak up? What would help you speak up and what would discourage it?

Sociological Research: Conforming to Expectations

In 1951, psychologist Solomon Asch sat a small group of about eight people around a table. Only one of the people sitting there was the true subject; the rest were associates of the experimenter. However, the subject was led to believe that the others were all, like him, people brought in for an experiment in visual judgments. The group was shown two cards, the first card with a single vertical line, and the second card with three vertical lines differing in length. The experimenter polled the group and asked each participant one at a time which line on the second card matched up with the line on the first card.

However, this was not really a test of visual judgment. Rather, it was Asch's study on the pressures of conformity. He was curious to see what the effect of multiple wrong answers would be on the subject, who presumably was able to tell which lines matched. In order to test this, Asch had each planted respondent answer in a specific way. The subject was seated in such a way that he had to hear almost everyone else's answers before it was his turn. Sometimes the nonsubject members would unanimously choose an answer that was clearly wrong.

So what was the conclusion? Asch found that thirty-seven out of fifty test subjects responded with an "obviously erroneous" answer at least once. When faced by a unanimous wrong answer from the rest of the group, the subject conformed to a mean of four of the staged answers. Asch revised the study and repeated it, wherein the subject still heard the staged wrong answers, but was allowed to write down his answer rather than speak it aloud. In this version, the number of examples of conformity––giving an incorrect answer so as not to contradict the group––fell by two thirds. He also found that group size had an impact on how much pressure the subject felt to conform.

The results showed that speaking up when only one other person gave an erroneous answer was far more common than when five or six people defended the incorrect position. Finally, Asch discovered that people were far more likely to give the correct answer in the face of near-unanimous consent if they had a single ally. If even one person in the group also dissented, the subject conformed only a quarter as often. Clearly, it was easier to be a minority of two than a minority of one.

Asch concluded that there are two main causes for conformity: people want to be liked by the group or they believe the group is better informed than they are. He found his study results disturbing. To him, they revealed that intelligent, well-educated people would, with very little coaxing, go along with an untruth. He believed this result highlighted real problems with the education system and values in our society (Asch 1956).

Stanley Milgram, a Yale psychologist, had similar results in his experiment that is now known simply as the Milgram Experiment. In 1962, Milgram found that research subjects were overwhelmingly willing to perform acts that directly conflicted with their consciences when directed by a person of authority. In the experiment, subjects were willing to administer painful, even supposedly deadly, shocks to others who answered questions incorrectly.

The Bystander Effect and Diffusion of Responsibility

Social psychologists have recognized that other people's presence influences our behavior, whether we are aware of it or not. One example is the bystander effect, a situation in which people are less likely to interfere during an emergency or when a social norm is being violated if there are others around. They feel less responsible because of the presence of other bystanders (Beyer et al., 2017). This is known as diffusion of responsibility. To counteract the bystander effect and to foster prosocial responsibility is the concept of "*see something, say something*" with the intention of disrupting the passive group behavior.

Most of the time people report that they don't want to get involved and that's why they don't respond when they see something wrong. They assume someone else will step up and help. Researchers have found that people are less likely to help if they don't know the victim (Cherry 2020).

Think about it this way, you're walking to class and there are several students around. Someone falls on the ground having a seizure. What would you do? The bystander effect suggests that unless you know the person who has fallen, you are more likely to walk away than help. However, social psychologists believe that you are much more likely to help, or at least stop and check, if you are the only one around.

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5.4: Formal Organizations

Types of Formal Organizations

A complaint of modern life is that society is dominated by large and impersonal secondary organizations. From schools to businesses to healthcare to government, these organizations, referred to as formal organizations, are highly bureaucratized. Indeed, all formal organizations are, or likely will become, bureaucracies. We will discuss the purpose of formal organizations and the structure of their bureaucracies.

Sociologist Amitai Etzioni (1975) posited that formal organizations fall into three categories:

1. Normative Organizations
2. Coercive Organizations
3. Utilitarian Organizations

Normative organizations

- Also called voluntary organizations
- Are based on shared interests.
- Joining them is voluntary.
- People find membership rewarding in an intangible way.
- They receive non-material benefits.
- Intrinsic satisfaction of belonging to something meaningful.
- The Audubon Society and a ski club are examples of normative organizations.

Coercive organizations

- Are groups that we must be coerced, or pushed, to join.
- These may include prison or a rehabilitation center.
- Require strict obedience and control over members' daily lives
- Symbolic interactionist Erving Goffman states that most coercive organizations are total institutions or one in which inmates or military soldiers live a controlled lifestyle and in which total resocialization takes place.

Utilitarian organizations

- Are joined for material or practical rewards, such as income, credentials, or career advancement.
- High school and the workplace fall into this category—one joined in pursuit of a diploma, the other in order to make money.
- These organizations are structured around instrumental goals and efficiency.

Table 5.4.1: Types of Formal Organizations (Etzioni, 1975)

Types of Organizations	Normative or Voluntary	Coercive	Utilitarian
Benefit of Membership	Intangible benefit	Corrective benefit	Tangible benefit
Type of Membership	Volunteer basis	Required	Contractual basis
Feeling of Connectedness	Shared affinity	No affinity	Some affinity

The Structure of Bureaucracies

Bureaucracies are an ideal type of formal organization. By ideal, sociologists don't mean "best." Rather, bureaucracies have

a collection of characteristics that most of them exhibit. Pioneer sociologist Max Weber characterized a bureaucracy as having a hierarchy of authority, a clear division of labor, explicit rules, and impersonality (1922). People often complain about bureaucracies––declaring them slow, rule-bound, difficult to navigate, and unfriendly. Let's take a look at terms that define a bureaucracy to understand what they mean.

Max Weber's characterization of a bureaucracy

According to Weber, bureaucracies are characterized by:

- Hierarchy of Authority- Clear chain of command
- Clear Division of Labor
- Explicit Rules and regulations
- Impersonality
- Merit-based advancement

Hierarchy of authority refers to the chain of command that places one individual or office in charge of another, who in turn must answer to her own superiors. For example, as an employee at Walmart, your shift manager assigns you tasks. Your shift manager answers to his store manager, who must answer to her regional manager, and so on, up to the CEO who must answer to the board members, who in turn answer to the stockholders. Everyone in this bureaucracy follows the chain of command.

Bureaucracies have a clear division of labor: each individual has a specialized task to perform. For example, at a university, psychology professors teach psychology, but they do not attempt to provide students with financial aid forms. The Office of Admissions often takes on this task. In this case, it is a clear and commonsense division. But what about in a restaurant where food is backed up in the kitchen and a hostess is standing nearby texting on her phone? Her job is to seat customers, not to deliver food. Is this a smart division of labor?

Bureaucracies have explicit rules, rules that are outlined, written down, and standardized. For example, at your college or university, the student guidelines are contained within the Student Handbook. As technology changes and campuses encounter new concerns like cyberbullying, identity theft, and other problems that arise, organizations scramble to ensure their explicit rules cover these emerging issues.

Finally, bureaucracies are also characterized by impersonality, which takes personal feelings out of professional situations. This characteristic grew, to some extent, out of a desire to avoid nepotism, backroom deals, and other types of favoritism, while simultaneously protecting customers and others served by the organization. Impersonality Bureaucracies can effectively and efficiently serve volumes of customers quickly. However, explicit rules, clear division of labor, and a strict hierarchy of authority does not allow them to easily adjust to unique or new situations. As a result, customers frequently complain that stores with bureaucratic structures, like Walmart, care little about individuals, other businesses, and the community at large.

Bureaucracies are often meritocracies, meaning that hiring and promotion is based on proven and documented skills, rather than on nepotism or random choice. In order to get into a prestigious college, you need to perform well on the SAT and have an impressive transcript. In order to become a lawyer and represent clients, you must graduate law school and pass the state bar exam. Of course, there are many well-documented examples of success by those who did not proceed through traditional meritocracies. Think about technology companies with founders who dropped out of college, or performers who became famous after a YouTube video went viral.

In addition, organizations that aspire to become meritocracies encounter challenges. How well do you think established meritocracies identify talent? Wealthy families hire tutors, interview coaches, test-prep services, and consultants to help their kids get into the best schools. This starts as early as kindergarten in New York City, where competition for the most highly-regarded schools is especially fierce. Are these schools, many of which have copious scholarship funds that are intended to make the school more democratic, really offering all applicants a fair shake?

There are several positive aspects of bureaucracies. They are intended to improve efficiency, ensure equal opportunities, and serve a large population. And there are times when rigid hierarchies are needed. But remember that many of our bureaucracies grew large at the same time that our school model was developed––during the Industrial Revolution. Young workers were trained, and organizations were built for mass production, assembly line work, and factory jobs. In these scenarios, a clear chain of command was critical. Now, in the information age, this kind of rigid training and adherence to protocol can actually decrease both productivity and efficiency.

Today's workplace requires a faster pace, more problem solving, and a flexible approach to work. Too much adherence to explicit rules and a division of labor can leave an organization behind. And unfortunately, once established, bureaucracies can take on a life of their own. Maybe you have heard the expression "trying to turn a tanker around mid-ocean," which refers to the difficulties of changing direction with something large and set in its ways. State governments and current budget crises are examples of this challenge. It is almost impossible to make quick changes, leading states to fail, year after year, to address increasingly unbalanced budgets. Finally, bureaucracies, grew as institutions at a time when privileged white males held all the power. While ostensibly based on meritocracy, bureaucracies can perpetuate the existing balance of power by only recognizing the merit in traditionally male and privileged paths.

Michels (1911) suggested that all large organizations are characterized by the Iron Rule of Oligarchy**,** wherein an entire organization is ruled by a few elites. Do you think this is true? Can a large organization be collaborative?

The McDonaldization of Society

The McDonaldization of Society (Ritzer 1993) refers to the increasing presence of the fast food business model in common social institutions, including government, education, and even relationships. The term itself isn't widely used in publications, research, or common conversation, but its effects are very familiar, even commonplace. The McDonald's model includes efficiency (the division of labor), predictability, calculability, and control (monitoring). For example, in your average chain grocery store, people at the register check out customers while stockers keep the shelves full of goods and deli workers slice meats and cheese to order (efficiency). Whenever you enter a store within that grocery chain, you receive the same type of goods, see the same store organization, and find the same brands at the same prices (predictability). You will find that goods are sold by the pound, so that you can weigh your fruit and vegetable purchase rather than simply guessing at the price for that bag of onions. The employees use a timecard to calculate their hours and receive overtime pay (calculability). Finally, you will notice that all store employees are wearing a uniform, and usually a name tag, so that they can be easily identified. There are security cameras to monitor the store, and some parts of the store, such as the stockroom, are generally considered off-limits to customers (control). This approach is so common in chain stores that you might not even notice it; in fact, if you went to a large-chain resturant or a store like Walmart, seeing a worker or a process that didn't have these uniform characteristics would seem odd.

While McDonaldization has resulted in improved profits and an increased availability of various goods and services to more people worldwide, it has also reduced the variety of goods available in the marketplace while rendering available products uniform, generic, and bland. Think of the difference between a mass-produced shoe and one made by a local cobbler, between a chicken from a family-owned farm and a corporate grower, or between a cup of coffee from the local diner and one from Starbucks. Some more contemporary efforts can be referred to as "de-McDonaldization": farmers markets, microbreweries, and various do-it-yourself trends. And with recent advertising and products emphasizing individuality, even McDonald's seems to be de-McDonaldizing itself.

The corporate impact of this phenomenon is interesting on its own, but sociologists and ordinary citizens are often more concerned about its echoes in other areas of society. A primary example, discussed extensively later on in this text, is education. Curricula and teaching practices were long the domain of local districts under state guidance. Some experts felt that this led to both inefficiency and underperformance. Starting in the 1990s and especially in the early 2000s with the No Child Left Behind law, national standards began to override local approaches. But the desired outcome (improved education) is difficult to measure and far more difficult to achieve. Due to funding gaps, difficult standards, and intense public and local government opposition, the law was largely seen as having limited impact and was eventually phased out.

Healthcare has also gone to a mass production and efficiency model. As you will explore later in the text, U.S. healthcare providers and insurers faced overwhelming increases in demand, partly the result of America's aging and less healthy population. In the 1990s, providers consolidated in what was called hospital "merger mania." Local hospitals and even small doctors' offices were merged or acquired by larger systems (Fuchs 1997). The trend continued with new growth in providers like urgent care offices. Other efficiency and standardization methods include telemedicine, new types of healthcare professionals, insurance mandates, and artificial intelligence.



Figure 5.4.1: This McDonald's storefront in Egypt shows the McDonaldization of society. (McDonald's in Cairo by Uricm55 via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0)

Sociology in the Real World: Secrets of the McJob

We often talk about bureaucracies disparagingly, and no organization takes more heat than fast food restaurants. Several books and movies, such as *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* by Eric Schossler, paint an ugly picture of what goes in, what goes on, and what comes out of fast food chains. From their environmental impact to their role in the U.S. obesity epidemic, fast food chains are connected to numerous societal ills. Furthermore, working at a fast food restaurant is often disparaged, and even referred to dismissively, as having a McJob rather than a real job.

But business school professor Jerry Newman went undercover and worked behind the counter at seven fast food restaurants to discover what really goes on there. His book, *My Secret Life on the McJob*, documents his experience. Unlike Schossler, Newman found that these restaurants offer much good alongside the bad. Specifically, he asserted that the employees were honest and hardworking, that management was often impressive, and that the jobs required a lot more skill and effort than most people imagined. In the book, Newman cites a pharmaceutical executive who says a fast-food service job on an applicant's résumé is a plus because it indicates the employee is reliable and can handle pressure.

Businesses like Chipotle, Panera, and Costco attempt to combat many of the effects of McDonaldization. In fact, Costco is known for paying its employees an average of $20 per hour, or slightly more than $40,000 per year. Nearly 90% of their employees receive health insurance from Costco, a number that is unheard of in the retail sector.

While Chipotle is not known for the high wages of its employees, it is known for attempting to sell high-quality foods from responsibly sourced providers. This is a different approach from what Schossler describes among burger chains like McDonalds.

So, what do you think? Are these McJobs and the organizations that offer them still serving an important role in the economy and people's careers? Or are they dead-end jobs that typify all that is negative about large bureaucracies? Have you ever worked in one? Would you?

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5.5: Key Terms

Glossary

- aggregate | a collection of people who exist in the same place at the same time, but who don't interact or share a sense of identity
- authoritarian leader | a leader who issues orders and assigns tasks
- bureaucracies | formal organizations characterized by a hierarchy of authority, a clear division of labor, explicit rules, and impersonality.
- category | people who share similar characteristics but who are not connected in any way
- clear division of labor | the fact that each individual in a bureaucracy has a specialized task to perform
- coercive organizations | organizations that people do not voluntarily join, such as prison or a mental hospital
- conformity | the extent to which an individual complies with group or societal norms
- democratic leader | a leader who encourages group participation and consensus-building before moving into action
- dyad | a two-member group
- explicit rules | the types of rules in a bureaucracy; rules that are outlined, recorded, and standardized
- expressive function | a group function that serves an emotional need
- expressive leader | a leader who is concerned with process and with ensuring everyone's emotional wellbeing
- formal organizations | large, impersonal organizations
- group | any collection of at least two people who interact with some frequency and who share some sense of aligned identity
- hierarchy of authority | a clear chain of command found in a bureaucracy
- impersonality | the removal of personal feelings from a professional situation
- in-group | a group a person belongs to and feels is an integral part of his identity
- instrumental function | being oriented toward a task or goal
- instrumental leader | a leader who is goal oriented with a primary focus on accomplishing tasks
- Iron Rule of Oligarchy | the theory that an organization is ruled by a few elites rather than through collaboration
- laissez-faire leader | a hands-off leader who allows members of the group to make their own decisions
- leadership function | the main focus or goal of a leader
- leadership style | the style a leader uses to achieve goals or elicit action from group members
- McDonaldization of Society | the increasing presence of the fast food business model in common social institutions
- meritocracy | a bureaucracy where membership and advancement is based on merit—proven and documented skills
- normative or voluntary organizations | organizations that people join to pursue shared interests or because they provide some intangible rewards
- out-group | a group that an individual is not a member of, and may even compete with
- primary groups | small, informal groups of people who are closest to us
- reference groups | groups to which an individual compares herself
- secondary groups | larger and more impersonal groups that are task-focused and time limited
- total institution | an organization in which participants live a controlled lifestyle and in which total resocialization occurs
- triad | a three-member group
- utilitarian organizations | organizations that are joined to fill a specific material need

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5.6: Short Answer

Critical Thinking Questions

1. How has technology changed your primary groups and secondary groups? Do you have more (and separate) primary groups due to online connectivity? Do you believe that someone, like Levy, can have a true primary group made up of people she has never met? Why, or why not?
2. Compare and contrast two different political groups or organizations, such as the MeToo and Tea Party movements. How do the groups differ in terms of leadership, membership, and activities? How do the group's goals influence participants? Are any of them in-groups (and have they created out-groups)? Explain your answer.
3. The concept of hate crimes has been linked to in-groups and out-groups. Can you think of an example where people have been excluded or tormented due to this kind of group dynamic?
4. Think of a scenario where an authoritarian leadership style would be beneficial. Explain. What are the reasons it would work well? What are the risks?
5. Describe a time you were led by a leader using, in your opinion, a leadership style that didn't suit the situation. When and where was it? What could she or he have done better?
6. Imagine you are in Asch's study. Would you find it difficult to give the correct answer in that scenario? Why or why not? How would you change the study now to improve it?
7. What kind of leader do you tend to be? Do you embrace different leadership styles and functions as the situation changes? Give an example of a time you were in a position of leadership and what function and style you expressed.
8. What do you think about the recent spotlight on fast food restaurants? Do you think they contribute to society's ills? Do you believe they provide a needed service? Have you ever worked a job like this? What did you learn?
9. Do you consider today's large companies like General Motors, Amazon, or Facebook to be bureaucracies? Why, or why not? Which of the main characteristics of bureaucracies do you see in them? Which are absent?
10. Where do you prefer to shop, eat out, or grab a cup of coffee? Large chains like Walmart or smaller retailers? Starbucks or a local restaurant? What do you base your decisions on? Does this section change how you think about these choices? Why, or why not?

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5.7: Further Research

Additional Learning Resources

- For more information about cyberbullying causes and statistics, check out the cyberbullying research center.
- What is your leadership style? Take an online quiz to find out.
- The concept of McDonaldization is a growing one. Check out Wienclaw's article for further discussion of this phenomenon.

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5.8: References

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5.9: Alternative Text Descriptions

Figure 5.1: Roadmap about groups and organizations

A horizontal instructional diagram presents three large arrows pointing from left to right. Each arrow contains a colored circle with one guiding question: why, who, and how. A long multicolored arrow along the bottom labels the sequence “A Roadmap for Understanding Social Groups, Movements, and Change.”

The first, purple arrow is labeled “The WHY” and asks, “Why do people form social groups, movements, and organizations?” The supporting text explains that this section explores the characteristics, purposes, and types of social groups, social movements, and formal organizations in U.S. society.

The second, green arrow is labeled “The WHO” and asks, “Who is involved and how do groups and organizations compare?” The text below explains that this section compares decentralized grassroots movements with formal organizations through historical and contemporary examples.

The third, blue arrow is labeled “The HOW” and asks, “How do groups and movements create change and shape society?” The supporting text explains that this section analyzes how social movements and organizations influence culture, politics, public policy, and social change through collective action and sociological perspectives.

Overall, the diagram presents a progression from examining why people organize, to identifying and comparing the people and structures involved, and finally to understanding how collective efforts can shape institutions, public life, and broader social change.

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6: DEVIANCE, CRIME, AND SOCIAL CONTROL

Introduction

Every society has rules about what people are expected to do, how they are expected to behave, and what happens when those expectations are violated. Some rules are formal, such as laws against theft or violence. Others are informal, such as expectations about politeness, dress, language, or classroom behavior. When people break these rules, their actions may be labeled as deviant, criminal, inappropriate, or even dangerous. But these labels are not always neutral or automatic. They depend on social context, power, culture, history, and the people or institutions doing the labeling.

This chapter examines deviance, crime, and social control as social processes. Students will explore how societies define deviance, how laws are created and enforced, and how institutions such as families, schools, police, courts, and prisons shape behavior. The chapter also introduces major sociological theories that help explain why deviance and crime occur, why some groups are more likely to be punished than others, and how social control can both maintain order and reproduce inequality.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- Define deviance, crime, and social control, and distinguish between formal and informal forms of regulation.
- Explain how social norms and cultural expectations shape what is considered deviant or criminal.
- Compare major sociological theories of deviance and crime, including functionalist, conflict, feminist, and symbolic interactionist perspectives.
- Analyze how power, inequality, and social institutions influence the creation and enforcement of laws.
- Evaluate the social consequences of crime control policies, including policing, punishment, incarceration, and rehabilitation.

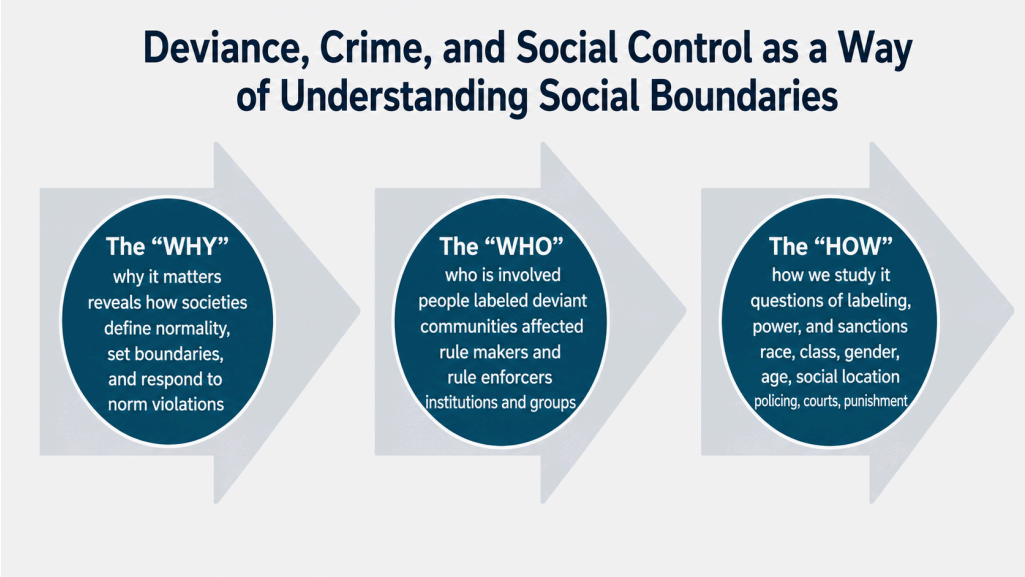


Figure 6.1: Deviance, crime, and social control reveal how societies define norms, enforce boundaries, and respond to violations. (Marx Gomez-Liendo via ChatGPT). Access alternative description for Figure 6.1.

Why, Who, and How

Deviance and crime are not just about "bad behavior"; they reveal how societies define normality, enforce boundaries, and respond to people who challenge or violate expectations. We will study these issues by asking sociological questions: Who gets

labeled deviant? Who has the power to create and enforce rules? How do race, class, gender, age, and social location affect experiences with discipline, policing, courts, and punishment? This chapter is about individuals who violate norms, communities affected by crime and social control, institutions that enforce rules, and societies that decide which behaviors are tolerated, punished, ignored, or transformed.

6.1: Case Study and Vignette
6.2: Deviance and Control
6.3: Theoretical Perspectives on Deviance and Crime
6.4: Crime and the Law
6.5: Key Terms
6.6: Short Answer
6.7: Further Research
6.8: References
6.9: Accessible Text Descriptions

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6.1: Case Study and Vignette

The Social Construction of Deviance

The changing legal and social status of marijuana in the United States offers a powerful example of how deviance is socially constructed. For decades, marijuana was classified as an illegal substance and was widely associated with danger, crime, and moral decline. People who used marijuana were often labeled as irresponsible, lazy, or threatening to social order. These labels were not simply based on the effects of the drug itself. They were also shaped by public fear, political campaigns, law enforcement practices, and racialized stereotypes about who used marijuana and what kind of person a marijuana user was assumed to be.

Over time, however, public opinion changed dramatically. In 1969, when Gallup first asked about cannabis legalization, only 12 percent of U.S. adults supported it. By 2013, the Pew Research Center found that, for the first time, a majority of Americans, 52 percent, supported legalizing cannabis. By 2019, that number had increased to 67 percent, meaning that about two-thirds of Americans favored some form of legalization, decriminalization, or elimination of jail time for cannabis use (Daniller 2019). As public opinion shifted, many states changed their laws as well. Cannabis use, once widely treated as deviant and criminal, became increasingly accepted in medical, recreational, and commercial contexts.

From “Deviant” to Legalized?

Imagine a young adult in the United States in the 1970s who is caught using cannabis. Even if the person is not harming anyone, they may be treated as a criminal, disciplined by school authorities, rejected by family members, or viewed by neighbors as a “bad influence.” The behavior is not only illegal; it is also stigmatized. To many people at the time, cannabis use seems to represent rebellion, irresponsibility, and social decline.

Now imagine a young adult in a state where cannabis is legally sold in licensed dispensaries. This person may purchase cannabis for recreational use, medical treatment, anxiety, pain management, or sleep. Their behavior may still be criticized by some people, but it is no longer automatically treated as criminal or socially unacceptable in the same way. In some communities, cannabis use has become routine, commercialized, and even associated with wellness or personal choice.

This comparison shows that deviance is not simply about the behavior itself. The same act can be understood differently depending on the historical moment, the legal context, the cultural setting, and the social group making the judgment. Cannabis use did not change as much as the social meanings attached to it changed. What shifted was the way people, institutions, and governments defined the behavior.

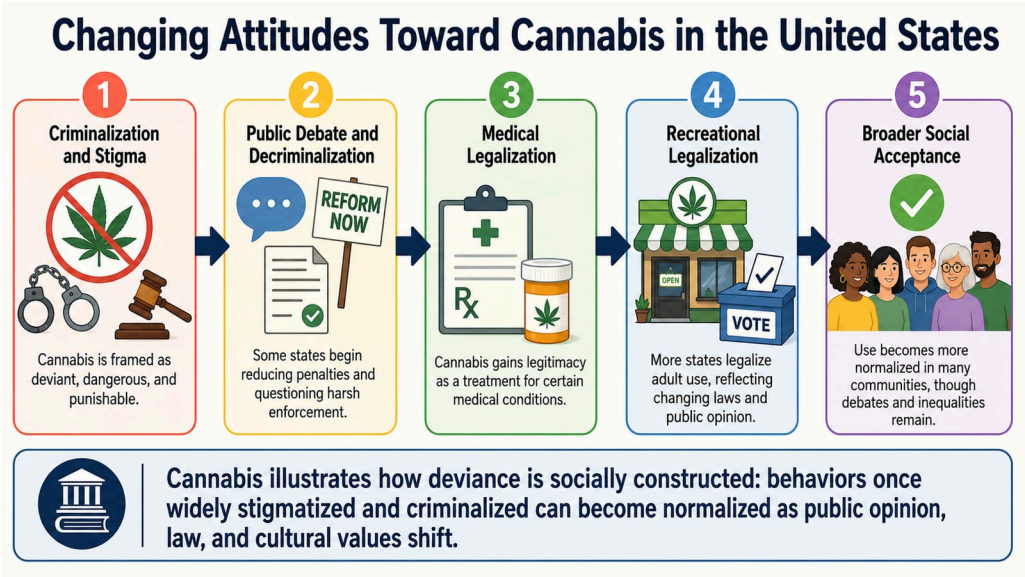


Figure 6.1.1: U.S. attitudes toward cannabis shifted from criminalization and stigma to medical and recreational legalization and broader, though still unequal, social acceptance. (Marx Gomez-Liendo via ChatGPT). Access alternative description for Figure 6.1.1.

Contextual Definitions

The cannabis case helps us understand one of the most important lessons in the sociology of deviance: there are no universal or permanent definitions of deviant behavior. What counts as deviant varies across societies, subcultures, and historical periods. Behaviors such as tattoos, vegan lifestyles, single parenthood, breast implants, divorce, and even jogging were once seen by some groups as unusual, inappropriate, or morally questionable. Today, many of these practices are widely accepted or normalized.

These changes usually do not happen immediately. They often involve debate, conflict, activism, new research, media representation, and generational change. When a norm is connected to major social institutions, such as family, religion, medicine, education, or law, the process of change can be especially controversial. Divorce, for example, was once heavily stigmatized because it challenged traditional ideas about marriage and family. Cannabis legalization has been similarly controversial because it raises questions about health, morality, policing, racial inequality, state authority, and personal freedom.

For sociologists, the key question is not simply whether cannabis use is “right” or “wrong.” Instead, sociology asks: Who gets to define a behavior as deviant? Who is punished for it? Who benefits when the definition changes? And how do law, culture, race, class, and power shape the process? Cannabis shows us that deviance is not just about rule-breaking. It is also about social labeling, institutional control, and the changing boundaries of what a society considers normal.

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6.2: Deviance and Control

What is Deviance?

Wells Fargo CEO John Stumpf was forced to resign after his company enrolled customers in unnecessary auto insurance programs, while also fraudulently creating bank accounts without client consent. Both of these actions are prohibited by a range of laws and regulations. Over a million victims were charged improper fees or overcharged for insurance; some suffered reductions in their credit scores, and an estimated 25,000 people had their cars improperly repossessed. Even though these actions were found to be criminal, no one from Wells Fargo faced jail time, as is common in financial crimes. Deviance does not always align with punishment, and perceptions of its impact vary greatly.

What, exactly, is deviance? And what is the relationship between deviance and crime? According to sociologist William Graham Sumner, deviance is a violation of established contextual, cultural, or social norms, whether folkways, mores, or codified law (1906). It can be as minor as picking your nose in public or as major as committing murder. Although the word "deviance" has a negative connotation in everyday language, sociologists recognize that deviance is not necessarily bad (Schoepflin 2011). In fact, from a structural functionalist perspective, one of the positive contributions of deviance is that it fosters social change. For example, during the U.S. civil rights movement, Rosa Parks violated social norms when she refused to move to the "Black section" of the bus, and the Little Rock Nine broke customs of segregation to attend an Arkansas public school.

"What is deviant behavior?" cannot be answered in a straightforward manner. Whether an act is labeled deviant or not depends on many factors, including location, audience, and the individual committing the act (Becker 1963). Listening to music on your phone on the way to class is considered acceptable behavior. Listening to music during your 2 p.m. sociology lecture is considered rude. Listening to music when on the witness stand before a judge may cause you to be held in contempt of court and consequently fined or jailed.

As norms vary across cultures and time, it also makes sense that notions of deviance change. Sixty years ago, public schools in the United States had dress codes that often banned women from wearing pants to class. Today, it's socially acceptable for women to wear pants, but less so for men to wear skirts. And more recently, the act of wearing or not wearing a mask became a matter of deviance, and in some cases, political affiliation and legality. Whether an act is deviant or not depends on society's response to that act.

Sociology in the Real World: Why I Drive a Hearse

When sociologist Todd Schoepflin ran into his childhood friend Bill, he was shocked to see him driving a hearse for everyday tasks, instead of an ordinary car. A professionally trained researcher, Schoepflin wondered what effect driving a hearse had on his friend and what effect it might have on others on the road. Would using such a vehicle for everyday errands be considered deviant by most people?

Schoepflin interviewed Bill, curious first to know why he drove such an unconventional car. Bill had simply been on the lookout for a reliable winter car; on a tight budget, he searched used car ads and stumbled upon one for the hearse. The car ran well, and the price was right, so he bought it.

Bill admitted that others' reactions to the car had been mixed. His parents were appalled, and he received odd stares from his coworkers. A mechanic once refused to work on it, and stated that it was "a dead person machine." On the whole, however, Bill received mostly positive reactions. Strangers gave him a thumbs-up on the highway and stopped him in parking lots to chat about his car. His girlfriend loved it, his friends wanted to take it tailgating, and people offered to buy it. Could it be that driving a hearse isn't really so deviant after all?

Schoepflin theorized that, although viewed as outside conventional norms, driving a hearse is such a mild form of deviance that it actually becomes a mark of distinction. Conformists find the choice of vehicle intriguing or appealing, while nonconformists see a fellow oddball to whom they can relate. As one of Bill's friends remarked, "Every guy wants to own a unique car like this, and *you* can certainly pull it off." Such anecdotes remind us that although deviance is often viewed as a violation of norms, it's not always viewed in a negative light (Schoepflin 2011).



Figure 6.2.1: A black hearse parked near a building, illustrating a vehicle associated with funeral services and the transportation of the deceased. Would you use it to drive around? (Hearse New Orleans by Infrogmation of New Orleans via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY 4.0)

Deviance, Crime, and Society

Deviance is a more encompassing term than crime, meaning that it includes a range of activities, some of which are crimes and some of which are not. Sociologists may study both with equal interest, but, as a whole, society views crime as far more significant. Crime preoccupies several levels of government, and it drives concerns among families and communities.

Deviance may be considered relative: Behaviors may be considered deviant based mostly on the circumstances in which they occurred; those circumstances may drive the perception of deviance more than the behavior itself. Relatively minor acts of deviance can have long-term impacts on the person and the people around them. For example, if an adult, who should "know better," spoke loudly or told jokes at a funeral, they may be chastised and forever marked as disrespectful or unusual. But in many cultures, funerals are followed by social gatherings – some taking on a party-like atmosphere – so those same jovial behaviors would be perfectly acceptable, and even encouraged, just an hour later.

As discussed earlier, we typically learn these social norms as children and evolve them with experience. But the relativity of deviance can have significant societal impacts, including perceptions and prosecutions of crime. They may often be based on racial, ethnic, or related prejudices. When 15-year-old Elizabeth Eckford of the Little Rock Nine attempted to enter her legally desegregated high school, she was abiding by the law; but she was considered deviant by the crowd of White people that harassed and insulted her. (These events are discussed in more detail in the Education chapter.)

Consider the example of marijuana legalization mentioned earlier. Why was marijuana illegal in the first place? In fact, it wasn't. Humans have used cannabis openly in their societies for thousands of years. While it was not a widely used substance in the United States, it had been accepted as a medicinal and recreational option, and was neither prohibited nor significantly regulated until the early 1900s. What changed?

In the early 1900s, an influx of immigrants began entering the country from Mexico. These newcomers took up residence in White communities, spoke a different language, and began competing for jobs and resources. They used marijuana more frequently than most Americans. Police and others began to circulate rumors regarding the substance's link to violence and immorality. Newspapers and lawmakers spoke about the "Marijuana Menace" and the "evil weed," and articles and images began to portray it as a corrupting force on America's youth. Beginning in 1916, state after state began passing laws prohibiting marijuana use, and in 1937 Congress passed a federal law banning it (White 2012). Penalties for its usage increased over time, spiking during the War on Drugs, with racially and ethnically disparate applications. But more recently, as discussed in the introduction, marijuana is once again seen as an important medical treatment and an acceptable recreational pursuit. What changed this time?

Perceptions and proclamations of deviance have long been a means to oppress people by labeling their private behavior as criminal. Until the 1970s and 1980s, same-sex acts were prohibited by state laws. It was illegal to be gay or lesbian, and the

restrictions extended to simple displays like holding hands. Other laws prohibited clothing deemed “inappropriate” for one’s biological sex. As a result, military service members and even war veterans were dishonorably discharged (losing all benefits) if they were discovered to be gay. Police harassed and humiliated LGBTQ people and regularly raided gay bars. And anti-LGBTQ street violence or hate crimes were tacitly permitted because they were rarely prosecuted and often lightly punished. While most states had eliminated their anti-LGBTQ laws by the time the Supreme Court struck them down in 2003, 14 states still had some version of them on the books.

To further explore the relativity of deviance and its relationship to perceptions of crime, consider gambling. Excessive or high-risk gambling is usually seen as deviant, but more moderate gambling is generally accepted. Still, gambling has long been limited in most of the United States, making it a crime to participate in certain types of gambling or to do so outside of specified locations. For example, a state may allow betting on horse races but not on sports. Changes to these laws are occurring, but for decades, a generally non-deviant behavior has been made criminal: When otherwise law-abiding people decided to engage in low-stakes and non-excessive gambling, they were breaking the law. Sociologists may study the essential question arising from this situation: Are these gamblers being deviant by breaking the law, even when the actual behavior at hand is not generally considered deviant?

Social Control

When a person violates a social norm, what happens? A driver caught speeding can receive a speeding ticket. A student who wears a bathrobe to class gets a warning from a professor. An adult belching loudly is avoided. All societies practice social control, the regulation and enforcement of norms. The underlying goal of social control is to maintain social order, an arrangement of practices and behaviors on which society’s members base their daily lives. Think of social order as an employee handbook and social control as a manager. When a worker violates a workplace guideline, the manager steps in to enforce the rules; when an employee is doing an exceptionally good job at following the rules, the manager may praise or promote the employee.

The means of enforcing rules are known as sanctions. Sanctions can be positive as well as negative. Positive sanctions are rewards given for conforming to norms. A promotion at work is a positive sanction for working hard. Negative sanctions are punishments for violating norms. Being arrested is a punishment for shoplifting. Both types of sanctions play a role in social control.

Sociologists also classify sanctions as formal or informal. Although shoplifting, a form of social deviance, may be illegal, there are no laws dictating the proper way to scratch your nose. That doesn’t mean picking your nose in public won’t be punished; instead, you will encounter informal sanctions. Informal sanctions emerge in face-to-face social interactions. For example, wearing flip-flops to an opera or swearing loudly in church may draw disapproving looks or even verbal reprimands, whereas behavior that is seen as positive—such as helping an elderly person carry grocery bags across the street—may receive positive informal reactions, such as a smile or pat on the back.

Formal sanctions, on the other hand, are ways to officially recognize and enforce norm violations. If a student violates a college’s code of conduct, for example, the student might be expelled. Someone who speaks inappropriately to the boss could be fired. Someone who commits a crime may be arrested or imprisoned. On the positive side, a soldier who saves a life may receive an official commendation.

The table below shows the relationship between different types of sanctions.

Table 6.2.1 Informal/Formal Sanctions: Formal and informal sanctions may be positive or negative. Informal sanctions arise in social interactions, whereas formal sanctions officially enforce norms.

Outcome	Informal	Formal
Positive	An expression of thanks	A promotion at work
Negative	An angry comment	A parking fine

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6.3: Theoretical Perspectives on Deviance and Crime

Functionalism

Sociologists who follow the functionalist approach are concerned with the way the different elements of a society contribute to the whole. They view deviance as a key component of a functioning society. Strain theory, social disorganization theory, and cultural deviance theory represent three functionalist perspectives on deviance in society.

Émile Durkheim: The Essential Nature of Deviance

Émile Durkheim believed that deviance is a necessary part of a successful society. One way deviance is functional, he argued, is that it challenges people's present views (1893). For instance, when Black students across the United States participated in sit-ins during the civil rights movement, they challenged society's notions of segregation. Moreover, Durkheim noted, when deviance is punished, it reaffirms currently held social norms, which also contributes to society (1893). Seeing a student given detention for skipping class reminds other high schoolers that playing hooky isn't allowed and that they, too, could get detention.

Durkheim's point regarding the impact of punishing deviance speaks to his arguments about law. Durkheim saw laws as an expression of the "collective conscience," which are the beliefs, morals, and attitudes of a society. "A crime is a crime because we condemn it," he said (1893). He discussed the impact of societal size and complexity as contributors to the collective conscience and the development of justice systems and punishments. For example, in large, industrialized societies that were largely bound together by the interdependence of work (the division of labor), punishments for deviance were generally less severe. In smaller, more homogeneous societies, deviance might be punished more severely.

Robert Merton: Strain Theory

Sociologist Robert Merton agreed that deviance is an inherent part of a functioning society, but he expanded on Durkheim's ideas by developing strain theory, which notes that access to socially acceptable goals plays a part in determining whether a person conforms or deviates. From birth, we're encouraged to achieve the "American Dream" of financial success. A person who attends business school, receives an MBA, and goes on to make a million-dollar income as CEO of a company is said to be a success. However, not everyone in our society stands on equal footing. That MBA-turned-CEO may have grown up in the best school district and had means to hire tutors. Another person may grow up in a neighborhood with lower-quality schools, and may not be able to pay for extra help. A person may have the socially acceptable goal of financial success but lack a socially acceptable way to reach that goal. According to Merton's theory, an entrepreneur who can't afford to launch their own company may be tempted to embezzle from their employer for start-up funds.

Merton defined five ways people respond to this gap between having a socially accepted goal and having no socially accepted way to pursue it.

1. *Conformity*: Those who conform choose not to deviate. They pursue their goals to the extent that they can through socially accepted means.
2. *Innovation*: Those who innovate pursue goals they cannot reach through legitimate means by instead using criminal or deviant means.
3. *Ritualism*: People who ritualize lower their goals until they can reach them through socially acceptable ways. These members of society focus on conformity rather than attaining a distant dream.
4. *Retreatism*: Others retreat and reject society's goals and means. Some people who beg and people who are homeless have withdrawn from society's goal of financial success.
5. *Rebellion*: A handful of people rebel and replace a society's goals and means with their own. Terrorists or freedom fighters look to overthrow a society's goals through socially unacceptable means.

Social Disorganization Theory

Developed by researchers at the University of Chicago in the 1920s and 1930s, social disorganization theory asserts that crime is most likely to occur in communities with weak social ties and the absence of social control. An individual who grows up in a

poor neighborhood with high rates of drug use, violence, teenage delinquency, and deprived parenting is more likely to become engaged in crime than an individual from a wealthy neighborhood with a good school system and families who are involved positively in the community.



Figure 6.3.1: Proponents of social disorganization theory believe that individuals who grow up in impoverished areas are more likely to participate in deviant or criminal behaviors. (Camden NJ poverty by Phillies1fan777 via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under PDM 1.0)

Social disorganization theory points to broad social factors as the cause of deviance. A person isn't born as someone who will commit crimes but becomes one over time, often based on factors in their social environment. Robert Sampson and Byron Groves (1989) found that poverty and family disruption in given localities had a strong positive correlation with social disorganization. They also determined that social disorganization was, in turn, associated with high rates of crime and delinquency—or deviance. Recent studies Sampson conducted with Lydia Bean (2006) revealed similar findings. High rates of poverty and single-parent homes correlated with high rates of juvenile violence. Research into social disorganization theory can greatly influence public policy. For instance, studies have found that children from disadvantaged communities who attend preschool programs that teach basic social skills are significantly less likely to engage in criminal activity. (Lally 1987)

Conflict Theory

Conflict theory looks to social and economic factors as the causes of crime and deviance. Unlike functionalists, conflict theorists don't see these factors as positive functions of society. They see them as evidence of inequality in the system. They also challenge social disorganization theory and control theory and argue that both ignore racial and socioeconomic issues and oversimplify social trends (Akers 1991). Conflict theorists also look for answers to the correlation of gender and race with wealth and crime.

Karl Marx: An Unequal System

Conflict theory was greatly influenced by the work of German philosopher, economist, and social scientist Karl Marx. Marx believed that the general population was divided into two groups. He labeled the wealthy, who controlled the means of production and business, the bourgeois. He labeled the workers who depended on the bourgeois for employment and survival the proletariat. Marx believed that the bourgeois centralized their power and influence through government, laws, and other authority agencies in order to maintain and expand their positions of power in society. Though Marx spoke little of deviance, his ideas created the foundation for conflict theorists who study the intersection of deviance and crime with wealth and power.

C. Wright Mills: The Power Elite

In his book *The Power Elite* (1956), sociologist C. Wright Mills described the existence of what he dubbed the power elite, a small group of wealthy and influential people at the top of society who hold the power and resources. Wealthy executives, politicians, celebrities, and military leaders often have access to national and international power, and in some cases, their decisions affect everyone in society. Because of this, the rules of society are stacked in favor of a privileged few who manipulate them to stay

on top. It is these people who decide what is criminal and what is not, and the effects are often felt most by those who have little power. Mills' theories explain why celebrities can commit crimes and suffer little or no legal retribution. For example, *USA Today* maintains a database of NFL players accused and convicted of crimes. 51 NFL players had been convicted of committing domestic violence between the years 2000 and 2019. They have been sentenced to a collective 49 days in jail, and most of those sentences were deferred or otherwise reduced. In most cases, suspensions and fines levied by the NFL or individual teams were more severe than the justice system's (Schrotenboer 2020 and clickitticket.com 2019).

Crime and Social Class

While crime is often associated with the underprivileged, crimes committed by the wealthy and powerful remain an under-punished and costly problem within society. The FBI reported that victims of burglary, larceny, and motor vehicle theft lost a total of $15.3 billion dollars in 2009 (FBI 2010). In comparison, when former advisor and financier Bernie Madoff was arrested in 2008, the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission reported that the estimated losses of his financial Ponzi scheme fraud were close to $50 billion (SEC 2009).

This imbalance based on class power is also found within U.S. criminal law. In the 1980s, the use of crack cocaine (a less expensive but powerful drug) quickly became an epidemic that swept the country's poorest urban communities. Its pricier counterpart, cocaine, was associated with upscale users and was a drug of choice for the wealthy. The legal implications of being caught by authorities with crack versus cocaine were starkly different. In 1986, federal law mandated that being caught in possession of 50 grams of crack was punishable by a ten-year prison sentence. An equivalent prison sentence for cocaine possession, however, required possession of 5,000 grams. In other words, the sentencing disparity was 1 to 100 (New York Times Editorial Staff 2011). This inequality in the severity of punishment for crack versus cocaine paralleled the unequal social class of respective users. A conflict theorist would note that those in society who hold the power are also the ones who make the laws concerning crime. In doing so, they make laws that will benefit them, while the powerless classes who lack the resources to make such decisions suffer the consequences. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, states passed numerous laws increasing penalties, especially for repeat offenders. The U.S. government passed an even more significant law, the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 (known as the 1994 Crime Bill), which further increased penalties, funded prisons, and incentivized law enforcement agencies to further pursue drug offenders. One outcome of these policies was the mass incarceration of Black and Hispanic people, which led to a cycle of poverty and reduced social mobility. The crack-cocaine punishment disparity remained until 2010, when President Obama signed the Fair Sentencing Act, which decreased the disparity to 1 to 18 (The Sentencing Project 2010).

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is a theoretical approach that can be used to explain how societies and/or social groups come to view behaviors as deviant or conventional.

Labeling Theory

Although all of us violate norms from time to time, few people would consider themselves deviant. Those who do, however, have often been labeled "deviant" by society and have gradually come to believe it themselves. Labeling theory examines the ascribing of a deviant behavior to another person by members of society. Thus, what is considered deviant is determined not so much by the behaviors themselves or the people who commit them, but by the reactions of others to these behaviors. As a result, what is considered deviant changes over time and can vary significantly across cultures.

Sociologist Edwin Lemert expanded on the concepts of labeling theory and identified two types of deviance that affect identity formation. Primary deviance is a violation of norms that does not result in any long-term effects on the individual's self-image or interactions with others. Speeding is a deviant act, but receiving a speeding ticket generally does not make others view you as a bad person, nor does it alter your own self-concept. Individuals who engage in primary deviance still maintain a feeling of belonging in society and are likely to continue to conform to norms in the future.

Sometimes, in more extreme cases, primary deviance can morph into secondary deviance. Secondary deviance occurs when a person's self-concept and behavior begin to change after his or her actions are labeled as deviant by members of society. The person may begin to take on and fulfill the role of a "deviant" as an act of rebellion against the society that has labeled that individual as such. For example, consider a high school student who often cuts class and gets into fights. The student is reprimanded frequently by teachers and school staff, and soon enough, develops a reputation as a "troublemaker." As a result, the student starts acting out even more and breaking more rules; the student has adopted the "troublemaker" label and embraced this

deviant identity. Secondary deviance can be so strong that it bestows a master status on an individual. A master status is a label that describes the chief characteristic of an individual. Some people see themselves primarily as doctors, artists, or grandfathers. Others see themselves as beggars, convicts, or addicts.

Theory in Context: The History of Madness

Sociologist and philosopher Michel Foucault argued that ideas about "normal" and "abnormal" behavior change over time. In *Madness and Civilization*, he studied how European societies understood "madness" in different historical periods. For example, during the Renaissance, people considered "insanity" as a sign that someone might have a special kind of wisdom or insight. Later, during the Classical Age, people labeled as "insane," along with others considered socially undesirable, were often confined in institutions. In the modern era, madness became more closely connected to medicine, diagnosis, and treatment (Foucault 1961/1964).

Even if you haven't read Foucault's book yet, there is a clear point here: deviance is not only about what a person does. It is also about how society labels, organizes, studies, and controls people who are seen as different. Foucault's work helps us ask: Who gets defined as "normal"? Who gets labeled "deviant" or "ill"? And how do institutions such as medicine, law, schools, prisons, and hospitals shape those definitions?

Techniques of Neutralization

How do people deal with the labels they are given? This was the subject of a study done by Sykes and Matza (1957). They studied teenage boys who had been labeled as juvenile delinquents to see how they either embraced or denied these labels. Have you ever used any of these techniques?

Let's take a scenario and apply all five techniques to explain how they are used. A young person is working for a retail store as a cashier. Their cash drawer has been coming up short for a few days. When the boss confronts the employee, they are labeled as a thief for the suspicion of stealing. How does the employee deal with this label?

The Denial of Responsibility: When someone doesn't take responsibility for their actions or blames others. They may use this technique and say that it was their boss's fault because they don't get paid enough to make rent or because they're getting a divorce. They are rejecting the label by denying responsibility for the action.

The Denial of Injury: Sometimes people will look at a situation in terms of what effect it has on others. If the employee uses this technique they may say, "What's the big deal? Nobody got hurt. Your insurance will take care of it." The person doesn't see their actions as a big deal because nobody "got hurt."

The Denial of the Victim: If there is no victim there's no crime. In this technique the person sees their actions as justified or that the victim deserved it. Our employee may look at their situation and say, "I've worked here for years without a raise. I was owed that money and if you won't give it to me I'll get it my own way."

The Condemnation of the Condemners: The employee might "turn it around on" the boss by blaming them. They may say something like, "You don't know my life, you have no reason to judge me." This is taking the focus off of their actions and putting the onus on the accuser to, essentially, prove the person is living up to the label, which also shifts the narrative away from the deviant behavior.

Appeal to a Higher Authority: The final technique that may be used is to claim that the actions were for a higher purpose. The employee may tell the boss that they stole the money because their mom is sick and needs medicine or something like that. They are justifying their actions by making it seem as though the purpose for the behavior is a greater "good" than the action is "bad." (Sykes & Matza, 1957)

Social Policy and Debate: The Right to Vote

Before she lost her job as an administrative assistant, Leola Strickland postdated and mailed a handful of checks for amounts ranging from $90 to $500. By the time she was able to find a new job, the checks had bounced, and she was convicted of fraud under Mississippi law. Strickland pleaded guilty to a felony charge and repaid her debts; in return, she was spared from serving prison time.

Strickland appeared in court in 2001. More than ten years later, she is still feeling the sting of her sentencing. Why? Because Mississippi is one of twelve states in the United States that bans convicted felons from voting (ProCon 2011).

To Strickland, who said she had always voted, the news came as a great shock. She isn't alone. Some 5.3 million people in the United States are currently barred from voting because of felony convictions (ProCon 2009). These individuals include inmates, parolees, probationers, and even people who have never been jailed, such as Leola Strickland.

Under the Fourteenth Amendment, states are allowed to deny voting privileges to individuals who have participated in "rebellion or other crime" (Krajick 2004). Although there are no federally mandated laws on the matter, most states practice at least one form of *felony disenfranchisement*.

Is it fair to prevent citizens from participating in such an important process? Proponents of disfranchisement laws argue that felons have a debt to pay to society. Being stripped of their right to vote is part of the punishment for criminal deeds. Such proponents point out that voting isn't the only instance in which ex-felons are denied rights; state laws also ban released criminals from holding public office, obtaining professional licenses, and sometimes even inheriting property (Lott and Jones 2008).

Opponents of felony disfranchisement in the United States argue that voting is a basic human right and should be available to all citizens regardless of past deeds. Many point out that felony disfranchisement has its roots in the 1800s, when it was used primarily to block Black citizens from voting. These laws disproportionately target poor minority members, denying them a chance to participate in a system that, as a social conflict theorist would point out, is already constructed to their disadvantage (Holding 2006). Those who cite labeling theory worry that denying deviants the right to vote will only further encourage deviant behavior. If ex-criminals are disenfranchised from voting, are they being disenfranchised from society?

Edwin Sutherland: Differential Association

In the early 1900s, sociologist Edwin Sutherland sought to understand how deviant behavior developed among people. Since criminology was a young field, he drew on other aspects of sociology including social interactions and group learning (Laub 2006). His conclusions established differential association theory, which suggested that individuals learn deviant behavior from those close to them who provide models of and opportunities for deviance. According to Sutherland, deviance is less a personal choice and more a result of differential socialization processes. For example, a young person whose friends are sexually active is more likely to view sexual activity as acceptable. Sutherland developed a series of propositions to explain how deviance is learned. In proposition five, for example, he discussed how people begin to accept and participate in a behavior after learning whether it is viewed as "favorable" by those around them. In proposition six, Sutherland expressed the ways that exposure to more "definitions" favoring the deviant behavior than those opposing it may eventually lead a person to partake in deviance (Sutherland 1960), applying almost a quantitative element to the learning of certain behaviors. In the example above, a young person may find sexual activity more acceptable once a certain number of their friends become sexually active, not after only one does so.

Sutherland's theory may explain why crime is multigenerational. A longitudinal study beginning in the 1960s found that the best predictor of antisocial and criminal behavior in children was whether their parents had been convicted of a crime (Todd and Jury 1996). Children who were younger than ten years old when their parents were convicted were more likely than other children to engage in spousal abuse and criminal behavior by their early thirties. Even when taking socioeconomic factors such as dangerous neighborhoods, poor school systems, and overcrowded housing into consideration, researchers found that parents were the main influence on the behavior of their offspring (Todd and Jury 1996).

Travis Hirschi: Control Theory

Continuing with an examination of large social factors, control theory states that social control is directly affected by the strength of social bonds and that deviance results from a feeling of disconnection from society. Individuals who believe they are a part of

society are less likely to commit crimes against it.

Travis Hirschi (1969) identified four types of social bonds that connect people to society:

1. *Attachment* measures our connections to others. When we are closely attached to people, we worry about their opinions of us. People conform to society's norms in order to gain approval (and prevent disapproval) from family, friends, and romantic partners.
2. *Commitment* refers to the investments we make in the community. A well-respected local businessperson who volunteers at their synagogue and is a member of the neighborhood block organization has more to lose from committing a crime than a person who doesn't have a career or ties to the community.
3. Similarly, levels of *involvement*, or participation in socially legitimate activities, lessen a person's likelihood of deviance. A child who plays little league baseball and takes art classes has fewer opportunities to _____.
4. The final bond, *belief*, is an agreement on common values in society. If a person views social values as beliefs, they will conform to them. An environmentalist is more likely to pick up trash in a park, because a clean environment is a social value to them (Hirschi 1969).

Table 6.3.1 Summary of Theoretical Perspectives on Deviance and Crime

Theoretical Perspective	Associated Theorist	Deviance arises from:
Strain Theory	Robert Merton	A lack of ways to reach socially accepted goals by accepted methods
Social Disorganization Theory	University of Chicago researchers	Weak social ties and a lack of social control; society has lost the ability to enforce norms with some groups
Unequal System	Karl Marx	Inequalities in wealth and power that arise from the economic system
Power Elite	C. Wright Mills	Ability of those in power to define deviance in ways that maintain the status quo
Labeling Theory	Edwin Lemert	The reactions of others, particularly those in power who are able to determine labels
Differential Association Theory	Edwin Sutherland	Learning and modeling deviant behavior seen in other people close to the individual
Control Theory	Travis Hirschi	Feelings of disconnection from society

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6.4: Crime and the Law

Types of Crimes

Although deviance is a violation of social norms, it's not always punishable, and it's not necessarily bad. Crime, on the other hand, is a behavior that violates official law and is punishable through formal sanctions. Walking to class backward is a deviant behavior. Driving with a blood alcohol percentage over the state's limit is a crime. Like other forms of deviance, however, ambiguity exists concerning what constitutes a crime and whether all crimes are, in fact, "bad" and deserve punishment. For example, during the 1960s, civil rights activists often violated laws intentionally as part of their effort to bring about racial equality. In hindsight, we recognize that the laws that deemed many of their actions crimes—for instance, Rosa Parks refusing to give up her seat to a White man—were inconsistent with social equality.

As you have learned, all societies have informal and formal ways of maintaining social control. Within these systems of norms, societies have legal codes that maintain formal social control through laws, which are rules adopted and enforced by a political authority. Those who violate these rules incur negative formal sanctions. Normally, punishments are relative to the degree of the crime and the importance to society of the value underlying the law. As we will see, however, there are other factors that influence criminal sentencing.

Not all crimes are given equal weight. Society generally socializes its members to view certain crimes as more severe than others. For example, most people would consider murdering someone to be far worse than stealing a wallet and would expect a murderer to be punished more severely than a thief. In modern U.S. society, crimes are classified as one of two types based on their severity. Violent crimes (also known as "crimes against a person") are based on the use of force or the threat of force. Rape, murder, and armed robbery fall under this category. Nonviolent crimes involve the destruction or theft of property but do not use force or the threat of force. Because of this, they are also sometimes called "property crimes." Larceny, car theft, and vandalism are all types of nonviolent crimes. If you use a crowbar to break into a car, you are committing a nonviolent crime; if you mug someone with the crowbar, you are committing a violent crime.

When we think of crime, we often picture street crime, or offenses committed by ordinary people against other people or organizations, usually in public spaces. An often overlooked category is corporate crime, or crime committed by white-collar workers in a business environment. Embezzlement, insider trading, and identity theft are all types of corporate crime. Although these types of offenses rarely receive the same amount of media coverage as street crimes, they can be far more damaging. Financial frauds such as insurance scams, Ponzi schemes, and improper practices by banks can devastate families who lose their savings or home.

An often-debated third type of crime is victimless crime. Crimes are called victimless when the perpetrator is not explicitly harming another person. As opposed to battery or theft, which clearly have a victim, a crime like drinking a beer when someone is twenty years old or selling a sexual act do not result in injury to anyone other than the individual who engages in them, although they are illegal. While some claim acts like these are victimless, others argue that they actually do harm society. Prostitution may foster abuse toward women by clients or pimps. Drug use may increase the likelihood of employee absences. Such debates highlight how the deviant and criminal nature of actions develops through ongoing public discussion.

Big Picture: Hate Crimes

Attacks based on a person's race, religion, or other characteristics are known as hate crimes. Hate crimes in the United States evolved from the time of early European settlers and their violence toward Native Americans. Such crimes weren't investigated until the early 1900s, when the Ku Klux Klan began to draw national attention for its activities against Black people and other groups. The term "hate crime," however, didn't become official until the 1980s (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2011).

The severity and impact of hate crimes is significant, but the different crime reporting methods mentioned earlier can obscure the issue. According to the Department of Justice, an average of approximately 205,000 Americans fall victim to hate crimes each year (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2021). But the FBI reports a much lower number; for example, the 2019 report indicates 7,314 criminal incidents and 8,559 related offenses as being motivated by bias (FBI 2020). The discrepancy

is due to many factors: very few people actually report hate crimes for fear of retribution or based on the difficulties of enduring a criminal proceeding; also, law enforcement agencies must find clear proof that a particular crime was motivated by bias rather than other factors. (For example, an assailant who robs someone and uses a slur while committing that crime may not be deemed to be bias-motivated.) But both reports show a growth in hate crimes, with quantities increasing each year.

The majority of hate crimes are racially motivated, but many are based on religious (especially anti-Semitic) prejudice (FBI 2020). The murders of Brandon Teena in 1993 and Matthew Shepard in 1998 significantly increased awareness of hate crimes based on gender expression and sexual orientation; LGBTQ people remain a major target of hate crimes.

The motivation behind hate crimes can arise quickly, singling out specific groups who endure a rash of abuses in a short period of time. For example, beginning in 2020, people increasingly began committing violent crimes against people of Asian descent, with evidence that the attackers associated the victims with the coronavirus pandemic (Asian American Bar Association 2021).

Crime Statistics

The FBI gathers data from approximately 17,000 law enforcement agencies, and the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) is the annual publication of this data (FBI 2021). The UCR has comprehensive information from police reports but fails to account for the many crimes that go unreported, often due to victims' fear, shame, or distrust of the police. The quality of this data is also inconsistent because of differences in approaches to gathering victim data; important details are not always asked for or reported (Cantor and Lynch 2000). As of 2021, states will be required to provide data for the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS), which captures more detailed information on each crime, including time of day, location, and other contexts. NIBRS is intended to provide more data-informed discussion to better improve crime prevention and policing (FBI 2021).

The U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics publishes a separate self-report study known as the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS). A self-report study is a collection of data gathered using voluntary response methods, such as questionnaires or telephone interviews. Self-report data are gathered each year, asking approximately 160,000 people in the United States about the frequency and types of crime they've experienced in their daily lives (BJS 2019). The NCVS reports a higher rate of crime than the UCR, likely picking up information on crimes that were experienced but never reported to the police. Age, race, gender, location, and income-level demographics are also analyzed.

The NCVS survey format allows people to more openly discuss their experiences and also provides a more-detailed examination of crimes, which may include information about consequences, relationship between victim and criminal, and substance abuse involved. One disadvantage is that the NCVS misses some groups of people, such as those who don't have telephones and those who move frequently. The quality of information may also be reduced by inaccurate victim recall of the crime (Cantor and Lynch 2000).

Public Perception of Crime

Neither the NCVR nor the UCR accounts for all crime in the United States, but general trends can be determined. Crime rates, particularly for violent and gun-related crimes, have been on the decline since peaking in the early 1990s (Cohn, Taylor, Lopez, Gallagher, Parker, and Maass 2013). However, the public believes crime rates are still high, or even worsening. Recent surveys (Saad 2011; Pew Research Center 2013, cited in Overburg and Hoyer 2013) have found U.S. adults believe crime is worse now than it was twenty years ago.

Inaccurate public perception of crime may be heightened by popular crime series such as Law & Order (Warr 2008) and by extensive and repeated media coverage of crime. Many researchers have found that people who closely follow media reports of crime are likely to estimate the crime rate as inaccurately high and more likely to feel fearful about the chances of experiencing crime (Chiricos, Padgett, and Gertz 2000). Recent research has also found that people who reported watching news coverage of 9/11 or the Boston Marathon Bombing for more than an hour daily became more fearful of future terrorism (Holman, Garfin, and Silver 2014).

The U.S. Criminal Justice System

A criminal justice system is an organization that exists to enforce a legal code. There are three branches of the U.S. criminal

justice system: the police, the courts, and the corrections system.

Police

Police are a civil force in charge of enforcing laws and public order at a federal, state, or community level. No unified national police force exists in the United States, although there are federal law enforcement officers. Federal officers operate under specific government agencies such as the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI); the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF); and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Federal officers can only deal with matters that are explicitly within the power of the federal government, and their field of expertise is usually narrow. A county police officer may spend time responding to emergency calls, working at the local jail, or patrolling areas as needed, whereas a federal officer would be more likely to investigate suspects in firearms trafficking or provide security for government officials.

State police have the authority to enforce statewide laws, including regulating traffic on highways. Local or county police, on the other hand, have a limited jurisdiction with authority only in the town or county in which they serve.

Courts

Once a crime has been committed and a violator has been identified by the police, the case goes to court. A court is a system that has the authority to make decisions based on law. The U.S. judicial system is divided into federal courts and state courts. As the name implies, federal courts (including the U.S. Supreme Court) deal with federal matters, including trade disputes, military justice, and government lawsuits. Judges who preside over federal courts are selected by the president with the consent of Congress.

State courts vary in their structure but generally include three levels: trial courts, appellate courts, and state supreme courts. In contrast to the large courtroom trials in TV shows, most noncriminal cases are decided by a judge without a jury present. Traffic court and small claims court are both types of trial courts that handle specific civil matters.

Criminal cases are heard by trial courts with general jurisdictions. Usually, a judge and jury are both present. It is the jury's responsibility to determine guilt and the judge's responsibility to determine the penalty, though in some states the jury may also decide the penalty. Unless a defendant is found "not guilty," any member of the prosecution or defense (whichever is the losing side) can appeal the case to a higher court. In some states, the case then goes to a special appellate court; in others it goes to the highest state court, often known as the state supreme court.

However, not all criminal cases move through the court system as carefully or slowly as this formal description might suggest. Legal scholar Steve Zeidman uses the phrase "assembly-line justice" to describe a process in which criminal cases, especially lower-level cases, are handled very quickly and routinely, sometimes with limited time for defendants to understand their rights, meet with an attorney, or consider the consequences of pleading guilty. This is especially important for people who cannot afford private legal representation and must rely on overburdened public defense systems. From a sociological perspective, assembly-line justice raises questions about inequality, access to legal counsel, and whether the court system treats all defendants with the same care and protection (Zeidman, 2018).

Unless a defendant is found "not guilty," any member of the prosecution or defense, whichever is the losing side, can appeal the case to a higher court. In some states, the case then goes to a special appellate court; in others it goes to the highest state court, often known as the state supreme court.

Corrections

The corrections system is charged with supervising individuals who have been arrested, convicted, and sentenced for a criminal offense, plus people detained while awaiting hearings, trials, or other procedures. At the end of 2018, approximately 2.3 million people were incarcerated in the United States (BJS 2020); these include people who are in state and federal prisons as well as those in local jails or related facilities, as explained below. Since many convicted people are placed on probation or parole, have their sentences deferred or otherwise altered, or are released under other circumstances, the total number of people within the corrections system is much higher. In 2018, the total number of people either incarcerated, detained, paroled, or on probation was 6,410,000 (BJS 2020).

The U.S. incarceration rate has grown considerably in the last hundred years, but has begun to decline in the past decade. The total correctional population (including parolees and those on probation), peaked in 2007 at 7.3 million, resulting in approximately

1 in 32 people being under some sort of correctional supervision. With the 2018 correction system number close to 6.4 million people, that ratio goes to 1 in every 40 people (BJS 2020). The declines are seen as a positive, but the United States holds the largest number of prisoners of any nation in the world.

Prison is different from jail. A jail provides temporary confinement, usually while an individual awaits trial or parole. Prisons are facilities built for individuals serving sentences of more than a year. Whereas jails are small and local, prisons are large and run by either the state or the federal government. While incarcerated, people have differing levels of freedom and opportunity for engagement. Some inmates have options to take classes, play organized sports, and otherwise enrich themselves, usually with the goal of improving their lives upon release. Other incarcerated people have very limited opportunities. Usually these distinctions are based on the severity of their crimes and their behavior once imprisoned, but available resources and funding can be a significant factor.

Parole refers to a temporary release from prison or jail that requires supervision and the consent of officials. Parole is different from probation, which is supervised time used as an alternative to prison. Probation and parole can both follow a period of incarceration in prison, especially if the prison sentence is shortened. Most people in these situations are supervised by correctional officers or other appropriate professionals, including mental health professionals; they may attend regular meetings or counseling sessions and may be required to report on their activities and travel. People on probation or parole often have strict guidelines; not only will they be returned to jail upon committing a crime, but they may also be prohibited from associating with known criminals or suspects. These strategies are designed to prevent people on parole or probation from returning to criminal engagements, and to increase the likelihood that they will remain positive members of the community through interactions with family, productive employment, and mental health treatment if needed.

Policing and Race

This chapter described just a few of the sociological theories regarding deviance and crime; there are many more, as well as many approaches for preventing crime and enforcing laws. Citizens, law enforcement, and elected officials weigh a wide array of contexts and personal experiences when considering the best way to address crime. In at least some cases, decision makers are motivated by a desire to protect the status quo or improve their political or financial position.

As discussed earlier, during the 1980s, crack cocaine was exploding in usage among lower income, Black, and Hispanic people. White middle class and upper economic class Americans became terrified of the potential for their family and children to be involved with drugs and drug-related crime. State governments passed increasingly harsh laws, resulting in stiffer penalties and the removal of judges' discretion in drug case sentencing. Among the most well known of these were "three strikes laws," which mandated long sentences for anyone convicted of multiple drug offenses, even if the offenses themselves were minor. Practices like civil forfeiture, in which law enforcement or municipalities could seize cash and property of suspected criminals even before they were convicted, provided a significant financial incentive to investigate drug crimes (Tiegen 2018).

The additional funding sources and high likelihood of successful prosecution drove police forces toward more aggressive and inequitable tactics. After training by the Drug Enforcement Agency, police forces around the country began racial profiling in a focused, consistent manner. Black and Hispanic people were many times more likely than White people to be pulled over for routine traffic stops. Local police forces focused on patrolling minority-inhabited neighborhoods, resulting in more arrests and prosecutions of Black and Hispanic people (Harris 2020).

No issue related to race and policing is of more concern than the shooting of unarmed Black people by police. The lack of punishment of police officers for committing these acts perpetuates the issue of unequal justice. Eric Garner was killed by an officer using a prohibited chokehold after Garner had allegedly committed a misdemeanor. Breonna Taylor was killed by police who violently infiltrated the wrong home. None of the officers involved in those deaths were prosecuted, though several were fired. The officer who killed George Floyd was immediately charged with the crime, and was eventually convicted, but some believe that to be the case due to the clear and horrific video of the event (Abdollah 2021).

Police advocates, elected officials, and ordinary citizens often express the importance of effective and just law enforcement. When "Defund The Police" became a widespread position during 2020, many Black people spoke out against it; polling revealed that a majority of Black people did not support the idea, and over 80 percent of Black people preferred having the police spend the same or more time in their communities (Saad 2020). While this frequently cited result is relatively consistent across different polls, it also reveals divisions within the Black community, often based on age or other factors. The same polls find that many Black people still distrust the police or feel less secure when they see them (Yahoo/Yougov 2020).

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6.5: Key Terms

Glossary

- **conflict theory** | a theory that examines social and economic factors as the causes of criminal deviance
- **control theory** | a theory that states social control is directly affected by the strength of social bonds and that deviance results from a feeling of disconnection from society
- **corporate crime** | crime committed by white-collar workers in a business environment
- **corrections system** | the system tasked with supervising individuals who have been arrested for, convicted of, or sentenced for criminal offenses
- **court** | a system that has the authority to make decisions based on law
- **crime** | a behavior that violates official law and is punishable through formal sanctions
- **criminal justice system** | an organization that exists to enforce a legal code
- **cultural deviance theory** | a theory that suggests conformity to the prevailing cultural norms of lower-class society causes crime
- **deviance** | a violation of contextual, cultural, or social norms
- **differential association theory** | a theory that states individuals learn deviant behavior from those close to them who provide models of and opportunities for deviance
- **formal sanctions** | sanctions that are officially recognized and enforced
- **hate crimes** | attacks based on a person's race, religion, or other characteristics
- **informal sanctions** | sanctions that occur in face-to-face interactions
- **labeling theory** | the ascribing of a deviant behavior to another person by members of society
- **legal codes** | codes that maintain formal social control through laws
- **master status** | a label that describes the chief characteristic of an individual
- **negative sanctions** | punishments for violating norms
- **nonviolent crimes** | crimes that involve the destruction or theft of property, but do not use force or the threat of force
- **police** | a civil force in charge of regulating laws and public order at a federal, state, or community level
- **positive sanctions** | rewards given for conforming to norms
- **power elite** | a small group of wealthy and influential people at the top of society who hold the power and resources
- **primary deviance** | a violation of norms that does not result in any long-term effects on the individual's self-image or interactions with others
- **sanctions** | the means of enforcing rules
- **secondary deviance** | deviance that occurs when a person's self-concept and behavior begin to change after his or her actions are labeled as deviant by members of society
- **self-report study** | a collection of data acquired using voluntary response methods, such as questionnaires or telephone interviews
- **social control** | the regulation and enforcement of norms
- **social disorganization theory** | a theory that asserts crime occurs in communities with weak social ties and the absence of social control
- **social order** | an arrangement of practices and behaviors on which society's members base their daily lives
- **strain theory** | a theory that addresses the relationship between having socially acceptable goals and having socially acceptable means to reach those goals
- **street crime** | crime committed by average people against other people or organizations, usually in public spaces
- **victimless crime** | activities against the law, but that do not result in injury to any individual other than the person who engages in them
- **violent crimes** | crimes based on the use of force or the threat of force

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6.6: Short Answer

Critical Thinking Questions

1. If given the choice, would you purchase an unusual car such as a hearse for everyday use? How would your friends, family, or significant other react? Since deviance is culturally defined, most of the decisions we make are dependent on the reactions of others. Is there anything the people in your life encourage you to do that you don't? Why don't you?
2. Think of a recent time when you used informal negative sanctions. To what act of deviance were you responding? How did your actions affect the deviant person or persons? How did your reaction help maintain social control?
3. Pick a famous politician, business leader, or celebrity who has been arrested recently. What crime did they allegedly commit? Who was the victim? Explain their actions from the point of view of one of the major sociological paradigms. What factors best explain how this person might be punished if convicted of the crime?
4. If we assume that the power elite's status is always passed down from generation to generation, how would Edwin Sutherland explain these patterns of power through differential association theory? What crimes do these elite few get away with?
5. Recall the crime statistics presented in this section. Do they surprise you? Are these statistics represented accurately in the media? Why, or why not?

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6.7: Further Research

Additional Learning Resources

- Although we rarely think of it in this way, deviance can have a positive effect on society. Check out the Positive Deviance Initiative, a program initiated by Tufts University to promote social movements around the world that strive to improve people's lives.
- The Skull and Bones Society made news in 2004 when it was revealed that then-President George W. Bush and his Democratic challenger, John Kerry, had both been members at Yale University. In the years since, conspiracy theorists have linked the secret society to numerous world events, arguing that many of the nation's most powerful people are former Bonesmen. Although such ideas may raise a lot of skepticism, many influential people of the past century have been Skull and Bones Society members, and the society is sometimes described as a college version of the power elite later in life.
- Is the U.S. criminal justice system confusing? You're not alone. Check out a handy flowchart from the Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- How is crime data collected in the United States? Read about the methods of data collection and take the National Crime Victimization Survey.
- The Gun Violence Archive provides frequently updated data on gun violence incidents in the United States. **Note:** This resource may not be accessible to assistive technologies.
- The FBI Crime Data Explorer is useful for examining official crime data collected through the Uniform Crime Reporting Program.
- The Sentencing Project provides research reports, data tools, advocacy materials, and state-level information related to mass incarceration, sentencing reform, racial justice, youth justice, and voting rights in the U.S. criminal legal system.

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6.9: Accessible Text Descriptions

Figure 6.1: Roadmap

A horizontal instructional diagram titled “Deviance, Crime, and Social Control as a Way of Understanding Social Boundaries.” Beneath the title, three large light-gray arrows point from left to right. Each arrow contains a dark teal circle with white text and presents one guiding question: why, who, and how.

The first circle is labeled “The ‘WHY’” and explains why the topic matters. Studying deviance, crime, and social control reveals how societies define normality, establish social boundaries, and respond when norms are violated.

The second circle is labeled “The ‘WHO’” and identifies the people and groups involved. These include people labeled deviant, communities affected by rule violations or enforcement, rule makers, rule enforcers, institutions, and social groups.

The third circle is labeled “The ‘HOW’” and explains how sociologists study the topic. They examine labeling, power, sanctions, and the effects of race, class, gender, age, and social location. They also study institutions and processes such as policing, courts, and punishment.

Overall, the diagram presents deviance, crime, and social control as tools for understanding how societies create, enforce, and contest the boundaries of acceptable behavior.

Figure 6.1.1: Changing Attitudes Toward Cannabis

An infographic titled “Changing Attitudes Toward Cannabis in the United States” presents five numbered stages arranged from left to right, connected by arrows to show a historical and social progression.

1. Criminalization and Stigma: A cannabis leaf appears behind a red prohibition symbol, alongside handcuffs and a judge’s gavel. The text explains that cannabis was framed as deviant, dangerous, and punishable.
2. Public Debate and Decriminalization: A speech bubble, a document, and a protest sign reading “Reform Now” represent growing public discussion and policy change. The text states that some states began reducing penalties and questioning harsh enforcement.
3. Medical Legalization: A medical clipboard, prescription symbol, and cannabis-labeled medicine container represent the recognition of cannabis as a treatment. The text explains that cannabis gained legitimacy for certain medical conditions.
4. Recreational Legalization: A storefront with a cannabis symbol, a ballot box labeled “Vote,” and a completed ballot represent legal adult use. The text states that more states legalized recreational cannabis as laws and public opinion changed.
5. Broader Social Acceptance: A diverse group of people appears beneath a green check mark. The text explains that cannabis use became more normalized in many communities, while debates and inequalities continued.

A summary statement at the bottom explains the central sociological point: cannabis demonstrates that deviance is socially constructed. Behaviors that were once widely stigmatized and criminalized can become normalized as public opinion, law, and cultural values change.

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7: MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY

Introduction

Media and technology shape nearly every part of contemporary social life. From smartphones and social media platforms to artificial intelligence, streaming services, online learning, and global communication networks, technological systems influence how people connect, learn, work, organize, consume information, and understand the world around them. Sociology helps us examine these changes not only as individual choices or personal habits, but as social processes shaped by institutions, power, culture, inequality, and historical change.

This chapter explores the relationship between media, technology, and society. We will consider how technological innovation transforms everyday life, how media industries shape public knowledge and cultural narratives, and how access to digital tools is unequally distributed across communities and nations. We will also examine how sociological theories help us interpret both the promises and the problems of media and technology, including questions of digital inequality, surveillance, misinformation, globalization, and social change.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- Define key concepts related to media, technology, digital communication, and the digital divide.
- Explain how media and technology influence social interaction, culture, institutions, and everyday life.
- Analyze how inequalities in access, ownership, representation, and digital skills shape people's experiences with media and technology.
- Apply major sociological perspectives, including functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism, to examples involving media and technology.
- Evaluate the social consequences of emerging technologies, including their potential benefits, risks, and unequal impacts across different groups and societies.

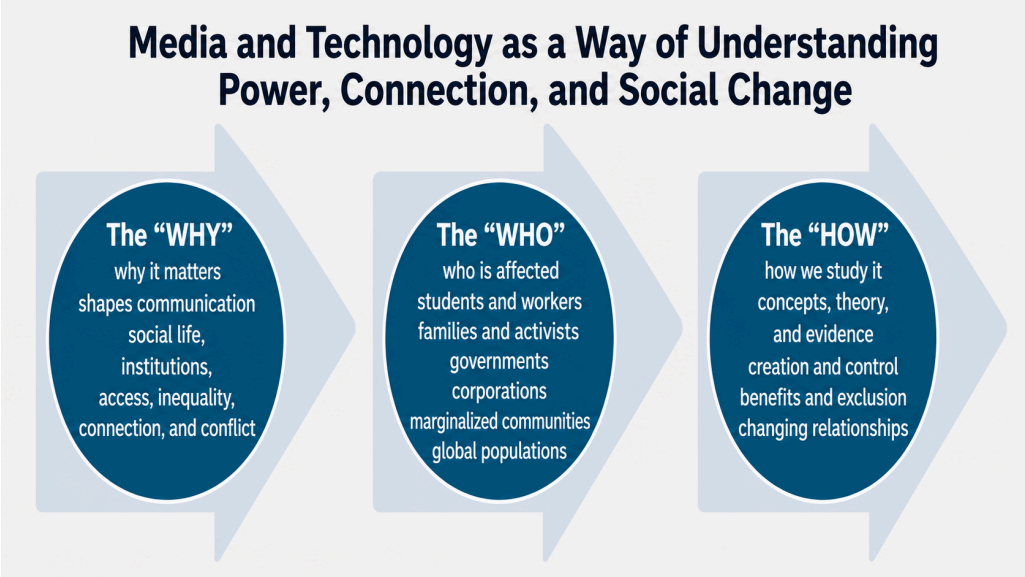


Figure 7.1: Media and technology decisively shape communication, accessibility, and inequality, enabling us to better understand power dynamics, connections, and the mechanisms of social change. (Marx Gomez-Liendo via ChatGPT). Access alternative description for Figure 7.1

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Why, Who, and How

Media and technology are central to how society is organized, experienced, and contested. We study them by using sociological concepts, theories, and evidence to move beyond simple claims that technology is either “good” or “bad.” Instead, we ask how technologies are created, who controls them, who benefits from them, who is excluded from them, and how they reshape social relationships. Who is affected by these changes? Everyone, but not in the same way. Students, workers, families, activists, governments, corporations, marginalized communities, and global populations all experience media and technology differently depending on their social location, access to resources, and position within larger systems of power.

7.1: Case Study and Vignette

7.2: Technology Today

7.3: Media and Technology in Society

7.4: Global Implications of Media and Technology

7.5: Theoretical Perspectives on Media and Technology

7.6: Key Terms

7.7: Short Answer

7.8: Further Research

7.9: References

7.10: Accessible Text Descriptions

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7.1: Case Study and Vignette

Celebrities and Digital Connection

When a celebrity announces that they are quitting social media, the decision often becomes big news, especially on social media itself. A single post, interview comment, or account deactivation can quickly generate thousands of reactions from fans, entertainment journalists, critics, and other public figures. Depending on the celebrity's status and their stated reason for leaving, the announcement may be met with astonishment, disappointment, concern, or even debate. Some people may worry about the celebrity's mental health. Others may frame the decision as a response to online harassment, bullying, surveillance, misinformation, or the exhausting pressure of constant visibility.

Logging Off in Public

Celebrities step away from social media for many reasons, and many eventually return. Lizzo left Twitter after saying there were "too many trolls." Lorde suggested that the constant stream of updates, arguments, and disturbing news had become emotionally overwhelming, describing the experience as having "front-row seats to the hellfire" (Kirkpatrick 2020). Other artists, including Rihanna, Justin Bieber, Adele, and Coldplay, have taken breaks or gone through long periods of inactivity. In each case, the decision attracts attention not only because the person is famous, but because social media has become part of how celebrity itself is produced, maintained, and consumed.

At first glance, a person deciding not to use a particular app might seem unimportant to our everyday lives. After all, most people do not personally know the celebrity. Yet the reaction to these announcements shows that social media relationships can feel meaningful, even when they are mediated through screens and platforms. What if a singer regularly shares personal reflections, family photos, or behind-the-scenes moments? What if an actor uses social media to speak directly to fans instead of communicating only through magazines, television interviews, or publicists? What if a musician posts updates about a new album, shares playlists, promotes remixes, or hints at tour dates? For many fans, social media provides not only information but also a sense of closeness, access, and participation.

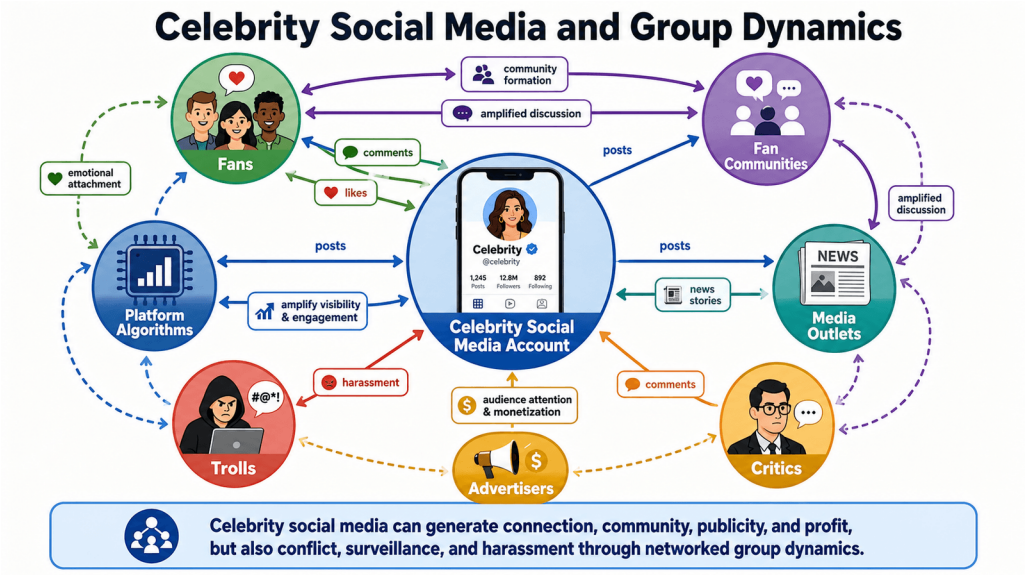


Figure 7.1.1: Network diagram linking a celebrity social media account to fans, fan communities, media, algorithms, advertisers, critics, and trolls. (Marx Gomez-Liendo via ChatGPT). Access alternative description for Figure 7.1.1.

Socialization Through Social Media

The vignette above raises important sociological questions about media, technology, and social life. Social media transmits

information and helps organize relationships, identities, communities, and feelings of belonging. A celebrity's account may function as a marketing tool, but it may also become a gathering place for fans. People comment, repost, debate, defend, criticize, celebrate, and mourn together. Through these repeated interactions, followers may begin to experience themselves as part of a larger community.

This is where earlier sociological concepts, such as groups and socialization, become useful. In traditional terms, a musician's fanbase might be understood as a secondary group: a large and relatively impersonal group organized around a shared interest. Members of a fanbase may admire the same artist, listen to the same music, attend the same concerts, or buy the same merchandise, but they are not necessarily close to one another. Social media can complicate this distinction. In online spaces such as Reddit threads, TikTok comment sections, Instagram fan pages, Discord servers, or X conversations, fans may come to recognize one another, develop inside jokes, share personal experiences, and offer emotional support. A group that begins as a loose collection of strangers can start to feel like a primary group, where members experience familiarity, care, and emotional connection.

This does not mean that online communities are identical to face-to-face communities. Digital interactions can be intense, fragmented, temporary, or shaped by platform algorithms. Still, they can produce real social bonds. A fan who is isolated in their offline life may find a connection through a shared music community. A young person exploring identity may find affirmation through artists and fan groups that reflect their experiences. People who live in different countries, speak different languages, or come from different social backgrounds may interact through a shared attachment to the same public figure. In this sense, media and technology expand the possibilities of social connection, even as they introduce new tensions.

Selena Gomez offers a useful example of the complicated relationship between celebrity, visibility, and digital life. She has taken several breaks from social media and has described the experience of being highly followed online as overwhelming. Reflecting on becoming the most followed person on Instagram, she explained that the platform had become consuming: something she woke up to, went to sleep to, and felt unable to escape. She described it as addictive and as exposing her to thoughts, images, and concerns she did not want shaping her life (Haskell 2017). Her comments point to a broader issue: social media can create opportunities for connection, creativity, activism, and self-expression, but it can also intensify comparison, anxiety, harassment, surveillance, and the pressure to remain constantly available.

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7.2: Technology Today

What Is Technology?

It is easy to look at the latest virtual reality headset and think technology is a recent addition to our world. But from the steam engine to the most cutting-edge robotic surgery tools, technology has described the application of science to address the problems of daily life. We might roll our eyes at enormous and clunky computers of the 1970s that had far less storage than a free thumb drive. But chances are, twenty years from now our skinny laptops and pocket-filling phones will look just as archaic.

If someone asked your instructor what instructional technology they used, your instructor would likely assume the questioner was referring to courseware platforms, classroom response offerings, or presentation software. But if your instructor simply responded with, "pencil and paper," they'd still be accurately describing technology. Modern paper and writing devices would have been considered fantastical creations in ancient times. And the fact that they endure, even as many other potential replacements have come into play, shows how effective those technologies are.

Just as the availability of digital technology shapes how we live today, the creation of stone tools changed how premodern humans lived and how well they ate. From the first calculator, invented in 2400 BCE in Babylon in the form of an abacus, to the predecessor of the modern computer, created in 1882 by Charles Babbage, all of our technological innovations are advancements on previous iterations. And indeed, all aspects of our lives are influenced by technology. In agriculture, the introduction of machines that can till, thresh, plant, and harvest greatly reduced the need for manual labor, which in turn meant there were fewer rural jobs. This led to the urbanization of society, as well as lowered birth rates because there was less need for large families to work the farms. In the criminal justice system, the ability to ascertain innocence through DNA testing has saved the lives of people on death row. The examples are endless: technology plays a role in absolutely every aspect of our lives.

Technological Inequality

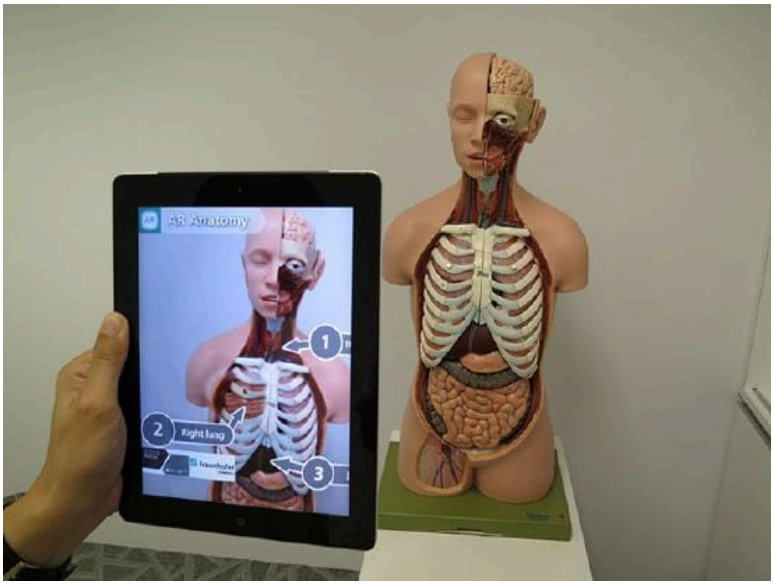


Figure 7.2.1: Augmented reality devices, robotics and 3D printing labs, and creatorspaces can significantly improve education. But due to their expense, they can also increase learning inequities. (Augmented reality by zedinteractive via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC0 1.0)

As with any improvement to human society, not everyone has equal access. Technology, in particular, often creates changes that lead to ever greater inequalities. In short, the gap gets wider faster. This technological stratification has led to a new focus on ensuring better access for all.

There are two forms of technological stratification. The first is differential class-based access to technology in the form of the digital divide. This digital divide has led to the second form, a knowledge gap, which is, as it sounds, an ongoing and increasing gap in information for those who have less access to technology. Simply put, students in well-funded schools receive more

exposure to technology than students in poorly funded schools. Those students with more exposure gain more proficiency, which makes them far more marketable in an increasingly technology-based job market and leaves our society divided into those with technological knowledge and those without. Even as we improve access, we have failed to address an increasingly evident gap in e-readiness—the ability to sort through, interpret, and process knowledge (Sciadas 2003).

Since the beginning of the millennium, social science researchers have tried to bring attention to the digital divide, the uneven access to technology among different races, classes, and geographic areas. The term became part of the common lexicon in 1996, when then Vice President Al Gore used it in a speech. This was the point when personal computer use shifted dramatically, from 300,000 users in 1991 to more than 10 million users by 1996 (Rappaport 2009). In part, the issue of the digital divide had to do with communities that received infrastructure upgrades that enabled high-speed Internet access, upgrades that largely went to affluent urban and suburban areas, leaving out large swaths of the country.

At the end of the twentieth century, technology access was also a big part of the school experience for those whose communities could afford it. Early in the millennium, poorer communities had little or no technology access, while well-off families had personal computers at home and wired classrooms in their schools. In the 2000s, however, the prices for low-end computers dropped considerably, and it appeared the digital divide was naturally ending. Research demonstrates that technology use and Internet access still vary a great deal by race, class, and age in the United States, though most studies agree that there is minimal difference in Internet use by adult men and adult women.

Digital Divide

Data from the Pew Research Center (Perrin 2019) suggests the emergence of yet another divide. Larger percentages of groups such as Latinos and African Americans use their phones rather than traditional computers to connect to the Internet and undertake related activities. Roughly eight in ten White people reported owning computers, in contrast to roughly six in ten Black and Hispanic people owning them. White people were also more likely to have broadband (high-speed Internet) in their homes. But approximately one in four Black and Hispanic people reported being smartphone-only Internet users, a number that far outpaces White people's reliance on the devices. While it might seem that the Internet is the Internet, regardless of how you get there, there's a notable difference. Tasks like updating a résumé or filling out a job application are much harder on a cell phone than on a large-screen computer in the home. As a result, the digital divide might mean no access to computers or the Internet, but could mean access to the kind of online technology that allows for empowerment, not just entertainment (Washington 2011).

Another aspect of the digital divide is present in the type of community one lives in. Census data released in 2018 showed that in the study period of 2013 to 2017, 78 percent of U.S. households had Internet access, but that homes in rural and low-income areas were below that national average by 13 percent. The data was collected by county, and showed that "mostly urban" counties significantly outpaced "mostly rural" counties. "Completely rural," lower-income counties had the lowest rates of home Internet adoption, at about 60 percent (Martin 2019).

One potential outcome of reduced home Internet and computer access can be the relatively low representation of certain populations in computing courses, computing majors, and computing careers. Some school districts, often with the help of government grants or corporate sponsorships, aim to address this aspect of the digital divide by providing computers to those who need them, either at a low cost or at no charge. A number of organizations, such as Code.org, Black Girls Code, and Black Boys Code, work to overcome the disparity by offering computer science education programs and camps, collaborative instruction programs with local school districts, and (perhaps most impactful in the long term) teacher training programs. As a result, the number of Black and Hispanic students in courses like Advanced Placement Computer Science has increased dramatically in recent years, as has the number of college majors from the same populations.

As a whole, the digital divide brings some level of controversy. Some question why it still exists after having been identified more than twenty years ago. Others question whether or not it exists at all, and offer data to support the claim that it does not exist (American Press Institute 2015). However, most experts agree that the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that the digital divide has persisted, particularly in education. While millions of students were confined to home and remote instruction, they were divided by their Internet access, their familiarity with computer hardware and software, and their ability to solve their own technology issues (PRB 2020). Even when governments and educational institutions implemented improvements to the access and technology situation, there remained the qualitative aspect of unplanned remote education: Many instructors and students are not as effective while communicating only through computer screens. When considering education, policymakers faced arduous decision-making processes and contentious debates as they tried the balance the issues of safety, educational quality, teacher safety, student mental health, and the overall changing landscape of the pandemic.

Constant Contact and Replaced Relationships

How often do you check your phone for new messages or alerts? If you're typical, it might be over 100 times a day. (The number is difficult to cite with confidence, because every few months, organizations or companies release new studies claiming to have updated statistics.) What happens to your phone when you are sleeping? In 2012, researchers reported that “44% of cell phone owners have slept with their phone next to their bed because they wanted to make sure they didn’t miss any calls, text messages, or other updates during the night, and 29% of cell owners describe their cell phone as ‘something they can’t imagine living without’” (Smith 2012). Just three years later, a frequently cited report by Bank of America indicated the number of phone-accompanied sleepers was at 71 percent (Kooser 2015). A more recent survey of 500 people found it to be 66 percent, but that survey only included adults (Abbott 2020). However, these surveys and the reaction to them might be a factor of selective memory: Prior to the rise of cell phones, many people had telephones in their rooms, often within arm's reach of their bed.

While people report that cell phones make it easier to stay in touch, simplify planning, and increase their productivity, those are not the only impacts of constant device usage in the United States. Smith also reports that “roughly one in five cell owners say that their phone has made it at least somewhat harder to forget about work at home or on the weekends; to give people their undivided attention; or to focus on a single task without being distracted” (Smith 2012). As mentioned in the opening of this chapter, even celebrities who have perhaps benefitted the most from increased communication and social media report stress and concern about their online presence and its related outcomes.

With so many people using social media both in the United States and abroad, it is no surprise that social media is a powerful force for social change or political expression. For example, McKenna Pope, a thirteen-year-old girl, used the Internet to successfully petition Hasbro to fight gender stereotypes by creating a gender-neutral Easy-Bake Oven instead of using only the traditional pink color (Kumar 2014). Movements such as MeToo and Black Lives Matter gained prominence partly through what is sometimes referred to as "hashtag activism." More recently, TikTok users who actively opposed Donald Trump's re-election registered for nearly all the seats at a major rally. When they did not attend, the arena was nearly empty, after the campaign had predicted it would be overflowing. Later, Trump supporters used the social media site Parler in their own rally planning and coordination.

New Communication Methods

Such consistent and impactful usage leads to unavoidable results: Newer communication methods are replacing older ones. Speaking by phone seems archaic and almost intrusive for some people, who greatly prefer non-voice messaging apps or texts. Media observers, etiquette commentators, and friends and family may lament people beginning and ending relationships by text message, but those methods have proven more comfortable, especially for young people.

What are the effects? There have not been studies on every type of relationship, but research into romantic relationships shows interesting results. First, consider the elements of a relationship. One is attachment, or the bond that people form with each other. Research has shown that constant communication via messaging significantly increases the level of attachment. That fact seems intuitive: people who continually check in on each other, report their whereabouts, and offer support or affirmation will build a stronger bond. The same study, however, found that the respondents rated the overall quality of the relationship as weaker or less satisfying when it was dominated by text messaging instead of voice conversation (Luo 2014).

Many of us have experienced another aspect of relationships: reliance or imbalance. Researchers have found that close friends who are heavily reliant on mobile devices and associated messaging may have more issues regarding overdependence on the relationship and differing expectations regarding communication. Friendships that do not rely on mobile devices may have far less frequent contact. Research found elements of guilt and pressure to respond (called entrapment) in mobile-dependent relationships, which led to overall dissatisfaction (Hall 2012).

Online Privacy, Security, and Control

As we increase our footprints on the web by going online more often to connect socially, share material, conduct business, and store information, we also increase our vulnerability to those with negative intent. Most Americans seem to accept that increased usage of online and related tools brings risks, but their perceptions of those risks are evolving. For example, people have different viewpoints on risks associated with individuals, companies, and the government. The Pew Research Center conducts frequent surveys on these topics. A recent publication indicated the following:

- 81 percent of people felt they had little control over the data collected by companies; 84 percent felt they had little control

over data collected by the government.
- 62 percent felt that it was not possible to go through the day without having data collected about them by companies; 63% felt it wasn't possible to go through a day without data collection by the government.
- 79 percent were concerned about that data use by companies; 64 percent were concerned about data use by the government.

Other elements of the research demonstrate that older Americans felt more concern than younger ones, and that Black and Hispanic people were more likely than White people to believe the government was tracking them (Auxier 2019).

These attitudes may be revealed by practices or attitudes toward privacy efforts and safeguards. One person may be annoyed every time a privacy notice interrupts them, and they may simply sign the statement without thinking much about it. Another person may read every word of the agreement and carefully deliberate over whether to proceed.

Online privacy concerns also extend from individuals to their dependents. In accordance with the Child Online Privacy Protection Act, school districts must consider and control certain elements of privacy on behalf of students, meaning they cannot require or encourage students under age thirteen to provide personal information. Likewise, online platforms such as Instagram do not let children under the age of thirteen register for their sites. And where children are registered by their parents, sites like YouTube and, more recently, TikTok issue controls to prevent inappropriate portrayals by children or inappropriate behavior by other members. For example, YouTube often disables comments on videos produced by children (Moreno 2020). TikTok added privacy and protection methods in 2020, but in early 2021 was hit with allegations of violating child safety and privacy guidelines.

Although schools and companies are required to take steps to lower risks to children, parents and guardians are free to make their own choices on behalf of their children. Some parents avoid showing their children on social media; they do not post pictures, and ask family members to refrain from doing so (Levy, 2019). On the other end of the spectrum, some parents run social media accounts for their children. Sometimes referred to as "sharents," they may share entertaining videos, promote products through demos or try-ons, or post professionally produced photos on behalf of clothing companies or equipment makers. A child's (even a toddler's) role as an influencer can be financially lucrative, and companies making everything from helmets to dancewear have taken notice (Allchin 2012).

Net Neutrality

The issue of net neutrality, the principle that all Internet data should be treated equally by Internet service providers, is part of the national debate about Internet access and the digital divide. On one side of this debate is the belief that those who provide Internet service, like those who provide electricity and water, should be treated as common carriers, legally prohibited from discriminating based on the customer or nature of the goods. Supporters of net neutrality suggest that without such legal protections, the Internet could be divided into “fast” and “slow” lanes. A conflict perspective theorist might suggest that this discrimination would allow bigger corporations, such as Amazon, to pay Internet providers a premium for faster service, which could lead to gaining an advantage that would drive small, local competitors out of business.

The other side of the debate holds the belief that designating Internet service providers as common carriers would constitute an unreasonable regulatory burden and limit the ability of telecommunication companies to operate profitably. A functional perspective theorist might point out that, without profits, companies would not invest in making improvements to their Internet service or expanding those services to underserved areas. The final decision rests with the Federal Communications Commission and the federal government, which must decide how to fairly regulate broadband providers without dividing the Internet into haves and have-nots.

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7.3: Media and Technology in Society

Categorizing Technology

Technology and the media are interwoven, and neither can be separated from contemporary society in most core and semi-peripheral nations. Media is a term that refers to all print, digital, and electronic means of communication. From the time the printing press was created (and even before), technology has influenced how and where information is shared. Today, it is impossible to discuss media and the ways societies communicate without addressing the fast-moving pace of technology change. Twenty years ago, if you wanted to share news of your baby's birth or a job promotion, you phoned or wrote letters. You might tell a handful of people, but you probably wouldn't call up several hundred, including your old high school chemistry teacher, to let them know. Now, you might join an online community of parents-to-be even before you announce your pregnancy via a staged Instagram picture. The circle of communication is wider than ever, and when we talk about how societies engage with technology, we must take media into account, and vice versa.

Technology creates media. The comic book you bought your daughter is a form of media, as is the movie you streamed for family night, the web site you used to order takeout, the billboard you passed on the way to pick up your food, and the newspaper you read while you were waiting for it. Without technology, media would not exist, but remember, technology is more than just the media we are exposed to.

There is no one way of dividing technology into categories. Whereas once it might have been simple to classify innovations such as machine-based or drug-based or the like, the interconnected strands of technological development mean that advancement in one area might be replicated in dozens of others. For simplicity's sake, we will look at how the U.S. Patent Office, which receives patent applications for nearly all major innovations worldwide, addresses patents. This regulatory body will patent three types of innovation. Utility patents are the first type. These are granted for the invention or discovery of any new and useful process, product, or machine, or for a significant improvement to existing technologies. The second type of patent is a design patent. Commonly conferred in architecture and industrial design, this means someone has invented a new and original design for a manufactured product. Plant patents, the final type, recognize the discovery of new plant types that can be asexually reproduced. While genetically modified food is the hot-button issue within this category, farmers have long been creating new hybrids and patenting them. A more modern example might be food giant Monsanto, which patents corn with built-in pesticide (U.S. Patent and Trademark Office 2011).

Disruptive Technologies

Anderson and Tushman (1990) suggest an evolutionary model of technological change, in which a breakthrough in one form of technology leads to a number of variations. Once those are assessed, a prototype emerges, and then a period of slight adjustments to the technology, interrupted by a breakthrough. For example, in terms of portable data storage, the first mainstream device was a floppy disk–a square, plastic object larger than a playing card, which in its final iteration held 1.4 megabytes of data (or less than a single high-resolution photo). Until the early 2000s, these were common formats, and students and professionals would regularly carry several of them. Floppy disks were improved and upgraded, then replaced by higher-capacity Zip and Jaz disks, which were then replaced by flash drives. This is essentially a generational model for categorizing technology, in which first-generation technology is a relatively unsophisticated jumping-off point that leads to an improved second generation, and so on.

Another type of evolution involves disruptive technology (or disruptive innovation), which is a product, service, or process that has a major effect on the operation of an entire industry, and/or may create new industries or new markets. In the example above, a disruptive technology might be the advent of cloud-based storage platforms like Google Drive and iCloud, which have significantly reduced the need for physical portable storage. Disruptive technology can create and destroy entire industries, sometimes in a rapid manner rather than in an evolutionary one. In one of the most famous examples, the advent of digital photography rendered film-based cameras obsolete; the change came quickly, and many companies could not adjust. In a similar manner, ride-sharing services have had a massive impact on the taxi and limousine industry. Emerging technologies such as blockchain, additive manufacturing (3D printing), and augmented reality are likely to have similar impacts. For example, if companies decide that it is more efficient to 3D print many products or components close to their destinations instead of shipping them from distant manufacturing plants and warehouses, the entire shipping industry may be affected.

The sociological impact of disruptive technology can be sudden. Digital photography, for example, resulted in the rapid decline of companies like Kodak, which had been stalwarts of the American economy and a major employer. Layoffs devastated cities like Rochester, New York. The advent of online music purchasing and subscription services resulted in the closure of thousands of record stores, both small businesses and large chains like Tower Records. Beyond the economic impact, these stores were often parts of the fabric of communities, places for fans to gather to explore and share music. Automation has likewise changed manufacturing and mining, resulting in severe job loss and drastic alterations in regions such as the Great Lakes, where many towns went from being part of the Manufacturing Belt to being part of the Rust Belt.

Sociology in the Real World: Violence in Media and Video Games: Does It Matter?



Figure 7.3.1: The Grand Theft Auto (GTA) videogame series is highly violent. The games are rated M (Mature 17+) by the ESRB and 18+ by PEGI due to intense, realistic violence, criminal activity, strong language, sexual content, and substance use. (Grand Theft Auto IV Special Edition by Michel Ngilen via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0)

A glance through popular video game and movie titles geared toward children and teens shows the vast spectrum of violence that is displayed, condoned, and acted out.

As a way to guide parents in their programming choices, the motion picture industry put a rating system in place in the 1960s. But new media—video games in particular—proved to be uncharted territory. In 1994, the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ERSB) set a ratings system for games that addressed issues of violence, sexuality, drug use, and the like. California took it a step further by making it illegal to sell video games to underage buyers. The case led to a heated debate about personal freedoms and child protection, and in 2011, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against the California law, stating it violated freedom of speech (ProCon 2012).

Children's play has often involved games of aggression—from cops and robbers to fake sword fights. Many articles report on the controversy surrounding the suggested link between violent video games and violent behavior. Is the link real? Psychologists Anderson and Bushman (2001) reviewed forty-plus years of research on the subject and, in 2003, determined that there are causal linkages between violent video game use and aggression. They found that children who had just played a violent video game demonstrated an immediate increase in hostile or aggressive thoughts, an increase in aggressive emotions, and physiological arousal that increased the chances of acting out aggressive behavior (Anderson 2003).

However, though the American Psychological Association and other researchers found an increase in aggressive tendencies based on video game play, several studies and conclusions indicated "scant evidence" that violent video games cause either physical violence or criminal behavior. Researchers have found correlations between those behaviors, essentially indicating that violent people may be more likely to play violent video games, but that still does not mean that video games cause violence.

Types of Media and Technology

Media and technology have evolved hand in hand, from early print to modern publications, from radio to television to film. New media emerge constantly, such as we see in the online world.

Newspaper

Early forms of print media, found in ancient Rome, were hand-copied onto boards and carried around to keep the citizenry informed. With the invention of the printing press, the way that people shared ideas changed, as information could be mass produced and stored. For the first time, there was a way to spread knowledge and information more efficiently; many credit this development as leading to the Renaissance and ultimately the Age of Enlightenment. This is not to say that newspapers of old were more trustworthy than the *Weekly World News* and *National Enquirer* are today. Sensationalism abounded, as did censorship that forbade any subjects that would incite the populace.

The invention of the telegraph, in the mid-1800s, changed print media almost as much as the printing press. Suddenly information could be transmitted in minutes. As the nineteenth century became the twentieth, U.S. publishers such as Hearst redefined the world of print media and wielded an enormous amount of power to socially construct national and world events. Of course, even as the media empires of William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer were growing, print media also allowed for the dissemination of countercultural or revolutionary materials. Internationally, Vladimir Lenin's *Irksa* (*The Spark*) newspaper was published in 1900 and played a role in Russia's growing communist movement (World Association of Newspapers 2004).

With the invention and widespread use of television in the mid-twentieth century, newspaper circulation steadily dropped off, and in the 21st century, circulation has dropped further as more people turn to internet news sites and other forms of new media to stay informed. According to the Pew Research Center, 2009 saw an unprecedented drop in newspaper circulation––down 10.6 percent from the year before (Pew 2010).

This shift away from newspapers as a source of information has profound effects on societies. When the news is given to a large diverse conglomerate of people, it must maintain some level of broad-based reporting and balance in order to appeal to a broad audience and keep them subscribing. As newspapers decline, news sources become more fractured, so each segment of the audience can choose specifically what it wants to hear and what it wants to avoid. Increasingly, newspapers are shifting online in an attempt to remain relevant. It is hard to tell what impact new media platforms will have on the way we receive and process information.

It is hard to tell what impact new media platforms will have on the way we receive and process information. The Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism (2013) reported that audiences for all the major news magazines declined in 2012, though digital ad revenue increased. The same report suggested that, while newspaper circulation is holding steady at around $10 billion after years of decline, it is digital pay plans that allow newspapers to keep their heads above water, and the digital ad revenue that is increasing for news magazines is not enough to compensate for print revenue loss in newspapers.

A 2014 report suggested that U.S. adults read a median of five books per year in 2013, which is about average. But are they reading traditional print or e-books? About 69 percent of people said they had read at least one printed book in the past year, versus 28 percent who said they'd read an e-book (DeSilver 2014). Is print more effective at conveying information? In recent study, Mangen, Walgermo, and Bronnick (2013) found that students who read on paper performed slightly better than those who read an e-book on an open-book reading comprehension exam of multiple-choice and short-answer questions. While a meta-analysis of research by Andrews (1992) seemed to confirm that people read more slowly and comprehend less when reading from screens, a meta-analysis of more recent research on this topic does not show anything definite (Noyes and Garland 2008).

Television and Radio



Figure 7.3.2: news, sports, entertainment, and public information do not simply appear on screens, but are shaped by workers, equipment, schedules, and editorial decisions. (SKY Sport24 news channel by Morningfrost via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0)

Radio programming obviously preceded television, but both shaped people's lives in much the same way. In both cases, information (and entertainment) could be enjoyed at home, with a kind of immediacy and community that newspapers could not offer. For instance, many people in the United States might remember when they saw on television or heard on the radio that the Twin Towers in New York City had been attacked in 2001. Even though people were in their own homes, media allowed them to share these moments in real time. This same kind of separate-but-communal approach occurred with entertainment too. School-aged children and office workers gathered to discuss the previous night's installment of a serial television or radio show.

Right up through the 1970s, U.S. television was dominated by three major networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC) that competed for ratings and advertising dollars. The networks also exerted a lot of control over what people watched. Public television, in contrast, offered an educational nonprofit alternative to the sensationalization of news spurred by the network competition for viewers and advertising dollars. Those sources—PBS (Public Broadcasting Service), the BBC (British Broadcasting Company), and CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Company)—garnered a worldwide reputation for high-quality programming and a global perspective. Al Jazeera, the Arabic independent news station, has joined this group as a similar media force that broadcasts to people worldwide.

The impact of television on U.S. society is hard to overstate. By the late 1990s, 98 percent of U.S. homes had at least one television set, and the average person watched between two and a half and five hours of television daily. All this television has a powerful socializing effect, providing reference groups while reinforcing social norms, values, and beliefs.

Film

The film industry took off in the 1930s, when color and sound were first integrated into feature films. Like television, early films were unifying for society: as people gathered in theaters to watch new releases, they would laugh, cry, and be scared together. Movies also act as time capsules or cultural touchstones for society. From Westerns starring the tough-talking Clint Eastwood to the biopic of Facebook founder and Harvard dropout Mark Zuckerberg, movies illustrate society's dreams, fears, and experiences. While many consider Hollywood the epicenter of moviemaking, India's Bollywood actually produces more films per year, speaking to the cultural aspirations and norms of Indian society. The film industry, like other media formats, has gone through substantial change as a result of streaming services, online privacy, and the new competition for people's entertainment dollars. Because the mainstream movie industry has been so reliant on ticket sales at live theaters, the COVID-19 pandemic affected it more dramatically than most other media categories. Highly anticipated movies slated for 2020 and 2021 releases were delayed or shifted to streaming distribution, reducing revenue. And some companies made lasting decisions regarding their future offerings.

New Media and Online Environments

New media encompasses all interactive forms of information exchange. These include social networking sites, blogs, podcasts,

wikis, and virtual worlds. Many are not "new" in the sense that they were developed in the past few years (some may be older than you), but they are newer than the media mentioned above, and they rely on types of technologies that were not available until about thirty years ago. Many are ways disruptive to traditional media or to companies that rely on those other formats. Clearly, the list of new media grows almost daily, and you might feel we are missing some. In fact, the immediacy of new media coupled with the lack of oversight means we must be more careful than ever to ensure that we are making good decisions about the accuracy, ethics, and cultural responsiveness of these formats.

Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence (AI) refers broadly to computer systems designed to perform tasks that are commonly associated with human intelligence, such as recognizing patterns, making predictions, interpreting language, or generating new content. AI is already woven into many aspects of everyday life. Recommendation systems suggest what music to listen to or what videos to watch, navigation apps predict traffic, employers may use automated systems to screen job applicants, and social media platforms rely on algorithms to determine which posts people see. More recently, generative AI systems have made it possible for people to produce text, images, audio, video, and computer code by entering instructions or prompts.

Like other forms of technology, however, AI does not develop or operate outside society. AI systems are created by people and organizations, trained on data produced through social activity, and deployed within institutions that already have particular rules, inequalities, and goals. Sociologists therefore ask not only what AI can do, but also who develops it, who controls it, whose data it uses, and who benefits or experiences harm from its use. Researchers have shown, for example, that automated classification systems can be difficult for ordinary people to understand or challenge (Burrell, 2016), while digital systems used to rank and classify people can influence how institutions evaluate their risk, preferences, opportunities, and worth (Fourcade & Healy, 2017).

These questions become especially important when algorithms reproduce patterns of inequality. Research has demonstrated how apparently neutral technologies can reproduce racial and gender hierarchies through search engines, automated classifications, and other digital systems (Benjamin, 2019; Noble, 2018). At the same time, AI is changing the nature of communication itself. People increasingly interact with chatbots, recommendation systems, virtual assistants, and other technologies that respond to them in personalized ways. Sociologist Elena Esposito (2022) suggests that rather than thinking only about whether machines can become intelligent like humans, we should also examine how communication changes when algorithms become participants in social interaction. As AI becomes integrated into education, workplaces, government, media, and personal relationships, sociologists will continue to examine how these technologies reshape power, inequality, institutions, identities, and everyday social life.

Planned Obsolescence: Technology That's Built to Crash



Figure 7.3.3: The 1923 Chevrolet is cited as one of the earliest examples of annual facelifts in the car industry because it had a restyled body covering what essentially was nine-year-old technology. (1923 Chevrolet Superior Series B by Bahnfrend via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0)

Chances are your mobile phone company, as well as the makers of your laptop and your household appliances, are all counting on their products to fail. Not too quickly, of course, or consumers wouldn't stand for it—but frequently enough that you might find that it costs far more to fix a device than to replace it with a newer model. Or you find the phone company e-mails you saying that you're eligible for a free new phone, because yours is a whopping two years old. And appliance repair people say that while they might be fixing some machines that are twenty years old, they generally aren't fixing those that are seven years old; newer models are built to be thrown out. This strategy is called planned obsolescence, and it is the business practice of planning for a product to be obsolete or unusable from the time it is created.

To some extent, planned obsolescence is a natural extension of new and emerging technologies. After all, who is going to cling to an enormous and slow desktop computer from 2000 when a few hundred dollars can buy one that is significantly faster and better? But the practice is not always so benign. The classic example of planned obsolescence is the nylon stocking. Women's stockings—once an everyday staple of women's lives––get "runs" or "ladders" after only a few wearings. This requires the stockings to be discarded and new ones purchased. Not surprisingly, the garment industry did not invest heavily in finding a rip-proof fabric; it was in manufacturers' best interest that their product be regularly replaced.

Those who use Microsoft Windows might feel that like the women who purchased endless pairs of stockings, they are victims of planned obsolescence. Every time Windows releases a new operating system, there are typically not many innovations in it that consumers feel they must have. However, the software programs are upwardly compatible only. This means that while the new versions can read older files, the old version cannot read the newer ones. In short order, those who have not upgraded right away find themselves unable to open files sent by colleagues or friends, and they usually wind up upgrading as well.

Planned obsolescence is not always done ethically, and some companies can dictate the obsolescence after the user makes a purchase. Apple users took to social media to confirm that their older iPhones suddenly began losing power or were slowing down considerably. Many users bought new phones at high prices, and later learned that the slow downs were intended by the phone maker. Customers filed dozens of class action lawsuits, which are suits where a very large group of people can band together. Apple was found to have intentionally and improperly altered its phones through a software update in order to hide battery problems. While it never admitted guilt, Apple's $500 million settlement paid benefits to iPhone 6 and iPhone 7 users who had been affected, and a later $113 agreement with state attorneys general included provisions to behave more ethically and transparently (CNBC 2020).

Product Advertising and the Attention Economy

Companies use advertising to sell to us, but the way they reach us is changing. Naomi Klein identified the destructive impact of corporate branding her 1999 text, *No Logo*, an antiglobalization treatise that focused on sweatshops, corporate power, and anticonsumerist social movements. In the post-millennial society, synergistic advertising practices ensure you are receiving the same message from a variety of sources and on a variety of platforms. For example, you may see billboards for Miller beer on your way to a stadium, sit down to watch a game preceded by a Miller commercial on the big screen, and watch a halftime ad in which people are shown holding up the trademark bottles. Chances are you can guess which brand of beer is for sale at the concession stand.

Advertising has changed, as technology and media have allowed consumers to bypass traditional advertising venues. From the invention of the remote control, which allows us to skip television advertising without leaving our seats, to recording devices that let us watch programs but skip the ads, conventional television advertising is on the wane. And print media is no different. Advertising revenue in newspapers and on television has fallen significantly, which shows that companies need new ways of getting their messages to consumers.

Brand ambassadorships can also be powerful tools for advertisers. For example, companies hire college students to be their on-campus representatives, and they may target for students engaged in high-profile activities like sports, fraternities, and music. (This practice is slightly different from sponsorships, and note that some students, particularly athletes, need to follow strict guidelines about accepting money or products.) The marketing team is betting that if we buy perfume because Beyoncé tells us to, we'll also choose our workout gear, clothing, or make-up brand if another student encourages that choice. Tens of thousands of brand ambassadors or brand evangelists work on college campuses, and such marketing approaches are seen as highly effective investments for companies. The numbers make it clear: Ambassador-referred customers provide sixteen percent higher value to companies than other customers, and over ninety percent of people indicate that people trust referrals from people they know (On-Campus Advertising, 2017).

Social media has made such influencer and ambassador marketing a near constant. Some formal ambassadors are sponsored

by companies to show or use their products. In some cases, compensation arrives only in the form of the free products and whatever monetization the ambassador receives from the site, such as YouTube. Influencers are usually less formally engaged with companies than are ambassadors, relying mostly on site revenue to reward their efforts. Some influencers may overstate their popularity in order to get free products or services. For example, luxury hotels report that they are barraged by influencers (some with very few followers, and therefore questionable influence) who expect free stays in exchange for creating posts promoting the location (Locker 2019).

One ethical and perhaps relationship-oriented question is whether paid ambassadors should be required to disclose their relationship with a company, and how that works in online versus face-to-face interactions. In this case, online presence may be more "truthful" than in-person relationships. A video can formally include sponsorship information, and some ambassadors list partners or sponsors on their profiles. But in day-to-day, in-person conversations, it might be awkward for a classmate or colleague to mention that they are wearing a particular brand or using gear based on a financial relationship. In other words, the person sitting next to you with the great bag may be paid to carry it, and you may never know.

Homogenization and Fragmentation

Despite the variety of media at hand, the mainstream news and entertainment you enjoy are increasingly homogenized. Research by McManus (1995) suggests that different news outlets all tell the same stories, using the same sources, resulting in the same message, presented with only slight variations. So whether you are reading the *New York Times* or the CNN's web site, the coverage of national events like a major court case or political issue will likely be the same.

Simultaneously with this homogenization among the major news outlets, the opposite process is occurring in the newer media streams. With so many choices, people increasingly customize their news experience, minimizing their opportunity to encounter information that does not jive with their worldview (Prior 2005). For instance, those who are staunchly Republican can avoid centrist or liberal-leaning cable news shows and web sites that would show Democrats in a favorable light. They know to seek out Fox News over MSNBC, just as Democrats know to do the opposite. Further, people who want to avoid politics completely can choose to visit web sites that deal only with entertainment or that will keep them up to date on sports scores. They have an easy way to avoid information they do not wish to hear. Americans seem to view this phenomenon with great concern, indicating that the impact of customized or personalized news delivers worse news. Yet, they still engage with the platforms that deliver news in that manner.

The fragmentation of the news has led to an increased amount of digital tribalism. Tribalism in this sense is the state or tendency to gather and reinforce ideas belonging to a group, and to do so out of a sense of strong loyalty. Digital tribalism, then, is the tendency to do so online, and also to forge new tribes purely based on online personas or ideologies. Instead of basing these groups on the classic bonds of ethnic, religious, or geographic ideologies, they are based on politics, emotions, lifestyles or lifestyle goals, or even brands (Taute & Sierra 2014). Digital tribes can lead people to a greater sense of belonging, and can also be heavily exploited for commercial or power-attaining interests.

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7.4: Global Implications of Media and Technology

Media Globalization

Technology, and increasingly media, has always driven globalization. In a landmark book, Thomas Friedman (2005), identified several ways in which technology "flattened" the globe and contributed to our global economy. The first edition of *The World Is Flat*, written in 2005, posits that core economic concepts were changed by personal computing and high-speed Internet. Access to these two technological shifts has allowed core-nation corporations to recruit workers in call centers located in China or India. Using examples like a Midwestern U.S. woman who runs a business from her home via the call centers of Bangalore, India, Friedman warns that this new world order will exist whether core-nation businesses are ready or not, and that in order to keep its key economic role in the world, the United States will need to pay attention to how it prepares workers of the twenty-first century for this dynamic.

Of course not everyone agrees with Friedman's theory. Many economists pointed out that in reality innovation, economic activity, and population still gather in geographically attractive areas, and they continue to create economic peaks and valleys, which are by no means flattened out to mean equality for all. China's hugely innovative and powerful cities of Shanghai and Beijing are worlds away from the rural squalor of the country's poorest denizens.

It is worth noting that Friedman is an economist, not a sociologist. His work focuses on the economic gains and risks this new world order entails. In this section, we will look more closely at how media globalization and technological globalization play out in a sociological perspective. As the names suggest, media globalization is the worldwide integration of media through the cross-cultural exchange of ideas, while technological globalization refers to the cross-cultural development and exchange of technology.

Lyons (2005) suggests that multinational corporations are the primary vehicle of media globalization, and these corporations control global mass-media content and distribution (Compaine 2005). It is true, when looking at who controls which media outlets, that there are fewer independent news sources as larger and larger conglomerates develop. In the early 2000s, the United States offered about 1,500 newspapers, 2,800 book publishers, plus 6,000 magazines and a whopping 10,000 radio outlets (Bagdikian 2004). By 2019, some of those numbers had changed: There were only 1,000 newspapers, but over 7,000 magazines (note that both newspapers and magazines count as such even if they publish largely online) (BBC 2019). The number of book publishers and radio outlets has generally remained static, which may seem surprising.

Media Consolidation

On the surface, there is endless opportunity to find diverse media outlets. But the numbers are misleading. Media consolidation is a process in which fewer and fewer owners control the majority of media outlets. This creates an oligopoly in which a few firms dominate the media marketplace. In 1983, a mere 50 corporations owned the bulk of mass-media outlets. Today in the United States just five companies control 90 percent of media outlets (McChesney 1999). Ranked by 2014 company revenue, Comcast is the biggest, followed by the Disney Corporation, Time Warner, CBS, and Viacom (Time.com 2014). What impact does this consolidation have on the type of information to which the U.S. public is exposed? Does media consolidation deprive the public of multiple viewpoints and limit its discourse to the information and opinions shared by a few sources? Why does it matter?

Monopolies matter because less competition typically means consumers are less well served since dissenting opinions or diverse viewpoints are less likely to be found. Media consolidation results in the following dysfunctions. First, consolidated media owes more to its stockholders than to the public. Publicly traded Fortune 500 companies must pay more attention to their profitability and to government regulators than to the public's right to know. The few companies that control most of the media, because they are owned by the power elite, represent the political and social interests of only a small minority. In an oligopoly there are fewer incentives to innovate, improve services, or decrease prices.

While some social scientists predicted that the increase in media forms would create a global village (McLuhan 1964), current research suggests that the public sphere accessing the global village will tend to be rich, Caucasoid, and English-speaking (Jan 2009). As shown by the spring 2011 uprisings throughout the Arab world, technology really does offer a window into the news of the world. For example, here in the United States we saw internet updates of Egyptian events in real time, with people tweeting, posting, and blogging on the ground in Tahrir Square.

Still, there is no question that the exchange of technology from core nations to peripheral and semi-peripheral ones leads to a

number of complex issues. For instance, someone using a conflict theorist approach might focus on how much political ideology and cultural colonialism occurs with technological growth. In theory at least, technological innovations are ideology-free; a fiber optic cable is the same in a Muslim country as a secular one, a communist country or a capitalist one. But those who bring technology to less-developed nations—whether they are nongovernment organizations, businesses, or governments—usually have an agenda. A functionalist, in contrast, might focus on the ways technology creates new means to share information about successful crop-growing programs, or on the economic benefits of opening a new market for cell phone use. Either way, cultural and societal assumptions and norms are being delivered along with those high-speed wires.

Cultural and ideological bias are not the only risks of media globalization. In addition to the risk of cultural imperialism and the loss of local culture, other problems come with the benefits of a more interconnected globe. One risk is the potential for censoring by national governments that let in only the information and media they feel serve their message, as is occurring in China. In addition, core nations such as the United States risk the use of international media by criminals to circumvent local laws against socially deviant and dangerous behaviors such as gambling, child pornography, and the sex trade. Offshore or international web sites allow U.S. citizens (and others) to seek out whatever illegal or illicit information they want, from twenty-four hour online gambling sites that do not require proof of age, to sites that sell child pornography. These examples illustrate the societal risks of unfettered information flow.

Authority and the Internet: An Uncomfortable Friendship



Figure 7.4.1: In 2012, protesters opposed to the proposed U.S. bill known as the "Stop Online Piracy Act" (SOPA) raised concerns about the potential for the legislation to grant the government and copyright holders excessive power. They argued that it could lead to the blocking of websites, restrictions on online sharing, and limitations on freedom of expression. This prompted a wider debate about copyright enforcement and its implications for Internet censorship and control. (SOPA rally by Jim.henderson via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC0 1.0)

In the United States, the Internet is used to access illegal gambling and pornography sites, as well as to research stocks, crowd-source what car to buy, or keep in touch with childhood friends. Can we allow one or more of those activities, while restricting the rest? And who decides what needs restricting? In a country with democratic principles and an underlying belief in free-market capitalism, the answer is decided in the court system. But globally, the questions––and the governments' responses––are very different.

Other countries take a far more restrictive and directive approach to Internet regulation. China, which is a country with a tight rein on the dissemination of information, has long worked to suppress what it calls “harmful information,” including dissent concerning government politics, dialogue about China’s relationship with Hong Kong, or criticism of the government’s handling of events.

With sites like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube blocked in China, the nation’s Internet users turn to local media companies for their needs. Even so, the country exerts strong control by identifying and prosecuting some violators of the bans, and undertaking more far-reaching tactics.

The nation blocks the use of certain terms, such as “human rights,” and passes new laws that require people to register with their real names and make it more dangerous to criticize government actions.

In early 2021, Myanmar's military launched a coup against its government. Elected leader Ang San Suu Kyi was arrested, and other top officials were detained or pushed from power. (Suu Kyi had previously spent years under house arrest.) Immediately, citizens launched widespread and persistent protests against the coup. Myanmar's military took immediate steps to quell the protests, including firing at and killing dozens of protesters and storming colleges and hospitals. But first, the government banned Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp in an effort to reduce coordination among protesters and restrain news about the crackdown. The government also arrested reporters, including foreign nationals, who were accused of violating a public order law. Social media companies replied in what ways they could, such as deactivating the accounts of Myanmar's military so that they couldn't share their own messages.

Technological Globalization

Technological globalization is speeded in large part by technological diffusion, the spread of technology across borders. In the last two decades, there has been rapid improvement in the spread of technology to peripheral and semi-peripheral nations, and a 2008 World Bank report discusses both the benefits and ongoing challenges of this diffusion. In general, the report found that technological progress and economic growth rates were linked, and that the rise in technological progress has helped improve the situations of many living in absolute poverty (World Bank 2008). The report recognizes that rural and low-tech products such as corn can benefit from new technological innovations, and that, conversely, technologies like mobile banking can aid those whose rural existence consists of low-tech market vending. In addition, technological advances in areas like mobile phones can lead to competition, lowered prices, and concurrent improvements in related areas such as mobile banking and information sharing.

However, the same patterns of social inequality that create a digital divide in the United States also create digital divides within peripheral and semi-peripheral nations. While the growth of technology use among countries has increased dramatically over the past several decades, the spread of technology within countries is significantly slower among peripheral and semi-peripheral nations. In these countries, far fewer people have the training and skills to take advantage of new technology, let alone access it. Technological access tends to be clustered around urban areas and leaves out vast swaths of peripheral-nation citizens. While the diffusion of information technologies has the potential to resolve many global social problems, it is often the population most in need that is most affected by the digital divide. For example, technology to purify water could save many lives, but the villages in peripheral nations most in need of water purification don’t have access to the technology, the funds to purchase it, or the technological comfort level to introduce it as a solution.

How Mobile Phones Are Impacting Sub-Saharan Africa



Figure 7.4.2: Mobile phone access can expand communication, but at the same time, the spread of mobile technology through foreign corporations raises questions about cultural imperialism, economic dependency, and who defines what “development” should look like. (Ghanaian farmer on phone by IanCamp via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0)

Many of Africa's poorest countries suffer from a marked lack of infrastructure including poor roads, limited electricity, and minimal access to education and telephones. But while landline use has not changed appreciably during the past ten years, there's been a fivefold increase in mobile phone access; more than a third of people in Sub-Saharan Africa have the ability to access a mobile phone (Katine 2010). Even more can use a "village phone"—through a shared-phone program created by the Grameen Foundation. With access to mobile phone technology, a host of benefits become available that have the potential to change the dynamics in these poorest nations. Sometimes that change is as simple as being able to make a phone call to neighboring market towns. By finding out which markets have vendors interested in their goods, fishers and farmers can ensure they travel to the market that will serve them best and avoid a wasted trip. Others can use mobile phones and some of the emerging money-sending systems to securely send money to a family member or business partner elsewhere (Katine 2010).

These shared-phone programs are often funded by businesses like Germany's Vodafone or Britain's Masbabi, which hope to gain market share in the region. Phone giant Nokia points out that there are 4 billion mobile phone users worldwide—that's more than twice as many people as have bank accounts—meaning there is ripe opportunity to connect banking companies with people who need their services (ITU Telecom 2009). Not all access is corporate-based, however. Other programs are funded by business organizations that seek to help peripheral nations with tools for innovation and entrepreneurship.

But this wave of innovation and potential business comes with costs. There is, certainly, the risk of cultural imperialism, and the assumption that core nations (and core-nation multinationals) know what is best for those struggling in the world's poorest communities. Whether well intentioned or not, the vision of a continent of Africans successfully chatting on their iPhone may not be ideal. Like all aspects of global inequity, access to technology in Africa requires more than just foreign investment. There must be a concerted effort to ensure the benefits of technology get to where they are needed most.

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7.5: Theoretical Perspectives on Media and Technology

A Quick Note

It is difficult to conceive of any one theory or theoretical perspective that can explain the variety of ways in which people interact with technology and the media. Technology runs the gamut from the match you strike to light a candle all the way up to sophisticated nuclear power plants that might power the factory where that candle was made. Media could refer to the television you watch, the ads wrapping the bus you take to work or school, or the magazines you flip through in a dentist's waiting room, not to mention all the forms of new media, including Instagram, Facebook, blogs, YouTube, and the like. Are media and technology critical to the forward march of humanity? Are they pernicious capitalist tools that lead to the exploitation of workers worldwide? Are they the magic bullet the world has been waiting for to level the playing field and raise the world's poor out of extreme poverty? Choose any opinion and you will find studies and scholars who agree with you––and those who disagree.

Functionalism

Because functionalism focuses on how media and technology contribute to the smooth functioning of society, a good place to begin understanding this perspective is to write a list of functions you perceive media and technology to perform. Your list might include the ability to find information on the Internet, television's entertainment value, or how advertising and product placement contribute to social norms.

Commercial Function



Figure 7.5.1: From a functionalist perspective, media can entertain audiences, attract attention to products or brands, support advertising, and help organize shared cultural experiences around consumption. (Production of a TV commercial by JJorge Royan via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0)

As you might guess, with nearly every U.S. household possessing a television, and the 250 billion hours of television watched annually by people in the United States, companies that wish to connect with consumers find television an irresistible platform to promote their goods and services (Nielsen 2012). Television advertising is a highly functional way to meet a market demographic where it lives. Sponsors can use the sophisticated data gathered by network and cable television companies regarding their viewers and target their advertising accordingly. Whether you are watching cartoons on Nick Jr. or a cooking show on Telemundo, chances are advertisers have a plan to reach you.

And it certainly doesn't stop with television. Commercial advertising precedes movies in theaters and shows up on and inside public transportation, as well as on the sides of building and roadways. Major corporations such as Coca-Cola bring their

advertising into public schools, by sponsoring sports fields or tournaments, as well as filling the halls and cafeterias of those schools with vending machines hawking their goods. With rising concerns about childhood obesity and attendant diseases, the era of soda machines in schools may be numbered. In fact, as part of the United States Department of Agriculture's Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act and Michelle Obama's Let's Move! Initiative, a ban on junk food in school began in July 2014.

Entertainment Function

An obvious manifest function of media is its entertainment value. Most people, when asked why they watch television or go to the movies, would answer that they enjoy it. And the numbers certainly illustrate that. While 2012 Nielsen research shows a slight reduction of U.S. homes with televisions, the reach of television is still vast. And the amount of time spent watching is equally large. Clearly, enjoyment is paramount. On the technology side, as well, there is a clear entertainment factor to the use of new innovations. From online gaming to chatting with friends on Facebook, technology offers new and more exciting ways for people to entertain themselves.

Social Norm Functions

Even while the media is selling us goods and entertaining us, it also serves to socialize us, helping us pass along norms, values, and beliefs to the next generation. In fact, we are socialized and resocialized by media throughout our whole lives. All forms of media teach us what is good and desirable, how we should speak, how we should behave, and how we should react to events. Media also provide us with cultural touchstones during events of national significance. How many of your older relatives can recall watching the explosion of the space shuttle *Challenger* on television? How many of those reading this textbook followed the events of September 11 or Hurricane Katrina on television or the Internet?

Just as in Anderson and Bushman's (2011) evidence in the Violence in Media and Video Games: Does It Matter? feature, debate still exists over the extent and impact of media socialization. One recent study (Krahe et al. 2011) demonstrated that violent media content does have a desensitizing affect and is correlated with aggressive thoughts. Another group of scholars (Gentile, Mathieson, and Crick 2011) found that among children exposure to media violence led to an increase in both physical and relational aggression. Yet, a meta-analysis study covering four decades of research (Savage 2003) could not establish a definitive link between viewing violence and committing criminal violence.

It is clear from watching people emulate the styles of dress and talk that appear in media that media has a socializing influence. What is not clear, despite nearly fifty years of empirical research, is how much socializing influence the media has when compared to other agents of socialization, which include any social institution that passes along norms, values, and beliefs (such as peers, family, religious institutions, and the like).

Life-Changing Functions

Like media, many forms of technology do indeed entertain us, provide a venue for commercialization, and socialize us. For example, some studies suggest the rising obesity rate is correlated with the decrease in physical activity caused by an increase in use of some forms of technology, a latent function of the prevalence of media in society (Kautiainen et al. 2011). Without a doubt, a manifest function of technology is to change our lives, sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse. Think of how the digital age has improved the ways we communicate. Have you ever used Skype or another webcast to talk to a friend or family member far away? Or maybe you have organized a fund drive, raising thousands of dollars, all from your desk chair.

Of course, the downside to this ongoing information flow is the near impossibility of disconnecting from technology that leads to an expectation of constant convenient access to information and people. Such a fast-paced dynamic is not always to our benefit. Some sociologists assert that this level of media exposure leads to narcotizing dysfunction, a result in which people are too overwhelmed with media input to really care about the issue, so their involvement becomes defined by awareness instead of by action (Lazerfeld and Merton 1948).

Conflict Perspective

In contrast to theories in the functional perspective, the conflict perspective focuses on the creation and reproduction of inequality—social processes that tend to disrupt society rather than contribute to its smooth operation. When we take a conflict perspective, one major focus is the differential access to media and technology embodied in the digital divide. Conflict theorists also look at who controls the media, and how media promotes the norms of upper-middle-class White people in the United States

while minimizing the presence of the working class, especially people of color.

Control of Media and Technology

Powerful individuals and social institutions have a great deal of influence over which forms of technology are released, when and where they are released, and what kind of media is available for our consumption, which is a form of gatekeeping. Shoemaker and Vos (2009) define gatekeeping as the sorting process by which thousands of possible messages are shaped into a mass media-appropriate form and reduced to a manageable amount. In other words, the people in charge of the media decide what the public is exposed to, which, as C. Wright Mills (1956) famously noted, is the heart of media's power. Take a moment to think of the way "new media" evolve and replace traditional forms of hegemonic media. With hegemonic media, a culturally diverse society can be dominated by one race, gender, or class that manipulates the media to impose its worldview as a societal norm. New media weakens the gatekeeper role in information distribution. Popular sites such as YouTube and Facebook not only allow more people to freely share information but also engage in a form of self-policing. Users are encouraged to report inappropriate behavior that moderators will then address.

In addition, some conflict theorists suggest that the way U.S. media are generated results in an unbalanced political arena. Those with the most money can buy the most media exposure, run smear campaigns against their competitors, and maximize their visual presence. Almost a year before the 2012 U.S. presidential election, the candidates––Barack Obama for the Democrats and numerous Republican contenders––had raised more than $186 million (Carmi et al. 2012). Some would say that the *Citizens United vs. Federal Election Committee* is a major contributing factor to our unbalanced political arena. In *Citizens United*, the Supreme Court affirmed the right of outside groups, including Super Political Action Committees (SuperPACs) with undisclosed donor lists, to spend unlimited amounts of money on political ads as long as they don't coordinate with the candidate's campaign or specifically advocate for a candidate. What do you think a conflict perspective theorist would suggest about the potential for the non-rich to be heard in politics, especially when SuperPACs ensure that the richest groups have the most say?

Technological Social Control and Digital Surveillance

Social scientists take the idea of the surveillance society so seriously that there is an entire journal devoted to its study, *Surveillance and Society*. The panoptic surveillance envisioned by Jeremy Bentham, depicted in the form of an all-powerful, all-seeing government by George Orwell in *1984*, and later analyzed by Michel Foucault (1975) is increasingly realized in the form of technology used to monitor our every move. This surveillance was imagined as a form of constant monitoring in which the observation posts are decentralized and the observed is never communicated with directly. Today, digital security cameras capture our movements, observers can track us through our cell phones, and police forces around the world use facial-recognition software.

Feminist Perspective



Figure 7.5.2: Donna Haraway is an American professor emerita in the history of consciousness and feminist studies departments at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Her work has been influential for cyberfeminism, especially her writings on cyborg identities, technology, embodiment, and the blurred boundaries between humans and machines. (Donna Haraway by jeanbaptisteparis via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0)

Take a look at popular television shows, advertising campaigns, and online game sites. In most, women are portrayed in a particular set of parameters and tend to have a uniform look that society recognizes as attractive. Most are thin, White or light-skinned, beautiful, and young. Why does this matter? Feminist perspective theorists believe this idealized image is crucial in creating and reinforcing stereotypes. For example, Fox and Bailenson (2009) found that online female avatars conforming to gender stereotypes enhance negative attitudes toward women, and Brasted (2010) found that media (advertising in particular) promotes gender stereotypes. As early as 1990, *Ms.* magazine instituted a policy to publish without any commercial advertising.

The gender gap in tech-related fields (science, technology, engineering, and math) is no secret. A 2011 U.S. Department of Commerce Report suggested that gender stereotyping is one reason for this gap which acknowledges the bias toward men as keepers of technological knowledge (US Department of Commerce 2011). But gender stereotypes go far beyond the use of technology. Press coverage in the media reinforces stereotypes that subordinate women; it gives airtime to looks over skills, and coverage disparages women who defy accepted norms.

Recent research in new media has offered a mixed picture of its potential to equalize the status of men and women in the arenas of technology and public discourse. A European agency, the Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities for Men and Women (2010), issued an opinion report suggesting that while there is the potential for new media forms to perpetuate gender stereotypes and the gender gap in technology and media access, at the same time new media could offer alternative forums for feminist groups and the exchange of feminist ideas. Still, the committee warned against the relatively unregulated environment of new media and the potential for antifeminist activities, from pornography to human trafficking, to flourish there.

Increasingly prominent in the discussion of new media and feminism is cyberfeminism, the application to, and promotion of, feminism online. Research on cyberfeminism runs the gamut from the liberating use of blogs by women living in Iraq during the second Gulf War (Peirce 2011) to an investigation of the Suicide Girls web site (Magnet 2007).

Symbolic Interactionism

Technology itself may act as a symbol for many. The kind of computer you own, the kind of car you drive, your ability to afford the latest Apple product—these serve as a social indicator of wealth and status. Neo-Luddites are people who see technology as symbolizing the coldness and alienation of modern life. But for technophiles, technology symbolizes the potential for a brighter future. For those adopting an ideological middle ground, technology might symbolize status (in the form of a massive flat-screen television) or failure (ownership of a basic old mobile phone with no bells or whistles).

Social Construction of Reality

Meanwhile, media create and spread symbols that become the basis for our shared understanding of society. Theorists working in the interactionist perspective focus on this social construction of reality, an ongoing process in which people subjectively create and understand reality. Media constructs our reality in a number of ways. For some, the people they watch on a screen can become a primary group, meaning the small informal groups of people who are closest to them. For many others, media becomes a reference group: a group that influences an individual and to which an individual compares himself or herself, and by which we judge our successes and failures. We might do very well without the latest smartphone, until we see characters using it on our favorite television show or our classmates whipping it out between classes.

While media may indeed be the medium to spread the message of rich White men, Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, and Sasson (1992) point out that some forms of media discourse allow competing constructions of reality to appear. For example, advertisers find new and creative ways to sell us products we don't need and probably wouldn't want without their prompting, but some networking sites such as Freecycle offer a commercial-free way of requesting and trading items that would otherwise be discarded. The web is also full of blogs chronicling lives lived "off the grid," or without participation in the commercial economy.

Social Networking and Social Construction

While Tumblr and Facebook encourage us to check in and provide details of our day through online social networks, corporations can just as easily promote their products on these sites. Even supposedly crowd-sourced sites like Yelp (which aggregates local reviews) are not immune to corporate shenanigans. That is, we think we are reading objective observations when in reality we may be buying into one more form of advertising.

Facebook, which started as a free social network for college students, is increasingly a monetized business, selling you goods and services in subtle ways. But chances are you don't think of Facebook as one big online advertisement. What started out as a symbol of coolness and insider status, unavailable to parents and corporate shills, now promotes consumerism in the form of games and fandom. For example, think of all the money spent to upgrade popular Facebook games like Candy Crush. And notice that whenever you become a "fan," you likely receive product updates and special deals that promote online and real-world consumerism. It is unlikely that millions of people want to be "friends" with Pampers. But if it means a weekly coupon, they will, in essence, rent out space on their Facebook pages for Pampers to appear. Thus, we develop both new ways to spend money and brand loyalties that will last even after Facebook is considered outdated and obsolete.

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7.6: Key Terms

Glossary

- **cyberfeminism** | the application to and promotion of feminism online
- **design patents** | patents that are granted when someone has invented a new and original design for a manufactured product
- **digital divide** | the uneven access to technology around race, class, and geographic lines
- **e-readiness** | the ability to sort through, interpret, and process digital knowledge
- **evolutionary model of technological change** | a breakthrough in one form of technology that leads to a number of variations, from which a prototype emerges, followed by a period of slight adjustments to the technology, interrupted by a breakthrough
- **gatekeeping** | the sorting process by which thousands of possible messages are shaped into a mass media-appropriate form and reduced to a manageable amount
- **knowledge gap** | the gap in information that builds as groups grow up without access to technology
- **media** | all print, digital, and electronic means of communication
- **media consolidation** | a process by which fewer and fewer owners control the majority of media outlets
- **media globalization** | the worldwide integration of media through the cross-cultural exchange of ideas
- **neo-Luddites** | those who see technology as a symbol of the coldness of modern life
- **net neutrality** | the principle that all Internet data should be treated equally by internet service providers
- **new media** | all interactive forms of information exchange
- **oligopoly** | a situation in which a few firms dominate a marketplace
- **panoptic surveillance** | a form of constant monitoring in which the observation posts are decentralized and the observed is never communicated with directly
- **planned obsolescence** | the act of a technology company planning for a product to be obsolete or unable from the time it's created
- **plant patents** | patents that recognize the discovery of new plant types that can be asexually reproduced
- **technological diffusion** | the spread of technology across borders
- **technological globalization** | the cross-cultural development and exchange of technology
- **technology** | the application of science to solve problems in daily life
- **technophiles** | those who see technology as symbolizing the potential for a brighter future
- **utility patents** | patents that are granted for the invention or discovery of any new and useful process, product, or machine

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7.7: Short Answer

Critical Thinking Questions

1. Where and how do you get your news? Do you watch network television? Read the newspaper? Go online? How about your parents or grandparents? Do you think it matters where you seek out information? Why, or why not?
2. Do you believe new media allows for the kind of unifying moments that television and radio programming used to? If so, give an example.
3. Where are you most likely to notice advertisements? What causes them to catch your attention?
4. Do you believe that technology has indeed flattened the world in terms of providing opportunity? Why, or why not? Give examples to support your reason.
5. Where do you get your news? Is it owned by a large conglomerate? Does it matter to you who owns your local news outlets? Why, or why not?
6. Who do you think is most likely to bring innovation and technology, such as cell phone businesses, to Sub-Saharan Africa: nonprofit organizations, governments, or businesses? Why?
7. Contrast a functionalist viewpoint of digital surveillance with a conflict perspective viewpoint.
8. In what ways has the Internet affected how you view reality? Explain using a symbolic interactionist perspective.
9. Describe how a cyberfeminist might address the fact that powerful female politicians are often demonized in traditional media.
10. The issue of airplane-pilot exhaustion is an issue of growing media concern. Select a theoretical perspective, and describe how it would explain this.
11. Would you characterize yourself as a technophile or a Luddite? Explain, and use examples.

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7.8: Further Research

Additional Learning Resources

- To learn more about the digital divide and its importance, read some key takeaways from Syracuse University.
- To find out more about Internet privacy and security, check the Privacy Rights Clearinghouse website.
- To get a sense of the timeline of technology, check out the World Economic Forum's technology timeline infographic. **Note:** This resource may not be accessible to assistive technologies. A more accessible alternative is availble in Our World in Data website.
- To understand how independent media coverage differs from major corporate-affiliated news outlets, review material from the Democracy Now! website.
- To learn more about cyberfeminism, check out the interdisciplinary artist collective subRosa.
- To explore the implications of panoptic surveillance, review some surveillance studies at the free, open-source Surveillance & Society site.
- Read an example of socialist media from Jacobin magazine.

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7.10: Accessible Text Descriptions

Figure 7.1: Roadmap

A horizontal instructional diagram titled “Media and Technology as a Way of Understanding Power, Connection, and Social Change.” Beneath the title, three large light-gray arrows point from left to right. Each arrow contains a dark teal circle with white text organized around the guiding questions why, who, and how.

The first circle is labeled “The ‘WHY’” and explains why media and technology matter. They shape communication, social life, institutions, access, inequality, connection, and conflict.

The second circle is labeled “The ‘WHO’” and identifies who is affected. This includes students and workers, families and activists, governments, corporations, marginalized communities, and populations around the world.

The third circle is labeled “The ‘HOW’” and explains how sociologists study media and technology. They use concepts, theory, and evidence to examine who creates and controls technologies, who benefits or is excluded, and how technologies change social relationships.

Overall, the diagram presents media and technology as social systems that organize communication and connection while also shaping power, access, inequality, conflict, and broader processes of social change.

Figure 7.1.1: Social Media and Group Dynamics

An infographic titled “Celebrity Social Media and Group Dynamics” places a celebrity social media account at the center of a network. The central image shows a smartphone displaying a verified celebrity profile. Colored arrows connect the account to seven surrounding groups and institutions: fans, fan communities, platform algorithms, media outlets, advertisers, critics, and trolls. Labels on the arrows identify the kinds of exchanges circulating through the network.

At the upper left, fans interact with the celebrity account through likes and comments. Fans also develop emotional attachment and connect with platform algorithms. Arrows between fans and fan communities represent community formation and amplified discussion.

At the upper right, fan communities receive celebrity posts and circulate discussion among members. They also connect with media outlets, helping amplify stories and public attention.

On the left, platform algorithms receive and distribute posts. A label explains that algorithms amplify visibility and engagement, shaping which content reaches audiences. Dashed arrows also connect algorithms with fans and trolls, indicating that platform systems can intensify both participation and conflict.

At the lower left, trolls direct harassment toward the celebrity account. Their activity is connected to platform algorithms and to advertisers through dashed network pathways.

At the bottom center, advertisers exchange money for audience attention and monetization. Their position illustrates how celebrity visibility and engagement are converted into commercial value.

At the lower right, critics respond through comments and connect with advertisers, media outlets, and fan communities. These relationships show how criticism can circulate through multiple parts of the network.

On the right, media outlets receive celebrity posts and generate news stories, which can flow back toward the celebrity account and outward to audiences and communities.

A summary statement at the bottom explains the main idea: celebrity social media can produce connection, community, publicity, and profit, but it can also generate conflict, surveillance, and harassment through networked group dynamics.

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8: STRATIFICATION, WORK, AND GLOBAL INEQUALITY

Introduction

Social inequality is produced through social structures, economic institutions, and historical processes that shape who has access to wealth, power, security, and opportunity. In every society, people are positioned differently in relation to resources and rewards, and those differences influence nearly every aspect of life, from housing and education to health, work, and political voice. Sociology helps us see that inequality is not simply the result of individual effort or personal choices, but is deeply connected to broader systems of stratification that organize social life.

Work and the economy are central to this process. The kinds of jobs people do, the wages they earn, the protections they receive, and the conditions under which they labor all help explain how inequality is reproduced both within and across societies. At the same time, globalization has linked local lives to transnational flows of labor, capital, goods, and power. This chapter examines how stratification operates in the United States, how work and economic systems shape life chances, and how global inequality emerges from long-standing patterns of uneven development. By connecting these themes, the chapter invites students to see inequality as a social relationship rather than an individual outcome.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students should be able to:

- Define social stratification and related concepts such as class, status, power, and life chances.
- Describe how work and economic systems contribute to the production and reproduction of inequality.
- Compare patterns of inequality within the United States and across the global system.
- Analyze how historical processes, institutions, and globalization shape unequal outcomes.
- Evaluate sociological explanations of stratification, labor, and global inequality using major theoretical perspectives.



Figure 8.1: Stratification, work, and global inequality show how power and opportunity shape life chances across the world. (Marx Gomez-Liendo via ChatGPT). Access an alternative description for Figure 8.1.

Why, Who, and How

Inequality shapes the opportunities people have, the risks they face, and the futures they can imagine. It affects where people live, what kind of work they do, how secure their lives are, and how much voice they have in society. The chapter approaches these

issues sociologically by examining the structures, institutions, and historical forces that organize inequality. It is about the people and groups whose lives are shaped by these systems: workers, families, migrants, employers, policymakers, and communities in both wealthy and poor regions of the world. By studying stratification, labor, and global inequality together, students can better understand how personal experiences are linked to broader patterns of power and social organization.

8.1: Case Study and Vignette
8.2: Understanding Stratification
8.3: Stratification in the United States
8.4: Work, labor, and the economy
8.5: Globalization and the restructuring of work
8.6: Global inequality
8.7: Theoretical Perspectives
8.8: Key Terms
8.9: Short Answer
8.10: Further Research
8.11: References
8.12: Accessible Text Descriptions

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8.1: Case Study and Vignette

Threads of Opportunity

Social inequality is often described as if it were simply the outcome of talent, effort, or personal choice. Sociology asks us to look more closely. People move through society with very different starting points, and their chances are shaped by family background, access to education, labor-market conditions, and the broader economic systems in which they live. Work is not just an individual activity; it is part of a larger social institution through which resources are produced, exchanged, and distributed. At the same time, those local realities are tied to global processes that connect consumers, workers, firms, and governments across national borders.

This chapter brings those questions together. It examines how stratification operates within the United States, how work and the economy shape life chances, and how global inequality is reproduced through uneven development, labor exploitation, and unequal access to wealth and opportunity. Read the following vignette as an invitation to think sociologically about the links among class position, educational mobility, employment, and the global circulation of goods.

Elena's Story

Elena is the first person in her family to attend college. She works part-time at a large retail store while taking classes at a community college, hoping that education will open doors that were not available to her parents. Her mother cleans offices at night, her stepfather drives for a delivery app when he can get enough hours, and together they piece together rent, groceries, and tuition payments one month at a time. Elena has been told since childhood that hard work leads to success, but she is beginning to notice that effort alone does not level the playing field. Some of her classmates do not need jobs, do not worry about rent, and do not hesitate to imagine themselves transferring to a four-year university.

At work, Elena helps unload boxes of low-cost clothing shipped from overseas. She notices how quickly styles change and how cheaply the items sell. During a sociology class discussion, she learns more about the workers who often make these goods in factories far from where they are purchased. She begins to wonder: Who made these clothes? Under what conditions? Why are some workers paid so little that refusing unsafe work is almost impossible? The products she stocks on store shelves suddenly seem connected to larger systems of labor, trade, and inequality that extend well beyond her town. These global connections feel even more personal when she realizes that the low prices attracting customers may depend on wages and conditions that keep other workers vulnerable.

Elena also sees how economic change affects places closer to home. Her uncle once held a stable manufacturing job that offered benefits and a predictable schedule, but the plant downsized years ago. Since then, he has moved between temporary jobs, contract work, and long stretches of unemployment. Family conversations often return to the same questions: Why do some communities lose secure jobs while corporate profits rise? Why do wages stagnate even as living costs increase? Why do some forms of work seem valued more than others? Elena starts to understand that her family's struggles are not just private troubles. They are linked to broader structures of stratification, shifting labor markets, and a global economy that distributes risks and rewards unevenly.

As the quarter continues, Elena sees that class position, educational opportunity, job security, and global production are all part of the same sociological story. Her own hopes for mobility are real, but they unfold within systems that shape who gets ahead, who remains precarious, and whose labor makes prosperity possible for others.



Figure 8.1.1: Family background, education, employment, income, consumption, global supply chains, and overseas labor conditions can produce and are shaped by global inequality. (Marx Gomez-Liendo via ChatGPT). Access alternative description for Figure 8.1.1.

Some Guiding Questions

Elena's story illustrates why these topics belong together in a single chapter. Her educational path raises questions about mobility and the unequal distribution of opportunity. Her family's work experiences point to the economy as a social institution structured by specialization, dependence, and power. The clothing she sells connects local consumption to transnational production networks in which the rewards of globalization are distributed unevenly. What looks like a personal story is also a story about class, labor, and the global organization of inequality.

As you read the rest of the chapter, consider several questions: Why do some people and communities have more resources, stability, and mobility than others? How do labor markets and economic institutions create advantages for some while increasing insecurity for others? What responsibilities do corporations, governments, and consumers have in a world where the goods people buy are often produced under very unequal conditions? These questions will help frame the chapter's larger argument: inequality is not accidental or natural, but socially organized through systems of stratification, work, and global economic relations.

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8.2: Understanding Stratification

Defining the Concept

Sociologists use the term social stratification to describe the system of social standing. Social stratification refers to a society's categorization of its people into rankings based on factors like wealth, income, education, family background, and power.

Geologists also use the word "stratification" to describe the distinct vertical layers found in rock. Typically, society's layers, made of people, represent the uneven distribution of society's resources. Society views the people with more resources as the top layer of the social structure of stratification. Other groups of people, with fewer and fewer resources, represent the lower layers. An individual's place within this stratification is called socioeconomic status (SES).



Figure 8.2.1: Strata in rock illustrate social stratification. People are sorted, or layered, into social categories. Many factors determine a person's social standing, such as wealth, income, education, family background, and power. (Tyrrell Museum Badlands by Ymblanter via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0)

Most people and institutions in the United States indicate that they value equality, a belief that everyone has an equal chance at success. In other words, hard work and talent—not inherited wealth, prejudicial treatment, institutional racism, or societal values—determine social mobility. This emphasis on choice, motivation, and self-effort perpetuates the American belief that people control their own social standing.

However, sociologists recognize social stratification as a society-wide system that makes inequalities apparent. While inequalities exist between individuals, sociologists are interested in larger social patterns. Sociologists look to see if individuals with similar backgrounds, group memberships, identities, and location in the country share the same social stratification. No individual, rich or poor, can be blamed for social inequalities, but instead all participate in a system where some rise and others fall. Most Americans believe the rising and falling is based on individual choices. But sociologists see how the structure of society affects a person's social standing and therefore is created and supported by society.

Factors that define stratification vary in different societies. In most societies, stratification is an economic system, based on wealth, the net value of money and assets a person has, and income, a person's wages or investment dividends. While people are regularly categorized based on how rich or poor they are, other important factors influence social standing. For example, in some cultures, prestige is valued, and people who have them are revered more than those who don't. In some cultures, the elderly are esteemed, while in others, the elderly are disparaged or overlooked. Societies' cultural beliefs often reinforce stratification.

One key determinant of social standing is our parents. Parents tend to pass their social position on to their children. People inherit not only social standing but also the cultural norms, values, and beliefs that accompany a certain lifestyle. They share these

with a network of friends and family members that provide resources and support. This is one of the reasons first-generation college students do not fare as well as other students. They lack access to the resources and support commonly provided to those whose parents have gone to college.

Other determinants are found in a society's occupational structure. Teachers, for example, often have high levels of education but receive relatively low pay. Many believe that teaching is a noble profession, so teachers should do their jobs for love of their profession and the good of their students—not for money. Yet, the same attitude is not applied to professional athletes, executives, or those working in corporate world. Cultural attitudes and beliefs like these support and perpetuate social and economic inequalities.

Systems of Stratification

Sociologists distinguish between two types of systems of stratification. Closed systems accommodate little change in social position. They do not allow people to shift levels and do not permit social relationships between levels. Closed systems include estate, slavery, and caste systems. Open systems are based on achievement and allow for movement and interaction between layers and classes. How different systems operate reflect, emphasize, and foster specific cultural values, shaping individual beliefs. In this section, we'll review class and caste stratification systems, plus discuss the ideal system of meritocracy.

The Caste System

Caste systems are closed stratification systems where people can do little or nothing to change the social standing of their birth. The caste system determines all aspects of an individual's life: occupations, marriage partners, and housing. Individual talents, interests, or potential do not provide opportunities to improve a person's social position.

In the Hindu caste tradition, people expect to work in an occupation and to enter into a marriage based on their caste. Accepting this social standing is considered a moral duty and people are socialized to accept their social standing. Cultural values reinforced the system. Caste systems promote beliefs in fate, destiny, and the will of a higher power, rather than promoting individual freedom as a value. This belief system is an ideology. Every culture has an ideology that supports its system of stratification.

The caste system in India has been officially dismantled, but is still deeply embedded in Indian society, particularly in rural areas. In India's larger cities, people now have more opportunities to choose their own career paths and marriage partners. As a global center of employment, corporations have introduced merit-based hiring and employment to the nation shifting the cultural expectations of the caste system.

The Class System

A class system is based on both social factors and individual achievement. A class consists of a set of people who share similar status based on factors like wealth, income, education, family background, and occupation. Unlike caste systems, class systems are open. People may move to a different level (vertical movement) of education or employment status than their parents. Though family and other societal models help guide a person toward a career, personal choice and opportunity play a role.

They can also socialize with and marry members of other classes. People have the option to form an exogamous marriage, a union of spouses from different social categories. Exogamous marriages often focus on values such as love and compatibility. Though social conformities still exist that encourage people to choose partners within their own class, called an endogamous marriage, people are not as pressured to choose marriage partners based solely on their social location.

Meritocracy

Meritocracy is a hypothetical system in which social stratification is determined by personal effort and merit. The concept of meritocracy is an ideal because no society has ever existed where social standing was based entirely on merit. Rather, multiple factors influence social standing, including processes like socialization and the realities of inequality within economic systems. While a meritocracy has never existed, sociologists see aspects of meritocracies in modern societies when they study the role of academic and job performance and the systems in place for evaluating and rewarding achievement in these areas.

The differences between an open and closed system are explored further in the example below.

Status Consistency

Sociologists use the term status consistency to describe the consistency, or lack thereof, of an individual's rank across the factors that determine social stratification within a lifetime. Caste systems correlate with high status consistency, due to the inability to move out of a class, whereas the more flexible class system demonstrates lower status consistency.

To illustrate, let's consider Serena. Serena earned her high school diploma but did not go to college. Completing high school but not college is a trait more common to the lower-middle class. After high school, she began landscaping, which, as manual labor, tracks with lower-middle class or even lower class. However, over time, Serena started her own company. She hired employees. She won larger contracts. Serena became a business owner and earned more money. Those traits represent the upper-middle class. Inconsistencies between Serena's educational level, her occupation, and income show Serena's flexibility in her social status, giving her low status consistency. In a class system, hard work, new opportunities, coupled with a lower education status still allow a person movement into middle or upper class, whereas in a caste system, that would not be possible. In a class system, low status consistency correlates with having more choices and opportunities.

Social Policy and Debate: Leaving Royalty Behind



Figure 8.2.2: Prince Harry and Meghan Markle with other members of the Royal family, in 2017. One year later, the couple would wed, and the American-born actress and fashion designer would immediately become Her Royal Highness The Duchess of Sussex, a position and title that bestows significant benefits of social class (Harry and Meghan by Mark Jones via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY 4.0).

Meghan Markle, who married a member of the British royal family, for years endured unceasing negative media attention, invasion of privacy, and racially abusive comments. She and her husband–Prince Harry, grandson to Queen Elizabeth–undertook a series of legal actions to push back against overly aggressive media outlets. But because of the continued harassment and disagreements with others in the royal family, Meghan and Harry decided to step down from their royal obligations and begin a disassociation from the British monarchy. In doing so, they gave up honorary positions, titles, and financial support. For Meghan, who had been born in the U.S. and had earned her wealth through a successful career, these changes may not be so jarring. Prince Harry, however, had been "His Royal Highness" since he was born; by nature of his ancestry he was entitled to vast sums of money, property, and cultural-political positions such as Honorary Air Commandant, Commodore-in-Chief, and President of the Queen's Commonwealth Trust. Harry would also lose the military rank he had earned through almost ten years of military service, including two combat deployments to Afghanistan. Would Megxit work for him? What gave him those honors in the first place?

Britain's monarchy arose during the Middle Ages. Its social hierarchy placed royalty at the top and commoners on the bottom. This was generally a closed system, with people born into positions of nobility. Wealth was passed from generation to generation through primogeniture, a law stating that all property would be inherited by the firstborn son. If the family had no son, the land went to the next closest male relation. Women could not inherit property, and their social standing was primarily determined through marriage.

The arrival of the Industrial Revolution changed Britain's social structure. Commoners moved to cities, got jobs, and made better livings. Gradually, people found new opportunities to increase their wealth and power. Today, the government is a constitutional monarchy with the prime minister and other ministers elected to their positions, and with the royal family's role being largely ceremonial. The long-ago differences between nobility and commoners have blurred, and the modern class system in Britain is similar to that of the United States (McKee 1996).

Today, the royal family still commands wealth, power, and a great deal of attention. When Queen Elizabeth II retires or passes away, Prince Charles will be first in line to ascend the throne. If he abdicates (chooses not to become king) or dies, the position will go to Prince William, Prince Harry's older brother.

Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, meanwhile, moved to Los Angeles and signed a voiceover deal with Disney while also joining Netflix in a series production. They founded an organization focusing on non-profit activities and media ventures. Living in LA and working to some extent in entertainment, they will likely be considered a different type of royalty.

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8.3: Stratification in the United States

Social Classes

For sociologists, categorizing social class is a fluid science. Sociologists generally identify three levels of class in the United States: upper, middle, and lower class. Within each class, there are many subcategories. Wealth is the most significant way of distinguishing classes, because wealth can be transferred to one's children and perpetuate the class structure. One economist, J.D. Foster, defines the 20 percent of U.S. citizens' highest earners as "upper income," and the lower 20 percent as "lower income." The remaining 60 percent of the population make up the middle class (Mason 2010). With that distinction, economists can describe the range in annual household incomes for the middle-class, but they cannot show how the range of all incomes vary and how they change over time. For this reason, the Pew Center defines classes based on the median household income. The lower class includes those whose income is two-thirds of the national median, the middle class includes those whose income falls between two-thirds and twice the median, and the upper class includes those whose income is above twice the national median (Kochhar 2015). Though median income levels vary from state to state, at the national level you would be considered in the middle-class if you earned between $48,500 to $145,500 in 2018 U.S. dollars (Bennett 2000).

One sociological perspective distinguishes the classes, in part, according to their relative power and control over their lives. Members of the upper class not only have power and control over their own lives, but their social status gives them power and control over others' lives. The middle class doesn't generally control other strata of society, but its members do exert control over their own lives. In contrast, the lower class has little control over their work or lives. Below, we will explore the major divisions of U.S. social class and their key subcategories.



Figure 8.3.1: Does taste or fashion sense indicate class? Is there any way to tell if these people come from an upper-, middle-, or lower-class background? (Troy Ramone and Bunny by THOR via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY 4.0)

Upper Class

The upper class is considered the top, and only the powerful elite get to see the view from there. In the United States, people with extreme wealth make up one percent of the population, and they own roughly one-third of the country's wealth (Beeghley 2008).

Money provides not just access to material goods, but also access to a lot of power. As corporate leaders, members of the upper class make decisions that affect the job status of millions of people. As media owners, they influence the collective identity of the nation. They run the major network television stations, radio broadcasts, newspapers, magazines, publishing houses, and sports franchises. As board members of the most influential colleges and universities, they influence cultural attitudes and values. As philanthropists, they establish foundations to support social causes they believe in. As campaign contributors and legislation

drivers, they fund political campaigns to sway policymakers, sometimes to protect their own economic interests and at other times to support or promote a cause. (The methods, effectiveness, and impact of these political efforts are discussed in the Politics and Government chapter.)

U.S. society has historically distinguished between “old money” (inherited wealth passed from one generation to the next) and “new money” (wealth you have earned and built yourself). While both types may have equal net worth, they have traditionally held different social standings. People of old money, firmly situated in the upper class for generations, have held high prestige. Their families have socialized them to know the customs, norms, and expectations that come with wealth. Often, the very wealthy don’t work for wages. Some study business or become lawyers in order to manage the family fortune. Others, such as Paris Hilton and Kim Kardashian, capitalize on being a rich socialite and transform that into celebrity status, flaunting a wealthy lifestyle.

However, new-money members of the upper class are not oriented to the customs and mores of the elite. They haven’t gone to the most exclusive schools. They have not established old-money social ties. People with new money might flaunt their wealth, buying sports cars and mansions, but they might still exhibit behaviors attributed to the middle and lower classes.

The Middle Class

Many people consider themselves middle class, but there are differing ideas about what that means. People with annual incomes of $150,000 call themselves middle class, as do people who annually earn $30,000. That helps explain why, in the United States, the middle class is broken into upper and lower subcategories.

Lower-middle class members tend to complete a two-year associate’s degrees from community or technical colleges or a four-year bachelor’s degree. Upper-middle class people tend to continue on to postgraduate degrees. They’ve studied subjects such as business, management, law, or medicine.

Middle-class people work hard and live fairly comfortable lives. Upper-middle-class people tend to pursue careers, own their homes, and travel on vacation. Their children receive high-quality education and healthcare (Gilbert 2010). Parents can support more specialized needs and interests of their children, such as more extensive tutoring, arts lessons, and athletic efforts, which can lead to more social mobility for the next generation. Families within the middle class may have access to some wealth, but also must work for an income to maintain this lifestyle.

In the lower middle class, people hold jobs supervised by members of the upper middle class. They fill technical, lower- level management or administrative support positions. Compared to lower-class work, lower-middle-class jobs carry more prestige and come with slightly higher paychecks. With these incomes, people can afford a decent, mainstream lifestyle, but they struggle to maintain it. They generally don’t have enough income to build significant savings. In addition, their grip on class status is more precarious than those in the upper tiers of the class system. When companies need to save money, lower-middle class people are often the ones to lose their jobs.

The Lower Class

The lower class is also referred to as the working class. Just like the middle and upper classes, the lower class can be divided into subsets: the working class, the working poor, and the underclass. Compared to the lower middle class, people from the lower economic class have less formal education and earn smaller incomes. They work jobs that require less training or experience than middle-class occupations and often do routine tasks under close supervision.

Working-class people, the highest subcategory of the lower class, often land steady jobs. The work is hands-on and often physically demanding, such as landscaping, cooking, cleaning, or building.

Beneath the working class is the working poor. They have unskilled, low-paying employment. However, their jobs rarely offer benefits such as healthcare or retirement planning, and their positions are often seasonal or temporary. They work as migrant farm workers, housecleaners, and day laborers. Education is limited. Some lack a high school diploma.



Figure 8.3.2: Bike messengers and bike delivery people are often considered members of the working class. They endure difficult and dangerous conditions to do their work, and they are not always well represented by government agencies and in regulations designed for safety or fairness. (Cyclist in the storm by Enzo Abramo via Public Domain Pictures is licensed under CC0 1.0)

How can people work full-time and still be poor? Even working full-time, millions of the working poor earn incomes too meager to support a family. The government requires employers pay a minimum wage that varies from state to state, and often leave individuals and families below the poverty line. In addition to low wages, the value of the wage has not kept pace with inflation. “The real value of the federal minimum wage has dropped 17% since 2009 and 31% since 1968 (Cooper, Gould, & Zipperer, 2019). Furthermore, the living wage, the amount necessary to meet minimum standards, differs across the country because the cost of living differs. Therefore, the amount of income necessary to survive in an area such as New York City differs dramatically from small town in Oklahoma (Glasmeier, 2020).

The underclass is the United States’ lowest tier. The term itself and its classification of people have been questioned, and some prominent sociologists (including a former president of the American Sociological Association), believe its use is either overgeneralizing or incorrect (Gans 1991). But many economists, sociologists government agencies, and advocacy groups recognize the growth of the underclass. Members of the underclass live mainly in inner cities. Many are unemployed or underemployed. Those who do hold jobs typically perform menial tasks for little pay. Some of the underclass are homeless. Many rely on welfare systems to provide food, medical care, and housing assistance, which often does not cover all their basic needs. The underclass have more stress, poorer health, and suffer crises fairly regularly.

Class Traits

Does a person’s appearance indicate class? Can you tell a person’s education level based on their clothing? Do you know a person’s income by the car they drive? Class traits, also called class markers, are the typical behaviors, customs, and norms that define each class. Class traits indicate the level of exposure a person has to a wide range of cultures. Class traits also indicate the amount of resources a person has to spend on items like hobbies, vacations, and leisure activities.

People may associate the upper class with enjoyment of costly, refined, or highly cultivated tastes—expensive clothing, luxury cars, high-end fund-raisers, and frequent or expensive vacations. People may also believe that the middle and lower classes are more likely to enjoy camping, fishing, or hunting, shopping at large retailers, and participating in community activities. While these descriptions may identify class traits, they are stereotypes. Moreover, just as class distinctions have blurred in recent decades, so too have class traits. A factory worker could be a skilled French cook. A billionaire might dress in ripped jeans, and a low-income student might own designer shoes.

For famous wealthy people, making choices that do not seem to align with their economic status can often lead to public commentary. Jennifer Lopez being spotted in a dress that cost less than $30 and Zac Efron shopping at thrift stores have made the news. Others, like Halle Berry and Keanu Reeves, are known for frequent use of public transportation and relatively modest living (at least when considering to their net worth). When questioned, most point to nothing more than practicality. Lady Gaga tweeted " why do people look at me like I'm crazy when i use coupons at grocery or try bargaining at retail..." (2012). And in dense,

crowded cities such as Washington, Chicago, and New York, riding the trains is often faster and easier than taking a car.

Social Mobility

People are often inspired and amazed at people's ability to overcome extremely difficult upbringings. Mariano Rivera, acknowledged to be the best relief pitcher in history, made a baseball glove out of cardboard and tape because his family could not afford a real one. Alice Coachman grew up with few resources and was denied access to training facilities because of her race; she ran barefoot and built her own high jump equipment before becoming the first Black athlete (and one of the first American track and field athletes) to win an Olympic Gold. Pelé, perhaps the most transformative figure in soccer, learned the game while using a rag-stuffed sock for a ball. These are some of the stories told in documentaries or biographies meant to inspire and share the challenges of unequal upbringings. Relative to the overall population, the number of people who rise from poverty to become very successful is small, and the number that become wealthy is even smaller. Systemic barriers like unequal education, discrimination, and lack of opportunity can slow or diminish one's ability to move up. Still, people who earn a college degree, get a job promotion, or marry someone with a good income may move up socially.

Social mobility refers to the ability of individuals to change positions within a social stratification system. When people improve or diminish their economic status in a way that affects social class, they experience social mobility. Individuals can experience upward or downward social mobility for a variety of reasons. Upward mobility refers to an increase—or upward shift—when they move from a lower to a higher socioeconomical class. In contrast, individuals experience downward mobility when they move from higher socioeconomic class to a lower one. Some people move downward because of business setbacks, unemployment, or illness. Dropping out of school, losing a job, or getting a divorce may result in a loss of income or status and, therefore, downward social mobility.

It is not uncommon for different generations of a family to belong to varying social classes. This is known as intergenerational mobility. For example, an upper-class executive may have parents who belonged to the middle class. In turn, those parents may have been raised in the lower class. Patterns of intergenerational mobility can reflect long-term societal changes.

On the other hand, intragenerational mobility refers to changes in a person's social mobility over the course of their lifetime. For example, the wealth and prestige experienced by one person may be quite different from that of their siblings.

Structural mobility happens when societal changes enable a whole group of people to move up or down the social class ladder. Structural mobility is attributable to changes in society as a whole. In the first half of the twentieth century, industrialization expanded the U.S. economy, raising the standard of living and leading to upward structural mobility for almost everyone. In the decade and a half of the twenty-first century, recessions and the outsourcing of jobs overseas have contributed to the withdrawal of Americans from the workforce (BLS 2021). Many people experienced economic setbacks, creating a wave of downward structural mobility.

When analyzing the trends and movements in social mobility, sociologists consider all modes of mobility. Scholars recognize that mobility is not as common or easy to achieve as many people think.

Stratification of Socioeconomic Classes

In the last century, the United States has seen a steady rise in its standard of living, the level of wealth available to acquire the material necessities and comforts to maintain a specific lifestyle. The country's standard of living is based on factors such as income, employment, class, literacy rates, mortality rates, poverty rates, and housing affordability. A country with a high standard of living will often reflect a high quality of life, which in the United States means residents can afford a home, own a car, and take vacations. Ultimately, standard of living is shaped by the wealth and distribution of wealth in a country and the expectations its citizens have for their lifestyle.

Wealth is not evenly distributed in most countries. In the United States, a small portion of the population has the means to the highest standard of living. The wealthiest one percent of the population holds one-third of our nation's wealth while the bottom 50 percent of Americans hold only 2 percent. Those in-between, the top 50 to 90 percent hold almost two-thirds of the nation's wealth (The Federal Reserve, 2021).

Many people think of the United States as a "middle-class society." They think a few people are rich, a few are poor, and most are fairly well off, existing in the middle of the social strata. Rising from lower classes into the middle-class is to achieve the American Dream. For this reason, scholars are particularly worried by the shrinking of the middle class. Although the middle class is still

significantly larger than the lower and upper classes, it shrank from 69 percent in 1971 to 51 percent in 2020. Arguably the most significant threat to the U.S.'s relatively high standard of living is the decline of the middle class. The wealth of the middle class has also been declining in recent decades. Its share of the wealth fell from 32 percent in 1983 to 16 percent in 2016 (Horowitz, Igielnik, & Kochhar 2020).

People with wealth often receive the most and best schooling, access better health care, and consume the most goods and services. In addition, wealthy people also wield decision-making power over their daily life because money gives them access to better resources. By contrasts, many lower-income individuals receive less education and inadequate health care and have less influence over the circumstances of their everyday lives.

Additionally, tens of millions of women and men struggle to pay rent, buy food, find work, and afford basic medical care. Women who are single heads of household tend to have a lower income and lower standard of living than their married or single male counterparts. This is a worldwide phenomenon known as the "feminization of poverty"—which acknowledges that women disproportionately make up the majority of individuals in poverty across the globe and have a lower standard of living. In the United States, women make up approximately 56 percent of Americans living in poverty. One reason for this difference is the struggle of single mothers to provide for their children. One in four unmarried mothers lives in poverty (Bleiweis, 2020). The wage gap, discussed extensively in the Work and the Economy chapter, also contributes to the gender-disparity in poverty.

In the United States, poverty is most often referred to as a relative rather than absolute measurement. Absolute poverty is an economic condition in which a family or individual cannot afford basic necessities, such as food and shelter, so that day-to-day survival is in jeopardy. Relative poverty is an economic condition in which a family or individuals have 50% income less than the average median income. This income is sometimes called the poverty level or the poverty line. In 2021, for example, the poverty for a single individual was set at $12,880 for one individual, $17,420 for a couple, and $26,500 for a family of four (ASPE 2021).

As a wealthy developed country, the United States invests in resources to provide the basic necessities to those in need through a series of federal and state social welfare programs. These programs provide food, medical, and cash assistance. Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) provides cash assistance. The goal of TANF is to help families with children achieve economic self-sufficiency. Adults who receive assistance must fall under a specific income level, usually half the poverty level, set by the state. TANF funding goes to childcare, support for parents who are working or training a required number of hours a week, and other services. TANF is time-limited. Most states only provide assistance for a maximum of 5 years (CBPP).

One of the best-known programs is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), administered by the United States Department of Agriculture and formerly known as the Food Stamp Program. This program began in the Great Depression, when unmarketable or surplus food was distributed to the hungry. It was not formalized until 1961, when President John F. Kennedy initiated a food stamp pilot program. His successor Lyndon B. Johnson was instrumental in the passage of the Food Stamp Act in 1964. In 1965, more than 500,000 individuals received food assistance. During the height of the pandemic in 2020, participation reached 43 million people.

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8.4: Work, labor, and the economy

Overview

In sociology, economy refers to the social institution through which a society's resources are exchanged and managed. The earliest economies were based on trade, which is often a simple exchange in which people traded one item for another. While today's economic activities are more complex than those early trades, the underlying goals remain the same: exchanging goods and services allows individuals to meet their needs and wants. In 1893, Émile Durkheim described what he called "mechanical" and "organic" solidarity that correlates to a society's economy. Mechanical solidarity exists in simpler societies where social cohesion comes from sharing similar work, education, and religion. Organic solidarity arises out of the mutual interdependence created by the specialization of work. The complex U.S. economy, and the economies of other industrialized nations, meet the definition of organic solidarity. Most individuals perform a specialized task to earn money they use to trade for goods and services provided by others who perform different specialized tasks. In a simplified example, an elementary school teacher relies on farmers for food, doctors for healthcare, carpenters to build shelter, and so on. The farmers, doctors, and carpenters all rely on the teacher to educate their children. They are all dependent on each other and their work.

Economy is one of human society's earliest social structures. Our earliest forms of writing (such as Sumerian clay tablets) were developed to record transactions, payments, and debts between merchants. As societies grow and change, so do their economies. The economy of a small farming community is very different from the economy of a large nation with advanced technology. In this chapter, we will examine different types of economic systems and how they have functioned in various societies.

Detroit, once the roaring headquarters of the country's large and profitable automotive industry, had already been in a population decline for several decades as auto manufacturing jobs were being outsourced to other countries and foreign car brands began to take increasing portions of U.S. market share. According to State of Michigan population data (State of Michigan, n.d.), Detroit was home to approximately 1.85 million residents in 1950, which dwindled to slightly more than 700,000 in 2010 following the economic crash. The drastic reduction took its toll on the city. It is estimated that a third of the buildings in Detroit have been abandoned. The current average home price hovers around $7,000, while homes nationwide sell on average for around $200,000. The city has filed for bankruptcy, and its unemployment rate hovers around 30 percent.

The Wage Gap in the United States

The Equal Pay Act, passed by the U.S. Congress in 1963, was designed to reduce the wage gap between men and women. The act in essence required employers to pay equal wages to men and women who were performing substantially similar jobs. However, more than fifty years later, women continue to make less money than their male counterparts. According to a report released by the White House in 2013, full-time working women made just 77 cents for every dollar a man made (National Equal Pay Taskforce 2013). Seven years later, the gap had only closed by four cents, with women making 81 cents for every dollar a man makes (Payscale 2020).

A part of the White House report read, "This significant gap is more than a statistic—it has real-life consequences. When women, who make up nearly half the workforce, bring home less money each day, it means they have less for the everyday needs of their families, and over a lifetime of work, far less savings for retirement."

As shocking as it is, the gap actually widens when we add race and ethnicity to the picture. For example, African American women make on average 64 cents for every dollar a White male makes. Latina women make 56 cents, or 44 percent less, for every dollar a White man makes. African American and Latino men also make notably less than White men. Asian Americans tend to be the only minority that earns as much as or more than White men.

Certain professions have their own differences in wage gaps, even those whose participants have higher levels of education and supposedly a more merit-based method of promotion and credit. For example, U.S. and Canadian scientists have a significant wage gap that begins as soon as people enter the workforce. For example, of the PhD recipients that have jobs lined up after earning their degree, men reported an initial salary average of $92,000 per year, while women's was only $72,500. Men with permanent jobs in the life sciences reported an expected median salary of $87,000, compared with $80,000 for women. In mathematics and computer sciences, men reported an expected median salary of $125,000; for women, that figure was $101,500 (Woolston 2021).

Recent Economic Conditions

In 2015, the United States continued its recovery from the “Great Recession,” arguably the worst economic downturn since the stock market collapse in 1929 and the Great Depression that ensued.

The 2008 recession was brought on by aggressive lending, extremely risky behavior by investment firms, and lax oversight by the government. During this time, banks provided mortgages to people with poor credit histories, sometimes with deceptively low introductory interest rates. When the rates rose, borrowers' mortgage payments increased to the point where they couldn't make payments. At the same time, investment firms had purchased these risky mortgages in the form of large bundled investments worth billions of dollars each (mortgage-backed securities or MBS). Rating agencies were supposed to rate mortgage securities according to their level of risk, but they typically rated all MBS as high-quality no matter what types of mortgages they contained. When the mortgages defaulted, the investment firms' holdings went down. The massive rate of loan defaults put a strain on the financial institutions that had made the loans as well as those that had purchased the MBS, and this stress rippled throughout the entire economy and around the globe.

With the entire financial system on the verge of permanent damage, the U.S. government bailed out many of these firms and provided support to other industries, such as airlines and automobile companies. But the Recession couldn't be stopped. The United States fell into a period of high and prolonged unemployment, extreme reductions in wealth (except at the very top), stagnant wages, and loss of value in personal property (houses and land).

Starting in 2009, however, employment began to tick back up as companies found their footing. By 2012, most of the country's employment rates were similar to the levels prior to the Great Recession. However, for most segments of the population, median income had not increased, and in fact it has receded in many cases. The size, income, and wealth of the middle class have been declining since the 1970s— effects that were perhaps hastened by the recession. Today, wealth is distributed inequitably at the top. Corporate profits have increased more than 141 percent, and CEO pay has risen by more than 298 percent.

Although wages had not increased, and certain parts of the economy, such as brick-and-mortar retail (department stores and similar chains) were doing poorly, the economy as a whole grew from the time after the Great Recession through 2020. Unemployment reached a historic low in late 2019. COVID-19 changed all that. As you may have experienced yourself, entire industries suffered incredible losses as they were forced to shut down or severely reduce operations. Some people were laid off from their jobs, while others had their hours or wages reduced. Unemployment skyrocketed again, reaching a new high of nearly 15 percent, only about six months after it had been at its record low. Industries as diverse as hospitality and mining reported massive decreases in employment, and part-time workers in particular were hard hit. By early 2021, the overall unemployment rate had returned to generally normal levels. The impact on those who had gone without work for so long, however, was significant (Congressional Research Service 2021).

Economic Systems

The dominant economic systems of the modern era are capitalism and socialism, and there have been many variations of each system across the globe. Countries have switched systems as their rulers and economic fortunes have changed. For example, Russia has been transitioning to a market-based economy since the fall of communism in that region of the world. Vietnam, where the economy was devastated by the Vietnam War, restructured to a state-run economy in response, and more recently has been moving toward a socialist-style market economy. In the past, other economic systems reflected the societies that formed them. Many of these earlier systems lasted centuries. These changes in economies raise many questions for sociologists. What are these older economic systems? How did they develop? Why did they fade away? What are the similarities and differences between older economic systems and modern ones?

Economics of Agricultural, Industrial, and Postindustrial Societies

Our earliest ancestors lived as hunter-gatherers. Small groups of extended families roamed from place to place looking for subsistence. They would settle in an area for a brief time when there were abundant resources. They hunted animals for their meat and gathered wild fruits, vegetables, and cereals. They ate what they caught or gathered their goods as soon as possible, because they had no way of preserving or transporting it. Once the resources of an area ran low, the group had to move on, and everything they owned had to travel with them. Food reserves only consisted of what they could carry. Many sociologists contend that hunter-gatherers did not have a true economy, because groups did not typically trade with other groups due to the scarcity of goods.

The Agricultural Revolution

The first true economies arrived when people started raising crops and domesticating animals. Although there is still a great deal of disagreement among archeologists as to the exact timeline, research indicates that agriculture began independently and at different times in several places around the world. The earliest agriculture was in the Fertile Crescent in the Middle East around 11,000–10,000 years ago. Next were the valleys of the Indus, Yangtze, and Yellow rivers in India and China, between 10,000 and 9,000 years ago. The people living in the highlands of New Guinea developed agriculture between 9,000 and 6,000 years ago, while people were farming in Sub-Saharan Africa between 5,000 and 4,000 years ago. Agriculture developed later in the western hemisphere, arising in what would become the eastern United States, central Mexico, and northern South America between 5,000 and 3,000 years ago (Diamond 2003).

Agriculture began with the simplest of technologies—for example, a pointed stick to break up the soil—but really took off when people harnessed animals to pull an even more efficient tool for the same task: a plow. With this new technology, one family could grow enough crops not only to feed themselves but also to feed others. Knowing there would be abundant food each year as long as crops were tended led people to abandon the nomadic life of hunter-gatherers and settle down to farm.

The improved efficiency in food production meant that not everyone had to toil all day in the fields. As agriculture grew, new jobs emerged, along with new technologies. Excess crops needed to be stored, processed, protected, and transported. Farming equipment and irrigation systems needed to be built and maintained. Wild animals needed to be domesticated and herds shepherded. Economies began to develop because people now had goods and services to trade. At the same time, farmers eventually came to labor for the ruling class.

As more people specialized in nonfarming jobs, villages grew into towns and then into cities. Urban areas created the need for administrators and public servants. Disputes over ownership, payments, debts, compensation for damages, and the like led to the need for laws and courts—and the judges, clerks, lawyers, and police who administered and enforced those laws.

At first, most goods and services were traded as gifts or through bartering between small social groups (Mauss 1922). Exchanging one form of goods or services for another was known as bartering. This system only works when one person happens to have something the other person needs at the same time. To solve this problem, people developed the idea of a means of exchange that could be used at any time: that is, money. Money refers to an object that a society agrees to assign a value to so it can be exchanged for payment. In early economies, money was often objects like cowry shells, rice, barley, or even rum. Precious metals quickly became the preferred means of exchange in many cultures because of their durability and portability. The first coins were minted in Lydia in what is now Turkey around 650–600 B.C.E. (Goldsborough 2010). Early legal codes established the value of money and the rates of exchange for various commodities. They also established the rules for inheritance, fines as penalties for crimes, and how property was to be divided and taxed (Horne 1915). A symbolic interactionist would note that bartering and money are systems of symbolic exchange. Monetary objects took on a symbolic meaning, one that carries into our modern-day use of cash, checks, and debit cards.

As city-states grew into countries and countries grew into empires, their economies grew as well. When large empires broke up, their economies broke up too. The governments of newly formed nations sought to protect and increase their markets. They financed voyages of discovery to find new markets and resources all over the world, which ushered in a rapid progression of economic development.

Colonies were established to secure these markets, and wars were financed to take over territory. These ventures were funded in part by raising capital from investors who were paid back from the goods obtained. Governments and private citizens also set up large trading companies that financed their enterprises around the world by selling stocks and bonds.

Governments tried to protect their share of the markets by developing a system called mercantilism. Mercantilism is an economic policy based on accumulating silver and gold by controlling colonial and foreign markets through taxes and other charges. The resulting restrictive practices and exacting demands included monopolies, bans on certain goods, high tariffs, and exclusivity requirements. Mercantilist governments also promoted manufacturing and, with the ability to fund technological improvements, they helped create the equipment that led to the Industrial Revolution.

The Industrial Revolution

Until the end of the eighteenth century, most manufacturing was done by manual labor. This changed as inventors devised machines to manufacture goods. A small number of innovations led to a large number of changes in the British economy. In the textile industries, the spinning of cotton, worsted yarn, and flax could be done more quickly and less expensively using new

machines with names like the Spinning Jenny and the Spinning Mule (Bond 2003). Another important innovation was made in the production of iron: Coke from coal could now be used in all stages of smelting rather than charcoal from wood, which dramatically lowered the cost of iron production while increasing availability (Bond 2003). James Watt ushered in what many scholars recognize as the greatest change, revolutionizing transportation and thereby the entire production of goods with his improved steam engine.

As people moved to cities to fill factory jobs, factory production also changed. Workers did their jobs in assembly lines and were trained to complete only one or two steps in the manufacturing process. These advances meant that more finished goods could be manufactured with more efficiency and speed than ever before.

The Industrial Revolution also changed agricultural practices. Until that time, many people practiced subsistence farming in which they produced only enough to feed themselves and pay their taxes. New technology introduced gasoline-powered farm tools such as tractors, seed drills, threshers, and combine harvesters. Farmers were encouraged to plant large fields of a single crop to maximize profits. With improved transportation and the invention of refrigeration, produce could be shipped safely all over the world.

The Industrial Revolution modernized the world. With growing resources came growing societies and economies. Between 1800 and 2000, the world's population grew sixfold, while per capita income saw a tenfold jump (Maddison 2003).

While many people's lives were improving, the Industrial Revolution also birthed many societal problems. There were inequalities in the system. Owners amassed vast fortunes while laborers, including young children, toiled for long hours in unsafe conditions. Workers' rights, wage protection, and safe work environments are issues that arose during this period and remain concerns today.

Postindustrial Societies and the Information Age

Postindustrial societies, also known as information societies, have evolved in modernized nations. One of the most valuable goods of the modern era is information. Those who have the means to produce, store, and disseminate information are leaders in this type of society.

One way scholars understand the development of different types of societies (like agricultural, industrial, and postindustrial) is by examining their economies in terms of four sectors: primary, secondary, tertiary, and quaternary. Each has a different focus. The primary sector extracts and produces raw materials (like metals and crops). The secondary sector turns those raw materials into finished goods. The tertiary sector provides services: child care, healthcare, and money management. Finally, the quaternary sector produces ideas; these include the research that leads to new technologies, the management of information, and a society's highest levels of education and the arts (Kenessey 1987).

In underdeveloped countries, the majority of the people work in the primary sector. As economies develop, more and more people are employed in the secondary sector. In well-developed economies, such as those in the United States, Japan, and Western Europe, the majority of the workforce is employed in service industries. In the United States, for example, almost 80 percent of the workforce is employed in the tertiary sector (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2011).

The rapid increase in computer use in all aspects of daily life is a main reason for the transition to an information economy. Fewer people are needed to work in factories because computerized robots now handle many of the tasks. Other manufacturing jobs have been outsourced to less-developed countries as a result of the developing global economy. The growth of the Internet has created industries that exist almost entirely online. Within industries, technology continues to change how goods are produced. For instance, the music and film industries used to produce physical products like CDs and DVDs for distribution. Now those goods are increasingly produced digitally and streamed or downloaded at a much lower physical manufacturing cost. Information and the means to use it creatively have become commodities in a postindustrial economy.

Capitalism

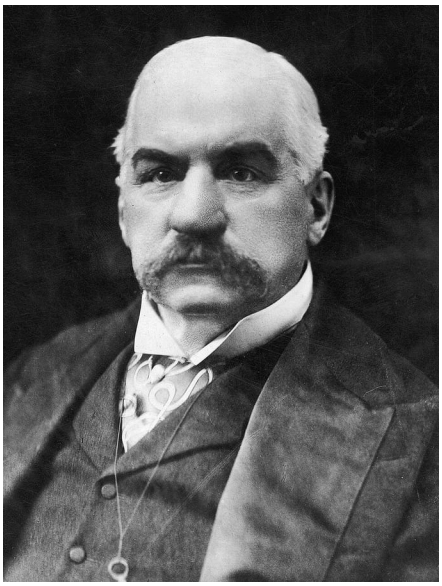


Figure 8.4.1: J. P. Morgan, American financier and banker whose influence over banking, railroads, and industrial consolidation made him a central figure in the growth of corporate capitalism in the United States. (J.P. Morgan by Unknown via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under PDM 1.0)

Scholars don't always agree on a single definition of capitalism. For our purposes, we will define capitalism as an economic system in which there is private ownership (as opposed to state ownership) and where there is an impetus to produce profit, and thereby wealth. This is the type of economy in place in the United States today. Under capitalism, people invest capital (money or property invested in a business venture) in a business to produce a product or service that can be sold in a market to consumers. The investors in the company are generally entitled to a share of any profit made on sales after the costs of production and distribution are taken out. These investors often reinvest their profits to improve and expand the business or acquire new ones. To illustrate how this works, consider this example. Sarah, Antonio, and Chris each invest $250,000 into a start-up company that offers an innovative baby product. When the company nets $1 million in profits its first year, a portion of that profit goes back to Sarah, Antonio, and Chris as a return on their investment. Sarah reinvests with the same company to fund the development of a second product line, Antonio uses his return to help another start-up in the technology sector, and Chris buys a small yacht for vacations.

To provide their product or service, owners hire workers to whom they pay wages. The cost of raw materials, the retail price they charge consumers, and the amount they pay in wages are determined through the law of supply and demand and by competition. When demand exceeds supply, prices tend to rise. When supply exceeds demand, prices tend to fall. When multiple businesses market similar products and services to the same buyers, there is competition. Competition can be good for consumers because it can lead to lower prices and higher quality as businesses try to get consumers to buy from them rather than from their competitors.

Wages tend to be set in a similar way. People who have talents, skills, education, or training that is in short supply and is needed by businesses tend to earn more than people without comparable skills. Competition in the workforce helps determine how much people will be paid. In times when many people are unemployed and jobs are scarce, people are often willing to accept less than they would when their services are in high demand. In this scenario, businesses are able to maintain or increase profits by not increasing workers' wages.

Capitalism in Practice

As capitalists began to dominate the economies of many countries during the Industrial Revolution, the rapid growth of businesses and their tremendous profitability gave some owners the capital they needed to create enormous corporations that could monopolize an entire industry. Many companies controlled all aspects of the production cycle for their industry, from the raw materials, to the production, to the stores in which they were sold. These companies were able to use their wealth to buy out or stifle any competition.

In the United States, the predatory tactics used by these large monopolies caused the government to take action. Starting in

the late 1800s, the government passed a series of laws that broke up monopolies and regulated how key industries—such as transportation, steel production, and oil and gas exploration and refining—could conduct business.

The United States is considered a capitalist country. However, the U.S. government has a great deal of influence on private companies through the laws it passes and the regulations enforced by government agencies. Through taxes, regulations on wages, guidelines to protect worker safety and the environment, plus financial rules for banks and investment firms, the government exerts a certain amount of control over how all companies do business. State and federal governments also own, operate, or control large parts of certain industries, such as the post office, schools, hospitals, highways and railroads, and many water, sewer, and power utilities. Debate over the extent to which the government should be involved in the economy remains an issue of contention today. Some criticize such involvements as socialism (a type of state-run economy), while others believe intervention is necessary to protect the rights of workers and the well-being of the general population.

Socialism



Figure 8.4.2: Vladimir Lenin, Russian revolutionary and political theorist who adapted Marxist ideas to revolutionary organization, class struggle, imperialism, and the establishment of a socialist state. (Lenin in 1920 by Unknown via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under PDM 1.0)

Socialism is an economic system in which there is government ownership (often referred to as “state run”) of goods and their production, with an impetus to share work and wealth equally among the members of a society. Under socialism, everything that people produce, including services, is considered a social product. Everyone who contributes to the production of a good or to providing a service is entitled to a share in any benefits that come from its sale or use. To make sure all members of society get their fair share, governments must be able to control property, production, and distribution.

The focus in socialism is on benefitting society, whereas capitalism seeks to benefit the individual. Socialists claim that a capitalistic economy leads to inequality, with unfair distribution of wealth and individuals who use their power at the expense of society. Socialism strives, ideally, to control the economy to avoid the problems inherent in capitalism.

Within socialism, there are diverging views on the extent to which the economy should be controlled. One extreme believes all but the most personal items are public property. Other socialists believe only essential services such as healthcare, education, and utilities (electrical power, telecommunications, and sewage) need direct control. Under this form of socialism, farms, small shops, and businesses can be privately owned but are subject to government regulation.

The other area on which socialists disagree is on what level society should exert its control. In communist countries like the former Soviet Union, China, Vietnam, and North Korea, the national government exerts control over the economy centrally. They had the power to tell all businesses what to produce, how much to produce, and what to charge for it. Other socialists believe control should be decentralized so it can be exerted by those most affected by the industries being controlled. An example of this would be a town collectively owning and managing the businesses on which its residents depend.

Because of challenges in their economies, several of these communist countries have moved from central planning to letting

market forces help determine many production and pricing decisions. Market socialism describes a subtype of socialism that adopts certain traits of capitalism, like allowing limited private ownership or consulting market demands. This could involve situations like profits generated by a company going directly to the employees of the company or being used as public funds (Gregory and Stuart 2003). Many Eastern European and some South American countries have mixed economies. Key industries are nationalized and directly controlled by the government; however, most businesses are privately owned and regulated by the government.

Organized socialism never became powerful in the United States. The success of labor unions and the government in securing workers' rights, joined with the high standard of living enjoyed by most of the workforce, made socialism less appealing than the controlled capitalism practiced here.

Socialism in Practice

As with capitalism, the basic ideas behind socialism go far back in history. Plato, in ancient Greece, suggested a republic in which people shared their material goods. Early Christian communities believed in common ownership, as did the systems of monasteries set up by various religious orders. Many of the leaders of the French Revolution called for the abolition of all private property, not just the estates of the aristocracy they had overthrown. Thomas More's *Utopia*, published in 1516, imagined a society with little private property and mandatory labor on a communal farm. A *utopia* has since come to mean an imagined place or situation in which everything is perfect. Most experimental utopian communities had the abolition of private property as a founding principle.

Modern socialism really began as a reaction to the excesses of uncontrolled industrial capitalism in the 1800s and 1900s. The enormous wealth and lavish lifestyles enjoyed by owners contrasted sharply with the miserable conditions of the workers.

Some of the first great sociological thinkers studied the rise of socialism. Max Weber admired some aspects of socialism, especially its rationalism and how it could help social reform, but he worried that letting the government have complete control could result in an "iron cage of future bondage" from which there is no escape (Greisman and Ritzer 1981).

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809–1865) was another early socialist who thought socialism could be used to create utopian communities. In his 1840 book, *What Is Property?*, he famously stated that "property is theft" (Proudhon 1840). By this he meant that if an owner did not work to produce or earn the property, then the owner was stealing it from those who did. Proudhon believed economies could work using a principle called mutualism, under which individuals and cooperative groups would exchange products with one another on the basis of mutually satisfactory contracts (Proudhon 1840).

By far the most important influential thinker on socialism is Karl Marx. Through his own writings and those with his collaborator, industrialist Friedrich Engels, Marx used a scientific analytical process to show that throughout history, the resolution of class struggles caused changes in economies. He saw the relationships evolving from slave and owner, to serf and lord, to journeyman and master, to worker and owner. Neither Marx nor Engels thought socialism could be used to set up small utopian communities. Rather, they believed a socialist society would be created after workers rebelled against capitalistic owners and seized the means of production. They felt industrial capitalism was a necessary step that raised the level of production in society to a point it could progress to a socialist and then communist state (Marx and Engels 1848). These ideas form the basis of the sociological perspective of social conflict theory.

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8.5: Globalization and the restructuring of work

What Is Globalization?

Globalization refers to the process of integrating governments, cultures, and financial markets through international trade into a single world market. Often, the process begins with a single motive, such as market expansion (on the part of a corporation) or increased access to healthcare (on the part of a nonprofit organization). But usually there is a snowball effect, and globalization becomes a mixed bag of economic, philanthropic, entrepreneurial, and cultural efforts. Sometimes the efforts have obvious benefits, even for those who worry about cultural colonialism, such as campaigns to bring clean-water technology to rural areas that do not have access to safe drinking water.

Other globalization efforts, however, are more complex. Let us look, for example, at the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The agreement was among the countries of North America, including Canada, the United States, and Mexico, and allowed much freer trade opportunities without the kind of tariffs (taxes) and import laws that restrict international trade. Often, trade opportunities are misrepresented by politicians and economists, who sometimes offer them up as a panacea to economic woes. For example, trade can lead to both increases and decreases in job opportunities. This is because while easier, more lax export laws mean there is the potential for job growth in the United States, imports can mean the exact opposite. As the United States imports more goods from outside the country, jobs typically decrease, as more and more products are made overseas.

Many prominent economists believed that when NAFTA was created in 1994 it would lead to major gains in jobs. But by 2010, the evidence showed an opposite impact; the data showed 682,900 U.S. jobs lost across all states (Parks 2011). While NAFTA did increase the flow of goods and capital across the northern and southern U.S. borders, it also increased unemployment in Mexico, which spurred greater amounts of illegal immigration motivated by a search for work. NAFTA was renegotiated in 2018, and was formally replaced by the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement in 2020.

There are several forces driving globalization, including the global economy and multinational corporations that control assets, sales, production, and employment (United Nations 1973). Characteristics of multinational corporations include the following: A large share of their capital is collected from a variety of different nations, their business is conducted without regard to national borders, they concentrate wealth in the hands of core nations and already wealthy individuals, and they play a key role in the global economy.

We see the emergence of global assembly lines, where products are assembled over the course of several international transactions. For instance, Apple designs its next-generation Mac prototype in the United States, components are made in various peripheral nations, they are then shipped to another peripheral nation such as Malaysia for assembly, and tech support is outsourced to India.

Globalization has also led to the development of global commodity chains, where internationally integrated economic links connect workers and corporations for the purpose of manufacture and marketing (Plahe 2005). For example, in *maquiladoras*, mostly found in northern Mexico, workers may sew imported precut pieces of fabric into garments.

Globalization also brings an international division of labor, in which comparatively wealthy workers from core nations compete with the low-wage labor pool of peripheral and semi-peripheral nations. This can lead to a sense of xenophobia, which is an illogical fear and even hatred of foreigners and foreign goods. Corporations trying to maximize their profits in the United States are conscious of this risk and attempt to “Americanize” their products, selling shirts printed with U.S. flags that were nevertheless made in Mexico.

Aspects of Globalization

Globalized trade is nothing new. Societies in ancient Greece and Rome traded with other societies in Africa, the Middle East, India, and China. Trade expanded further during the Islamic Golden Age and after the rise of the Mongol Empire. The establishment of colonial empires after the voyages of discovery by European countries meant that trade was going on all over the world. In the nineteenth century, the Industrial Revolution led to even more trade of ever-increasing amounts of goods. However, the advance of technology, especially communications, after World War II and the Cold War triggered the explosive acceleration in the process occurring today.

One way to look at the similarities and differences that exist among the economies of different nations is to compare their standards of living. The statistic most commonly used to do this is the domestic process per capita. This is the gross domestic product, or GDP, of a country divided by its population. The table below compares the top 11 countries with the bottom 11 out of the 228 countries listed in the *CIA World Factbook*.

Table 8.5.1: Gross Domestic Product Per Capita. Not every country is benefiting from globalization. The GDP per capita of the poorest country is 255 times less than that of the wealthiest country. (Credit: World Bank)

Country	GDP Per Capita in U.S. Dollars
Monaco	185,829.00
Liechtenstein	181,402.80
Bermuda	117,089.30
Luxembourg	114,704.60
Isle of Man	89,108.40
Cayman Islands	85,975.00
Macao SAR, China	84,096.40
Switzerland	81,993.70
Ireland	78,661.00
Norway	75,419.60
Burundi	261.2
Malawi	411.6
Sudan	441.5
Central African Republic	467.9
Mozambique	503.6
Afghanistan	507.1
Madagascar	523.4
Sierra Leone	527.5
Niger	553.9
Congo, Dem. Rep.	580.7

There are benefits and drawbacks to globalization. Some of the benefits include the exponentially accelerated progress of development, the creation of international awareness and empowerment, and the potential for increased wealth (Abedian 2002). However, experience has shown that countries can also be weakened by globalization. Some critics of globalization worry about the growing influence of enormous international financial and industrial corporations that benefit the most from free trade and unrestricted markets. They fear these corporations can use their vast wealth and resources to control governments to act in their interest rather than that of the local population (Bakan 2004). Indeed, when looking at the countries at the bottom of the list above, we are looking at places where the primary benefactors of mineral exploitation are major corporations and a few key political figures.

Other critics oppose globalization for what they see as negative impacts on the environment and local economies. Rapid industrialization, often a key component of globalization, can lead to widespread economic damage due to the lack of regulatory environment (Speth 2003). Further, as there are often no social institutions in place to protect workers in countries where jobs are scarce, some critics state that globalization leads to weak labor movements (Boswell and Stevis 1997). Finally, critics are concerned that wealthy countries can force economically weaker nations to open their markets while protecting their own local products from competition (Wallerstein 1974). This can be particularly true of agricultural products, which are often one of the main exports of poor and developing countries (Koroma 2007). In a 2007 article for the United Nations, Koroma discusses the difficulties faced by “least developed countries” (LDCs) that seek to participate in globalization efforts. These countries

typically lack the infrastructure to be flexible and nimble in their production and trade, and therefore are vulnerable to everything from unfavorable weather conditions to international price volatility. In short, rather than offering them more opportunities, the increased competition and fast pace of a globalized market can make it more challenging than ever for LDCs to move forward (Koroma 2007).

The increasing use of outsourcing of manufacturing and service-industry jobs to developing countries has caused increased unemployment in some developed countries. Countries that do not develop new jobs to replace those that move, and train their labor force to do them, will find support for globalization weakening.

Work in the United States

The American Dream has always been based on opportunity. There is a great deal of mythologizing about the energetic upstart who can climb to success based on hard work alone. Common wisdom states that if you study hard, develop good work habits, and graduate high school or, even better, college, then you'll have the opportunity to land a good job. That has long been seen as the key to a successful life. And although the reality has always been more complex than suggested by the myth, the worldwide recession that began in 2008 took its toll on the American Dream. During the recession, more than 8 million U.S. workers lost their jobs, and unemployment rates surpassed 10 percent on a national level. Today, while the recovery is still incomplete, many sectors of the economy are hiring, and unemployment rates have receded.

Sociology in the Real World: Real Money, Virtual Worlds

If you are not one of the tens of millions gamers who enjoy World of Warcraft, Final Fantasy, Fortnite, Apex, or other online games, you might not know that for some people, these aren't just games: They're employment. The virtual world has been yielding very real profits for entrepreneurs who are able to buy, sell, and manage online real estate, currency, and more for cash (Holland and Ewalt 2006). If it seems strange that people would pay real money for imaginary goods, consider that for serious gamers the online world is of equal importance to the real one.

These entrepreneurs can sell items because the gaming sites have introduced scarcity into the virtual worlds. Scarcity of any resource, be it food, oil, gems, or virtual goods, drives supply and demand. When the supply is low, and demand is high, people are often willing to pay to get what they want. Even though the games offer enjoyment, scarcity builds tension and leads to a greater sense of satisfaction.

So how does it work? One of the ways to make such a living is by farming, gathering, or crafting certain resources, such as mining a particular ore or building a product to sell. The buyers are those looking for a competitive edge or who simply don't want to spend their time on those tasks. Other methods include power leveling, in which one person may pay another to play the game for them to acquire wealth and power in the game environment. As you may have read in the chapter on Media and Technology, an online presence can also pay dividends from advertisers or even directly from fans. Highly popular players stream their gameplay on Twitch and other services; others offer coaching, game guides, or reviews.

Then there is prize money or other compensation. Gaming tournaments may offer monetary awards to the winner. Finally, the growth of college and professional esports indicates that monetization and virtual/real-world crossovers are going to be continually lucrative in the form of sponsorship, prizes, and scholarships.

Polarization in the Workforce

The mix of jobs available in the United States began changing many years before the recession struck, and, as mentioned above, the American Dream has not always been easy to achieve. Geography, race, gender, and other factors have always played a role in the reality of success. More recently, the increased outsourcing—or contracting a job or set of jobs to an outside source—of manufacturing jobs to developing nations has greatly diminished the number of high-paying, often unionized, blue-collar positions available. A similar problem has arisen in the white-collar sector, with many low-level clerical and support positions also being outsourced, as evidenced by the international technical-support call centers in Mumbai, India, and Newfoundland, Canada. The number of supervisory and managerial positions has been reduced as companies streamline their command structures and industries continue to consolidate through mergers. Even highly educated skilled workers such as computer programmers have seen their jobs vanish overseas.

The automation of the workplace, which replaces workers with technology, is another cause of the changes in the job market.

Computers can be programmed to do many routine tasks faster and less expensively than people who used to do such tasks. Jobs like bookkeeping, clerical work, and repetitive tasks on production assembly lines all lend themselves to automation. Envision your local supermarket's self-scan checkout aisles. The automated cashiers affixed to the units take the place of paid employees. Now one cashier can oversee transactions at six or more self-scan aisles, which was a job that used to require one cashier per aisle.

Despite the ongoing economic recovery, the job market is actually growing in some areas, but in a very polarized fashion. Polarization means that a gap has developed in the job market, with most employment opportunities at the lowest and highest levels and few jobs for those with mid-level skills and education. At one end, there has been strong demand for low-skilled, low-paying jobs in industries like food service and retail. On the other end, some research shows that in certain fields there has been a steadily increasing demand for highly skilled and educated professionals, technologists, and managers. These high-skilled positions also tend to be highly paid (Autor 2010).

The fact that some positions are highly paid while others are not is an example of the class system, an economic hierarchy in which movement (both upward and downward) between various rungs of the socioeconomic ladder is possible. Theoretically, at least, the class system as it is organized in the United States is an example of a meritocracy, an economic system that rewards merit––typically in the form of skill and hard work––with upward mobility. A theorist working in the functionalist perspective might point out that this system is designed to reward hard work, which encourages people to strive for excellence in pursuit of reward. A theorist working in the conflict perspective might counter with the thought that hard work does not guarantee success even in a meritocracy, because social capital––the accumulation of a network of social relationships and knowledge that will provide a platform from which to achieve financial success––in the form of connections or higher education are often required to access the high-paying jobs. Increasingly, we are realizing intelligence and hard work aren't enough. If you lack knowledge of how to leverage the right names, connections, and players, you are unlikely to experience upward mobility.

With so many jobs being outsourced or eliminated by automation, what kind of jobs are there a demand for in the United States? While fishing and forestry jobs are in decline, in several markets jobs are increasing. These include community and social service, personal care and service, finance, computer and information services, and healthcare. Professions that typically require significant education and training and tend to be lucrative career choices. In particular, jobs that require some type of license or formal certification – be it healthcare, technology, or a trade – usually have a higher salary than those that do not. Service jobs, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, can include everything from jobs with the fire department to jobs scooping ice cream (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2019). There is a wide variety of training needed, and therefore an equally large wage potential discrepancy. One of the largest areas of growth by industry, rather than by occupational group (as seen above), is in the health field. This growth is across occupations, from associate-level nurse's aides to management-level assisted-living staff. As baby boomers age, they are living longer than any generation before, and the growth of this population segment requires an increase in capacity throughout our country's elder care system, from home healthcare nursing to geriatric nutrition.

Notably, jobs in farming are in decline. This is an area where those with less education traditionally could be assured of finding steady, if low-wage, work. With these jobs disappearing, more and more workers will find themselves untrained for the types of employment that are available.

Another projected trend in employment relates to the level of education and training required to gain and keep a job. As the chart below shows us, growth rates are higher for those with more education. Those with a professional degree or a master's degree may expect job growth of 20 and 22 percent respectively, and jobs that require a bachelor's degree are projected to grow 17 percent. At the other end of the spectrum, jobs that require a high school diploma or equivalent are projected to grow at only 12 percent, while jobs that require less than a high school diploma will grow 14 percent. Quite simply, without a degree, it will be more difficult to find a job. It is worth noting that these projections are based on overall growth across all occupation categories, so obviously there will be variations within different occupational areas. However, once again, those who are the least educated will be the ones least able to fulfill the American Dream.

Table 8.5.2: More education means more jobs (generally) and a higher amount of compensation. (Credit: Bureau of Labor Statistics)

Typical entry-level education	Employment change, 2019–29 (percent)	Median annual wage, 2019(1)
Total, all occupations	3.7	$39,810
Doctoral or professional degree	5.9	$107,660
Master's degree	15.0	$76,180
Bachelor's degree	6.4	$75,440

Typical entry-level education	Employment change, 2019–29 (percent)	Median annual wage, 2019(1)
Associate's degree	6.2	$54,940
Postsecondary nondegree award	5.6	$39,940
Some college, no degree	-0.1	$36,790
High school diploma or equivalent	1.5	$37,930
No formal educational credential	3.3	$25,700

In the past, rising education levels in the United States had been able to keep pace with the rise in the number of education-dependent jobs. However, since the late 1970s, men have been enrolling in college at a lower rate than women, and graduating at a rate of almost 10 percent less. The lack of male candidates reaching the education levels needed for skilled positions has opened opportunities for women, minorities, and immigrants (Wang 2011).

Women in the Workforce

As discussed in the chapter introduction, women have been entering the workforce in ever-increasing numbers for several decades. They have also been finishing college and going on to earn higher degrees at higher rate than men do. This has resulted in many women being better positioned to obtain high-paying, high-skill jobs (Autor 2010).

While women are getting more and better jobs and their wages are rising more quickly than men's wages are, U.S. Census statistics show that they are still earning only 81 percent of what men are for the same positions (U.S. Census Bureau 2020).

Immigration and the Workforce

Simply put, people will move from where there are few or no jobs to places where there are jobs, unless something prevents them from doing so. The process of moving to a country is called immigration. Due to its reputation as the land of opportunity, the United States has long been the destination of all skill levels of workers. While the rate decreased somewhat during the economic slowdown of 2008, immigrants, both documented and undocumented, continue to be a major part of the U.S. workforce.

In 2005, before the recession arrived, immigrants made up a historic high of 14.7 percent of the workforce (Lowell et al. 2006). During the 1970s through 2000s, the United States experienced both an increase in college-educated immigrants and in immigrants who lacked a high school diploma. With this range across the spectrum, immigrants are well positioned for both the higher-paid jobs and the low-wage low-skill jobs that are predicted to grow in the next decade (Lowell et al. 2006). In the early 2000s, it certainly seemed that the United States was continuing to live up to its reputation of opportunity. But what about during the recession of 2008, when so many jobs were lost and unemployment hovered close to 10 percent? How did immigrant workers fare then?

The answer is that as of June 2009, when the National Bureau of Economic Research (NEBR) declared the recession officially over, “foreign-born workers gained 656,000 jobs while native-born workers lost 1.2 million jobs” (Kochhar 2010). As these numbers suggest, the unemployment rate that year decreased for immigrant workers and increased for native workers. The reasons for this trend are not entirely clear. Some Pew research suggests immigrants tend to have greater flexibility to move from job to job and that the immigrant population may have been early victims of the recession, and thus were quicker to rebound (Kochhar 2010). Regardless of the reasons, the 2009 job gains are far from enough to keep them inured from the country’s economic woes. Immigrant earnings are in decline, even as the number of jobs increases, and some theorize that increase in employment may come from a willingness to accept significantly lower wages and benefits.

While the political debate is often fueled by conversations about low-wage-earning immigrants, there are actually as many highly skilled––and high-earning––immigrant workers as well. Many immigrants are sponsored by their employers who claim they possess talents, education, and training that are in short supply in the U.S. These sponsored immigrants account for 15 percent of all legal immigrants (Batalova and Terrazas 2010). Interestingly, the U.S. population generally supports these high-level workers, believing they will help lead to economic growth and not be a drain on government services (Hainmueller and Hiscox 2010). On the other hand, undocumented immigrants tend to be trapped in extremely low-paying jobs in agriculture, service, and construction with few ways to improve their situation without risking exposure and deportation.

Poverty in the United States

When people lose their jobs during a recession or in a changing job market, it takes longer to find a new one, if they can find one at all. If they do, it is often at a much lower wage or not full time. This can force people into poverty. In the United States, we tend to have what is called relative poverty, defined as being unable to live the lifestyle of the average person in your country. This must be contrasted with the absolute poverty that is frequently found in underdeveloped countries and defined as the inability, or near-inability, to afford basic necessities such as food (Byrns 2011).

We cannot even rely on unemployment statistics to provide a clear picture of total unemployment in the United States. First, unemployment statistics do not take into account underemployment, a state in which a person accepts a lower paying, lower status job than their education and experience qualifies them to perform. Second, unemployment statistics only count those:

1. who are actively looking for work
2. who have not earned income from a job in the past four weeks
3. who are ready, willing, and able to work

The unemployment statistics provided by the U.S. government are rarely accurate, because many of the unemployed become discouraged and stop looking for work. Not only that, but these statistics undercount the youngest and oldest workers, the chronically unemployed (e.g., homeless), and seasonal and migrant workers.

A certain amount of unemployment is a direct result of the relative inflexibility of the labor market, considered structural unemployment, which describes when there is a societal level of disjuncture between people seeking jobs and the available jobs. This mismatch can be geographic (they are hiring in one area, but most unemployed live somewhere else), technological (workers are replaced by machines, as in the auto industry), educational (a lack of specific knowledge or skills among the workforce) or can result from any sudden change in the types of jobs people are seeking versus the types of companies that are hiring.

Because of the high standard of living in the United States, many people are working at full-time jobs but are still poor by the standards of relative poverty. They are the working poor. The United States has a higher percentage of working poor than many other developed countries (Brady, Fullerton and Cross 2010). In terms of employment, the Bureau of Labor Statistics defines the working poor as those who have spent at least 27 weeks working or looking for work, and yet remain below the poverty line. Many of the facts about the working poor are as expected: Those who work only part time are more likely to be classified as working poor than those with full-time employment; higher levels of education lead to less likelihood of being among the working poor; and those with children under 18 are four times more likely than those without children to fall into this category. In 2009, the working poor included 10.4 million Americans, up almost 17 percent from 2008 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2011).

Most developed countries protect their citizens from absolute poverty by providing different levels of social services such as unemployment insurance, welfare, food assistance, and so on. They may also provide job training and retraining so that people can reenter the job market. In the past, the elderly were particularly vulnerable to falling into poverty after they stopped working; however, pensions, retirement plans, and Social Security were designed to help prevent this. A major concern in the United States is the rising number of young people growing up in poverty. Growing up poor can cut off access to the education and services people need to move out of poverty and into stable employment. As we saw, more education was often a key to stability, and those raised in poverty are the ones least able to find well-paying work, perpetuating a cycle.

Another notion important to sociologists and citizens is the expense of being poor. In a practical sense, people with more money on hand, better credit, a more stable income, and reliable insurance can purchase items or services in different ways than people who lack those things. For example, someone with a higher income can pay bills more reliably, as well as have more credit extended to them through credit cards or loans. When it comes time for those people to purchase a car, for example, they can likely negotiate a lower monthly payment or less money down. In an even more simplistic situation, people with more spending money can buy groceries in bulk, spending far less per unit than those who must purchase smaller portions. The single greatest expense for most adults is housing; beyond its significant portion of a family's expenses, housing drives many other costs, such as transportation (how close does someone live to the places they need to go), childcare, and other areas. And people in poverty pay significantly more for their housing than others – sometimes 70-80 percent of their total income. Those with fewer resources are also more likely to rent rather than own, so they do not build credit in the same way, nor do they have the opportunity to sell the property later and utilize their equity (Nobles 2019).

The ways that governments, organizations, individuals, and society as a whole help the poor are matters of significant debate, informed by extensive study. Sociologists and other professionals contribute to these conversations and provide evidence of the impacts of these circumstances and interventions to change them. The decisions made on these issues have a profound effect

on working in the United States.

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8.6: Global inequality

Human Development

Just as the United States' wealth is increasingly concentrated among its richest citizens, global inequality concentrates resources within certain nations and among certain people.

Measuring the financial resource of the world's richest people is generally easier than measuring the resources of people living in poverty (Matthews 2019), but researchers and advocates have created some tools to evaluate and understand economic conditions and outcomes.

One straightforward method is to compare the ratio of income of the richest 10 percent to the income of the poorest 10 percent. (The same method is sometime used with the richest 20 percent and the poorest 20 percent.) This method does not always provide a full picture of income inequality (it literally leaves out the middle), but it can certain provide insight.

The Human Development Index expresses the capabilities of people's potential achievement. The index is calculated using data regarding people's lifespan, education, and income. By using both financial and non-financial factors, it paints a deeper picture of the lives and issues in a region. For example, a nation with high income but low education will still have difficulty in overall opportunity. This approach was developed by Pakistani economist Mahbub ul Haq, who produced the first annual Human Development report, which captures and illustrates development issues and changes each year.

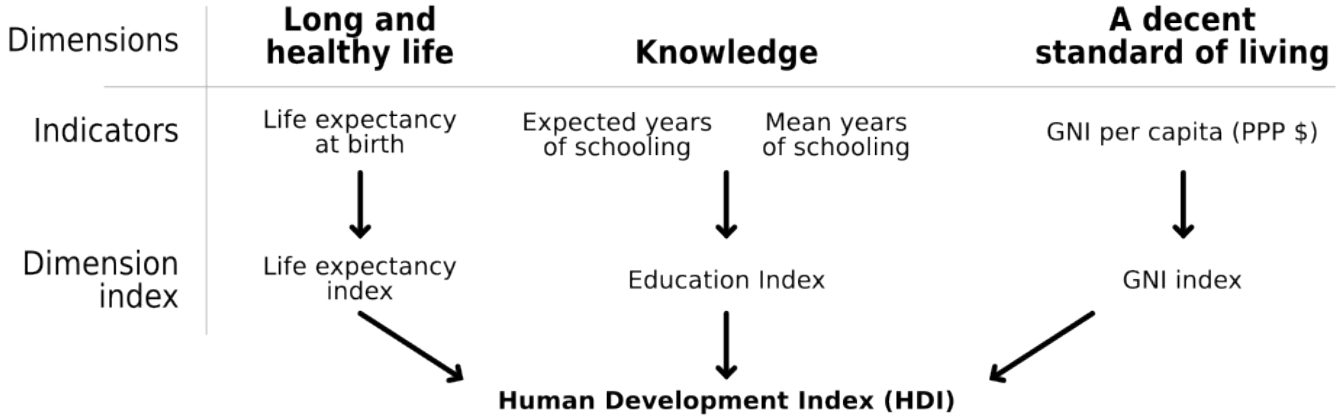


Figure 8.6.1: The Human Development Index combines measures of health, education, and income to assess a country's level of human development. (HDI Underlying Principles by Sertion via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC0 1.0). Access alternative description for Figure 8.6.1.

Another measure of inequality is Gini Coefficient, named after the Italian sociologist and statistician Corrado Gini. (Be sure not to confuse this with GNI, which is the gross national income.) It is is calculated using a number of financial indicators, and is expressed as either a decimal or a percentage. A country in which every resident has the same income would have a Gini coefficient of 0 (or 0 percent). A country in which one resident earned all the income, while everyone else earned nothing, would have an income Gini coefficient of 1 (or 100 percent). Thus, the higher the number (the closer to that one person having all the income or wealth), the more inequality there is.

Other gauges are a bit more direct: To indicate the level of poverty within a nation or region, researchers calculate the percentage of the population living beneath various poverty thresholds. A common measure is to consider the percentage of a nation's population living on less than $1.90 per day, which is commonly known as the International Poverty Line. (Note that United States dollars are often used as a global standard in these types of measurement.) The table in the next sub-section uses this method.

These are just a few of the ways that sociologists, economists, governments, and others try to understand levels of income inequality and poverty. Changes in these indicators would alert policymakers that something is affecting the population. No changes might tell people that, for example, a new financial assistance program for the poor is not working.

Global Stratification

While stratification in the United States refers to the unequal distribution of resources among individuals, global stratification refers to this unequal distribution among nations. There are two dimensions to this stratification: gaps between nations and gaps within nations. When it comes to global inequality, both economic inequality and social inequality may concentrate the burden of poverty among certain segments of the earth's population (Myrdal 1970).

As mentioned earlier, one way to evaluate stratification is to consider how many people are living in poverty, and particularly extreme poverty, which is often defined as needing to survive on less than $1.90 per day. Fortunately, until the COVID-19 pandemic impacted economies in 2020, the extreme poverty rate had been on a 20-year decline. In 2015, 10.1 percent of the world's population was living in extreme poverty; in 2017, that number had dropped an entire percentage point to 9.2 percent. While a positive, that 9.2 percent is equivalent to 689 million people living on less than $1.90 a day. The same year, 24.1 percent of the world lived on less than $3.20 per day and 43.6 percent on less than $5.50 per day in 2017 (World Bank 2020). The table below makes the differences in poverty very clear.

Table 8.6.1: The differences among countries is clear when considering their extreme poverty rates. For the most part, the selected countries show disparities even within countries from the same regions. All data is from 2018. (World Bank 2020)

Country	Percentage of people living on less than $1.90	Percentage of people living on less than $3.90	Percentage of people living on less than $5.50
Colombia	4.1	10.9	27.8
Costa Rica	1.4	3.6	10.9
Georgia	4.5	15.7	42.9
Kyrgyzstan	0.9	15.5	61.3
Sierra Leone	40.1	74.4	92.1
Angola	51.8	73.2	89.3
Lithuania	0.7	1.0	3.8
Ukraine	0.0	0.4	4.0
Vietnam	1.9	7.0	23.6
Indonesia	3.6	9.6	53.2

Most of us are accustomed to thinking of global stratification as economic inequality. For example, we can compare the United States' average worker's wage to America's average wage. Social inequality, however, is just as harmful as economic discrepancies. Prejudice and discrimination—whether against a certain race, ethnicity, religion, or the like—can create and aggravate conditions of economic equality, both within and between nations. Think about the inequity that existed for decades within the nation of South Africa. Apartheid, one of the most extreme cases of institutionalized and legal racism, created a social inequality that earned it the world's condemnation.

Gender inequity is another global concern. Consider the controversy surrounding female genital mutilation. Nations that practice this female circumcision procedure defend it as a longstanding cultural tradition in certain tribes and argue that the West shouldn't interfere. Western nations, however, decry the practice and are working to stop it.

Inequalities based on sexual orientation and gender identity exist around the globe. According to Amnesty International, a number of crimes are committed against individuals who do not conform to traditional gender roles or sexual orientations (however those are culturally defined). From culturally sanctioned rape to state-sanctioned executions, the abuses are serious. These legalized and culturally accepted forms of prejudice and discrimination exist everywhere—from the United States to Somalia to Tibet—restricting the freedom of individuals and often putting their lives at risk (Amnesty International 2012).

Global Classification

A major concern when discussing global inequality is how to avoid an ethnocentric bias implying that less-developed nations want to be like those who've attained post-industrial global power. Terms such as developing (nonindustrialized) and developed (industrialized) imply that unindustrialized countries are somehow inferior, and must improve to participate successfully in the global economy, a label indicating that all aspects of the economy cross national borders. We must take care how we delineate different countries. Over time, terminology has shifted to make way for a more inclusive view of the world.

Global classification methods are not only important in understanding economic differences among countries, but also in providing ways to classify countries and identify trends in other areas. The classifications discussed below will be used in other chapters, such as the chapter on health and medicine.

Cold War Terminology

Cold War terminology was developed during the Cold War era (1945–1989). Familiar and still used by many, it classifies countries into first world, second world, and third world nations based on their respective economic development and standards of living. When this nomenclature was developed, capitalistic democracies such as the United States and Japan were considered part of the first world. The poorest, most undeveloped countries were referred to as the third world and included most of sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and Asia. The second world was the in-between category: nations not as limited in development as the third world, but not as well off as the first world, having moderate economies and standard of living, such as China or Cuba. Later, sociologist Manual Castells (1998) added the term fourth world to refer to stigmatized minority groups that were denied a political voice all over the globe (indigenous minority populations, prisoners, and the homeless, for example).

Also during the Cold War, global inequality was described in terms of economic development. Along with developing and developed nations, the terms less-developed nation and underdeveloped nation were used. This was the era when the idea of *noblesse oblige* (first-world responsibility) took root, suggesting that the so-termed developed nations should provide foreign aid to the less-developed and underdeveloped nations in order to raise their standard of living.

Immanuel Wallerstein: World Systems Approach

Immanuel Wallerstein's (1979) world systems approach uses an economic basis to understand global inequality. Wallerstein conceived of the global economy as a complex system that supports an economic hierarchy that placed some nations in positions of power with numerous resources and other nations in a state of economic subordination. Those that were in a state of subordination faced significant obstacles to mobilization.

Core nations are dominant capitalist countries, highly industrialized, technological, and urbanized. For example, Wallerstein contends that the United States is an economic powerhouse that can support or deny support to important economic legislation with far-reaching implications, thus exerting control over every aspect of the global economy and exploiting both semi-peripheral and peripheral nations. We can look at free trade agreements such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) as an example of how a core nation is able to leverage its power to gain the most advantageous position in the matter of global trade.

Peripheral nations have very little industrialization; what they do have often represents the outdated castoffs of core nations or the factories and means of production owned by core nations. They typically have unstable governments, inadequate social programs, and are economically dependent on core nations for jobs and aid. There are abundant examples of countries in this category, such as Vietnam and Cuba. We can be sure the workers in a Cuban cigar factory, for example, which are owned or leased by global core nation companies, are not enjoying the same privileges and rights as U.S. workers.

Semi-peripheral nations are in-between nations, not powerful enough to dictate policy but nevertheless acting as a major source for raw material and an expanding middle-class marketplace for core nations, while also exploiting peripheral nations. Mexico is an example, providing abundant cheap agricultural labor to the U.S., and supplying goods to the United States market at a rate dictated by the U.S. without the constitutional protections offered to United States workers.

World Bank Economic Classification by Income

While the World Bank is often criticized, both for its policies and its method of calculating data, it is still a common source for global economic data. Along with tracking the economy, the World Bank tracks demographics and environmental health to provide a complete picture of whether a nation is high income, middle income, or low income.

High-Income Nations

The World Bank defines high-income nations as having a gross national income of at least $12,536 per capita. in 2019 (World Bank 2021). (Note that the classifications will always lag by a couple of years so that analysts can evaluate the true income of the nations.) Examples include Belgium, Canada, Japan, Oman, Puerto Rico, and the United States.

High-income countries face two major issues: capital flight and deindustrialization. Capital flight refers to the movement (flight) of capital from one nation to another, as when General Motors automotive company closed U.S. factories in Michigan and opened factories in Mexico.

Deindustrialization, a related issue, occurs as a consequence of capital flight, as no new companies open to replace jobs lost to foreign nations. As expected, global companies move their industrial processes to the places where they can get the most production with the least cost, including the building of infrastructure, training of workers, shipping of goods, and, of course, paying employee wages. This means that as emerging economies create their own industrial zones, global companies see the opportunity for existing infrastructure and much lower costs. Those opportunities lead to businesses closing the factories that provide jobs to the middle class within core nations and moving their industrial production to peripheral and semi-peripheral nations.

Middle-Income Nations

The World Bank divides middle-income economies into two categories. Lower middle income areas are those with a GNI per capita of more than $1,036 but less than $4,045. Upper middle income areas are those with A GNI per capita between $4,046 and $12,535. Democratic Republic of Congo, Tunisia, Philippines, El Salvador, and Nepal are are examples of lower-middle-income countries. And Argentina, Mexico, China, Iran, Turkey, and Namibia are examples of upper-middle-income nations (World Bank 2021).

Perhaps the most pressing issue for middle-income nations is the problem of debt accumulation. As the name suggests, debt accumulation is the buildup of external debt, wherein countries borrow money from other nations to fund their expansion or growth goals. As the uncertainties of the global economy make repaying these debts, or even paying the interest on them, more challenging, nations can find themselves in trouble. Once global markets have reduced the value of a country's goods, it can be very difficult to ever manage the debt burden. Such issues have plagued middle-income countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as East Asian and Pacific nations (Dogruel and Dogruel 2007).

Low-Income Nations

The World Bank defines low-income countries as nations whose per capita GNI was $1,035 per capita or less in 2019. For example, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, and Yemen are considered low-income countries. Low-income economies are primarily found in Asia and Africa (World Bank 2021), where most of the world's population lives. There are two major challenges that these countries face: women are disproportionately affected by poverty (in a trend toward a global feminization of poverty) and much of the population lives in absolute poverty.

Nations' classifications often change as their economies evolve and, sometimes, when their political positions change. Nepal, Indonesia, and Romania all moved up to a higher status based on improved economies. While Sudan, Algeria, and Sri Lanka moved down a level. A few years ago, Myanmar was a low-income nation, but now it has moved into the middle-income area. With Myanmar's 2021 coup, the massive citizen response, and the military's killing of protesters, its economy may go through a downturn again, returning it to the low-income nation status.

Big Picture: Capital Flight, Outsourcing, and Jobs in the United States

Capital flight describes jobs and infrastructure moving from one nation to another. Look at the U.S. automobile industry. In the early twentieth century, the cars driven in the United States were made here, employing thousands of workers in Detroit and in the companies that produced everything that made building cars possible. However, once the fuel crisis of the 1970s hit and people in the United States increasingly looked to imported cars with better gas mileage, U.S. auto manufacturing began to decline. During the 2007–2009 recession, the U.S. government provided emergency funding (usually called a "bail out") for the three main auto companies, which is evidence of those companies' vulnerability. At the same time, Japanese-owned Toyota and Honda and South Korean Kia maintained stable sales levels.

Capital flight also occurs when services (as opposed to manufacturing) are relocated. Chances are if you have called the tech support line for your cell phone or Internet provider, you've spoken to someone halfway across the globe. This professional might tell you her name is Susan or Joan, but her accent makes it clear that her real name might be Parvati or Indira. It might be the middle of the night in that country, yet these service providers pick up the line saying, "Good morning," as though they are in the next town over. They know everything about your phone or your modem, often using a remote server to log in to your home computer to accomplish what is needed. These are the workers of the twenty-first century. They are not on factory floors or in traditional sweatshops; they are educated, speak at least two languages, and usually have significant technology skills. They are skilled workers, but they are paid a fraction of what similar workers are paid in the United States. For U.S. and multinational companies, the equation makes sense. India and other semi-peripheral countries have emerging infrastructures and education systems to fill their needs, without core nation costs.

As services are relocated, so are jobs. In the United States, unemployment is high. Many college-educated people are unable to find work, and those with only a high school diploma are in even worse shape. We have, as a country, outsourced ourselves out of jobs, and not just menial jobs, but white-collar work as well. But before we complain too bitterly, we must look at the culture of consumerism that we embrace. A flat screen television that might have cost $1,000 a few years ago is now $250. That cost savings has to come from somewhere. When consumers seek the lowest possible price, shop at big box stores for the biggest discount they can get, and generally ignore other factors in exchange for low cost, they are building the market for outsourcing. And as the demand is built, the market will ensure it is met, even at the expense of the people who wanted it in the first place.

Global Wealth and Poverty

What does it mean to be poor? Does it mean being a single mother with two kids in New York City, waiting for the next paycheck in order to buy groceries? Does it mean living with almost no furniture in your apartment because your income doesn't allow for extras like beds or chairs? Or does it mean having to live with the distended bellies of the chronically malnourished throughout the peripheral nations of Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia? Poverty has a thousand faces and a thousand gradations; there is no single definition that pulls together every part of the spectrum. You might feel you are poor if you can't afford cable television or buy your own car. Every time you see a fellow student with a new laptop and smartphone you might feel that you, with your ten-year-old desktop computer, are barely keeping up. However, someone else might look at the clothes you wear and the calories you consume and consider you rich.

Types of Poverty

Social scientists define global poverty in different ways and take into account the complexities and the issues of relativism described above. Relative poverty is a state of living where people can afford necessities but are unable to meet their society's average standard of living. People often disparage "keeping up with the Joneses"—the idea that you must keep up with the neighbors' standard of living to not feel deprived. But it is true that you might feel "poor" if you are living without a car to drive to and from work, without any money for a safety net should a family member fall ill, and without any "extras" beyond just making ends meet.

Contrary to relative poverty, people who live in extreme poverty lack even the basic necessities, which typically include adequate food, clean water, safe housing, and access to healthcare. Extreme poverty occurs when someone lives on less than 1.90 U.S dollars per day.

In prior years, the World Bank—the primary organization analyzing these trends--focused heavily on the number of people under that extreme poverty level of $1.90 per day. (The previous term was "absolute poverty.") In 2018, the World Bank added two more measures to consider: people living on less than $3.20 and people living on less than $5.50. As the number of people in that extreme category continues to decline, these two new categories will be important to recognize the population that lives above the $1.90 line, but still remains vulnerable to extreme poverty. Someone who begins to earn enough to live on more than $1.90 is still in severe poverty and should be considered as such (Schoch 2020).

If you were forced to live on $1.90 a day, or even $5.50, how would you do it? What would you deem worthy of spending money on, and what could you do without? How would you manage the necessities—and how would you make up the gap between what you need to live and what you can afford?

Subjective poverty describes poverty that is composed of many dimensions; it is subjectively present when your actual income

does not meet your expectations and perceptions. With the concept of subjective poverty, the poor themselves have a greater say in recognizing when it is present. In short, subjective poverty has more to do with how a person or a family defines themselves. This means that a family subsisting on a few dollars a day in Nepal might think of themselves as doing well, within their perception of normal. However, a westerner traveling to Nepal might visit the same family and see extreme need.

Big Picture: The Underground Economy Around the World

What do the driver of an unlicensed hack cab in New York, a piecework seamstress working from her home in Mumbai, and a street tortilla vendor in Mexico City have in common? They are all members of the underground economy, a loosely defined unregulated market unhindered by taxes, government permits, or human protections. Official statistics before the worldwide recession posit that the underground economy accounted for over 50 percent of nonagricultural work in Latin America; the figure went as high as 80 percent in parts of Asia and Africa (Chen 2001). A recent article in the *Wall Street Journal* discusses the challenges, parameters, and surprising benefits of this informal marketplace. The wages earned in most underground economy jobs, especially in peripheral nations, are a pittance––a few rupees for a handmade bracelet at a market, or maybe 250 rupees ($5 U.S.) for a day's worth of fruit and vegetable sales (Barta 2009). But these tiny sums mark the difference between survival and extinction for the world's poor.

The underground economy has never been viewed very positively by global economists. After all, its members don't pay taxes, don't take out loans to grow their businesses, and rarely earn enough to put money back into the economy in the form of consumer spending. But according to the International Labor Organization (an agency of the United Nations), some 52 million people worldwide will lose their jobs due to the ongoing worldwide recession. And while those in core nations know that high unemployment rates and limited government safety nets can be frightening, their situation is nothing compared to the loss of a job for those barely eking out an existence. Once that job disappears, the chance of staying afloat is very slim.

Within the context of this recession, some see the underground economy as a key player in keeping people alive. Indeed, an economist at the World Bank credits jobs created by the informal economy as a primary reason why peripheral nations are not in worse shape during this recession. Women in particular benefit from the informal sector. The majority of economically active women in peripheral nations are engaged in the informal sector, which is somewhat buffered from the economic downturn. The flip side, of course, is that it is equally buffered from the possibility of economic growth.

Even in the United States, the informal economy exists, although not on the same scale as in peripheral and semi-peripheral nations. It might include under-the-table nannies, gardeners, and housecleaners, as well as unlicensed street vendors and taxi drivers. There are also those who run informal businesses, like daycares or salons, from their houses. Analysts estimate that this type of labor may make up 10 percent of the overall U.S. economy, a number that will likely grow as companies reduce head counts, leaving more workers to seek other options. In the end, the article suggests that, whether selling medicinal wines in Thailand or woven bracelets in India, the workers of the underground economy at least have what most people want most of all: a chance to stay afloat (Barta 2009).

Who Are the Impoverished?

Who are the impoverished? Who is living in absolute poverty? The truth that most of us would guess is that the richest countries are often those with the least people. Compare the United States, which possesses a relatively small slice of the population pie and owns by far the largest slice of the wealth pie, with India. These disparities have the expected consequence. The poorest people in the world are women and those in peripheral and semi-peripheral nations. For women, the rate of poverty is particularly worsened by the pressure on their time. In general, time is one of the few luxuries the very poor have, but study after study has shown that women in poverty, who are responsible for all family comforts as well as any earnings they can make, have less of it. The result is that women are suffering more in terms of overall wellbeing (Buvinic 1997). It is harder for females to get credit to expand businesses, to take the time to learn a new skill, or to spend extra hours improving their craft so as to be able to earn at a higher rate.

Global Feminization of Poverty

In almost all societies, women have higher rates of poverty than men. More women and girls live in poor conditions, receive inadequate healthcare, bear the brunt of malnutrition and inadequate drinking water, and so on. This situation goes back decades, and led University of Michigan sociologist Diana Pearce to coin the term "feminization of poverty" in 1978. Throughout the 1990s, data indicated that while overall poverty rates were rising, especially in peripheral nations, the rates of impoverishment increased

for women nearly 20 percent more than for men (Mogadham 2005). More recently, as extreme poverty rates continue to fall, women still make up a disproportionate amount of the world's poor. Gender differences are sometimes difficult to discern in international poverty data, but researchers have undertaken efforts to define the makeup of those affected by poverty. Of people aged 25-34, the world has 122 women living in poverty for every 100 men living in poverty. The world's elderly below the poverty line are also more likely to be women (World Bank 2018).

Why is this happening? While myriad variables affect women's poverty, research specializing in this issue identifies three causes (Mogadham 2005):

1. The expansion in the number of female-headed households
2. The persistence and consequences of intra-household inequalities and biases against women
3. The implementation of neoliberal economic policies around the world

While women are living longer and healthier lives today compared to ten years ago, around the world many women are denied basic rights, particularly in the workplace. In peripheral nations, they accumulate fewer assets, farm less land, make less money, and face restricted civil rights and liberties. Women can stimulate the economic growth of peripheral nations, but they are often undereducated and lack access to credit needed to start small businesses. When women are able to attain higher levels of education, they account for significant economic growth within their nations (OECD 2012).

A wide range of organizations undertake programs or provide support in order to improve opportunity, safety, education, equality, and financial outcomes for women. Some of these efforts involve diplomacy, such as one government (or a coalition) working to secure greater rights and improve circumstances of women in other countries. Key areas of focus are reducing institutional and cultural discrimination, ending domestic violence, providing women more agency in decision making, and increasing education for children (Scott 2012). Other programs focus on more immediate needs and opportunities. Microcredit and women's collective savings accounts are ways to provide financial resources for women and families to make important investments, such as building a well at their home to improve health and reduce time spent obtaining clean water. Other uses may involve starting a business, paying a debt, or buying an important appliance or equipment. Unfortunately, these microfinance programs don't have a track record of alleviating poverty, and in some cases they can lead to negative outcomes such as trapping women in a cycle of debt, or increasing domestic violence. Collective savings programs—where local people pool their resources and extend credit within their group—have shown some more positive outcomes (Aizenman 2016 and Niner 2018). The UN has emphasized that microfinance and cultural empowerment would both be more successful if they were used in concert with each other (Scott 2012).

Africa

The majority of the poorest countries in the world are in Africa. That is not to say there is not diversity within the countries of that continent; countries like South Africa and Egypt have much lower rates of poverty than Angola and Ethiopia, for instance. Overall, African income levels have been dropping relative to the rest of the world, meaning that Africa as a whole is getting relatively poorer. Making the problem worse, 2014 saw an outbreak of the *Ebola* virus in western Africa, leading to a public health crisis and an economic downturn due to loss of workers and tourist dollars.

Why is Africa in such dire straits? Much of the continent's poverty can be traced to the availability of land, especially arable land (land that can be farmed). Centuries of struggle over land ownership have meant that much useable land has been ruined or left unfarmed, while many countries with inadequate rainfall have never set up an infrastructure to irrigate. Many of Africa's natural resources were long ago taken by colonial forces, leaving little agricultural and mineral wealth on the continent.

Further, African poverty is worsened by civil wars and inadequate governance that are the result of a continent re-imagined with artificial colonial borders and leaders. Consider the example of Rwanda. There, two ethnic groups cohabitated with their own system of hierarchy and management until Belgians took control of the country in 1915 and rigidly confined members of the population into two unequal ethnic groups. While, historically, members of the Tutsi group held positions of power, the involvement of Belgians led to the Hutu seizing power during a 1960s revolt. This ultimately led to a repressive government and genocide against Tutsis that left hundreds of thousands of Rwandans dead or living in diaspora (U.S. Department of State 2011c). The painful rebirth of a self-ruled Africa has meant many countries bear ongoing scars as they try to see their way towards the future (World Poverty 2012a). In 2020, armed conflicts were underway in regions of nations including the Tigray conflict in Ethiopia, the Kamwina Nsapo rebellion in Democratic Republic of Congo, the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria and neighboring countries, and several more. While most of the ongoing conflicts are considered minor, they are both dangerous and disruptive to the people living in those regions, and several have included ethnic cleansing, mass kidnapping, extensive sexual violence, and use of child soldiers.

Asia

While the majority of the world's poorest countries are in Africa, the majority of the world's poorest people are in Asia. As in Africa, Asia finds itself with disparity in the distribution of poverty, with Japan and South Korea holding much more wealth than India and Cambodia. In fact, most poverty is concentrated in South Asia. One of the most pressing causes of poverty in Asia is simply the pressure that the size of the population puts on its resources. Unlike Africa, many people living in poverty reside in urban areas, often in crowded, unhygenic conditions with limited access to water and resources. Estimates indicate that Asia has 60 percent of the world's people who live in slums (WorldVision 2019). Those who find work often do so in garment factories or other manufacturing facilities, where pay is very low and the demands are incredibly high. (See the feature below on sweatshop labor.) Children are sent to work in these conditions as well.

Asia is also frequently impacted by natural disasters. Countries like India, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Thailand, and the Philippines experience frequent typhoons (hurricanes) and flooding. For those living in insecure structures —often constructed from various leftover materials and not subject to any type of building codes—such events can leave entire swaths of the population homeless and vulnerable to disease or injury (WorldVision 2019).

MENA

The Middle East and North Africa region (MENA) includes oil-rich countries in the Gulf, such as Iran, Iraq, and Kuwait, but also countries that are relatively resource-poor in relationship to their populations, such as Morocco and Yemen. These countries are predominately Islamic. For the last quarter-century, economic growth was slower in MENA than in other developing economies, and almost a quarter of the 300 million people who make up the population live on less than $2.00 a day (World Bank 2013).

The International Labour Organization tracks the way income inequality influences social unrest. The two regions with the highest risk of social unrest are Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East-North Africa region (International Labour Organization 2012). Increasing unemployment and high socioeconomic inequality in MENA were major factors in the Arab Spring, which—beginning in 2010—toppled dictatorships throughout the Middle East in favor of democratically elected government. Unemployment and income inequalities are still being blamed on immigrants, foreign nationals, and ethnic/religious minorities.

Sociology in the Real World: Sweatshops and Student Protests: Who's Making Your Team Spirit?



Figure 8.6.2: These protesters holding a banner that reads "USC Uses Sweatshops" seek to bring attention to the issue of sweatshop labor in producing clothing. (Anti-sweatshop protest at USC, Los Angeles by Cory Doctorow via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0)

Most of us don't pay too much attention to where our favorite products are made. And certainly when you're shopping for a college sweatshirt or ball cap to wear to a school football game, you probably don't turn over the label, check who produced the item, and then research whether or not the company has fair labor practices. But for the members of USAS—United

Students Against Sweatshops—that's exactly what they do. The organization, which was founded in 1997, has waged countless battles against both apparel makers and other multinational corporations that do not meet what USAS considers fair working conditions and wages. USAS also focuses on ensuring safe and non-exploitative conditions as well as improved pay and benefits for campus workers, including dining hall staff, security guards, and adjuncts (USAS 2021).

How do clothes get made, and why are garment workers among the most commonly mistreated? In many cases, large apparel companies—including Nike, Lululemon, H&M, Urban Outfitters (owner of Anthropologie and Free People), Zara, and most other major brands—outsource their manufacturing to factories around the world. The apparel companies negotiate prices and schedules with the local manufacturers, and often push for the lowest possible manufacturing cost and the fastest schedule. In order to keep up with demand and manufacture the clothing at the required cost, the factories may pay their employees less, force them to work longer hours, and may maintain unsafe conditions. All of those tactics are associated with sweatshop practices (Chan 2019). In response to action from organizations like USAS, many apparel companies have undertaken steps to ensure that the factories they use are treating workers properly, but in reality, it is very difficult to know for sure. Often, the brands work through subcontractors and subsidiaries, and may not know exactly which factories are producing their products.

Members of USAS helped form the Worker Rights Consortium (WRC), which monitors working conditions for a wide array of companies and their affiliated factories. WRC conducts regular reviews of worldwide manufacturing facilities and publishes the results. The WRC also studies and reports on overall economic conditions and their effect on employment. For example, in 2020, as the global economy went through a rapid downturn, apparel companies demanded lower prices while they also reduced their orders, which put workers at risk of exploitation or job loss (Karim 2020).

Consequences of Poverty

Not surprisingly, the consequences of poverty are often also causes. The poor often experience inadequate healthcare, limited education, and the inaccessibility of birth control. But those born into these conditions are incredibly challenged in their efforts to break out since these consequences of poverty are also causes of poverty, perpetuating a cycle of disadvantage.

According to sociologists Neckerman and Torche (2007) in their analysis of global inequality studies, the consequences of poverty are many. Neckerman and Torche have divided them into three areas. The first, termed "the sedimentation of global inequality," relates to the fact that once poverty becomes entrenched in an area, it is typically very difficult to reverse. As mentioned above, poverty exists in a cycle where the consequences and causes are intertwined. The second consequence of poverty is its effect on physical and mental health. Poor people face physical health challenges, including malnutrition and high infant mortality rates. Mental health is also detrimentally affected by the emotional stresses of poverty, with relative deprivation carrying the most robust effect. Again, as with the ongoing inequality, the effects of poverty on mental and physical health become more entrenched as time goes on. Neckerman and Torche's third consequence of poverty is the prevalence of crime. Cross-nationally, crime rates are higher, particularly for violent crime, in countries with higher levels of income inequality (Fajnzylber 2002).

Slavery

While most of us are accustomed to thinking of slavery in terms of the antebellum South, modern day slavery goes hand-in-hand with global inequality. In short, slavery refers to any situation in which people are sold, treated as property, or forced to work for little or no pay. Just as in the pre-Civil War United States, these humans are at the mercy of their employers. Chattel slavery, the form of slavery once practiced in the American South, occurs when one person owns another as property. Child slavery, which may include child prostitution, is a form of chattel slavery. In debt bondage, or bonded labor, the poor pledge themselves as servants in exchange for the cost of basic necessities like transportation, room, and board. In this scenario, people are paid less than they are charged for room and board. When travel is required, they can arrive in debt for their travel expenses and be unable to work their way free, since their wages do not allow them to ever get ahead.

The global watchdog group Anti-Slavery International recognizes other forms of slavery: human trafficking (in which people are moved away from their communities and forced to work against their will), child domestic work and child labor, and certain forms of servile marriage, in which women are little more than enslaved people (Anti-Slavery International 2012).

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8.7: Theoretical Perspectives

The Question of the "Why"

Sociologists use theory to move beyond description and ask deeper questions about inequality. Why are wealth, power, and prestige distributed unevenly within societies? How do work and the economy shape people's life chances? Why do some nations accumulate extraordinary wealth while others remain marginalized within the global system? Theory helps connect these questions by showing that stratification, labor, and global inequality are not separate issues, but interrelated dimensions of social life.

Even a familiar example such as professional sports can illustrate these patterns. Basketball is one of the highest-paying professional sports, yet stratification exists even among teams and players in the NBA. For example, the Toronto Raptors reportedly have one of the league's lowest annual payrolls, while the New York Knicks pay among the highest. Stephen Curry, a Golden State Warriors guard, has been one of the highest-paid athletes in the NBA, earning around $43 million a year (Sports Illustrated 2020), whereas the lowest-paid player earns just over $200,000 (ESPN 2021). Even within a single occupation or field, layers of ranking and inequality exist. Sociological theories help explain why.

Functionalist Perspective

From a functionalist perspective, society is composed of interdependent parts that work together to maintain stability and order. Functionalists examine how institutions such as the economy, education, and stratification contribute to the functioning of society as a whole. In this view, inequality is not necessarily seen as a problem in itself; instead, it may serve a purpose by helping allocate people to different social roles.

One of the best-known functionalist explanations of inequality is the Davis-Moore thesis. Davis and Moore argued that the greater the functional importance of a social role, the greater must be the reward attached to it (Davis and Moore 1945). According to this perspective, some jobs are more important to society than others, and some require more training, talent, or sacrifice. Because highly skilled positions are more difficult to fill, they must offer higher pay, greater prestige, or more power in order to motivate qualified people to pursue them.

This argument is often illustrated through comparisons across occupations. A functionalist might argue that a firefighter's job is rewarded differently from that of a grocery store cashier because firefighting requires more training, greater physical risk, and a higher degree of responsibility. Without the incentive of better pay, greater prestige, and stronger benefits, fewer people might be willing to prepare for and perform such work. In this sense, stratification is seen as a mechanism that encourages people to invest in demanding roles and helps society distribute labor efficiently.

Functionalists also apply this reasoning to the economy more broadly. Work and the economy are viewed as part of a larger social system designed to produce and distribute goods and services efficiently. The economy supports the health of society by coordinating agriculture, manufacturing, transportation, finance, and retail systems. From this perspective, the continued health of the economy is vital to the health of the nation.

At the same time, functionalists recognize that dysfunctions can occur when institutions fail to adapt to changing conditions. Robert Merton used the concept of dysfunction to refer to consequences that disrupt social institutions or organization (Merton 1968). Recessions, inflation, financial crises, and poorly regulated markets can undermine social stability and reveal weaknesses within economic institutions. Functionalists may view these moments as disruptions in an otherwise interdependent system.

Critics, however, argue that functionalism can naturalize inequality too easily. Melvin Tumin challenged the Davis-Moore thesis by arguing that it does not adequately explain inequalities rooted in education, race, or gender, and that stratification can actually prevent qualified people from attempting to fill important roles (Tumin 1953). In this sense, the system may not always reward the most talented or socially useful individuals, but instead reflect preexisting barriers to opportunity.

Conflict Perspective

Conflict theorists offer a sharply different interpretation. Rather than seeing inequality as functional or necessary, conflict theory

argues that stratification benefits some groups at the expense of others. This perspective focuses on power, domination, and the unequal distribution of resources. It asks who controls wealth, who performs the labor, and who benefits most from the existing organization of society.

Conflict theory is strongly shaped by the work of Karl Marx, who argued that capitalist societies are divided according to people's relationship to the means of production. In Marx's time, this meant a division between the bourgeoisie, who owned factories, businesses, and land, and the proletariat, who sold their labor in order to survive (Marx 1848). Marx argued that workers were oppressed by the bourgeoisie and experienced alienation, isolation, and misery as a result of their lack of power.

From this perspective, social stratification is not a neutral system for allocating talent. Instead, it reproduces class inequality and protects the interests of dominant groups. A conflict theorist would question why some occupations receive enormous rewards while others that are socially necessary remain undervalued. For example, a basketball player may be paid millions of dollars for a single season while a public school teacher may earn far less. To conflict theorists, such disparities are evidence that rewards are shaped less by collective social need than by power, profit, and market advantage.

Conflict theorists also see the economy as a site of struggle rather than harmony. In capitalist systems, owners accumulate wealth and power by benefiting from workers' labor. The economy is not primarily a source of stability, but a structure that reflects and reproduces inequality. This insight remains influential in analyses of contemporary capitalism, where employers, corporations, and investors often capture disproportionate rewards while many workers face low wages, insecurity, and limited control over their work.

This perspective can also be extended to global inequality. At the international level, wealthier countries and corporations often benefit from unequal labor arrangements, trade relationships, and access to global markets. Conflict approaches therefore help explain why inequality persists not only within nations but also across them. The concentration of wealth remains a central concern. As of 2010, 20 percent of Americans owned 90 percent of U.S. wealth (Domhoff 2014). While this may not resemble the rigid aristocracies of earlier periods, it is enough to lead many sociologists to question the idea that contemporary capitalist societies are true meritocracies.

Symbolic Interactionist Perspective

While functionalism and conflict theory focus on large-scale structures, symbolic interactionism examines inequality at the micro level of everyday life. Symbolic interactionists are interested in how people construct social reality through interaction and how status, work, and class are experienced, communicated, and interpreted in daily life.

One important insight of this perspective is that people tend to interact with others who occupy similar social positions. In many communities, people live, work, and socialize with others who share similar income levels, educational backgrounds, tastes, and lifestyles. Social stratification therefore shapes everyday relationships and social networks, not just institutional outcomes. The tendency for people of similar status to associate with one another reflects how deeply inequality is woven into ordinary life.

Symbolic interactionists also analyze the visible symbols of social standing. Housing, clothing, transportation, accessories, and personal style can all communicate status. Through these markers, people make assumptions about themselves and others. The symbolic dimensions of class matter because they influence how people are perceived and how they perceive themselves. In this sense, inequality is not only structured materially; it is also expressed culturally.

One concept often associated with this perspective is conspicuous consumption, the purchase and use of products in order to make a social statement about status. A luxury car, expensive sneakers, or fashionable eco-friendly accessories may function as symbols of wealth, aspiration, or prestige. These goods communicate messages that go beyond their practical use.

In the sociology of work, symbolic interactionism also highlights how occupations shape identity and socialization. The concept of career inheritance refers to the tendency of children to enter the same or similar occupations as their parents, a pattern supported by research (Antony 1998). Related to this is career socialization, the process of learning the norms and values of a particular occupation. Through family experiences and everyday interaction, individuals absorb assumptions about what kinds of jobs are desirable, attainable, or appropriate for people like them.

Symbolic interactionists are also interested in job satisfaction and workplace experience. Research suggests that workers are more likely to feel satisfied when they have some control over their work, participate in decision-making, experience freedom from surveillance, and feel integral to the outcomes of their labor (Kohn et al. 1990). By contrast, greater vulnerability to stress, higher levels of perceived risk, and more intense workplace pressure are associated with lower job satisfaction (Sunyal, Sunyal, and Yasin

2011). These findings show that inequality is not only about wages or prestige, but also about how work is lived, interpreted, and valued by workers themselves.

Explaining Global Dynamics: Modernization and Dependency Theories

When sociologists examine inequality at the global level, two influential theoretical approaches are modernization theory and dependency theory. Both attempt to explain why some countries are wealthier and more industrialized than others, but they differ sharply in how they understand the causes of global inequality.

According to modernization theory, low-income countries are affected by their lack of industrialization and can improve their global economic standing through (Armer and Katsillis 2010):

1. an adjustment of cultural values and attitudes to work
2. industrialization and other forms of economic growth

Critics point out the inherent ethnocentric bias of this theory. It supposes all countries have the same resources and are capable of following the same path. In addition, it assumes that the goal of all countries is to be as "developed" as possible. There is no room within this theory for the possibility that industrialization and technology are not the best goals.

There is, of course, some basis for this assumption. Data show that core nations tend to have lower maternal and child mortality rates, longer life spans, and less absolute poverty. It is also true that in the poorest countries, millions of people die from the lack of clean drinking water and sanitation facilities, which are benefits most of us take for granted. At the same time, the issue is more complex than the numbers might suggest. Cultural equality, history, community, and local traditions are all at risk as modernization pushes into peripheral countries. The challenge, then, is to allow the benefits of modernization while maintaining a cultural sensitivity to what already exists.

Dependency theory was created in part as a response to the Western-centric mindset of modernization theory. It states that global inequality is primarily caused by core nations (or high-income nations) exploiting semi-peripheral and peripheral nations (or middle-income and low-income nations), which creates a cycle of dependence (Hendricks 2010). As long as peripheral nations are dependent on core nations for economic stimulus and access to a larger piece of the global economy, they will never achieve stable and consistent economic growth. Further, the theory states that since core nations, as well as the World Bank, choose which countries to make loans to, and for what they will loan funds, they are creating highly segmented labor markets that are built to benefit the dominant market countries.

At first glance, it seems this theory ignores the formerly low-income nations that are now considered middle-income nations and are on their way to becoming high-income nations and major players in the global economy, such as China. But some dependency theorists would state that it is in the best interests of core nations to ensure the long-term usefulness of their peripheral and semi-peripheral partners. Following that theory, sociologists have found that entities are more likely to outsource a significant portion of a company's work if they are the dominant player in the equation; in other words, companies want to see their partner countries healthy enough to provide work, but not so healthy as to establish a threat (Caniels and Roeleveld 2009).

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8.8: Key Terms

Glossary

- **absolute poverty** | a level of deprivation so severe that day-to-day survival is in jeopardy
- **automation** | the replacement of workers by technology
- **bartering** | the exchange of goods or services without using money
- **capital flight** | the movement of capital, jobs, or other resources from one nation to another
- **capitalism** | an economic system based on private ownership and the pursuit of profit
- **career inheritance** | the tendency for children to enter the same or similar occupations as their parents
- **caste system** | a system of stratification in which people are born into a social position they retain for life
- **chattel slavery** | a form of slavery in which one person is treated as the property of another
- **class** | a social group that shares a similar status based on wealth, income, education, and occupation
- **class system** | a system of stratification based on social factors and individual achievement
- **class traits** | the typical behaviors, customs, and norms associated with a particular social class
- **closed system** | a stratification system that allows little or no change in social position
- **conspicuous consumption** | the purchase and display of goods to make a statement about social status
- **convergence theory** | a theory explaining how and why societies become more alike as their economies develop
- **core nations** | dominant capitalist countries that control a large share of global wealth and resources
- **Davis-Moore thesis** | the argument that some degree of social stratification is necessary and functional for society
- **debt accumulation** | the buildup of external debt as countries borrow money to finance growth or development
- **debt bondage** | a condition in which people pledge themselves as servants for money or passage and are paid too little to regain their freedom
- **dependency theory** | a theory arguing that global inequality results from the exploitation of peripheral and semi-peripheral nations by core nations
- **deindustrialization** | the decline or loss of industrial production, often as jobs move to lower-cost regions
- **depression** | a sustained recession affecting several sectors of the economy
- **downward mobility** | movement into a lower social class
- **economy** | the social institution through which a society manages the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services
- **endogamous marriages** | marriages between people within the same social category
- **exogamous unions** | unions between spouses from different social categories
- **extreme poverty** | a condition in which a person is barely able, or unable, to meet basic needs
- **first world** | a Cold War term referring to industrialized capitalist democracies
- **fourth world** | a term referring to stigmatized minority groups lacking voice or representation on the global stage
- **GINI coefficient** | a measure of income inequality, usually expressed on a scale from complete equality to extreme inequality
- **global assembly lines** | production processes in which goods are assembled through multiple international stages
- **global commodity chains** | internationally linked networks connecting workers, firms, and markets in the production and distribution of goods
- **global feminization of poverty** | the pattern in which women bear a disproportionate share of the burden of poverty
- **global inequality** | the unequal concentration of resources, wealth, and power across the world
- **global stratification** | the unequal distribution of wealth, power, and resources between countries
- **gross national income (GNI)** | the total income of a nation, including the value of goods and services produced and income earned by its citizens and corporations
- **ideology** | a system of beliefs that justifies a society's arrangement of stratification
- **income** | money earned from work, investments, or other sources
- **intergenerational mobility** | a change in social class between different generations of a family
- **intragenerational mobility** | a change in social position over the course of an individual's lifetime
- **market socialism** | a form of socialism that incorporates selected features of capitalism, such as limited private ownership or market signals
- **mechanical solidarity** | social cohesion based on shared work, values, and beliefs, common in simpler societies
- **mercantilism** | an economic policy based on accumulating wealth through trade controls, colonial extraction, and state regulation
- **meritocracy** | an ideal system in which social standing is based on personal effort and achievement
- **modernization theory** | a theory arguing that low-income countries can improve their economic standing through

industrialization and shifts in cultural attitudes toward work
- **money** | an object or medium that a society accepts as having value for exchange
- **mutualism** | a form of socialism in which individuals and cooperatives exchange goods through mutually satisfactory agreements
- **open system** | a stratification system based on achievement that allows movement between social levels
- **organic solidarity** | social cohesion based on mutual dependence created by the specialization of work
- **outsourcing** | the practice of contracting jobs or services to an outside provider, often in another country
- **peripheral nations** | nations on the margins of the global economy with low levels of industrialization and limited power
- **polarization** | the widening gap between high-end and low-end jobs, accompanied by a shrinking middle
- **primogeniture** | a law or custom in which inheritance passes to the firstborn son
- **recession** | two or more consecutive quarters of economic decline
- **relative poverty** | a condition in which a person lacks the resources needed to maintain the average standard of living in a society
- **second world** | a Cold War term referring to nations with moderate economies and standards of living, often associated with state socialism
- **semi-peripheral nations** | nations occupying an intermediate position in the global economy, serving as both producers and markets
- **social mobility** | the ability to move within a system of social stratification
- **social stratification** | a system that ranks people into categories based on wealth, power, prestige, or other valued resources
- **socialism** | an economic system based on government or collective ownership of the means of production and the goal of distributing work and wealth more equally
- **socioeconomic status (SES)** | an individual's position based on wealth, power, prestige, education, and occupation
- **standard of living** | the level of material comfort and goods available to support a particular lifestyle
- **status consistency** | the degree to which a person's rank is similar across categories such as wealth, power, and prestige
- **structural mobility** | a broad social change that allows an entire group of people to move up or down the class system
- **structural unemployment** | a mismatch between the jobs available in a society and the skills of the people seeking work
- **subjective poverty** | a condition in which people feel poor because their actual income does not meet their expectations
- **subsistence farming** | farming in which people grow only enough food to support themselves and their families
- **third world** | a Cold War term referring to poor, nonindustrialized countries
- **underemployment** | a condition in which a person works in a job below their skill, education, or experience level
- **underground economy** | an unregulated sphere of labor and exchange operating outside formal laws and protections
- **upward mobility** | movement into a higher social class
- **wealth** | the total value of money, property, and other assets a person owns
- **xenophobia** | an irrational fear or hostility toward foreigners or foreign goods

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8.9: Short Answer

Critical Thinking Questions

1. Track the social stratification of your family tree. Did the social standing of your parents differ from the social standing of your grandparents and great-grandparents? Are there any exogamous marriages in your history? Does your family exhibit status consistencies or inconsistencies?
2. Review the concept of stratification. Does your family have wealth? What is the overall family income? What kind of employment do your caregivers, parents, or guardians have? Where would you guess you fall within the social classes: low, middle, or high?
3. Where did your family grow up? What is their understanding of the American Dream and how you can achieve it? Does your family share the same understanding of stratification?
4. Which social class do you and your family belong to? Are you in a different or the same social class as your grandparents and great-grandparents? Why are you in the class you are? What changed? What stayed the same? Marriages? Acquisition of property? Education? Career changes? Reflect on your family's journey within the classes.
5. What class traits define your peer group? For example, what speech patterns or clothing trends do you and your friends share? What cultural elements, such as taste in music or hobbies, define your peer group? How do you see this set of class traits as different from other classes either above or below yours?
6. Write a list of ten to twenty class traits that describe the environment of your upbringing. Which of these seem like true class traits, and which seem like stereotypes? What items might fall into both categories? How do you imagine a sociologist might address the conflation of class traits and stereotypes?
7. What does it mean for a country to be seen as "underdeveloped"? What about "developed"? How does this shape our perception of the citizens within those countries?
8. Why is it important to understand and be aware of global stratification? Make a list of specific issues that are related to global stratification. For inspiration, turn on a news channel or read the newspaper. Next, choose a topic from your list and look at it more closely. Who is affected by this issue? How is the issue specifically related to global stratification?
9. Analyze the Davis-Moore thesis. Do you agree with Davis and Moore? Does social stratification have an important function in society? What examples can you think of that support the thesis? What examples can you think of that refute the thesis?
10. Consider social stratification from the symbolic interactionist perspective. How does social stratification influence the daily interactions of individuals? How do systems of class, based on factors such as prestige, power, income, and wealth, influence your own daily routines, as well as your beliefs and attitudes? Illustrate your ideas with specific examples and anecdotes from your own life and the lives of people in your community.
11. Consider the matter of rock-bottom prices at Walmart. What would a functionalist think of Walmart's model of squeezing vendors to get the absolute lowest prices so it can pass them along to core nation consumers?
12. Why do you think some scholars find Cold War terminology, such as "first world," objectionable?
13. Give an example of the feminization of poverty in core nations. How is it the same or different in peripheral nations?
14. Pretend you are a sociologist studying global inequality by looking at child labor manufacturing Barbie dolls in China. What do you focus on? How will you find this information? What theoretical perspective might you use?
15. Consider the concept of subjective poverty. Does it make sense that poverty is in the eye of the beholder? When you see a person who is homeless, is your reaction different if he or she is seemingly content versus begging? Why?
16. Think of people among your family, your friends, or your classmates who are relatively unequal in terms of wealth. What is their relationship like? What factors come into play?
17. Go to your campus bookstore or visit its website. Find out who manufactures apparel and novelty items with your school's insignias. In what countries are these produced? Conduct some research to determine how well your school adheres to the principles advocated by USAS.
18. There is much criticism that modernization theory is Eurocentric. Do you think dependency theory is also biased? Why, or why not?
19. Compare and contrast modernization theory and dependency theory. Which do you think is more useful for explaining global inequality? Explain, using examples.
20. Explain the difference between state socialism with central planning and market socialism.
21. In what ways can capitalistic and socialistic economies converge?
22. Describe the impact a rapidly growing economy can have on families.
23. How do you think the United States economy will change as we move closer to a technology-driven service economy?
24. What impact has globalization had on the music you listen to, the books you read, or the movies or television you watch?
25. What effect can immigration have on the economy of a developing country?

26. Is globalization a danger to local cultures? Why, or why not?
27. As polarization occurs in the U.S. job market, this will affect other social institutions. For example, if midlevel education will not lead to employment, we could see polarization in educational levels as well. Use the sociological imagination to consider what social institutions may be impacted, and how.
28. Do you believe we have a true meritocracy in the United States? Why, or why not?

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8.10: Further Research

Additional Learning Resources

- The U.S. Census Bureau provides an interactive tool for exploring income and social stratification in the United States. Using American Community Survey data, you can compare median income across demographic characteristics such as race, Hispanic origin, and age.
- Wealth, Shown to Scale is an interactive scrolling visualization especially useful for exploring social stratification, wealth concentration, inequality, and debates about the distribution of economic resources. **Note:** This resource may not be accessible to assistive technologies.
- The Pew Research Center Created an income calculator to determine people's socioeconomic classification according to state and income.
- Our World in Data's Global Economic Inequality page a wide range of data sources, narratives, and charts. While the sources should be verified before citing them in papers, the presentation offers a multifaceted picture of global inequality.
- To learn more about the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, visit the official website.
- To learn more about the existence and impact of global poverty, peruse the poverty and equity data portal.
- Students often think that the United States is immune to the atrocity of human trafficking. Check out the DOJ website to learn more about trafficking in the United States.
- For more information about the ongoing practices of slavery in the modern world take a look at the Anti-Slavery International website.
- For more information about economic modernization, check out the Hudson Institute.
- Learn more about economic dependency at the University of Texas Inequality Project. **Note:** This resource may not be accessible to assistive technologies.
- One alternative to traditional capitalism is to have the workers own the company for which they work. To learn more about company-owned businesses, visit the Employee Ownership Foundation website.
- The World Social Forum (WSF) was created in response to the creation of the World Economic Forum (WEF). The WSF is a coalition of organizations dedicated to the idea of a worldwide civil society and presents itself as an alternative to WEF, which it says is too focused on capitalism. Learn more about the WSF.
- The role of women in the workplace is constantly changing. To learn more, check out the U.S. Department of Labor's website.
- To see some jobs and employment trends for the next decade, check out the Employment Projections Program of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

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8.12: Accessible Text Descriptions

Figure 8.1: Roadmap

A horizontal instructional diagram titled “Stratification, Work, and Global Inequality as a Way of Understanding Power and Opportunity.” Beneath the title, three large light-gray arrows point from left to right. Each arrow contains a dark teal circle with white text organized around three guiding questions: why, who, and how.

The first circle is labeled “The ‘WHY’” and explains why the topic matters. Stratification, work, and global inequality shape people’s life chances, including access to work, housing, security, power, voice, and the ability to imagine and pursue future possibilities. The second circle is labeled “The ‘WHO’” and identifies those affected. These include workers, families, migrants, employers, policymakers, and communities in both wealthy and poor regions. The third circle is labeled “The ‘HOW’” and explains how sociologists study the topic.

They examine social structures, institutions, and historical forces, as well as labor, inequality, global patterns, and their effects on personal lives. Overall, the diagram presents stratification, work, and global inequality as interconnected ways of understanding how power and opportunity are distributed across societies and regions.

Figure 8.1.1: Interconnected Systems of Stratification

An infographic titled “Interconnected Systems of Stratification, Work, and Global Inequality” presents eight numbered stages arranged from left to right and connected by arrows. The sequence shows how individual opportunities and everyday consumption are linked to larger social and economic systems.

1. Family Background: An illustration of a family standing in front of a house represents the social and economic conditions into which people are born. Family resources can influence access to support, stability, and future opportunities.
2. Education: A graduation cap resting on books represents schooling and credentials. Educational access and quality are shaped partly by family background and can affect later opportunities.
3. Employment Opportunities: A briefcase represents access to jobs and careers. Education, social networks, discrimination, and labor-market conditions influence the kinds of employment available to different people.
4. Income and Security: Money, coins, and a shield represent earnings, savings, and protection from economic risk. Employment conditions affect income, financial stability, and the ability to meet basic needs.
5. Consumption: Shopping bags and a cart represent the goods and services people purchase. Consumption depends on income, but it also connects consumers to systems of production beyond their immediate communities.
6. Global Supply Chains: A cargo ship, shipping containers, and a globe represent the international networks through which goods are produced, transported, and sold.
7. Labor Conditions Abroad: A worker wearing a hard hat stands in front of a factory. This stage highlights the working conditions, wages, safety, and rights of people who produce goods in other countries.
8. Global Inequality: A globe, unequal bars, coins, and a money bag represent uneven distributions of wealth and opportunity across countries and populations.

A concluding statement at the bottom explains the main idea: individual opportunities and everyday consumption are shaped by interconnected systems of stratification, work, and global economic relations.

Figure 8.6.1: Human Development Index

A flow diagram explains how the Human Development Index (HDI) is calculated from three dimensions: a long and healthy life, knowledge, and a decent standard of living.

Under a long and healthy life, the indicator is life expectancy at birth. This measure is converted into a life expectancy index.

Under knowledge, two indicators are used: expected years of schooling and mean years of schooling. These measures are combined to produce an education index.

Under a decent standard of living, the indicator is gross national income per capita, adjusted for purchasing power parity and expressed in dollars. This measure is converted into a GNI index.

Arrows from the life expectancy index, education index, and GNI index point toward the Human Development Index (HDI). The diagram shows that HDI summarizes human development by combining health, educational attainment, and material living standards rather than relying on income alone.

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9: RACE AND ETHNICITY

Introduction

Race and ethnicity shape how people understand themselves, relate to others, and experience social institutions such as schools, workplaces, neighborhoods, healthcare systems, and the criminal legal system. Although people often talk about race as if it were simply biological, sociologists emphasize that race is socially constructed: societies create racial categories, give them meaning, and organize unequal access to resources, power, and belonging around them. Ethnicity, meanwhile, refers to shared cultural practices, ancestry, language, traditions, and collective identities that connect people to communities and histories.

This chapter examines race and ethnicity as both forms of identity and systems of social inequality. We will explore how prejudice, discrimination, racism, and intergroup relations operate at individual, institutional, and structural levels. We will also consider how racial and ethnic categories have changed over time, how they differ across societies, and how people resist inequality through social movements, cultural pride, coalition-building, and demands for justice.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- Define key concepts related to race, ethnicity, minority groups, prejudice, discrimination, and racism.
- Explain how sociologists understand race and ethnicity as socially constructed categories.
- Compare major theoretical perspectives on race and ethnicity, including functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism.
- Analyze how racism and discrimination operate at interpersonal, institutional, and structural levels.
- Evaluate examples of intergroup relations and racial inequality in the United States using sociological evidence and concepts.



Figure 9.1: Race and ethnicity shape life chances, everyday experiences, and patterns of inequality, while sociology helps us understand social change. (Marx Gomez-Liendo via ChatGPT). Access alternative description for Figure 9.1.

Why, Who, and How

Race and ethnicity continue to shape people's life chances, opportunities, and everyday experiences, even in societies that claim to value equality. We will study these topics sociologically by looking beyond individual attitudes and asking how history,

institutions, culture, and power create patterns of advantage and disadvantage. The chapter is about all of us: people who experience racism directly, people who benefit from racial privilege, people who belong to multiple racial or ethnic communities, and people who are still learning how these categories shape social life. By approaching race and ethnicity with care, evidence, and sociological imagination, we can better understand both inequality and the possibilities for social change.

9.1: Case Study and Vignette
9.2: Racial, Ethnic, and Minority Groups
9.3: Theoretical Perspectives on Race and Ethnicity
9.4: Prejudice, Discrimination, and Racism
9.5: Intergroup Relationships
9.6: Race and Ethnicity in the United States
9.7: Key Terms
9.8: Short Answer
9.9: Further Research
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9.1: Case Study and Vignette

Sociology of Race

The killing of Trayvon Martin became one of the most widely discussed cases in recent U.S. debates about race, policing, racial profiling, and the criminal legal system. Trayvon Martin was a seventeen-year-old Black teenager who was visiting family in Sanford, Florida, on February 26, 2012. That evening, he walked to a nearby convenience store to buy a snack. As he returned to the gated community where he was staying, George Zimmerman, a White Hispanic man and neighborhood watch coordinator, noticed him and called the police to report a "suspicious" person. Although the police dispatcher told Zimmerman not to follow Martin, Zimmerman continued to do so. Soon after, the two had a physical confrontation, and Zimmerman shot and killed Martin (CNN Library, 2021).

The case raised urgent sociological questions about how race shapes perception, suspicion, fear, and institutional response. Many people argued that Martin was racially profiled, meaning that race was used as a basis for suspicion rather than specific evidence of wrongdoing. Zimmerman was initially questioned by police but released under Florida's "Stand Your Ground" law. After weeks of public protest and national attention, a special prosecutor charged Zimmerman with second-degree murder. He was later found not guilty. The case became a major turning point in public conversations about anti-Black racism, racial profiling, neighborhood surveillance, and whether the legal system treats victims and defendants differently depending on race (CNN Library, 2021).

Racial Profiling

Trayvon Martin was walking back from a convenience store with a snack. He was not in a courtroom, a police station, or a political debate. He was simply moving through a residential community. Yet his presence was interpreted as suspicious.

From a sociological perspective, this moment invites us to ask: What made Trayvon Martin appear threatening to someone else? Was it his age, his clothing, his gender, his race, the neighborhood context, or a combination of these factors? Why are some bodies read as "out of place" in certain spaces? And how do these interpretations connect to larger patterns of racial inequality?

The case also shows how individual actions and institutional systems can overlap. Zimmerman's decision to follow Martin was an individual action, but it occurred within a larger social context: stereotypes about Black boys and men, neighborhood fears about crime, legal rules about self-defense, and a criminal legal system shaped by racial inequality. In this way, the killing of Trayvon Martin is not only about one encounter between two people. It is also about how race can influence perception, suspicion, public reaction, media coverage, policing, and legal outcomes.



Figure 9.1.1: Racial profiling can move from individual bias toward, for example, Black youth to institutional intervention, community protest, and wider public debate about racism, safety, and justice. (Marx Gomez-Liendo via ChatGPT). Access alternative description for Figure 9.1.1.

The Real Consequences of Social Construction

This case helps illustrate several concepts from this chapter. It connects to race as a social construction because the meaning attached to Martin's presence was not neutral; it was shaped by social ideas about race, danger, and belonging. It connects to prejudice and discrimination because racial stereotypes can influence how people interpret ordinary behavior. It connects to institutional racism because legal and policing systems may reproduce racial inequality even when individuals claim they are acting reasonably or without racist intent. Finally, it connects to intergroup relations because the public response to Martin's death revealed deep divisions in how different communities understand safety, justice, and racial inequality in the United States.

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9.2: Racial, Ethnic, and Minority Groups

What Is Race?

While many students first entering a sociology classroom are accustomed to conflating the terms “race,” “ethnicity,” and “minority group,” these three terms have distinct meanings for sociologists. The idea of race refers to superficial physical differences that a particular society considers significant, while ethnicity describes shared culture. And the term "minority groups" describe groups that are subordinate, or that lack power in society regardless of skin color or country of origin. For example, in modern U.S. history, the elderly might be considered a minority group due to a diminished status that results from popular prejudice and discrimination against them. Ten percent of nursing home staff admitted to physically abusing an elderly person in the past year, and 40 percent admitted to committing psychological abuse (World Health Organization 2011). In this chapter we focus on racial and ethnic minorities.

A human race is a grouping of humankind based on shared physical or social qualities that can vary from one society to another.

Historically, the concept of race has changed across cultures and eras, and has eventually become less connected with ancestral and familial ties, and more concerned with superficial physical characteristics. In the past, theorists developed categories of race based on various geographic regions, ethnicities, skin colors, and more. Their labels for racial groups have connoted regions or skin tones, for example.

German physician, zoologist, and anthropologist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752-1840) introduced one of the famous groupings by studying human skulls. Blumenbach divided humans into five races (MacCord 2014):

- Caucasian or White race: people of European, Middle Eastern, and North African origin
- Ethiopian or Black race: people of sub-Saharan Africans origin (sometimes spelled Aethiopian)
- Malayan or Brown race: people of Southeast Asian origin and Pacific Islanders
- Mongolian or Yellow race: people of all East Asian and some Central Asian origin
- American or Red race: people of North American origin or American Indians

Social Construction

Over time, descriptions of race like Blumenbach's have fallen into disuse, and the social construction of race is a more accepted way of understanding racial categories. Social science organizations including the American Association of Anthropologists, the American Sociological Association, and the American Psychological Association have all officially rejected explanations of race like those listed above. Research in this school of thought suggests that race is not biologically identifiable and that previous racial categories were based on pseudoscience; they were often used to justify racist practices (Omi and Winant 1994; Graves 2003). For example, some people used to think that genetics of race determined intelligence. While this idea was mostly put to rest in the later 20th Century, it resurged several times in the past 50 years, including the widely read and cited 1994 book, *The Bell Curve*. Researchers have since provided substantial evidence that refutes a biological-racial basis for intelligence, including the widespread closing of IQ gaps as Black people gained more access to education (Dickens 2006). This research and other confirming studies indicate that any generally lower IQ among a racial group was more about *nurture* than *nature*, to put it into the terms of the Socialization chapter.

While many of the historical considerations of race have been corrected in favor of more accurate and sensitive descriptions, some of the older terms remain. For example, it is generally unacceptable and insulting to refer to Asian people or Native American people with color-based terminology, but it is acceptable to refer to White and Black people in that way. In 2020, a number of publications announced that they would begin capitalizing the names of races, though not everyone used the same approach (Seipel 2020). This practice comes nearly a hundred years after sociologist and leader W.E.B. Du Bois drove newsrooms to capitalize "Negro," the widely used term at the time. And, finally, some members of racial groups (or ethnic groups, which are described below) "reclaim" terms previously used to insult them (Rao 2018). These examples are more evidence of the social construction of race, and our evolving relationships among people and groups.

What Is Ethnicity?

Ethnicity is sometimes used interchangeably with race, but they are very different concepts. Ethnicity is based on shared culture—the practices, norms, values, and beliefs of a group that might include shared language, religion, and traditions, among other commonalities. Like race, the term ethnicity is difficult to describe and its meaning has changed over time. And as with race, individuals may be identified or self-identify with ethnicities in complex, even contradictory, ways. For example, ethnic groups such as Irish, Italian American, Russian, Jewish, and Serbian might all be groups whose members are predominantly included in the "White" racial category. Ethnicity, like race, continues to be an identification method that individuals and institutions use today—whether through the census, diversity initiatives, nondiscrimination laws, or simply in personal day-to-day relations.

In some cases, ethnicity is incorrectly used as a synonym for national origin, but those constructions are technically different. National origin (itself sometimes confused with nationality) has to do with the geographic and political associations with a person's birthplace or residence. But people from a nation can be of a wide range of ethnicities, often unknown to people outside of the region, which leads to misconceptions. For example, someone in the United States may, with no ill-intent, refer to all Vietnamese people as an ethnic group. But Vietnam is home to 54 formally recognized ethnic groups.

Adding to the complexity: Sometimes, either to build bridges between ethnic groups, promote civil rights, gain recognition, or other reasons, diverse but closely associated ethnic groups may develop a "pan-ethnic" group. For example, the various ethnic groups and national origins of people from Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and adjoining nations, who may share cultural, linguistic, or other values, may group themselves together in a collective identity. If they do so, they may not seek to erase their individual ethnicities, but finding the correct description and association can be challenging and depend on context. The large number of people who make up the Asian American community may embrace their collective identity in the context of the United States. However, that embrace may depend on people's ages, and may be expressed differently when speaking to different populations (Park 2008). For example, someone who identifies as Asian American while at home in Houston may not refer to themselves as such when they visit extended family in Japan. In a similar manner, a grouping of people from Mexico, Central America and South America—often referred to as Latinx, Latina, or Latino—may be embraced by some and rejected by others in the group (Martinez 2019).

What Are Minority Groups?

Sociologist Louis Wirth (1945) defined a minority group as "any group of people who, because of their physical or cultural characteristics, are singled out from the others in the society in which they live for differential and unequal treatment, and who therefore regard themselves as objects of collective discrimination." The term minority connotes discrimination, and in its sociological use, the term subordinate group can be used interchangeably with the term minority group, while the term dominant group is often substituted for the group that represents rulers or is in the majority who can access power and privilege in a given society. These definitions correlate to the concept that the dominant group is that which holds the most power in a given society, while subordinate groups are those who lack power compared to the dominant group.

Note that being a numerical minority is not a characteristic of being a minority group; sometimes larger groups can be considered minority groups due to their lack of power. It is the lack of power that is the predominant characteristic of a minority, or subordinate group. For example, consider apartheid in South Africa, in which a numerical majority (the Black inhabitants of the country) were exploited and oppressed by the White minority.

According to Charles Wagley and Marvin Harris (1958), a minority group is distinguished by five characteristics: (1) unequal treatment and less power over their lives, (2) distinguishing physical or cultural traits like skin color or language, (3) involuntary membership in the group, (4) awareness of subordination, and (5) high rate of in-group marriage. Additional examples of minority groups might include the LGBTQ community, religious practitioners whose faith is not widely practiced where they live, and people with disabilities.

Scapegoat theory, developed initially from Dollard's (1939) Frustration-Aggression theory, suggests that the dominant group will displace its unfocused aggression onto a subordinate group. History has shown us many examples of the scapegoating of a subordinate group. An example from the last century is the way Adolf Hitler blamed the Jewish population for Germany's social and economic problems. In the United States, recent immigrants have frequently been the scapegoat for the nation's—or an individual's—woes. Many states have enacted laws to disenfranchise immigrants; these laws are popular because they let the dominant group scapegoat a subordinate group.

Multiple Identities



Figure 9.2.1: Golfer Tiger Woods has Chinese, Thai, African American, Native American, and Dutch heritage. Individuals with multiple ethnic backgrounds are becoming more common. (Tiger Woods by Tim Hipps via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY 4.0)

Prior to the twentieth century, racial intermarriage (referred to as miscegenation) was extremely rare, and in many places, illegal. While the sexual subordination of enslaved people did result in children of mixed race, these children were usually considered Black, and therefore, property. There was no concept of multiple racial identities with the possible exception of the Creole. Creole society developed in the port city of New Orleans, where a mixed-race culture grew from French and African inhabitants. Unlike in other parts of the country, “Creoles of color” had greater social, economic, and educational opportunities than most African Americans.

Increasingly during the modern era, the removal of miscegenation laws and a trend toward equal rights and legal protection against racism have steadily reduced the social stigma attached to racial exogamy (exogamy refers to marriage outside a person’s core social unit). It is now common for the children of racially mixed parents to acknowledge and celebrate their various ethnic identities. Golfer Tiger Woods, for instance, has Chinese, Thai, African American, Native American, and Dutch heritage; he jokingly refers to his ethnicity as “Cablinasian,” a term he coined to combine several of his ethnic backgrounds. While this is the trend, it is not yet evident in all aspects of our society. For example, the U.S. Census only recently added additional categories for people to identify themselves, such as non-White Hispanic. A growing number of people chose multiple races to describe themselves on the 2020 Census, indicating that individuals have multiple identities.

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9.3: Theoretical Perspectives on Race and Ethnicity

Functionalism

Functionalism emphasizes that all the elements of society have functions that promote solidarity and maintain order and stability in society. Hence, we can observe people from various racial and ethnic backgrounds interacting harmoniously in a state of social balance. Problems arise when one or more racial or ethnic groups experience inequalities and discriminations. This creates tension and conflict resulting in temporary dysfunction of the social system. For example, the killing of a Black man George Floyd by a White police officer in 2020 stirred up protests demanding racial justice and changes in policing in the United States. To restore the society's pre-disturbed state or to seek a new equilibrium, the police department and various parts of the system require changes and compensatory adjustments.

Another way to apply the functionalist perspective to race and ethnicity is to discuss the way racism can contribute positively to the functioning of society by strengthening bonds between in-group members through the ostracism of out-group members. Consider how a community might increase solidarity by refusing to allow outsiders access. On the other hand, Rose (1951) suggested that dysfunctions associated with racism include the failure to take advantage of talent in the subjugated group, and that society must divert from other purposes the time and effort needed to maintain artificially constructed racial boundaries. Consider how much money, time, and effort went toward maintaining separate and unequal educational systems prior to the civil rights movement.

In the view of functionalism, racial and ethnic inequalities must have served an important function in order to exist as long as they have. This concept, sometimes, can be problematic. How can racism and discrimination contribute positively to society? Nash (1964) focused his argument on the way racism is functional for the dominant group, for example, suggesting that racism morally justifies a racially unequal society. Consider the way slave owners justified slavery in the antebellum South, by suggesting Black people were fundamentally inferior to White and preferred slavery to freedom.

Interactionism

For symbolic interactionists, race and ethnicity provide strong symbols as sources of identity. In fact, some interactionists propose that the symbols of race, not race itself, are what lead to racism. Famed Interactionist Herbert Blumer (1958) suggested that racial prejudice is formed through interactions between members of the dominant group: Without these interactions, individuals in the dominant group would not hold racist views. These interactions contribute to an abstract picture of the subordinate group that allows the dominant group to support its view of the subordinate group, and thus maintains the status quo. An example of this might be an individual whose beliefs about a particular group are based on images conveyed in popular media, and those are unquestionably believed because the individual has never personally met a member of that group.

Another way to apply the interactionist perspective is to look at how people define their races and the race of others. Some people who claim a White identity have a greater amount of skin pigmentation than some people who claim a Black identity; how did they come to define themselves as Black or White?

Conflict Theory

Conflict theories are often applied to inequalities of gender, social class, education, race, and ethnicity. A conflict theory perspective of U.S. history would examine the numerous past and current struggles between the White ruling class and racial and ethnic minorities, noting specific conflicts that have arisen when the dominant group perceived a threat from the minority group. In the late nineteenth century, the rising power of Black Americans after the Civil War resulted in draconian Jim Crow laws that severely limited Black political and social power. For example, Vivien Thomas (1910–1985), the Black surgical technician who helped develop the groundbreaking surgical technique that saves the lives of "blue babies" was classified as a janitor for many years, and paid as such, despite the fact that he was conducting complicated surgical experiments. The years since the Civil War have showed a pattern of attempted disenfranchisement, with gerrymandering and voter suppression efforts aimed at predominantly minority neighborhoods.

Intersection Theory

Feminist sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (1990) further developed intersection theory, originally articulated in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw, which suggests we cannot separate the effects of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and other attributes (Figure 11.4). When we examine race and how it can bring us both advantages and disadvantages, it is important to acknowledge that the way we experience race is shaped, for example, by our gender and class. Multiple layers of disadvantage intersect to create the way we experience race. For example, if we want to understand prejudice, we must understand that the prejudice focused on a White woman because of her gender is very different from the layered prejudice focused on an Asian woman in poverty, who is affected by stereotypes related to being poor, being a woman, and her ethnic status.

Table 9.3.1: Intersecting systems of privilege and oppression

Systems of Power	Privilege	Oppression/Resistance
Genderism	Male and Masculine Female and Feminine	Gender "deviant"
Androcentrism	Male	Female
Racism	White	People of Color
Eurocentrism	European in Origin	Non-European
Heterosexism	Heterosexual	"Deviant" Sexualities
Ableism	Able-bodied	People diagnosed with disabilities
Elitism	Credentialed, highly literate	Nonliterate, uncredentialed
Aegism	Young	Old
Politics of Appearance	"Attractive"	"Unattractive"
Class Bias	Upper and Upper-middle class	Working Class, Poor
Language Bias	Anglophones	English as a Second Language
Colorism	Light, Pale	Dark
Religious Oppression	Majority Religion	Minority Religion
Pro-natalism	Fertile	Nonfertile / Infertile

Culture of Prejudice

Culture of prejudice refers to the theory that prejudice is embedded in our culture. We grow up surrounded by images of stereotypes and casual expressions of racism and prejudice. Consider the casually racist imagery on grocery store shelves or the stereotypes that fill popular movies and advertisements. It is easy to see how someone living in the Northeastern United States, who may know no Mexican Americans personally, might gain a stereotyped impression from such sources as Speedy Gonzalez or Taco Bell's talking Chihuahua. Because we are all exposed to these images and thoughts, it is impossible to know to what extent they have influenced our thought processes.

A Decolonial Perspective on Race and Ethnicity

Most introductory sociology chapters explain race and ethnicity by focusing on social construction, prejudice, discrimination, and inequality within a particular society. A decolonial perspective adds another layer. It asks us to connect race and ethnicity to the long history of colonialism, empire, slavery, capitalism, and global inequality. From this perspective, racism is part of a larger world system that has ranked people, cultures, languages, religions, economies, and ways of knowing for centuries.

Sociologist Ramón Grosfoguel (2011) argues that modern systems of power did not develop through economics alone. Colonialism created several connected hierarchies at the same time, including racial, gender, sexual, religious, linguistic, economic, political, and knowledge hierarchies. In other words, colonial power did not simply take land or labor; it also shaped whose lives were valued, whose cultures were respected, whose languages were treated as legitimate, and whose ideas counted as "real" knowledge. For Grosfoguel, race and racism are central to this global pattern because colonial societies often justified domination by portraying European peoples as superior and non-European peoples as inferior.

This approach helps us see that racial inequality is built into institutions, borders, schools, universities, labor markets, immigration systems, media, and global relations. For example, when a society treats Western European thinkers as "universal" while treating Indigenous, African, Asian, Latin American, or other knowledge traditions as "local," "cultural," or less theoretical, that is not just an academic choice. A decolonial perspective would ask how those choices reflect older colonial patterns of power. Grosfoguel calls attention to the importance of thinking from the perspectives of people and communities who have been historically marginalized, rather than only studying them from the outside.

This does not mean rejecting everything associated with Europe or the West. Grosfoguel is careful to say that decolonial thinking is not anti-European. Instead, it challenges the idea that any one tradition should define truth, knowledge, progress, or civilization for everyone else. A decolonial approach invites what he calls a more pluriversal way of thinking: not one universal story imposed on the world, but many critical perspectives in dialogue with one another. This means asking not only, "How do racial groups experience inequality?" but also, "Who gets to define society, history, knowledge, and justice in the first place?"

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9.4: Prejudice, Discrimination, and Racism

Basic Concepts

It is important to learn about stereotypes before discussing the terms prejudice, discrimination, and racism that are often used interchangeably in everyday conversation. Stereotypes are oversimplified generalizations about groups of people. Stereotypes can be based on race, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation—almost any characteristic. They may be positive (usually about one's own group) but are often negative (usually toward other groups, such as when members of a dominant racial group suggest that a subordinate racial group is stupid or lazy). In either case, the stereotype is a generalization that doesn't take individual differences into account.

Where do stereotypes come from? In fact, new stereotypes are rarely created; rather, they are recycled from subordinate groups that have assimilated into society and are reused to describe newly subordinate groups. For example, many stereotypes that are currently used to characterize new immigrants were used earlier in American history to characterize Irish and Eastern European immigrants.

Prejudice

Prejudice refers to the beliefs, thoughts, feelings, and attitudes someone holds about a group. A prejudice is not based on personal experience; instead, it is a prejudgment, originating outside actual experience. Recall from the chapter on Crime and Deviance that the criminalization of marijuana was based on anti-immigrant sentiment; proponents used fictional, fear-instilling stories of "reefer madness" and rampant immoral and illegal activities among Spanish-speaking people to justify new laws and harsh treatment of marijuana users. Many people who supported criminalizing marijuana had never met any of the new immigrants who were rumored to use it; the ideas were based in prejudice.

While prejudice is based in beliefs outside of experience, experience can lead people to feel that their prejudice is confirmed or justified. This is a type of confirmation bias. For example, if someone is taught to believe that a certain ethnic group has negative attributes, every negative act committed someone in that group can be seen as confirming the prejudice. Even a minor social offense committed by a member of the ethnic group, like crossing the street outside the crosswalk or talking too loudly on a bus, could confirm the prejudice.

While prejudice often originates outside experience, it isn't instinctive. Prejudice—as well as the stereotypes that lead to it and the discrimination that stems from it—is most often taught and learned. The teaching arrives in many forms, from direct instruction or indoctrination, to observation and socialization. Movies, books, charismatic speakers, and even a desire to impress others can all support the development of prejudices.

Discrimination

While prejudice refers to biased thinking, discrimination consists of actions against a group of people. Discrimination can be based on race, ethnicity, age, religion, health, and other categories. For example, discrimination based on race or ethnicity can take many forms, from unfair housing practices such as redlining to biased hiring systems. Overt discrimination has long been part of U.S. history. In the late nineteenth century, it was not uncommon for business owners to hang signs that read, "Help Wanted: No Irish Need Apply." And southern Jim Crow laws, with their "Whites Only" signs, exemplified overt discrimination that is not tolerated today.

Discrimination also manifests in different ways. The scenarios above are examples of individual discrimination, but other types exist. Institutional discrimination occurs when a societal system has developed with embedded disenfranchisement of a group, such as the U.S. military's historical nonacceptance of minority sexualities (the "don't ask, don't tell" policy reflected this norm).

While the form and severity of discrimination vary significantly, they are considered forms of oppression. Institutional discrimination can also include the promotion of a group's status, such in the case of privilege, which is the benefits people receive simply by being part of the dominant group.

Most people have some level of privilege, whether it has to do with health, ability, race, or gender. When discussing race, the

focus is often on White privilege, which is the societal privilege that benefits White people, or those perceived to be White, over non-White people in some societies, including the United States. Most White people are willing to admit that non-White people live with a set of disadvantages due to the color of their skin. But until they gain a good degree of self-awareness, few people are willing to acknowledge the benefits they themselves receive by being a part of the dominant group. Why not? Some may feel it lessens their accomplishments, others may feel a degree of guilt, and still others may feel that admitting to privilege makes them seem like a bad or mean person. But White (or other dominant) privilege is an institutional condition, not a personal one. It exists whether the person asks for it or not. In fact, a pioneering thinker on the topic, Peggy McIntosh, noted that she didn't recognize privilege because, in fact, it was not based in meanness. Instead, it was an "invisible weightless knapsack full of special provisions" that she didn't ask for, yet from which she still benefitted (McIntosh 1989). As the reference indicates, McIntosh's first major publication about White privilege was released in 1989; many people have only become familiar with the term in recent years.

Prejudice and discrimination can overlap and intersect in many ways. To illustrate, here are four examples of how prejudice and discrimination can occur. Unprejudiced nondiscriminators are open-minded, tolerant, and accepting individuals. Unprejudiced discriminators might be those who unthinkingly practice sexism in their workplace by not considering women or gender nonconforming people for certain positions that have traditionally been held by men. Prejudiced nondiscriminators are those who hold racist beliefs but don't act on them, such as a racist store owner who serves minority customers. Prejudiced discriminators include those who actively make disparaging remarks about others or who perpetuate hate crimes.

Racism

Racism is a stronger type of prejudice and discrimination used to justify inequalities against individuals by maintaining that one racial category is somehow superior or inferior to others; it is a set of practices used by a racial dominant group to maximize advantages for itself by disadvantaging racial minority groups. Such practices have affected wealth gap, employment, housing discrimination, government surveillance, incarceration, drug arrests, immigration arrests, infant mortality and much more (Race Forward 2021).

Broadly, individuals belonging to minority groups experience both individual racism and systemic racism during their lifetime. While reading the following some of the common forms of racism, ask yourself, “Am I a part of this racism?” “How can I contribute to stop racism?”

- Individual or Interpersonal Racism refers to prejudice and discrimination executed by individuals consciously and unconsciously that occurs between individuals. Examples include telling a racist joke and believing in the superiority of White people.
- Systemic Racism, also called structural racism or institutional racism, is systems and structures that have procedures or processes that disadvantages racial minority groups. Systemic racism occurs in organizations as discriminatory treatments and unfair policies based on race that result in inequitable outcomes for White people over people of color. For example, a school system where students of color are distributed into underfunded schools and out of the higher-resourced schools.
- Racial Profiling is a type of systemic racism that involves the singling out of racial minorities for differential treatment, usually harsher treatment. The disparate treatment of racial minorities by law enforcement officials is a common example of racial profiling in the United States. For example, a study on the Driver's License Privilege to All Minnesota Residents from 2008 to 2010 found that the percentage of Latinos arrested was disproportionally high (Feist 2013). Similarly, the disproportionate number of Black men arrested, charged, and convicted of crimes reflect racial profiling.
- Historical Racism is economic inequality or social disparity caused by past racism. For example, African-Americans have had their opportunities in wealth, education and employment adversely affected due to the mistreatment of their ancestors during the slavery and post-slavery period (Wilson 2012).
- Cultural Racism occurs when the assumption of inferiority of one or more races is built into the culture of a society. For example, the European culture is considered supposedly more mature, evolved and rational than other cultures (Blaut 1992). A study showed that White and Asian American students with high GPAs experience greater social acceptance while Black and Native American students with high GPAs are rejected by their peers (Fuller-Rowell and Doan 2010).
- Colorism is a form of racism, in which someone believes one type of skin tone is superior or inferior to another within a racial group. For example, if an employer believes a Black employee with a darker skin tone is less capable than a Black employee with lighter skin tone, that is colorism. Studies suggest that darker skinned African Americans experience more discrimination than lighter skinned African Americans (Herring, Keith, and Horton 2004; Klonoff and Landrine 2000).
- Color-Avoidance Racism (sometimes referred to as "colorblind racism") is an avoidance of racial language by European-Americans that the racism is no longer an issue. The U.S. cultural narrative that typically focuses on individual racism fails to recognize systemic racism. It has arisen since the post-Civil Rights era and supports racism while avoiding any reference to race (Bonilla-Silva (2015).

How to Be an Antiracist

Almost all mainstream voices in the United States oppose racism. Despite this, racism is prevalent in several forms. For example, when a newspaper uses people's race to identify individuals accused of a crime, it may enhance stereotypes of a certain minority. Another example of racist practices is racial steering, in which real estate agents direct prospective homeowners toward or away from certain neighborhoods based on their race.

Racist attitudes and beliefs are often more insidious and harder to pin down than specific racist practices. They become more complex due to implicit bias (also referred to as unconscious bias) which is the process of associating stereotypes or attitudes towards categories of people without conscious awareness – which can result in unfair actions and decisions that are at odds with one's conscious beliefs about fairness and equality (Osta and Vasquez 2021). For example, in schools we often see "honors" and "gifted" classes quickly filled with White students while the majority of Black and Latino students are placed in the lower track classes. As a result, our mind consciously and unconsciously starts to associate Black and Latino students with being less intelligent, less capable. Osta and Vasquez (2021) argue that placing the student of color into a lower and less rigorous track, we reproduce the inequity and the vicious cycle of structural racism and implicit bias continues.

If everyone becomes antiracist, breaking the vicious cycle of structural racism and implicit bias may not be far away. To be antiracist is a radical choice in the face of history, requiring a radical reorientation of our consciousness (Kendi 2019). Proponents of anti-racism indicate that we must work collaboratively within ourselves, our institutions, and our networks to challenge racism at local, national and global levels. The practice of anti-racism is everyone's ongoing work that everyone should pursue at least the following (Carter and Snyder 2020):

- Understand and own the racist ideas in which we have been socialized and the racist biases that these ideas have created within each of us.
- Identify racist policies, practices, and procedures and replace them with antiracist policies, practices, and procedures.

Anti-racism need not be confrontational in the sense of engaging in direct arguments with people, feeling terrible about your privilege, or denying your own needs or success. In fact, many people who are a part of a minority acknowledge the need for allies from the dominant group (Melaku 2020). Understanding and owning the racist ideas, and recognizing your own privilege, is a good and brave thing.

We cannot erase racism simply by enacting laws to abolish it, because it is embedded in our complex reality that relates to educational, economic, criminal, political, and other social systems. Importantly, everyone can become antiracist by making conscious choices daily. Being racist or antiracist is not about who you are; it is about what you do (Carter and Snyder 2020).

What does it mean to you to be an "anti-racist"? How do see the recent events or protests in your community, country or somewhere else? Are they making any desired changes?

What Counts as Knowledge?

When we think about racism, we often think first about individual prejudice, discrimination, hate crimes, or unequal treatment in institutions such as schools, workplaces, housing, policing, and healthcare. Grosfoguel (2013) asks us to look at another important area: knowledge itself. Who gets treated as an important thinker? Whose ideas are assigned in classes? Whose histories are considered central? Whose experiences are treated as evidence, and whose are dismissed as "opinion," "culture," or "just personal experience"?

Grosfoguel uses the term epistemic racism/sexism to describe the way systems of knowledge can rank some people, traditions, and worldviews as more legitimate than others. The word epistemic comes from epistemology, which refers to the study of knowledge: how we know what we know, what counts as evidence, and who is recognized as a producer of knowledge. From this perspective, racism can shape what societies define as "truth," "reason," "science," "theory," and "civilization."

A simple way to understand this is to think about a college syllabus. If most of the "classic" thinkers in a field come from a narrow group of European or Western male authors, students may begin to assume that these authors represent universal knowledge, while thinkers from Indigenous, African, Asian, Latin American, Middle Eastern, feminist, or other traditions are treated as secondary, specialized, or optional. Grosfoguel argues that this pattern is not accidental. He asks why many Westernized universities have treated knowledge produced by a few men from a small number of Western countries as if it were the main foundation for understanding the entire world.

This does not mean that students should reject European or Western thinkers. The point is to ask a more sociological question: Why have some thinkers been made central while others have been pushed to the margins? This decolonial approach encourages us to study knowledge as part of social power. Just as wealth, land, political rights, and legal protection have been distributed unequally, recognition as a “knower” or “theorist” has also been distributed unequally.

Grosfoguel connects this issue to a long history of colonial violence. He argues that colonialism did not only conquer land and exploit labor; it also attacked, erased, or devalued the knowledge systems of colonized and marginalized peoples. He uses the term epistemicide to describe the destruction or suppression of ways of knowing. For example, colonial systems often portrayed Indigenous knowledge, African knowledge, women’s knowledge, spiritual traditions, oral histories, and non-Western philosophies as inferior, irrational, primitive, or non-scientific. Over time, these judgments shaped schools, universities, archives, museums, and academic disciplines.

When some groups are mainly studied as “problems” while others are treated as the people who produce knowledge about those problems, inequality is being reproduced in subtle but powerful ways. For example, imagine a class on family, religion, politics, or medicine. Are Indigenous communities only mentioned as historical examples, or are Indigenous scholars included as theorists? Are African American communities only discussed in relation to inequality, or are Black intellectual traditions presented as sources of major sociological insight? Are Latin American, Asian, Arab, African, and Pacific Islander thinkers included only during special topics, or are they integrated into the main conversation? These questions help students see how race and ethnicity shape not only social life, but also the organization of knowledge.

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9.5: Intergroup Relationships

Group Dynamics on a Large Scale

Intergroup relations (relationships between different groups of people) range along a spectrum between tolerance and intolerance. The most tolerant form of intergroup relations is pluralism, in which no distinction is made between minority and majority groups, but instead there's equal standing. At the other end of the continuum are amalgamation, expulsion, and even genocide—stark examples of intolerant intergroup relations. The relationships between racial and ethnic groups are shaped by longer histories of conquest, slavery, migration, empire, and global inequality. These histories created social hierarchies that ranked groups by race, religion, language, culture, labor, and political power (Grosfoguel, 2011).

Pluralism

Pluralism is represented by the ideal of the United States as a "salad bowl": a great mixture of different cultures where each culture retains its own identity and yet adds to the flavor of the whole. True pluralism is characterized by mutual respect on the part of all cultures, both dominant and subordinate, creating a multicultural environment of acceptance. In reality, true pluralism is a difficult goal to reach. In the United States, the mutual respect required by pluralism is often missing, and the nation's past model of a melting pot posits a society where cultural differences aren't embraced as much as erased. A deeper form of pluralism requires respect for different histories, languages, cultural practices, and knowledge traditions. In this sense, diversity is not only about representation or visibility, but also about whether different communities have real power to shape institutions, define social problems, contribute knowledge, and participate as equals. This kind of pluralism asks society to move beyond simply "including" marginalized groups and toward taking their perspectives seriously as part of the shared production of knowledge and social life.

Assimilation

Assimilation describes the process by which a minority individual or group gives up its own identity by taking on the characteristics of the dominant culture. In the United States, which has a history of welcoming and absorbing immigrants from different lands, assimilation has been a function of immigration.

Most people in the United States have immigrant ancestors. In relatively recent history, between 1890 and 1920, the United States became home to around 24 million immigrants. In the decades since then, further waves of immigrants have come to these shores and have eventually been absorbed into U.S. culture, sometimes after facing extended periods of prejudice and discrimination. Assimilation may lead to the loss of the minority group's cultural identity as they become absorbed into the dominant culture, but assimilation has minimal to no impact on the majority group's cultural identity.

Some groups may keep only symbolic gestures of their original ethnicity. For instance, many Irish Americans may celebrate Saint Patrick's Day, many Hindu Americans enjoy a Diwali festival, and many Mexican Americans may celebrate *Cinco de Mayo* (a May 5 acknowledgment of the Mexican victory over the French Empire at the Battle of Puebla). However, for the rest of the year, other aspects of their originating culture may be forgotten.

Assimilation is antithetical to the "salad bowl" created by pluralism; rather than maintaining their own cultural flavor, subordinate cultures give up their own traditions in order to conform to their new environment. Sociologists measure the degree to which immigrants have assimilated to a new culture with four benchmarks: socioeconomic status, spatial concentration, language assimilation, and intermarriage. When faced with racial and ethnic discrimination, it can be difficult for new immigrants to fully assimilate. Language assimilation, in particular, can be a formidable barrier, limiting employment and educational options and therefore constraining growth in socioeconomic status.

Amalgamation

Amalgamation is the process by which a minority group and a majority group combine to form a new group. Amalgamation creates the classic "melting pot" analogy; unlike the "salad bowl," in which each culture retains its individuality, the "melting pot" ideal sees the combination of cultures that results in a new culture entirely.

Amalgamationin the form of miscegenation is achieved through intermarriage between races. In the United States, antimiscegenation laws, which criminalized interracial marriage, flourished in the South during the Jim Crow era. It wasn't until 1967's *Loving v. Virginia* that the last antimiscegenation law was struck from the books, making these laws unconstitutional.

Genocide

Genocide, the deliberate annihilation of a targeted (usually subordinate) group, is the most toxic intergroup relationship. Historically, we can see that genocide has included both the intent to exterminate a group and the function of exterminating of a group, intentional or not.

Possibly the most well-known case of genocide is Hitler's attempt to exterminate the Jewish people in the first part of the twentieth century. Also known as the Holocaust, the explicit goal of Hitler's "Final Solution" was the eradication of European Jewish people, as well as the destruction of other minority groups such as Catholics, people with disabilities, and LGBTQ people. With forced emigration, concentration camps, and mass executions in gas chambers, Hitler's Nazi regime was responsible for the deaths of 12 million people, 6 million of whom were Jewish. Hitler's intent was clear, and the high Jewish death toll certainly indicates that Hitler and his regime committed genocide. But how do we understand genocide that is not so overt and deliberate?

Genocide involves the attempted destruction of a people, but destruction can take more than one form. In addition to physical violence, dominant groups may also attack a community's language, religion, memory, education, land-based knowledge, and cultural traditions. The term epistemicide refers to the destruction or suppression of ways of knowing. For example, colonial violence against Indigenous communities often involved not only forced removal and death, but also the suppression of Indigenous languages, spiritual practices, ecological knowledge, and systems of education (Grosfoguel, 2013).

The treatment of the Native Americans by the European colonizers is an example of that. Some historians estimate that Native American populations dwindled from approximately 12 million people in the year 1500 to barely 237,000 by the year 1900 (Lewy 2004). European settlers coerced American Indians off their own lands, often causing thousands of deaths in forced removals, such as occurred in the Cherokee or Potawatomi Trail of Tears. Settlers also enslaved Native Americans and forced them to give up their religious and cultural practices. But the major cause of Native American death was neither slavery nor war nor forced removal: it was the introduction of European diseases and Native American lack of immunity to them. Smallpox, diphtheria, and measles flourished among indigenous American tribes who had no exposure to the diseases and no ability to fight them. Quite simply, these diseases decimated the tribes. The use of diseases as weapon was most likely unintentional in some cases and intentional in others. For example, during the Seven Years War, the British gave smallpox-infected blankets to the Native tribes in order to "reduce them," and this and similar practices likely continued throughout the centuries-long assault on the Native American people.

Genocide is not a just a historical concept; it is practiced even in the twenty- first century. For example, ethnic and geographic conflicts in the Darfur region of Sudan have led to hundreds of thousands of deaths. As part of an ongoing land conflict, the Sudanese government and their state-sponsored Janjaweed militia have led a campaign of killing, forced displacement, and systematic rape of Darfuri people. Although a treaty was signed in 2011, the peace is fragile.

More recently, Gaza has become a central case in global debates about genocide and international law. Although the immediate escalation followed the Hamas-led attacks on Israel on October 7, 2023, the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians long predates 2023. Gaza is part of the Palestinian territories occupied by Israel in 1967, and although Israel withdrew its settlements and permanent ground forces from Gaza in 2005, many international bodies and human rights organizations continue to describe Gaza as occupied because Israel has maintained significant control over its borders, airspace, coastline, movement of people and goods, and access to essential resources (Amnesty International, 2024). Since 2007, Gaza has also been under a blockade that has deeply restricted daily life for Palestinians. After October 7, Israel launched a large-scale military campaign in Gaza. Since then, Palestinian civilians have experienced mass death, forced displacement, destruction of homes, hospitals, schools, and infrastructure, and severe restrictions on humanitarian aid. South Africa brought a case against Israel at the International Court of Justice under the Genocide Convention. The Court has not issued a final ruling on whether genocide has occurred, but it ordered provisional measures requiring Israel to prevent acts covered by the Genocide Convention and to allow humanitarian assistance. Human rights organizations and a UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry have concluded that Israel's actions in Gaza amount to genocide, while Israel rejects that charge and argues that its military campaign is directed against Hamas, not Palestinians as a group (International Court of Justice, 2024). This case shows why genocide is not only a historical topic, but also a contemporary legal, political, and sociological question.

Expulsion

Expulsion refers to a subordinate group being forced, by a dominant group, to leave a certain area or country. It also reflects decisions about who is allowed to belong, who is treated as a threat, and who is denied protection by the dominant society. Historically, forced removal has often been tied to racial, religious, or colonial classifications that mark some groups as outsiders or obstacles. In this sense, expulsion is both a physical process and a symbolic one: it removes people from territory while also defining them as not fully part of the social or political community (Grosfoguel, 2011). As seen in the examples of the Trail of Tears and the Holocaust, expulsion can be a factor in genocide. However, it can also stand on its own as a destructive group interaction. Expulsion has often occurred historically with an ethnic or racial basis. In the United States, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066 in 1942, after the Japanese government's attack on Pearl Harbor. The Order authorized the establishment of internment camps for anyone with as little as one-eighth Japanese ancestry (i.e., one great-grandparent who was Japanese). Over 120,000 legal Japanese residents and Japanese U.S. citizens, many of them children, were held in these camps for up to four years, despite the fact that there was never any evidence of collusion or espionage. (In fact, many Japanese Americans continued to demonstrate their loyalty to the United States by serving in the U.S. military during the War.) In the 1990s, the U.S. executive branch issued a formal apology for this expulsion; reparation efforts continue today.

Segregation

Segregation refers to the physical separation of two groups, particularly in residence, but also in workplace and social functions. It is important to distinguish between *de jure* segregation (segregation that is enforced by law) and *de facto* segregation (segregation that occurs without laws but because of other factors). A stark example of *de jure* segregation is the apartheid movement of South Africa, which existed from 1948 to 1994. Under apartheid, Black South Africans were stripped of their civil rights and forcibly relocated to areas that segregated them physically from their White compatriots. Only after decades of degradation, violent uprisings, and international advocacy was apartheid finally abolished.

De jure segregation occurred in the United States for many years after the Civil War. During this time, many former Confederate states passed Jim Crow laws that required segregated facilities for Black and White people. These laws were codified in 1896's landmark Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which stated that "separate but equal" facilities were constitutional. For the next five decades, Black people were subjected to legalized discrimination, forced to live, work, and go to school in separate—but *unequal*—facilities. It wasn't until 1954 and the *Brown v. Board of Education* case that the Supreme Court declared that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal," thus ending *de jure* segregation in the United States.

De facto segregation, however, cannot be abolished by any court mandate. Few institutions desegregated as a result of *Brown*; in fact, government and even military intervention was necessary to enforce the ruling, and it took the Civil Rights Act and other laws to formalize the equality. Segregation is still alive and well in the United States, with different racial or ethnic groups often segregated by neighborhood, borough, or parish. Sociologists use segregation indices to measure racial segregation of different races in different areas. The indices employ a scale from zero to 100, where zero is the most integrated and 100 is the least. In the New York metropolitan area, for instance, the Black-White segregation index was seventy-nine for the years 2005–2009. This means that 79 percent of either Black or White people would have to move in order for each neighborhood to have the same racial balance as the whole metro region (Population Studies Center 2010).

It is important to note that separation can also happen within institutions of knowledge. For instance, some groups may be included in textbooks mainly as examples of "problems" or "minority experiences," while other groups are presented as the main producers of theory, science, history, and political thought. This creates an unequal relationship between those who are treated as objects of study and those who are recognized as authoritative knowers. In this way, racial and ethnic inequality can shape not only where people live or study, but also whose ideas are considered central (Grosfoguel, 2013).

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9.6: Race and Ethnicity in the United States

A Multi-Ethnic Society

When colonists came to the New World, they found a land that did not need "discovering" since it was already inhabited. While the first wave of immigrants came from Western Europe, eventually the bulk of people entering North America were from Northern Europe, then Eastern Europe, then Latin America and Asia. And let us not forget the forced immigration of enslaved Africans. Most of these groups underwent a period of disenfranchisement in which they were relegated to the bottom of the social hierarchy before they managed (for those who could) to achieve social mobility. Because of this achievement, the U.S. is still a "dream destination" for millions of people living in other countries. Many thousands of people, including children, arrive here every year both documented and undocumented. Most Americans welcome and support new immigrants wholeheartedly. For example, the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act introduced in 2001 provides a means for undocumented immigrants who arrived in the U.S. as children to gain a pathway to permanent legal status. Similarly, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) introduced in 2012 gives young undocumented immigrants a work permit and protection from deportation (Georgetown Law 2021). Today, the U.S. society is multicultural, multiracial and multiethnic that is composed of people from several national origins.

The U.S. Census Bureau collects racial data in accordance with guidelines provided by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB 2016). These data are based on self-identification; generally reflect a social definition of race recognized in this country that include racial and national origin or sociocultural groups. People may choose to report more than one race to indicate their racial mixture, such as "American Indian" and "White." People who identify their origin as Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish may be of any race. OMB requires five minimum categories: White, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. The U.S. Census Bureau's QuickFacts as of July 1, 2019 showed that over 328 million people representing various racial groups were living in the U.S. (Table 11.1).

Table 9.6.1: Percentage of Race and Hispanic Origin Population in 2019. Total US population estimate: 328,239,523 (Table courtesy of U.S. Census Bureau)

Race and Hispanic Origin	Percentage (%)
White alone	76.3
Black or African American alone	13.4
American Indian and Alaska Native alone	1.3
Asian alone	5.9
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone	0.2
Two or More Races	2.8
Hispanic or Latino	18.5
White alone, not Hispanic or Latino	60.1

To clarify the terminology in the table, note that the U.S. Census Bureau defines racial groups as follows:

- White – A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa.
- Black or African American – A person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa.
- American Indian or Alaska Native – A person having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America) and who maintains tribal affiliation or community attachment.
- Asian – A person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam.
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander – A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands.

Information on race is required for many Federal programs and is critical in making policy decisions, particularly for civil rights

including racial justice. States use these data to meet legislative redistricting principles. Race data also are used to promote equal employment opportunities and to assess racial disparities in health and environmental risks that demonstrates the extent to which this multiculturality is embraced. The many manifestations of multiculturalism carry significant political repercussions. The sections below will describe how several groups became part of U.S. society, discuss the history of intergroup relations for each faction, and assess each group's status today.

Native Americans

Native Americans are Indigenous peoples, the only nonimmigrant people in the United States. According to the National Congress of American Indians, Native Americans are "All Native people of the United States and its trust territories (i.e., American Indians, Alaska Natives, Native Hawaiians, Chamorros, and American Samoans), as well as persons from Canadian First Nations and Indigenous communities in Mexico and Central and South America who are U.S. residents (NCAI 2020, p. 11)." Native Americans once numbered in the millions but by 2010 made up only 0.9 percent of U.S. populace; see above (U.S. Census 2010). Currently, about 2.9 million people identify themselves as Native American alone, while an additional 2.3 million identify themselves as Native American mixed with another ethnic group (Norris, Vines, and Hoeffel 2012).

Sociology in the Real World: Sports Teams with Native American Names



Figure 9.6.1: Demonstrators challenge Native American mascots as racialized representations that reduce living communities to stereotypes and symbols of entertainment. One sign reads "We are not your mascots." Another states, "We are not a bygone people like the Vikings. We are here. We are now." A third reads "Be human." Another describes a racial slur as "a history of harm, not 'honor.'" One protester holds a sign featuring a crossed-out image associated with a Native American-themed sports logo and the words "I'm done." (Not Your Mascot by Fibonacci Blue via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY 4.0)

The sports world abounds with team names like the Indians, the Warriors, the Braves, and even the Savages and Redskins. These names arise from historically prejudiced views of Native Americans as fierce, brave, and strong: attributes that would be beneficial to a sports team, but are not necessarily beneficial to people in the United States who should be seen as more than that.

Since the civil rights movement of the 1960s, the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) has been campaigning against the use of such mascots, asserting that the "warrior savage myth . . . reinforces the racist view that Indians are uncivilized and uneducated and it has been used to justify policies of forced assimilation and destruction of Indian culture" (NCAI Resolution #TUL-05-087 2005). The campaign has met with limited success. While some teams have changed their names, hundreds of professional, college, and K–12 school teams still have names derived from this stereotype. Another group, American Indian Cultural Support (AICS), is especially concerned with the use of such names at K–12 schools, influencing children when they should be gaining a fuller and more realistic understanding of Native Americans than such stereotypes supply.

> After years of pressure and with a wider sense of social justice and cultural sensitivity, the Washington Football Team removed their offensive name before the 2020 season, and the Cleveland Major League Baseball team announced it would change its name after the 2021 season.
>
> What do you think about such names? Should they be allowed or banned? What argument would a symbolic interactionist make on this topic?

History of Intergroup Relations

Native American culture prior to European settlement is referred to as Pre-Columbian: that is, prior to the coming of Christopher Columbus in 1492. Mistakenly believing that he had landed in the East Indies, Columbus named the indigenous people "Indians," a name that has persisted for centuries despite being a geographical misnomer and one used to blanket hundreds of sovereign tribal nations (NCAI 2020).

The history of intergroup relations between European colonists and Native Americans is a brutal one. As discussed in the section on genocide, the effect of European settlement of the Americans was to nearly destroy the indigenous population. And although Native Americans' lack of immunity to European diseases caused the most deaths, overt mistreatment and massacres of Native Americans by Europeans were devastating as well.

From the first Spanish colonists to the French, English, and Dutch who followed, European settlers took what land they wanted and expanded across the continent at will. If indigenous people tried to retain their stewardship of the land, Europeans fought them off with superior weapons. Europeans' domination of the Americas was indeed a conquest; one scholar points out that Native Americans are the only minority group in the United States whose subordination occurred purely through conquest by the dominant group (Marger 1993).

After the establishment of the United States government, discrimination against Native Americans was codified and formalized in a series of laws intended to subjugate them and keep them from gaining any power. Some of the most impactful laws are as follows:

- The Indian Removal Act of 1830 forced the relocation of any Native tribes east of the Mississippi River to lands west of the river.
- The Indian Appropriation Acts funded further removals and declared that no Indian tribe could be recognized as an independent nation, tribe, or power with which the U.S. government would have to make treaties. This made it even easier for the U.S. government to take land it wanted.
- The Dawes Act of 1887 reversed the policy of isolating Native Americans on reservations, instead forcing them onto individual properties that were intermingled with White settlers, thereby reducing their capacity for power as a group.

Native American culture was further eroded by the establishment of boarding schools in the late nineteenth century. These schools, run by both Christian missionaries and the United States government, had the express purpose of "civilizing" Native American children and assimilating them into White society. The boarding schools were located off-reservation to ensure that children were separated from their families and culture. Schools forced children to cut their hair, speak English, and practice Christianity. Physical and sexual abuses were rampant for decades; only in 1987 did the Bureau of Indian Affairs issue a policy on sexual abuse in boarding schools. Some scholars argue that many of the problems that Native Americans face today result from almost a century of mistreatment at these boarding schools.

Current Status

The eradication of Native American culture continued until the 1960s, when Native Americans were able to participate in and benefit from the civil rights movement. The Indian Civil Rights Act of 1968 guaranteed Indian tribes most of the rights of the United States Bill of Rights. New laws like the Indian Self-Determination Act of 1975 and the Education Assistance Act of the same year recognized tribal governments and gave them more power. Indian boarding schools have dwindled to only a few, and Native American cultural groups are striving to preserve and maintain old traditions to keep them from being lost forever. Today, Native Americans are citizens of three sovereigns: their tribal nations, the United States, and the state in which they reside (NCAI 2020).

However, Native Americans (some of whom wish to be called American Indians so as to avoid the "savage" connotations of the term "native") still suffer the effects of centuries of degradation. Long-term poverty, inadequate education, cultural dislocation,

and high rates of unemployment contribute to Native American populations falling to the bottom of the economic spectrum. Native Americans also suffer disproportionately with lower life expectancies than most groups in the United States.

African Americans

As discussed in the section on race, the term African American can be a misnomer for many individuals. Many people with dark skin may have their more recent roots in Europe or the Caribbean, seeing themselves as Dominican American or Dutch American, for example. Further, actual immigrants from Africa may feel that they have more of a claim to the term African American than those who are many generations removed from ancestors who originally came to this country.

The U.S. Census Bureau (2019) estimates that at least 13.4 percent of the United States' population is Black.

How and Why They Came

African Americans are the exemplar minority group in the United States whose ancestors did not come here by choice. A Dutch sea captain brought the first Africans to the Virginia colony of Jamestown in 1619 and sold them as indentured servants. (Indentured servants are people who are committed to work for a certain period of time, typically without formal pay). This was not an uncommon practice for either Black or White people, and indentured servants were in high demand. For the next century, Black and White indentured servants worked side by side. But the growing agricultural economy demanded greater and cheaper labor, and by 1705, Virginia passed the slave codes declaring that any foreign-born non-Christian could be enslaved, and that enslaved people were considered property.

The next 150 years saw the rise of U.S. slavery, with Black Africans being kidnapped from their own lands and shipped to the New World on the trans-Atlantic journey known as the Middle Passage. Once in the Americas, the Black population grew until U.S.-born Black people outnumbered those born in Africa. But colonial (and later, U.S.) slave codes declared that the child of an enslaved person was also an enslaved person, so the slave class was created. By 1808, the slave trade was internal in the United States, with enslaved people being bought and sold across state lines like livestock.

History of Intergroup Relations

There is no starker illustration of the dominant-subordinate group relationship than that of slavery. In order to justify their severely discriminatory behavior, slaveholders and their supporters viewed Black people as innately inferior. Enslaved people were denied even the most basic rights of citizenship, a crucial factor for slaveholders and their supporters. Slavery poses an excellent example of conflict theory's perspective on race relations; the dominant group needed complete control over the subordinate group in order to maintain its power. Whippings, executions, rapes, and denial of schooling and health care were widely practiced.

Slavery eventually became an issue over which the nation divided into geographically and ideologically distinct factions, leading to the Civil War. And while the abolition of slavery on moral grounds was certainly a catalyst to war, it was not the only driving force. Students of U.S. history will know that the institution of slavery was crucial to the Southern economy, whose production of crops like rice, cotton, and tobacco relied on the virtually limitless and cheap labor that slavery provided. In contrast, the North didn't benefit economically from slavery, resulting in an economic disparity tied to racial/political issues.

A century later, the civil rights movement was characterized by boycotts, marches, sit-ins, and freedom rides: demonstrations by a subordinate group and their supporters that would no longer willingly submit to domination. The major blow to America's formally institutionalized racism was the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This Act, which is still important today, banned discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.

Current Status

Although government-sponsored, formalized discrimination against African Americans has been outlawed, true equality does not yet exist. The National Urban League's *2020 Equality Index* reports that Black people's overall equality level with White people has been generally improving. Measuring standards of civic engagement, economics, education, and others, Black people had an equality level of 71 percent in 2010 and had an equality level of 74 percent in 2020. The *Index*, which has been published since 2005, notes a growing trend of increased inequality with White people, especially in the areas of unemployment, insurance coverage, and incarceration. Black people also trail White people considerably in the areas of economics, health, and education (National Urban League 2020).

To what degree do racism and prejudice contribute to this continued inequality? The answer is complex. 2008 saw the election of this country's first African American president: Barack Obama. Despite being popularly identified as Black, we should note that President Obama is of a mixed background that is equally White, and although all presidents have been publicly mocked at times (Gerald Ford was depicted as a klutz, Bill Clinton as someone who could not control his libido), a startling percentage of the critiques of Obama were based on his race. In a number of other chapters, we discuss racial disparities in healthcare, education, incarceration, and other areas.

Although Black people have come a long way from slavery, the echoes of centuries of disempowerment are still evident.

Sociology in the Real World: Black People Are Still Seeking Racial Justice



Figure 9.6.2: This gathering at the site of George Floyd's death took place five days after he was killed. The location, at Chicago Avenue and 38th Street in Minneapolis, became a memorial. (Vigil for George Floyd by Fibonacci Blue via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY 4.0)

In 2020, racial justice movements expanded their protests against incidents of police brutality and all racially motivated violence against Black people. Black Lives Matter (BLM), an organization founded in 2013 in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman, was a core part of the movement to protest the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and other Black victims of police violence. Millions of people from all racial backgrounds participated in the movement directly or indirectly, demanding justice for the victims and their families, redistributing police department funding to drive more holistic and community-driven law enforcement, addressing systemic racism, and introducing new laws to punish police officers who kill innocent people.

The racial justice movement has been able to achieve some these demands. For example, Minneapolis City Council unanimously approved $27 million settlement to the family of George Floyd in March 2021, the largest pre-trial settlement in a wrongful death case ever for the life of a Black person (Shapiro and Lloyd, 2021). $500,000 from the settlement amount is intended to enhance the business district in the area where Floyd died. Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man, was arrested and murdered in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020. Do you think such settlement is adequate to provide justice for the victims, their families and communities affected by the horrific racism? What else should be done more? How can you contribute to bring desired changes?

Asian Americans

Asian Americans represent a great diversity of cultures and backgrounds. The experience of a Japanese American whose family has been in the United States for three generations will be drastically different from a Laotian American who has only been in the United States for a few years. This section primarily discusses Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese immigrants and shows the differences between their experiences. The most recent estimate from the U.S. Census Bureau (2019) suggest about 5.9 percent of the population identify themselves as Asian.

How and Why They Came

The national and ethnic diversity of Asian American immigration history is reflected in the variety of their experiences in joining U.S. society. Asian immigrants have come to the United States in waves, at different times, and for different reasons.

The first Asian immigrants to come to the United States in the mid-nineteenth century were Chinese. These immigrants were primarily men whose intention was to work for several years in order to earn incomes to support their families in China. Their main destination was the American West, where the Gold Rush was drawing people with its lure of abundant money. The construction of the Transcontinental Railroad was underway at this time, and the Central Pacific section hired thousands of migrant Chinese men to complete the laying of rails across the rugged Sierra Nevada mountain range. Chinese men also engaged in other manual labor like mining and agricultural work. The work was grueling and underpaid, but like many immigrants, they persevered.

Japanese immigration began in the 1880s, on the heels of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Many Japanese immigrants came to Hawaii to participate in the sugar industry; others came to the mainland, especially to California. Unlike the Chinese, however, the Japanese had a strong government that negotiated with the U.S. government to ensure the well-being of their immigrants. Japanese men were able to bring their wives and families to the United States, and were thus able to produce second- and third-generation Japanese Americans more quickly than their Chinese counterparts.

The most recent large-scale Asian immigration came from Korea and Vietnam and largely took place during the second half of the twentieth century. While Korean immigration has been fairly gradual, Vietnamese immigration occurred primarily post-1975, after the fall of Saigon and the establishment of restrictive communist policies in Vietnam. Whereas many Asian immigrants came to the United States to seek better economic opportunities, Vietnamese immigrants came as political refugees, seeking asylum from harsh conditions in their homeland. The Refugee Act of 1980 helped them to find a place to settle in the United States.

History of Intergroup Relations

Chinese immigration came to an abrupt end with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. This act was a result of anti-Chinese sentiment burgeoned by a depressed economy and loss of jobs. White workers blamed Chinese migrants for taking jobs, and the passage of the Act meant the number of Chinese workers decreased. Chinese men did not have the funds to return to China or to bring their families to the United States, so they remained physically and culturally segregated in the Chinatowns of large cities. Later legislation, the Immigration Act of 1924, further curtailed Chinese immigration. The Act included the race-based National Origins Act, which was aimed at keeping U.S. ethnic stock as undiluted as possible by reducing “undesirable” immigrants. It was not until after the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 that Chinese immigration again increased, and many Chinese families were reunited.

Although Japanese Americans have deep, long-reaching roots in the United States, their history here has not always been smooth. The California Alien Land Law of 1913 was aimed at them and other Asian immigrants, and it prohibited immigrants from owning land. An even uglier action was the Japanese internment camps of World War II, discussed earlier as an illustration of expulsion.

Current Status

Asian Americans certainly have been subject to their share of racial prejudice, despite the seemingly positive stereotype as the model minority. The model minority stereotype is applied to a minority group that is seen as reaching significant educational, professional, and socioeconomic levels without challenging the existing establishment.

This stereotype is typically applied to Asian groups in the United States, and it can result in unrealistic expectations by putting a stigma on members of this group that do not meet the expectations. Stereotyping all Asians as smart and capable can also lead to a lack of much-needed government assistance and to educational and professional discrimination.

Sociology in the Real World: Hate Crimes Against Asian Americans



Figure 9.6.3: In response to widespread attacks against Asian people, partly linked to incorrect associations regarding Asian people and the COVID-19 pandemic, groups around the country and world held Stop Asian Hate rallies like this one in Canada. One sign reads, "We Are Not a Virus, Hate Is." And another reads "Protect Asian Women." (Stop Asian Hate rally by GoToVan via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY 4.0)

Asian Americans across the United States experienced a significant increase in hate crimes, harassment and discrimination tied to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Community trackers recorded more than 3,000 anti-Asian attacks nationwide during 2020 in comparison to about 100 such incidents recorded annually in the prior years (Abdollah 2021). Asian American leaders have been urging community members to report any criminal incidents, demanding local law enforcement agencies for greater enforcement of existing hate-crime laws.

Many Asian Americans feel their communities have long been ignored by mainstream politics, media and entertainment although they are considered as a "model minority." Recently, Asian American journalists are sharing their own stories of discrimination on social media and a growing chorus of federal lawmakers are demanding actions. Do you think you can do something to stop violence against Asian Americans? Can any of your actions not only help Asian Americans but also wider people in the United States?

White Americans

White Americans are the dominant racial group in the United States. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2019), 76.3 percent of U.S. adults currently identify themselves as White alone. In this section, we will focus on German, Irish, Italian, and Eastern European immigrants.

Why They Came

White ethnic Europeans formed the second and third great waves of immigration, from the early nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. They joined a newly minted United States that was primarily made up of White Protestants from England. While most immigrants came searching for a better life, their experiences were not all the same.

The first major influx of European immigrants came from Germany and Ireland, starting in the 1820s. Germans came both for economic opportunity and to escape political unrest and military conscription, especially after the Revolutions of 1848. Many German immigrants of this period were political refugees: liberals who wanted to escape from an oppressive government. They were well-off enough to make their way inland, and they formed heavily German enclaves in the Midwest that exist to this day.

The Irish immigrants of the same time period were not always as well off financially, especially after the Irish Potato Famine of 1845. Irish immigrants settled mainly in the cities of the East Coast, where they were employed as laborers and where they faced

significant discrimination.

German and Irish immigration continued into the late 19th century and earlier 20th century, at which point the numbers for Southern and Eastern European immigrants started growing as well. Italians, mainly from the Southern part of the country, began arriving in large numbers in the 1890s. Eastern European immigrants—people from Russia, Poland, Bulgaria, and Austria-Hungary—started arriving around the same time. Many of these Eastern Europeans were peasants forced into a hardscrabble existence in their native lands; political unrest, land shortages, and crop failures drove them to seek better opportunities in the United States. The Eastern European immigration wave also included Jewish people escaping pogroms (anti-Jewish massacres) of Eastern Europe and the Pale of Settlement in what was then Poland and Russia.

History of Intergroup Relations

In a broad sense, German immigrants were not victimized to the same degree as many of the other subordinate groups this section discusses. While they may not have been welcomed with open arms, they were able to settle in enclaves and establish roots. A notable exception to this was during the lead up to World War I and through World War II, when anti-German sentiment was virulent.

Irish immigrants, many of whom were very poor, were more of an underclass than the Germans. In Ireland, the English had oppressed the Irish for centuries, eradicating their language and culture and discriminating against their religion (Catholicism). Although the Irish had a larger population than the English, they were a subordinate group. This dynamic reached into the New World, where Anglo-Americans saw Irish immigrants as a race apart: dirty, lacking ambition, and suitable for only the most menial jobs. In fact, Irish immigrants were subject to criticism identical to that with which the dominant group characterized African Americans. By necessity, Irish immigrants formed tight communities segregated from their Anglo neighbors.

The later wave of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe was also subject to intense discrimination and prejudice. In particular, the dominant group—which now included second- and third-generation Germans and Irish—saw Italian immigrants as the dregs of Europe and worried about the purity of the American race (Myers 2007). Italian immigrants lived in segregated slums in Northeastern cities, and in some cases were even victims of violence and lynching similar to what African Americans endured. They undertook physical labor at lower pay than other workers, often doing the dangerous work that other laborers were reluctant to take on, such as earth moving and construction.

Current Status

German Americans are the largest group among White ethnic Americans in the country. For many years, German Americans endeavored to maintain a strong cultural identity, but they are now culturally assimilated into the dominant culture.

There are now more Irish Americans in the United States than there are Irish in Ireland. One of the country's largest cultural groups, Irish Americans have slowly achieved acceptance and assimilation into the dominant group.

Myers (2007) states that Italian Americans' cultural assimilation is "almost complete, but with remnants of ethnicity." The presence of "Little Italy" neighborhoods—originally segregated slums where Italians congregated in the nineteenth century—exist today. While tourists flock to the saints' festivals in Little Italies, most Italian Americans have moved to the suburbs at the same rate as other White groups. Italian Americans also became more accepted after World War II, partly because of other, newer migrating groups and partly because of their significant contribution to the war effort, which saw over 500,000 Italian Americans join the military and fight against the Axis powers, which included Italy itself.

As you will see in the Religion chapter, Jewish people were also a core immigrant group to the United States. They often resided in tight-knit neighborhoods in a similar way to Italian people. Jewish identity is interesting and varied, in that many Jewish people consider themselves as members of a collective ethnic group as well as a religion, and many Jewish people feel connected by their ancestry as well as their religion. In fact, much of the data around the number of Jewish Americans is presented with caveats about different definitions and identifications of what it means to be Jewish (Lipka 2013).

As we have seen, there is no minority group that fits easily in a category or that can be described simply. While sociologists believe that individual experiences can often be understood in light of their social characteristics (such as race, class, or gender), we must balance this perspective with awareness that no two individuals' experiences are alike. Making generalizations can lead to stereotypes and prejudice. The same is true for White ethnic Americans, who come from diverse backgrounds and have had a great variety of experiences.

Social Policy and Debate: Thinking about White Ethnic Americans: Arab Americans



Figure 9.6.4: The Islamic Center of America in Dearborn, Michigan is the largest mosque, or Islamic religious place of worship, in the United States. (Islamic Center of America by Dane Hillard via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under ; author via source CC BY 4.0)

The first Arab immigrants came to this country in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They were predominantly Syrian, Lebanese, and Jordanian Christians, and they came to escape persecution and to make a better life. These early immigrants and their descendants, who were more likely to think of themselves as Syrian or Lebanese than Arab, represent almost half of the Arab American population today (Myers 2007). Restrictive immigration policies from the 1920s until 1965 curtailed immigration, but Arab immigration since 1965 has been steady. Immigrants from this time period have been more likely to be Muslim and more highly educated, escaping political unrest and looking for better opportunities.

The United States was deeply affected by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and racial profiling has proceeded against Arab Americans since then. Particularly when engaged in air travel, being young and Arab-looking is enough to warrant a special search or detainment. This Islamophobia (irrational fear of or hatred against Muslims) does not show signs of abating. Arab Americans represent all religious practices, despite the stereotype that all Arabic people practice Islam. Geographically, the Arab region comprises the Middle East and parts of North Africa (MENA). People whose ancestry lies in that area or who speak primarily Arabic may consider themselves Arabs.

The U.S. Census has struggled with the issue of Arab identity. The 2020 Census, as in previous years, did not offer a (MENA) category under the question of race. The US government rejected a push by Arab American advocates and organizations to add the new category, meaning that people stemming from the Arab region will be counted as "white" (Harb 2018). Do you think an addition of MENA category is appropriate to reduce prejudice and discrimination against Arab Americans? What other categories should be added to promote racial justice in the United States?

Hispanic Americans

The U.S. Census Bureau uses two ethnicities in collecting and reporting data: “Hispanic or Latino” and “Not Hispanic or Latino." Hispanic or Latino is a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race. Hispanic Americans have a wide range of backgrounds and nationalities.

The segment of the U.S. population that self-identifies as Hispanic in 2019 was recently estimated at 18.5 percent of the total (U.S. Census Bureau 2019). According to the 2010 U.S. Census, about 75 percent of the respondents who identify as Hispanic report being of Mexican, Puerto Rican, or Cuban origin. Remember that the U.S. Census allows people to report as being more than one ethnicity.

Not only are there wide differences among the different origins that make up the Hispanic American population, but there are also different names for the group itself. Hence, there have been some disagreements over whether Hispanic or Latino is the correct

term for a group this diverse, and whether it would be better for people to refer to themselves as being of their origin specifically, for example, Mexican American or Dominican American. This section will compare the experiences of Mexican Americans and Cuban Americans.

How and Why They Came

Mexican Americans form the largest Hispanic subgroup and also the oldest. Mexican migration to the United States started in the early 1900s in response to the need for inexepensive agricultural labor. Mexican migration was often circular; workers would stay for a few years and then go back to Mexico with more money than they could have made in their country of origin. The length of Mexico's shared border with the United States has made immigration easier than for many other immigrant groups.

Cuban Americans are the second-largest Hispanic subgroup, and their history is quite different from that of Mexican Americans. The main wave of Cuban immigration to the United States started after Fidel Castro came to power in 1959 and reached its crest with the Mariel boatlift in 1980. Castro's Cuban Revolution ushered in an era of communism that continues to this day. To avoid having their assets seized by the government, many wealthy and educated Cubans migrated north, generally to the Miami area.

History of Intergroup Relations

For several decades, Mexican workers crossed the long border into the United States, both "documented" and "undocumented" to work in the fields that provided produce for the developing United States. Western growers needed a steady supply of labor, and the 1940s and 1950s saw the official federal Bracero Program (*bracero* is Spanish for *strong-arm*) that offered protection to Mexican guest workers. Interestingly, 1954 also saw the enactment of "Operation Wetback," which deported thousands of illegal Mexican workers. From these examples, we can see the U.S. treatment of immigration from Mexico has been ambivalent at best.

Sociologist Douglas Massey (2006) suggests that although the average standard of living than in Mexico may be lower in the United States, it is not so low as to make permanent migration the goal of most Mexicans. However, the strengthening of the border that began with 1986's Immigration Reform and Control Act has made one-way migration the rule for most Mexicans. Massey argues that the rise of illegal one-way immigration of Mexicans is a direct outcome of the law that was intended to reduce it.

Cuban Americans, perhaps because of their relative wealth and education level at the time of immigration, have fared better than many immigrants. Further, because they were fleeing a Communist country, they were given refugee status and offered protection and social services. The Cuban Migration Agreement of 1995 has curtailed legal immigration from Cuba, leading many Cubans to try to immigrate illegally by boat. According to a 2009 report from the Congressional Research Service, the U.S. government applies a "wet foot/dry foot" policy toward Cuban immigrants; Cubans who are intercepted while still at sea will be returned to Cuba, while those who reach the shore will be permitted to stay in the United States.

Current Status

Mexican Americans, especially those who are here undocumented, are at the center of a national debate about immigration. Myers (2007) observes that no other minority group (except the Chinese) has immigrated to the United States in such an environment of legal dispute. He notes that in some years, three times as many Mexican immigrants may have entered the United States undocumented as those who arrived documented. It should be noted that this is due to enormous disparity of economic opportunity on two sides of an open border, not because of any inherent inclination to break laws. In his report, "Measuring Immigrant Assimilation in the United States," Jacob Vigdor (2008) states that Mexican immigrants experience relatively low rates of economic and civic assimilation. He further suggests that "the slow rates of economic and civic assimilation set Mexicans apart from other immigrants, and may reflect the fact that the large numbers of Mexican immigrants residing in the United States undocumented have few opportunities to advance themselves along these dimensions."

By contrast, Cuban Americans are often seen as a model minority group within the larger Hispanic group. Many Cubans had higher socioeconomic status when they arrived in this country, and their anti-Communist agenda has made them welcome refugees to this country. In south Florida, especially, Cuban Americans are active in local politics and professional life. As with Asian Americans, however, being a model minority can mask the issue of powerlessness that these minority groups face in U.S. society.

Social Policy and Debate: Arizona's Senate Bill 1070



Figure 9.6.5: Protesters in Minneapolis in solidarity to people's struggle in Arizona to dispute the harsh new anti-immigration law. (protest against Arizona immigrant law by Fibonacci Blue via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY 4.0)

As both legal and illegal immigrants, and with high population numbers, Mexican Americans are often the target of stereotyping, racism, and discrimination. A harsh example of this is in Arizona, where a stringent immigration law—known as SB 1070 (for Senate Bill 1070)—caused a nationwide controversy. Formally titled "Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act, the law requires that during a lawful stop, detention, or arrest, Arizona police officers must establish the immigration status of anyone they suspect may be here illegally. The law makes it a crime for individuals to fail to have documents confirming their legal status, and it gives police officers the right to detain people they suspect may be in the country illegally.

To many, the most troublesome aspect of this law is the latitude it affords police officers in terms of whose citizenship they may question. Having "reasonable suspicion that the person is an alien who is unlawfully present in the United States" is reason enough to demand immigration papers (Senate Bill 1070 2010). Critics say this law will encourage racial profiling (the illegal practice of law enforcement using race as a basis for suspecting someone of a crime), making it hazardous to be caught "Driving While Brown," a takeoff on the legal term Driving While Intoxicated (DWI) or the slang reference of "Driving While Black." Driving While Brown refers to the likelihood of getting pulled over just for being nonWhite.

SB 1070 has been the subject of many lawsuits, from parties as diverse as Arizona police officers, the American Civil Liberties Union, and even the federal government, which is suing on the basis of Arizona contradicting federal immigration laws (ACLU 2011). The future of SB 1070 is uncertain, but many other states have tried or are trying to pass similar measures. Do you think such measures are appropriate?

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9.7: Key Terms

Glossary

- **amalgamation** | the process by which a minority group and a majority group combine to form a new group
- **antiracist** | a person who opposes racism and acts for racial justice
- **assimilation** | the process by which a minority individual or group takes on the characteristics of the dominant culture
- **colorism** | the belief that one type of skin tone is superior or inferior to another within a racial group
- **culture of prejudice** | the theory that prejudice is embedded in our culture
- **discrimination** | prejudiced action against a group of people
- **dominant group** | a group of people who have more power in a society than any of the subordinate groups
- **ethnicity** | shared culture, which may include heritage, language, religion, and more
- **expulsion** | the act of a dominant group forcing a subordinate group to leave a certain area or even the country
- **genocide** | the deliberate annihilation of a targeted (usually subordinate) group
- **intersection theory** | theory that suggests we cannot separate the effects of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and other attributes
- **minority group** | any group of people who are singled out from the others for differential and unequal treatment
- **model minority** | the stereotype applied to a minority group that is seen as reaching higher educational, professional, and socioeconomic levels without protest against the majority establishment
- **pluralism** | the ideal of the United States as a "salad bowl:" a mixture of different cultures where each culture retains its own identity and yet adds to the "flavor" of the whole
- **prejudice** | biased thought based on flawed assumptions about a group of people
- **racial profiling** | the use by law enforcement of race alone to determine whether to stop and detain someone
- **racial steering** | the act of real estate agents directing prospective homeowners toward or away from certain neighborhoods based on their race
- **racism** | a set of attitudes, beliefs, and practices that are used to justify the belief that one racial category is somehow superior or inferior to others
- **redlining** | the practice of routinely refusing mortgages for households and business located in predominately minority communities
- **scapegoat theory** | a theory that suggests that the dominant group will displace its unfocused aggression onto a subordinate group
- **sedimentation of racial inequality** | the intergenerational impact of de facto and de jure racism that limits the abilities of Black people to accumulate wealth
- **segregation** | the physical separation of two groups, particularly in residence, but also in workplace and social functions
- **social construction of race** | the school of thought that race is not biologically identifiable
- **stereotypes** | oversimplified ideas about groups of people
- **subordinate group** | a group of people who have less power than the dominant group
- **systemic racism** | racism embedded in social institutions; also referred to as institutional racism and structural racism
- **White privilege** | the societal privilege that benefits White people, or those perceived to be White, over non-White people in some societies, including the United States

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9.8: Short Answer

Critical Thinking Questions

1. Why do you think the term “minority” has persisted when the word “subordinate” is more descriptive?
2. How do you describe your ethnicity? Do you include your family’s country of origin? Do you consider yourself multiethnic? How does your ethnicity compare to that of the people you spend most of your time with?
3. How do redlining and racial steering contribute to institutionalized racism?
4. Give an example of stereotyping that you see in everyday life. Explain what would need to happen for this to be eliminated.
5. Give three examples of White privilege. Do you know people who have experienced this? From what perspective?
6. What is the worst example of culture of prejudice you can think of? What are your reasons for thinking it is the worst?
7. Do you believe immigration laws should foster an approach of pluralism, assimilation, or amalgamation? Which perspective do you think is most supported by current U.S. immigration policies?
8. Which intergroup relation do you think is the most beneficial to the subordinate group? To society as a whole? Why?
9. In your opinion, which group had the easiest time coming to this country? Which group had the hardest time? Why?
10. Which group has made the most socioeconomic gains? Why do you think that group has had more success than others have?

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9.9: Further Research

Additional Learning Resources

- Explore aspects of race and ethnicity at PBS's video, "What Is Race?".
- Are you aware of your own or others' privilege? Watch a TED Talk on White privilege to explore the concept.
- Learn more about institutional racism at the Southern Poverty Law Center's website.
- Learn more about how prejudice develops by watching the short documentary "Eye of the Storm"
- So you think you know your own assumptions? Check and find out with the Implicit Association Test
- What do you know about the treatment of Australia's aboriginal population? Find out more by viewing the feature-length documentary *Our Generation*. **Note:** This video may not be accessible to people with visual or hearing impairments.
- Are people interested in reclaiming their ethnic identities? Read the article *The White Ethnic Revival* and decide.
- What is the current racial composition of the United States? Review up-to-the minute statistics at the United States Census Bureau.

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9.11: Accessible Text Descriptions

Figure 9.1: Roadmap

A horizontal instructional diagram titled “Race and Ethnicity as a Way of Understanding Inequality and Social Change.” Beneath the title, three large light-gray arrows point from left to right. Each arrow contains a dark teal circle with white text organized around three guiding questions: why, who, and how.

The first circle is labeled “The ‘WHY’” and explains why race and ethnicity matter. They shape people’s life chances, opportunities, everyday experiences, and exposure to equality or inequality.

The second circle is labeled “The ‘WHO’” and identifies who is involved. This includes people who experience racism, people who benefit from racial privilege, racial and ethnic communities, and everyone seeking to understand how these social processes operate.

The third circle is labeled “The ‘HOW’” and explains how sociologists study race and ethnicity. They examine history, institutions, culture, and power, using evidence to identify patterns of advantage, disadvantage, and social change.

Overall, the diagram presents race and ethnicity as social forces that influence opportunities and experiences while also providing a framework for analyzing inequality, privilege, and efforts toward social transformation.

Figure 9.1.1: Racial Profiling

An infographic titled “From Racial Profiling to Institutional Outcomes” presents six numbered stages arranged from left to right and connected by arrows.

1. Racial Stereotypes and Fear: A silhouette, a thought bubble containing several figures, and a warning symbol represent bias and racialized assumptions. The text explains that these assumptions shape how people perceive others.
2. Suspicion of Black Youth in Public or Semi-Private Spaces: A Black teenager wearing a backpack walks near homes and a store. The text states that an ordinary presence may be interpreted as suspicious.
3. Surveillance or Reporting to Authorities: A security camera and a cellphone symbolize monitoring, following, or calling authorities.
4. Police and Legal Decision-Making: A police badge, courthouse, and judge’s gavel represent formal institutional involvement. The text explains that institutional action can escalate an individual person’s suspicion.
5. Public Protest and Social Movement Response: A diverse group of demonstrators holds signs reading “Justice Now,” “No Justice No Peace,” and “End Racism.” The text states that communities mobilize against injustice.
6. Broader Debate About Racism, Safety, and Justice: Speech bubbles, scales of justice, and a group of people represent public discussion. The text explains that the event becomes part of a larger social conversation.

A concluding statement across the bottom summarizes the main point: racial profiling can move from individual perception to institutional outcomes, shaping public controversy and broader struggles over racism, safety, and justice.

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10: GENDER, SEX, AND SEXUALITY

Introduction

In this module, we will look at how sex, gender, and sexuality shape our everyday lives. We will explore what gender identity means, how it develops, and how society influences the roles people are expected to play. We will learn about different sexual orientations and gender expressions. We will delve deeper into inequality across institutions like family, education, and work. We will examine all of this through a sociological lens to understand how everything fits together in society.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- Explain how socialization shapes gender roles in the United States across different stages of life.
- Analyze how gender operates as a system of stratification within major American institutions (e.g., family, education, workplace, media).
- Apply sociological perspectives (functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism) to interpret issues related to gender and sexuality.
- Evaluate examples of gender inequality in the United States and their impact on individuals and groups.
- Differentiate and assess attitudes, identities, and issues related to sex, sexuality, and sex education in contemporary society.

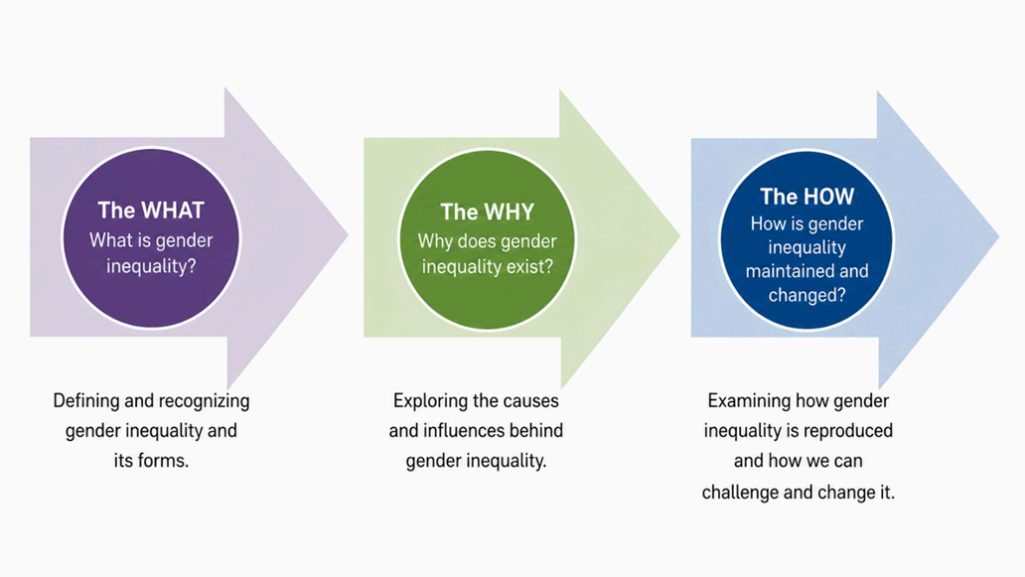


Figure 10.1: Defining gender inequality, recognizing the social forces that shape it, and analyzing how social institutions and collective action can either reproduce or challenge it are three critical areas of sociological exploration. (Jayanti Roy via ChatGPT). Access alternative description for Figure 10.1.

Why, Who, and How

This diagram provides a simple roadmap for understanding gender inequality by breaking the topic into three key parts. It begins with the “What,” helping you define and recognize what gender inequality looks like in everyday life and across institutions. It then moves to the “Why,” where you explore the social, cultural, and structural forces that create and sustain these inequalities. Finally, the “How” focuses on the ways gender inequality is maintained—and how individuals and societies can challenge and change it.

10.1: Case Study/Vignette
10.2: Sex, Gender, Identity, and Expression
10.3: Gender and Gender Inequality
10.4: Sexuality
10.5: Key Terms
10.6: Short Answer
10.7: Further Research
10.8: References
10.9: Accessible Text Description

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10.1: Case Study/Vignette

Gender Disparities

The fight for gender equality in sports has extended far beyond the playing field, drawing attention to long-standing disparities in pay, treatment, and opportunity. As public awareness grew around unequal compensation in international soccer, the U.S. Women's National Soccer Team emerged at the center of a landmark legal battle for equity. Their lawsuit against the U.S. Soccer Federation became a powerful symbol of collective action and resistance to institutional discrimination. The historic settlement reached in 2022 marked a significant step forward in the broader movement for gender justice and equal rights in sports.

US Women's Soccer



Figure 10.1.1: Elite women athletes compete at the highest level, yet gender pay disparities in sports show how compensation is shaped not only by performance but also by institutional investment, media exposure, sponsorship, and unequal valuations of women's labor. (Alex Morgan by Soccerfan1996 via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0)

After years of advocating for equal pay and fair treatment, the gender pay gap in international soccer became increasingly difficult to ignore. Reports showed that women competing in the FIFA World Cup earned only a fraction of what men received in prize money—at times as little as 25 cents for every dollar awarded to male players. Growing public awareness of these disparities led members of the U.S. Women's National Soccer Team (USWNT) to take legal action, filing a federal gender discrimination lawsuit against the U.S. Soccer Federation in March 2019.

Twenty-eight members of the USWNT alleged that they were consistently paid less than their male counterparts despite achieving greater success on the field. The timing of the lawsuit was particularly striking. The women had just won their second consecutive FIFA Women's World Cup championship in 2019, while the U.S. Men's National Team had failed to qualify for the 2018 FIFA World Cup. Despite the men's lack of success, their compensation remained significantly higher than that of the women's team. As the women celebrated their championship victory, stadiums filled with fans chanting, "Equal Pay!" transforming the issue into a national conversation about gender equity.

The lawsuit brought global attention to systemic gender inequality in sports, highlighting disparities not only in compensation but also in working conditions, travel accommodations, training resources, and overall institutional support. On February 22, 2022, the case concluded with a landmark settlement valued at $24 million. The agreement included $22 million in back pay for the players, to be distributed with court approval, along with a $2 million fund to support former players' educational, charitable, and post-career endeavors. More importantly, U.S. Soccer committed to equalizing pay and World Cup prize money between the men's and women's national teams in future collective bargaining agreements.

The outcome marked a historic milestone in the fight for gender equity in sports and serves as a powerful example of how collective action, advocacy, and organized resistance can challenge institutional discrimination and bring about meaningful social change. Why do you think gender pay disparities persisted despite the women's team's greater athletic success, and what does this reveal about societal values and gender norms?

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10.2: Sex, Gender, Identity, and Expression

Sex and Gender

When filling out a document such as a job application or school registration form, you are often asked to provide your name, address, phone number, birth date, and sex or gender. But have you ever been asked to provide your sex *and* your gender? Like most people, you may not have realized that sex and gender are not the same. However, sociologists and most other social scientists view them as conceptually distinct. Sex refers to physical or physiological differences between males and females, including both primary sex characteristics (the reproductive system) and secondary characteristics such as height and muscularity. Gender refers to behaviors, personal traits, and social positions that society attributes to being female or male.



Figure 10.2.1: While the biological differences between males and females are fairly straightforward, the social and cultural aspects of being a man or woman can be complicated. (Meeting at the Deans office by Saltrabook via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0).

A person's sex, as determined by their biology, does not always correspond with their gender. Therefore, the terms *sex* and *gender* are not interchangeable. A baby who is born with male genitalia will most likely be identified as male. As a child or adult, however, they may identify with the feminine aspects of culture. Since the term *sex* refers to biological or physical distinctions, characteristics of sex will not vary significantly between different human societies. Generally, persons of the female sex, regardless of culture, will eventually menstruate and develop breasts that can lactate. Characteristics of gender, on the other hand, may vary greatly between different societies. For example, in U.S. culture, it is considered feminine (or a trait of the female gender) to wear a dress or skirt. However, in many Middle Eastern, Asian, and African cultures, sarongs, robes, or gowns are considered masculine. The kilt worn by a Scottish man does not make him appear feminine in that culture.

The dichotomous or binary view of gender (the notion that someone is either male or female) is specific to certain cultures and is not universal. In some cultures gender is viewed as fluid. In the past, some anthropologists used the term *berdache* to refer to individuals who occasionally or permanently dressed and lived as a different gender. The practice has been noted among certain Native American tribes (Jacobs, Thomas, and Lang 1997). Samoan culture accepts what Samoans refer to as a "third gender." *Fa'afafine*, which translates as "the way of the woman," is a term used to describe individuals who are born biologically male but embody both masculine and feminine traits. Fa'afafines are considered an important part of Samoan culture. Individuals from other cultures may mislabel their sexuality because fa'afafines have a varied sexual life that may include men and women (Poasa 1992).

Social Policy and Debate: The Legalese of Sex and Gender

The terms *sex* and *gender* have not always been differentiated in the English language. It was not until the 1950s that U.S. and British psychologists and other professionals formally began distinguishing between sex and gender. Since then, professionals have increasingly used the term gender (Moi 2005). By the end of the twenty-first century, expanding the proper usage of the term *gender* to everyday language became more challenging—particularly where legal language is concerned. In an effort to clarify usage of the terms *sex* and *gender*, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia wrote in a 1994 briefing, "The word gender has acquired the new and useful connotation of cultural or attitudinal characteristics (as opposed to physical characteristics) distinctive to the sexes. That is to say, gender is to sex as feminine is to female and masculine is to male" (*J.E.B. v. Alabama*, 144 S. Ct. 1436 [1994]). Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg had a different take, however. She freely swapped them in her briefings so as to avoid having the word "sex" pop up too often. Ginsburg decided on this approach earlier in her career while she was arguing before the Supreme court; her Columbia Law School secretary suggested it to Ginsburg, saying that when "those nine men" (the Supreme Court justices), "hear that word and their first association is not the way you want them to be thinking" (Block 2020).

More recently, the word "sex" was a key element of the landmark Supreme Court case affirming that the Civil Rights Act's workplace protections applied to LGBTQ people. Throughout the case documents and discussions, the term and its meanings are discussed extensively. In his decision statement, Justice Neil Gorsuch wrote, "It is impossible to discriminate against a person for being homosexual or transgender without discriminating … based on sex" (Supreme Court 2020). Dissenting justices and commentators felt that Gorsuch and the other justices in the majority were recalibrating the original usage of the term. The arguments about the language itself, which occupy much of the Court's writings on the matter, are further evidence of the evolving nature of the words, as well as their significance.

Sexuality and Sexual Orientation

A person's sexuality is their capacity to experience sexual feelings and attraction. Studying sexual attitudes and practices is a particularly interesting field of sociology because sexual behavior and attitudes about sexual behavior have cultural and societal influences and impacts. As you will see in the Relationships, Marriage, and Family chapter, each society interprets sexuality and sexual activity in different ways, with different attitudes about premarital sex, the age of sexual consent, homosexuality, masturbation, and other sexual behaviors (Widmer 1998).

Definitions

Heterosexuality: the attraction to individuals of the other sex

Homosexuality: the attraction to individuals of the same sex

Bisexuality: the attraction to individuals of either sex

Asexuality: a lack of sexual attraction or desire for sexual contact

Pansexuality: an attraction to people regardless of sex, gender, gender identity, or gender expression

Omnisexuality: an attraction to people of all sexes, genders, gender identities, and gender expressions that considers the person's gender

Queer: an umbrella term used to describe sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression.

Other categories may not refer to a sexual attraction, but rather a romantic one. For example, an *aromantic* person does not experience romantic attraction; this is different from asexuality, which refers to a lack of sexual attraction. And some sexual orientations do not refer to gender in their description, though those who identify as having that orientation may feel attraction to a certain gender. For example, *demisexual* refers to someone who feels a sexual attraction to someone only after they form an emotional bond; the term itself doesn't distinguish among gender identities, but the person may feel attraction based on gender (PFLAG 2021). It is important to acknowledge and understand that many of these orientations exist on on a spectrum, and there may be no specific term to describe how an individual feels. Some terms have been developed to address this—such

as *graysexual* or *grayromantic*—but their usage is a personal choice (Asexual Visibility and Education Network 2021).

People who are attracted to others of a different gender are typically referred to as "straight," and people attracted to others of the same gender are typically referred to as "gay" for men and "lesbian" for women. As discussed, above, however, there are many more sexual and romantic orientations, so the term "gay," for example, should not be used to describe all of them. Proper terminology includes the acronyms LGBT and LGBTQ, which stands for “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender” (and “Queer” or “Questioning” when the Q is added). In other cases, people and organizations may add "I" to represent Intersex people (described below), and "A" for Asexual or Aromantic people (or sometimes for "Allies"), as well as one "P" to describe Pansexual people and sometimes another "P" to describe Polysexual people. Finally, some people and organizations add a plus sign (+) to represent other possible identities or orientations. Sexuality and gender terminology are constantly changing, and may mean different things to different people; they are not universal, and each individual defines them for themselves (UC Davis LGBTQIA Resource Center 2020). Finally, a person who does not fully understand all of these terms can still be supportive of people who have those orientations or others; in fact, advocacy and support organizations indicate it is much better to admit you don't know something than to make assumptions or apply an incorrect label to someone (GLAAD 2021).

While the descriptions above are evidence of a vast degree of diversity, the United States and many other countries are heteronormative societies, meaning many people assume heterosexual orientation is biologically determined and is the default or normal type of orientation. While awareness and acceptance of different sexual orientations and identities seems to be increasing, the influence of a heteronormative society can lead LGBTQ people to be treated like "others," even by people who do not deliberately seek to cause them harm. This can lead to significant distress (Boyer 2020). Causes of these heteronormative behaviors and expectations are tied to implicit biases; they can be especially harmful for children and young adults (Tompkins 2017).

There is not a wealth of research describing exactly when people become aware of their sexual orientation. According to current scientific understanding, individuals are usually aware of their sexual orientation between middle childhood and early adolescence (American Psychological Association 2008). They do not have to participate in sexual activity to be aware of these emotional, romantic, and physical attractions; people can be celibate and still recognize their sexual orientation, and may have very different experiences of discovering and accepting their sexual orientation. Some studies have shown that a percentage of people may start to have feelings related to attraction or orientation at ages nine or ten, even if these feelings are not sexual (Calzo 2018). At the point of puberty, some may be able to announce their sexual orientation, while others may be unready or unwilling to make their sexual orientation or identity known since it goes against society’s historical norms (APA 2008). And finally, some people recognize their true sexual orientation later in life—in their 30s, 40s, and beyond.

There is no scientific consensus regarding the exact reasons why an individual holds a specific sexual orientation. Research has been conducted to study the possible genetic, hormonal, developmental, social, and cultural influences on sexual orientation, but there has been no evidence that links sexual orientation to one factor (APA 2008). Alfred Kinsey was among the first to conceptualize sexuality as a continuum rather than a strict dichotomy of gay or straight. He created a six-point rating scale that ranges from exclusively heterosexual to exclusively homosexual. See the figure below. In his 1948 work *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, Kinsey writes, “Males do not represent two discrete populations, heterosexual and homosexual. The world is not to be divided into sheep and goats … The living world is a continuum in each and every one of its aspects” (Kinsey 1948). Many of Kinsey's specific research findings have been criticized or discredited, but his influence on future research is widely accepted.

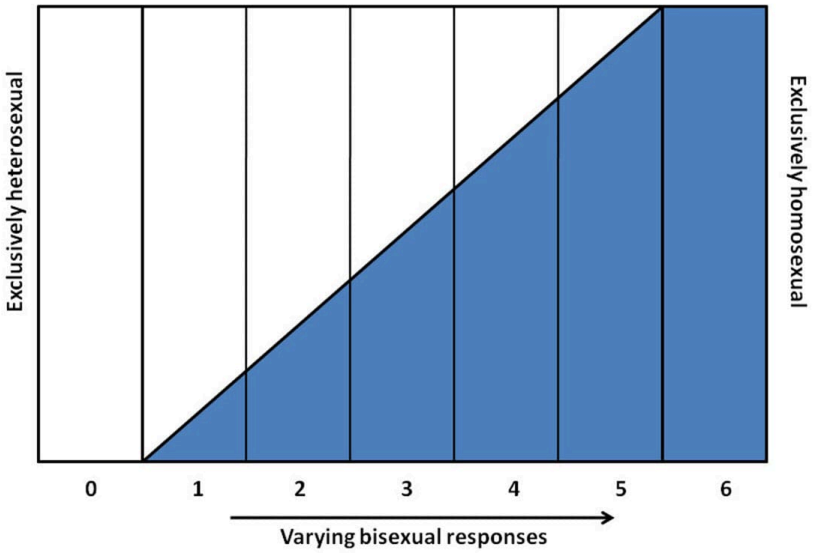


Figure 10.2.2: Simple stepped graphic showing six ascending stages increasing from left to right (Kinsey Scale by Unknown Author via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC 0 1.0). Access alternative description for Figure 10.2.2.

Later scholarship by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick expanded on Kinsey's notions. She coined the term "homosocial" to oppose "homosexual," describing nonsexual same-sex relations. Sedgwick recognized that in U.S. culture, males are subject to a clear divide between the two sides of this continuum, whereas females enjoy more fluidity. This can be illustrated by the way women in the United States can express homosocial feelings (nonsexual regard for people of the same sex) through hugging, handholding, and physical closeness. In contrast, U.S. males refrain from these expressions since they violate the heteronormative expectation that male sexual attraction should be exclusively for females. Research suggests that it is easier for women violate these norms than men, because men are subject to more social disapproval for being physically close to other men (Sedgwick 1985).

Because of the deeply personal nature of sexual orientation, as well as the societal biases against certain orientations, many people may question their sexual orientation before fully accepting it themselves. In a similar way, parents may question their children's sexual orientation based on certain behaviors. Simply viewing the many web pages and discussion forums dedicated to people expressing their questions makes it very clear that sexual orientation is not always clear. Feelings of guilt, responsibility, rejection, and simple uncertainty can make the process and growth very challenging. For example, a woman married to a man who recognizes that she is asexual, or a man married to a woman who recognizes that he is attracted to men, may both have extreme difficulty coming to terms with their sexuality, as well as disclosing it to others. At younger ages, similarly challenging barriers and difficulties exist. For example, adolescence can be a difficult and uncertain time overall, and feelings of different or changing orientation or nonconformity can only add to the challenges (Mills-Koonce 2018).

Gender Roles

As we grow, we learn how to behave from those around us. In this socialization process, children are introduced to certain roles that are typically linked to their biological sex. The term gender role refers to society's concept of how men and women are expected to look and how they should behave. These roles are based on norms, or standards, created by society. In U.S. culture, masculine roles are usually associated with strength, aggression, and dominance, while feminine roles are usually associated with passivity, nurturing, and subordination. Role learning starts with socialization at birth. Even today, our society is quick to outfit male infants in blue and girls in pink, even applying these color-coded gender labels while a baby is in the womb.

One way children learn gender roles is through play. Parents typically supply boys with trucks, toy guns, and superhero paraphernalia, which are active toys that promote motor skills, aggression, and solitary play. Daughters are often given dolls and dress-up apparel that foster nurturing, social proximity, and role play. Studies have shown that children will most likely choose to play with "gender appropriate" toys (or same-gender toys) even when cross-gender toys are available because parents give children positive feedback (in the form of praise, involvement, and physical closeness) for gender normative behavior (Caldera, Huston, and O'Brien 1998). As discussed in the Socialization chapter, some parents and experts become concerned about young people becoming too attached to these stereotypical gender roles.

The drive to adhere to masculine and feminine gender roles continues later in life, in a tendency sometimes referred to as

"occupational sorting" (Gerdeman 2019). Men tend to outnumber women in professions such as law enforcement, the military, and politics. Women tend to outnumber men in care-related occupations such as childcare, healthcare (even though the term “doctor” still conjures the image of a man), and social work. These occupational roles are examples of typical U.S. male and female behavior, derived from our culture’s traditions. Adherence to these roles demonstrates fulfillment of social expectations but not necessarily personal preference (Diamond 2002); sometimes, people work in a profession because of societal pressure and/or the opportunities afforded to them based on their gender.

Historically, women have had difficulty shedding the expectation that they cannot be a "good mother" and a "good worker" at the same time, which results in fewer opportunities and lower levels of pay (Ogden 2019). Generally, men do not share this difficulty: Since the assumed role of a men as a fathers does not seem to conflict with their perceived work role, men who are fathers (or who are expected to become fathers) do not face the same barriers to employment or promotion (González 2019). This is sometimes referred to as the "motherhood penalty" versus the "fatherhood premium," and is prevalent in many higher income countries (Bygren 2017). These concepts and their financial and societal implications will be revisited later in the chapter.

Gender Identity

U.S. society allows for some level of flexibility when it comes to acting out gender roles. To a certain extent, men can assume some feminine roles and women can assume some masculine roles without interfering with their gender identity. Gender identity is a person’s deeply held internal perception of one's gender.

Transgender people's sex assigned at birth and their gender identity are not necessarily the same. A transgender woman is a person who was assigned male at birth but who identifies and/or lives as a woman; a transgender man was assigned female at birth but lives as a man. While determining the size of the transgender population is difficult, it is estimated that 1.4 million adults (Herman 2016) and 2 percent of high school students in the U.S. identify as transgender (Johns 2019). The term "transgender" does not indicate sexual orientation or a particular gender expression, and we should avoid making assumptions about people's sexual orientation based on knowledge about their gender identity (GLAAD 2021).



Figure 10.2.3: Actress Laverne Cox is the first openly transgender person to play a transgender character on a major show. She won a producing Emmy and was nominated four times for the Best Actress Emmy. She is also an advocate for LGBTQ issues outside of her career, such as in this "Ain't I a Woman?" speaking tour. (Laverne Cox by KOMUnews via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY 4.0)

Some transgender individuals may undertake a process of transition, in which they move from living in a way that is more aligned with the sex assigned at birth to living in a way that is aligned with their gender identity. Transitioning may take the form of social, legal or medical aspects of someone's life, but not everyone undertakes any or all types of transition. Social transition may involve the person's presentation, name, pronouns, and relationships. Legal transition can include changing their gender on government or other official documents, changing their legal name, and so on. Some people may undergo a physical or medical transition, in which they change their outward, physical, or sexual characteristics in order for their physical being to better align with their gender identity (UCSF Transgender Care 2019). Not all transgender individuals choose to alter their bodies: many will maintain their original anatomy but may present themselves to society as another gender. This is typically done by adopting the

dress, hairstyle, mannerisms, or other characteristic typically assigned to another gender. It is important to note that people who cross-dress, or wear clothing that is traditionally assigned to a gender different from their biological sex, are not necessarily transgender. Cross-dressing is typically a form of self-expression or personal style, and it does not indicate a person's gender identity or that they are transgender (TSER 2021).

There is no single, conclusive explanation for why people are transgender. Transgender expressions and experiences are so diverse that it is difficult to identify their origin. Some hypotheses suggest biological factors such as genetics or prenatal hormone levels as well as social and cultural factors such as childhood and adulthood experiences. Most experts believe that all of these factors contribute to a person's gender identity (APA 2008).

Intersex is a general term used to describe people whose sex traits, reproductive anatomy, hormones, or chromosomes are different from the usual two ways human bodies develop. Some intersex traits are recognized at birth, while others are not recognizable until puberty or later in life (interACT 2021). While some intersex people have physically recognizable features that are described by specific medical terms, intersex people and newborns are healthy. Most in the medical and intersex community reject unnecessary surgeries intended to make a baby conform to a specific gender assignment; medical ethicists indicate that any surgery to alter intersex characteristics or traits—if desired—should be delayed until an individual can decide for themselves (Behrens 2021). If a physical trait or medical condition prohibits a baby from urinating or performing another bodily function (which is very rare), then a medical procedure such as surgery will be needed; in other cases, hormonal issues related to intersex characteristics may require medical intervention. Intersex and transgender are not interchangeable terms; many transgender people have no intersex traits, and many intersex people do not consider themselves transgender. Some intersex people believe that intersex people should be included within the LGBTQ community, while others do not (Koyama n.d.).

Those who identify with the sex they were assigned at birth are often referred to as *cisgender*, utilizing the Latin prefix "cis," which means "on the same side." (The prefix "trans" means "across.") Because they are in the majority and do not have a potential component to transition, many cisgender people do not self-identify as such. As with transgender people, the term or usage of cisgender does not indicate a person's sexual orientation, gender, or gender expression (TSER 2021). And as many societies are heteronormative, they are also *cisnormative*, which is the assumption or expectation that everyone is cisgender, and that anything other than cisgender is not normal. The language of sexuality, sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression is continually changing and evolving.

When individuals do not feel comfortable identifying with the gender associated with their biological sex, then they may experience gender dysphoria. Gender dysphoria is a diagnostic category in the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5) that describes individuals who do not identify as the gender that most people would assume they are. This dysphoria must persist for at least six months and result in significant distress or dysfunction to meet DSM-5 diagnostic criteria. In order for children to be assigned this diagnostic category, they must verbalize their desire to become the other gender. It is important to note that not all transgender people experience gender dysphoria, and that its diagnostic categorization is not universally accepted. For example, in 2019, the World Health Organization reclassified "gender identity disorder" as "gender incongruence," and categorized it under sexual health rather than a mental disorder. However, health and mental health professionals indicate that the presence of the diagnostic category does assist in supporting those who need treatment or help.

People become aware that they may be transgender at different ages. Even if someone does not have a full (or even partial) understanding of gender terminology and its implications, they can still develop an awareness that their gender assigned at birth does not align with their gender identity. Society, particularly in the United States, has been reluctant to accept transgender identities at any age, but we have particular difficulty accepting those identities in children. Many people feel that children are too young to understand their feelings, and that they may "grow out of it." And it is true that some children who verbalize their identification or desire to live as another gender may ultimately decide to live in alignment with their assigned gender. But if a child consistently describes themselves as a gender (or as both genders) and/or expresses themselves as that gender over a long period of time, their feelings cannot be attributed to going through a "phase" (Mayo Clinic 2021).

Some children, like many transgender people, may feel pressure to conform to social norms, which may lead them to suppress or hide their identity. Experts find evidence of gender dysphoria—the long-term distress associated with gender identification—in children as young as seven (Zaliznyak 2020). Again, most children have a limited understanding of the social and societal impacts of being transgender, but they can feel strongly that they are not aligned with their assigned sex. And considering that many transgender people do not come out or begin to transition until much later in life—well into their twenties—they may live for a long time under that distress.

Discrimination Against LGBTQ people

Recall from the chapter on Crime and Deviance that the FBI's hate crime data indicates that crimes against LGBTQ people have been increasing, and that those crimes account for nearly one in five hate crimes committed in the United States (FBI 2020). While the disbanding of anti-LGBTQ laws in the United States has reduced government or law enforcement oppression or abuse, it has not eliminated it. In other countries, however, LGBTQ people can face even more danger. Reports from the United Nations, Human Rights Watch, and the International Lesbian, Gay, Trans, and Intersex Association (ILGA) indicate that many countries impose penalties for same-sex relationships, gender noncomformity, and other acts deemed opposed to the cultural or religious observances of the nation. As of 2020, six United Nations members imposed the death penalty for consensual same-sex acts, and another 61 countries penalized same sex acts, through jail time, corporal punishment (such as lashing), or other measures. These countries include prominent United States allies such as the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia (both of which can legally impose the death penalty for same-sex acts). Some nearby nations criminalize same-sex relations: Barbados can impose lifetime imprisonment for same-sex acts, and Jamaica, St. Kitts and Nevis, and Saint Lucia have lesser penalties, though Saint Lucia's government indicates it does not enforce those laws (ILGA 2020). Even when the government criminal code does not formalize anti-LGBTQ penalties, local ordinances or government agents may have wide discretion. For example, many people fleeing Central American countries do so as a result of anti-LGBTQ violence, sometimes at the hands of police (Human Rights Watch 2020).

Such severe treatment at the hands of the government is no longer the case in the United States. But until the 1960s and 1970s, every state in the country criminalized same-sex acts, which allowed the military to dishonorably discharge gay veterans (stripping them of all benefits) and law enforcement agencies to investigate and detain people suspected of same-sex acts. Police regularly raided bars and clubs simply for allowing gay and lesbian people to dance together. Public decency laws allowed police to arrest people if they did not wear clothing aligning with the typical dress for their biological sex. Criminalization of same-sex acts began to unravel at the state level in the 1960's and 1970s, and was fully invalidated in a 2003 Supreme Court decision.

Hate crimes and anti-LGBTQ legislation are overt types of discrimination, but LGBTQ people are also treated differently from straight and cisgender people in schools, housing, and in healthcare. This can have effects on mental health, employment and financial opportunities, and relationships. For example, more than half of LGBTQ adults and 70 percent of those who are transgender or gender nonconforming report experiencing discrimination from a health care professional; this leads to delays or reluctance in seeking care or preventative visits, which has negative health outcomes (American Heart Association 2020). Similarly, elderly LGBTQ people are far less likely to come out to healthcare professionals than are straight or cisgender people, which may also lead to healthcare issues at an age that is typically highly reliant on medical care (Foglia 2014).

Much of this discrimination is based on stereotypes and misinformation. Some is based on heterosexism, which Herek (1990) suggests is both an ideology and a set of institutional practices that privilege straight people and heterosexuality over other sexual orientations. Much like racism and sexism, heterosexism is a systematic disadvantage embedded in our social institutions, offering power to those who conform to heterosexual orientation while simultaneously disadvantaging those who do not. *Homophobia*, an extreme or irrational aversion to gay, lesbian, bisexual, or all LGBTQ people, which often manifests as prejudice and bias. *Transphobia* is a fear, hatred, or dislike of transgender people, and/or prejudice and discrimination against them by individuals or institutions.

Fighting discrimination and being an ally

Major policies to prevent discrimination based on sexual orientation have not come into effect until recent years. In 2011, President Obama overturned “don’t ask, don’t tell,” a controversial policy that required gay and lesbian people in the US military to keep their sexuality undisclosed. In 2015, the Supreme Court ruled in the case of *Obgerfell vs. Hodge*s that the right to civil marriage was guaranteed to same-sex couples. And, as discussed above, in the landmark 2020 Supreme Court decision added sexual orientation and gender identity as categories protected from employment discrimination by the Civil Rights Act. At the same time, laws passed in several states permit some level of discrimination against same-sex couples and other LGBTQ people based on a person's individual religious beliefs or prejudices.

Supporting LGTBQ people requires effort to better understand them without making assumptions. Understand people by listening, respecting them, and by remembering that every person—LGBTQ or otherwise— is different. Being gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, or asexual is not a choice, but the way a person expresses or reveals that reality is their choice. Your experience or knowledge of other LGBTQ people (even your own experience if you are LGBTQ) cannot dictate how another person feels or acts. Finally, as discussed in the Race and Ethnicity chapter, intersectionality means that people are defined by more than their gender identity and sexual orientation. People from different age groups, races, abilities, and experiences within the LGTBQ community have different perspectives and needs.

While each individual has their own perspective, respecting their feelings and protecting their equality and wellbeing does have some common elements. These include referring to a person as they would like to be referred to, including the avoidance of abbreviations or slang terms unless you are sure they accept them. For example, many people and organizations (including those referenced in this chapter) use the abbreviation "trans" to represent transgender people, but a non-transgender person should not use that abbreviation unless they know the person or subject is comfortable with it. Respect also includes people's right to privacy: One person should never out a person to someone else or assume that someone is publicly out. LGBTQ allies can support everyone's rights to be equal and empowered members of society, including within organizations, institutions, and even individual classrooms.

Supporting others may require a change in mindset and practice. For example, if a transgender person wants to be referred to by a different name, or use different pronouns, it might take some getting used to, especially if you have spent years referring to the person by another name or by other pronouns. However, making the change is worthwhile and not overly onerous.

Language is an important part of culture, and it has been evolving to better include and describe people who are not gender-binary. In many languages, including English, pronouns are gendered. That is, pronouns are intended to identify the gender of the individual being referenced. English has traditionally been binary, providing only “he/him/his,” for male subjects and “she/her/hers,” for female subjects.

This binary system excludes those who identify as neither male nor female. The word “they,” which was used for hundreds of years as a singular pronoun, is more inclusive. As a result, in fact, Merriam Webster selected this use of “they” as Word of the Year for 2019. “They” and other pronouns are now used to reference those who do not identify as male or female on the spectrum of gender identities.

Gender inclusive language has impacts beyond personal references. In biology, anatomy, and healthcare, for example, people commonly refer to organs or processes with gender associations. However, more accurate and inclusive language avoids such associations. For example, *women* do not produce eggs; *ovaries* produce eggs. *Men* are not more likely to be color-blind; those with *XY chromosomes* are more likely to be color blind (Gender Inclusive Biology 2019).

Beyond the language of gender, the language of society and culture itself can be either a barrier or an opening to inclusivity. Societal norms are important sociological concepts, and behaviors outside of those norms can lead to exclusion. By disassociating gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation from the concept of norms, we can begin to eliminate the implicit and explicit biases regarding those realities. In everyday terms, this can take the form of avoiding references to what is normal or not normal in regard to sexuality or gender (Canadian Public Health Association 2019).

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10.3: Gender and Gender Inequality

Gender and Socialization

The phrase “boys will be boys” is often used to justify behavior such as pushing, shoving, or other forms of aggression from young boys. The phrase implies that such behavior is unchangeable and something that is part of a boy’s nature. Aggressive behavior, when it does not inflict significant harm, is often accepted from boys and men because it is congruent with the cultural script for masculinity. The “script” written by society is in some ways similar to a script written by a playwright. Just as a playwright expects actors to adhere to a prescribed script, society expects women and men to behave according to the expectations of their respective gender roles. Scripts are generally learned through a process known as socialization, which teaches people to behave according to social norms.

Socialization

Children learn at a young age that there are distinct expectations for boys and girls. Cross-cultural studies reveal that children are aware of gender roles by age two or three. At four or five, most children are firmly entrenched in culturally appropriate gender roles (Kane 1996). Children acquire these roles through socialization, a process in which people learn to behave in a particular way as dictated by societal values, beliefs, and attitudes. For example, society often views riding a motorcycle as a masculine activity and, therefore, considers it to be part of the male gender role. Attitudes such as this are typically based on stereotypes, oversimplified notions about members of a group. Gender stereotyping involves overgeneralizing about the attitudes, traits, or behavior patterns of women or men. For example, women may be thought of as too timid or weak to ride a motorcycle.

Gender stereotypes form the basis of sexism. Sexism refers to prejudiced beliefs that value one sex over another. It varies in its level of severity. In parts of the world where women are strongly undervalued, young girls may not be given the same access to nutrition, healthcare, and education as boys. Further, they will grow up believing they deserve to be treated differently from boys (UNICEF 2011; Thorne 1993). While it is illegal in the United States when practiced as discrimination, unequal treatment of women continues to pervade social life. It should be noted that discrimination based on sex occurs at both the micro- and macro-levels. Many sociologists focus on discrimination that is built into the social structure; this type of discrimination is known as institutional discrimination (Pincus 2008).

Gender socialization occurs through four major agents of socialization: family, education, peer groups, and mass media. Each agent reinforces gender roles by creating and maintaining normative expectations for gender-specific behavior. Exposure also occurs through secondary agents such as religion and the workplace. Repeated exposure to these agents over time leads men and women into a false sense that they are acting naturally rather than following a socially constructed role.

Family is the first agent of socialization. There is considerable evidence that parents socialize sons and daughters differently. Generally speaking, girls are given more latitude to step outside of their prescribed gender role (Coltrane and Adams 2004; Kimmel 2000; Raffaelli and Ontai 2004). However, differential socialization typically results in greater privileges afforded to sons. For instance, boys are allowed more autonomy and independence at an earlier age than daughters. They may be given fewer restrictions on appropriate clothing, dating habits, or curfew. Sons are also often free from performing domestic duties such as cleaning or cooking and other household tasks that are considered feminine. Daughters are limited by their expectation to be passive and nurturing, generally obedient, and to assume many of the domestic responsibilities.

Even when parents set gender equality as a goal, there may be underlying indications of inequality. For example, boys may be asked to take out the garbage or perform other tasks that require strength or toughness, while girls may be asked to fold laundry or perform duties that require neatness and care. It has been found that fathers are firmer in their expectations for gender conformity than are mothers, and their expectations are stronger for sons than they are for daughters (Kimmel 2000). This is true in many types of activities, including preference for toys, play styles, discipline, chores, and personal achievements. As a result, boys tend to be particularly attuned to their father’s disapproval when engaging in an activity that might be considered feminine, like dancing or singing (Coltraine and Adams 2008). Parental socialization and normative expectations also vary along lines of social class, race, and ethnicity. African American families, for instance, are more likely than Caucasians to model an egalitarian role structure for their children (Staples and Boulin Johnson 2004).

Gender Socialization

The reinforcement of gender roles and stereotypes continues once a child reaches school age. Until very recently, schools were rather explicit in their efforts to stratify boys and girls. The first step toward stratification was segregation. Girls were encouraged to take home economics or humanities courses and boys to take math and science.

Studies suggest that gender socialization still occurs in schools today, perhaps in less obvious forms (Lips 2004). Teachers may not even realize they are acting in ways that reproduce gender differentiated behavior patterns. Yet any time they ask students to arrange their seats or line up according to gender, teachers may be asserting that boys and girls should be treated differently (Thorne 1993).

Even in levels as low as kindergarten, schools subtly convey messages to girls indicating that they are less intelligent or less important than boys. For example, in a study of teacher responses to male and female students, data indicated that teachers praised male students far more than female students. Teachers interrupted girls more often and gave boys more opportunities to expand on their ideas (Sadker and Sadker 1994). Further, in social as well as academic situations, teachers have traditionally treated boys and girls in opposite ways, reinforcing a sense of competition rather than collaboration (Thorne 1993). Boys are also permitted a greater degree of freedom to break rules or commit minor acts of deviance, whereas girls are expected to follow rules carefully and adopt an obedient role (Ready 2001).

Mimicking the actions of significant others is the first step in the development of a separate sense of self (Mead 1934). Like adults, children become agents who actively facilitate and apply normative gender expectations to those around them. When children do not conform to the appropriate gender role, they may face negative sanctions such as being criticized or marginalized by their peers. Though many of these sanctions are informal, they can be quite severe. For example, a girl who wishes to take karate class instead of dance lessons may be called a “tomboy” and face difficulty gaining acceptance from both male and female peer groups (Ready 2001). Boys, especially, are subject to intense ridicule for gender nonconformity (Coltrane and Adams 2004; Kimmel 2000).

Mass media serves as another significant agent of gender socialization. In television and movies, women tend to have less significant roles and are often portrayed as wives or mothers. When women are given a lead role, it often falls into one of two extremes: a wholesome, saint-like figure or a malevolent, hypersexual figure (Etaugh and Bridges 2003). This same inequality is pervasive in children’s movies (Smith 2008). Research indicates that in the ten top-grossing G-rated movies released between 1991 and 2013, nine out of ten characters were male (Smith 2008).

Television commercials and other forms of advertising also reinforce inequality and gender-based stereotypes. Women are almost exclusively present in ads promoting cooking, cleaning, or childcare-related products (Davis 1993). Think about the last time you saw a man star in a dishwasher or laundry detergent commercial. In general, women are underrepresented in roles that involve leadership, intelligence, or a balanced psyche. Of particular concern is the depiction of women in ways that are dehumanizing, especially in music videos. Even in mainstream advertising, however, themes intermingling violence and sexuality are quite common (Kilbourne 2000).

Social Stratification and Inequality

Stratification refers to a system in which groups of people experience unequal access to basic, yet highly valuable, social resources. There is a long history of gender stratification in the United States. When looking to the past, it would appear that society has made great strides in terms of abolishing some of the most blatant forms of gender inequality (see timeline below) but underlying effects of male dominance still permeate many aspects of society.

- Before 1809—Women could not execute a will
- Before 1840—Women were not allowed to own or control property
- Before 1920—Women were not permitted to vote
- Before 1963—Employers could legally pay a woman less than a man for the same work
- Before 1973—Women did not have the right to a safe and legal abortion (Imbornoni 2009)

The Pay Gap

Despite making up nearly half (49.8 percent) of payroll employment, men vastly outnumber women in authoritative, powerful, and, therefore, high-earning jobs (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). Even when a woman’s employment status is equal to a man’s, she will

generally make only 81 cents for every dollar made by her male counterpart (Payscale 2020). Women in the paid labor force also still do the majority of the unpaid work at home. On an average day, 84 percent of women (compared to 67 percent of men) spend time doing household management activities (U.S. Census Bureau 2011). This double duty keeps working women in a subordinate role in the family structure (Hochschild and Machung 1989).

Gender stratification through the division of labor is not exclusive to the United States. According to George Murdock's classic work, *Outline of World Cultures* (1954), all societies classify work by gender. When a pattern appears in all societies, it is called a cultural universal. While the phenomenon of assigning work by gender is universal, its specifics are not. The same task is not assigned to either men or women worldwide. But the way each task's associated gender is valued is notable. In Murdock's examination of the division of labor among 324 societies around the world, he found that in nearly all cases the jobs assigned to men were given greater prestige (Murdock and White 1968). Even if the job types were very similar and the differences slight, men's work was still considered more vital.

Part of the gender pay gap can be attributed to unique barriers faced by women regarding work experience and promotion opportunities. A mother of young children is more likely to drop out of the labor force for several years or work on a reduced schedule than is the father. As a result, women in their 30s and 40s are likely, on average, to have less job experience than men. This effect becomes more evident when considering the pay rates of two groups of women: those who did *not* leave the workforce and those who did: In the United States, childless women with the same education and experience levels as men are typically paid with closer (but not exact) parity to men. However, women with families and children are paid less: Mothers are recommended a 7.9 percent lower starting salary than non-mothers, which is 8.6 percent lower than men (Correll 2007).

This evidence points to levels of discrimination that go beyond behaviors by individual companies or organizations. As discussed earlier in the gender roles section, many of these gaps are rooted in America's social patterns of discrimination, which involve the roles that different genders play in child-rearing, rather than individual discrimination by employers in hiring and salary decisions. On the other hand, legal and ethical practices demand that organizations do their part to promote more equity among all genders.

The Glass Ceiling

The idea that women are unable to reach the executive suite is known as the glass ceiling. It is an invisible barrier that women encounter when trying to win jobs in the highest level of business. At the beginning of 2021, for example, a record 41 of the world's largest 500 companies were run by women. While a vast improvement over the number twenty years earlier – where only two of the companies were run by women – these 41 chief executives still only represent eight percent of those large companies (Newcomb 2020).

Why do women have a more difficult time reaching the top of a company? One idea is that there is still a stereotype in the United States that women aren't aggressive enough to handle the boardroom or that they tend to seek jobs and work with other women (Reiners 2019). Other issues stem from the gender biases based on gender roles and motherhood discussed above.

Another idea is that women lack mentors, executives who take an interest and get them into the right meetings and introduce them to the right people to succeed (Murrell & Blake-Beard 2017).

Women in Politics

One of the most important places for women to help other women is in politics. Historically in the United States, like many other institutions, political representation has been mostly made up of White men. By not having women in government, their issues are being decided by people who don't share their perspective. The number of women elected to serve in Congress has increased over the years, but does not yet accurately reflect the general population. For example, in 2018, the population of the United States was 49 percent male and 51 percent female, but the population of Congress was 78.8 percent male and 21.2 percent female (Manning 2018). Over the years, the number of women in the federal government has increased, but until it accurately reflects the population, there will be inequalities in our laws.

Movements for Change: Feminism

One of the underlying issues that continues to plague women in the United States is misogyny. This is the hatred of or, aversion to, or prejudice against women. Over the years misogyny has evolved as an ideology that men are superior to women in all aspects of life. There have been multiple movements to try and fight this prejudice.

In 1963, writer and feminist Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique* in which she contested the post-World War II belief that it was women's sole destiny to marry and bear children. Friedan's book began to raise the consciousness of many women who agreed that homemaking in the suburbs sapped them of their individualism and left them unsatisfied. In 1966, the National Organization for Women (NOW) formed and proceeded to set an agenda for the *feminist movement*. Framed by a statement of purpose written by Friedan, the agenda began by proclaiming NOW's goal to make possible women's participation in all aspects of American life and to gain for them all the rights enjoyed by men.

Feminists engaged in protests and actions designed to bring awareness and change. For example, the New York Radical Women demonstrated at the 1968 Miss America Pageant in Atlantic City to bring attention to the contest's—and society's—exploitation of women. The protestors tossed instruments of women's oppression, including high-heeled shoes, curlers, girdles, and bras, into a "freedom trash can." News accounts incorrectly described the protest as a "bra burning," which at the time was a way to demean and trivialize the issue of women's rights (Gay 2018).

Other protests gave women a more significant voice in a male-dominated social, political, and entertainment climate. For decades, *Ladies Home Journal* had been a highly influential women's magazine, managed and edited almost entirely by men. Men even wrote the advice columns and beauty articles. In 1970, protesters held a sit-in at the magazine's offices, demanding that the company hire a woman editor-in-chief, add women and non-White writers at fair pay, and expand the publication's focus.

Feminists were concerned with far more than protests, however. In the 1970s, they opened battered women's shelters and successfully fought for protection from employment discrimination for pregnant women, reform of rape laws (such as the abolition of laws requiring a witness to corroborate a woman's report of rape), criminalization of domestic violence, and funding for schools that sought to counter sexist stereotypes of women. In 1973, the U.S. Supreme Court in *Roe v. Wade* invalidated a number of state laws under which abortions obtained during the first three months of pregnancy were illegal. This made a nontherapeutic abortion a legal medical procedure nationwide.

Gloria Steinem had pushed through gender barriers to take on serious journalism subjects, and had emerged as a prominent advocate for women's rights. Through her work, Steinem met Dorothy Pittman-Hughes, who had founded New York City's first shelter for domestic violence victims as well as the city's Agency for Child Development. Together they founded *Ms*. Magazine, which avoided articles on homemaking and fashion in favor of pieces on women's rights and empowerment. *Ms*. showcased powerful and accomplished women such as Shirley Chisholm and Sissy Farenthold, and was among the first publications to bring domestic violence, sexual harassment, and body image issues to the national conversation (Pogrebrin 2011).

Many advances in women's rights were the result of women's greater engagement in politics. For example, Patsy Mink, the first Asian American woman elected to Congress, was the co-author of the Education Amendments Act of 1972, Title IX of which prohibits sex discrimination in education. Mink had been interested in fighting discrimination in education since her youth, when she opposed racial segregation in campus housing while a student at the University of Nebraska. She went to law school after being denied admission to medical school because of her gender. Like Mink, many other women sought and won political office, many with the help of the National Women's Political Caucus (NWPC). In 1971, the NWPC was formed by Bella Abzug, Gloria Steinem, Shirley Chisholm, and other leading feminists to encourage women's participation in political parties, elect women to office, and raise money for their campaign.



Figure 10.3.1: "Unbought and Unbossed": Shirley Chisholm was the first Black United States Congresswoman, the co-founder of the Congressional Black Caucus, and a candidate for a major-party Presidential nomination. (Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm by The Library of Congress via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under PDM 1.0)

Shirley Chisholm personally took up the mantle of women's involvement in politics. Born of immigrant parents, she earned degrees from Brooklyn College and Columbia University, and began a career in early childhood education and advocacy. In the 1950's she joined various political action groups, worked on election campaigns, and pushed for housing and economic reforms. After leaving one organization over its refusal to involve women in the decision-making process, she sought to increase gender and racial diversity within political and activist organizations throughout New York City. In 1968, she became the first Black woman elected to Congress. Refusing to take the quiet role expected of new Representatives, she immediately began sponsoring bills and initiatives. She spoke out against the Vietnam War, and fought for programs such as Head Start and the national school lunch program, which was eventually signed into law after Chisholm led an effort to override a presidential veto. Chisholm would eventually undertake a groundbreaking presidential run in 1972, and is viewed as paving the way for other women, and especially women of color, achieving political and social prominence (Emmrich 2019).

Theoretical Perspectives on Gender

Sociological theories help sociologists to develop questions and interpret data. For example, a sociologist studying why middle-school girls are more likely than their male counterparts to fall behind grade-level expectations in math and science might use a feminist perspective to frame her research. Another scholar might proceed from the conflict perspective to investigate why women are underrepresented in political office, and an interactionist might examine how the symbols of femininity interact with symbols of political authority to affect how women in Congress are treated by their male counterparts in meetings.

Structural Functionalism

Structural functionalism has provided one of the most important perspectives of sociological research in the twentieth century and has been a major influence on research in the social sciences, including gender studies. Viewing the family as the most integral component of society, assumptions about gender roles within marriage assume a prominent place in this perspective.

Functionalists argue that gender roles were established well before the pre-industrial era when men typically took care of responsibilities outside of the home, such as hunting, and women typically took care of the domestic responsibilities in or around the home. These roles were considered functional because women were often limited by the physical restraints of pregnancy and nursing and unable to leave the home for long periods of time. Once established, these roles were passed on to subsequent generations since they served as an effective means of keeping the family system functioning properly.

When changes occurred in the social and economic climate of the United States during World War II, changes in the family structure also occurred. Many women had to assume the role of breadwinner (or modern hunter-gatherer) alongside their domestic role in order to stabilize a rapidly changing society. When the men returned from war and wanted to reclaim their jobs,

society fell back into a state of imbalance, as many women did not want to forfeit their wage-earning positions (Hawke 2007).

Conflict Theory

According to conflict theory, society is a struggle for dominance among social groups (like women versus men) that compete for scarce resources. When sociologists examine gender from this perspective, we can view men as the dominant group and women as the subordinate group. According to conflict theory, social problems are created when dominant groups exploit or oppress subordinate groups. Consider the Women's Suffrage Movement or the debate over women's "right to choose" their reproductive futures. It is difficult for women to rise above men, as dominant group members create the rules for success and opportunity in society (Farrington and Chertok 1993).

Friedrich Engels, a German sociologist, studied family structure and gender roles. Engels suggested that the same owner-worker relationship seen in the labor force is also seen in the household, with women assuming the role of the proletariat. This is due to women's dependence on men for the attainment of wages, which is even worse for women who are entirely dependent upon their spouses for economic support. Contemporary conflict theorists suggest that when women become wage earners, they can gain power in the family structure and create more democratic arrangements in the home, although they may still carry the majority of the domestic burden, as noted earlier (Rismanand and Johnson-Sumerford 1998).

Feminist Theory

Feminist theory is a type of conflict theory that examines inequalities in gender-related issues. It uses the conflict approach to examine the maintenance of gender roles and inequalities. Radical feminism, in particular, considers the role of the family in perpetuating male dominance. In patriarchal societies, men's contributions are seen as more valuable than those of women. Patriarchal perspectives and arrangements are widespread and taken for granted. As a result, women's viewpoints tend to be silenced or marginalized to the point of being discredited or considered invalid.

Sanday's study of the Indonesian Minangkabau (2004) revealed that in societies some consider to be matriarchies (where women comprise the dominant group), women and men tend to work cooperatively rather than competitively regardless of whether a job is considered feminine by U.S. standards. The men, however, do not experience the sense of bifurcated consciousness under this social structure that modern U.S. females encounter (Sanday 2004).

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism aims to understand human behavior by analyzing the critical role of symbols in human interaction. This is certainly relevant to the discussion of masculinity and femininity. Imagine that you walk into a bank hoping to get a small loan for school, a home, or a small business venture. If you meet with a male loan officer, you may state your case logically by listing all the hard numbers that make you a qualified applicant as a means of appealing to the analytical characteristics associated with masculinity. If you meet with a female loan officer, you may make an emotional appeal by stating your good intentions as a means of appealing to the caring characteristics associated with femininity.

Because the meanings attached to symbols are socially created and not natural, and fluid, not static, we act and react to symbols based on the current assigned meaning. The word *gay*, for example, once meant "cheerful," but by the 1960s it carried the primary meaning of "homosexual." In transition, it was even known to mean "careless" or "bright and showing" (Oxford American Dictionary 2010). Furthermore, the word *gay* (as it refers to a person), carried a somewhat negative and unfavorable meaning fifty years ago, but it has since gained more neutral and even positive connotations. When people perform tasks or possess characteristics based on the gender role assigned to them, they are said to be doing gender. This notion is based on the work of West and Zimmerman (1987). Whether we are expressing our masculinity or femininity, West and Zimmerman argue, we are always "doing gender." Thus, gender is something we do or perform, not something we are.

In other words, both gender and sexuality are socially constructed. The social construction of sexuality refers to the way in which socially created definitions about the cultural appropriateness of sex-linked behavior shape the way people see and experience sexuality. This is in marked contrast to theories of sex, gender, and sexuality that link male and female behavior to biological determinism, or the belief that men and women behave differently due to differences in their biology.

Sociological Research: Being Male, Being Female, and Being Healthy

In 1971, Broverman and Broverman conducted a groundbreaking study on the traits mental health workers ascribed to males and females. When asked to name the characteristics of a female, the list featured words such as unaggressive, gentle, emotional, tactful, less logical, not ambitious, dependent, passive, and neat. The list of male characteristics featured words such as aggressive, rough, unemotional, blunt, logical, direct, active, and sloppy (Seem and Clark 2006). Later, when asked to describe the characteristics of a healthy person (not gender specific), the list was nearly identical to that of a male.

This study uncovered the general assumption that being female is associated with being somewhat unhealthy or not of sound mind. This concept seems extremely dated, but in 2006, Seem and Clark replicated the study and found similar results. Again, the characteristics associated with a healthy male were very similar to that of a healthy (genderless) adult. The list of characteristics associated with being female broadened somewhat but did not show significant change from the original study (Seem and Clark 2006). This interpretation of feminine characteristic may help us one day better understand gender disparities in certain illnesses, such as why one in eight women can be expected to develop clinical depression in her lifetime (National Institute of Mental Health 1999). Perhaps these diagnoses are not just a reflection of women's health, but also a reflection of society's labeling of female characteristics, or the result of institutionalized sexism.

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10.4: Sexuality

Sexual Attitudes and Practices

In the area of sexuality, sociologists focus their attention on sexual attitudes and practices, not on physiology or anatomy. As mentioned earlier, sexuality is viewed as a person's capacity for sexual feelings. Studying sexual attitudes and practices is a particularly interesting field of sociology because sexual behavior is a cultural universal. Throughout time and place, the vast majority of human beings have participated in sexual relationships (Broude 2003). Each society, however, interprets sexuality and sexual activity in different ways. At the same time, sociologists have learned that certain norms are shared among most societies. The incest taboo is present in every society, though which relative is deemed unacceptable for sex varies widely from culture to culture. For example, sometimes the relatives of the father are considered acceptable sexual partners for a woman while the relatives of the mother are not. Likewise, societies generally have norms that reinforce their accepted social system of sexuality.



Figure 10.4.1: Sexual practices can differ greatly among groups. Recent trends include the finding that married couples have sex more frequently than do singles and that 27 percent of married couples in their 30s have sex at least twice a week (NSSHB 2010). (Long Wedding Dress by epSos.de via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY 4.0)

What is considered "normal" in terms of sexual behavior is based on the mores and values of the society. Societies that value monogamy, for example, would likely oppose extramarital sex. Individuals are socialized to sexual attitudes by their family, education system, peers, media, and religion. Historically, religion has been the greatest influence on sexual behavior in most societies, but in more recent years, peers and the media have emerged as two of the strongest influences, particularly among U.S. teens (Potard, Courtois, and Rusch 2008). Let us take a closer look at sexual attitudes in the United States and around the world.

Sexuality around the World

Cross-national research on sexual attitudes in industrialized nations reveals that normative standards differ across the world. For example, several studies have shown that Scandinavian students are more tolerant of premarital sex than are U.S. students (Grose 2007). A study of 37 countries reported that non-Western societies—like China, Iran, and India—valued chastity highly in a potential mate, while Western European countries—such as France, the Netherlands, and Sweden—placed little value on prior sexual experiences (Buss 1989).

Even among Western cultures, attitudes can differ. For example, according to a 33,590-person survey across 24 countries, 89 percent of Swedes responded that there is nothing wrong with premarital sex, while only 42 percent of Irish responded this way. From the same study, 93 percent of Filipinos responded that sex before age 16 is always wrong or almost always wrong, while only 75 percent of Russians responded this way (Widmer, Treas, and Newcomb 1998). Sexual attitudes can also vary within a country.

For instance, 45 percent of Spaniards responded that homosexuality is always wrong, while 42 percent responded that it is never wrong; only 13 percent responded somewhere in the middle (Widmer, Treas, and Newcomb 1998).

Of industrialized nations, several European nations are is thought to be the most liberal when it comes to attitudes about sex, including sexual practices and sexual openness. Sweden, for example, has very few regulations on sexual images in the media, and sex education, which starts around age six, is a compulsory part of Swedish school curricula. Switzerland, Belgium, Iceland, Denmark, and The Netherlands have similar policies. Their more open approach to sex has helped countries avoid some of the major social problems associated with sex. For example, rates of teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease are among the world's lowest in Switzerland and the Netherlands – lower than other European countries and far lower than the United States (Grose 2007 and Dutch News 2017). It would appear that these approaches are models for the benefits of sexual freedom and frankness. However, implementing their ideals and policies regarding sexuality in other, more politically conservative, nations would likely be met with resistance.

Sexuality in the United States

The United States prides itself on being the land of the "free," but it is rather restrictive when it comes to its citizens' general attitudes about sex compared to other industrialized nations. In an international survey, 25 percent of U.S. respondents stated that premarital sex is always wrong, while the average among the 24 countries surveyed was 17 percent, with less than ten percent of respondents from France, Germany, and Spain saying premarital sex was unacceptable (Chamie 2018). Similar discrepancies were found in questions about the condemnation of sex before the age of 16, extramarital sex, and homosexuality, with total disapproval of these acts being 12, 13, and 11 percent higher, respectively, in the United States, than the study's average (Widmer, Treas, and Newcomb 1998). U.S. culture is particularly restrictive in its attitudes about sex when it comes to women and sexuality.

It is widely believed that men are more sexual than are women. In fact, there was a popular notion that men think about sex every seven seconds. Research, however, suggests that men think about sex an average of 19 times per day, which is closer to once an hour, compared to 10 times per day for women (Fisher, Moore, and Pittenger 2011).

Belief that men have—or have the right to—more sexual urges than women creates a double standard. Ira Reiss, a pioneer researcher in the field of sexual studies, defined the *double standard* as prohibiting premarital sexual intercourse for women but allowing it for men (Reiss 1960). This standard has evolved into allowing women to engage in premarital sex only within committed love relationships, but allowing men to engage in sexual relationships with as many partners as they wish without condition (Milhausen and Herold 1999). Due to this double standard, a woman is likely to have fewer sexual partners in her life time than a man. According to a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) survey, the average thirty-five-year-old woman has had three opposite-sex sexual partners while the average thirty-five-year-old man has had twice as many (Centers for Disease Control 2011).

The future of a society's sexual attitudes may be somewhat predicted by the values and beliefs that a country's youth expresses about sex and sexuality. Data from the most recent National Survey of Family Growth reveals that 70 percent of boys and 78 percent of girls ages fifteen to nineteen said they "agree" or "strongly agree" that "it's okay for an unmarried female to have a child" (National Survey of Family Growth 2013). In a separate survey, 65 percent of teens stated that they "strongly agreed" or "somewhat agreed" that although waiting until marriage for sex is a nice idea, it's not realistic (NBC News 2005). This does not mean that today's youth have given up traditional sexual values such as monogamy. Nearly all college men (98.9 percent) and women (99.2 percent) who participated in a 2002 study on sexual attitudes stated they wished to settle down with one mutually exclusive sexual partner at some point in their lives, ideally within the next five years (Pedersen et al. 2002).

Sex Education

One of the biggest controversies regarding sexual attitudes is sexual education in U.S. classrooms. Unlike many other countries, sex education is not required in all public school curricula in the United States. The heart of the controversy is not about whether sex education should be taught in school (studies have shown that only seven percent of U.S. adults oppose sex education in schools); it is about the *type* of sex education that should be taught.

Much of the debate is over the issue of abstinence as compared to a comprehensive sex education program. Abstinence-only programs focus on avoiding sex until marriage and/or delaying it as long as possible. So they do not focus on other types of prevention of unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections. As a result, according to the Sexuality and Information Council of the United States, only 38 percent of high schools and 14 percent of middle schools across the country teach all 19 topics identified as critical for sex education by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Janfaza 2020).

Research suggests that while government officials may still be debating about the content of sexual education in public schools, the majority of U.S. adults are not. Two-thirds (67 percent) of Americans say education about safer sexual practices is more effective than abstinence-only education in terms of reducing unintended pregnancies. A slightly higher percentage—69 percent—say that emphasizing safer sexual practices and contraception in sexuality education is a better way to reduce the spread of STIs than is emphasizing abstinence (Davis 2018).

Even with these clear majorities in favor of comprehensive education, the Federal government offers roughly $85 million per year to communities that will drive abstinence-only sex education (Columbia Public Health 2017 a). The results, as stated earlier, are relatively clear: the United States has nearly four times the rate of teenage pregnancy than a country like Germany, which has a comprehensive sex education program.

In a similar educational issue not necessarily related to sexuality, researchers and public health advocates find that young girls feel underprepared for puberty. Ages of first menstruation (menarche) and breast development are continually declining in the United States, but education about these changes typically doesn't begin until middle school, which is generally too late. Young people indicate concerns about misinformation and discomfort during the informal conversations about the topics with friends, sisters, or mothers (Columbia Public Health 2017 b)

Sociological Perspectives on Sex and Sexuality

Sociologists representing all three major theoretical perspectives study the role sexuality plays in social life today. Scholars recognize that sexuality continues to be an important and defining social location and that the manner in which sexuality is constructed has a significant effect on perceptions, interactions, and outcomes.

Structural Functionalism

When it comes to sexuality, functionalists stress the importance of regulating sexual behavior to ensure marital cohesion and family stability. Since functionalists identify the family unit as the most integral component in society, they maintain a strict focus on it at all times and argue in favor of social arrangements that promote and ensure family preservation.

Functionalists such as Talcott Parsons (1955) have long argued that the regulation of sexual activity is an important function of the family. Social norms surrounding family life have, traditionally, encouraged sexual activity within the family unit (marriage) and have discouraged activity outside of it (premarital and extramarital sex). From a functionalist point of view, the purpose of encouraging sexual activity in the confines of marriage is to intensify the bond between spouses and to ensure that procreation occurs within a stable, legally recognized relationship. This structure gives offspring the best possible chance for appropriate socialization and the provision of basic resources.

In this context, the functionalist perspective does not take into account the increasing legal acceptance of same-sex marriage, or the rise in LGBTQ couples who choose to bear and raise children through a variety of available resources.

Conflict Theory

From a conflict theory perspective, sexuality is another area in which power differentials are present and where dominant groups actively work to promote their worldview as well as their economic interests.

For conflict theorists, there were two key dimensions to the debate over marriage equality—one ideological and the other economic. Dominant groups wish for their worldview—which embraces traditional marriage and the nuclear family—to win out over what they see as the intrusion of a secular, individually driven worldview. On the other hand, many LGBTQ activists argue that legal marriage is a fundamental right that cannot be denied based on sexual orientation and that, historically, there already exists a precedent for changes to marriage laws: the 1960s legalization of formerly forbidden interracial marriages is one example.

From an economic perspective, activists in favor of same-sex marriage point out that legal marriage brings with it certain entitlements, many of which are financial in nature, like Social Security benefits and medical insurance (Solmonese 2008). Denial of these benefits to same-sex couples is wrong, they argue. Conflict theory suggests that as long as people struggle over these social and financial resources, there will be some degree of conflict.

Symbolic Interactionism

Interactionists focus on the meanings associated with sexuality and with sexual orientation. Since femininity is devalued in U.S. society, those who adopt such traits are subject to ridicule; this is especially true for boys or men. Just as masculinity is the symbolic norm, so too has heterosexuality come to signify normalcy. Prior to 1973, the American Psychological Association (APA) defined homosexuality as an abnormal or deviant disorder. Interactionist labeling theory recognizes the impact this has made. Before 1973, the APA was powerful in shaping social attitudes toward homosexuality by defining it as pathological. Today, the APA cites no association between sexual orientation and psychopathology and sees homosexuality as a normal aspect of human sexuality (APA 2008).

Recall Cooley's "looking-glass self," which suggests that self develops as a result of our interpretation and evaluation of the responses of others (Cooley 1902). Constant exposure to derogatory labels, jokes, and pervasive homophobia would lead to a negative self-image, or worse, self-hate. The CDC reports that homosexual youths (as referred to in the study) who experience high levels of social rejection are six times more likely to have high levels of depression and eight times more likely to have attempted suicide (CDC 2011).

Queer Theory

Queer Theory is an interdisciplinary approach to sexuality studies that identifies Western society's rigid splitting of gender into specific roles and questions the manner in which we have been taught to think about sexual orientation. According to Jagose (1996), Queer [Theory] focuses on mismatches between anatomical sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation, not just division into male/female or homosexual/hetereosexual. By calling their discipline "queer," scholars reject the effects of labeling; instead, they embraced the word "queer" and reclaimed it for their own purposes. The perspective highlights the need for a more flexible and fluid conceptualization of sexuality—one that allows for change, negotiation, and freedom. This mirrors other oppressive schemas in our culture, especially those surrounding gender and race (Black versus White, man versus woman).

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick: ways in which people's sexualities are different

- Even identical genital acts mean very different things to different people.
- Sexuality makes up a large share of the self-perceived identity of some people, a small share of others'.
- Some people spend a lot of time thinking about sex, others little.
- Some people like to have a lot of sex, others little or none.
- Many people have their richest mental/emotional involvement with sexual acts that they don't do, or don't even want to do.
- Some people like spontaneous sexual scenes, others like highly scripted ones, others like spontaneous-sounding ones that are nonetheless totally predictable.
- Some people experience their sexuality as deeply embedded in a matrix of gender meanings and gender differentials. Others do not (Sedgwick 1990).

Thus, theorists utilizing queer theory strive to question the ways society perceives and experiences sex, gender, and sexuality, opening the door to new scholarly understanding.

Throughout this chapter we have examined the complexities of gender, sex, and sexuality. Differentiating between sex, gender, and sexual orientation is an important first step to a deeper understanding and critical analysis of these issues. Understanding the sociology of sex, gender, and sexuality will help to build awareness of the inequalities experienced by people outside the dominant groups.

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10.5: Key Terms

Glossary

- **biological determinism** | the belief that men and women behave differently due to inherent sex differences related to their biology
- **doing gender** | the performance of tasks based upon the gender assigned to us by society and, in turn, ourselves
- **DOMA** | Defense of Marriage Act, a 1996 U.S. law explicitly limiting the definition of “marriage” to a union between one man and one woman and allowing each individual state to recognize or deny same-sex marriages performed in other states
- **double standard** | the concept that prohibits premarital sexual intercourse for women but allows it for men
- **gender** | a term that refers to social or cultural distinctions of behaviors that are considered male or female
- **gender dysphoria** | a condition listed in the DSM-5 in which people whose gender at birth is contrary to the one they identify with. This condition replaces "gender identity disorder"
- **gender identity** | a person’s deeply held internal perception of one's gender
- **gender role** | society’s concept of how men and women should behave
- **glass ceiling** | an invisible barrier that women encounter when trying to win jobs in the highest level of business
- **heterosexism** | an ideology and a set of institutional practices that privilege straight people and heterosexuality over other sexual orientations
- **homophobia** | an extreme or irrational aversion to gay, lesbian, bisexual, or all LGBTQ people, which often manifests as prejudice and bias
- **intersex** | people born with sex characteristics (including genitals, gonads and chromosome patterns) that do not fit typical binary notions of male or female bodies.
- **misogyny** | the hatred of or, aversion to, or prejudice against women
- **pay gap** | the difference in earnings between men and women
- **sex** | a term that denotes the presence of physical or physiological differences between males and females
- **sexism** | the prejudiced belief that one sex should be valued over another
- **sexual orientation** | a person’s physical, mental, emotional, and sexual attraction to a particular sex (male or female)
- **sexuality** | a person’s capacity for sexual feelings
- **social construction of sexuality** | socially created definitions about the cultural appropriateness of sex-linked behavior which shape how people see and experience sexuality
- **transgender** | an adjective that describes individuals who identify with the behaviors and characteristics that are other than their biological sex

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10.6: Short Answer

Critical Thinking Questions

1. Why do sociologists find it important to differentiate between sex and gender? What importance does the differentiation have in modern society?
2. How is children's play influenced by gender roles? Think back to your childhood. How "gendered" were the toys and activities available to you? Do you remember gender expectations being conveyed through the approval or disapproval of your playtime choices?
3. In what way do parents treat sons and daughters differently? How do sons and daughters typically respond to this treatment?
4. What can be done to lessen the effects of gender stratification in the workplace? How does gender stratification harm both men and women?
5. Why is it important to have women in political roles?
6. What can be done to narrow the pay gap for women?
7. Identify three examples of how U.S. society is heteronormative.
8. Consider the types of derogatory labeling that sociologists study and explain how these might apply to discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

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10.7: Further Research

Additional Learning Resources

- To learn about what organizations are doing to improve diversity and social justice education for young people, review Learning For Justice's educational materials.
- For more information on gender identity and advocacy for transgender individuals, see the Global Action for Trans Equality website.
- Visit The Trevor Project website for more information on suicide prevention and crisis intervention for LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning) young people.
- Check out a digital archive on the history of different generations of Women in the U.S. Congress.
- To learn about different approaches to sex education, visit the Advocates for Youth website.

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10.9: Accessible Text Description

Figure 10.1: Roadmap

A horizontal instructional diagram contains three large arrows pointing from left to right. Each arrow includes a colored circle with a guiding question and a short explanation beneath it.

The first, purple arrow is labeled “The WHAT” and asks, “What is gender inequality?” The text below explains that this stage involves defining gender inequality and recognizing its different forms.

The second, green arrow is labeled “The WHY” and asks, “Why does gender inequality exist?” The text below explains that this stage examines the causes and social influences behind gender inequality.

The third, blue arrow is labeled “The HOW” and asks, “How is gender inequality maintained and changed?” The text below explains that this stage investigates how gender inequality is reproduced and how it can be challenged and transformed.

Overall, the diagram presents a progression from identifying gender inequality, to explaining its causes, to analyzing the social processes that sustain it and the possibilities for change.

Figure 10.2.2: Kinsey Scale

A rectangular graph presents a seven-point continuum labeled from 0 through 6 along the bottom. The left side is labeled “Exclusively heterosexual,” and the right side is labeled “Exclusively homosexual.” An arrow beneath the scale points from left to right and is labeled “Varying bisexual responses.”

A diagonal line rises steadily from near the bottom at the heterosexual end to the top at the homosexual end. The area below the line is shaded blue, increasing across the scale from left to right.

The numbered positions suggest a gradual range:

- 0 represents exclusively heterosexual.
- 1 through 5 represent varying degrees of bisexual response or attraction.
- 6 represents exclusively homosexual.

Overall, the diagram illustrates sexual orientation as a spectrum with intermediate positions rather than only two mutually exclusive categories.

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11: HEALTH AND MEDICINE

Introduction

After the height of the coronavirus pandemic, what does “health” mean to you? Does your opinion of it differ from your pre-COVID attitudes? Many people who became severely ill or died from COVID had other health issues (known as comorbidities) such as hypertension and obesity. Do you know people whose attitudes about their general health changed? Do you know people who are more or less suspicious of the government, more or less likely to listen to doctors or scientists? What do you think will be the best way to prevent illness and death should another pandemic strike?

Medical sociology is the systematic study of how humans manage issues of health and illness, disease and disorders, and healthcare for both the sick and the healthy. Medical sociologists study the physical, mental, and social components of health and illness. Major topics for medical sociologists include the doctor/patient relationship, the structure and socioeconomics of healthcare, and how culture impacts attitudes toward disease and wellness.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- Define key concepts in medical sociology, including health, illness, disease, social epidemiology, stigma, and medicalization.
- Explain how social, cultural, economic, and environmental factors influence health outcomes and access to healthcare.
- Analyze how gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and other social determinants contribute to health disparities and inequalities.
- Compare healthcare systems in the United States and other countries, evaluating their strengths, challenges, and approaches to healthcare access.
- Apply the major sociological perspectives of structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism to understand health, illness, healthcare, and health policy.

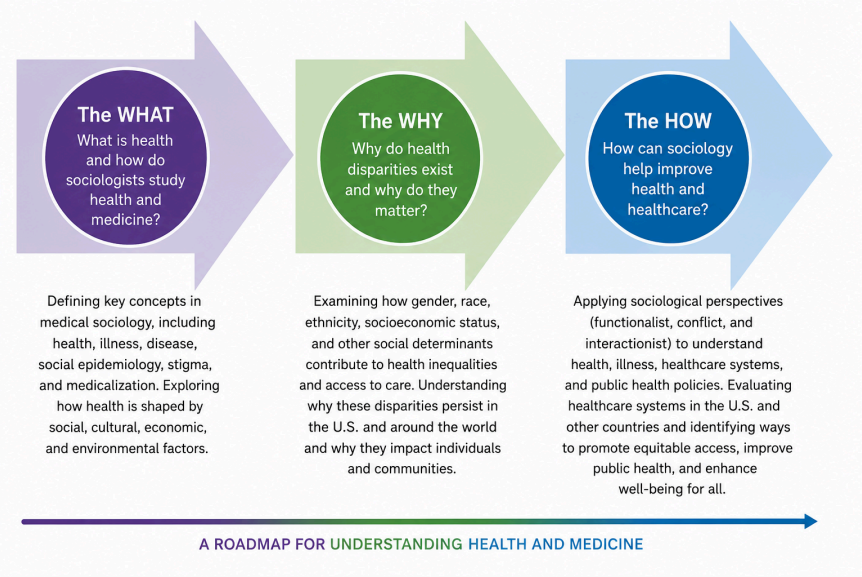


Figure 11.1: Health and illness are not distributed randomly: social position, institutional arrangements, and unequal access to resources shape who is exposed to risk, who receives care, and whose well-being is prioritized. Sociological analysis connects these disparities to broader systems of power and identifies pathways toward more equitable health outcomes. (Jayanti Roy via ChatGPT). Access alternative description for Figure 11.1.

Why, Who, and How

Health and illness can be examined through three guiding questions: what, why, and how. The “what” asks how health, illness, and disease are defined and why those definitions may vary across societies, institutions, and historical periods. Medical sociology moves beyond an exclusively biological understanding of health by examining how cultural meanings, social relationships, living conditions, and environmental exposures influence people’s experiences. It also introduces concepts such as social epidemiology, stigma, disability, medicalization, and the sick role, drawing attention to the ways certain conditions become recognized, classified, treated, or socially judged.

The “why” explores why health outcomes differ so widely among individuals, communities, and countries. Sociologists study how income, occupation, housing, education, race, ethnicity, gender, disability, immigration status, neighborhood conditions, and access to healthcare shape exposure to illness and opportunities for recovery. These patterns are not simply the result of personal choices. They reflect the organization of workplaces, healthcare systems, markets, governments, and other institutions that distribute risks and resources unevenly. This perspective helps explain why some populations experience higher rates of disease, shorter life expectancy, greater environmental hazards, or more difficulty obtaining timely and appropriate care.

The “how” considers how sociological theories can deepen our understanding of healthcare systems, public health policies, medical interactions, and responses to disease. Structural functionalism examines the roles that medicine and healthcare institutions perform in maintaining social stability. Conflict theory emphasizes unequal access, competing interests, professional power, and the commercialization of care. Symbolic interactionism focuses on how people interpret symptoms, negotiate medical identities, experience stigma, and interact with healthcare professionals. Together, these perspectives help us evaluate how communities, institutions, and governments might prevent illness, improve access and quality of care, address persistent disparities, and build healthier and more equitable societies.

11.1: Case Study/Vignette

11.2: The Social Construction of Health

11.3: Global Health

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11.1: Case Study/Vignette

Social Determinants of Health

Health and illness are often discussed as individual experiences: a person gets sick, seeks care, recovers, or lives with the consequences. Sociology asks us to look beyond the individual body and examine the social conditions that shape exposure to illness, access to care, and the ability to recover. The COVID-19 pandemic made these connections especially visible. Health risks were not distributed evenly. They were shaped by work, income, housing, caregiving responsibilities, family structure, public policy, and access to resources such as paid leave, protective equipment, health insurance, and reliable information.

The following case study focuses on Maria, a home-based family child care provider whose work became essential during the pandemic. Her story shows that health is not only about hospitals, doctors, or personal choices. It is also about the social organization of care. Maria's decisions affected children, parents, essential workers, and her own multigenerational household. Her experience helps us ask sociological questions about risk, responsibility, inequality, and care work: Who is expected to keep society functioning during a health crisis? Who receives protection and support? And what happens when people's economic survival conflicts with their health and safety?



Figure 11.1.1: A classroom arranged for physical distancing illustrates how schools adapted routines, space, and expectations in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. (Covid-19-prepared classroom by Louis Bafrance via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0)

Maria's Story

In March 2020, Maria had operated a licensed family child care program from her home for nearly 15 years. She cared for eight children ranging in age from 10 months to 5 years. Many of the children's parents worked in hospitals, grocery stores, emergency services, and other essential jobs, making Maria's program a critical support for the community.

When COVID-19 spread across the United States, Maria faced an impossible decision. Closing her program meant losing her family's primary source of income and leaving essential workers without childcare. Remaining open meant exposing herself, her husband, and her elderly mother, who lived with the family and had hypertension, to the virus.

As public health recommendations changed, Maria worked hard to keep everyone safe. She purchased masks, thermometers, cleaning supplies, and hand sanitizer, often paying out of pocket because supplies were difficult to find. She rearranged her home to allow children more space, increased outdoor activities, sanitized toys throughout the day, and screened children and families each morning.

Some parents appreciated the new safety procedures, while others questioned the rules, including mask requirements and exclusion policies for children with symptoms. Several families temporarily withdrew their children because they had lost their jobs or were working from home. Maria's enrollment dropped, and her income decreased significantly, but many of her expenses remained the same.

Throughout the pandemic, Maria worried constantly about becoming ill. If she became sick, she would have to close her program immediately, leaving families without childcare and placing additional financial strain on her own household.

Although Maria never required hospitalization, she eventually contracted COVID-19 after one child's parent unknowingly brought the virus into the program. She recovered physically but continued to experience fatigue and anxiety for several months. Even after reopening, enrollment was slow to recover, and Maria found herself questioning whether she could continue in the profession she loved.

Despite these challenges, Maria remained committed to supporting young children and their families. She attended online professional development workshops, sought guidance from licensing agencies, and connected with other family child care providers through virtual support groups. These networks helped reduce her sense of isolation and reminded her that she was not facing these challenges alone.

How did the pandemic expose inequalities among families with young children? How did income and access to resources affect Maria's ability to keep her program open? Why were some families able to work from home while others depended on childcare? How might gender have influenced Maria's experiences as a family child care provider?

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11.2: The Social Construction of Health

The Cultural Meaning of Illness

The social construction of health is a major research topic within medical sociology. At first glance, the concept of a social construction of health does not seem to make sense. After all, if disease is a measurable, physiological problem, then there can be no question of socially constructing disease, right? Well, it's not that simple. The idea of the social construction of health emphasizes the socio-cultural aspects of the discipline's approach to physical, objectively definable phenomena.

Sociologists Conrad and Barker (2010) offer a comprehensive framework for understanding the major findings of the last fifty years of development in this concept. Their summary categorizes the findings in the field under three subheadings: the cultural meaning of illness, the social construction of the illness experience, and the social construction of medical knowledge.

Many medical sociologists contend that illnesses have both a biological and an experiential component and that these components exist independently of each other. Our culture, not our biology, dictates which illnesses are stigmatized and which are not, which are considered disabilities and which are not, and which are deemed contestable (meaning some medical professionals may find the existence of this ailment questionable) as opposed to definitive (illnesses that are unquestionably recognized in the medical profession) (Conrad and Barker 2010).

For instance, sociologist Erving Goffman (1963) described how social stigmas hinder individuals from fully integrating into society. In essence, Goffman (1963) suggests we might view illness as a stigma that can push others to view the ill in an undesirable manner. The stigmatization of illness often has the greatest effect on the patient and the kind of care they receive. Many contend that our society and even our healthcare institutions discriminate against certain diseases—like mental disorders, AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases, and skin disorders (Sartorius 2007). Facilities for these diseases may be sub-par; they may be segregated from other healthcare areas or relegated to a poorer environment. The stigma may keep people from seeking help for their illness, making it worse than it needs to be.

Contested illnesses are those that are questioned or questionable by some medical professionals. Disorders like fibromyalgia or chronic fatigue syndrome may be either true illnesses or only in the patients' heads, depending on the opinion of the medical professional. This dynamic can affect how a patient seeks treatment and what kind of treatment they receive.

The Social Construction of the Illness Experience

The idea of the social construction of the illness experience is based on the concept of reality as a social construction. In other words, there is no objective reality; there are only our own perceptions of it. The social construction of the illness experience deals with such issues as the way some patients control the manner in which they reveal their diseases and the lifestyle adaptations patients develop to cope with their illnesses.

In terms of constructing the illness experience, culture and individual personality both play a significant role. For some people, a long-term illness can have the effect of making their world smaller, more defined by the illness than anything else. For others, illness can be a chance for discovery, for re-imaging a new self (Conrad and Barker 2007). Culture plays a huge role in how an individual experiences illness. Widespread diseases like AIDS or breast cancer have specific cultural markers that have changed over the years and that govern how individuals—and society—view them.

Today, many institutions of wellness acknowledge the degree to which individual perceptions shape the nature of health and illness. Regarding physical activity, for instance, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommends that individuals use a standard level of exertion to assess their physical activity. This Rating of Perceived Exertion (RPE) gives a more complete view of an individual's actual exertion level, since heartrate or pulse measurements may be affected by medication or other issues (Centers for Disease Control 2011a). Similarly, many medical professionals use a comparable scale for perceived pain to help determine pain management strategies.

The Social Construction of Medical Knowledge

Conrad and Barker show how medical knowledge is socially constructed; that is, it can both reflect and reproduce inequalities in

gender, class, race, and ethnicity. Conrad and Barker (2011) use the example of the social construction of women's health and how medical knowledge has changed significantly in the course of a few generations. For instance, in the early nineteenth century, pregnant women were discouraged from driving or dancing for fear of harming the unborn child, much as they are discouraged, with more valid reason, from smoking or drinking alcohol today.

Social Policy and Debate: Has Breast Cancer Awareness Gone Too Far?



Figure 19.3: Pink ribbons are a ubiquitous reminder of breast cancer. But do pink ribbon chocolates do anything to eradicate the disease? (Pink Ribbon chocolates by wishuponacupcake via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY 4.0)

Every October, the world turns pink. Football and baseball players wear pink accessories. Skyscrapers and large public buildings are lit with pink lights at night. Shoppers can choose from a huge array of pink products. In 2014, people wanting to support the fight against breast cancer could purchase any of the following pink products: KitchenAid mixers, Master Lock padlocks and bike chains, Wilson tennis rackets, Fiat cars, and Smith & Wesson handguns. You read that correctly. The goal of all these pink products is to raise awareness and money for breast cancer. However, the relentless creep of pink has many people wondering if the pink marketing juggernaut has gone too far.

Pink has been associated with breast cancer since 1991, when the Susan G. Komen Foundation handed out pink ribbons at its 1991 Race for the Cure event. Since then, the pink ribbon has appeared on countless products, and then by extension, the color pink has come to represent support for a cure of the disease. No one can argue about the Susan G. Komen Foundation's mission—to find a cure for breast cancer—or the fact that the group has raised millions of dollars for research and care. However, some people question if, or how much, all these products really help in the fight against breast cancer (Begos 2011).

The advocacy group Breast Cancer Action (BCA) position themselves as watchdogs of other agencies fighting breast cancer. They accept no funding from entities, like those in the pharmaceutical industry, with potential profit connections to this health industry. They've developed a trademarked "Think Before You Pink" campaign to provoke consumer questioning of the end contributions made to breast cancer by companies hawking pink wares. They do not advise against "pink" purchases; they just want consumers to be informed about how much money is involved, where it comes from, and where it will go. For instance, what percentage of each purchase goes to breast cancer causes? BCA does not judge how much is enough, but it informs customers and then encourages them to consider whether they feel the amount is enough (Think Before You Pink 2012).

BCA also suggests that consumers make sure that the product they are buying does not actually *contribute* to breast cancer, a phenomenon they call "pinkwashing." This issue made national headlines in 2010, when the Susan G. Komen Foundation partnered with Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) on a promotion called "Buckets for the Cure." For every bucket of grilled or regular fried chicken, KFC would donate fifty cents to the Komen Foundation, with the goal of reaching 8 million dollars: the largest single donation received by the foundation. However, some critics saw the partnership as an unholy alliance. Higher

body fat and eating fatty foods has been linked to increased cancer risks, and detractors, including BCA, called the Komen Foundation out on this apparent contradiction of goals. Komen's response was that the program did a great deal to raise awareness in low-income communities, where Komen previously had little outreach (Hutchison 2010).

What do you think? Are fundraising and awareness important enough to trump issues of health? What other examples of "pinkwashing" can you think of?

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11.3: Global Health

A Reminder About Social Stratification

Social epidemiology is the study of the causes and distribution of diseases. Social epidemiology can reveal how social problems are connected to the health of different populations. These epidemiological studies show that the health problems of high-income nations differ from those of low-income nations, but also that diseases and their diagnosis are changing. Cardiovascular disease, for example, is now the both most prevalent disease and the disease most likely to be fatal in lower-income countries. And globally, 70 percent of cardiovascular disease cases and deaths are due to modifiable risks (Dagenais 2019).

Some theorists differentiate among three types of countries: core nations, semi-peripheral nations, and peripheral nations. Core nations are those that we think of as highly developed or industrialized, semi-peripheral nations are those that are often called developing or newly industrialized, and peripheral nations are those that are relatively undeveloped. While the most pervasive issue in the U.S. healthcare system is affordable access to healthcare, other core countries have different issues, and semi-peripheral and peripheral nations are faced with a host of additional concerns. Reviewing the status of global health offers insight into the various ways that politics and wealth shape access to healthcare, and it shows which populations are most affected by health disparities.

Health in High-Income Nations

Obesity, which is on the rise in high-income nations, has been linked to many diseases, including cardiovascular problems, musculoskeletal problems, diabetes, and respiratory issues. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2011), obesity rates are rising in all countries, with the greatest gains being made in the highest-income countries. The United States has the highest obesity rate at 42 percent; some of these people are considered severely obese, which occurs in 9 percent of U.S. adults (Hales 2020).

Wallace Huffman and his fellow researchers (2006) contend that several factors are contributing to the rise in obesity in developed countries:

- Improvements in technology and reduced family size have led to a reduction of work to be done in household production.
- Unhealthy market goods, including processed foods, sweetened drinks, and sweet and salty snacks are replacing home-produced goods.
- Leisure activities are growing more sedentary, for example, computer games, web surfing, and television viewing.
- More workers are shifting from active work (agriculture and manufacturing) to service industries.
- Increased access to passive transportation has led to more driving and less walking.

Obesity and weight issues have significant societal costs, including lower life expectancies and higher shared healthcare costs.

While ischemic heart disease is the single most prevalent cause of death in higher-income countries, cancers of all types combine to be a higher overall cause of death. Cancer accounts for twice as many deaths as cardiovascular disease in higher-income countries (Mahase 2019).

Health in Low-Income Nations

In peripheral nations with low per capita income, it is not the cost of healthcare that is the most pressing concern. Rather, low-income countries must manage such problems as infectious disease, high infant mortality rates, scarce medical personnel, and inadequate water and sewer systems. Due to such health concerns, low-income nations have higher rates of infant mortality and lower average life spans.

One of the biggest contributors to medical issues in low-income countries is the lack of access to clean water and basic sanitation resources. According to a 2014 UNICEF report, almost half of the developing world's population lacks improved sanitation facilities. The World Health Organization (WHO) tracks health-related data for 193 countries, and organizes them by region. In their 2011 World Health Statistics report, they document the following statistics:

- Globally in 2019, the rate of mortality for children under five was 38 per 1,000 live births, which is a dramatic change from previous decades. (In 1990, the rate was 93 deaths per 1,000 births (World Health Organization 2020.)) In low-income countries, however, that rate is much higher. The child mortality rate in low-income nations was 11 times higher than that of high-income countries—76 deaths per 1,000 births compared to 7 deaths per 1,000 births (Keck 2020). To consider it regionally, the highest under-five mortality rate remains in the WHO African Region (74 per 1000 live births), around 9 times higher than that in the WHO European Region (8 per 1000 live births) (World Health Organization 2021).
- The most frequent causes of death in children under five years old are pneumonia, diarrhea, congenital anomalies, preterm birth complications, birth asphyxia/trauma, and malaria, all of which can be prevented or treated with affordable interventions including immunization, adequate nutrition, safe water and food and quality care by a trained health provider when needed.

The availability of doctors and nurses in low-income countries is one-tenth that of nations with a high income. Challenges in access to medical education and access to patients exacerbate this issue for would-be medical professionals in low-income countries (World Health Organization 2011).

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11.4: Health in the United States

Health by Race and Ethnicity

Health in the United States is a complex and often contradictory issue. One the one hand, as one of the wealthiest nations, the United States fares well in health comparisons with the rest of the world. However, the United States also lags behind almost every industrialized country in terms of providing care to *all* its citizens. The following sections look at different aspects of health in the United States.

When looking at the social epidemiology of the United States, it is hard to miss the disparities among races. The discrepancy between Black and White Americans shows the gap clearly; in 2018, the average life expectancy for White males was approximately five years longer than for Black males: 78.8 compared to 74.7 (Wamsley 2021). (Note that in 2020 life expectancies of all races declined further, though the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic was a significant cause.) Other indicates show a similar disparity. The 2018 infant mortality rates for different races and ethnicities are as follows:

- Non-Hispanic Black people: 10.8
- Native Hawaiian people or other Pacific Islanders: 9.4
- Native American/Alaska Native people: 8.2
- Hispanic people: 4.9
- Non-Hispanic White people: 4.6
- Asian and Asian American people: 3.6 (Centers for Disease Control 2021)

According to a report from the Henry J. Kaiser Foundation (2007), African Americans also have higher incidence of several diseases and causes of mortality, from cancer to heart disease to diabetes. In a similar vein, it is important to note that ethnic minorities, including Mexican Americans and Native Americans, also have higher rates of these diseases and causes of mortality than White people.

Lisa Berkman (2009) notes that this gap started to narrow during the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s, but it began widening again in the early 1980s. What accounts for these perpetual disparities in health among different ethnic groups? Much of the answer lies in the level of healthcare that these groups receive. The National Healthcare Disparities Report shows that even after adjusting for insurance differences, racial and ethnic minority groups receive poorer quality of care and less access to care than dominant groups. The Report identified these racial inequalities in care:

- Black people, Native Americans, and Alaska Native people received worse care than Whites for about 40 percent of quality measures.
- Hispanic people, Native Hawaiian people, and Pacific Islanders received worse care than White people for more than 30 percent of quality measures.
- Asian people received worse care than White people for nearly 30 percent of quality measures but better care for nearly 30 percent of quality measures (Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality 2020).

Health by Socioeconomic Status

Discussions of health by race and ethnicity often overlap with discussions of health by socioeconomic status, since the two concepts are intertwined in the United States. As the Agency for Health Research and Quality (2010) notes, “racial and ethnic minorities are more likely than non-Hispanic whites to be poor or near poor,” so much of the data pertaining to subordinate groups is also likely to be pertinent to low socioeconomic groups. Marilyn Winkleby and her research associates (1992) state that “one of the strongest and most consistent predictors of a person's morbidity and mortality experience is that person's socioeconomic status (SES). This finding persists across all diseases with few exceptions, continues throughout the entire lifespan, and extends across numerous risk factors for disease.” Morbidity is the incidence of disease.

It is important to remember that economics are only part of the SES picture; research suggests that education also plays an important role. Phelan and Link (2003) note that many behavior-influenced diseases like lung cancer (from smoking), coronary artery disease (from poor eating and exercise habits), and AIDS initially were widespread across SES groups. However, once information linking habits to disease was disseminated, these diseases decreased in high SES groups and increased in low SES

groups. This illustrates the important role of education initiatives regarding a given disease, as well as possible inequalities in how those initiatives effectively reach different SES groups.

Health by Gender

Women are affected adversely both by unequal access to and institutionalized sexism in the healthcare industry. According to a recent report from the Kaiser Family Foundation, women experienced a decline in their ability to see needed specialists between 2001 and 2008. In 2008, one quarter of women questioned the quality of their healthcare (Ranji and Salganico 2011). Quality is partially indicated by access and cost. In 2018, roughly one in four (26%) women—compared to one in five (19%) men—reported delaying healthcare or letting conditions go untreated due to cost. Because of costs, approximately one in five women postponed preventive care, skipped a recommended test or treatment, or reduced their use of medication due to cost (Kaiser Family Foundation 2018).

We can see an example of institutionalized sexism in the way that women are more likely than men to be diagnosed with certain kinds of mental disorders. Psychologist Dana Becker notes that 75 percent of all diagnoses of Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) are for women according to the *Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. This diagnosis is characterized by instability of identity, of mood, and of behavior, and Becker argues that it has been used as a catch-all diagnosis for too many women. She further decries the pejorative connotation of the diagnosis, saying that it predisposes many people, both within and outside of the profession of psychotherapy, against women who have been so diagnosed (Becker).

Many critics also point to the medicalization of women's issues as an example of institutionalized sexism. Medicalization refers to the process by which previously normal aspects of life are redefined as deviant and needing medical attention to remedy. Historically and contemporaneously, many aspects of women's lives have been medicalized, including menstruation, premenstrual syndrome, pregnancy, childbirth, and menopause. The medicalization of pregnancy and childbirth has been particularly contentious in recent decades, with many women opting against the medical process and choosing a more natural childbirth. Fox and Worts (1999) find that all women experience pain and anxiety during the birth process, but that social support relieves both as effectively as medical support. In other words, medical interventions are no more effective than social ones at helping with the difficulties of pain and childbirth. Fox and Worts further found that women with supportive partners ended up with less medical intervention and fewer cases of postpartum depression. Of course, access to quality birth care outside the standard medical models may not be readily available to women of all social classes.

Sociology in the Real World: Medicalization of Sleeplessness



Figure 11.4.1: Many people fail to get enough sleep. But is insomnia a disease that should be cured with medication? (Sleeping students by Love Krittaya via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under PDM 1.0)

How is your “sleep hygiene?” Sleep hygiene refers to the lifestyle and sleep habits that contribute to sleeplessness. Bad habits that can lead to sleeplessness include inconsistent bedtimes, lack of exercise, late-night employment, napping during the day, and sleep environments that include noise, lights, or screen time (National Institutes of Health 2011a).

According to the National Institute of Health, examining sleep hygiene is the first step in trying to solve a problem with sleeplessness.

Sleep problems continue to be a major public health issue in the United States. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), approximately one in three U.S. adults does not get the recommended seven or more hours of sleep each night. In addition, data from the 2024 National Health Interview Survey found that 30.5% of adults reported sleeping fewer than seven hours per night, 15.4% had trouble falling asleep, and 18.1% had difficulty staying asleep most days or every day. These findings highlight the growing importance of healthy sleep habits and the need for both behavioral and medical approaches to improving sleep health.

According to a study in the *American Journal of Public Health* (2011), prescriptions for sleep medications increased dramatically from 1993 to 2007. While complaints of sleeplessness during doctor’s office visits more than doubled during this time, insomnia diagnoses increased more than sevenfold, from about 840,000 to 6.1 million. The authors of the study conclude that sleeplessness has been medicalized as insomnia, and that “insomnia may be a public health concern, but potential overtreatment with marginally effective, expensive medications with nontrivial side effects raises definite population health concerns” (Moloney, Konrad, and Zimmer 2011). Indeed, a study published in 2004 in the *Archives of Internal Medicine* shows that cognitive behavioral therapy, not medication, was the most effective sleep intervention (Jacobs, Pace-Schott, Stickgold, and Otto 2004).

The use of sleep medications has remained common. CDC data from 2024 found that 12.9% of U.S. adults used sleep aids most days or every day, including prescription medications, over-the-counter products, supplements, and cannabis-based products. Women and older adults were more likely to report regular use of sleep aids than men and younger adults.

A century ago, people who couldn’t sleep were told to count sheep. Now they pop a pill, and all those pills add up to a very lucrative market for the pharmaceutical industry.

Food for thought: Is this industry behind the medicalization of sleeplessness, or is it just responding to a need?

Mental Health and Disability

The treatment received by those defined as mentally ill or disabled varies greatly from country to country. In the post-millennial United States, those of us who have never experienced such a disadvantage take for granted the rights our society guarantees for each citizen. We do not think about the relatively recent nature of the protections, unless, of course, we know someone constantly inconvenienced by the lack of accommodations or misfortune of suddenly experiencing a temporary disability.

Mental Health

People with mental disorders (a condition that makes it more difficult to cope with everyday life) and people with mental illness (a severe, lasting mental disorder that requires long-term treatment) experience a wide range of effects. According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), the United States has over 50 million adults with mental illness or mental disorder, or 20 percent of the total adult population. Of these, 13 million have what is considered serious mental illness or mental disorder (5 percent of the adult population); serious mental illness is that which causes impairment or disability (National Institute of Mental Health 2021). Finally, 16.5 percent of children aged 6-17 experienced mental illness or disorder (National Alliance on Mental Illness 2021).

The most common mental disorders in the United States are anxiety disorders. Almost 18 percent of U.S. adults are likely to be affected in a single year, and 28 percent are likely to be affected over the course of a lifetime (Anxiety and Depression Institute of America 2021). It is important to distinguish between occasional feelings of anxiety and a true anxiety disorder. Anxiety is a normal reaction to stress that we all feel at some point, but anxiety disorders are feelings of worry and fearfulness that last for months at a time. Anxiety disorders include obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), panic disorders, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and both social and specific phobias.

The second most common mental disorders in the United States are mood disorders; roughly 10 percent of U.S. adults are

likely to be affected yearly, while 21 percent are likely to be affected over the course of a lifetime (National Institute of Mental Health 2005). Mood disorders are the most common causes of illness-related hospitalization in the U.S. (Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality 2021). Major mood disorders are depression and dysthymic disorder. Like anxiety, depression might seem like something that everyone experiences at some point, and it is true that most people feel sad or "blue" at times in their lives. A true depressive episode, however, is more than just feeling sad for a short period. It is a long-term, debilitating illness that usually needs treatment to cure. Bipolar disorder is characterized by dramatic shifts in energy and mood, often affecting the individual's ability to carry out day-to-day tasks. Bipolar disorder used to be called manic depression because of the way people would swing between manic and depressive episodes.

Depending on what definition is used, there is some overlap between mood disorders and personality disorders, which affect 9 percent of people in the United States yearly. A personality disorder is an enduring and inflexible pattern of long duration leading to significant distress or impairment, that is not due to use of substances or another medical condition. In other words, personality disorders cause people to behave in ways that are seen as abnormal to society but seem normal to them.

Diagnosis and Classification

The diagnosis and classification regarding personality disorders has been evolving and is somewhat controversial. To guide diagnosis and potential treatments of mental disorders, the American Psychological Association publishes the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual on Mental Disorders* (DSM). Experts working on the latest version initially proposed changing the categories of personality disorders. However, the final publication retains the original ten categories, but contains an alternate/emerging approach for classifying them. This evolution demonstrates the challenges and the wide array of treating conditions, and also represents areas of difference between theorists, practitioners, governing bodies, and other stakeholders. As discussed in the Sociological Research chapter, study and investigation is a diligent and multi-dimensional process. As the diagnostic application evolves, we will see how their definitions help scholars across disciplines understand the intersection of health issues and how they are defined by social institutions and cultural norms.

Another commonly diagnosed mental disorder is Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), which affects 9 percent of U.S. children and 4 percent of adults on a lifetime basis (Danielson 2018). Since ADHD is one of the most common childhood disorders, it is often incorrectly considered only a disease found in children. But ADHD can be a serious issue for adults who either had been diagnosed as children or who are diagnosed as adults. ADHD is marked by difficulty paying attention, difficulty controlling behavior, and hyperactivity. As a result, it can lead to educational and behavioral issues in children, success issues in college, and challenges in workplace and family life. However, there is some social debate over whether such drugs are being overprescribed (American Psychological Association). A significant difficulty in diagnosis, treatment, and societal understanding of ADHD is that it changes in expression based on a wide range of factors, including age (CHADD 2020).

Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) encompass a group of developmental brain disorders that are characterized by "deficits in social interaction, verbal and nonverbal communication, and engagement in repetitive behaviors or interests" (National Institute of Mental Health).

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), approximately 1 in 31 (3.2%) 8-year-old children in the United States were identified with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in 2022, an increase from 1 in 36 in 2020, 1 in 44 in 2018, and 1 in 54 in 2016. Researchers attribute much of this increase to improved awareness, broader diagnostic criteria, earlier screening, and greater access to evaluation and services, although ongoing research continues to examine additional genetic and environmental influences. Autism is also identified more frequently in boys than girls and occurs across all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups.

The rate of increase and awareness has assisted diagnosis and treatment, but autism is a cause of significant fear among parents and families. Because of its impact on relationships and especially verbal communication, children with autism (and their parents) can be shunned, grossly misunderstood, and mistreated. For example, people with an autism spectrum disorder who cannot verbalize are often assumed to be unintelligent, or are sometimes left out of conversations or activities because others feel they cannot participate. Parents may be reluctant to let their children play with or associate with children with ASD. Adults with ASD go through many of the same misconceptions and mistreatments, such as being denied opportunities or being made to feel unwelcome (Applied Behavior Analysis).

Disability

Disability refers to a reduction in one's ability to perform everyday tasks. The World Health Organization makes a distinction between the various terms used to describe disabilities. They use the term impairment to describe the physical limitations, while

reserving the term disability to refer to the social limitation.

Before the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990, people in the United States with disabilities were often excluded from opportunities and social institutions many of us take for granted. This occurred not only through employment and other kinds of discrimination but also through casual acceptance by most people in the United States of a world designed for the convenience of the able-bodied. Imagine being in a wheelchair and trying to use a sidewalk without the benefit of wheelchair-accessible curbs. Imagine as a blind person trying to access information without the widespread availability of Braille. Imagine having limited motor control and being faced with a difficult-to-grasp round door handle. Issues like these are what the ADA tries to address. Ramps on sidewalks, Braille instructions, and more accessible door levers are all accommodations to help people with disabilities.

People with disabilities can be stigmatized by their illnesses. Stigmatization means their identity is spoiled; they are labeled as different, discriminated against, and sometimes even shunned. They are labeled (as an interactionist might point out) and ascribed a master status (as a functionalist might note), becoming “the blind girl” or “the boy in the wheelchair” instead of someone afforded a full identity by society. This can be especially true for people who are disabled due to mental illness or disorders.

As discussed in the section on mental health, many mental health disorders can be debilitating and can affect a person’s ability to cope with everyday life. This can affect social status, housing, and especially employment.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2025), employment outcomes for people with disabilities have improved over the past decade, but significant disparities remain. In 2024, the employment-population ratio for people with disabilities was 22.7%, compared with 65.5% for people without disabilities. The unemployment rate for people with disabilities was 7.5%, nearly double the 3.8% rate for those without disabilities. Additionally, about 75% of people with disabilities were not participating in the labor force, compared with about 32% of those without disabilities. These findings illustrate the continuing barriers to employment and economic participation faced by many individuals with disabilities.

Sociology in the Real World: Obesity: The Last Acceptable Prejudice?

Many people who see a person with obesity may make negative assumptions about them based on their size. According to a study from the Yale Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity, large people are the object of “widespread negative stereotypes that overweight and obese persons are lazy, unmotivated, lacking in self-discipline, less competent, noncompliant, and sloppy” (Puhl and Heuer 2009).

Historically, both in the United States and elsewhere, it was considered acceptable to discriminate against people based on prejudiced opinions. Even after slavery was abolished through the 13th Amendment in 1865, institutionalized racism and prejudice against Black people persisted. In an example of stereotype interchangeability, the same insults that are flung today at the overweight and obese population (lazy, for instance) have been flung at various racial and ethnic groups in earlier history.

Why is it considered acceptable to feel prejudice toward—even to hate—people with obesity? Puhl and Heuer suggest that these feelings stem from the perception that obesity is preventable through self-control, better diet, and more exercise. Highlighting this contention is the fact that studies have shown that people’s perceptions of obesity are more positive when they think the obesity was caused by non-controllable factors like biology (a thyroid condition, for instance) or genetics.

Health experts emphasize that obesity is a disease, and that it is not the result of simple overeating. There are often a number of contributing factors that make it more difficult to avoid. Even with some understanding of non-controllable factors that might affect obesity, people with obesity are still subject to stigmatization. Puhl and Heuer’s study is one of many that document discrimination at work, in the media, and even in the medical profession. Large people are less likely to get into college than thinner people, and they are less likely to succeed at work.

Stigmatization of people with obesity comes in many forms, from the seemingly benign to the potentially illegal. In movies and television shows, overweight people are often portrayed negatively, or as stock characters who are the butt of jokes. One study found that in children’s movies “obesity was equated with negative traits (evil, unattractive, unfriendly, cruel) in 64 percent of the most popular children's videos. In 72 percent of the videos, characters with thin bodies had desirable traits,

such as kindness or happiness" (Hines and Thompson 2007). In movies and television for adults, the negative portrayal is often meant to be funny. Think about the way you have seen obese people portrayed in movies and on television; now think of any other subordinate group being openly denigrated in such a way. It is difficult to find a parallel example.

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11.5: Comparative Health and Medicine

U.S. Healthcare

There are broad, structural differences among the healthcare systems of different countries. In core nations, those differences might arise in the administration of healthcare, while the care itself is similar. In peripheral and semi-peripheral countries, a lack of basic healthcare administration can be the defining feature of the system. Most countries rely on some combination of modern and traditional medicine. In core countries with large investments in technology, research, and equipment, the focus is usually on modern medicine, with traditional (also called alternative or complementary) medicine playing a secondary role. In the United States, for instance, the American Medical Association (AMA) resolved to support the incorporation of complementary and alternative medicine in medical education. In developing countries, even quickly modernizing ones like China, traditional medicine (often understood as “complementary” by the western world) may still play a larger role.

U.S. healthcare coverage can broadly be divided into two main categories: public healthcare (government-funded) and private healthcare (privately funded).

Public and Private Healthcare

The two main publicly funded healthcare programs are Medicare, which provides health services to people over sixty-five years old as well as people who meet other standards for disability, and Medicaid, which provides services to people with very low incomes who meet other eligibility requirements. Other government-funded programs include service agencies focused on Native Americans (the Indian Health Service), Veterans (the Veterans Health Administration), and children (the Children’s Health Insurance Program).

Private insurance is typically categorized as either employment-based insurance or direct-purchase insurance. Employment-based insurance is health plan coverage that is provided in whole or in part by an employer or union; it can cover just the employee, or the employee and their family. Direct purchase insurance is coverage that an individual buys directly from a private company.

Despite multiple public and private insurance options, a significant number of Americans remain without health insurance. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), approximately 27.2 million people (8.2% of the U.S. population) were uninsured in 2024**.** Adults without health insurance are less likely to receive preventive care, routine checkups, and timely treatment for chronic conditions, often delaying care until illnesses become more serious and requiring emergency medical services. These disparities highlight the continuing challenges of ensuring equitable access to healthcare in the United States.

The number of uninsured people is far lower than in previous decades.The number of uninsured Americans is considerably lower than it was before the Affordable Care Act (ACA) was implemented. Prior to the ACA, the uninsured rate was approximately 18% in 2013, with more than 40 million people lacking health insurance. After the ACA's major provisions took effect in 2014, the uninsured rate declined substantially, reaching historic lows. As of 2024, approximately 27.2 million people (8.2% of the U.S. population) were uninsured, less than half the pre-ACA rate. Although coverage has expanded significantly, millions of Americans continue to face barriers to affordable healthcare, particularly in states that did not expand Medicaid and among lower-income populations.

The Affordable Care Act, which came into full force in 2014, allowed more people to get affordable insurance. The uninsured number reached its lowest point in 2016, before beginning to climb again (Garfield 2019).

People having some insurance may mask the fact that they could be underinsured; that is, people who pay at least 10 percent of their income on healthcare costs not covered by insurance or, for low-income adults, those whose medical expenses or deductibles are at least 5 percent of their income (Schoen, Doty, Robertson, and Collins 2011).

Why are so many people uninsured or underinsured? Skyrocketing healthcare costs are part of the issue. While most people get their insurance through their employer, not all employers offer it, especially retail companies or small businesses in which many of the workers may be part time. Finally, for many years insurers could deny coverage to people with pre-existing conditions--previous illnesses or chronic diseases.

The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (often abbreviated ACA or nicknamed Obamacare) was a landmark change in U.S. healthcare. Passed in 2010 and fully implemented in 2014, it increased eligibility to programs like Medicaid, helped guarantee insurance coverage for people with pre-existing conditions, and established regulations to make sure that the premium funds collected by insurers and care providers go directly to medical care. It also included an individual mandate, which requires everyone to have insurance coverage by 2014 or pay a penalty. A series of provisions, including significant subsidies, are intended to address the discrepancies in income that are currently contributing to high rates of uninsurance and underinsurance. In 2012 the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the ACA's individual mandate. 29 million people in the United States have gained health insurance under ACA (Economic Policy Institute 2021).

The ACA remains contentious. The Supreme Court ruled in the case of *National Federation of Independent Businesses v. Sebelius* in 2012, that states cannot be forced to participate in the PPACA's Medicaid expansion. This ruling opened the door to further challenges to the ACA in Congress and the Federal courts, some state governments, conservative groups and independent businesses. The ACA has been a driving factor in elections and public opinion. In 2010 and 2014, many Republican gains in Congressional seats were related to fierce concern about Obamacare. However, once millions of people were covered by the law and the economy continued to improve, public sentiment and elections swung the other way. Healthcare was the top issue for voters, and desire to preserve the law was credited for many of the Democratic gains in the election, which carried over to 2020.

Other recent debates have focused on preventing fraudulent enrollments, verifying eligibility for premium subsidies, and addressing the expiration of enhanced premium tax credits that helped lower insurance costs during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The ACA also continues to reflect political differences among states. Some states have expanded Medicaid, increasing healthcare access for low-income residents, while others have chosen not to expand the program, resulting in differences in insurance coverage and access to care across the country. As healthcare costs continue to rise and millions of Americans still lack affordable coverage, the future of the ACA remains an important topic in public policy and national elections.

Healthcare Elsewhere

Clearly, healthcare in the United States has some areas for improvement. But how does it compare to healthcare in other countries? Many people in the United States are fond of saying that this country has the best healthcare in the world, and while it is true that the United States has a higher quality of care available than many peripheral or semi-peripheral nations, it is not necessarily the “best in the world.” In a report on how U.S. healthcare compares to that of other countries, researchers found that the United States does “relatively well in some areas—such as cancer care—and less well in others—such as mortality from conditions amenable to prevention and treatment” (Docteur and Berenson 2009).

One critique of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act is that it will create a system of socialized medicine, a term that for many people in the United States has negative connotations lingering from the Cold War era and earlier. Under a socialized medicine system, the government owns and runs the system. It employs the doctors, nurses, and other staff, and it owns and runs the hospitals (Klein 2009). The best example of socialized medicine is in Great Britain, where the National Health System (NHS) gives free healthcare to all its residents. And despite some U.S. citizens’ knee-jerk reaction to any healthcare changes that hint of socialism, the United States has one socialized system with the Veterans Health Administration.

It is important to distinguish between socialized medicine, in which the government owns the healthcare system, and universal healthcare, which is simply a system that guarantees healthcare coverage for everyone. Germany, Singapore, and Canada all have universal healthcare. People often look to Canada’s universal healthcare system, Medicare, as a model for the system. In Canada, healthcare is publicly funded and is administered by the separate provincial and territorial governments. However, the care itself comes from private providers. This is the main difference between universal healthcare and socialized medicine. The Canada Health Act of 1970 required that all health insurance plans must be “available to all eligible Canadian residents, comprehensive in coverage, accessible, portable among provinces, and publicly administered” (International Health Systems Canada 2010).

Socialized Medicine

Heated discussions about socialization of medicine and managed-care options seem frivolous when compared with the issues of healthcare systems in developing or underdeveloped countries. In many countries, per capita income is so low, and governments are so fractured, that healthcare as we know it is virtually non-existent. Care that people in developed countries take for granted—like hospitals, healthcare workers, immunizations, antibiotics and other medications, and even sanitary water for drinking and washing—are unavailable to much of the population. Organizations like Doctors Without Borders, UNICEF, and the World Health Organization have played an important role in helping these countries get their most basic health needs met.

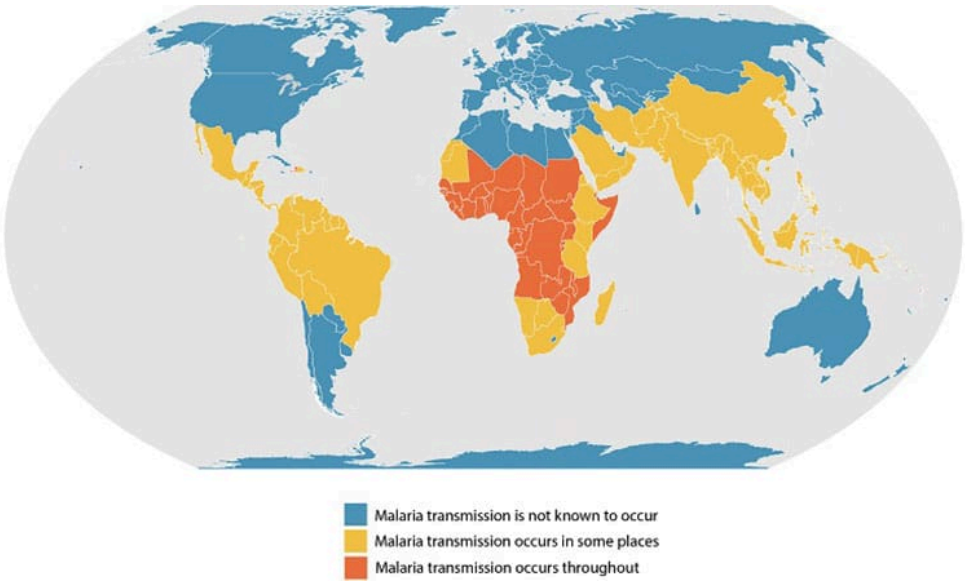


Figure 11.5.1: In 2020, Malaria transmission was concentrated in tropical and subtropical regions, especially across much of sub-Saharan Africa, while transmission was limited or absent in many wealthier temperate regions. (Malaria distribution 2020 by Julius Senegal via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under PDM 1.0). Access alternative description for Figure 11.5.1.

WHO, which is the health arm of the United Nations, set eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000 with the aim of reaching these goals by 2015. Some of the goals deal more broadly with the socioeconomic factors that influence health, but MDGs 4, 5, and 6 all relate specifically to large-scale health concerns, the likes of which most people in the United States will never contemplate. MDG 4 is to reduce child mortality, MDG 5 aims to improve maternal health, and MDG 6 strives to combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases. The goals may not seem particularly dramatic, but the numbers behind them show how serious they are.

For MDG 4, the WHO reports that 2009 infant mortality rates in "children under 5 years old in the WHO African Region (127 per 1000 live births) and in low-income countries (117 per 1000 live births) [had dropped], but they were still higher than the 1990 global level of 89 per 1000 live births" (World Health Organization 2011). The fact that these deaths could have been avoided through appropriate medicine and clean drinking water shows the importance of healthcare.

Much progress has been made on MDG 5, with maternal deaths decreasing by 34 percent. However, almost all maternal deaths occurred in developing countries, with the African region still experiencing high numbers (World Health Organization 2011).

On MDG 6, the WHO is seeing some decreases in per capita incidence rates of malaria, tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS, and other diseases. However, the decreases are often offset by population increases (World Health Organization 2011). Again, the lowest-income countries, especially in the African region, experience the worst problems with disease. An important component of disease prevention and control is epidemiology, or the study of the incidence, distribution, and possible control of diseases. Fear of Ebola contamination, primarily in Western Africa but also to a smaller degree in the United States, became national news in the summer and fall of 2014.

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11.6: Theoretical Perspectives on Health and Medicine

Functionalism

According to the functionalist perspective, health is vital to the stability of the society, and therefore sickness is a sanctioned form of deviance. Talcott Parsons (1951) was the first to discuss this in terms of the sick role: patterns of expectations that define appropriate behavior for the sick and for those who take care of them.

According to Parsons, the sick person has a specific role with both rights and responsibilities. To start with, the sick person has not chosen to be sick and should not be treated as responsible for her condition. The sick person also has the right of being exempt from normal social roles; they are not required to fulfill the obligation of a well person and can avoid her normal responsibilities without censure. However, this exemption is temporary and relative to the severity of the illness. The exemption also requires legitimation by a physician; that is, a physician must certify that the illness is genuine.

The responsibility of the sick person is twofold: to try to get well and to seek technically competent help from a physician. If the sick person stays ill longer than is appropriate (malingers), they may be stigmatized.

Parsons argues that since the sick are unable to fulfill their normal societal roles, their sickness weakens the society. Therefore, it is sometimes necessary for various forms of social control to bring the behavior of a sick person back in line with normal expectations. In this model of health, doctors serve as gatekeepers, deciding who is healthy and who is sick—a relationship in which the doctor has all the power. But is it appropriate to allow doctors so much power over deciding who is sick? And what about people who are sick, but are unwilling to leave their positions for any number of reasons (personal/social obligations, financial need, or lack of insurance, for instance).

Conflict Perspective

Theorists using the conflict perspective suggest that issues with the healthcare system, as with most other social problems, are rooted in capitalist society. According to conflict theorists, capitalism and the pursuit of profit lead to the commodification of health: the changing of something not generally thought of as a commodity into something that can be bought and sold in a marketplace. In this view, people with money and power—the dominant group—are the ones who make decisions about how the healthcare system will be run. They therefore ensure that they will have healthcare coverage, while simultaneously ensuring that subordinate groups stay subordinate through lack of access. This creates significant healthcare—and health—disparities between the dominant and subordinate groups.

Alongside the health disparities created by class inequalities, there are a number of health disparities created by racism, sexism, ageism, and heterosexism. When health is a commodity, the poor are more likely to experience illness caused by poor diet, to live and work in unhealthy environments, and are less likely to challenge the system. In the United States, a disproportionate number of racial minorities also have less economic power, so they bear a great deal of the burden of poor health. It is not only the poor who suffer from the conflict between dominant and subordinate groups. For many years now, same-sex couples have been denied spousal benefits, either in the form of health insurance or in terms of medical responsibility. Further adding to the issue, doctors hold a disproportionate amount of power in the doctor/patient relationship, which provides them with extensive social and economic benefits.

While conflict theorists are accurate in pointing out certain inequalities in the healthcare system, they do not give enough credit to medical advances that would not have been made without an economic structure to support and reward researchers: a structure dependent on profitability. Additionally, in their criticism of the power differential between doctor and patient, they are perhaps dismissive of the hard-won medical expertise possessed by doctors and not patients, which renders a truly egalitarian relationship more elusive.

Symbolic Interactionism

According to theorists working in this perspective, health and illness are both socially constructed. As we discussed in the beginning of the chapter, interactionists focus on the specific meanings and causes people attribute to illness. The term

medicalization of deviance refers to the process that changes “bad” behavior into “sick” behavior. A related process is demedicalization, in which “sick” behavior is normalized again. Medicalization and demedicalization affect who responds to the patient, how people respond to the patient, and how people view the personal responsibility of the patient (Conrad and Schneider 1992).

An example of medicalization is illustrated by the history of how our society views alcohol and alcoholism. During the nineteenth century, people who drank too much were considered bad, lazy people. They were called drunks, and it was not uncommon for them to be arrested or run out of a town. Drunks were not treated in a sympathetic way because, at that time, it was thought that it was their own fault that they could not stop drinking. During the latter half of the twentieth century, however, people who drank too much were increasingly defined as alcoholics: people with a disease or a genetic predisposition to addiction who were not responsible for their drinking. With alcoholism defined as a disease and not a personal choice, alcoholics came to be viewed with more compassion and understanding. Thus, “badness” was transformed into “sickness.”

There are numerous examples of demedicalization in history as well. During the Civil War era, enslaved people who escaped from their enslavers were diagnosed with a mental disorder called drapetomania. This has since been reinterpreted as a completely appropriate response to being enslaved. A more recent example is homosexuality, which was labeled a mental disorder or a sexual orientation disturbance by the American Psychological Association until 1973.

While interactionism does acknowledge the subjective nature of diagnosis, it is important to remember who most benefits when a behavior becomes defined as illness. Pharmaceutical companies make billions treating illnesses such as fatigue, insomnia, and hyperactivity that may not actually be illnesses in need of treatment, but opportunities for companies to make more money.

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11.7: Key Terms

Glossary

- **anxiety disorders** | feelings of worry and fearfulness that last for months at a time
- **commodification** | the changing of something not generally thought of as a commodity into something that can be bought and sold in a marketplace
- **contested illnesses** | illnesses that are questioned or considered questionable by some medical professionals
- **demedicalization** | the social process that normalizes “sick” behavior
- **disability** | a reduction in one’s ability to perform everyday tasks; the World Health Organization notes that this is a social limitation
- **epidemiology** | the study of the incidence, distribution, and possible control of diseases
- **impairment** | the physical limitations a less-able person faces
- **individual mandate** | a government rule that requires everyone to have insurance coverage or they will have to pay a penalty
- **legitimation** | the act of a physician certifying that an illness is genuine
- **medical sociology** | the systematic study of how humans manage issues of health and illness, disease and disorders, and healthcare for both the sick and the healthy
- **medicalization** | the process by which aspects of life that were considered bad or deviant are redefined as sickness and needing medical attention to remedy
- **medicalization of deviance** | the process that changes “bad” behavior into “sick” behavior
- **mood disorders** | long-term, debilitating illnesses like depression and bipolar disorder
- **morbidity** | the incidence of disease
- **mortality** | the number of deaths in a given time or place
- **personality disorders** | disorders that cause people to behave in ways that are seen as abnormal to society but seem normal to them
- **private healthcare** | health insurance that a person buys from a private company; private healthcare can either be employer-sponsored or direct-purchase
- **public healthcare** | health insurance that is funded or provided by the government
- **sick role** | the pattern of expectations that define appropriate behavior for the sick and for those who take care of them
- **social epidemiology** | the study of the causes and distribution of diseases
- **socialized medicine** | when the government owns and runs the entire healthcare system
- **stereotype interchangeability** | stereotypes that don’t change and that get recycled for application to a new subordinate group
- **stigmatization** | the act of spoiling someone's identity; they are labeled as different, discriminated against, and sometimes even shunned due to an illness or disability
- **stigmatization of illness** | illnesses that are discriminated against and whose sufferers are looked down upon or even shunned by society
- **underinsured** | people who spend at least 10 percent of their income on healthcare costs that are not covered by insurance
- **universal healthcare** | a system that guarantees healthcare coverage for everyone

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11.8: Short Answer

Critical Thinking Questions

1. Pick a common illness and describe which parts of it are medically constructed, and which parts are socially constructed.
2. What diseases are the most stigmatized? Which are the least? Is this different in different cultures or social classes?
3. If social epidemiologists studied the United States in the colonial period, what differences would they find between now and then?
4. What do you think are some of the contributing factors to obesity-related diseases in the United States?
5. What factors contribute to the disparities in health among racial, ethnic, and gender groups in the United States?
6. Do you know anyone with a mental disorder? How does it affect his or her life?
7. What do you think are the best and worst parts of the PPACA? Why?
8. Compare and contrast the healthcare system of the United States with the WHO's Millennium Development Goals.
9. What do you think are the best and worst parts of the PPACA? Why?
10. Compare and contrast the healthcare system of the United States with the WHO's Millennium Development Goals.

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11.9: Further Research

Additional Learning Resources

- Read The Conversation's article discussing the measures nations and individuals may take to prevent or manage future pandemics. It contains many links to international efforts and studies. What do you think about our commitment to these steps?
- Study an interactive map of global life expectancies. What trends do you notice? **Note:** This resource may not be accessible to assistive technologies.
- People with disabilities, disorders, and neurodiversity are often mistreated even by others who do not know the best way to act around them. Children with autism experience this continually. Check out a guide from parents of children diagnosed with autism to learn more about it.
- A massive surge in substance use disorders and overdoses occurred in the United States based on the usage of prescription drugs. The causes were widespread and were rooted in pharmaceutical company approaches, medical policies, and social causes. Read more Nature's article about the causes of the U.S. opioid crisis.

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11.11: Accessible Text Description

Figure 11.1: Roadmap

A horizontal instructional diagram presents three large arrows pointing from left to right. Each arrow contains a colored circle with one guiding question: what, why, and how. A long multicolored arrow along the bottom labels the sequence “A Roadmap for Understanding Health and Medicine.”

The first, purple arrow is labeled “The WHAT” and asks, “What is health and how do sociologists study health and medicine?” The text below explains that this section defines key concepts in medical sociology, including health, illness, disease, social epidemiology, stigma, and medicalization. It also examines how social, cultural, economic, and environmental conditions shape health.

The second, green arrow is labeled “The WHY” and asks, “Why do health disparities exist and why do they matter?” The supporting text explains that this section considers how gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and other social determinants contribute to unequal health outcomes and unequal access to care. It also examines why these disparities persist in the United States and globally and how they affect individuals and communities.

The third, blue arrow is labeled “The HOW” and asks, “How can sociology help improve health and healthcare?” The text below explains that this section applies functionalist, conflict, and interactionist perspectives to health, illness, healthcare systems, and public health policy. It also compares healthcare systems in the United States and other countries and considers ways to expand equitable access, strengthen public health, and improve well-being.

Overall, the diagram presents a progression from defining health sociologically, to analyzing the causes and consequences of health inequality, and finally to applying sociological knowledge to healthcare systems, public policy, and efforts to promote health equity.

Figure 11.5.1: Malaria Distribution

A world map uses three colors to show the geographic distribution of malaria transmission.

Blue indicates countries where malaria transmission is not known to occur. This category includes most of North America, Europe, northern Asia, Australia, New Zealand, and the southern part of South America.

Yellow indicates countries where malaria transmission occurs in some places. This category includes much of Latin America, Mexico, parts of the Caribbean, North and southern Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, China, and much of Southeast Asia.

Orange indicates countries where malaria transmission occurs throughout. This category is concentrated mainly across sub-Saharan Africa, especially central, western, and parts of eastern Africa.

Overall, the map shows that malaria risk is unevenly distributed across the world. Transmission is most widespread in tropical regions, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, while it is absent or much more limited in many temperate and higher-income regions.

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12: MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

Introduction

This chapter explores how our understanding of family is changing in today's society. You will look at what defines a family and how patterns of marriage, parenting, and living arrangements have shifted over time. We'll also examine different family structures, including single-parent households, blended families, foster care, cohabitation, same-sex couples, and individuals who choose not to marry, and what makes each unique. Along the way, you'll learn how lines of descent and residence shape family organization across cultures. The chapter also considers the broader social impact of these changes, including how families influence identity, relationships, and social stability. We will also explore the interpersonal and societal effects of divorce and family abuse, helping you better understand both the challenges and resilience within modern families.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- Describe and explain society's current understanding of family and how marriage and family patterns have changed over time.
- Differentiate between lines of descent and residence, and identify variations in family structures across cultures and contexts.
- Examine and compare the characteristics of diverse family forms, including single-parent families, blended families, foster care, cohabitation, same-sex couples, and unmarried individuals.
- Analyze the social impact of changing family structures on individuals, relationships, and society as a whole.
- Evaluate the social and interpersonal effects of divorce and family abuse, including their implications for well-being and social stability.

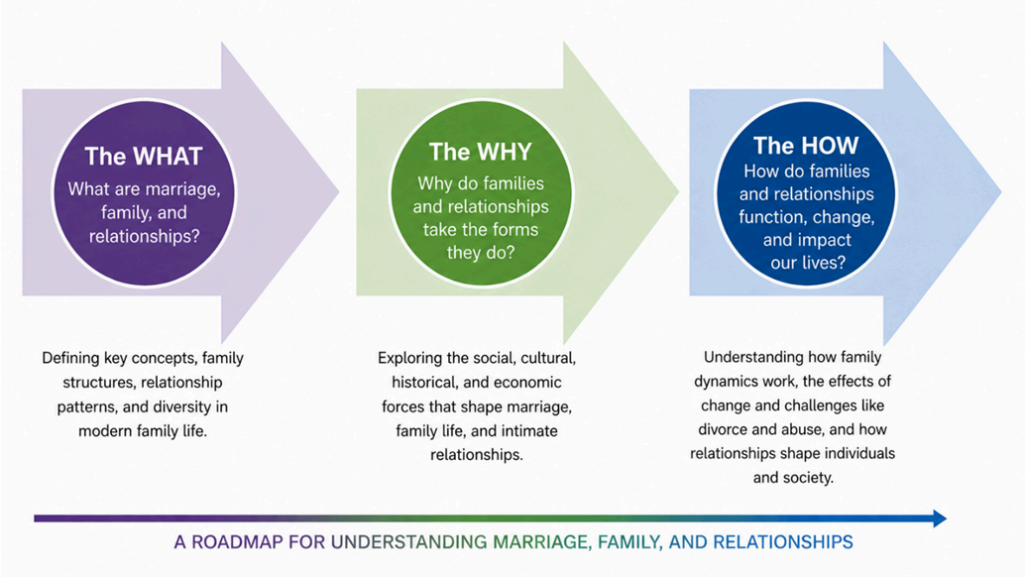


Figure 12.1: Sociology examines the forces that shape families and relationships, and understands how they function, change, and influence social life. (Jayanti Roy via ChatGPT). Access alternative description for Figure 12.1.

Why, Who, and How

Marriage, family, and intimate relationships can be examined through three guiding questions: what, why, and how. The "what" asks how societies define marriage and family, which relationships receive legal or cultural recognition, and how family structures differ across communities and historical periods. It also draws attention to the diversity of contemporary family life, including

single-parent families, blended families, extended families, cohabiting partners, same-sex couples, and families formed through adoption or other caregiving arrangements. The “why” explores the social, cultural, historical, political, and economic forces that shape these patterns. Ideas about love, gender roles, parenting, sexuality, inheritance, and household responsibilities are not simply personal choices; they are influenced by laws, religious traditions, labor markets, migration, social class, race, ethnicity, and changing cultural expectations. The “how” considers how families and relationships operate in everyday life, how people negotiate care, authority, intimacy, conflict, and responsibility, and how family experiences shape identity, opportunity, and well-being. It also examines how relationships change over time and how families respond to major transitions and challenges, including childbirth, aging, divorce, economic hardship, domestic violence, and shifts in social policy. Together, these questions help us understand families not only as private relationships, but also as social institutions connected to broader patterns of inequality, support, belonging, and social change.

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12.1: Case Study/Vignette

Marriage as a Sociological Topic

The Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) was a law passed in 1996 that defined marriage, at the federal level, as only between a man and a woman. Because of this, same-sex couples were not recognized as legally married by the federal government, even if they were married in a state that allowed it. This meant they were denied many important benefits that married couples usually receive, such as tax breaks, inheritance rights, health insurance through a spouse, and access to family housing.

DOMA also allowed states to refuse to recognize same-sex marriages performed in other states. Over time, many states created their own laws banning same-sex marriage, which increased inequality for LGBTQ+ couples across the country.

In 2013, the Supreme Court ruled in United States v. Windsor that part of DOMA was unconstitutional because it treated same-sex couples unfairly. This decision meant that the federal government had to recognize same-sex marriages in states where they were legal, giving those couples access to the same federal benefits as others. This ruling was an important step toward marriage equality and helped lead to broader legal recognition of same-sex marriage in the United States.



Figure 12.1.1: A family celebrates after the defeat of California Proposition 8 and the end of DOMA restrictions. The sign reads, “Post DOMA/ Prop 8, Happiness for Mommy, Mama, and Baby Georgie,” illustrating how legal recognition shapes marriage rights, family legitimacy, and social belonging. (Mommy, Mama, and Baby Georgie by Quinn Dombrowski via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0)

“Legally Married… But Not Everywhere”

Alex and Jordan have been together for years. They live in a state where same-sex marriage is legal, and they are excited to finally get married surrounded by family and friends. After the wedding, they begin planning their future—sharing health insurance, filing taxes together, and building a life as a legally recognized couple.

But soon, they realize things are more complicated than they expected. Because of a federal law at the time—the Defense of Marriage Act—their marriage is not recognized by the federal government. This means they cannot access many of the same benefits that other married couples receive, such as tax advantages or spousal Social Security benefits. Even more confusing, if they travel or move to another state, their marriage might not be recognized there either.

Do you think marriage should be defined by the government? Why or why not?

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12.2: What Is Marriage? What Is a Family?

Sociological Definitions

Marriage and family are key structures in many societies. Many of us learn from a young age that finding and joining the right person is a key to happiness and security. We're told that children need two parents. Many of the tax laws, medical laws, retirement benefit laws, and banking and loan processes seem to favor or assume marriage. Should those assumptions be changed? Is marriage still the foundation of the family and our society?

In 1960, 66 percent of households in America were headed by a married couple. That meant that most children grew up in such households, as did their friends and extended families. Marriage could certainly be seen as the foundation of the culture. By 2010, that number of households headed by married couples had dropped to 45 percent (Luscombe 2014). The approximately 20 percent drop is more than just a statistic; it has significant practical effects. It means that nearly every child in most parts of America is either in or is close to a family that is not headed by a married couple. It means that teachers and counselors and even people who meet children in a restaurant can't assume they live with two married parents. Some view this decline as a problem with outcomes related to values, crime, financial strength, and mental health. Sociologists may study that viewpoint to determine if it is actually true.

What is marriage? Not even sociologists are able to agree on a single meaning. For our purposes, we'll define marriage as a legally recognized social contract between two people, traditionally based on a sexual relationship and implying a permanence of the union. In practicing cultural relativism, we should also consider variations, such as whether a legal union is required, whether more than two people can be involved, or whether the marriage is a religious one or a civil one.

Sociologists are interested in the relationship between the institution of marriage and the institution of family because, historically, marriages are what create a family, and families are the most basic social unit upon which society is built. Both marriage and family create status roles that are sanctioned by society.

The question of what constitutes a family may be an even more difficult one to answer; it's a prime area of debate in family sociology, as well as in politics and religion. Social conservatives tend to define the family in terms of structure with each family member filling a certain role (like father, mother, or child). Sociologists, on the other hand, tend to define family more in terms of the manner in which members relate to one another than on a strict configuration of status roles.

What is a family?

A family is a socially recognized group (usually joined by blood, marriage, cohabitation, or adoption) that forms an emotional connection and serves as an economic unit of society.

Sociologists identify different types of families based on how one enters into them.

A family of orientation refers to the family into which a person is born.

A family of procreation describes one that is formed through marriage.

Drawing on two sociological paradigms, the sociological understanding of what constitutes a family can be explained by symbolic interactionism as well as functionalism. These two theories indicate that families are groups in which participants view themselves as family members and act accordingly. In other words, families are groups in which people come together to form a strong primary group connection and maintain emotional ties to one another over a long period of time. Such families may include groups of close friends or teammates. In addition, the functionalist perspective views families as groups that perform vital roles for society—both internally (for the family itself) and externally (for society as a whole). Families provide for one another's physical, emotional, and social well-being. Parents care for and socialize children. Later in life, adult children often care for elderly parents. While interactionism helps us understand the subjective experience of belonging to a "family," functionalism illuminates the many purposes of families and their roles in the maintenance of a balanced society (Parsons and Bales 1956). We will go into more detail about how these theories apply to family in the following pages.

Challenges Families Face

People in the United States as a whole are somewhat divided when it comes to determining what does and what does not constitute a family. In a 2010 survey conducted by professors at the University of Indiana, nearly all participants (99.8 percent) agreed that a husband, wife, and children constitute a family. Ninety-two percent stated that a husband and a wife without children still constitute a family. The numbers drop for less traditional structures: unmarried couples with children (83 percent), unmarried couples without children (39.6 percent), gay male couples with children (64 percent), and gay male couples without children (33 percent) (Powell et al. 2010). This survey revealed that children tend to be the key indicator in establishing "family" status: the percentage of individuals who agreed that unmarried couples and gay couples constitute a family nearly doubled when children were added.

The study also revealed that 60 percent of U.S. respondents agreed that if you consider yourself a family, you are a family (a concept that reinforces an interactionist perspective) (Powell 2010). The government, however, is not so flexible in its definition of "family." The U.S. Census Bureau defines a family as "a group of two people or more (one of whom is the householder) related by birth, marriage, or adoption and residing together" (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). While this structured definition can be used as a means to consistently track family-related patterns over several years, it excludes individuals such as cohabitating unmarried couples. Legality aside, sociologists would argue that the general concept of family is more diverse and less structured than in years past. Society has given more leeway to the design of a family making room for what works for its members (Jayson 2010).

Family is, indeed, a subjective concept, but it is a fairly objective fact that family (whatever one's concept of it may be) is very important to people in the United States. In a 2023 survey by Pew Research Center in Washington, DC, 73% of U.S. adults consider spending time with their family to be one of the most important elements of their lives, outranking other personal priorities (Pew Research Center 2023). It is also very important to society. President Ronald Reagan notably stated, "The family has always been the cornerstone of American society. Our families nurture, preserve, and pass on to each succeeding generation the values we share and cherish, values that are the foundation of our freedoms" (Lee 2009). While the design of the family may have changed in recent years, the fundamentals of emotional closeness and support are still present.

The Pew Research Center analyzed living situation of 40-year-olds from different generations. At that age, Millennials indicated that 45 percent of them were not living in a family of their own. In contrast, when Gen Xers and Baby Boomers were about 40 years old (around 2003 and 1987, respectively), an average of 33 percent of them lived outside of a family (Barroso 2020). The dynamic of nearly a 50-50 split between family/non-family for Millennials is very different from a two-third/one third split of Boomers and Gen X.

The data also show that women are having children later in life and that men are much less likely to live in a household with their own children. In 2019, 32 percent of Millennial men were living in a household with their children, compared to 41 percent of Gen X men in 2003 and 44 percent of Boomer men in 1987 (Barroso 2020). Again, the significant drop off in parenting roles likely has an impact on attitudes toward family.

Alongside the debate surrounding what constitutes a family is the question of what people in the United States believe constitutes a marriage. Many religious and social conservatives believe that marriage can only exist between a man and a woman, citing religious scripture and the basics of human reproduction as support. Social liberals and progressives, on the other hand, believe that marriage can exist between two consenting adults—be they a man and a woman, or a woman and a woman—and that it would be discriminatory to deny such a couple the civil, social, and economic benefits of marriage.

Marriage Patterns

With single parenting and cohabitation (when a couple shares a residence but not a marriage) becoming more acceptable in recent years, people may be less motivated to get married. In a recent survey, 39 percent of respondents answered "yes" when asked whether marriage is becoming obsolete (Pew Research Center 2010). The institution of marriage is likely to continue, but some previous patterns of marriage will become outdated as new patterns emerge. In this context, cohabitation contributes to the phenomenon of people getting married for the first time at a later age than was typical in earlier generations (Glezer 1991). Furthermore, marriage will continue to be delayed as more people place education and career ahead of "settling down."

One Partner or Many?

People in the United States typically equate marriage with monogamy, when someone is married to only one person at a time. In many countries and cultures around the world, however, having one spouse is not the only form of accepted marriage, even if it

is the most common. Polygamy, or being married to more than one person at a time, is accepted to varying degrees around the world, with most polygamous societies existing in northern Africa and east Asia (OECD 2019). Instances of polygamy are almost exclusively in the form of a man being married to more than one woman at the same time, rather than a woman being married to more than one man (Altman and Ginat 1996).

While the majority of societies accept polygamy, the majority of people do not practice it. Even in the regions where it is most common, only an average of 11 percent of the population lives in arrangements that include more than one spouse (Kramer 2020). In these relationships, the husbands are often older, wealthy, high-status men (Altman and Ginat 1996). The average plural marriage involves no more than three wives. Negev Bedouin men in Israel, for example, typically have two wives, although it is acceptable to have up to four (Griver 2008). As urbanization increases in these cultures, polygamy is likely to decrease as a result of greater access to mass media, technology, and education (Altman and Ginat 1996).

In the United States, polygamy is illegal. A recent Gallup poll showed that 21 percent of people believe polygamy is morally acceptable, which is a major increase since earlier versions of the same poll. But the poll also found that polygamy was among the least acceptable behaviors considered in the study; for example, polygamy was far less acceptable than consensual sex between teenagers, though it was more acceptable than a married person having an affair (Brenan 2020). The act of entering into marriage while still married to another person is referred to as bigamy and is considered a felony in most states.

Residency and Lines of Descent

When considering one's lineage, most people in the United States look to both their father's and mother's sides. Both paternal and maternal ancestors are considered part of one's family. This pattern of tracing kinship is called bilateral descent. Note that kinship, or one's traceable ancestry, can be based on blood or marriage or adoption. Sixty percent of societies, mostly modernized nations, follow a bilateral descent pattern. Unilateral descent (the tracing of kinship through one parent only) is practiced in the other 40 percent of the world's societies, with high concentration in pastoral cultures (O'Neal 2006).

There are three types of unilateral descent: patrilineal, which follows the father's line only; matrilineal, which follows the mother's side only; and ambilineal, which follows either the father's only or the mother's side only, depending on the situation. In patrilineal societies, such as those in rural China and India, only males carry on the family surname. This gives males the prestige of permanent family membership while females are seen as only temporary members (Harrell 2001). U.S. society assumes some aspects of patrilineal decent. For instance, most children assume their father's last name even if the mother retains her birth name.

In matrilineal societies, inheritance and family ties are traced to women. Matrilineal descent is common in Native American societies, notably the Crow and Cherokee tribes. In these societies, children are seen as belonging to the women and, therefore, one's kinship is traced to one's mother, grandmother, great grandmother, and so on (Mails 1996). In ambilineal societies, which are most common in Southeast Asian countries, parents may choose to associate their children with the kinship of either the mother or the father. This choice may be based on the desire to follow stronger or more prestigious kinship lines or on cultural customs such as men following their father's side and women following their mother's side (Lambert 2009).

Tracing one's line of descent to one parent rather than the other can be relevant to the issue of residence. In many cultures, newly married couples move in with, or near to, family members. In a patrilocal residence system it is customary for the wife to live with (or near) her husband's blood relatives (or family of orientation). Patrilocal systems can be traced back thousands of years. In a DNA analysis of 4,600-year-old bones found in Germany, scientists found indicators of patrilocal living arrangements (Haak et al 2008). Patrilocal residence is thought to be disadvantageous to women because it makes them outsiders in the home and community; it also keeps them disconnected from their own blood relatives. In China, where patrilocal and patrilineal customs are common, the written symbols for maternal grandmother (*wàipá*) are separately translated to mean "outsider" and "women" (Cohen 2011).

Similarly, in matrilocal residence systems, where it is customary for the husband to live with his wife's blood relatives (or her family of orientation), the husband can feel disconnected and can be labeled as an outsider. The Minangkabau people, a matrilocal society that is indigenous to the highlands of West Sumatra in Indonesia, believe that home is the place of women and they give men little power in issues relating to the home or family (Joseph and Najmabadi 2003). Most societies that use patrilocal and patrilineal systems are patriarchal, but very few societies that use matrilocal and matrilineal systems are matriarchal, as family life is often considered an important part of the culture for women, regardless of their power relative to men.

Stages of Family Life

As we've established, the concept of family has changed greatly in recent decades. Historically, it was often thought that many families evolved through a series of predictable stages. Developmental or "stage" theories used to play a prominent role in family sociology (Strong and DeVault 1992). Today, however, these models have been criticized for their linear and conventional assumptions as well as for their failure to capture the diversity of family forms. While reviewing some of these once-popular theories, it is important to identify their strengths and weaknesses.

The set of predictable steps and patterns families experience over time is referred to as the family life cycle. One of the first designs of the family life cycle was developed by Paul Glick in 1955. In Glick's original design, he asserted that most people will grow up, establish families, rear and launch their children, experience an "empty nest" period, and come to the end of their lives. This cycle will then continue with each subsequent generation (Glick 1989). Glick's colleague, Evelyn Duvall, elaborated on the family life cycle by developing these classic stages of family (Strong and DeVault 1992):

Table 12.2.1: This table shows one example of how a "stage" theory might categorize the phases a family goes through.

Stage Theory		
Stage	**Family Type**	**Children**
1	Marriage Family	Childless
2	Procreation Family	Children ages 0 to 2.5
3	Preschooler Family	Children ages 2.5 to 6
4	School-age Family	Children ages 6–13
5	Teenage Family	Children ages 13–20
6	Launching Family	Children begin to leave home
7	Empty Nest Family	"Empty nest"; adult children have left home

The family life cycle was used to explain the different processes that occur in families over time. Sociologists view each stage as having its own structure with different challenges, achievements, and accomplishments that transition the family from one stage to the next. For example, the problems and challenges that a family experiences in Stage 1 as a married couple with no children are likely much different than those experienced in Stage 5 as a married couple with teenagers. The success of a family can be measured by how well they adapt to these challenges and transition into each stage. While sociologists use the family life cycle to study the dynamics of family over time, consumer and marketing researchers have used it to determine what goods and services families need as they progress through each stage (Murphy and Staples 1979).

As early "stage" theories have been criticized for generalizing family life and not accounting for differences in gender, ethnicity, culture, and lifestyle, less rigid models of the family life cycle have been developed. One example is the family life course, which recognizes the events that occur in the lives of families but views them as parting terms of a fluid course rather than in consecutive stages (Strong and DeVault 1992). This type of model accounts for changes in family development, such as the fact that in today's society, childbearing does not always occur with marriage. It also sheds light on other shifts in the way family life is practiced. Society's modern understanding of family rejects rigid "stage" theories and is more accepting of new, fluid models.

Sociology in the Real World: The Evolution of Television Families

Whether you grew up watching the Huxtables, the Simpsons, the Kardashians, or the Johnsons, most of the drama or comedy you saw involved the relationships, tensions, challenges, and sometimes ridiculousness of family life. You may have also seen a great deal of change. The 1960s was the height of the suburban U.S. nuclear family on television with shows such as *The Donna Reed Show* and *Father Knows Best*. While some shows of this era portrayed single parents (*My Three Sons* and *Bonanza*, for instance), the single status almost always resulted from being widowed—not divorced or unwed.

Although family dynamics in real U.S. homes were changing, the expectations for families portrayed on television were not. The United States' first reality show, *An American Family* aired on PBS in 1973. The show chronicled Bill and Pat Loud and their children. During the series, the oldest son, Lance, announced to the family that he was gay, and at the series' conclusion, Bill and Pat decided to divorce. Although the Loud's union was among the 30 percent of marriages that ended in divorce in 1973, the family was featured on the cover of the March 12 issue of *Newsweek* with the title "The Broken Family" (Ruoff 2002).

Less traditional family structures in sitcoms gained popularity in the 1980s with shows such as *Diff'rent Strokes* (a widowed man with two adopted African American sons) and *One Day at a Time* (a divorced woman with two teenage daughters). Still, traditional families such as those in *Family Ties* and *The Cosby Show* dominated the ratings. The late 1980s and the 1990s saw the introduction of the dysfunctional family. Shows such as *Roseanne*, *Married with Children*, and *The Simpsons* portrayed traditional nuclear families, but in a much less flattering light than those from the 1960s did (Museum of Broadcast Communications 2011).

In the early 2000s, the nontraditional family has become somewhat of a tradition in television. While many situation comedies focus on single men and women without children, those that do portray families often stray from the classic structure: they include unmarried and divorced parents, adopted children, gay or lesbian couples, and multigenerational households.

A major shift occurred with Modern Family, which became a landmark example of how television reflects contemporary family diversity. The series portrays multiple interconnected families, including a blended family, an interracial marriage, same-sex parents raising a child, adoptive parenting, and multigenerational relationships. Unlike earlier television programs that centered on one "ideal" family model, *Modern Family* presents family life as varied, imperfect, humorous, and socially dynamic.

Sociologically, *Modern Family* can be examined through several perspectives. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, the show highlights how family members create meaning through everyday interactions, communication, humor, and shared experiences. From a conflict or feminist perspective, the series also reflects changing gender expectations, parenting roles, and negotiations of power within relationships. Functionalists might argue that despite its diversity, the families in the show still perform many traditional social functions such as socialization, emotional support, and caregiving.

The popualrity of Modern Family demonstrates how television both shapes and reflects society's evolving understanding of what constitutes a family. Rather than presenting one "correct" model, modern television increasingly acknowledges that families can differ in structure, culture, identity, and experience while still fulfilling important social and emotional roles.

Black-ish, which portrays an extended family of African Americans, has at many times dealt with the issue implied by its name: That sometimes what it means to be Black can bring issues of interpretation conflict, especially across generations. For example, the children of the central family have shown interest in "blending in" with their White friends, which brings negative reactions from their grandparents.

Other shows, such as *Shameless*, interweave family diversity with complex and painful issues such as addiction. The series has a large cast of characters representing different groups, and central to the series are the roles of children, rather than parents, as family leaders. "The families on shows like this one aren't as idealistic, but they remain relatable," states television critic Maureen Ryan. "The most successful shows, comedies especially, have families that you can look at and see parts of your family in them" (Respers France 2010).

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12.3: Variations in Family Life

Single Parents, Blended Families, and Foster Families

The combination of husband, wife, and children that 99.8 percent of people in the United States believe constitutes a family is not representative of 99.8 percent of U.S. families. According to 2010 census data, only 66 percent of children under seventeen years old live in a household with two married parents. This is a decrease from 77 percent in 1980 (U.S. Census 2011). This two-parent family structure is known as a nuclear family, referring to married parents and children as the nucleus, or core, of the group. Recent years have seen a rise in variations of the nuclear family with the parents not being married. Three percent of children live with two cohabiting parents (U.S. Census 2011).

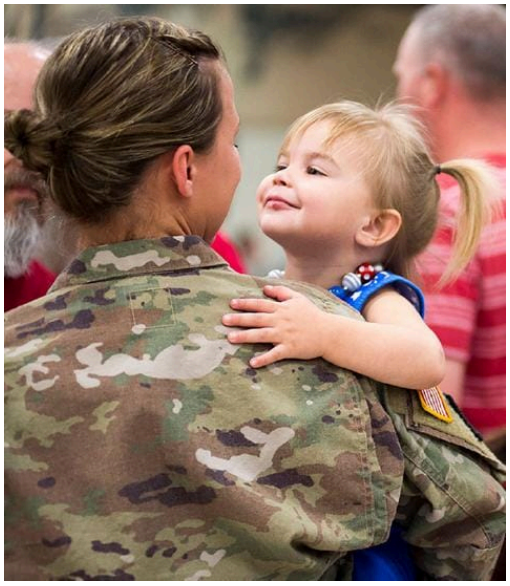


Figure 12.3.1: Military families sometimes have to endure long parental absences. The other parent or other family members, including older siblings, often take on more responsibility during deployments. The serving parent faces stress and detachment when they are away. (Oklahoma National Guard by The National Guard via flickr is licensed under CC BY 4.0)

Approximately 27% of U.S. children live with one parent, 16% in blended families, and 400,000 are in foster care. The U.S. has the world's highest rate of children in single-parent homes (23% live with one parent and no other adults). About 80% of single-parent homes are maintained by mothers. About 16 percent of children are living in blended families, those with step parents and/or step-siblings. This number has remained relatively stable since the 1980s when the Census Bureau began reliably measuring it. Four percent of children live in families with couples who are not married. (That number is partially composed of parents in same-sex relationships who were previously prohibited from getting married.)

In some cases, parents can no longer care for their children. In 2018, three million children lived with a guardian who was neither their biological nor adoptive parent. The causes range from parental mental health issues, drug use, or incarceration, as well as physical or sexual abuse of the children by the parent, or abandonment by the parent. The wide array of causes leads to a similarly wide array of arrangements and types of people and organizations involved. About half of these children live with grandparents, and about 20 percent live with other relatives (ChildStats 2019). Sometimes a grandparent or other relative temporarily assumes care of children, perhaps informally, while other times the arrangement is longer term and the state or city child welfare or similar department is involved.

25 percent of children who do not live with an adoptive or biological parent live with nonrelatives, including foster parents, temporary guardians, or people in other types of relationships with the child or the child's parents. Non-relative foster parents are state-certified adults, who care for children under the guidance and supervision of a relevant agency. Foster parents comply with guideline and are provided with financial support for the children they care for. (Sometimes the term foster parent refers to a relative who cares for the children under agency guidelines, and sometimes these "kinship" foster parents are also provided financial support.)

When children are placed into foster care or other non-parental care, agencies and families usually do their best to keep siblings together. Brothers and sisters usually provide each other with someone to navigate social challenges and provide continuity over time. Studies have shown that siblings placed together show more closeness to their foster caregivers and like living in the foster home more than those not placed with a sibling (Hegar and Rosenthal, 2011). Separating siblings can cause them to worry about each other or their birth families, and slows acceptance of their new home (Affronti, Rittner, & Semanchin Jones, 2015).

Siblings sometimes play more of a parental role themselves, especially when there are large age gaps or if there are very young children involved. These older siblings may take on some parental responsibilities during a divorce or when children are sent to live with others. "Parentified" siblings may have trouble navigating the complexities of parental roles when they themselves are often still very young. These experiences can actually be traumatic and lead to compulsive disorders as well as lifelong issues with relationships and self-care (Lamothe 2017)

Changes in the traditional family structure raise questions about how such societal shifts affect children. U.S. Census statistics have long shown that children living in homes with both parents grow up with more financial and educational advantages than children who are raised in single-parent homes (U.S. Census 1997). Parental marital status seems to be a significant indicator of advancement in a child's life. Children living with a divorced parent typically have more advantages than children living with a parent who never married; this is particularly true of children who live with divorced fathers. This correlates with the statistic that never-married parents are typically younger, have fewer years of schooling, and have lower incomes (U.S. Census 1997). Six in ten children living with only their mother live near or below the poverty level. Of those being raised by single mothers, 69 percent live in or near poverty compared to 45 percent for divorced mothers (U.S. Census 1997). Though other factors such as age and education play a role in these differences, it can be inferred that marriage between parents is generally beneficial for children.

Cohabitation

Living together before or in lieu of marriage is a growing option for many couples. Cohabitation is when a man and woman live together in a sexual relationship without being married. According to an analysis by the Pew Research Center using data from the National Survey of Family Growth, 59% of adults between the ages of 18 and 44 have lived with an unmarried partner at some point in their lives, while only 50% have ever been married. These findings reflect changing patterns in relationships and family formation among younger adults (Graf, 2019).

Cohabitating couples may choose to live together in an effort to spend more time together or to save money on living costs. Many couples view cohabitation as a "trial run" for marriage. 66 percent of married couples who cohabited but were not engaged saw cohabitation as a step toward marriage. And 44 percent of cohabiting adults who are not yet engaged or married see moving in with their partner as a step toward marriage (Horowitz 2019).

While couples may use this time to "work out the kinks" of a relationship before they wed, the most recent research has found that cohabitation has little effect on the success of a marriage. In fact, those who do not cohabitate before marriage have slightly better rates of remaining married for more than ten years (Jayson 2010). Cohabitation may contribute to the increase in the number of men and women who delay marriage. In the U.S., the median age for first marriage is 30.8 years for men and 28.4 years for women. This reflects a steady, decades-long upward trend. (U.S. Census 2025).

Same-Sex Couples



Figure 12.3.2: After being together for 23 years, Phyllis Siegel (standing) and Connie Kopolev were the first same-sex couple to marry in New York City. (Phyllis Siegel and Connie Kopelov by TJ Sengel via flickr is licensed under CC BY 4.0)

The number of same-sex couples has grown significantly in the past decade. The U.S. Census Bureau reported 594,000 same-sex couple households in the United States, a 50 percent increase from 2000. This increase is a result of more coupling, the growing social acceptance of LGBTQ people, and a subsequent increase in people's willingness to share more about their identity. Nationally, same-sex couple households make up 1.5 percent of the total partner-headed households in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau 2020). When the 2015 Obergefell vs. Hodges Supreme Court decision legalized same-sex marriage throughout the United States, all federally mandated spousal rights and benefits began apply to same-sex married couples. These have impacts on Social Security and veterans benefits, family leave, and so on. For example, when same-sex marriage was not legal, an LGBTQ person couldn't take the same type of family leave as an opposite sex spouse could if their partner became ill, and could even be prohibited from visiting their partner in the hospital.

In terms of demographics, same-sex couples are not very different from opposite-sex couples. Same-sex couple households have an average age of 52 and an average annual household income of about $107,000; opposite-sex couple households have an average age of 59 and an average household income of $97,000. Same-sex couples are less likely to have children under 18-years-old, with a rate of 14 percent compared to 38 percent of opposite-sex couples; note these include both married and unmarried couples (Census Bureau 2020).

In an analysis of 81 parenting studies, sociologists found no quantifiable data to support the notion that opposite-sex parenting is any better than same-sex parenting. Children of lesbian couples, however, were shown to have slightly lower rates of behavioral problems and higher rates of self-esteem (Biblarz and Stacey 2010). Prior to the nationwide legalization, studies also showed that the rate of suicide among high school students declined in states where same-sex marriage was legal. Suicide is the second-highest cause of death among high school students, and it is a tragic outcome for LGBTQ teenagers who feel unaccepted or vulnerable. The evidence indicates that the legalization of same-sex marriage had positive outcomes for the emotional and mental wellbeing of LGBTQ people (Johns Hopkins University 2017).

Staying Single

About three-in-ten American adults report that they are single, meaning that they are neither married nor in a committed relationship. That group varies greatly by age and gender. Half of men below age 30 are single, compared with about a quarter of men between ages 30-64. About 30 percent of women under 30 are single, and that drops to 19 percent for women between 30 and 60 years-old. There are also differences among racial lines, with White and Hispanic adults less likely to be single than are Black people. Single individuals are found in higher concentrations in large cities or metropolitan areas, with New York City being one of the highest.

Although both single men and single women report social pressure to get married, women are subject to greater scrutiny. Single women are often portrayed as unhappy or in some way lacking something they should have. Single men, on the other hand, are

typically portrayed as lifetime bachelors who cannot settle down or simply “have not found the right girl.” Single women report feeling insecure and displaced in their families when their single status is disparaged (Roberts 2007). However, single women older than thirty-five years old report feeling secure and happy with their unmarried status, as many women in this category have found success in their education and careers. In general, women feel more independent and more prepared to live a large portion of their adult lives without a spouse or domestic partner than they did in the 1960s (Roberts 2007).

The decision to marry or not to marry can be based on a variety of factors including religion and cultural expectations. Asian individuals are the most likely to marry, while African Americans are the least likely to marry (Venugopal 2011). Additionally, individuals who place no value on religion are more likely to be unmarried than those who place a high value on religion. For Black women, however, the importance of religion made no difference in marital status (Bakalar 2010). In general, being single is not a rejection of marriage; rather, it is a lifestyle that does not necessarily include marriage.

Sociological Research: Deceptive Divorce Rates

It is often cited that half of all marriages end in divorce. This statistic has made many people cynical when it comes to marriage, but it is misleading. Let’s take a closer look at the data.

Using National Center for Health Statistics data from 2003 that show a marriage rate of 7.5 (per 1000 people) and a divorce rate of 3.8, it would appear that exactly one half of all marriages failed (Hurley 2005). This reasoning is deceptive, however, because instead of tracing actual marriages to see their longevity (or lack thereof), this compares what are unrelated statistics: that is, the number of marriages in a given year does not have a direct correlation to the divorces occurring that same year. Research published in the *New York Times* took a different approach—determining how many people had ever been married, and of those, how many later divorced. The result? According to this analysis, U.S. divorce rates have only gone as high as 41 percent (Hurley 2005). Another way to calculate divorce rates would be through a cohort study. For instance, we could determine the percentage of marriages that are intact after, say, five or seven years, compared to marriages that have ended in divorce after five or seven years. Sociological researchers must remain aware of research methods and how statistical results are applied. As illustrated, different methodologies and different interpretations can lead to contradictory, and even misleading, results.

Theoretical Perspectives on Marriage and Family

Sociologists study families on both the macro and micro level to determine how families function. Sociologists may use a variety of theoretical perspectives to explain events that occur within and outside of the family.

Functionalism

When considering the role of family in society, functionalists uphold the notion that families are an important social institution and that they play a key role in stabilizing society. They also note that family members take on status roles in a marriage or family. The family—and its members—perform certain functions that facilitate the prosperity and development of society.

Sociologist George Murdock conducted a survey of 250 societies and determined that there are four universal residual functions of the family: sexual, reproductive, educational, and economic (Lee 1985). According to Murdock, the family (which for him includes the state of marriage) regulates sexual relations between individuals. He does not deny the existence or impact of premarital or extramarital sex, but states that the family offers a socially legitimate sexual outlet for adults (Lee 1985). This outlet gives way to reproduction, which is a necessary part of ensuring the survival of society.

Once children are produced, the family plays a vital role in training them for adult life. As the primary agent of socialization and enculturation, the family teaches young children the ways of thinking and behaving that follow social and cultural norms, values, beliefs, and attitudes. Parents teach their children manners and civility. A well-mannered child reflects a well-mannered parent.

Parents also teach children gender roles. Gender roles are an important part of the economic function of a family. In each family, there is a division of labor that consists of instrumental and expressive roles. Men tend to assume the instrumental roles in the family, which typically involve work outside of the family that provides financial support and establishes family status. Women tend to assume the expressive roles, which typically involve work inside of the family which provides emotional support and physical care for children (Crano and Aronoff 1978). According to functionalists, the differentiation of the roles on the basis of sex ensures that families are well balanced and coordinated. When family members move outside of these roles, the family is thrown out of

balance and must recalibrate in order to function properly. For example, if the father assumes an expressive role such as providing daytime care for the children, the mother must take on an instrumental role such as gaining paid employment outside of the home in order for the family to maintain balance and function.

Conflict Theory

Conflict theorists are quick to point out that U.S. families have been defined as private entities, the consequence of which has been to leave family matters to only those within the family. Many people in the United States are resistant to government intervention in the family: parents do not want the government to tell them how to raise their children or to become involved in domestic issues. Conflict theory highlights the role of power in family life and contends that the family is often not a haven but rather an arena where power struggles can occur. This exercise of power often entails the performance of family status roles. Conflict theorists may study conflicts as simple as the enforcement of rules from parent to child, or they may examine more serious issues such as domestic violence (spousal and child), sexual assault, marital rape, and incest.

The first study of marital power was performed in 1960. Researchers found that the person with the most access to value resources held the most power. As money is one of the most valuable resources, men who worked in paid labor outside of the home held more power than women who worked inside the home (Blood and Wolfe 1960). Conflict theorists find disputes over the division of household labor to be a common source of marital discord. Household labor offers no wages and, therefore, no power. Studies indicate that when men do more housework, women experience more satisfaction in their marriages, reducing the incidence of conflict (Coltrane 2000). In general, conflict theorists tend to study areas of marriage and life that involve inequalities or discrepancies in power and authority, as they are reflective of the larger social structure.

Symbolic Interactionism

Interactionists view the world in terms of symbols and the meanings assigned to them (LaRossa and Reitzes 1993). The family itself is a symbol. To some, it is a father, mother, and children; to others, it is any union that involves respect and compassion. Interactionists stress that family is not an objective, concrete reality. Like other social phenomena, it is a social construct that is subject to the ebb and flow of social norms and ever-changing meanings.

Consider the meaning of other elements of family: “parent” was a symbol of a biological and emotional connection to a child; with more parent-child relationships developing through adoption, remarriage, or change in guardianship, the word “parent” today is less likely to be associated with a biological connection than with whoever is socially recognized as having the responsibility for a child’s upbringing. Similarly, the terms “mother” and “father” are no longer rigidly associated with the meanings of caregiver and breadwinner. These meanings are more free-flowing through changing family roles.

Interactionists also recognize how the family status roles of each member are socially constructed, playing an important part in how people perceive and interpret social behavior. Interactionists view the family as a group of role players or “actors” that come together to act out their parts in an effort to construct a family. These roles are up for interpretation. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a “good father,” for example, was one who worked hard to provide financial security for his children. Today, a “good father” is one who takes the time outside of work to promote his children’s emotional well-being, social skills, and intellectual growth—in some ways, a much more daunting task.

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12.4: Challenges Families Face

Divorce and Remarriage

As the structure of family changes over time, so do the challenges families face. Events like divorce and remarriage present new difficulties for families and individuals. Other long-standing domestic issues such as abuse continue to strain the health and stability of today's families.

Divorce, while fairly common and accepted in modern U.S. society, was once a word that would only be whispered and was accompanied by gestures of disapproval. In 1960, divorce was generally uncommon, affecting only 9.1 out of every 1,000 married persons. That number more than doubled (to 20.3) by 1975 and peaked in 1980 at 22.6. Over the last quarter century, divorce rates have dropped steadily and are now similar to those in 1970 (Wang 2020). The dramatic increase in divorce rates after the 1960s has been associated with the liberalization of divorce laws, as well as the shift in societal makeup due to women increasingly entering the workforce (Michael 1978). The decrease in divorce rates can be attributed to three probable factors: First, an increase in the age at which people get married, and second, an increased level of education among those who marry—both of which have been found to promote greater marital stability. The third factor is that the marriage rate itself is going down, and with it the divorce rate. According to the most recent estimates, the refined marriage rate was 31.2 new marriages per 1,000 unmarried women aged 15 and older in 2024**,** compared with 31.5 in 2023. This suggests that marriage rates have largely stabilized after decades of decline.

Divorce does not occur equally among all people in the United States; some segments of the U.S. population are more likely to divorce than others. According to the American Community Survey (ACS), men and women in the Northeast and Midwest have the lowest rates of divorce. The South generally has the highest rate of divorce. Divorce rates are likely higher in the South because marriage rates are higher and marriage occurs at younger-than-average ages in this region. In the Northeast, the marriage rate is lower and first marriages tend to be delayed; therefore, the divorce rate is lower (Reynolds 2020). Note that these are generalizations. For example, the District of Columbia has a high marriage rate but among the lowest divorce rate (Anderson 2020).

Causes of Divorce

So what causes divorce? While more young people are choosing to postpone or opt out of marriage, those who enter into the union do so with the expectation that it will last. A great deal of marital problems can be related to stress, especially financial stress. According to researchers participating in the University of Virginia's National Marriage Project, couples who enter marriage without a strong asset base (like a home, savings, and a retirement plan) are 70 percent more likely to be divorced after three years than are couples with at least $10,000 in assets. This is connected to factors such as age and education level that correlate with low incomes.

The addition of children to a marriage creates added financial and emotional stress. Research has established that marriages enter their most stressful phase upon the birth of the first child (Popenoe and Whitehead 2007). This is particularly true for couples who have multiples (twins, triplets, and so on). Married couples with twins or triplets are 17 percent more likely to divorce than those with children from single births (McKay 2010). Another contributor to the likelihood of divorce is a general decline in marital satisfaction over time. As people get older, they may find that their values and life goals no longer match up with those of their spouse (Popenoe and Whitehead 2004).

Divorce is thought to have a cyclical pattern. Children of divorced parents are 40 percent more likely to divorce than children of married parents. And when we consider children whose parents divorced and then remarried, the likelihood of their own divorce rises to 91 percent (Wolfinger 2005). This might result from being socialized to a mindset that a broken marriage can be replaced rather than repaired (Wolfinger 2005). That sentiment is also reflected in the finding that when both partners of a married couple have been previously divorced, their marriage is 90 percent more likely to end in divorce (Wolfinger 2005).

About 15 percent of all married couples involve one partner who is in their second marriage while the other partner is in their first marriage. About 9 percent of married couples are both in their second marriage. (U.S. Census Bureau 2015). The vast majority (91 percent) of remarriages occur after divorce; only 9 percent occur after death of a spouse (Kreider 2006). Most men and women remarry within five years of a divorce, with the median length for men (three years) being lower than for women (4.4 years). This

length of time has been fairly consistent since the 1950s. The majority of those who remarry are between the ages of twenty-five and forty-four (Kreider 2006). The general pattern of remarriage also shows that White people are more likely to remarry than Black people.

Marriage the second time around (or third or fourth) can be a very different process than the first. Remarriage lacks many of the classic courtship rituals of a first marriage. In a second marriage, individuals are less likely to deal with issues like parental approval, premarital sex, or desired family size (Elliot 2010). In a survey of households formed by remarriage, a mere 8 percent included only biological children of the remarried couple. Of the 49 percent of homes that include children, 24 percent included only the woman's biological children, 3 percent included only the man's biological children, and 9 percent included a combination of both spouse's children (U.S. Census Bureau 2006).

Children of Divorce and Remarriage

Divorce and remarriage can be stressful on partners and children alike. Divorce is often justified by the notion that children are better off in a divorced family than in a family with parents who do not get along. However, long-term studies determine that to be generally untrue. Research suggests that while marital conflict does not provide an ideal childrearing environment, going through a divorce can be damaging. Children are often confused and frightened by the threat to their family security. They may feel responsible for the divorce and attempt to bring their parents back together, often by sacrificing their own well-being (Amato 2000). Only in high-conflict homes do children benefit from divorce and the subsequent decrease in conflict. The majority of divorces come out of lower-conflict homes, and children from those homes are more negatively impacted by the stress of the divorce than the stress of unhappiness in the marriage (Amato 2000). Studies also suggest that stress levels for children are not improved when a child acquires a stepfamily through marriage. Although there may be increased economic stability, stepfamilies typically have a high level of interpersonal conflict (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994).

Children's ability to deal with a divorce may depend on their age. Research has found that divorce may be most difficult for school-aged children, as they are old enough to understand the separation but not old enough to understand the reasoning behind it. Older teenagers are more likely to recognize the conflict that led to the divorce but may still feel fear, loneliness, guilt, and pressure to choose sides. Infants and preschool-age children may suffer the heaviest impact from the loss of routine that the marriage offered (Temke 2006).

Proximity to parents also makes a difference in a child's well-being after divorce. Boys who live or have joint arrangements with their fathers show less aggression than those who are raised by their mothers only. Similarly, girls who live or have joint arrangements with their mothers tend to be more responsible and mature than those who are raised by their fathers only Recent research suggests that children generally benefit when both parents remain actively involved after divorce, provided the family environment is safe and supportive. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, about 68% of U.S. children live with two parents, while approximately 22% live with their mother only and about 5% live with their father only. Although children continue to be more likely to reside primarily with their mothers, shared parenting arrangements have become increasingly common, reflecting changing custody practices and greater involvement of fathers in childrearing (U.S. Census Bureau 2025). Still, researchers suggest that a strong parent-child relationship can greatly improve a child's adjustment to divorce (Temke 2006).

There is empirical evidence that divorce has not discouraged children in terms of how they view marriage and family. A blended family has additional stress resulting from combining children from the current and previous relationships. The blended family may also have a parent that has different discipline techniques. In a survey conducted by researchers from the University of Michigan, about three-quarters of high school seniors said it was "extremely important" to have a strong marriage and family life. And over half believed it was "very likely" that they would be in a lifelong marriage (Popenoe and Whitehead 2007). These numbers have continued to climb over the last twenty-five years.

Violence and Abuse

Violence and abuse are among the most disconcerting of the challenges that today's families face. Abuse can occur between spouses, between parent and child, as well as between other family members. The frequency of violence among families is a difficult to determine because many cases of spousal abuse and child abuse go unreported. In any case, studies have shown that abuse (reported or not) has a major impact on families and society as a whole.

Domestic Violence

Domestic violence is a significant social problem in the United States. It is often characterized as violence between household or family members, specifically spouses. To include unmarried, cohabitating, and same-sex couples, family sociologists have created the term intimate partner violence (IPV). (Note that healthcare and support personnel, researchers, or victims may use these terms or related ones interchangeably to refer to the same general issue of violence, aggression, and abuse.) Women are the primary victims of intimate partner violence.

Intimate partner violence (IPV) remains a significant public health and social issue in the United States. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), approximately 41% of women and 26% of men have experienced contact sexual violence, physical violence, or stalking by an intimate partner during their lifetime. Additionally, nearly one in three women and one in ten men have experienced these forms of violence and reported significant impacts such as injury, fear, post-traumatic stress symptoms, or the need for medical care or legal assistance.

IPV may include physical violence, such as punching, kicking, or other methods of inflicting physical pain; sexual violence, such as rape or other forced sexual acts; threats and intimidation that imply either physical or sexual abuse; and emotional abuse, such as harming another's sense of self-worth through words or controlling another's behavior. IPV often starts as emotional abuse and then escalates to other forms or combinations of abuse (Centers for Disease Control 2012). IPV includes stalking as well as technological violence (sometimes called cyber aggression), which is committed through communications/social networks or which uses cameras or other technologies to harm victims or control their behavior (Watkins 2016).



Figure 12.4.1: Many people have experienced intimate partner violence. Note that while data like this are important to consider and hopefully build awareness around IPV, there are gaps in both reporting and information gathering. For example, less information is known about IPV against transgender people, but analysis of various sources indicate that it is 1.7 times more likely to be committed against transgender people than against cisgender people, as described below. (Credit: Centers for Disease Control). Access alternative description for Figure 12.4.1.

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Beyond its tragic outcomes and damaging long-term effects, sociologists and other researchers seeking to understand and prevent IPV and support victims may find a wide variance in the data.

On a global scale, intimate partners kill over 130 women each day. The UN Office of Drugs and Crime reported that, "women continue to pay the highest price as a result of gender inequality, discrimination and negative stereotypes... They are also the most likely to be killed by intimate partners and family" (Doom 2018).

Types of IPV

The types of intimate partner violence (IPV) experienced by women and men differ in both frequency and form. According to the CDC's 2023/2024 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, approximately 19.7% of women have experienced contact sexual violence by an intimate partner, 22.5% have experienced physical violence, and 12.2% have experienced stalking by an intimate partner during their lifetime. Among men, 4.4% have experienced contact sexual violence by an intimate partner, 13.7% have experienced physical violence, and 4.2% have experienced stalking. These findings demonstrate that while both women and men experience IPV, women are disproportionately affected by sexual violence and severe forms of abuse. Perpetrators of IPV work to establish and maintain dependence in order to hold power and control over their victims,

making them feel stupid, crazy, or ugly—in some way worthless.

IPV affects different segments of the population at different rates. Racial and ethnic disparities in intimate partner violence persist in the United States. According to the CDC's National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS), American Indian and Alaska Native women experience the highest lifetime rates of intimate partner violence, with approximately 58% reporting IPV during their lifetime. Black women also experience disproportionately high rates, with an estimated 53.6% reporting lifetime contact sexual violence, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner, compared with 47.5% of White women. These numbers have been fairly stable for both racial groups over the last ten years.

Accurate statistics on IPV are difficult to determine, as it is estimated that more than half of nonfatal IPV goes unreported. It is not until victims choose to report crimes that patterns of abuse are exposed. Most victims studied stated that abuse had occurred for at least two years prior to their first report (Carlson, Harris, and Holden 1999). Also, studies and research methods apply a range of categories, which makes comparative or reinforcing data difficult to obtain. For example, some studies may only ask about IPV in two categories (for example, physical and sexual violence only) and may find fewer respondents reporting IPV than do studies that add psychological abuse, stalking, and technological violence.

Sometimes abuse is reported to police by a third party, but it still may not be confirmed by victims. A study of domestic violence incident reports found that even when confronted by police about abuse, 29 percent of victims denied that abuse occurred. Surprisingly, 19 percent of their assailants were likely to admit to abuse (Felson, Ackerman, and Gallagher 2005). According to the National Criminal Victims Survey, victims cite varied reasons why they are reluctant to report abuse, as shown in the table below.

Table 12.4.1: This chart shows reasons that victims give for why they fail to report abuse to police authorities (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2006-2010)

Reason Abuse Is Unreported	% Females	% Males
Considered a Private Matter	32	36
Fear of Retaliation	20	8
Incident not important enough to report	14	22
Belief That Police Won't Do Anything	15	16

IPV against LGBTQ people is generally higher than it is against non-LGBTQ people. Gay men report experiencing IPV in their lifetimes less often (26 percent) than straight men (29 percent) or bisexual men (37 percent). 44 percent of lesbian women report experiencing some type of IPV in their lifetime, compared to 35 percent of straight women. 61 percent of bisexual women report experiencing IPV, a much higher rate than any other sexual orientation frequently studied.

Studies regarding intimate partner violence against transgender people are relatively limited, but several are ongoing. A meta-analysis of available information indicated that physical IPV had occurred in the lifetimes of 38 percent of transgender people, and 25 percent of transgender people had experienced sexual IPV in their lifetimes. Compared with cisgender individuals, transgender individuals were 1.7 times more likely to experience any IPV (Peitzmeier 2020).

Many college students encounter IPV, as well. Overall, psychological violence seems to be the type of IPV college students face most frequently, followed by physical and/or sexual violence (Cho & Huang, 2017).

Teen dating violence remains a significant public health concern. According to the CDC's 2023 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, among high school students who dated during the previous year, 8.5% experienced physical dating violence and 9.5% experienced sexual dating violence. Additionally, 9% of all high school students reported having ever been physically forced to have sexual intercourse, and 11% experienced sexual violence by any perpetrator during the previous year.

IPV victimization during young adulthood, including the college years, is likely to lead to continuous victimization in adulthood, possibly throughout a lifetime (Greenman & Matsuda, 2016)

Child Abuse

Children continue to be among the most vulnerable victims of abuse and neglect. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Child Protective Services (CPS) agencies received an estimated 4.7 million reports involving approximately 7.5 million children in 2023. After investigation, an estimated 546,000 children were identified as victims of abuse or neglect. Neglect

remains the most common form of maltreatment, followed by physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse.

Three-fifths of child abuse reports are made by professionals, including teachers, law enforcement personnel, and social services staff. The rest are made by anonymous sources, other relatives, parents, friends, and neighbors.

Child abuse may come in several forms, the most common being neglect (78.3 percent), followed by physical abuse (10.8 percent), sexual abuse (7.6 percent), psychological maltreatment (7.6 percent), and medical neglect (2.4 percent) (Child Help 2011). Some children suffer from a combination of these forms of abuse. The majority (81.2 percent) of perpetrators are parents; 6.2 percent are other relatives.

Infant Abuse

Infants (children less than one year old) were the most victimized population with an incident rate of 20.6 per 1,000 infants. This age group is particularly vulnerable to neglect because they are entirely dependent on parents for care. Some parents do not purposely neglect their children; factors such as cultural values, standard of care in a community, and poverty can lead to hazardous level of neglect. If information or assistance from public or private services are available and a parent fails to use those services, child welfare services may intervene (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services).

Infants are also often victims of physical abuse, particularly in the form of violent shaking. This type of physical abuse is referred to as shaken-baby syndrome, which describes a group of medical symptoms such as brain swelling and retinal hemorrhage resulting from forcefully shaking or causing impact to an infant's head. A baby's cry is the number one trigger for shaking. Parents may find themselves unable to soothe a baby's concerns and may take their frustration out on the child by shaking him or her violently. Other stress factors, such as a poor economy, unemployment, and general dissatisfaction with parental life, may contribute this type of abuse. While there is no official central registry of shaken-baby syndrome statistics, it is estimated that each year 1,400 babies die or suffer serious injury from being shaken (Barr 2007).

Social Policy and Debate: Corporal Punishment

Physical abuse in children may come in the form of beating, kicking, throwing, choking, hitting with objects, burning, or other methods. Injury inflicted by such behavior is considered abuse even if the parent or caregiver did not intend to harm the child. Other types of physical contact that are characterized as discipline (spanking, for example) are not considered abuse as long as no injury results (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2008).

This issue is rather controversial among modern-day people in the United States. While some parents feel that physical discipline, or corporal punishment, is an effective way to respond to bad behavior, others feel that it is a form of abuse. According to a poll conducted by ABC News, 65 percent of respondents approve of spanking and 50 percent said that they sometimes spank their child.

Tendency toward physical punishment may be affected by culture and education. Those who live in the South are more likely than those who live in other regions to spank their child. Those who do not have a college education are also more likely to spank their child (Crandall 2011). Currently, 23 states officially allow spanking in the school system; however, many parents may object and school officials must follow a set of clear guidelines when administering this type of punishment (Crandall 2011). Studies have shown that spanking is not an effective form of punishment and may lead to aggression by the victim, particularly in those who are spanked at a young age (Berlin 2009).

Child abuse occurs at all socioeconomic and education levels and crosses ethnic and cultural lines. Just as child abuse is often associated with stresses felt by parents, including financial stress, parents who demonstrate resilience to these stresses are less likely to abuse (Samuels 2011). Young parents are typically less capable of coping with stresses, particularly the stress of becoming a new parent. Teenage mothers are more likely to abuse their children than their older counterparts. As a parent's age increases, the risk of abuse decreases. Children born to mothers who are fifteen years old or younger are twice as likely to be abused or neglected by age five than are children born to mothers ages twenty to twenty-one (George and Lee 1997).

Drug and alcohol use is also a known contributor to child abuse. Children raised by substance abusers have a risk of physical abuse three times greater than other kids, and neglect is four times as prevalent in these families (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2011). Other risk factors include social isolation, depression, low parental education, and a history of being mistreated as a child. Approximately 30 percent of abused children will later abuse their own children (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2006).

The long-term effects of child abuse impact the physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing of a child. Injury, poor health, and mental instability occur at a high rate in this group, with 80 percent meeting the criteria of one or more psychiatric disorders, such as depression, anxiety, or suicidal behavior, by age twenty-one. Abused children may also suffer from cognitive and social difficulties. Behavioral consequences will affect most, but not all, of child abuse victims. Children of abuse are 25 percent more likely, as adolescents, to suffer from difficulties like poor academic performance and teen pregnancy, or to engage in behaviors like drug abuse and general delinquency. They are also more likely to participate in risky sexual acts that increase their chances of contracting a sexually transmitted disease (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2006). Other risky behaviors include drug and alcohol abuse. As these consequences can affect the health care, education, and criminal systems, the problems resulting from child abuse do not just belong to the child and family, but to society as a whole.

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12.5: Key Terms

Glossary

- **ambilineal** | a type of unilateral descent that follows either the father's or the mother's side exclusively
- **bigamy** | the act of entering into marriage while still married to another person
- **bilateral descent** | the tracing of kinship through both parents' ancestral lines
- **cohabitation** | the act of a couple sharing a residence while they are not married
- **extended family** | a household that includes at least one parent and child as well as other relatives like grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins
- **family** | socially recognized groups of individuals who may be joined by blood, marriage, or adoption and who form an emotional connection and an economic unit of society
- **family life course** | a sociological model of family that sees the progression of events as fluid rather than as occurring in strict stages
- **family life cycle** | a set of predictable steps and patterns families experience over time
- **family of orientation** | the family into which one is born
- **family of procreation** | a family that is formed through marriage
- **intimate partner violence (IPV)** | violence that occurs between individuals who maintain a romantic or sexual relationship
- **kinship** | a person's traceable ancestry (by blood, marriage, and/or adoption)
- **marriage** | a legally recognized contract between two or more people in a sexual relationship who have an expectation of permanence about their relationship
- **matrilineal descent** | a type of unilateral descent that follows the mother's side only
- **matrilocal residence** | a system in which it is customary for a husband to live with the his wife's family
- **monogamy** | the act of being married to only one person at a time
- **nuclear family** | two parents (traditionally a married husband and wife) and children living in the same household
- **patrilineal descent** | a type of unilateral descent that follows the father's line only
- **patrilocal residence** | a system in which it is customary for the a wife to live with (or near) the her husband's family
- **polyandry** | a form of marriage in which one woman is married to more than one man at one time
- **polygamy** | the state of being committed or married to more than one person at a time
- **polygyny** | a form of marriage in which one man is married to more than one woman at one time
- **shaken-baby syndrome** | a group of medical symptoms such as brain swelling and retinal hemorrhage resulting from forcefully shaking or impacting an infant's head
- **unilateral descent** | the tracing of kinship through one parent only.

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12.6: Short Answer

Critical Thinking Questions

1. According to research, what are people's general thoughts on family in the United States? How do they view nontraditional family structures? How do you think these views might change in twenty years?
2. Explain the difference between bilateral and unilateral descent. Using your own association with kinship, explain which type of descent applies to you?
3. Explain the different variations of the nuclear family and the trends that occur in each.
4. Why are some couples choosing to cohabitate before marriage? What effect does cohabitation have on marriage?
5. Explain how financial status impacts marital stability. What other factors are associated with a couple's financial status?
6. Explain why more than half of IPV goes unreported? Why are those who are abused unlikely to report the abuse?

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12.7: Further Research

Additional Learning Resources

- For more information on family development and lines of descent, visit the New England Historical Genealogical Society's web site, American Ancestors, and find out how genealogies have been established and recorded since 1845.
- To find more information on child abuse, visit the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services website to review documents provided by the Child Welfare Information Gateway.

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12.9: Accessible Text Description

Figure 12.1: Roadmap

A horizontal instructional diagram presents three large arrows pointing from left to right. Each arrow contains a colored circle with one guiding question: what, why, and how. A long multicolored arrow along the bottom describes the sequence as “A roadmap for understanding marriage, family, and relationships.”

The first, purple arrow is labeled “The WHAT” and asks, “What are marriage, family, and relationships?” The supporting text explains that this stage defines key concepts and examines family structures, relationship patterns, and diversity in modern family life.

The second, green arrow is labeled “The WHY” and asks, “Why do families and relationships take the forms they do?” The supporting text states that this stage explores the social, cultural, historical, and economic forces shaping marriage, family life, and intimate relationships.

The third, blue arrow is labeled “The HOW” and asks, “How do families and relationships function, change, and impact our lives?” The supporting text explains that this stage examines family dynamics, the effects of change, challenges such as divorce and abuse, and the ways relationships shape individuals and society.

Overall, the diagram presents a progression from defining marriage, family, and relationships, to explaining the forces that shape them, and finally to analyzing how they operate, change, and affect personal and social life.

Figure 12.4.1: Intimate Partner Violence

In the first panel, the text reads “About 1 in 5 women and about 1 in 7 men report having experienced severe physical violence from an intimate partner in their lifetime.” In the second panel, the text reads, “About 1 in 5 women and 1 in 12 men have experienced contact sexual violence by an intimate partner.” In the third panel, the text reads, “10 percent of women and 2 percent of men report having been stalked by an intimate partner.”

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13: AGING AND THE ELDERLY

Introduction

This chapter explores aging and its impact on both individuals and society. As populations around the world continue to live longer, we will examine the biological, psychological, and social aspects of growing older, along with important topics such as ageism, poverty among older adults, geriatrics, and attitudes toward death, dying, and grief. Together, these topics provide a sociological understanding of the opportunities and challenges associated with an aging society.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- Explain the social, cultural, and demographic factors that contribute to population aging and describe how an aging population impacts major social institutions such as healthcare, education, business, and the family
- Analyze how cultural attitudes, stereotypes, and media representations of older adults shape perceptions of aging and contribute to ageism in society.
- Compare and contrast the biological, psychological, and social aspects of the aging process, including the challenges associated with later adulthood and changes in independence across the life course
- Evaluate the ways that the functionalist, conflict, and symbolic interactionist perspectives explain aging, the experiences of older adults, and society's responses to an aging population.

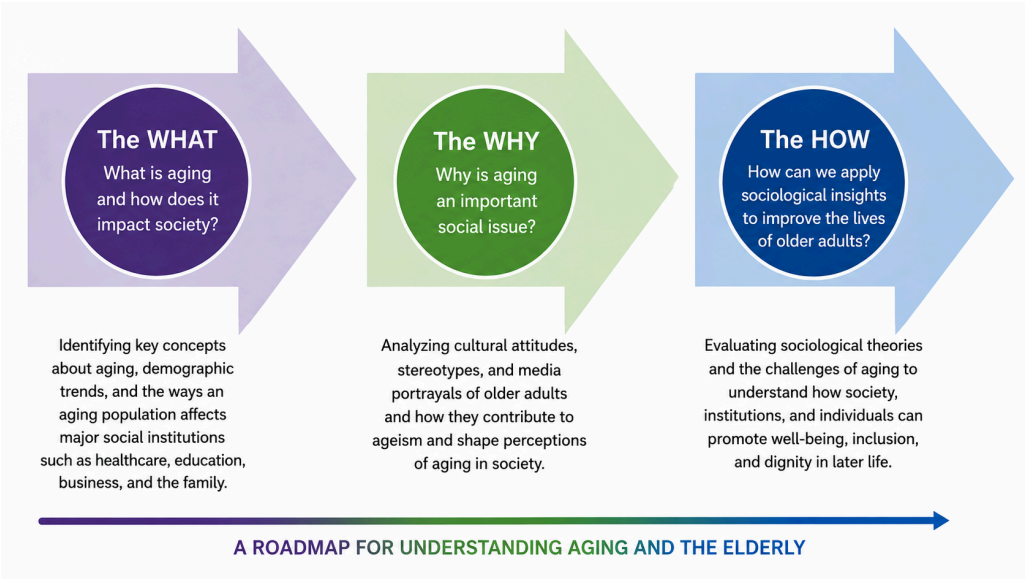


Figure 13.1: The process of aging in society can be analyzed by focusing on three key aspects: how an aging population affects social institutions, how ageism influences later life experiences, and how sociological insights can promote inclusion, dignity, and well-being for older adults. (Jayanti Roy via ChatGPT). Access alternative description for Figure 13.1.

Why, Who, and How

Aging and later life can be examined through three guiding questions: what, why, and how. The “what” asks how aging is defined and how it unfolds as both a biological process and a socially organized stage of the life course. It also examines demographic changes, including longer life expectancy and the growth of older populations, and considers how these trends affect healthcare, employment, retirement systems, education, housing, caregiving, and family relationships.

The “why” explores why aging is an important sociological issue and how experiences of later life are shaped by culture, history,

and inequality. Ideas about independence, productivity, beauty, health, and dependency influence how older adults are perceived and treated, while stereotypes and media portrayals can contribute to ageism. Aging is also experienced differently depending on class, race, ethnicity, gender, disability, family support, and access to economic and medical resources.

The “how” considers how sociological theories help explain these patterns and how individuals, communities, institutions, and public policies can respond. Functionalism examines the social roles associated with aging, conflict theory highlights inequalities in resources and power, and symbolic interactionism explores how meanings and identities are negotiated in everyday life. Together, these questions help us understand aging not simply as an individual or medical experience, but as a social process shaped by institutions, relationships, cultural expectations, and unequal opportunities. They also encourage us to consider how society can promote dignity, inclusion, security, well-being, and meaningful participation throughout later life.

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13.1: Case Study and Vignettes

Living Longer, Living Alone?

Longer life expectancy is often viewed as a major social achievement, reflecting improvements in medicine, nutrition, sanitation, and standards of living. Yet longevity also raises important questions about how societies organize care, distribute resources, and support people through later stages of life. Aging is not simply a biological process; it is shaped by family relationships, employment histories, income, housing, community connections, health care systems, and public policy.

Japan provides an important setting for examining these issues because it has one of the world's most rapidly aging populations. As birth rates decline and people live longer, older adults are increasingly likely to live alone, manage chronic health conditions, and depend on a combination of family assistance, community networks, and public services.



Figure 13.1.1: A neighborhood park overlooking Yokohama represents the public spaces where older adults can exercise, maintain routines, and connect with their communities. (Shimizugaoka park - Yokohama by Quercus acuta via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0)

Aging and Independence in Japan

Mr. Hiroshi Tanaka is an 84-year-old retired engineer who lives alone in a small apartment in Yokohama, Japan. After working for more than 40 years, he retired with a modest pension that allows him to meet his basic needs. His wife passed away several years ago, and his two adult children live in different parts of Japan because of their careers.

Each morning, Mr. Tanaka follows a familiar routine. He walks slowly to a nearby neighborhood park, where he meets other older adults to participate in light stretching. These gatherings help him stay physically active while also reducing the loneliness that many older adults experience. Afterward, he shops at a local market, prepares simple meals, and spends time reading newspapers or tending to a small balcony garden.

In recent years, however, everyday activities have become more challenging. Arthritis in his knees makes walking painful, and he has developed type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure that require regular medical appointments and medication. Although Japan's universal health care system and long-term care insurance provide valuable support, demand for these services continues to increase as the country's population ages.

Mr. Tanaka occasionally receives assistance from a home-care worker who visits several times each week to help with household chores and monitor his health. These services allow him to remain in his own home rather than moving into a nursing facility, something he strongly prefers.

Mr. Tanaka's story reflects both the successes and the challenges of longevity in modern Japan. Advances in medicine, nutrition, sanitation, and public health have enabled people to live longer than ever before. At the same time, declining birth rates, smaller family sizes, and longer life expectancy have created new social and economic pressures. Japan's experience illustrates how aging is not only a personal journey but also a societal issue that affects health care systems, public policy, family life, housing, transportation, and the workforce.

How should societies balance the benefits of increased life expectancy with the challenges of supporting an aging population? Consider the roles of governments, families, communities, employers, and health care systems in promoting healthy aging while ensuring that older adults can maintain dignity, independence, and quality of life.

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13.2: Who Are the Elderly?

Aging in Society

Think of U.S. movies and television shows you have watched recently. Did any of them feature older actors and actresses? What roles did they play? How were these older actors portrayed? Were they cast as main characters in a love story? Did they seem fully capable, safe, productive, and happy? Or were they a challenge to those around them? Were they grouchy or overly set in their ways?

Many media portrayals of the elderly reflect negative cultural attitudes toward aging. In the United States, society tends to glorify youth and associate it with beauty and sexuality. In comedies, the elderly are often associated with grumpiness or hostility. Rarely do the roles of older people convey the fullness of life experienced by seniors—as employees, lovers, or the myriad roles they have in real life. What values does this reflect?

One hindrance to society's fuller understanding of aging is that people rarely understand the process of aging until they reach old age themselves. This lack of understanding is in stark contrast to our perspective on childhood, something we've all experienced. And as is often the case with a lack of knowledge or understanding, it leads to myths, assumptions, and stereotypes about elderly people and the aging process. While stereotypes associated with race and gender may lead to more critical thought and sensitivity, many people accept age stereotypes without question (Levy 2002). Consider this: At your school or workplace, you have likely had the opportunity (or may be required) to attend workshops on racial equity, cultural sensitivity, sexual harassment, and so on. But even though the elderly are all around us (and increasing in number every day), very few institutions conduct similar workshops or forums about the elderly. Each culture has a certain set of expectations and assumptions about aging, all of which are part of our socialization.

While the landmarks of maturing into adulthood are a source of pride, often celebrated at major milestones like First Communion, Bar Mitzvah, or Quinceañera, signs of natural aging can be cause for shame or embarrassment. Some people avoid acknowledging their aging by rejecting help when they need it , which can lead to physical injury or problems obtaining needed items or information. For example, when vaccinations for the COVID-19 virus became available, U.S. seniors who didn't have help from family and friends lagged significantly in receiving vaccines; this occurred despite of the fact that seniors were known to be the highest risk group and were the most susceptible to illness and death if they were infected (Graham 2021). Those elderly people who were resistant to reach out for help may have waited too long, and their neighbors or other community members may not have known they needed the help. Why would they take this risk? Researchers aim to uncover the motivations and challenges that may result in these circumstances and behavior.

Studying Aging

Gerontology is a field of science that seeks to understand the process of aging and the challenges encountered as seniors grow older. Gerontologists investigate age, aging, and the aged. Gerontologists study what it is like to be an older adult in a society and the ways that aging affects members of a society. As a multidisciplinary field, gerontology includes the work of medical and biological scientists, social scientists, and even financial and economic scholars.

Social gerontology refers to a specialized field of gerontology that examines the social (and sociological) aspects of aging. Researchers focus on developing a broad understanding of the experiences of people at specific ages, such as mental and physical wellbeing, plus age-specific concerns such as the process of dying. Social gerontologists work as social researchers, counselors, community organizers, and service providers for older adults. Because of their specialization, social gerontologists are in a strong position to advocate for older adults.

Scholars in these disciplines have learned that "aging" reflects not only the physiological process of growing older but also our attitudes and beliefs about the aging process. You've likely seen online calculators that promise to determine your "real age" as opposed to your chronological age. These ads target the notion that people may "feel" a different age than their actual years. Some sixty-year-olds feel frail and elderly, while some eighty-year-olds feel sprightly.

Equally revealing is that as people grow older they define "old age" in terms of greater years than their current age (Logan 1992). Many people want to postpone old age and regard it as a phase that will never arrive. For example, many older Americans keep working well past what people consider retirement age, due to financial pressures or in order to remain, in their eyes, useful.

Some older adults even succumb to stereotyping their own age group (Rothbaum 1983).

In the United States, the experience of being elderly has changed greatly over the past century. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, many U.S. households were home to multigenerational families, and the experiences and wisdom of elders was respected. They offered wisdom and support to their children and often helped raise their grandchildren (Sweetser 1984).

Multigenerational U.S. families began to decline after World War II, and their numbers reached a low point around 1980, but they are consistently on the rise. A 2010 Pew Research Center analysis of census data found that 49 million people in the United States lived in a family household with at least two adult generations—or a grandparent and at least one other generation a record at the time. By 2016, that number had grown to 64 million people living in multigenerational households, roughly 20 percent of the population (Cohn 2018).

Attitudes toward the elderly have also been affected by large societal changes that have happened over the past 100 years. Researchers believe industrialization and modernization have contributed greatly to lowering the power, influence, and prestige the elderly once held. On the other hand, the sheer numbers of elderly people in certain societies can have other effects, such as older people's influence on policies and politics based on their voting influence.

The elderly have both benefited and suffered from these rapid social changes. In modern societies, a strong economy created new levels of prosperity for many people. Healthcare has become more widely accessible, and medicine has advanced, which allows the elderly to live longer. However, older people are not as essential to the economic survival of their families and communities as they were in the past.

Studying Aging Populations

Since its creation in 1790, the U.S. Census Bureau has been tracking age in the population. Age is an important factor to analyze with accompanying demographic figures, such as income and health. The population chart below shows projected age distribution patterns for the next several decades.

Statisticians use data to calculate the median age of a population, that is, the number that marks the halfway point in a group's age range. In the United States, the median age is about forty (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). That means that about half of the people in the United States are under forty and about half are over forty. This median age has been increasing, which indicates the population as a whole is growing older.

A cohort is a group of people who share a statistical or demographic trait. People belonging to the same age cohort were born in the same time frame. Understanding a population's age composition can point to certain social and cultural factors and help governments and societies plan for future social and economic challenges.

Sociological studies on aging might help explain the difference between Native American age cohorts and the general population. While Native American societies have a strong tradition of revering their elders, they also have a lower life expectancy because of lack of access to healthcare and high levels of mercury in fish, which is a traditional part of their diet.

Phases of Aging: The Young-Old, Middle-Old, and Old-Old

In the United States, all people over eighteen years old are considered adults, but there is a large difference between a person who is twenty-one years old and a person who is forty-five years old. More specific breakdowns, such as "young adult" and "middle-aged adult," are helpful. In the same way, groupings are helpful in understanding the elderly. The elderly are often lumped together to include everyone over the age of sixty-five. But a sixty-five-year-old's experience of life is much different from a ninety-year-old's.

The United States' older adult population can be divided into three life-stage subgroups: the young-old (approximately sixty-five to seventy-four years old), the middle-old (ages seventy-five to eighty-four years old), and the old-old (over age eighty-five). Today's young-old age group is generally happier, healthier, and financially better off than the young-old of previous generations. In the United States, people are better able to prepare for aging because resources are more widely available.

Also, many people are making proactive quality-of-life decisions about their old age while they are still young. In the past, family members made care decisions when an elderly person reached a health crisis, often leaving the elderly person with little choice about what would happen. The elderly are now able to choose housing, for example, that allows them some independence while still providing care when it is needed. Living wills, retirement planning, and medical power of attorney are other concerns that are

increasingly handled in advance.

The Graying of the United States

What does it mean to be elderly? Some define it as an issue of physical health, while others simply define it by chronological age. The U.S. government, for example, typically classifies people aged sixty-five years old as elderly, at which point citizens are eligible for federal benefits such as Social Security and Medicare. The World Health Organization has no standard, other than noting that sixty-five years old is the commonly accepted definition in most core nations, but it suggests a cut-off somewhere between fifty and fifty-five years old for semi-peripheral nations, such as those in Africa (World Health Organization 2012). AARP (formerly the American Association of Retired Persons) cites fifty as the eligible age of membership. It is interesting to note AARP's name change; by taking the word "retired" out of its name, the organization can broaden its base to any older people in the United States, not just retirees. This is especially important now that many people are working to age seventy and beyond.

There is an element of social construction, both local and global, in the way individuals and nations define who is elderly; that is, the shared meaning of the concept of elderly is created through interactions among people in society. As the table demonstrates, different generations have varying perspectives on aging. Researchers asked questions about the ages at which people reach certain milestones or new categories in life. Members of the Baby Boom generation indicate that a person is officially "old" when they turn 73 years old. Millennials, a much younger group, felt that people became old when they turned 59. The same survey asked questions about the end of youth and the prime of life (Emling 2017). Interestingly, Boomers and GenXers both felt that youth "ended" by age 31 and that the prime of life didn't start until many years later. Millennials felt that people reached the prime of life at age 36, *before* youth ended at age 40. It's worth noting that at the time of the survey, the Millennials were all 36 and younger.

Table 13.2.1: A survey conducted by the U.S. Trust gathered opinion data on the aging milestones and categories. Boomers, Gen X people, and Millennials had generally different views.

Question	Boomer response	Gen X response	Millennial response
At what age does youth end?	31	31	40
At what age is the prime of life?	50	47	36
At what age is someone old?	73	65	59

Demographically, the U.S. population has undergone a massive shift both in the overall population of elderly people and their share of the total population. Both are significant and impactful on major policy decisions and day-to-day life. In 1900, the population of U.S people over sixty-five years old was 3 million, representing about 4 percent of the total population. That number increased to 33 million in 1994, and was roughly 12 percent of the total population (Hobbs 1994). By 2016 that number had grown to 49 million, about 15 percent of the total population (U.S. Census Bureau 2018). This is a greater than tenfold increase in the elderly population, compared to a mere tripling of both the total population and of the population under sixty-five years old (Hobbs 1994). This increase has been called "the graying of America," a term that describes the phenomenon of a larger and larger percentage of the population getting older and older. There are several reasons why the United States is graying so rapidly. One of these is life expectancy: the average number of years a person born today may expect to live. When we review Census Bureau statistics grouping the elderly by age, it is clear that in the United States, at least, we are living longer. In 2010, there were about 80,000 centenarians in the United States alone. They make up one of the fastest-growing segments of the population (Boston University School of Medicine 2014).

It is interesting to note that not all people in the United States age equally. Most glaring is the difference between men and women; as Figure 13.6 shows, women have longer life expectancies than men. In 2010, there were ninety sixty-five-year-old men per one hundred sixty-five-year-old women. However, there were only eighty seventy-five-year-old men per one hundred seventy-five-year-old women, and only sixty eighty-five-year-old men per one hundred eighty-five-year-old women. Nevertheless, as the graph shows, the sex ratio actually increased over time, indicating that men are closing the gap between their life spans and those of women (U.S. Census Bureau 2010).

Baby Boomers

Of particular interest to gerontologists today is the population of Baby Boomers, the cohort born between 1946 and 1964 and now reaching their 60s and 70s. Coming of age in the 1960s and early 1970s, the baby boom generation was the first group of children and teenagers with their own spending power and therefore their own marketing power (Macunovich 2000). As this

group has aged, it has redefined what it means to be young, middle-aged, and now old. People in the Boomer generation do not want to grow old the way their grandparents did; the result is a wide range of products designed to ward off the effects—or the signs—of aging. Previous generations of people over sixty-five were “old.” Baby Boomers are in “later life” or “the third age” (Gilleard and Higgs 2007).

The baby boom generation is the cohort driving much of the dramatic increase in the over-sixty-five population. Figure 13.7 shows a comparison of the U.S. population by age and gender between 2000 and 2010. The biggest bulge in the pyramid (representing the largest population group) moves up the pyramid over the course of the decade; in 2000, the largest population group was age thirty-five to fifty-five. In 2010, that group was age forty-five to sixty-five, meaning the oldest baby Boomers were just reaching the age at which the U.S. Census considers them elderly. By 2030, all Baby Boomers will be age 65 and older, and represent the largest group of elderly people.

This aging of the Baby Boom cohort has serious implications for our society. Healthcare is one of the areas most impacted by this trend. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, healthcare spending is projected to grow by 5.5 percent each year from now until 2027. The portion of government spending on Medicare (a program in which the government covers some costs of healthcare for the elderly) is expected to increase from 3 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2009 to 8 percent of GDP in 2030, and to 15 percent in 2080 (CMS 2018).

Certainly, as Boomers age, they will put increasing burdens on the entire U.S. healthcare system. The American Geriatrics Society notes that from 2013-2025, there will be a 45 percent increase in demand for physicians who specialize in geriatrics. As a result, over 33,000 specialists will be needed to fill the healthcare needs in 2025. And in 2020, there were only 6,320 such specialists in the United States (AGS 2021).

Unlike the elderly of previous generations, Boomers do not expect that turning sixty-five means their active lives are over. They are not willing to abandon work or leisure activities, but they may need more medical support to keep living vigorous lives. This desire of a large group of over-sixty-five-year-olds wanting to continue with a high activity level is driving innovation in the medical industry (Shaw n.d.).

The economic impact of aging Boomers is also an area of concern for many observers. Although the baby boom generation earned more than previous generations and enjoyed a higher standard of living, they did not adequately prepare for retirement. According to most retirement and investment experts, in order to maintain their accustomed lifestyle, people need to save ten times their annual income before retiring. (Note: That's income, not salary.) So if a person has an income of $60,000 per year, they should have saved $600,000. If they made $100,000 per year, they should have saved $1 million. But most Baby Boomers have only saved an estimated $144,000, and only 40 percent have saved more than $250,000 (Gravier 2021). The causes of these shortfalls are varied, and include everything from lavish spending to economic recession to companies folding and reducing pension payments. Higher education costs increased significantly while many Baby Boomers were sending their children to college. No matter what the cause, many retirees report a great deal of stress about running out of money.

Just as some observers are concerned about the possibility of Medicare being overburdened, Social Security is considered to be at risk. Social Security is a government-run retirement program funded primarily through payroll taxes. With enough people paying into the program, there should be enough money for retirees to take out. But with the aging Boomer cohort starting to receive Social Security benefits and fewer workers paying into the Social Security trust fund, economists warn that the system will collapse by the year 2037. A similar warning came in the 1980s; in response to recommendations from the Greenspan Commission, the retirement age (the age at which people could start receiving Social Security benefits) was raised from sixty-two to sixty-seven and the payroll tax was increased. A similar hike in retirement age, perhaps to seventy, is a possible solution to the current threat to Social Security.

Aging around the World

The United States is certainly not alone regarding its aging population; in fact, it doesn’t even have the fastest-growing group of elderly people. In 2019, the world had 703 million people aged 65 years or over. By 2050, that number is projected to double to 1.5 billion. One in six people in the world will be 65 or over (United Nations 2020).

This percentage is expected to increase and will have a huge impact on the dependency ratio: the number of citizens not in the labor force (young, disabled, or elderly) to citizens in the labor force (Bartram and Roe 2005). One country that will soon face a serious aging crisis is China, which is on the cusp of an “aging boom”— a period when its elderly population will dramatically increase. The number of people above age sixty in China today is about 178 million, which amounts to 13.3 percent of its total population (Xuequan 2011). By 2050, nearly a third of the Chinese population will be age sixty or older, which will put a significant

burden on the labor force and impact China's economic growth (Bannister, Bloom, and Rosenberg 2010). On a more global scale, the dependency ratio is projected to more than double in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, Northern Africa and Western Asia, and Central and Southern Asia.

As healthcare improves and life expectancy increases across the world, elder care will be an emerging issue. Wienclaw (2009) suggests that with fewer working-age citizens available to provide home care and long-term assisted care to the elderly, the costs of elder care will increase.

Worldwide, the expectation governing the amount and type of elder care varies from culture to culture. For example, in Asia the responsibility for elder care lies firmly on the family (Yap, Thang, and Traphagan 2005). This is different from the approach in most Western countries, where the elderly are considered independent and are expected to tend to their own care. It is not uncommon for family members to intervene only if the elderly relative requires assistance, often due to poor health. Even then, caring for the elderly is considered voluntary. In the United States, decisions to care for an elderly relative are often conditionally based on the promise of future returns, such as inheritance or, in some cases, the amount of support the elderly provided to the caregiver in the past (Hashimoto 1996).

Cultural Attitudes Towards Aging

These differences are based on cultural attitudes toward aging. In China, several studies have noted the attitude of filial piety (deference and respect to one's parents and ancestors in all things) as defining all other virtues (Hsu 1971; Hamilton 1990). Cultural attitudes in Japan prior to approximately 1986 supported the idea that the elderly deserve assistance (Ogawa and Retherford 1993). However, seismic shifts in major social institutions (like family and economy) have created an increased demand for community and government care. For example, the increase in women working outside the home has made it more difficult to provide in-home care to aging parents, which leads to an increase in the need for government-supported institutions (Raikhola and Kuroki 2009).

In the United States, by contrast, many people view caring for the elderly as a burden. Even when there is a family member able and willing to provide for an elderly family member, 60 percent of family caregivers are employed outside the home and are unable to provide the needed support. At the same time, however, many middle-class families are unable to bear the financial burden of "outsourcing" professional healthcare, resulting in gaps in care (Bookman and Kimbrel 2011). It is important to note that even within the United States not all demographic groups treat aging the same way. While most people in the United States are reluctant to place their elderly members into out-of-home assisted care, demographically speaking, the groups least likely to do so are Latinos, African Americans, and Asians (Bookman and Kimbrel 2011).

Globally, the United States and other core nations are fairly well equipped to handle the demands of an exponentially increasing elderly population. However, peripheral and semi-peripheral nations face similar increases without comparable resources. Poverty among elders is a concern, especially among elderly women. The feminization of the aging poor, evident in peripheral nations, is directly due to the number of elderly women in those countries who are single, illiterate, and not a part of the labor force (Mujahid 2006).

In 2002, the Second World Assembly on Aging was held in Madrid, Spain, resulting in the Madrid Plan, an internationally coordinated effort to create comprehensive social policies to address the needs of the worldwide aging population. The plan identifies three themes to guide international policy on aging: 1) publicly acknowledging the global challenges caused by, and the global opportunities created by, a rising global population; 2) empowering the elderly; and 3) linking international policies on aging to international policies on development (Zelenev 2008).

The Madrid Plan has not yet been successful in achieving all its aims. However, it has increased awareness of the various issues associated with a global aging population, as well as raising the international consciousness to the way that the factors influencing the vulnerability of the elderly (social exclusion, prejudice and discrimination, and a lack of socio-legal protection) overlap with other developmental issues (basic human rights, empowerment, and participation), leading to an increase in legal protections (Zelenev 2008).

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13.3: The Process of Aging

A Life Course

As human beings grow older, they go through different phases or stages of life. It is helpful to understand aging in the context of these phases. A life course is the period from birth to death, including a sequence of predictable life events such as physical maturation. Each phase comes with different responsibilities and expectations, which of course vary by individual and culture. Children love to play and learn, looking forward to becoming preteens. As preteens begin to test their independence, they are eager to become teenagers. Teenagers anticipate the promises and challenges of adulthood. Adults become focused on creating families, building careers, and experiencing the world as independent people. Finally, many adults look forward to old age as a wonderful time to enjoy life without as much pressure from work and family life. In old age, grandparenthood can provide many of the joys of parenthood without all the hard work that parenthood entails. And as work responsibilities abate, old age may be a time to explore hobbies and activities that there was no time for earlier in life. But for other people, old age is not a phase that they look forward to. Some people fear old age and do anything to "avoid" it by seeking medical and cosmetic fixes for the natural effects of age. These differing views on the life course are the result of the cultural values and norms into which people are socialized, but in most cultures, age is a master status influencing self-concept, as well as social roles and interactions.

Through the phases of the life course, dependence and independence levels change. At birth, newborns are dependent on caregivers for everything. As babies become toddlers and toddlers become adolescents and then teenagers, they assert their independence more and more. Gradually, children come to be considered adults, responsible for their own lives, although the point at which this occurs is widely varied among individuals, families, and cultures.

As Riley (1978) notes, aging is a lifelong process and entails maturation and change on physical, psychological, and social levels. Age, much like race, class, and gender, is a hierarchy in which some categories are more highly valued than others. For example, while many children look forward to gaining independence, Packer and Chasteen (2006) suggest that even in children, age prejudice leads to a negative view of aging. This, in turn, can lead to a widespread segregation between the old and the young at the institutional, societal, and cultural levels (Hagestad and Uhlenberg 2006).

Sociological Research: Dr. Ignatz Nascher and the Birth of Geriatrics

In the early 1900s, a New York physician named Dr. Ignatz Nascher coined the term geriatrics, a medical specialty that focuses on the elderly. He created the word by combining two Greek words: *geron* (old man) and *iatrikos* (medical treatment). Nascher based his work on what he observed as a young medical student, when he saw many acutely ill elderly people who were diagnosed simply as "being old." There was nothing medicine could do, his professors declared, about the syndrome of "old age."

Nascher refused to accept this dismissive view, seeing it as medical neglect. He believed it was a doctor's duty to prolong life and relieve suffering whenever possible. In 1914, he published his views in his book *Geriatrics: The Diseases of Old Age and Their Treatment* (Clarfield 1990). Nascher saw the practice of caring for the elderly as separate from the practice of caring for the young, just as pediatrics (caring for children) is different from caring for grown adults (Clarfield 1990).

Nascher had high hopes for his pioneering work. He wanted to treat the aging, especially those who were poor and had no one to care for them. Many of the elderly poor were sent to live in "almshouses," or public old-age homes (Cole 1993). Conditions were often terrible in these almshouses, where the aging were often sent and just forgotten.

As hard as it might be to believe today, Nascher's approach was once considered unique. At the time of his death, in 1944, he was disappointed that the field of geriatrics had not made greater strides. In what ways are the elderly better off today than they were before Nascher's ideas gained acceptance?

Biological Changes

Each person experiences age-related changes based on many factors. Biological factors, such as molecular and cellular changes, are called primary aging, while aging that occurs due to controllable factors, such as lack of physical exercise and poor diet, is

called secondary aging (Whitbourne and Whitbourne 2010).

Most people begin to see signs of aging after fifty years old, when they notice the physical markers of age. Skin becomes thinner, drier, and less elastic. Wrinkles form. Hair begins to thin and gray. Men prone to balding start losing hair. The difficulty or relative ease with which people adapt to these changes is dependent in part on the meaning given to aging by their particular culture. A culture that values youthfulness and beauty above all else leads to a negative perception of growing old. Conversely, a culture that reveres the elderly for their life experience and wisdom contributes to a more positive perception of what it means to grow old.

The effects of aging can feel daunting, and sometimes the fear of physical changes (like declining energy, food sensitivity, and loss of hearing and vision) is more challenging to deal with than the changes themselves. The way people perceive physical aging is largely dependent on how they were socialized. If people can accept the changes in their bodies as a natural process of aging, the changes will not seem as frightening.

According to the federal Administration on Aging (2011), in 2009 fewer people over sixty-five years old assessed their health as "excellent" or "very good" (41.6 percent) compared to those aged eighteen to sixty-four (64.4 percent). Evaluating data from the National Center for Health Statistics and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Administration on Aging found that from 2006 to 2008, the most frequently reported health issues for those over sixty-five years old included arthritis (50 percent), hypertension (38 percent), heart disease (32 percent), and cancer (22 percent). About 27 percent of people age sixty and older are considered obese by current medical standards. Parker and Thorslund (2006) found that while the trend is toward steady improvement in most disability measures, there is a concomitant increase in functional impairments (disability) and chronic diseases. At the same time, medical advances have reduced some of the disabling effects of those diseases (Crimmins 2004).

Some impacts of aging are gender-specific. Some of the disadvantages aging women face arise from long-standing social gender roles. For example, Social Security favors men over women, inasmuch as women do not earn Social Security benefits for the unpaid labor they perform (usually at home) as an extension of their gender roles. In the healthcare field, elderly female patients are more likely than elderly men to see their healthcare concerns trivialized (Sharp 1995) and are more likely to have their health issues labeled psychosomatic (Munch 2004). Another female-specific aspect of aging is that mass-media outlets often depict elderly females in terms of negative stereotypes and as less successful than older men (Bazzini and Mclntosh I997).

For men, the process of aging—and society's response to and support of the experience—may be quite different. The gradual decrease in male sexual performance that occurs as a result of primary aging is medicalized and constructed as needing treatment (Marshall and Katz 2002) so that a man may maintain a sense of youthful masculinity. On the other hand, aging men have fewer opportunities to assert their masculine identities in the company of other men (for example, through sports participation) (Drummond 1998). And some social scientists have observed that the aging male body is depicted in the Western world as genderless (Spector-Mersel 2006).

Social and Psychological Changes

Male or female, growing older means confronting the psychological issues that come with entering the last phase of life. Young people moving into adulthood take on new roles and responsibilities as their lives expand, but an opposite arc can be observed in old age. What are the hallmarks of social and psychological change?

Retirement—the withdrawal from paid work at a certain age—is a relatively recent idea. Up until the late nineteenth century, people worked about sixty hours a week until they were physically incapable of continuing. Following the American Civil War, veterans receiving pensions were able to withdraw from the workforce, and the number of working older men began declining. A second large decline in the number of working men began in the post-World War II era, probably due to the availability of Social Security, and a third large decline in the 1960s and 1970s was probably due to the social support offered by Medicare and the increase in Social Security benefits (Munnell 2011).

In the twenty-first century, most people hope that at some point they will be able to stop working and enjoy the fruits of their labor. But do we look forward to this time or fear it? When people retire from familiar work routines, some easily seek new hobbies, interests, and forms of recreation. Many find new groups and explore new activities, but others may find it more difficult to adapt to new routines and loss of social roles, losing their sense of self-worth in the process.

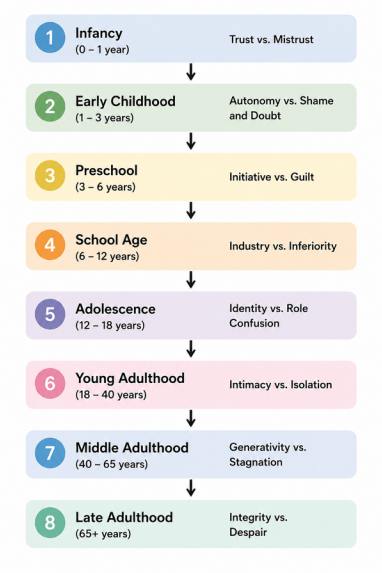


Figure 13.3.1: Erikson's theory presents development as a lifelong sequence of psychosocial challenges shaped by relationships, social expectations, and changing roles across the life course. (Jayanti Roy via ChatGPT). Access alternative description for Figure 13.3.1.

Each phase of life has challenges that come with the potential for fear. Erik H. Erikson (1902–1994), in his view of socialization, broke the typical lifespan into eight phases. Each phase presents a particular challenge that must be overcome. In the final stage, old age, the challenge is to embrace integrity over despair. Some people are unable to successfully overcome the challenge. They may have to confront regrets, such as being disappointed in their children's lives or perhaps their own. They may have to accept that they will never reach certain career goals. Or they must come to terms with what their career success has cost them, such as time with their family or declining personal health. Others, however, are able to achieve a strong sense of integrity and are able to embrace the new phase in life. When that happens, there is tremendous potential for creativity. They can learn new skills, practice new activities, and peacefully prepare for the end of life.

For some, overcoming despair might entail remarriage after the death of a spouse. A study conducted by Kate Davidson (2002) reviewed demographic data that asserted men were more likely to remarry after the death of a spouse and suggested that widows (the surviving female spouse of a deceased male partner) and widowers (the surviving male spouse of a deceased female partner) experience their postmarital lives differently. Many surviving women enjoyed a new sense of freedom, since they were living alone for the first time. On the other hand, for surviving men, there was a greater sense of having lost something, because they were now deprived of a constant source of care as well as the focus of their emotional life.

Aging and Sexuality

Although it is sometimes difficult to have an open, public national dialogue about aging and sexuality, the reality is that our sexual selves do not disappear after age sixty-five. People continue to enjoy sex—and not always safe sex—well into their later years. In fact, some research suggests that as many as one in five new cases of AIDS occurs in adults over sixty-five years old (Hillman 2011).

In some ways, old age may be a time to enjoy sex more, not less. For women, the elder years can bring a sense of relief as the fear of an unwanted pregnancy is removed and the children are grown and taking care of themselves. However, while we have expanded the number of psycho-pharmaceuticals to address sexual dysfunction in men, it was not until recently that the medical field acknowledged the existence of female sexual dysfunctions (Bryant 2004). Additional treatments have been developed or applied to address sexual desire or dysfunction, which sometimes leads members of both sexes to believe that problems are easily resolved. But emotional and social factors play an important role, and medications on their own cannot resolve all issues (Nonacs 2018).

Aging and sexuality also concerns relationships between people of different ages, referred to as age-gap relationships by researchers. These types of relationships are certainly not confined to the elderly, but people often make assumptions about elderly people in romantic relationships with younger people (and vice versa). Research into age-gap relationships indicates that social pressure can have impacts on relationship commitment or lead to break ups. The life stages of the people can also have impacts, especially if one of them is elderly and the other is not (Karantzas 2018). A relationship between a 30-year-old and

a 45-year-old most likely involves fewer discussions about serious health issues and retirement decisions than one between a 55-year-old and a 70-year-old. Both have 15-year age gaps, but the circumstances are quite different.

Sociology in the Real World: Aging "Out:" LGBTQ Seniors

How do different groups in our society experience the aging process? Are there any experiences that are universal, or do different populations have different experiences? An emerging field of study looks at how lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) people experience the aging process and how their experience differs from that of other groups or the dominant group. This issue is expanding with the aging of the baby boom generation; not only will aging boomers represent a huge bump in the general elderly population but also the number of LGBTQ seniors is expected to double by 2030 (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al. 2011).

A recent study titled *The Aging and Health Report: Disparities and Resilience among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Older Adults* finds that LGBTQ older adults have higher rates of disability and depression than their heterosexual peers. They are also less likely to have a support system that might provide elder care: a partner and supportive children (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al. 2011). Even for those LGBTQ seniors who are partnered, some states do not recognize a legal relationship between two people of the same sex, which reduces their legal protection and financial options.

As they transition to assisted-living facilities, LGBTQ people have the added burden of "disclosure management:" the way they share their sexual and relationship identity. In one case study, a seventy-eight-year-old lesbian woman lived alone in a long-term care facility. She had been in a long-term relationship of thirty-two years and had been visibly active in the LGBTQ community earlier in her life. However, in the long-term care setting, she was much quieter about her sexual orientation. She "selectively disclosed" her sexual identity, feeling safer with anonymity and silence (Jenkins et al. 2010). A study from the National Senior Citizens Law Center reports that only 22 percent of LGBTQ older adults expect they could be open about their sexual orientation or gender identity in a long-term care facility. Even more telling is the finding that only 16 percent of non-LGBTQ older adults expected that LGBTQ people could be open with facility staff (National Senior Citizens Law Center 2011).

Same-sex marriage—a civil rights battleground that is being fought in many states—can have major implications for the way the LGBTQ community ages. With marriage comes the legal and financial protection afforded to opposite-sex couples, as well as less fear of exposure and a reduction in the need to "retreat to the closet" (Jenkins et al. 2010). Changes in this area are coming slowly, and in the meantime, advocates have many policy recommendations for how to improve the aging process for LGBTQ individuals. These recommendations include increasing federal research on LGBTQ elders, increasing (and enforcing existing) laws against discrimination, and amending the federal Family and Medical Leave Act to cover LGBTQ caregivers (Grant 2009).

Death and Dying

For most of human history, the standard of living was significantly lower than it is now. Humans struggled to survive with few amenities and very limited medical technology. The risk of death due to disease or accident was high in any life stage, and life expectancy was low. As people began to live longer, death became associated with old age.

For many teenagers and young adults, losing a grandparent or another older relative can be the first loss of a loved one they experience. It may be their first encounter with grief, a psychological, emotional, and social response to the feelings of loss that accompanies death or a similar event.

People tend to perceive death, their own and that of others, based on the values of their culture. While some may look upon death as the natural conclusion to a long, fruitful life, others may find the prospect of dying frightening to contemplate. People tend to have strong resistance to the idea of their own death, and strong emotional reactions of loss to the death of loved ones. Viewing death as a loss, as opposed to a natural or tranquil transition, is often considered normal in the United States.

What may be surprising is how few studies were conducted on death and dying prior to the 1960s. Death and dying were fields that had received little attention until a psychologist named Elisabeth Kübler-Ross began observing people who were in the process of dying. As Kübler-Ross witnessed people's transition toward death, she found some common threads in their experiences. She observed that the process had five distinct stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. She published her findings in a 1969 book called *On Death and Dying*. The book remains a classic on the topic today.

Kübler-Ross' Stages of Grief

Kübler-Ross found that a person's first reaction to the prospect of dying is *denial*: this is characterized by the person's not wanting to believe he or she is dying, with common thoughts such as "I feel fine" or "This is not really happening to me." The second stage is *anger*, when loss of life is seen as unfair and unjust. A person then resorts to the third stage, *bargaining*: trying to negotiate with a higher power to postpone the inevitable by reforming or changing the way he or she lives. The fourth stage, psychological *depression*, allows for resignation as the situation begins to seem hopeless. In the final stage, a person adjusts to the idea of death and reaches *acceptance*. At this point, the person can face death honestly, by regarding it as a natural and inevitable part of life and can make the most of their remaining time.

The work of Kübler-Ross was eye-opening when it was introduced. It broke new ground and opened the doors for sociologists, social workers, health practitioners, and therapists to study death and help those who were facing death. Kübler-Ross's work is generally considered a major contribution to thanatology: the systematic study of death and dying.

Of special interests to thanatologists is the concept of "dying with dignity." Modern medicine includes advanced medical technology that may prolong life without a parallel improvement to the quality of life one may have. In some cases, people may not want to continue living when they are in constant pain and no longer enjoying life. Should patients have the right to choose to die with dignity? Dr. Jack Kevorkian was a staunch advocate for physician-assisted suicide: the voluntary or physician-assisted use of lethal medication provided by a medical doctor to end one's life. This right to have a doctor help a patient die with dignity is controversial. In the United States, Oregon was the first state to pass a law allowing physician-assisted suicides. In 1997, Oregon instituted the Death with Dignity Act, which required the presence of two physicians for a legal assisted suicide. This law was successfully challenged by U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft in 2001, but the appeals process ultimately upheld the Oregon law. As of 2019, seven states and the District of Columbia have passed similar laws allowing physician assisted suicide.

The controversy surrounding death with dignity laws is emblematic of the way our society tries to separate itself from death. Health institutions have built facilities to comfortably house those who are terminally ill. This is seen as a compassionate act, helping relieve the surviving family members of the burden of caring for the dying relative. But studies almost universally show that people prefer to die in their own homes (Lloyd, White, and Sutton 2011). Is it our social responsibility to care for elderly relatives up until their death? How do we balance the responsibility for caring for an elderly relative with our other responsibilities and obligations? As our society grows older, and as new medical technology can prolong life even further, the answers to these questions will develop and change.

The changing concept of hospice is an indicator of our society's changing view of death. Hospice is a type of healthcare that treats terminally ill people when "cure-oriented treatments" are no longer an option (Hospice Foundation of America 2012b). Hospice doctors, nurses, and therapists receive special training in the care of the dying. The focus is not on getting better or curing the illness, but on passing out of this life in comfort and peace. Hospice centers exist as a place where people can go to die in comfort, and increasingly, hospice services encourage at-home care so that someone has the comfort of dying in a familiar environment, surrounded by family (Hospice Foundation of America 2012a). While many of us would probably prefer to avoid thinking of the end of our lives, it may be possible to take comfort in the idea that when we do approach death in a hospice setting, it is in a familiar, relatively controlled place.

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13.4: Challenges Facing the Elderly

Poverty

Aging comes with many challenges. The loss of independence is one potential part of the process, as are diminished physical ability and age discrimination. The term senescence refers to the aging process, including biological, emotional, intellectual, social, and spiritual changes. This section discusses some of the challenges we encounter during this process.

As already observed, many older adults remain highly self-sufficient. Others require more care. Because the elderly typically no longer hold jobs, finances can be a challenge. And due to cultural misconceptions, older people can be targets of ridicule and stereotypes. The elderly face many challenges in later life, but they do not have to enter old age without dignity.

For many people in the United States, growing older once meant living with less income. In 1960, almost 35 percent of the elderly existed on poverty-level incomes. A generation ago, the nation's oldest populations had the highest risk of living in poverty.

At the start of the twenty-first century, the older population was putting an end to that trend. Among people over sixty-five years old, the poverty rate fell from 30 percent in 1967 to 9.7 percent in 2008, well below the national average of 13.2 percent (U.S. Census Bureau 2009). However, given the subsequent recession, which severely reduced the retirement savings of many while taxing public support systems, how are the elderly affected? According to the Kaiser Commission on Medicaid and the Uninsured, the national poverty rate among the elderly had risen to 14 percent by 2010 (Urban Institute and Kaiser Commission 2010).

Before the recession hit, what had changed to cause a reduction in poverty among the elderly? What social patterns contributed to the shift? For several decades, a greater number of women joined the workforce. More married couples earned double incomes during their working years and saved more money for their retirement. Private employers and governments began offering better retirement programs. By 1990, senior citizens reported earning 36 percent more income on average than they did in 1980; that was five times the rate of increase for people under age thirty-five (U.S. Census Bureau 2009).

In addition, many people were gaining access to better healthcare. New trends encouraged people to live more healthful lifestyles by placing an emphasis on exercise and nutrition. There was also greater access to information about the health risks of behaviors such as cigarette smoking, alcohol consumption, and drug use. Because they were healthier, many older people continue to work past the typical retirement age and provide more opportunity to save for retirement. Will these patterns return once the recession ends? Sociologists will be watching to see. In the meantime, they are realizing the immediate impact of the recession on elderly poverty.

During the recession, older people lost some of the financial advantages that they'd gained in the 1980s and 1990s. From October 2007 to October 2009 the values of retirement accounts for people over age fifty lost 18 percent of their value. The sharp decline in the stock market also forced many to delay their retirement (Administration on Aging 2009).

Ageism

Driving to the grocery store, Peter, twenty-three years old, got stuck behind a car on a four-lane main artery through his city's business district. The speed limit was thirty-five miles per hour, and while most drivers sped along at forty to forty-five mph, the driver in front of him was going the minimum speed. Peter tapped on his horn. He tailgated the driver. Finally, Peter had a chance to pass the car. He glanced over. Sure enough, Peter thought, a gray-haired old man guilty of "DWE," driving while elderly.

At the grocery store, Peter waited in the checkout line behind an older woman. She paid for her groceries, lifted her bags of food into her cart, and toddled toward the exit. Peter, guessing her to be about eighty years old, was reminded of his grandmother. He paid for his groceries and caught up with her.

"Can I help you with your cart?" he asked.

"No, thank you. I can get it myself," she said and marched off toward her car.

Peter's responses to both older people, the driver and the shopper, were prejudiced. In both cases, he made unfair assumptions. He assumed the driver drove cautiously simply because the man was a senior citizen, and he assumed the shopper needed help

carrying her groceries just because she was an older woman.

Responses like Peter's toward older people are fairly common. He didn't intend to treat people differently based on personal or cultural biases, but he did. Ageism is discrimination (when someone acts on a prejudice) based on age. Dr. Robert Butler coined the term in 1968, noting that ageism exists in all cultures (Brownell). Ageist attitudes and biases based on stereotypes reduce elderly people to inferior or limited positions.

Ageism can vary in severity. Peter's attitudes are probably seen as fairly mild, but relating to the elderly in ways that are patronizing can be offensive. When ageism is reflected in the workplace, in healthcare, and in assisted-living facilities, the effects of discrimination can be more severe. Ageism can make older people fear losing a job, feel dismissed by a doctor, or feel a lack of power and control in their daily living situations.

In early societies, the elderly were respected and revered. Many preindustrial societies observed gerontocracy, a type of social structure wherein the power is held by a society's oldest members. In some countries today, the elderly still have influence and power and their vast knowledge is respected. Reverence for the elderly is still a part of some cultures, but it has changed in many places because of social factors.

In many modern nations, however, industrialization contributed to the diminished social standing of the elderly. Today wealth, power, and prestige are also held by those in younger age brackets. The average age of corporate executives was fifty-nine years old in 1980. In 2008, the average age had lowered to fifty-four years old (Stuart 2008). Some older members of the workforce felt threatened by this trend and grew concerned that younger employees in higher level positions would push them out of the job market. Rapid advancements in technology and media have required new skill sets that older members of the workforce are less likely to have.

Changes happened not only in the workplace but also at home. In agrarian societies, a married couple cared for their aging parents. The oldest members of the family contributed to the household by doing chores, cooking, and helping with child care. As economies shifted from agrarian to industrial, younger generations moved to cities to work in factories. The elderly began to be seen as an expensive burden. They did not have the strength and stamina to work outside the home. What began during industrialization, a trend toward older people living apart from their grown children, has become commonplace. As you saw in the opening, children of older people can also feel guilt, sadness, and sometimes anger at both taking care of aging parents and with accepting that their parents are losing their abilities. Living apart, especially if an older person is moved to a nursing home or other facility, can often exacerbate these issues.

Mistreatment and Abuse

Mistreatment and abuse of the elderly is a major social problem. As expected, with the biology of aging, the elderly sometimes become physically frail. This frailty renders them dependent on others for care—sometimes for small needs like household tasks, and sometimes for assistance with basic functions like eating and toileting. Unlike a child, who also is dependent on another for care, an elder is an adult with a lifetime of experience, knowledge, and opinions—a more fully developed person. This makes the care-providing situation more complex.

Elder abuse occurs when a caretaker intentionally deprives an older person of care or harms the person in his or her charge. Caregivers may be family members, relatives, friends, health professionals, or employees of senior housing or nursing care. The elderly may be subject to many different types of abuse.

In a 2009 study on the topic led by Dr. Ron Acierno, the team of researchers identified five major categories of elder abuse: 1) physical abuse, such as hitting or shaking, 2) sexual abuse, including rape and coerced nudity, 3) psychological or emotional abuse, such as verbal harassment or humiliation, 4) neglect or failure to provide adequate care, and 5) financial abuse or exploitation (Acierno 2010).

The National Center on Elder Abuse (NCEA), a division of the U.S. Administration on Aging, also identifies abandonment and self-neglect as types of abuse. Table 13.2 shows some of the signs and symptoms that the NCEA encourages people to notice.

Table 13.4.1*: Signs of Elder Abuse: The National Center on Elder Abuse encourages people to watch for these signs of mistreatment.*

Type of Abuse	Signs and Symptoms
Physical abuse	Bruises, untreated wounds, sprains, broken glasses, lab findings of medication overdose

Type of Abuse	Signs and Symptoms
Sexual abuse	Bruises around breasts or genitals, torn or bloody underclothing, unexplained venereal disease
Emotional/psychological abuse	Being upset or withdrawn, unusual dementia-like behavior (rocking, sucking)
Neglect	Poor hygiene, untreated bed sores, dehydration, soiled bedding
Financial	Sudden changes in banking practices, inclusion of additional names on bank cards, abrupt changes to will
Self-neglect	Untreated medical conditions, unclean living area, lack of medical items like dentures or glasses

How prevalent is elder abuse? Two recent U.S. studies found that roughly one in ten elderly people surveyed had suffered at least one form of elder abuse. Some social researchers believe elder abuse is underreported and that the number may be higher. The risk of abuse also increases in people with health issues such as dementia (Kohn and Verhoek-Oftedahl 2011). Older women were found to be victims of verbal abuse more often than their male counterparts.

In Acierno's study, which included a sample of 5,777 respondents aged sixty and older, 5.2 percent of respondents reported financial abuse, 5.1 percent said they'd been neglected, and 4.6 endured emotional abuse (Acierno 2010). The prevalence of physical and sexual abuse was lower at 1.6 and 0.6 percent, respectively (Acierno 2010).

Other studies have focused on the caregivers to the elderly in an attempt to discover the causes of elder abuse. Researchers identified factors that increased the likelihood of caregivers perpetrating abuse against those in their care. Those factors include inexperience, having other demands such as jobs (for those who weren't professionally employed as caregivers), caring for children, living full-time with the dependent elder, and experiencing high stress, isolation, and lack of support (Kohn and Verhoek-Oftedahl 2011).

A history of depression in the caregiver was also found to increase the likelihood of elder abuse. Neglect was more likely when care was provided by paid caregivers. Many of the caregivers who physically abused elders were themselves abused—in many cases, when they were children. Family members with some sort of dependency on the elder in their care were more likely to physically abuse that elder. For example, an adult child caring for an elderly parent while at the same time depending on some form of income from that parent, is considered more likely to perpetrate physical abuse (Kohn and Verhoek-Oftedahl 2011).

A survey in Florida found that 60.1 percent of caregivers reported verbal aggression as a style of conflict resolution. Paid caregivers in nursing homes were at a high risk of becoming abusive if they had low job satisfaction, treated the elderly like children, or felt burnt out (Kohn and Verhoek-Oftedahl 2011). Caregivers who tended to be verbally abusive were found to have had less training, lower education, and higher likelihood of depression or other psychiatric disorders. Based on the results of these studies, many housing facilities for seniors have increased their screening procedures for caregiver applicants.

Big Picture: World War II Veterans



Figure 13.4.1: military service can become a lasting source of identity, recognition, collective memory, and institutional belonging (World War II Veterans by Defense Visual Information Distribution Service via Picryl is licensed under PDM 1.0)

World War II was a defining event in recent human history, and set the stage for America to become an economic and military superpower. Over 16 million Americans served in the war—an enormous amount on any scale, but especially significant considering that the U.S. had almost 200 million fewer people than it does today. That sizable and significant group is aging. Many are in their eighties and nineties, and many others have already passed on. Of the 16 million, less than 300,000 are alive. Data suggest that by 2036, there will be no living veterans of WWII (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs).

When these veterans came home from the war and ended their service, little was known about posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These heroes did not receive the mental and physical healthcare that could have helped them. As a result, many of them, now in old age, are dealing with the effects of PTSD. Research suggests a high percentage of World War II veterans are plagued by flashback memories and isolation, and that many "self-medicate" with alcohol.

Research has found that veterans of any conflict are more than twice as likely as nonveterans to commit suicide, with rates highest among the oldest veterans. Reports show that WWII-era veterans are four times as likely to take their own lives as people of the same age with no military service (Glantz 2010).

In May 2004, the National World War II Memorial in Washington, DC, was completed and dedicated to honor those who served during the conflict. Dr. Earl Morse, a physician and retired Air Force captain, treated many WWII veterans. He encouraged them to visit the memorial, knowing it could help them heal. Many WWII veterans expressed interest in seeing the memorial. Unfortunately, many were in their eighties and were neither physically nor financially able to travel on their own. Dr. Morse arranged to personally escort some of the veterans and enlisted volunteer pilots who would pay for the flights themselves. He also raised money, insisting the veterans pay nothing. By the end of 2005, 137 veterans, many using wheelchairs, had made the trip. The Honor Flight Network was up and running.

As of 2017, the Honor Flight Network had flown more than 200,000 U.S. veterans of World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War to Washington. The round-trip flights leave for day-long trips from over 140 airports in thirty states, staffed by volunteers who care for the needs of the elderly travelers (Honor Flight Network 2021).

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13.5: Theoretical Perspectives on Aging

Functionalism

What roles do individual senior citizens play in your life? How do you relate to and interact with older people? What role do they play in neighborhoods and communities, in cities and in states? Sociologists are interested in exploring the answers to questions such as these through three different perspectives: functionalism, symbolic interactionism, and conflict theory.

Functionalists analyze how the parts of society work together. Functionalists gauge how society's parts are working together to keep society running smoothly. How does this perspective address aging? The elderly, as a group, are one of society's vital parts.

Functionalists find that people with better resources who stay active in other roles adjust better to old age (Crosnoe and Elder 2002). Three social theories within the functional perspective were developed to explain how older people might deal with later-life experiences.

The earliest gerontological theory in the functionalist perspective is disengagement theory, which suggests that withdrawing from society and social relationships is a natural part of growing old. There are several main points to the theory. First, because everyone expects to die one day, and because we experience physical and mental decline as we approach death, it is natural to withdraw from individuals and society. Second, as the elderly withdraw, they receive less reinforcement to conform to social norms. Therefore, this withdrawal allows a greater freedom from the pressure to conform. Finally, social withdrawal is gendered, meaning it is experienced differently by men and women. Because men focus on work and women focus on marriage and family, when they withdraw they will be unhappy and directionless until they adopt a role to replace their accustomed role that is compatible with the disengaged state (Cummings and Henry 1961).

The suggestion that old age was a distinct state in the life course, characterized by a distinct change in roles and activities, was groundbreaking when it was first introduced. However, the theory is no longer accepted in its classic form. Criticisms typically focus on the application of the idea that seniors universally naturally withdraw from society as they age, and that it does not allow for a wide variation in the way people experience aging (Hothschild 1975).

The social withdrawal that Cummings and Henry recognized (1961), and its notion that elderly people need to find replacement roles for those they've lost, is addressed anew in activity theory. According to this theory, activity levels and social involvement are key to this process, and key to happiness (Havinghurst 1961; Neugarten 1964; Havinghurst, Neugarten, and Tobin 1968). According to this theory, the more active and involved an elderly person is, the happier he or she will be. Critics of this theory point out that access to social opportunities and activity are not equally available to all. Moreover, not everyone finds fulfillment in the presence of others or participation in activities. Reformulations of this theory suggest that participation in informal activities, such as hobbies, are what most affect later life satisfaction (Lemon, Bengtson, and Petersen 1972).

According to continuity theory**,** the elderly make specific choices to maintain consistency in internal (personality structure, beliefs) and external structures (relationships), remaining active and involved throughout their elder years. This is an attempt to maintain social equilibrium and stability by making future decisions on the basis of already developed social roles (Atchley 1971; Atchley 1989). One criticism of this theory is its emphasis on so-called "normal" aging, which marginalizes those with chronic diseases such as Alzheimer's.

Sociology in the Real World: The Graying of American Prisons

The COVID-19 pandemic placed a particular burden on prison populations and government officials who manage them. Many people unfamiliar with American prisons may have assumed this concern was due to the obvious: Prisons are by definition confined spaces, where space and freedom are in short supply. Incarcerated people often share cells, restrooms, and other facilities. These are all contributing factors to the grave concerns about prisoners and COVID. But they were all exacerbated by the one overall comorbidity for the coronavirus: age.

Just like elderly people outside of prison generally suffered the most from the disease, the same age group was highly susceptible in prison. Perhaps the most dire circumstance is the size and percentage of that age group in prison. By the time the pandemic hit, the population of people over 50 in American prisons was, for the first time in history, larger than every other age group, and nearly 200,000 people in correctional facilities were 55 and over. That portion of the prison population tripled from 2000 to 2016 (Li 2020).

Two factors contribute significantly to this country's aging prison population. One is the tough-on-crime reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, when mandatory minimum sentencing and "three strikes" policies sent many people to jail for thirty years to life, even when the third strike was a relatively minor offense. Many of today's elderly prisoners are those who were incarcerated thirty years ago for life sentences. The other factor influencing today's aging prison population is the aging of the overall population. As discussed in the section on aging in the United States, the percentage of people over sixty-five years old is increasing each year due to rising life expectancies and the aging of the Baby Boom generation.

So why should it matter that the elderly prison population is growing so swiftly? As discussed in the section on the process of aging, growing older is accompanied by a host of physical problems, like failing vision, mobility, and hearing. Chronic illnesses like heart disease, arthritis, and diabetes also become increasingly common as people age, whether they are in prison or not. In many cases, elderly prisoners are physically incapable of committing a violent—or possibly any—crime. Is it ethical to keep them locked up for the short remainder of their lives? And is it practical?

Aging inmates require far more healthcare, which places massive burdens on prison budgets and expenditures. When the healthcare costs are considered, some officials estimate the costs of incarcerating an aging person to be three times higher than to keep a younger person in prison. On the flip side, reducing prison sentences in Maryland saved an estimated $185 million over five years. When considering that many of these elderly people have served the majority of their sentence and generally pose a lower risk to society, many people in the corrections system itself advocate for releasing them early (Reese 2019).

Conflict Perspective

Theorists working the conflict perspective view society as inherently unstable, an institution that privileges the powerful wealthy few while marginalizing everyone else. According to the guiding principle of conflict theory, social groups compete with other groups for power and scarce resources. Applied to society's aging population, the principle means that the elderly struggle with other groups—for example, younger society members—to retain a certain share of resources. At some point, this competition may become conflict.

For example, some people complain that the elderly get more than their fair share of society's resources. In hard economic times, there is great concern about the huge costs of Social Security and Medicare. One of every four tax dollars, or about 28 percent, is spent on these two programs. In 1950, the federal government paid $781 million in Social Security payments. Now, the payments are 870 times higher. In 2008, the government paid $296 billion (Statistical Abstract 2011). The medical bills of the nation's elderly population are rising dramatically. While there is more care available to certain segments of the senior community, it must be noted that the financial resources available to the aging can vary tremendously by race, social class, and gender.

There are three classic theories of aging within the conflict perspective. Modernization theory (Cowgill and Holmes 1972) suggests that the primary cause of the elderly losing power and influence in society are the parallel forces of industrialization and modernization. As societies modernize, the status of elders decreases, and they are increasingly likely to experience social exclusion. Before industrialization, strong social norms bound the younger generation to care for the older. Now, as societies industrialize, the nuclear family replaces the extended family. Societies become increasingly individualistic, and norms regarding the care of older people change. In an individualistic industrial society, caring for an elderly relative is seen as a voluntary obligation that may be ignored without fear of social censure.

The central reasoning of modernization theory is that as long as the extended family is the standard family, as in preindustrial economies, elders will have a place in society and a clearly defined role. As societies modernize, the elderly, unable to work outside of the home, have less to offer economically and are seen as a burden. This model may be applied to both the developed and the developing world, and it suggests that as people age they will be abandoned and lose much of their familial support since they become a nonproductive economic burden.

Another theory in the conflict perspective is age stratification theory (Riley, Johnson, and Foner 1972). Though it may seem obvious now, with our awareness of ageism, age stratification theorists were the first to suggest that members of society might

be stratified by age, just as they are stratified by race, class, and gender. Because age serves as a basis of social control, different age groups will have varying access to social resources such as political and economic power. Within societies, behavioral age norms, including norms about roles and appropriate behavior, dictate what members of age cohorts may reasonably do. For example, it might be considered deviant for an elderly woman to wear a bikini because it violates norms denying the sexuality of older females. These norms are specific to each age strata, developing from culturally based ideas about how people should "act their age."

Thanks to amendments to the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA), which drew attention to some of the ways in which our society is stratified based on age, U.S. workers no longer must retire upon reaching a specified age. As first passed in 1967, the ADEA provided protection against a broad range of age discrimination and specifically addressed termination of employment due to age, age specific layoffs, advertised positions specifying age limits or preferences, and denial of healthcare benefits to those over sixty-five years old (U.S. EEOC 2012).

Age stratification theory has been criticized for its broadness and its inattention to other sources of stratification and how these might intersect with age. For example, one might argue that an older white male occupies a more powerful role, and is far less limited in his choices, compared to an older white female based on his historical access to political and economic power.

Finally, exchange theory (Dowd 1975), a rational choice approach, suggests we experience an increased dependence as we age and must increasingly submit to the will of others because we have fewer ways of compelling others to submit to us. Indeed, inasmuch as relationships are based on mutual exchanges, as the elderly become less able to exchange resources, they will see their social circles diminish. In this model, the only means to avoid being discarded is to engage in resource management, like maintaining a large inheritance or participating in social exchange systems via child care. In fact, the theory may depend too much on the assumption that individuals are calculating. It is often criticized for affording too much emphasis to material exchange and devaluing nonmaterial assets such as love and friendship.

Symbolic Interactionism

Generally, theories within the symbolic interactionist perspective focus on how society is created through the day-to-day interaction of individuals, as well as the way people perceive themselves and others based on cultural symbols. This microanalytic perspective assumes that if people develop a sense of identity through their social interactions, their sense of self is dependent on those interactions. A woman whose main interactions with society make her feel old and unattractive may lose her sense of self. But a woman whose interactions make her feel valued and important will have a stronger sense of self and a happier life.

Symbolic interactionists stress that the changes associated with old age, in and of themselves, have no inherent meaning. Nothing in the nature of aging creates any particular, defined set of attitudes. Rather, attitudes toward the elderly are rooted in society.

One microanalytical theory is Rose's (1962) subculture of aging theory, which focuses on the shared community created by the elderly when they are excluded (due to age), voluntarily or involuntarily, from participating in other groups. This theory suggests that elders will disengage from society and develop new patterns of interaction with peers who share common backgrounds and interests. For example, a group consciousness may develop within such groups as AARP around issues specific to the elderly like the Medicare "doughnut hole," focused on creating social and political pressure to fix those issues. Whether brought together by social or political interests, or even geographic regions, elders may find a strong sense of community with their new group.

Another theory within the symbolic interaction perspective is selective optimization with compensation theory. Baltes and Baltes (1990) based their theory on the idea that successful personal development throughout the life course and subsequent mastery of the challenges associated with everyday life are based on the components of selection, optimization, and compensation. Though this happens at all stages in the life course, in the field of gerontology, researchers focus attention on balancing the losses associated with aging with the gains stemming from the same. Here, aging is a process and not an outcome, and the goals (compensation) are specific to the individual.

According to this theory, our energy diminishes as we age, and we select (selection) personal goals to get the most (optimize) for the effort we put into activities, in this way making up for (compensation) the loss of a wider range of goals and activities. In this theory, the physical decline postulated by disengagement theory may result in more dependence, but that is not necessarily negative, as it allows aging individuals to save their energy for the most meaningful activities. For example, a professor who values teaching sociology may participate in a phased retirement, never entirely giving up teaching, but acknowledging personal physical limitations that allow teaching only one or two classes per year.

Swedish sociologist Lars Tornstam developed a symbolic interactionist theory called gerotranscendence: the idea that as people

age, they transcend the limited views of life they held in earlier times. Tornstam believes that throughout the aging process, the elderly become less self-centered and feel more peaceful and connected to the natural world. Wisdom comes to the elderly, Tornstam's theory states, and as the elderly tolerate ambiguities and seeming contradictions, they let go of conflict and develop softer views of right and wrong (Tornstam 2005).

Tornstam does not claim that everyone will achieve wisdom in aging. Some elderly people might still grow bitter and isolated, feel ignored and left out, or become grumpy and judgmental. Symbolic interactionists believe that, just as in other phases of life, individuals must struggle to overcome their own failings and turn them into strengths.

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13.6: Key Terms

Glossary

- ageism | discrimination based on age
- baby Boomers | people in the United States born between approximately 1946 and 1964
- centenarians | people 100 years old or older
- cohort | a group of people who share a statistical or demographic trait
- continuity theory | a theory which states that the elderly make specific choices to maintain consistency in internal (personality structure, beliefs) and external structures (relationships), remaining active and involved throughout their elder years
- dependency ratio | the number of nonproductive citizens (young, disabled, elderly) to productive working citizens
- disengagement theory | a theory which suggests that withdrawing from society and social relationships is a natural part of growing old
- elder abuse | the act of a caretaker intentionally depriving an older person of care or harming the person in their charge
- exchange theory | a theory which suggests that we experience an increased dependence as we age and must increasingly submit to the will of others, because we have fewer ways of compelling others to submit to us
- filial piety | deference and respect to one's parents and ancestors in all things
- geriatrics | a medical specialty focusing on the elderly
- gerontocracy | a type of social structure wherein the power is held by a society's oldest members
- gerontology | a field of science that seeks to understand the process of aging and the challenges encountered as seniors grow older
- gerotranscendence | the idea that as people age, they transcend limited views of life they held in earlier times
- grief | a psychological, emotional, and social response to the feelings of loss that accompanies death or a similar event
- hospice | healthcare that treats terminally ill people by providing comfort during the dying process
- life course | the period from birth to death, including a sequence of predictable life events
- life expectancy | the number of years a newborn is expected to live
- modernization theory | a theory which suggests that the primary cause of the elderly losing power and influence in society are the parallel forces of industrialization and modernization
- physician-assisted suicide | the voluntary use of lethal medication provided by a medical doctor to end one's life
- primary aging | biological factors such as molecular and cellular changes
- secondary aging | aging that occurs due to controllable factors like exercise and diet
- selective optimization with compensation theory | a theory based on the idea that successful personal development throughout the life course and subsequent mastery of the challenges associated with everyday life are based on the components of selection, optimization, and compensation
- senescence | the aging process, including biological, intellectual, emotional, social, and spiritual changes
- social gerontology | a specialized field of gerontology that examines the social (and sociological) aspects of aging
- subculture of aging theory | a theory that focuses on the shared community created by the elderly when they are excluded (due to age), voluntarily or involuntarily, from participating in other groups
- supercentenarians | people 110 of age or older
- thanatology | the systematic study of death and dying

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13.7: Short Answer

Critical Thinking Questions

1. Baby Boomers have been called the “Me Generation.” Do you know any baby Boomers? In what way do they exemplify their generation?
2. What social issues involve age disaggregation (breakdowns into groups) of a population? What kind of sociological studies would consider age an important factor?
3. Conduct a mini-census by counting the members of your extended family, and emphasize age. Try to include three or four generations, if possible. Create a table and include total population plus percentages of each generation. Next, begin to analyze age patterns in your family. What issues are important and specific to each group? What trends can you predict about your own family over the next ten years based on this census? For example, how will family members’ needs and interests and relationships change the family dynamic?
4. Test Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s five stages of grief. Think of someone or something you have lost. You might consider the loss of a relationship, possession, or aspect of your self-identity. For example, perhaps you dissolved a childhood friendship, sold your car, or got a bad haircut. For even a small loss, did you experience all five stages of grief? If so, how did the expression of each stage manifest? Did the process happen slowly or rapidly? Did the stages occur out of order? Did you reach acceptance? Try to recall the experience and analyze your own response to loss. Does your experience facilitate your empathizing with the elderly?
5. What do you think it will be like to be ten, twenty, and fifty years older than you are now? What facts are your assumptions based on? Are any of your assumptions about getting older false? What kind of sociological study could you establish to test your assumptions?
6. What is your relationship to aging and to time? Look back on your own life. How much and in what ways did you change in ten years and in twenty years? Does a decade seem like a long time or a short time in a life span? Now apply some of your ideas to the idea of aging. Do you think older people share similar experiences as they age?
7. Make a list of all the biases, generalizations, and stereotypes about elderly people that you have seen or heard. Include everything, no matter how small or seemingly trivial. Try to rate the items on your list. Which statements can be considered myths? Which frequently turn into discrimination?
8. Have you known any person who experienced prejudice or discrimination based on age? Think of someone who has been denied an experience or opportunity simply for being too old. Write the story as a case study.
9. Think of an older person you know well, perhaps a grandparent, other relative, or neighbor. How does this person defy certain stereotypes of aging?
10. Older people suffer discrimination, and often, so do teenagers. Compare the discrimination of the elderly to that of teenagers. What do the groups share in common and how are they different?
11. Remember Madame Jeanne Calment of France was the world's oldest living person until she died at 122 years old? Consider her life experiences from all three sociological points of view. Analyze her situation as if you were a functionalist, a symbolic interactionist, and a conflict theorist.
12. Which lifestyle do you think is healthiest for aging people—activity, continuity, or disengagement theories? What are the pros and cons of each theory? Find examples of real people who illustrate the theories, either from your own experience or your friends’ relationships with older people. Do your examples show positive or negative aspects of the theory they illustrate?

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13.8: Further Research

Additional Learning Resources

- Read the article “A Study of Sexuality and Health among Older Adults in the United States”.
- Veterans who served in the U.S. Armed Forces during various conflicts represent cohorts. Veterans share certain aspects of life in common. To find information on veteran populations and how they are aging, study the information on the website of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.
- Learn more about the Honor Flight Network, the organization offering trips to national war memorials in Washington, DC, at no cost to the veterans.
- New Dynamics of Aging is a website produced by an interdisciplinary team at the University of Sheffield. It is supposedly the largest research program on aging in the United Kingdom to date. In studying the experiences of aging and factors that shape aging, including behaviors, biology, health, culture, history, economics, and technology, researchers are promoting healthy aging and helping dispel stereotypes. Learn more by logging on to its website.

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13.10: Accessible Text Description

Figure 13.1: Roadmap

A horizontal instructional diagram presents three large arrows pointing from left to right. Each arrow contains a colored circle with one guiding question: what, why, and how. A long multicolored arrow along the bottom labels the sequence “A Roadmap for Understanding Aging and the Elderly.”

The first, purple arrow is labeled “The WHAT” and asks, “What is aging and how does it impact society?” The text below explains that this section identifies key concepts related to aging, demographic trends, and the ways an aging population affects major social institutions, including healthcare, education, business, and the family.

The second, green arrow is labeled “The WHY” and asks, “Why is aging an important social issue?” The supporting text explains that this section analyzes cultural attitudes, stereotypes, and media portrayals of older adults, including how these representations contribute to ageism and shape society’s understanding of aging.

The third, blue arrow is labeled “The HOW” and asks, “How can we apply sociological insights to improve the lives of older adults?” The text below explains that this section evaluates sociological theories and the challenges associated with aging to consider how individuals, institutions, and society can promote well-being, inclusion, and dignity in later life.

Overall, the diagram presents a progression from defining aging and examining demographic change, to analyzing ageism and cultural perceptions, and finally to considering how sociological knowledge can inform more equitable and supportive responses to aging.

Figure: 13.4.1: Erikson’s psychosocial development theory

A vertical infographic presents eight stages of Erik Erikson’s psychosocial development theory, arranged from infancy through late adulthood. Each stage appears in a colored horizontal box with a number, an age range, and a central psychosocial conflict. Downward arrows connect the stages to show progression across the life course.

1. Infancy, ages 0–1: Trust versus mistrust. Infants develop a basic sense of trust when caregivers respond consistently to their needs.
2. Early childhood, ages 1–3: Autonomy versus shame and doubt. Young children begin developing independence and confidence in their ability to act for themselves.
3. Preschool, ages 3–6: Initiative versus guilt. Children begin initiating activities, making plans, and exploring social roles.
4. School age, ages 6–12: Industry versus inferiority. Children develop skills and competence through schoolwork, responsibilities, and comparison with peers.
5. Adolescence, ages 12–18: Identity versus role confusion. Adolescents explore values, roles, relationships, and possible futures while developing a sense of identity.
6. Young adulthood, ages 18–40: Intimacy versus isolation. Adults seek close, committed relationships and meaningful emotional connections.
7. Middle adulthood, ages 40–65: Generativity versus stagnation. Adults focus on contributing to others and future generations through caregiving, work, mentoring, or community involvement.
8. Late adulthood, ages 65 and older: Integrity versus despair. Older adults reflect on their lives and may develop a sense of fulfillment or regret.

Overall, the diagram presents psychosocial development as a lifelong process in which people encounter different social and emotional challenges at each stage. The age ranges are approximate, and development may vary across individuals and social contexts.

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14: RELIGION

Introduction

Religion is one of the most enduring and influential social institutions in human societies. Across cultures and historical periods, people have used religion to create meaning, explain the unknown, mark important life transitions, build community, and connect everyday life to broader moral and spiritual frameworks. While religion is often understood as a matter of personal belief, sociologists study it as a social phenomenon: a set of beliefs, practices, organizations, rituals, symbols, and communities that shape how people understand themselves and their place in the world.

This chapter examines religion through a sociological lens. Rather than asking whether particular religious beliefs are true or false, sociology asks how religion functions in society, how it shapes social relationships, how religious organizations are structured, and how religion intersects with inequality, culture, politics, and social change. The chapter also introduces major world religions and explores the changing role of religion in the United States, including patterns of religious affiliation, secularization, diversity, and conflict.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- Define religion as a social institution and identify its major social components, including beliefs, rituals, symbols, and organizations.
- Explain how major sociological perspectives—functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism—analyze religion.
- Compare selected world religions in terms of their basic traditions, social organization, and cultural significance.
- Analyze the role of religion in shaping social identity, community, inequality, and social change.
- Evaluate contemporary trends in religion in the United States, including religious diversity, secularization, and the relationship between religion and public life.



Figure 14.1: Religion shapes meaning, identity, community, and social change, and sociology helps explain its varied social effects. (Marx Gomez-Liendo via ChatGPT). Access alternative description for Figure 14.1.

Why, Who, and How

Religion matters sociologically because it influences values, identities, communities, laws, politics, family life, education, and social movements. Sociologists study religion by looking at patterns: how people worship, how religious groups are organized, how religious meanings are created, and how religion can both support social stability and challenge existing power structures. This chapter focuses on individuals, communities, religious organizations, and societies, paying attention to how religion affects people differently depending on factors such as race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, migration, and historical context.

14.1: Case Study and Vignette

14.2: The Sociological Approach to Religion

14.3: World Religions

14.4: Religion in the United States

14.5: Key Terms

14.6: Short Answer

14.7: Further Research

14.8: References

14.9: Accessible Text Descriptions

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14.1: Case Study and Vignette

Studying Religion

Sociologists study religion because religion is a social institution that shapes communities, cultures, identities, conflicts, and everyday behavior. Across human history, societies have developed religious beliefs, rituals, symbols, and practices to explain life, death, suffering, morality, and humanity's place in the universe. Archaeological evidence, such as ceremonial burial sites, ritual objects, and sacred spaces, suggests that religion has been part of human social life since the earliest societies. For sociologists, this raises important questions: Why do people create sacred meanings? How do religious communities form? How does religion influence people's choices, values, relationships, and conflicts?

Émile Durkheim, one of the founding figures of sociology, argued that religion is a system of beliefs and practices related to the sacred—things set apart from ordinary life and treated with special reverence. He described religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things" that brings people together into a moral community (Durkheim, 1915). In this sense, religion includes shared rituals, moral codes, symbols, stories, spaces, and practices that help people understand what is meaningful, proper, forbidden, hopeful, or dangerous.

For example, some people may associate religion with a physical place, such as a church, mosque, synagogue, temple, shrine, or meditation center. Others may think of religion as a practice, such as prayer, confession, fasting, meditation, pilgrimage, or ritual celebration. Still others may experience religion as a guiding concept, such as sin, karma, dharma, salvation, grace, liberation, or compassion. All of these examples show how religion connects beliefs to social life. Religion shapes how people interpret events, respond to uncertainty, organize communities, and define moral responsibility.

A Moment of Misunderstanding

After a major news event involving political violence, a student notices that some classmates begin making negative comments about Islam. One student says, "I just don't understand why that religion is so violent." Another student, who is Muslim, becomes quiet and uncomfortable. The instructor pauses the conversation and asks the class to step back: "Are we talking about a religion practiced by nearly two billion people, or are we talking about the actions of a specific political group using religious language?"

The discussion shifts. Students begin asking different questions: How do stereotypes form? Why are some religions portrayed differently in the media? How do fear and lack of knowledge shape public opinion? How might Muslim students experience school, work, airports, or public spaces differently when Islam is associated with terrorism? The class begins to see that religion is not only about belief. It is also connected to power, representation, identity, prejudice, and social conflict.

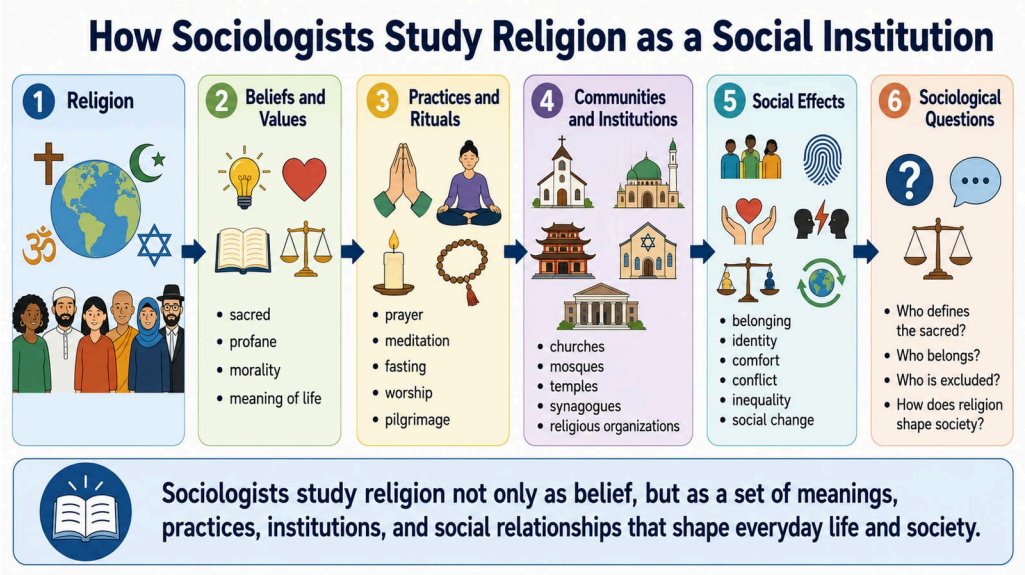


Figure 14.1.1: Religion is a social institution composed of shared meanings, practices, organizations, and relationships that shape identity, belonging, inequality, conflict, and social change (Marx Gomez-Liendo via ChatGPT). Access alternative description for Figure 14.1.1.

A Social Lens

This vignette shows why sociologists study religion as part of broader social life. Religion can bring people comfort, belonging, moral direction, and hope. It can also become a source of fear, conflict, exclusion, or misunderstanding, especially when religious groups are stereotyped or when political conflicts are framed in religious terms. After the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and during the rise of ISIS, for example, many educators, religious leaders, journalists, and community organizations worked to challenge anti-Muslim stereotypes and promote religious literacy. A sociological approach helps us distinguish between a religion, the diverse people who practice it, and the political or extremist movements that may claim to represent it.

Sociologists are especially interested in how people define the sacred and the profane. The sacred refers to things considered holy, special, spiritually significant, or set apart from ordinary life. The profane refers to the everyday, ordinary, or non-sacred aspects of life. These categories vary across societies. A place, object, text, meal, piece of clothing, day of the week, or bodily practice may be sacred in one religious tradition but ordinary in another. By studying these differences, sociologists can better understand how cultures create meaning and how people organize their lives around shared values.

Religion also helps sociologists examine other social issues, including inequality, race, gender, nationalism, migration, education, family life, law, and politics. Sociologists use research methods such as surveys, interviews, historical analysis, observation, and content analysis to study how religion influences people's lives. They may ask: How does religious affiliation shape political attitudes? How do religious communities support immigrants? How do gender roles operate within different religious traditions? How do media representations affect public attitudes toward minority religions? These questions show that religion is not separate from society; it is deeply woven into social life.

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14.2: The Sociological Approach to Religion

A Social Institution

From the Latin *religio* (respect for what is sacred) and *religare* (to bind, in the sense of an obligation), the term religion describes various systems of belief and practice that define what people consider to be sacred or spiritual (Fasching and deChant 2001; Durkheim 1915). Throughout history, and in societies across the world, leaders have used religious narratives, symbols, and traditions in an attempt to give more meaning to life and understand the universe. Some form of religion is found in every known culture, and it is usually practiced in a public way by a group. The practice of religion can include feasts and festivals, intercession with God or gods, marriage and funeral services, music and art, meditation or initiation, sacrifice or service, and other aspects of culture.

While some people think of religion as something individual because religious beliefs can be highly personal, religion is also a social institution. Social scientists recognize that religion exists as an organized and integrated set of beliefs, behaviors, and norms centered on basic social needs and values. Moreover, religion is a cultural universal found in all social groups. For instance, in every culture, funeral rites are practiced in some way, although these customs vary between cultures and within religious affiliations. Despite differences, there are common elements in a ceremony marking a person's death, such as announcement of the death, care of the deceased, disposition, and ceremony or ritual. These universals, and the differences in the way societies and individuals experience religion, provide rich material for sociological study.

In studying religion, sociologists distinguish between what they term the experience, beliefs, and rituals of a religion. Religious experience refers to the conviction or sensation that we are connected to "the divine." This type of communion might be experienced when people are pray or meditate. Religious beliefs are specific ideas members of a particular faith hold to be true, such as that Jesus Christ was the son of God, or that reincarnation exists. Another illustration of religious beliefs is the creation stories we find in different religions. Religious rituals are behaviors or practices that are either required or expected of the members of a particular group, such as bar mitzvah or confession of sins (Barkan and Greenwood 2003).

The History of Religion as a Sociological Concept

In the wake of nineteenth century European industrialization and secularization, three social theorists attempted to examine the relationship between religion and society: Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Karl Marx. They are among the founding thinkers of modern sociology.

As stated earlier, French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) defined religion as a "unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things" (1915). To him, sacred meant extraordinary—something that inspired wonder and that seemed connected to the concept of "the divine." Durkheim argued that "religion happens" in society when there is a separation between the profane (ordinary life) and the sacred (1915). A rock, for example, isn't sacred or profane as it exists. But if someone makes it into a headstone, or another person uses it for landscaping, it takes on different meanings—one sacred, one profane.

Durkheim is generally considered the first sociologist who analyzed religion in terms of its societal impact. Above all, he believed religion is about community: It binds people together (social cohesion), promotes behavior consistency (social control), and offers strength during life's transitions and tragedies (meaning and purpose). By applying the methods of natural science to the study of society, Durkheim held that the source of religion and morality is the collective mind-set of society and that the cohesive bonds of social order result from common values in a society. He contended that these values need to be maintained to maintain social stability.

But what would happen if religion were to decline? This question led Durkheim to posit that religion is not just a social creation but something that represents the power of society: When people celebrate sacred things, they celebrate the power of their society. By this reasoning, even if traditional religion disappeared, society wouldn't necessarily dissolve.

Whereas Durkheim saw religion as a source of social stability, German sociologist and political economist Max Weber (1864–1920) believed it was a precipitator of social change. He examined the effects of religion on economic activities and noticed that heavily Protestant societies—such as those in the Netherlands, England, Scotland, and Germany—were the most highly developed capitalist societies and that their most successful business leaders were Protestant. In his writing *The*

Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1905), he contends that the Protestant work ethic influenced the development of capitalism. Weber noted that certain kinds of Protestantism supported the pursuit of material gain by motivating believers to work hard, be successful, and not spend their profits on frivolous things. (The modern use of "work ethic" comes directly from Weber's Protestant ethic, although it has now lost its religious connotations.)

Big Picture: The Protestant Work Ethic in the Information Age

Max Weber (1904) posited that, in Europe in his time, Protestants were more likely than Catholics to value capitalist ideology, and believed in hard work and savings. He showed that Protestant values directly influenced the rise of capitalism and helped create the modern world order. Weber thought the emphasis on community in Catholicism versus the emphasis on individual achievement in Protestantism made a difference. His century-old claim that the Protestant work ethic led to the development of capitalism has been one of the most important and controversial topics in the sociology of religion. In fact, scholars have found little merit to his contention when applied to modern society (Greeley 1989).

What does the concept of work ethic mean today? The work ethic in the information age has been affected by tremendous cultural and social change, just as workers in the mid- to late nineteenth century were influenced by the wake of the Industrial Revolution. Factory jobs tend to be simple, uninvolved, and require very little thinking or decision making on the part of the worker. Today, the work ethic of the modern workforce has been transformed, as more thinking and decision making is required. Employees also seek autonomy and fulfillment in their jobs, not just wages. Higher levels of education have become necessary, as well as people management skills and access to the most recent information on any given topic. The information age has increased the rapid pace of production expected in many jobs.

On the other hand, the "McDonaldization" of the United States (Hightower 1975; Ritzer 1993), in which many service industries, such as the fast-food industry, have established routinized roles and tasks, has resulted in a "discouragement" of the work ethic. In jobs where roles and tasks are highly prescribed, workers have no opportunity to make decisions. They are considered replaceable commodities as opposed to valued employees. During times of recession, these service jobs may be the only employment possible for younger individuals or those with low-level skills. The pay, working conditions, and robotic nature of the tasks dehumanizes the workers and strips them of incentives for doing quality work.

Working hard also doesn't seem to have any relationship with Catholic or Protestant religious beliefs anymore, or those of other religions; information age workers expect talent and hard work to be rewarded by material gain and career advancement.

German philosopher, journalist, and revolutionary socialist Karl Marx (1818–1883) also studied the social impact of religion. He believed religion reflects the social stratification of society and that it maintains inequality and perpetuates the status quo. For him, religion was just an extension of working-class (proletariat) economic suffering. He famously argued that religion "is the opium of the people" (1844).

For Durkheim, Weber, and Marx, who were reacting to the great social and economic upheaval of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century in Europe, religion was an integral part of society. For Durkheim, religion was a force for cohesion that helped bind the members of society to the group, while Weber believed religion could be understood as something separate from society. Marx considered religion inseparable from the economy and the worker. Religion could not be understood apart from the capitalist society that perpetuated inequality. Despite their different views, these social theorists all believed in the centrality of religion to society.

Theoretical Perspectives on Religion

Modern-day sociologists often apply one of three major theoretical perspectives. These views offer different lenses through which to study and understand society: functionalism, symbolic interactionism, and conflict theory. Let's explore how scholars applying these paradigms understand religion.

Functionalism

Functionalists contend that religion serves several functions in society. Religion, in fact, depends on society for its existence, value, and significance, and vice versa. From this perspective, religion serves several purposes, like providing answers to spiritual mysteries, offering emotional comfort, and creating a place for social interaction and social control.

In providing answers, religion defines the spiritual world and spiritual forces, including divine beings. For example, it helps answer questions like, “How was the world created?” “Why do we suffer?” “Is there a plan for our lives?” and “Is there an afterlife?” As another function, religion provides emotional comfort in times of crisis. Religious rituals bring order, comfort, and organization through shared familiar symbols and patterns of behavior.

One of the most important functions of religion, from a functionalist perspective, is the opportunities it creates for social interaction and the formation of groups. It provides social support and social networking and offers a place to meet others who hold similar values and a place to seek help (spiritual and material) in times of need. Moreover, it can foster group cohesion and integration. Because religion can be central to many people’s concept of themselves, sometimes there is an “in-group” versus “out-group” feeling toward other religions in our society or within a particular practice. On an extreme level, the Inquisition, the Salem witch trials, and anti-Semitism are all examples of this dynamic. Finally, religion promotes social control: It reinforces social norms such as appropriate styles of dress, following the law, and regulating sexual behavior.

Conflict Theory

Conflict theorists view religion as an institution that helps maintain patterns of social inequality. For example, the Vatican has a tremendous amount of wealth, while the average income of Catholic parishioners is small. According to this perspective, religion has been used to support the “divine right” of oppressive monarchs and to justify unequal social structures, like India’s caste system.

Conflict theorists are critical of the way many religions promote the idea that believers should be satisfied with existing circumstances because they are divinely ordained. This power dynamic has been used by Christian institutions for centuries to keep poor people poor and to teach them that they shouldn’t be concerned with what they lack because their “true” reward (from a religious perspective) will come after death. Conflict theorists also point out that those in power in a religion are often able to dictate practices, rituals, and beliefs through their interpretation of religious texts or via proclaimed direct communication from the divine.

The feminist perspective is a conflict theory view that focuses specifically on gender inequality. In terms of religion, feminist theorists assert that, although women are typically the ones to socialize children into a religion, they have traditionally held very few positions of power within religions. A few religions and religious denominations are more gender equal, but male dominance remains the norm of most.

Sociology in the Real World: Rational Choice Theory: Can Economic Theory Be Applied to Religion?

How do people decide which religion to follow, if any? How does one pick a church or decide which denomination “fits” best? Rational choice theory (RCT) is one way social scientists have attempted to explain these behaviors. The theory proposes that people are self-interested, though not necessarily selfish, and that people make rational choices—choices that can reasonably be expected to maximize positive outcomes while minimizing negative outcomes. Sociologists Roger Finke and Rodney Stark (1988) first considered the use of RCT to explain some aspects of religious behavior, with the assumption that there is a basic human need for religion in terms of providing belief in a supernatural being, a sense of meaning in life, and belief in life after death. Religious explanations of these concepts are presumed to be more satisfactory than scientific explanations, which may help to account for the continuation of strong religious connectedness in countries such as the United States, despite predictions of some competing theories for a great decline in religious affiliation due to modernization and religious pluralism.

Another assumption of RCT is that religious organizations can be viewed in terms of “costs” and “rewards.” Costs are not only monetary requirements, but are also the time, effort, and commitment demands of any particular religious organization. Rewards are the intangible benefits in terms of belief and satisfactory explanations about life, death, and the supernatural, as well as social rewards from membership. RCT proposes that, in a pluralistic society with many religious options, religious organizations will compete for members, and people will choose between different churches or denominations in much the same way they select other consumer goods, balancing costs and rewards in a rational manner. In this framework, RCT also explains the development and decline of churches, denominations, sects, and even cults; this limited part of the very complex RCT theory is the only aspect well supported by research data.

Critics of RCT argue that it doesn’t fit well with human spiritual needs, and many sociologists disagree that the costs and rewards of religion can even be meaningfully measured or that individuals use a rational balancing process regarding religious affiliation. The theory doesn’t address many aspects of religion that individuals may consider essential (such as

faith) and further fails to account for agnostics and atheists who don't seem to have a similar need for religious explanations. Critics also believe this theory overuses economic terminology and structure and point out that terms such as "rational" and "reward" are unacceptably defined by their use; they would argue that the theory is based on faulty logic and lacks external, empirical support. A scientific explanation for *why* something occurs can't reasonably be supported by the fact that it *does* occur. RCT is widely used in economics and to a lesser extent in criminal justice, but the application of RCT in explaining the religious beliefs and behaviors of people and societies is still being debated in sociology today.

Symbolic Interactionism

Rising from the concept that our world is socially constructed, symbolic interactionism studies the symbols and interactions of everyday life. To interactionists, beliefs and experiences are not sacred unless individuals in a society regard them as sacred. The Star of David in Judaism, the cross in Christianity, and the crescent and star in Islam are examples of sacred symbols. Interactionists are interested in what these symbols communicate. Because interactionists study one-on-one, everyday interactions between individuals, a scholar using this approach might ask questions focused on this dynamic. The interaction between religious leaders and practitioners, the role of religion in the ordinary components of everyday life, and the ways people express religious values in social interactions—all might be topics of study to an interactionist.

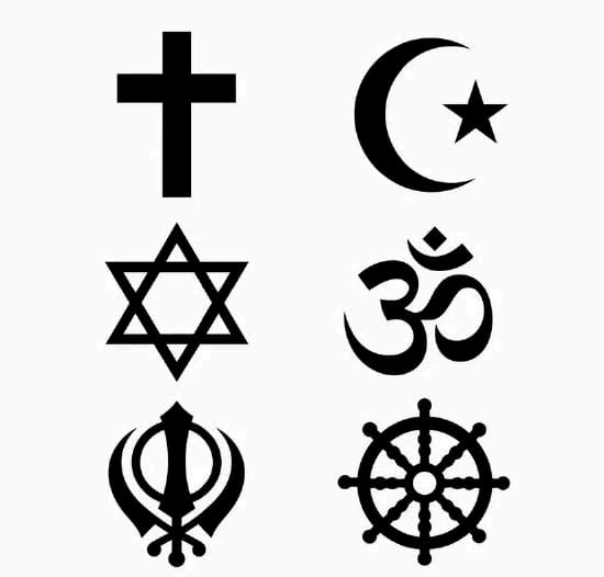


Figure 14.2.1: From left to right, symbols associated with Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Buddhism illustrate the diversity of religious traditions and collective identities. It is important to note that these are not the only religions in the world. (Religion Symbols by Unknown Author via Kuraplan is licensed under CC BY-NC 4.0)

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14.3: World Religions

Types of Religious Organizations

Religions organize themselves—their institutions, practitioners, and structures—in a variety of fashions. For instance, when the Roman Catholic Church emerged, it borrowed many of its organizational principles from the ancient Roman military and turned senators into cardinals, for example. Sociologists use different terms, like ecclesia, denomination, and sect, to define these types of organizations. Scholars are also aware that these definitions are not static. Most religions transition through different organizational phases. For example, Christianity began as a cult, transformed into a sect, and today exists as an ecclesia.

Cults, like sects, are new religious groups. In the United States today this term often carries pejorative connotations. However, almost all religions began as cults and gradually progressed to levels of greater size and organization. The term cult is sometimes used interchangeably with the term new religious movement (NRM). The new term may be an attempt to lessen the negativity that the term 'cult' has amassed.

Controversy exists over whether some groups are cults, perhaps due in part to media sensationalism over groups like polygamous Mormons or the Peoples Temple followers who died at Jonestown, Guyana. Some groups that are controversially labeled as cults today include the Church of Scientology and the Hare Krishna movement.

A sect is a small and relatively new group. Most of the well-known Christian denominations in the United States today began as sects. For example, the Methodists and Baptists protested against their parent Anglican Church in England, just as Henry VIII protested against the Catholic Church by forming the Anglican Church. From "protest" comes the term Protestant.

Occasionally, a sect is a breakaway group that may be in tension with larger society. They sometimes claim to be returning to "the fundamentals" or to contest the veracity of a particular doctrine. When membership in a sect increases over time, it may grow into a denomination. Often a sect begins as an offshoot of a denomination, when a group of members believes they should separate from the larger group.

Some sects do not grow into denominations. Sociologists call these established sects. Established sects, such as the Amish or Jehovah's Witnesses fall halfway between sect and denomination on the ecclesia–cult continuum because they have a mixture of sect-like and denomination-like characteristics.

A denomination is a large, mainstream religious organization, but it does not claim to be official or state sponsored. It is one religion among many. For example, Baptist, African Methodist Episcopal, Catholic, and Seventh-day Adventist are all Christian denominations.

Congregation

The term ecclesia, originally referring to a political assembly of citizens in ancient Athens, Greece, now refers to a congregation. In sociology, the term is used to refer to a religious group that most all members of a society belong to. It is considered a nationally recognized, or official, religion that holds a religious monopoly and is closely allied with state and secular powers. The United States does not have an ecclesia by this standard; in fact, this is the type of religious organization that many of the first colonists came to America to escape.

There are many countries in Europe, Asia, Central and South America, and Africa that are considered to have an official state-church. Most of their citizens share similar beliefs, and the state-church has significant involvement in national institutions, which includes restricting the behavior of those with different belief systems. The state-church of England is the Church of England or the Anglican Church established in the 16th century by King Henry VIII. In Saudi Arabia, Islamic law is enforced, and public display of any other religion is illegal. Using this definition then, it can be said that the major Abrahamic systems of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, are ecclesia; in some regions, they are considered a state-church.

One way to remember these religious organizational terms is to think of cults, sects, denominations, and ecclesia representing a continuum, with increasing influence on society, where cults are least influential and ecclesia are most influential.

Scholars from a variety of disciplines have strived to classify religions. One widely accepted categorization that helps people

understand different belief systems considers what or who people worship (if anything). Using this method of classification, religions might fall into one of these basic categories, as shown in Table 15.1.

Table 14.3.1: One way scholars have categorized religions is by classifying what or who they hold to be divine.

Religious Classification	What/Who Is Divine	Example
Polytheism	Multiple gods	Belief systems of the ancient Greeks and Romans
Monotheism	Single god	Judaism, Islam
Atheism	No deities	Atheism
Animism	Nonhuman beings (animals, plants, natural world)	Indigenous nature worship (Shinto)
Totemism	Human-natural being connection	Ojibwa (Native American) beliefs

Note that some religions may be practiced—or understood—in various categories. For instance, the Christian notion of the Holy Trinity (God, Jesus, Holy Spirit) defies the definition of monotheism, which is a religion based on belief in a single deity, to some scholars. Similarly, many Westerners view the multiple manifestations of Hinduism's godhead as polytheistic, which is a religion based on belief in multiple deities,, while Hindus might describe those manifestations are a monotheistic parallel to the Christian Trinity. Some Japanese practice Shinto, which follows animism, which is a religion that believes in the divinity of nonhuman beings, like animals, plants, and objects of the natural world, while people who practice totemism believe in a divine connection between humans and other natural beings.

It is also important to note that every society also has nonbelievers, such as atheists, who do not believe in a divine being or entity, and agnostics, who hold that ultimate reality (such as God) is unknowable. While typically not an organized group, atheists and agnostics represent a significant portion of the population. It is important to recognize that being a nonbeliever in a divine entity does not mean the individual subscribes to no morality. Indeed, many Nobel Peace Prize winners and other great humanitarians over the centuries would have classified themselves as atheists or agnostics.

The World's Religions and Philosophies

Religions have emerged and developed across the world. Some have been short-lived, while others have persisted and grown. In this section, we will explore seven of the world's major religions.

Hinduism

The oldest religion in the world, Hinduism originated in the Indus River Valley about 4,500 years ago in what is now modern-day northwest India and Pakistan. It arose contemporaneously with ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian cultures. With roughly one billion followers, Hinduism is the third-largest of the world's religions. Hindus believe in a divine power that can manifest as different entities. Three main incarnations—Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva—are sometimes compared to the manifestations of the divine in the Christian Trinity.

Multiple sacred texts, collectively called the Vedas, contain hymns and rituals from ancient India and are mostly written in Sanskrit. Hindus generally believe in a set of principles called dharma, which refer to one's duty in the world that corresponds with "right" actions. Hindus also believe in karma, or the notion that spiritual ramifications of one's actions are balanced cyclically in this life or a future life (reincarnation).

Buddhism

Buddhism was founded by Siddhartha Gautama around 500 B.C.E. Siddhartha was said to have given up a comfortable, upper-class life to follow one of poverty and spiritual devotion. At the age of thirty-five, he famously meditated under a sacred fig tree and vowed not to rise before he achieved enlightenment (*bodhi*). After this experience, he became known as Buddha, or "enlightened one." Followers were drawn to Buddha's teachings and the practice of meditation, and he later established a monastic order.

Buddha's teachings encourage Buddhists to lead a moral life by accepting the four Noble Truths: 1) life is suffering, 2) suffering arises from attachment to desires, 3) suffering ceases when attachment to desires ceases, and 4) freedom from suffering is possible by following the "middle way." The concept of the "middle way" is central to Buddhist thinking, which encourages people

to live in the present and to practice acceptance of others (Smith 1991). Buddhism also tends to deemphasize the role of a godhead, instead stressing the importance of personal responsibility (Craig 2002).

Confucianism

Confucianism was developed by Kung Fu-Tzu (Confucius), who lived in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E. An extraordinary teacher, his lessons—which were about self-discipline, respect for authority and tradition, and *jen* (the kind treatment of every person)—were collected in a book called the *Analects*.

Many consider Confucianism more of a philosophy or social system than a religion because it focuses on sharing wisdom about moral practices but doesn't involve any type of specific worship; nor does it have formal objects. In fact, its teachings were developed in context of problems of social anarchy and a near-complete deterioration of social cohesion. Dissatisfied with the social solutions put forth, Kung Fu-Tzu developed his own model of religious morality to help guide society (Smith 1991).

Taoism

In Taoism, the purpose of life is inner peace and harmony. Tao is usually translated as "way" or "path." The founder of the religion is generally recognized to be a man named Laozi, who lived sometime in the sixth century B.C.E. in China. Taoist beliefs emphasize the virtues of compassion and moderation.

The central concept of *tao* can be understood to describe a spiritual reality, the order of the universe, or the way of modern life in harmony with the former two. The ying-yang symbol and the concept of polar forces are central Taoist ideas (Smith 1991). Some scholars have compared this Chinese tradition to its Confucian counterpart by saying that "whereas Confucianism is concerned with day-to-day rules of conduct, Taoism is concerned with a more spiritual level of being" (Feng and English 1972).

Judaism

After their Exodus from Egypt in the thirteenth century B.C.E., Jews, a nomadic society, became monotheistic, worshipping only one God. The Jews' covenant, or promise of a special relationship with Yahweh (God), is an important element of Judaism. Abraham, a key figure in the foundation of the Jewish faith, is also recognized as a foundation of Christianity and Islam, resulting in the three religions and a few others being referred to as "Abrahamic." The sacred Jewish text is the Torah, which Christians also follow as the first five books of the Bible. Talmud refers to a collection of sacred Jewish oral interpretation of the Torah. Jews emphasize moral behavior and action in this world as opposed to beliefs or personal salvation in the next world. Since Moses was a leader of the Jewish people when he recorded the Ten Commandments, their culture is interwoven with that of other religions and of governments who adhere to "Judeo-Christian values."

Jewish people may identify as an ethnic group as well as a religion (Glauz-Todrank 2014). After numerous invasions and wars in the Jewish homeland, culminating in the destruction of the Second Temple, Jewish people relocated to other parts of the world in what is known as the Jewish Diaspora. Large populations settled in Europe, and eventually migrated to the United States. Though a contemporary Jewish person's ancestors may hail from Eastern Europe, the Middle East, or the Iberian Peninsula, many identify themselves as people of Jewish origin, rather than indicating the nation from which their ancestors emigrated (Chervyakov 2010). Today, Jewish people are the second-largest religious group in the United States (Pew Research Center 2018), and the United States is also home to the second largest population of Jewish people, with Israel having the largest.

Islam

Islam is monotheistic religion, and it follows the teaching of the prophet Muhammad, born in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, in 570 C.E. Muhammad is seen only as a prophet, not as a divine being, and he is believed to be the messenger of Allah (God), who is divine. The followers of Islam are called Muslims.

Islam means "peace" and "submission." The sacred text for Muslims is the Qur'an (or Koran). As with Christianity's Old Testament, many of the Qur'an stories are shared with the Jewish faith. Divisions exist within Islam, but all Muslims are guided by five beliefs or practices, often called "pillars": 1) Allah is the only god, and Muhammad is his prophet, 2) daily prayer, 3) helping those in poverty, 4) fasting as a spiritual practice, and 5) pilgrimage to the holy center of Mecca.

About one-fifth of the world's population identifies as Muslim. While there is a significant concentration of Muslim people in the

Middle East, they span the globe. The most country with the most Muslim people is is Indonesia, an island country in Southeast Asia. In the United States, Muslim people make up the third-largest religious group after Christian and Jewish people, and that population is expected to become larger than the U.S. Jewish population by about 2040 (Pew Research Center 2018).

Christianity

Today the largest religion in the world, Christianity began 2,000 years ago in Palestine, with Jesus of Nazareth, a leader who taught his followers about *caritas* (charity) or treating others as you would like to be treated yourself.

The sacred text for Christians is the Bible. While Jews, Christians, and Muslims share many of same historical religious stories, their beliefs verge. In their shared sacred stories, it is suggested that the son of God—a messiah—will return to save God's followers. While Christians believe that he already appeared in the person of Jesus Christ, Jews and Muslims disagree. While they recognize Christ as an important historical figure, their traditions don't believe he's the son of God, and their faiths see the prophecy of the messiah's arrival as not yet fulfilled.

The largest group of Christians in the United States are members of the Protestant religions, including members of the Baptist, Episcopal, Lutheran, Methodist, Pentecostal, and other churches. However, more people identify as Catholic than any one of those individual Protestant religions (Pew Research Center, 2020).

Different Christian groups have variations among their sacred texts. For instance, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, an established Christian sect, also uses the Book of Mormon, which they believe details other parts of Christian doctrine and Jesus' life that aren't included in the Bible. Similarly, the Catholic Bible includes the Apocrypha, a collection that, while part of the 1611 King James translation, is no longer included in Protestant versions of the Bible. Although monotheistic, many Christians describe their god through three manifestations that they call the Holy Trinity: the father (God), the son (Jesus), and the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is a term Christians often use to describe religious experience, or how they feel the presence of the sacred in their lives. One foundation of Christian doctrine is the Ten Commandments, which decry acts considered sinful, including theft, murder, and adultery.

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14.4: Religion in the United States

Religion and Social Change

Religion has historically been an impetus for and a barrier against social change. With Gutenberg's invention of the printing press, spreading ideas became far easier to share. Many pamphlets for all sorts of interests were printed, but one of Gutenberg's greatest contributions may have been mass producing the Christian Bible. The translation of sacred texts into everyday, nonscholarly language empowered people to shape their religions. However, printers did not just work for the Church. They printed many other texts, including those that were not aligned with Church doctrine. Martin Luther had his complaints against the Church (the 95 Theses) printed in 1517, which allowed them to be distributed throughout Europe. His convictions eventually led to the Protestant Reformation, which revolutionized not only the Church, but much of Western civilization. Disagreements between religious groups and instances of religious persecution have led to wars and genocides. The United States is no stranger to religion as an agent of social change. In fact, many of the United States' early European arrivals were acting largely on religious convictions when they were driven to settle in the United States.

Liberation Theology

Liberation theology began as a movement within the Roman Catholic Church in the 1950s and 1960s in Latin America, and it combines Christian principles with political activism. It uses the church to promote social change via the political arena, and it is most often seen in attempts to reduce or eliminate social injustice, discrimination, and poverty. A list of proponents of this kind of social justice (although some pre-date liberation theory) could include Francis of Assisi, Leo Tolstoy, Martin Luther King Jr., and Desmond Tutu.

Although begun as a moral reaction against the poverty caused by social injustice in that part of the world, today liberation theology is an international movement that encompasses many churches and denominations. Liberation theologians discuss theology from the point of view of the poor and the oppressed, and some interpret the scriptures as a call to action against poverty and injustice. In Europe and North America, feminist theology has emerged from liberation theology as a movement to bring social justice to women.

Social Policy and Debate: Religious Leaders and the Rainbow of Gay Pride

What happens when a religious leader officiates a gay marriage against denomination policies? What about when that same minister defends the action in part by coming out and making her own lesbian relationship known to the church?

In the case of the Reverend Amy DeLong, it meant a church trial. Some leaders in her denomination assert that homosexuality is incompatible with their faith, while others feel this type of discrimination has no place in a modern church (Barrick 2011).

As the LGBTQ community increasingly earns basic civil rights, how will religious communities respond? Many religious groups have traditionally discounted LGBTQ sexualities as "wrong." However, these organizations have moved closer to respecting human rights by, for example, increasingly recognizing women as an equal gender. The Episcopal Church, a Christian sect comprising about 2.3 million people in the United States, has been far more welcoming to LGBTQ people. Progressing from a supportive proclamation in 1976, the Episcopal Church in the USA declared in 2015 that its clergy could preside over and sanction same-sex marriages (HRC 2019). The decision was not without its detractors, and as recently as 2020 an Episcopal bishop (a senior leader) in upstate New York was dismissed for prohibiting same-sex marriages in his diocese. (NBC, 2020). Lutheran and Anglican denominations also support the blessing of same-sex marriages, though they do not necessarily offer them the full recognition of opposite-sex marriages.

Catholic Church leader Pope Francis has been pushing for a more open church, and some Catholic bishops have been advocating for a more "gay-friendly" church (McKenna, 2014). For these and some other policies, Pope Francis has met vocal resistance from Church members and some more conservative bishops, while other Catholic bishops have supported same-sex marriages.

American Jewish denominations generally recognize and support the blessing of same-sex marriages, and Jewish rabbis have been supporters of LGBTQ rights from the Civil Rights era. In other religions, such as Hinduism, which does not have a governing body common to other religions, LGBTQ people are generally welcomed, and the decision to perform same-sex marriages is at the discretion of individual priests.

Megachurches

A megachurch is a Christian church that has a very large congregation averaging more than 2,000 people who attend regular weekly services. As of 2009, the largest megachurch in the United States was in Houston Texas, boasting an average weekly attendance of more than 43,000 (Bogan 2009). Megachurches exist in other parts of the world, especially in South Korea, Brazil, and several African countries, but the rise of the megachurch in the United States is a fairly recent phenomenon that has developed primarily in California, Florida, Georgia, and Texas.

Since 1970 the number of megachurches in this country has grown from about fifty to more than 1,000, most of which are attached to the Southern Baptist denomination (Bogan 2009). Approximately six million people are members of these churches (Bird and Thumma 2011). The architecture of these church buildings often resembles a sport or concert arena. The church may include jumbotrons (large-screen televisual technology usually used in sports arenas to show close-up shots of an event). Worship services feature contemporary music with drums and electric guitars and use state-of-the-art sound equipment. The buildings sometimes include food courts, sports and recreation facilities, and bookstores. Services such as child care and mental health counseling are often offered.

Typically, a single, highly charismatic pastor leads the megachurch; at present, most are male. Some megachurches and their preachers have a huge television presence, and viewers all around the country watch and respond to their shows and fundraising.

Besides size, U.S. megachurches share other traits, including conservative theology, evangelism, use of technology and social networking (Facebook, Twitter, podcasts, blogs), hugely charismatic leaders, few financial struggles, multiple sites, and predominantly white membership. They list their main focuses as youth activities, community service, and study of the Scripture (Hartford Institute for Religion Research b).

Secularization

Historical sociologists Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Karl Marx and psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud anticipated secularization and claimed that the modernization of society would bring about a decrease in the influence of religion. Weber believed membership in distinguished clubs would outpace membership in Protestant sects as a way for people to gain authority or respect.

Conversely, some people suggest secularization is a root cause of many social problems, such as divorce, drug use, and educational downturn. One-time presidential contender Michele Bachmann even linked Hurricane Irene and the 2011 earthquake felt in Washington D.C. to politicians' failure to listen to God (Ward 2011). Similar statements have been made about Hurricane Harvey being the result of Houston's progressivism and for the city electing a lesbian mayor.

While some the United States seems to be increasingly secular, that change is occurring with a concurrent rise in fundamentalism. Compared to other democratic, industrialized countries, the United States is generally perceived to be a fairly religious nation. Whereas 65 percent of U.S. adults in a 2009 Gallup survey said religion was an important part of their daily lives, the numbers were lower in Spain (49 percent), Canada (42 percent), France (30 percent), the United Kingdom (27 percent), and Sweden (17 percent) (Crabtree and Pelham 2009).

Secularization interests social observers because it entails a pattern of change in a fundamental social institution. Much has been made about the rising number of people who identify as having no religious affiliation, which in a 2019 Pew Poll reached a new high of 26 percent, up from 17 percent in 2009 (Pew Research Center, 2020). But the motivations and meanings of having "no religion" vary significantly. A person who is a part of a religion may make a difficult decision to formally leave it based on disagreements with the organization or the tenets of the faith. Other people may simply "drift away," and decide to no longer identify themselves as members of a religion. Some people are not raised as a part of a religion, and therefore make a decision whether or not to join one later in life. And finally, a growing number of people identify as spiritual but not religious (SBNR) and they may pray, meditate, and even celebrate holidays in ways quite similar to people affiliated with formal religions; they may also find spirituality through other avenues that range from nature to martial arts. Sociologists and other social scientists may study these motivations and their impact on aspects of individuals' lives, as well as cultural and group implications.

In addition to the identification and change regarding people's religious affiliation, religious observance is also interesting. Researchers analyze the depth of involvement in formal institutions, like attending worship, and informal or individual practices. As shown in Table 15.2, of the religions surveyed, members of the Jehovah's Witness religion attend religious services more regularly than members of other religions in the United States. A number of Protestant religions also have relatively high attendance. Regular attendance at services may play a role in building social structure and acceptance of new people into the general community.

Table 14.4.1: A survey of U.S. adults asked about regularity of religious service attendance. (Credit: Pew Research Center, 2020)

Religious tradition	At least once a week	Once or twice a month/a few times a year	Seldom/ never
Buddhist	18%	50%	31%
Catholic	39%	40%	20%
Evangelical Protestant	58%	30%	12%
Hindu	18%	60%	21%
Historically Black Protestant	53%	36%	10%
Jehovah's Witness	85%	11%	3%
Jewish	19%	49%	31%
Mainline Protestant	33%	43%	24%
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints	77%	14%	9%
Muslim	45%	31%	22%
Orthodox Christian	31%	54%	15%
Unaffiliated (religious "nones")	4%	24%	72%

Sociology in the Real World: Thank God for that Touchdown: Separation of Church and State

Imagine three public universities with football games scheduled on Saturday. At University A, a group of students in the stands who share the same faith decide to form a circle amid the spectators to pray for the team. For fifteen minutes, people in the circle share their prayers aloud among their group. At University B, the team ahead at halftime decides to join together in prayer, giving thanks and seeking support from God. This lasts for the first ten minutes of halftime on the sidelines of the field while spectators watch. At University C, the game program includes, among its opening moments, two minutes set aside for the team captain to share a prayer of his choosing with the spectators.

In the tricky area of separation of church and state, which of these actions is allowed and which is forbidden? In our three fictional scenarios, the last example is against the law while the first two situations are perfectly acceptable.

In the United States, a nation founded on the principles of religious freedom (many settlers were escaping religious persecution in Europe), how stringently do we adhere to this ideal? How well do we respect people's right to practice any belief system of their choosing? The answer just might depend on what religion you practice.

In 2003, for example, a lawsuit escalated in Alabama regarding a monument to the Ten Commandments in a public building. In response, a poll was conducted by *USA Today*, CNN, and Gallup. Among the findings: 70 percent of people approved of a Christian Ten Commandments monument in public, while only 33 percent approved of a monument to the Islamic Qur'an in the same space. Similarly, survey respondents showed a 64 percent approval of social programs run by Christian organizations, but only 41 percent approved of the same programs run by Muslim groups (Newport 2003).

These statistics suggest that, for most people in the United States, freedom of religion is less important than the religion under discussion. And this is precisely the point made by those who argue for separation of church and state. According to their contention, any state-sanctioned recognition of religion suggests endorsement of one belief system at the expense of all others—contradictory to the idea of freedom of religion.

So what violates separation of church and state and what is acceptable? Myriad lawsuits continue to test the answer. In the case of the three fictional examples above, the issue of spontaneity is key, as is the existence (or lack thereof) of planning on the part of event organizers.

The next time you're at a state event—political, public school, community—and the topic of religion comes up, consider where it falls in this debate.

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14.5: Key Terms

Glossary

- **animism** | the religion that believes in the divinity of nonhuman beings, like animals, plants, and objects of the natural world
- **atheism** | the belief in no deities
- **cults** | religious groups that are small, secretive, and highly controlling of members and have a charismatic leader
- **denomination** | a large, mainstream religion that is not sponsored by the state
- **ecclesia** | a religion that is considered the state religion
- **established sects** | sects that last but do not become denominations
- **liberation theology** | the use of a church to promote social change via the political arena
- **megachurch** | a Christian church that has a very large congregation averaging more than 2,000 people who attend regular weekly services
- **monotheism** | a religion based on belief in a single deity
- **polytheism** | a religion based on belief in multiple deities
- **religion** | a system of beliefs, values, and practices concerning what a person holds to be sacred or spiritually significant
- **religious beliefs** | specific ideas that members of a particular faith hold to be true
- **religious experience** | the conviction or sensation that one is connected to “the divine”
- **religious rituals** | behaviors or practices that are either required for or expected of the members of a particular group
- **sect** | a small, new offshoot of a denomination
- **totemism** | the belief in a divine connection between humans and other natural beings

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14.6: Short Answer

Critical Thinking Questions

1. List some ways that you see religion having social control in the everyday world.
2. What are some sacred items that you're familiar with? Are there some objects, such as cups, candles, or clothing, that would be considered profane in normal settings but are considered sacred in special circumstances or when used in specific ways?
3. Consider a religion that you are familiar with, and discuss some of its beliefs, behaviors, and norms. Discuss how these meet social needs. Then, research a religion that you don't know much about. Explain how its beliefs, behaviors, and norms are like/unlike the other religion.
4. Consider the different types of religious organizations in the United States. What role did ecclesia play in the history of the United States? How have sects tended to change over time? What role do cults have today?
5. What is your understanding of monotheism versus polytheism? How might your ideology be an obstacle to understanding the theism of another religion you're unfamiliar with?
6. In U.S. society, do you believe there is social stratification that correlates with religious beliefs? What about within the practitioners of a given religion? Provide examples to illustrate your point.
7. Do you believe the United States is becoming more secularized or more fundamentalist? Comparing your generation to that of your parents or grandparents, what differences do you see in the relationship between religion and society? What would popular media have you believe is the state of religion in the United States today?

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14.7: Further Research

Additional Learning Resources

- For more discussion on the study of sociology and religion, The Immanent Frame is a forum for the exchange of ideas about religion, secularism, and society by leading thinkers in the social sciences and humanities.
- Some would argue that the Protestant work ethic is still alive and well in the United States.
- PBS's *Frontline* explores "the life of Jesus and the rise of Christianity" in an online in-depth documentary.
- For more insight on Confucianism, read the Analects by Confucius. For a primer on Judaism, read Judaism 101.
- Sorting through the different Christian denominations can be a daunting task. To help clarify these groups, go to this page with information on Christian denominations.
- What is a megachurch and how are they changing the face of religion? Read "Exploring the Megachurch Phenomena: Their Characteristics and Cultural Context".
- Curious about the LGBT religious movement? Visit the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) and Human Rights Campaign (HRC) websites for current news about the growing inclusion of LGBT citizens into their respective religious communities, both in the pews and from the pulpit.
- How do Christians feel about gay marriage? How many Mormons are there in the United States? The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life examines U.S. religious trends.

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14.9: Accessible Text Descriptions

Figure 14.1: Roadmap

A horizontal instructional diagram titled “Religion as a Way of Understanding Meaning, Community, and Social Change.” Beneath the title, three large light-gray arrows point from left to right. Each arrow contains a dark teal circle with white text organized around the guiding questions why, who, and how.

The first circle is labeled “The ‘WHY’” and explains why religion matters. Religion can shape values, identity, communities, laws, politics, family life, education, and social movements.

The second circle is labeled “The ‘WHO’” and identifies who is involved. This includes individuals and groups, religious communities, organizations, and societies. It also notes that religion affects people differently depending on race, class, gender, sexuality, and migration.

The third circle is labeled “The ‘HOW’” and explains how sociologists study religion. They examine patterns of worship, group organization, religious meanings, stability and change, and the relationships between power and resistance.

Overall, the diagram presents religion as both a source of personal and collective meaning and a social institution connected to identity, inequality, political life, community formation, and social transformation.

Figure 14.1.1: Religion as a Social Institution

A six-step flowchart shows how sociologists analyze religion not only as a set of beliefs, but also as a social institution that shapes everyday life and society.

- Step 1, Religion: The first panel introduces religion as a broad social phenomenon. It shows a globe surrounded by religious symbols, including a cross, crescent, Om symbol, and Star of David, along with a diverse group of people. This panel emphasizes that religion is a global and socially diverse institution.
- Step 2, Beliefs and Values: The second panel explains that sociologists study the belief systems and values associated with religion. It lists key concepts such as the sacred, the profane, morality, and the meaning of life. Icons such as a lightbulb, heart, book, and balance scale symbolize ideas, values, knowledge, and ethical frameworks.
- Step 3, Practices and Rituals: The third panel focuses on religious actions and routines. It lists prayer, meditation, fasting, worship, and pilgrimage. The illustrations include praying hands, a meditating person, a candle, and prayer beads, showing that religion is also expressed through repeated practices and rituals.
- Step 4, Communities and Institutions: The fourth panel shows how religion is organized collectively through churches, mosques, temples, synagogues, and religious organizations. Buildings representing different places of worship illustrate that religion operates through institutions and organized communities.
- Step 5, Social Effects: The fifth panel highlights the social consequences of religion. It lists belonging, identity, comfort, conflict, inequality, and social change. The icons suggest that religion can provide support and community, but can also generate division, shape status differences, and contribute to broader social transformation.
- Step 6, Sociological Questions: The sixth panel presents questions sociologists ask when studying religion: Who defines the sacred? Who belongs? Who is excluded? How does religion shape society? These questions show that sociologists are interested in power, boundaries, inclusion, exclusion, and the role of religion in social life.

Arrows connect the panels from left to right, showing a progression from religion as a general institution to its beliefs, practices, organizations, social consequences, and the critical questions sociologists use to study it. A summary banner at the bottom states that sociologists study religion not only as belief, but as a set of meanings, practices, institutions, and social relationships that shape everyday life and society.

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15: EDUCATION

Introduction

This chapter explores how education works as a powerful social institution both in the United States and around the world. You will examine differences in access to educational resources and the idea of universal education as a global goal. The chapter also looks at both the obvious (manifest) and hidden (latent) purposes of schooling in society. Using major sociological perspectives of functionalism, conflict theory, feminism, and interactionism, you will analyze how education can both support and challenge inequality. In addition, you will explore key historical and current issues in education, as well as the impact of efforts to promote educational equality. Finally, you will learn about important U.S. government programs and policies that shape education today.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- Define and describe key concepts in education, including universal access, and the manifest and latent functions of schooling.
- Identify and compare differences in educational resources and opportunities across countries and regions.
- Explain and apply major sociological perspectives (functionalism, conflict theory, feminism, and interactionism) to issues in education.
- Analyze historical and contemporary challenges in education, including inequalities and access to resources.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of educational equality efforts and U.S. government programs in addressing disparities in education.

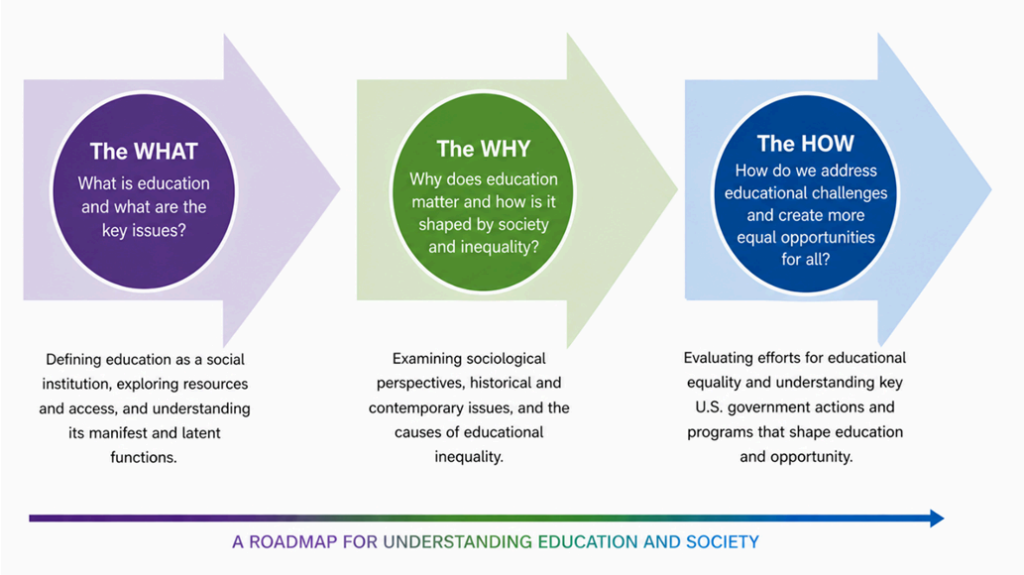


Figure 15.1: Three guiding questions shape a sociological analysis of education: How does education function as a social institution? Why are access and outcomes unequal? And how can policies and programs expand opportunities?. (Jayanti Roy via ChatGPT). Access alternative description for Figure 15.1.

Why, Who, and How

Education can be examined through three guiding questions: what, why, and how. The “what” asks how education functions as a social institution, what purposes schools serve, and how access to teachers, technology, funding, and other resources varies across communities. It also draws attention to education’s manifest functions, such as teaching academic knowledge and preparing students for employment, as well as latent functions, including socialization, relationship formation, and the

transmission of cultural expectations. The “why” explores why education matters and how it is shaped by broader social forces. Sociological theories help explain how schools can promote social integration and mobility while also reproducing inequalities connected to class, race, gender, language, disability, and neighborhood conditions. Historical developments, public policy, and changing labor markets also influence what schools teach, how they are organized, and which students receive the greatest opportunities. The “how” considers how societies respond to educational challenges and attempt to create more equitable outcomes. This includes examining laws, funding systems, desegregation efforts, accessibility measures, student support programs, and debates over curriculum, testing, and school choice. Together, these questions help us understand education not simply as an individual pathway to achievement, but as a major social institution that distributes knowledge, credentials, opportunities, and inequalities across society.

15.1: Case Study/ Vignette

15.2: Education around the World

15.3: Theoretical Perspectives on Education

15.4: Issues in Education

15.5: Key Terms

15.6: Short Answer

15.7: Further Research

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15.1: Case Study/ Vignette

Education For All

As a young girl growing up in Pakistan, Malala Yousafzai believed that education should be available to everyone, including girls. Despite threats and violence from the Taliban, she continued to speak publicly about the importance of attending school. Her courage drew international attention after she survived an assassination attempt in 2012. Today, Malala is recognized worldwide as an advocate for education, human rights, and social change.

Malala Yousafzai

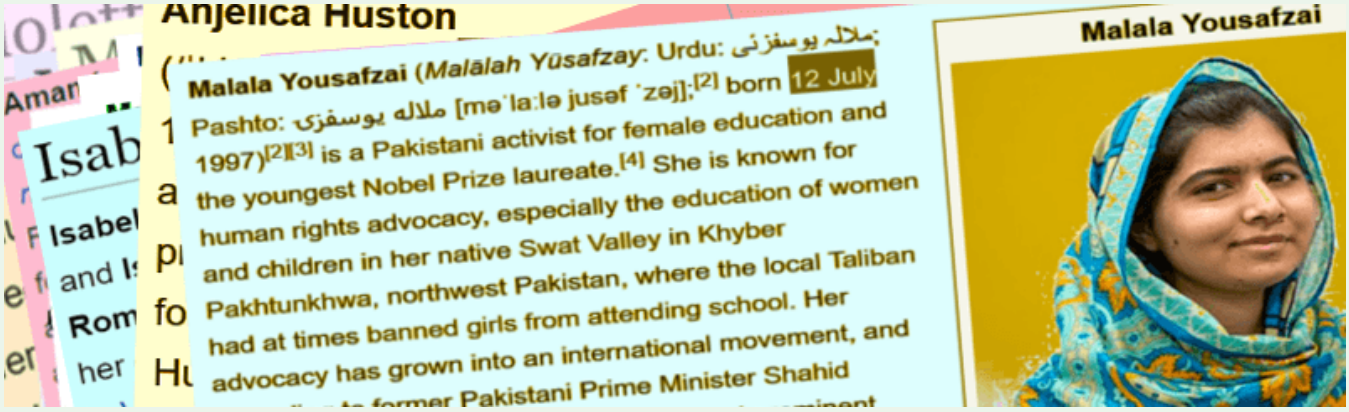


Figure 15.1.1: Malala Yousafzai is a Pakistani education activist and human rights advocate who survived an assassination attempt by the Taliban, helped establish the Malala Fund, and became the youngest person to receive the Nobel Peace Prize for her work advancing girls' access to education. (Woman of the Day by Victuallers via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0). Access alternative description for Figure 15.1.1.

Malala Yousafzai grew up in the Swat Valley of Pakistan, where her father, an educator, owned a school and strongly believed that girls deserved the same educational opportunities as boys. From an early age, Malala developed a love of learning and understood that education could empower individuals to improve not only their own lives but also their communities.

In 2008, when Malala was just 11 years old, the Taliban began taking control of the Swat Valley. The group imposed strict rules that limited many personal freedoms, particularly for women and girls. Television and music were banned, public life became heavily regulated, and girls were prohibited from attending school beyond a certain age. Thousands of girls' schools were forced to close or were destroyed, preventing many young women from receiving an education.

Despite these threats, Malala refused to remain silent. She began speaking publicly about the importance of education and even wrote an anonymous blog describing what life was like under Taliban rule. Her willingness to challenge these restrictions made her an international symbol of resistance, but it also made her a target.

On October 9, 2012, while riding home on a school bus, a masked gunman stopped the vehicle, asked, "Who is Malala?" and shot her in the head. The attack shocked people around the world. Malala was critically injured and flown to England, where she underwent several surgeries and months of rehabilitation before making a remarkable recovery.

Rather than allowing violence to silence her, Malala became an even stronger advocate for girls' education. In 2013, she addressed the United Nations, declaring that every child deserves the opportunity to learn. The following year, at just 17 years old, she became the youngest recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. Through the Malala Fund and her continued activism, she has worked to expand educational opportunities for girls around the world.

From a sociological perspective, Malala's story illustrates how gender inequality can be reinforced through cultural beliefs, political systems, and social institutions. It also demonstrates how individuals and collective action can challenge unequal power structures and inspire social change on a global scale.

> Who benefits from maintaining gender inequality, and who is disadvantaged? In what ways can education serve as a tool for challenging unequal power structures and creating social change?

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15.2: Education around the World

A Social Institution

Education is a social institution through which members of a society are taught basic academic knowledge, learning skills, and cultural norms. Every nation in the world is equipped with some form of education system, though those systems vary greatly. The major factors that affect education systems are the resources and money that are utilized to support those systems in different nations. As you might expect, a country's wealth has much to do with the amount of money spent on education. Countries that do not have such basic amenities as running water are unable to support robust education systems or, in many cases, any formal schooling at all. The result of this worldwide educational inequality is a social concern for many countries, including the United States.

International differences in education systems are not solely a financial issue. The value placed on education, the amount of time devoted to it, and the distribution of education within a country also play a role in those differences. For example, students in South Korea spend 220 days a year in school, compared to the 180 days a year of their United States counterparts (Pellissier 2010).

Then there is the issue of educational distribution and changes within a nation. The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) is administered to samples of fifteen-year-old students worldwide. In 2010, the results showed that students in the United States had fallen from fifteenth to twenty-fifth in the rankings for science and math (National Public Radio 2010). The same program showed that by 2018, U.S. student achievement had remained on the same level for mathematics and science, but had shown improvements in reading. In 2018, about 4,000 students from about 200 high schools in the United States took the PISA test (OECD 2019).

Analysts determined that the nations and city-states at the top of the rankings had several things in common. For one, they had well-established standards for education with clear goals for all students. They also recruited teachers from the top 5 to 10 percent of university graduates each year, which is not the case for most countries (National Public Radio 2010).

Finally, there is the issue of social factors. One analyst from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the organization that created the PISA test, attributed 20 percent of performance differences and the United States' low rankings to differences in social background. Researchers noted that educational resources, including money and quality teachers, are not distributed equitably in the United States. In the top-ranking countries, limited access to resources did not necessarily predict low performance. Analysts also noted what they described as "resilient students," or those students who achieve at a higher level than one might expect given their social background. In Shanghai and Singapore, the proportion of resilient students is about 70 percent. In the United States, it is below 30 percent. These insights suggest that the United States' educational system may be on a descending path that could detrimentally affect the country's economy and its social landscape (National Public Radio 2010).

Big Picture: Education in Finland

With public education in the United States under such intense criticism, why is it that Singapore, South Korea, and especially Finland (which is culturally most similar to us), have such excellent public education? Over the course of thirty years, the country has pulled itself from among the lowest rankings by the Organization of Economic Cooperation (OEDC) to first in 2012, and remains, as of 2014, in the top five. Contrary to the rigid curriculum and long hours demanded of students in South Korea and Singapore, Finnish education often seems paradoxical to outside observers because it appears to break a lot of the rules we take for granted. It is common for children to enter school at seven years old, and children will have more recess and less hours in school than U.S. children—approximately 300 less hours. Their homework load is light when compared to all other industrialized nations (nearly 300 fewer hours per year in elementary school). There are no gifted programs, almost no private schools, and no high-stakes national standardized tests (Laukkanen 2008; LynNell Hancock 2011).

Prioritization is different than in the United States. There is an emphasis on allocating resources for those who need them most, high standards, support for special needs students, qualified teachers taken from the top 10 percent of the nation's graduates and who must earn a Master's degree, evaluation of education, balancing decentralization and centralization.

> "We used to have a system which was really unequal," stated the Finnish Education Chief in an interview. "My parents never had a real possibility to study and have a higher education. We decided in the 1960s that we would provide a free quality education to all. Even universities are free of charge. Equal means that we support everyone and we're not going to waste anyone's skills." As for teachers, "We don't test our teachers or ask them to prove their knowledge. But it's true that we do invest in a lot of additional teacher training even after they become teachers" (Gross-Loh 2014).
>
> Yet over the past decade Finland has consistently performed among the top nations on the PISA. Finland's school children didn't always excel. Finland built its excellent, efficient, and equitable educational system in a few decades from scratch, and the concept guiding almost every educational reform has been equity. The Finnish paradox is that by focusing on the bigger picture for all, Finland has succeeded at fostering the individual potential of most every child.
>
> "We created a school system based on equality to make sure we can develop everyone's potential. Now we can see how well it's been working. Last year the OECD tested adults from twenty-four countries measuring the skill levels of adults aged sixteen to sixty-five on a survey called the PIAAC (Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies), which tests skills in literacy, numeracy, and problem solving in technology-rich environments. Finland scored at or near the top on all measures."

Formal and Informal Education

As already mentioned, education is not solely concerned with the basic academic concepts that a student learns in the classroom. Societies also educate their children, outside of the school system, in matters of everyday practical living. These two types of learning are referred to as formal education and informal education.

Formal education describes the learning of academic facts and concepts through a formal curriculum. Arising from the tutelage of ancient Greek thinkers, centuries of scholars have examined topics through formalized methods of learning. Education in earlier times was only available to the higher classes; they had the means for access to scholarly materials, plus the luxury of leisure time that could be used for learning. The Industrial Revolution and its accompanying social changes made education more accessible to the general population. Many families in the emerging middle class found new opportunities for schooling.

The modern U.S. educational system is the result of this progression. Today, basic education is considered a right and responsibility for all citizens. Expectations of this system focus on formal education, with curricula and testing designed to ensure that students learn the facts and concepts that society believes are basic knowledge.

In contrast, informal education describes learning about cultural values, norms, and expected behaviors by participating in a society. This type of learning occurs both through the formal education system and at home. Our earliest learning experiences generally happen via parents, relatives, and others in our community. Through informal education, we learn important life skills that help us get through the day and interact with each other, including how to dress for different occasions, how to perform regular tasks such as shopping for and preparing food, and how to keep our bodies clean. Many professional tasks and local customs are learned informally, as well.



Figure 15.2.1: Children showing younger siblings how to serve food is an example of informal education. (Slicing by Tim Pierce via flickr is licensed under CC BY 4.0)

Cultural transmission refers to the way people come to learn the values, beliefs, and social norms of their culture. Both informal and formal education include cultural transmission. For example, a student will learn about cultural aspects of modern history in a U.S. History classroom. In that same classroom, the student might learn the cultural norm for asking a classmate out on a date through passing notes and whispered conversations.

Access to Education

Another global concern in education is universal access. This term refers to people's equal ability to participate in an education system. On a world level, access might be more difficult for certain groups based on class or gender (as was the case in the United States earlier in the nation's history, a dynamic we still struggle to overcome). The modern idea of universal access arose in the United States as a concern for people with disabilities. In the United States, one way in which universal education is supported is through federal and state governments covering the cost of free public education. Of course, the way this plays out in terms of school budgets and taxes makes this an often-contested topic on the national, state, and community levels.

Table 15.2.1: How does state spending affect educational opportunities? Total expenditure (incl. capital outlay) (EducationData.org 2025)

Rank	State	Education Spending Per Student
1	New York	$33,626
2	District of Columbia	$37,326
3	Connecticut	$27,055
4	New Jersey	$27, 683
5	Vermont	$32,650
6	Alaska	$22,267
7	Massachusetts	$24,907
8	New Hampshire	$25,229
9	Pennsylvania	$26,827
10	Wyoming	$23,050
11	Rhode Island	$26,054
12	Illinois	$23,253

Rank	State	Education Spending Per Student
13	Delaware	$24,256
14	Hawaii	$26,053
15	Maryland	$22,642
16	Maine	$22,080
17	North Dakota	$21,192
18	Ohio	$20,136
19	Washington	$22,376
20	Minnesota	$21,591
21	California	$24,231
22	Nebraska	$18,618
23	Michigan	$22,392
24	Wisconsin	$19,701
25	Virginia	$19,054
26	Oregon	$20,879
27	Iowa	$17,804
28	Montana	$15,418
29	Kansas	$17,276
30	Louisiana	$16,303
31	West Virginia	$16,210
32	Kentucky	$17,622
33	South Carolina	$18,294
34	Missouri	$14,118
34	Georgia	$18,212
36	Indiana	$17,191
37	Colorado	$19,431
38	Arkansas	$16,400
39	South Dakota	$17,493
40	Alabama	16,400
41	Texas	$17,451
42	New Mexico	$21,451
43	Tennessee	$14,028
44	Nevada	$13,666
45	North Carolina	$14,782
46	Florida	$15,298
47	Mississippi	$14,118
48	Oklahoma	$14,158
49	Arizona	$14,757

Rank	State	Education Spending Per Student
50	Idaho	$12,055
51	Utah	$14,091

A precedent for universal access to education in the United States was set with the 1972 U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia's decision in *Mills v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia*. This case was brought on the behalf of seven school-age children with special needs who argued that the school board was denying their access to free public education. The school board maintained that the children's "exceptional" needs, which included intellectual disabilities, precluded their right to be educated for free in a public school setting. The board argued that the cost of educating these children would be too expensive and that the children would therefore have to remain at home without access to education.

This case was resolved in a hearing without any trial. The judge, Joseph Cornelius Waddy, upheld the students' right to education, finding that they were to be given either public education services or private education paid for by the Washington, D.C., board of education. He noted that "Constitutional rights must be afforded citizens despite the greater expense involved ... the District of Columbia's interest in educating the excluded children clearly must outweigh its interest in preserving its financial resources. ... The inadequacies of the District of Columbia Public School System whether occasioned by insufficient funding or administrative inefficiency, certainly cannot be permitted to bear more heavily on the "exceptional" or handicapped child than on the normal child" (Mills v. Board of Education 1972).

Today, the optimal way to include people with disabilities students in standard classrooms is still being researched and debated. "Inclusion" is a method that involves complete immersion in a standard classroom, whereas "mainstreaming" balances time in a special-needs classroom with standard classroom participation. There continues to be social debate surrounding how to implement the ideal of universal access to education.

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15.3: Theoretical Perspectives on Education

Functionalism

While it is clear that education plays an integral role in individuals' lives as well as society as a whole, sociologists view that role from many diverse points of view. Functionalists believe that education equips people to perform different functional roles in society. Conflict theorists view education as a means of widening the gap in social inequality. Feminist theorists point to evidence that sexism in education continues to prevent women from achieving a full measure of social equality. Symbolic interactionists study the dynamics of the classroom, the interactions between students and teachers, and how those affect everyday life. In this section, you will learn about each of these perspectives.

Functionalists view education as one of the more important social institutions in a society. They contend that education contributes two kinds of functions: manifest (or primary) functions, which are the intended and visible functions of education; and latent (or secondary) functions, which are the hidden and unintended functions.

Manifest Functions

There are several major manifest functions associated with education. The first is socialization. Beginning in preschool and kindergarten, students are taught to practice various societal roles. The French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), who established the academic discipline of sociology, characterized schools as "socialization agencies that teach children how to get along with others and prepare them for adult economic roles" (Durkheim 1898). Indeed, it seems that schools have taken on this responsibility in full.

This socialization also involves learning the rules and norms of the society as a whole. In the early days of compulsory education, students learned the dominant culture. Today, since the culture of the United States is increasingly diverse, students may learn a variety of cultural norms, not only that of the dominant culture.

School systems in the United States also transmit the core values of the nation through manifest functions like social control. One of the roles of schools is to teach students conformity to law and respect for authority. Obviously, such respect, given to teachers and administrators, will help a student navigate the school environment. This function also prepares students to enter the workplace and the world at large, where they will continue to be subject to people who have authority over them. Fulfillment of this function rests primarily with classroom teachers and instructors who are with students all day.



Figure 16.5: The teacher's authority in the classroom is a way in which education fulfills the manifest functions of social control. (LEEHS 18 by US Department of Education via flickr is licensed under CC BY 4.0)

Education also provides one of the major methods used by people for upward social mobility. This function is referred to as social placement. College and graduate schools are viewed as vehicles for moving students closer to the careers that will give them the financial freedom and security they seek. As a result, college students are often more motivated to study areas that they believe will be advantageous on the social ladder. A student might value business courses over a class in Victorian poetry because she sees business class as a stronger vehicle for financial success.

Latent Functions

Education also fulfills latent functions. As you well know, much goes on in a school that has little to do with formal education. For example, you might notice an attractive fellow student when he gives a particularly interesting answer in class—catching up with him and making a date speaks to the latent function of courtship fulfilled by exposure to a peer group in the educational setting.

The educational setting introduces students to social networks that might last for years and can help people find jobs after their schooling is complete. Of course, with social media such as Facebook and LinkedIn, these networks are easier than ever to maintain. Another latent function is the ability to work with others in small groups, a skill that is transferable to a workplace and that might not be learned in a homeschool setting.

The educational system, especially as experienced on university campuses, has traditionally provided a place for students to learn about various social issues. There is ample opportunity for social and political advocacy, as well as the ability to develop tolerance to the many views represented on campus. In 2011, the Occupy Wall Street movement swept across college campuses all over the United States, leading to demonstrations in which diverse groups of students were unified with the purpose of changing the political climate of the country.

Table 15.3.1: Manifest and Latent Functions of Education: According to functionalist theory, education contributes both manifest and latent functions.

Manifest Functions: Openly stated functions with intended goals	Latent Functions: Hidden, unstated functions with sometimes unintended consequences
Socialization	Courtship
Transmission of culture	Social networks
Social control	Group work
Social placement	Creation of generation gap
Cultural innovation	Political and social integration

Functionalists recognize other ways that schools educate and enculturate students. One of the most important U.S. values students in the United States learn is that of individualism—the valuing of the individual over the value of groups or society as a whole. In countries such as Japan and China, where the good of the group is valued over the rights of the individual, students do not learn as they do in the United States that the highest rewards go to the “best” individual in academics as well as athletics. One of the roles of schools in the United States is fostering self-esteem; conversely, schools in Japan focus on fostering social esteem—the honoring of the group over the individual.

In the United States, schools also fill the role of preparing students for competition in life. Obviously, athletics foster a competitive nature, but even in the classroom students compete against one another academically. Schools also fill the role of teaching patriotism. Students recite the Pledge of Allegiance each morning and take history classes where they learn about national heroes and the nation’s past.



Figure 15.3.1: Children recite the Pledge of Allegiance, illustrating how schools and civic ceremonies socialize young people into shared national symbols, rituals, and ideas of citizenship. (Children recite the Pledge of Allegiance by Unknown Author via Picryl is licensed under PDM 1.0)

Another role of schools, according to functionalist theory, is that of sorting, or classifying students based on academic merit or potential. The most capable students are identified early in schools through testing and classroom achievements. Such students are placed in accelerated programs in anticipation of successful college attendance.

Functionalists also contend that school, particularly in recent years, is taking over some of the functions that were traditionally undertaken by family. Society relies on schools to teach about human sexuality as well as basic skills such as budgeting and job applications—topics that at one time were addressed by the family.

Conflict Theory

Conflict theorists do not believe that public schools reduce social inequality. Rather, they believe that the educational system reinforces and perpetuates social inequalities that arise from differences in class, gender, race, and ethnicity. Where functionalists see education as serving a beneficial role, conflict theorists view it more negatively. To them, educational systems preserve the status quo and push people of lower status into obedience.

The fulfillment of one's education is closely linked to social class. Students of low socioeconomic status are generally not afforded the same opportunities as students of higher status, no matter how great their academic ability or desire to learn. Picture a student from a working-class home who wants to do well in school. On a Monday, he's assigned a paper that's due Friday. Monday evening, he has to babysit his younger sister while his divorced mother works. Tuesday and Wednesday, he works stocking shelves after school until 10:00 p.m. By Thursday, the only day he might have available to work on that assignment, he's so exhausted he can't bring himself to start the paper. His mother, though she'd like to help him, is so tired herself that she isn't able to give him the encouragement or support he needs. And since English is her second language, she has difficulty with some of his educational materials. They also lack a computer and printer at home, which most of his classmates have, so they have to rely on the public library or school system for access to technology. As this story shows, many students from working-class families have to contend with helping out at home, contributing financially to the family, poor study environments and a lack of support from their families. This is a difficult match with education systems that adhere to a traditional curriculum that is more easily understood and completed by students of higher social classes.

Such a situation leads to social class reproduction, extensively studied by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. He researched how cultural capital, or cultural knowledge that serves (metaphorically) as currency that helps us navigate a culture, alters the experiences and opportunities available to French students from different social classes. Members of the upper and middle classes have more cultural capital than do families of lower-class status. As a result, the educational system maintains a cycle in which the dominant culture's values are rewarded. Instruction and tests cater to the dominant culture and leave others struggling to identify with values and competencies outside their social class. For example, there has been a great deal of discussion over what standardized tests such as the SAT truly measure. Many argue that the tests group students by cultural ability rather than by

natural intelligence.

The cycle of rewarding those who possess cultural capital is found in formal educational curricula as well as in the hidden curriculum, which refers to the type of nonacademic knowledge that students learn through informal learning and cultural transmission. This hidden curriculum reinforces the positions of those with higher cultural capital and serves to bestow status unequally.

Conflict theorists point to tracking, a formalized sorting system that places students on "tracks" (advanced versus low achievers) that perpetuate inequalities. While educators may believe that students do better in tracked classes because they are with students of similar ability and may have access to more individual attention from teachers, conflict theorists feel that tracking leads to self-fulfilling prophecies in which students live up (or down) to teacher and societal expectations (Education Week 2004).

To conflict theorists, schools play the role of training working-class students to accept and retain their position as lower members of society. They argue that this role is fulfilled through the disparity of resources available to students in richer and poorer neighborhoods as well as through testing (Lauen and Tyson 2008).

IQ tests have been attacked for being biased—for testing cultural knowledge rather than actual intelligence. For example, a test item may ask students what instruments belong in an orchestra. To correctly answer this question requires certain cultural knowledge—knowledge most often held by more affluent people who typically have more exposure to orchestral music. Though experts in testing claim that bias has been eliminated from tests, conflict theorists maintain that this is impossible. These tests, to conflict theorists, are another way in which education does not provide opportunities, but instead maintains an established configuration of power.

Feminist Theory

Feminist theory aims to understand the mechanisms and roots of gender inequality in education, as well as their societal repercussions. Like many other institutions of society, educational systems are characterized by unequal treatment and opportunity for women. Almost two-thirds of the world's 862 million illiterate people are women, and the illiteracy rate among women is expected to increase in many regions, especially in several African and Asian countries (UNESCO 2005; World Bank 2007).

Women in the United States have been relatively late, historically speaking, to be granted entry to the public university system. In fact, it wasn't until the establishment of Title IX of the Education Amendments in 1972 that discriminating on the basis of sex in U.S. education programs became illegal. In the United States, there is also a post-education gender disparity between what male and female college graduates earn. A study released in May 2011 showed that, among men and women who graduated from college between 2006 and 2010, men out-earned women by an average of more than $5,000 each year. First-year job earnings for men averaged $33,150; for women the average was $28,000 (Godofsky, Zukin, and van Horn 2011). Similar trends are seen among salaries of professionals in virtually all industries.

When women face limited opportunities for education, their capacity to achieve equal rights, including financial independence, are limited. Feminist theory seeks to promote women's rights to equal education (and its resultant benefits) across the world.

Sociology in the Real World: Grade Inflation: When Is an A Really a C?

In 2019, news emerged of a criminal conspiracy regarding wealthy and, in some cases, celebrity parents who illegally secured college admission for their children. Over 50 people were implicated in the scandal, including employees from prestigious universities; several people were sentenced to prison. Their activity included manipulating test scores, falsifying students' academic or athletic credentials, and acquiring testing accommodations through dishonest claims of having a disability.

One of the questions that emerged at the time was how the students at the subject of these efforts could succeed at these challenging and elite colleges. Meaning, if they couldn't get in without cheating, they probably wouldn't do well. Wouldn't their lack of preparation quickly become clear?

Many people would say no. First, many of the students involved (the children of the conspirators) had no knowledge or no involvement of the fraud; those students may have been admitted anyway. But there may be another safeguard for underprepared students at certain universities: grade inflation.

Grade inflation generally refers to a practice of awarding students higher grades than they have earned. It reflects the observation that the relationship between letter grades and the achievements they reflect has been changing over time. Put simply, what used to be considered C-level, or average, now often earns a student a B, or even an A.

Some, including administrators at elite universities, argue that grade inflation does not exist, or that there are other factors at play, or even that it has benefits such as increased funding and elimination of inequality (Boleslavsky 2014). But the evidence reveals a stark change. Based on data compiled from a wide array of four-year colleges and universities, a widely cited study revealed that the number of A grades has been increasing by several percentage points per decade, and that A's were the most common grade awarded (Jaschik 2016). In an anecdotal case, a Harvard dean acknowledged that the median grade there was an A-, and the most common was also an A. Williams College found that the number of A+ grades had grown from 212 instances in 2009-10 to 426 instances in 2017-18 (Berlinsky-Schine 2020). Princeton University took steps to reduce inflation by limiting the number of A's that could be issued, though it then reversed course (Greason 2020).

Why is this happening? Some cite the alleged shift toward a culture that rewards effort instead of product, i.e., the amount of work a student puts in raises the grade, even if the resulting product is poor quality. Another oft-cited contributor is the pressure for instructors to earn positive course evaluations from their students. Finally, many colleges may accept a level of grade inflation because it works. Analysis and formal experiments involving graduate school admissions and hiring practices showed that students with higher grades are more likely to be selected for a job or a grad school. And those higher-grade applicants are still preferred even if decision-maker knows that the applicant's college may be inflating grades (Swift 2013). In other words, people with high GPA at a school with a higher average GPA are preferred over people who have a high GPA at a school with a lower average GPA.

Ironically, grade inflation is not simply a college issue. Many of the same college faculty and administrators who encounter or engage in some level of grade inflation may lament that it is also occurring at high schools (Murphy 2017).

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism sees education as one way that labeling theory is seen in action. A symbolic interactionist might say that this labeling has a direct correlation to those who are in power and those who are labeled. For example, low standardized test scores or poor performance in a particular class often lead to a student who is labeled as a low achiever. Such labels are difficult to "shake off," which can create a self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton 1968).

In his book *High School Confidential*, Jeremy Iversen details his experience as a Stanford graduate posing as a student at a California high school. One of the problems he identifies in his research is that of teachers applying labels that students are never able to lose. One teacher told him, without knowing he was a bright graduate of a top university, that he would never amount to anything (Iversen 2006). Iversen obviously didn't take this teacher's false assessment to heart. But when an actual seventeen-year-old student hears this from a person with authority over her, it's no wonder that the student might begin to "live down to" that label.

The labeling with which symbolic interactionists concern themselves extends to the very degrees that symbolize completion of education. Credentialism embodies the emphasis on certificates or degrees to show that a person has a certain skill, has attained a certain level of education, or has met certain job qualifications. These certificates or degrees serve as a symbol of what a person has achieved, and allows the labeling of that individual.

Indeed, as these examples show, labeling theory can significantly impact a student's schooling. This is easily seen in the educational setting, as teachers and more powerful social groups within the school dole out labels that are adopted by the entire school population.

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15.4: Issues in Education

Equal Education

As schools strive to fill a variety of roles in their students' lives, many issues and challenges arise. Students walk a minefield of bullying, violence in schools, the results of declining funding, changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and other problems that affect their education. When Americans are asked about their opinion of public education on the Gallup poll each year, reviews are mixed at best (Saad 2008). Schools are no longer merely a place for learning and socializing. With the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* ruling in 1954, schools became a repository of much political and legal action that is at the heart of several issues in education.

Until the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, schools had operated under the precedent set by *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896, which allowed racial segregation in schools and private businesses (the case dealt specifically with railroads) and introduced the much maligned phrase "separate but equal" into the U.S. lexicon. The 1954 *Brown v. Board* decision overruled this, declaring that state laws that had established separate schools for Black and White students were, in fact, unequal and unconstitutional.

While the ruling paved the way toward civil rights, it was also met with contention in many communities. In Arkansas in 1957, the governor mobilized the state National Guard to prevent Black students from entering Little Rock Central High School. President Eisenhower, in response, sent members of the 101st Airborne Division from Kentucky to uphold the students' right to enter the school. In 1963, almost ten years after the ruling, Governor George Wallace of Alabama used his own body to block two Black students from entering the auditorium at the University of Alabama to enroll in the school. Wallace's desperate attempt to uphold his policy of "segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever," stated during his 1963 inauguration (PBS 2000) became known as the "Stand in the Schoolhouse Door." He refused to grant entry to the students until a general from the Alabama National Guard arrived on President Kennedy's order.

Presently, students of all races and ethnicities are permitted into schools, but there remains a troubling gap in the equality of education they receive. The long-term socially embedded effects of racism—and other discrimination and disadvantage—have left a residual mark of inequality in the nation's education system. Students from wealthy families and those of lower socioeconomic status do not receive the same opportunities.

Today's public schools, at least in theory, are positioned to help remedy those gaps. Predicated on the notion of universal access, this system is mandated to accept and retain all students regardless of race, religion, social class, and the like. Moreover, public schools are held accountable to equitable per-student spending (Resnick 2004). Private schools, usually only accessible to students from high-income families, and schools in more affluent areas generally enjoy access to greater resources and better opportunities. In fact, some of the key predictors for student performance include socioeconomic status and family background. Children from families of lower socioeconomic status often enter school with learning deficits they struggle to overcome throughout their educational tenure. These patterns, uncovered in the landmark Coleman Report of 1966, are still highly relevant today, as sociologists still generally agree that there is a great divide in the performance of white students from affluent backgrounds and their nonwhite, less affluent, counterparts (Coleman 1966).

The findings in the Coleman Report were so powerful that they brought about two major changes to education in the United States. The federal Head Start program, which is still active and successful today, was developed to give low-income students an opportunity to make up the preschool deficit discussed in Coleman's findings. The program provides academic-centered preschool to students of low socioeconomic status.

Transfers and Busing

In the years following *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Southern states were not alone in their resistance to change. In New York City, schools in lower-income neighborhoods had less experienced teachers, inadequate facilities, and lower spending per student than did schools in higher-income neighborhoods, even though all of the schools were in the same district. In 1958, Activist Mae Mallory, with the support of grassroots advocate Ella Baker and the NAACP, led a group of parents who kept their children out of school, essentially boycotting the district. She and the rest of the group, known as the Harlem Nine, were publicly chastised and pursued by the judicial system. After several decisions and appeals, the culminating legal decision found that the city was effectively segregating schools, and that students in certain neighborhoods were still receiving a "discriminatorily inferior

education." New York City, the nation's largest school district, enacted an open transfer policy that laid the groundwork for further action (Jeffries 2012).

With the goal of further desegregating education, courts across the United States ordered some school districts to begin a program that became known as "busing." This program involved bringing students to schools outside their neighborhoods (and therefore schools they would not normally have the opportunity to attend) to bring racial diversity into balance. This practice was met with a great deal of public resistance from people on both sides dissatisfied with White students traveling to inner city schools and minority students being transported to schools in the suburbs.

No Child Left Behind and Every Student Succeeds

In 2001, the Bush administration passed the No Child Left Behind Act, which requires states to test students in grades three through eight. The results of those tests determine eligibility to receive federal funding. Schools that do not meet the standards set by the Act run the risk of having their funding cut. Sociologists and teachers alike have contended that the impact of the No Child Left Behind Act is far more negative than positive, arguing that a "one size fits all" concept cannot apply to education.

As a result of widespread criticism, many of the national aspects of the act were gradually altered, and in 2015 they were essentially eliminated. That year, Congress passed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The law decreases the federal role in education. Annual testing is still required, but the achievement and improvement accountability is shifted to the states, which must submit plans and goals regarding their approaches to the U.S. Department of Education for approval. While this aspect of ESSA was delayed for several years under the Trump administration, the Department of Education announced in April, 2020 that Massachusetts had become the first to have its plans approved. The COVID-19 pandemic delayed many states' further action in terms of ESSA approval.

New Views On Standardized Tests

The funding tie-in of the No Child Left Behind Act has led to the social phenomenon commonly called "teaching to the test," which describes when a curriculum focuses on equipping students to succeed on standardized tests, to the detriment of broader educational goals and concepts of learning. At issue are two approaches to classroom education: the notion that teachers impart knowledge that students are obligated to absorb, versus the concept of student-centered learning that seeks to teach children not facts, but problem solving abilities and learning skills. Both types of learning have been valued in the U.S. school system. The former, to critics of "teaching to the test," only equips students to regurgitate facts, while the latter, to proponents of the other camp, fosters lifelong learning and transferable work skills.

The Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and the American College Testing (ACT) have for decades served as rites of passage for millions of high school students. Colleges utilize the scores as benchmarks in the admissions process. Since the tests have been important in college admissions, many families place significant emphasis on preparing for them.

However, the disparity in how much money families are able to spend on that preparation results in inequities. SAT/ACT-prep courses and tutors are expensive, and not everyone can afford them. As a result, the inequity found in K-12 education may extend to college.

For years, college admissions programs have been taking these disparities into account, and have based admissions on factors beyond standardized test scores. However, issues with the tests remain. In 2020, a slate of highly selective colleges eliminated their standardized test requirement for admission, and, in 2021 several colleges expanded and extended their "test-optional" approach.

Students With Disabilities

Since the 1978 implementation of what would become the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), states and local districts have continually increased their investment in the quality of education for students with disabilities. The Act's reauthorization, coupled with No Child Left Behind, added requirements and guidance for states and school districts. Until that point in time, students with intellectual or other disabilities had been steadily improving their achievement, graduation rates, and success in post-high school endeavors. However, significant disparities existed (and persist today) based on race, ethnicity, and also on geography. Beyond the quality of education for students with disabilities, the disparity was often most noticeable in the classification of those students. States varied on which disabilities received services, and how much support was provided.

Many students with dyslexia, ADHD, and other disorders are either not diagnosed, not taken seriously, or not given as much support as they require in order to succeed. This can extend into adulthood. For example, ADHD was for years considered only a children's disease, something that people "grew out of." But the disorder can impact people at any age, something that many educators and even some doctors are not aware of.

No Child Left Behind's focus on standards and standardized testing extended to students with disabilities as well. A core goal was that students with disabilities would work toward the same standards and take the same tests (with accommodations, if needed) as did students without disabilities. The outcomes were mixed. Test performance for students with disabilities increased, but so did drop outs. There was also evidence that some schools were less welcoming to students with disabilities, as a way to increase average scores (National Council on Disabilities 2004).

In general, programs have improved to the point that students with disabilities are graduating from high school at a national average of about 73 percent. This is lower than the average graduation rate for students in all populations, which is 88 percent, but it is a vast improvement over previous decades (NCES 2020). However, several issues remain. First, students from lower-income and areas and states with lower education budgets still are offered far fewer services; they graduate high school at a much lower rate than the average. Second, because identification remains a major gap, many students with disabilities may be in the "mainstream" population but are not supported as well as they should be. Even when this group gets to college, they may be starting with a lower level of preparation (Samuels 2019).

School Choice

As we have seen, education is not equal, and people have varied needs. Parents, guardians, and child advocates work to obtain the best schooling for children, which may take them outside the traditional environment.

Public school alternatives to traditional schools include vocational schools, special education schools, magnet schools, charter schools, alternative schools, early college schools, and virtual schools. Private school options may include religious and non-religious options, as well as boarding schools. In some locations, a large number of students engage in these options. For example, in North Carolina, one in five students does not attend a traditional public school (Hui 2019).

Homeschooling refers to children being educated in their own homes, typically by a parent, instead of in a traditional public or private school system. Proponents of this type of education argue that it provides an outstanding opportunity for student-centered learning while circumventing problems that plague today's education system. Opponents counter that homeschooled children miss out on the opportunity for social development that occurs in standard classroom environments and school settings.

School choice advocates promote the idea that more choice allows parents and students a more effective educational experience that is right for them. They may choose a nontraditional school because it is more aligned with their philosophy, because they've been bullied or had other trouble in their neighborhood school, or because they want to prepare for a specific career (American Federation for Children 2017). School choice opponents may argue that while the alternative schools may be more effective for those students who need them and are fortunate enough to get in, the money would be better spent in general public schools.

Remote and Hybrid Schooling

The COVID-19 pandemic was among the most disruptive events in American education. You likely have your own stories, successes, failures, and preferences based on your experiences as students, parents, and family members. Educators at every level went through stages of intense stress, lack of information, and difficult choices. In many cities and states, families, school districts, governments, and health departments found themselves on different sides of debates. Countless arguments raged over attendance, mental health, instructional quality, safety, testing, academic integrity, and the best ways to move forward as the situation began to improve.

College students and their families went through similar disruptions and debates, compounded by the fact that many students felt that the high costs of particular colleges were not worth it. Overall college enrollment dipped significantly during the pandemic (Koenig 2020).

At the time of this writing, the sociological and educational impact of the pandemic is difficult to assess, though many are studying it. Overall data indicates that most outcomes are negative. Students underperformed, stress and mental health problems increased, and overall plans and pathways were interrupted. Perhaps most damaging was that the pandemic amplified many of the other challenges in education, meaning that under-resourced districts and underserved students were impacted even more

severely than others. On the other hand, once instructors and students adapted to the technological and social differences, many began to employ new techniques to ensure more caretaking, connection, differentiated instruction, and innovation. Most agree that education will be changed for years following the pandemic, but it might not all be for the worse.

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15.5: Key Terms

Glossary

- credentialism | the emphasis on certificates or degrees to show that a person has a certain skill, has attained a certain level of education, or has met certain job qualifications
- cultural capital | cultural knowledge that serves (metaphorically) as currency to help one navigate a culture
- cultural transmission | the way people come to learn the values, beliefs, and social norms of their culture
- education | a social institution through which a society's children are taught basic academic knowledge, learning skills, and cultural norms
- formal education | the learning of academic facts and concepts
- grade inflation | the idea that the achievement level associated with an A today is notably lower than the achievement level associated with A-level work a few decades ago
- Head Start program | a federal program that provides academically focused preschool to students of low socioeconomic status
- hidden curriculum | the type of nonacademic knowledge that people learn through informal learning and cultural transmission
- informal education | education that involves learning about cultural values, norms, and expected behaviors through participation in a society
- No Child Left Behind Act | an act that requires states to test students in prescribed grades, with the results of those tests determining eligibility to receive federal funding
- social placement | the use of education to improve one's social standing
- sorting | classifying students based on academic merit or potential
- tracking | a formalized sorting system that places students on "tracks" (advanced, low achievers) that perpetuate inequalities
- universal access | the equal ability of all people to participate in an education system

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15.6: Short Answer

Critical Thinking Questions

1. Has there ever been a time when your formal and informal educations in the same setting were at odds? How did you overcome that disconnect?
2. Do you believe free access to schools has achieved its intended goal? Explain.
3. Thinking of your school, what are some ways that a conflict theorist would say that your school perpetuates class differences?
4. Which sociological theory best describes your view of education? Explain why.
5. Based on what you know about symbolic interactionism and feminist theory, what do you think proponents of those theories see as the role of the school?
6. Is busing a reasonable method of serving students from diverse backgrounds? If not, suggest and support an alternative.

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15.7: Further Research

Additional Learning Resources

- Though it's a struggle, education is continually being improved in the developing world. To learn how educational programs are being fostered worldwide, explore the Education section of the Center for Global Development's website.
- Can tracking actually improve learning? This 2009 article from *Education Next* explores the debate with evidence from Kenya.
- The National Center for Fair & Open Testing (FairTest) is committed to ending the bias and other flaws seen in standardized testing. Their mission is to ensure that students, teachers, and schools are evaluated fairly. You can learn more about their mission, as well as the latest in news on test bias and fairness, at their website.
- Whether or not students in public schools are entitled to free speech is a subject of much debate. In the public school system, there can be a clash between the need for a safe learning environment and the guarantee to free speech granted to U.S. citizens. You can learn more about this complicated issue on this web page about the First Amendment in schools.

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15.9: Accessible Text Description

Figure 15.1: Roadmap

A horizontal instructional diagram presents three large arrows pointing from left to right. Each arrow contains a colored circle with one guiding question: what, why, and how. A multicolored arrow along the bottom labels the sequence “A Roadmap for Understanding Education and Society.”

The first, purple arrow is labeled “The WHAT” and asks, “What is education and what are the key issues?” The text below explains that this stage defines education as a social institution, examines educational resources and access, and identifies education’s manifest and latent functions.

The second, green arrow is labeled “The WHY” and asks, “Why does education matter and how is it shaped by society and inequality?” The supporting text explains that this stage applies sociological perspectives, considers historical and contemporary issues, and investigates the causes of educational inequality.

The third, blue arrow is labeled “The HOW” and asks, “How do we address educational challenges and create more equal opportunities for all?” The text below explains that this stage evaluates efforts to promote educational equity and examines major U.S. government actions and programs that shape education and opportunity.

Overall, the diagram presents a progression from defining education and its social functions, to analyzing the forces that create unequal access and outcomes, and finally to considering institutional and policy responses intended to expand educational opportunity.

Figure 15.1.1: Malala Yousafzai

A cropped screenshot shows several overlapping Wikipedia-style biographical pages. The main page is about Malala Yousafzai and includes a pale-yellow text panel beside a portrait of her wearing a blue and turquoise patterned headscarf. The portrait is labeled “Malala Yousafzai.”

The readable text in the central article states:

“Malala Yousafzai (Mallah Yūsafzay; Urdu: ملالہ یوسفزئی; Pashto: ملاله یوسفزی [məˈlaːlə juˈsəf ˈzəj]; born 12 July 1997) is a Pakistani activist for female education and the youngest Nobel Prize laureate. She is known for human rights advocacy, especially the education of women and children in her native Swat Valley in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, northwest Pakistan, where the local Taliban had at times banned girls from attending school. Her advocacy has grown into an international movement…”

The remaining sentence is cut off by the lower edge of the image and is not fully readable. Portions of other overlapping entries appear along the left side, including the visible heading “Anjelica Huston” and fragments of other names and text.

Overall, the image presents Malala Yousafzai through an online reference source, emphasizing her advocacy for girls’ education and human rights and illustrating how digital media circulates information about education, inequality, and global activism.

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16: GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS

Introduction

Government and politics shape many parts of our everyday lives, even when we do not always notice them directly. Decisions about public education, policing, immigration, healthcare, taxes, voting rights, environmental protection, and international relations are all connected to political institutions and struggles over power. In sociology, government is not only studied as a formal system of laws, elections, and offices; it is also examined as a social institution that organizes authority, distributes resources, and influences people's opportunities.

This chapter explores how power operates in society, how different forms of government organize political life, and how people participate in or are excluded from political processes. It also examines how sociological theories help us understand the relationship between government, inequality, social order, conflict, and change. Rather than treating politics as something that only happens in elections or government buildings, this chapter encourages us to see politics as part of everyday social life.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- Define key concepts related to government and politics, including power, authority, legitimacy, and the state.
- Identify different forms of government and explain how they organize political authority.
- Describe major patterns of political participation in the United States, including voting, civic engagement, and political inequality.
- Compare functionalist, conflict, and symbolic interactionist perspectives on government and power.
- Analyze how government and politics shape social life, social inequality, and possibilities for social change.

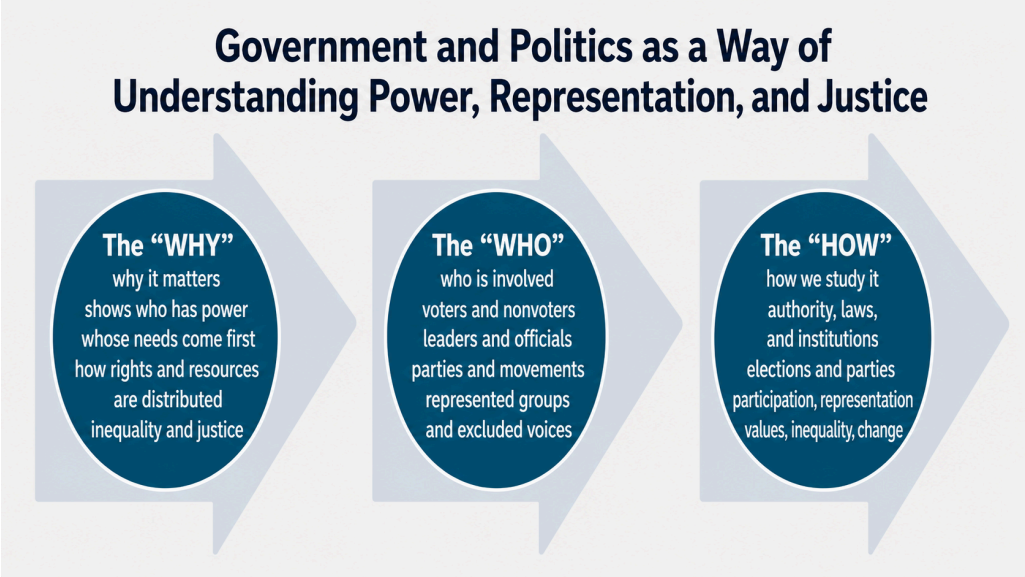


Figure 16.1: Government and politics shape power, representation, rights, and justice, helping us understand inequality and collective life. (Marx Gomez-Liendo via ChatGPT). Access alternative description for Figure 16.1.

Why, Who, and How

This chapter asks why government and politics matter for understanding society, because political systems help determine who has power, whose needs are prioritized, and how resources and rights are distributed. It examines how power is organized through authority, laws, institutions, elections, political parties, and social movements. And it also considers who participates in political

life, who is represented, and who may be excluded or marginalized. By studying government and politics sociologically, we can better understand how political institutions both reflect and shape broader social inequalities, cultural values, and struggles for justice.

16.1: Case Study and Vignette
16.2: Power and Authority
16.3: Forms of Government
16.4: Politics in the United States
16.5: Theoretical Perspectives on Government and Power
16.6: Key Terms
16.7: Short Answer
16.8: Further Research
16.9: References
16.10: Accessible Text Descriptions

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16.1: Case Study and Vignette

Voting Rights

Voting is often described as a basic right in a democratic society, but access to the ballot has never been equally available to all people. Throughout U.S. history, laws and policies have limited the voting rights of women, Black Americans, Indigenous peoples, immigrants, low-income communities, and people convicted of crimes. One important example is felony disenfranchisement, or the loss of voting rights due to a felony conviction.

This case study examines Florida's 2018 voting rights referendum, commonly known as Amendment 4, which restored voting rights to many people convicted of most felonies after completing their sentences. The case helps us understand key sociological questions about democracy, citizenship, inequality, and political power: Who gets to participate in political life? Who has the authority to define the meaning of a law? And what happens when the will of voters conflicts with the decisions of elected officials?

"I Thought I Had My Rights Back"

Imagine that you are a Florida resident who was convicted of a felony many years ago. You completed your prison sentence, finished probation, and have worked hard to rebuild your life. You have a job, a family, and a community. For years, you were told that because of your conviction, you could not vote.

Then, in November 2018, you hear the news: Florida voters have approved a referendum restoring voting rights to people convicted of most felonies after they complete their sentences. More than sixty percent of voters supported the change. For the first time in years, you feel that the state recognizes you again as a full member of the political community.

You begin thinking about the next election. You want to vote for candidates who support better schools, affordable housing, and criminal justice reform. You want your voice to count.

But then the rules change. State leaders pass a law saying that before you can vote, you must pay all court fines, fees, and restitution connected to your sentence. The problem is that you are not sure how much you owe. Records are difficult to understand. Some fees have accumulated over time. You are working, but your income barely covers rent, food, transportation, and family expenses.

You completed your sentence, but now you are told that you still cannot vote unless you can pay. You wonder: Was my right to vote really restored? Or was it restored only for people who could afford it?

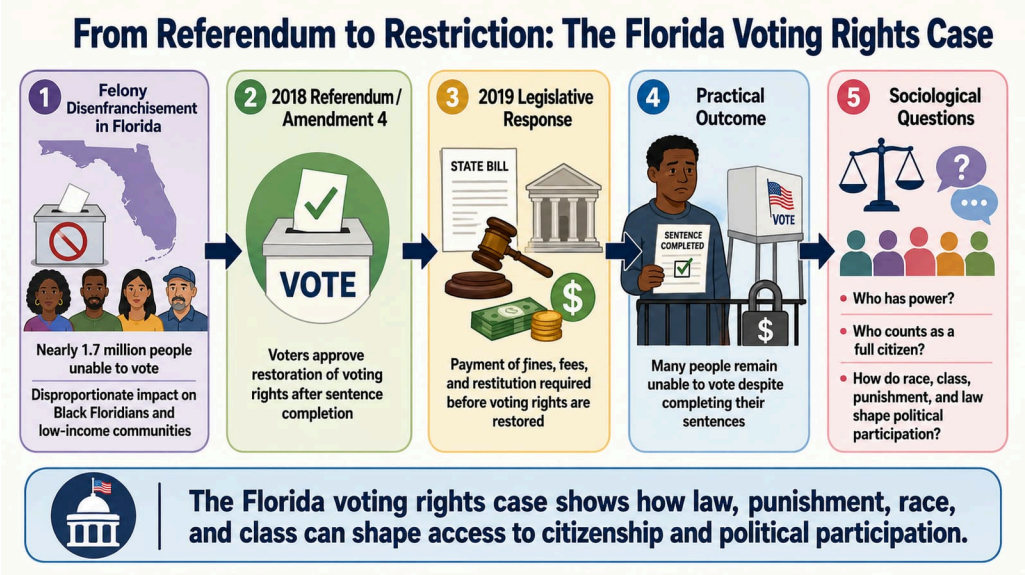


Figure 16.1.1: Florida's voting-rights case shows how legal rules can formally restore political rights while financial requirements continue to exclude many people, with unequal consequences across race and class. (Marx Gomez-Liendo via ChatGPT). Access alternative description for Figure 16.1.1.

What Democracy? For Whom?

Florida's 2018 referendum appeared to be a major expansion of democratic participation. Rather than waiting for elected representatives to pass a law, voters used a direct democratic process to decide the issue themselves. The result was clear: a large majority supported restoring voting rights to people convicted of most felonies after sentence completion.

At the time, Florida had nearly 1.7 million people unable to vote because of felony convictions, more than any other state (Lewis 2018). This mattered not only because of the number of people affected, but also because many Florida elections are decided by narrow margins. When a large segment of the population is excluded from voting, the political consequences can be significant.

Felony disenfranchisement also reflects broader patterns of inequality. Although these laws apply to people with felony convictions in general, they have a disproportionate impact on people of color and low-income communities. In Florida, about 23 percent of Black adults were unable to vote because of felony convictions (Brennan Center 2020). This shows how the criminal legal system can shape political participation and reinforce racial inequality.

The controversy deepened in 2019, when Florida's governor and legislature passed a law requiring people with felony convictions to pay all fines, fees, and restitution before regaining the right to vote. Supporters argued that completing a sentence should include paying all financial obligations. Critics argued that the law created a modern-day poll tax by making voting rights dependent on a person's ability to pay.

By the 2020 presidential election, hundreds of thousands of people who had completed their sentences were still unable to vote because of unpaid legal financial obligations. This outcome raised a central question in the sociology of government and politics: Where does power actually reside? Is power located in the people, who voted directly through a referendum? Is it located in legislatures, which interpret and implement laws? Or is it located in courts and administrative systems that determine how rights are applied in practice?

This case shows that democracy is about who is allowed to vote, whose voice counts, and who has the power to define the rules of participation. From a conflict theory perspective, Florida's voting rights debate reveals how laws can reproduce inequality even when they appear neutral. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, it also shows how labels such as "felon," "citizen," and "voter" shape how people are treated and how they understand their place in society.

Ultimately, the Florida case reminds us that political rights are not simply granted once and for all. They are contested, interpreted, restricted, expanded, and fought over. The struggle over Amendment 4 is therefore a story about citizenship, punishment, inequality, and the meaning of democracy itself.

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16.2: Power and Authority

What is Power?

The world has almost 200 countries. Many of those countries have states or provinces with their own governments. In some countries such as the United States and Canada, Native Americans and First Nations have their own systems of government in some relationship with the federal government. Just considering those thousands of different entities, it's easy to see what differentiates governments. What about what they have in common? Do all of them serve the people? Protect the people? Increase prosperity?

The answer to those questions might be a matter of opinion, perspective, and circumstance. However, one reality seems clear: Something all governments have in common is that they exert control over the people they govern. The nature of that control—what we will define as power and authority—is an important feature of society.

Sociologists have a distinctive approach to studying governmental power and authority that differs from the perspective of political scientists. For the most part, political scientists focus on studying how power is distributed in different types of political systems. They would observe, for example, that the United States' political system is divided into three distinct branches (legislative, executive, and judicial), and they would explore how public opinion affects political parties, elections, and the political process in general. Sociologists, however, tend to be more interested in the influences of governmental power on society and in how social conflicts arise from the distribution of power. Sociologists also examine how the use of power affects local, state, national, and global agendas, which in turn affect people differently based on status, class, and socioeconomic standing.

For centuries, philosophers, politicians, and social scientists have explored and commented on the nature of power. Pittacus (c. 640–568 B.C.E.) opined, "The measure of a man is what he does with power," and Lord Acton perhaps more famously asserted, "Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely" (1887). Indeed, the concept of power can have decidedly negative connotations, and the term itself is difficult to define.

Weber's Concept

Many scholars adopt the definition developed by German sociologist Max Weber, who said that power is the ability to exercise one's will over others (Weber 1922). Power affects more than personal relationships; it shapes larger dynamics like social groups, professional organizations, and governments. Similarly, a government's power is not necessarily limited to control of its own citizens. A dominant nation, for instance, will often use its clout to influence or support other governments or to seize control of other nation states. Efforts by the U.S. government to wield power in other countries have included joining with other nations to form the Allied forces during World War II, entering Iraq in 2002 to topple Saddam Hussein's regime, and imposing sanctions on the government of North Korea in the hopes of constraining its development of nuclear weapons.

Endeavors to gain power and influence do not necessarily lead to violence, exploitation, or abuse. Leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Mohandas Gandhi, for example, commanded powerful movements that effected positive change without military force. Both men organized nonviolent protests to combat corruption and injustice and succeeded in inspiring major reform. They relied on a variety of nonviolent protest strategies, such as rallies, sit-ins, marches, petitions, and boycotts.

Modern technology has made such forms of nonviolent reform easier to implement. Often, protesters can use cell phones and the Internet to disseminate information and plans to masses of protesters in a rapid and efficient manner. Some governments like Myanmar, China, and Russia tamp down communication and protest through platform bans or Internet blocks (see the Media and Technology chapter for more information). But in the Arab Spring uprisings of 2010-11, for example, Twitter feeds and other social media helped protesters coordinate their movements, share ideas, and bolster morale, as well as gain global support for their causes. Social media was also important in getting accurate accounts of the demonstrations out to the world, in contrast to many earlier situations in which government control of the media censored news reports. Notice that in these examples, the users of power were the citizens rather than the governments. They found they had power because they were able to exercise their will over their own leaders. Thus, government power does not necessarily equate to absolute power.

Big Picture: Social Media as a Terrorist Tool

British aid worker, Alan Henning, was the fourth victim of the Islamic State (known as ISIS or ISIL) to be beheaded before video cameras in a recording titled, "Another Message to America and Its Allies," which was posted on YouTube and pro-Islamic state Twitter feeds in the fall of 2014. Henning was captured during his participation in a convoy taking medical supplies to a hospital in conflict-ravaged northern Syria. His death was publicized via social media, as were the earlier beheadings of U.S. journalists Jim Foley and Steven Sotloff and British aid worker David Haines. The terrorist groups also used social media to demand an end to intervention in the Middle East by U.S., British, French, and Arab forces.

An international coalition, led by the United States, has been formed to combat ISIS in response to this series of publicized murders. France and the United Kingdom, members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and Belgium are seeking government approval through their respective parliaments to participate in airstrikes. The specifics of target locations are a key point, however, and they emphasize the delicate and political nature of current conflict in the region. Due to perceived national interest and geopolitical dynamics, Britain and France are more willing to be a part of airstrikes on ISIS targets in Iran and likely to avoid striking targets in Syria. Several Arab nations are a part of the coalition, including Bahrain, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. Turkey, another NATO member, has not announced involvement in airstrikes, presumably because ISIS is holding forty-nine Turkish citizens hostage.

U.S. intervention in Libya and Syria is controversial, and it arouses debate about the role of the United States in world affairs, as well as the practical need for, and outcome of, military action in the Middle East. Experts and the U.S. public alike are weighing the need for fighting terrorism in its current form of the Islamic State and the bigger issue of helping to restore peace in the Middle East. Some consider ISIS a direct and growing threat to the United States if left unchecked. Others believe U.S. intervention unnecessarily worsens the Middle East situation and prefer that resources be used at home rather than increasing military involvement in an area of the world where they believe the United States has intervened long enough.

Types of Authority

The protesters in Tunisia and the civil rights protesters of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s day had influence apart from their position in a government. Their influence came, in part, from their ability to advocate for what many people held as important values. Government leaders might have this kind of influence as well, but they also have the advantage of wielding power associated with their position in the government. As this example indicates, there is more than one type of authority in a community.

Authority refers to accepted power—that is, power that people agree to follow. People listen to authority figures because they feel that these individuals are worthy of respect. Generally speaking, people perceive the objectives and demands of an authority figure as reasonable and beneficial, or true.

Not all authority figures are police officers, elected officials or government authorities. Besides formal offices, authority can arise from tradition and personal qualities. Economist and sociologist Max Weber realized this when he examined individual action as it relates to authority, as well as large-scale structures of authority and how they relate to a society's economy. Based on this work, Weber developed a classification system for authority. His three types of authority are traditional authority, charismatic authority and legal-rational authority (Weber 1922).

Table 16.2.1 Weber's Three Types of Authority: Max Weber identified and explained three distinct types of authority:

Type of Authority	Traditional	Charismatic	Legal-Rational
Source of Power	Legitimized by long-standing custom	Based on a leader's personal qualities	Authority resides in the office, not the person
Leadership Style	Historic personality	Dynamic personality	Bureaucratic officials
Example	Patriarchy (traditional positions of authority)	Napoleon, Jesus Christ, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Jr.	U.S. presidency and Congress Modern British Parliament

Traditional Authority

According to Weber, the power of traditional authority is accepted because that has traditionally been the case; its legitimacy exists because it has been accepted for a long time. Britain's Queen Elizabeth, for instance, occupies a position that she inherited based on the traditional rules of succession for the monarchy. People adhere to traditional authority because they are invested in the past and feel obligated to perpetuate it. In this type of authority, a ruler typically has no real force to carry out his will or maintain his position but depends primarily on a group's respect.

A more modern form of traditional authority is patrimonialism, which is traditional domination facilitated by an administration and military that are purely personal instruments of the master (Eisenberg 1998). In this form of authority, all officials are personal favorites appointed by the ruler. These officials have no rights, and their privileges can be increased or withdrawn based on the caprices of the leader. The political organization of ancient Egypt typified such a system: when the royal household decreed that a pyramid be built, every Egyptian was forced to work toward its construction.

Traditional authority can be intertwined with race, class, and gender. In most societies, for instance, men are more likely to be privileged than women and thus are more likely to hold roles of authority. Similarly, members of dominant racial groups or upper-class families also win respect more readily. In the United States, the Kennedy family, which has produced many prominent politicians, exemplifies this model.

Charismatic Authority

Followers accept the power of charismatic authority because they are drawn to the leader's personal qualities. The appeal of a charismatic leader can be extraordinary, and can inspire followers to make unusual sacrifices or to persevere in the midst of great hardship and persecution. Charismatic leaders usually emerge in times of crisis and offer innovative or radical solutions. They may even offer a vision of a new world order. Hitler's rise to power in the postwar economic depression of Germany is an example.

Charismatic leaders tend to hold power for short durations, and according to Weber, they are just as likely to be tyrannical as they are heroic. Diverse male leaders such as Hitler, Napoleon, Jesus Christ, César Chávez, Malcolm X, and Winston Churchill are all considered charismatic leaders. Because so few women have held dynamic positions of leadership throughout history, the list of charismatic female leaders is comparatively short. Many historians consider figures such as Joan of Arc, Margaret Thatcher, and Mother Teresa to be charismatic leaders.

Rational-Legal Authority

According to Weber, power made legitimate by laws, written rules, and regulations is termed rational-legal authority. In this type of authority, power is vested in a particular rationale, system, or ideology and not necessarily in the person who implements the specifics of that doctrine. A nation that follows a constitution applies this type of authority. On a smaller scale, you might encounter rational-legal authority in the workplace via the standards set forth in the employee handbook, which provides a different type of authority than that of your boss.

Of course, ideals are seldom replicated in the real world. Few governments or leaders can be neatly categorized. Some leaders, like Mohandas Gandhi for instance, can be considered charismatic *and* legal-rational authority figures. Similarly, a leader or government can start out exemplifying one type of authority and gradually evolve or change into another type.

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16.3: Forms of Government

Monarchy

Even though people in the United States tend to be most aware of Great Britain's royals, many other nations also recognize kings, queens, princes, princesses, and other figures with official royal titles. The power held by these positions varies from one country to another. Strictly speaking, a monarchy is a government in which a single person (a monarch) rules until he or she dies or abdicates the throne. Usually, a monarch claims the rights to the title by way of hereditary succession or as a result of some sort of divine appointment or calling. As mentioned above, the monarchies of most modern nations are ceremonial remnants of tradition, and individuals who hold titles in such sovereignties are often aristocratic figureheads.

A few nations today, however, are run by governments wherein a monarch has absolute or unmitigated power. Such nations are called absolute monarchies. Although governments and regimes are constantly changing across the global landscape, it is generally safe to say that most modern absolute monarchies are concentrated in the Middle East and Africa. The small, oil-rich nation of Oman, for instance, is an example of an absolute monarchy. In this nation, Sultan Qaboos bin Said ruled from the 1970s until his death in 2020, when his cousin, Haitham bin Tariq, became Sultan. The Sultan creates all laws, appoints all judges, and has no formal check on their power. Living conditions and opportunities for Oman's citizens have improved to the point that the UN ranked the nation as the most improved in the world in the past (UNDP 2010), but many citizens who live under the reign of an absolute ruler must contend with oppressive or unfair policies that are installed based on the unchecked whims or political agendas of that leader.

In today's global political climate, monarchies far more often take the form of constitutional monarchies, governments of nations that recognize monarchs but require these figures to abide by the laws of a greater constitution. Many countries that are now constitutional monarchies evolved from governments that were once considered absolute monarchies. In most cases, constitutional monarchies, such as Great Britain and Canada, feature elected prime ministers whose leadership role is far more involved and significant than that of its titled monarchs. In spite of their limited authority, monarchs endure in such governments because people enjoy their ceremonial significance and the pageantry of their rites.

Oligarchy

The power in an oligarchy is held by a small, elite group. Unlike in a monarchy, members of an oligarchy do not necessarily achieve their statuses based on ties to noble ancestry. Rather, they may ascend to positions of power because of military might, economic power, or similar circumstances.

The concept of oligarchy is somewhat elusive; rarely does a society openly define itself as an oligarchy. Generally, the word carries negative connotations and conjures notions of a corrupt group whose members make unfair policy decisions in order to maintain their privileged positions. Many modern nations that claim to be democracies are really oligarchies. In fact, some prominent journalists, such as Paul Krugman, who won a Nobele laureate prize in economics, have labeled the United States an oligarchy, pointing to the influence of large corporations and Wall Street executives on U.S. policy (Krugman 2011). Other political analysts assert that all democracies are really just "elected oligarchies," or systems in which citizens must vote for an individual who is part of a pool of candidates who come from the society's elite ruling class (Winters 2011).

Oligarchies have existed throughout history, and today many consider Russia an example of oligarchic political structure. After the fall of communism, groups of business owners captured control of this nation's natural resources and have used the opportunity to expand their wealth and political influence. Once an oligarchic power structure has been established, it can be very difficult for middle- and lower-class citizens to advance their socioeconomic status.

Social Policy and Debate: Is the United States an Oligarchy?

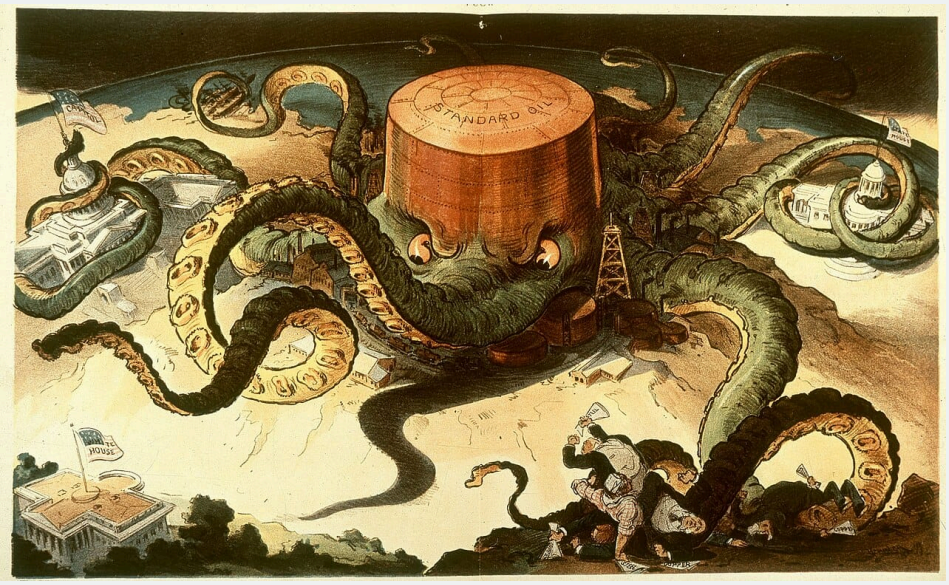


Figure 16.3.1: If left unregulated, corporate monopoly and concentrated economic power can influence governments and societies. (Standard Oil Octopus by Udo Keppler via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under PDM 1.0)

The American Gilded Age saw the rise and dominance of ultra-rich families such as the Vanderbilts, Rockefellers, and Carnegies, and the wealthy often indulged in absurd luxuries. One example is a lavish dinner party hosted for a pampered pet dog who attended wearing a $15,000 diamond collar (PBS Online 1999). At the same time, most Americans barely scraped by, living below what was considered the poverty level.

Some scholars believe that the United States has now embarked on a second gilded age, pointing out that the 400 wealthiest American families now own more than the 'lower' 150 million Americans put together (Zucman 2019), and that the top 1% own more than the bottom 50%.

Wealthy individuals and corporations are major political donors. Based on campaign finance reform legislation in 1971 and 2002, political campaign contributions were regulated and limited; however, the 2012 Supreme Court decision in the case of Citizens United versus the Federal Election Commission repealed many of those restrictions. The Court ruled that contributions of corporations and unions to Political Action Committees (PACs) are a form of free speech that cannot be abridged and so cannot be limited or disclosed. Opponents believe this is potentially a step in promoting oligarchy in the United States; the ultra-wealthy and those who control the purse strings of large corporations and unions will, in effect, be able to elect their candidate of choice through their unlimited spending power, as well as influence policy decisions, appointments to nonelected government jobs, and other forms of political power. Krugman (2011) says, "We have a society in which money is increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few people, and in which that concentration of income and wealth threatens to make us a democracy in name only."

How will that threat be fully assessed? And just because a small group of people can exert influence, do they? And does that influence work?

Wealthy people, and the companies and or industries they represent, use lobbying groups, think tanks, and legislative consulting group to directly influence policy. Investigations have compiled the widespread use and promotion of "model legislation," in which a lobbyist or industry group writes a bill that lawmakers then promote on their own. USA Today/Arizona Republic found that from 2010-18, over 10,000 bills were pushed through legislatures after being written and promoted by outside groups. These laws often thwart the will of the voters, or place the interests of a very small group of people above those of everyone else. For example, the interestingly titled Asbestos Transparency Bill was written by the asbestos industry to help protect it from lawsuits (O'Dell 2019). The same organizations also identify, train, manage, and compensate expert witnesses to testify on their behalf in front of various legislative and regulatory bodies.

> Does it work? Political scientists studied who benefits from laws and policies, and found that 78 percent of Congress's decisions benefit the top 10 percent of Americans. Note that those same laws sometimes benefit other Americans as well. But only 5 percent of laws and policies have been shown to benefit the larger 90 percent of people while not benefiting the wealthiest Americans (Represent.US 2014).

Dictatorship

Power in a dictatorship is held by a single person (or a very small group) that wields complete and absolute authority over a government and population. Like some absolute monarchies, dictatorships may be corrupt and seek to limit or even eradicate the liberties of the general population. Dictators use a variety of means to perpetuate their authority. Economic and military might, as well as intimidation and brutality are often foremost among their tactics; individuals are less likely to rebel when they are starving and fearful. Many dictators start out as military leaders and are conditioned to the use of violence against opposition.

Some dictators also possess the personal appeal that Max Weber identified with a charismatic leader. Subjects of such a dictator may believe that the leader has special ability or authority and may be willing to submit to his or her authority. The late Kim Jong-Il, North Korean dictator, and his successor, Kim Jong-Un, exemplify this type of charismatic dictatorship.

Some dictatorships do not align themselves with any particular belief system or ideology; the goal of this type of regime is usually limited to preserving the authority of the dictator. A totalitarian dictatorship is even more oppressive and attempts to control all aspects of its subjects' lives; including occupation, religious beliefs, and number of children permitted in each family. Citizens may be forced to publicly demonstrate their faith in the regime by participating in marches and demonstrations.

Some "benevolent" dictators, such as Napoleon and Anwar Sadat, are credited with advancing their people's standard of living or exercising a moderate amount of evenhandedness. Others grossly abuse their power. Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler, Saddam Hussein, Cambodia's Pol Pot, and Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe, for instance, are heads of state who earned a reputation for leading through fear and intimidation.

Democracy

A democracy is a form of government that strives to provide all citizens with an equal voice, or vote, in determining state policy, regardless of their level of socioeconomic status. Another important fundamental of the democratic state is the establishment and governance of a just and comprehensive constitution that delineates the roles and responsibilities of leaders and citizens alike.

Democracies, in general, ensure certain basic rights for their citizens. First and foremost, citizens are free to organize political parties and hold elections. Leaders, once elected, must abide by the terms of the given nation's constitution and are limited in the powers they can exercise, as well as in the length of the duration of their terms. Most democratic societies also champion freedom of individual speech, the press, and assembly, and they prohibit unlawful imprisonment. Of course, even in a democratic society, the government constrains citizens' total freedom to act however they wish. A democratically elected government does this by passing laws and writing regulations that, at least ideally, reflect the will of the majority of its people.

Although the United States champions the democratic ideology, it is not a "pure" democracy. In a purely democratic society, all citizens would vote on all proposed legislation, and this is not how laws are passed in the United States. There is a practical reason for this: a pure democracy would be hard to implement. Thus, the United States is a constitution-based federal republic in which citizens elect representatives to make policy decisions on their behalf. The term representative democracy, which is virtually synonymous with *republic*, can also be used to describe a government in which citizens elect representatives to promote policies that favor their interests. In the United States, representatives are elected at local and state levels, and the votes of the Electoral College determine who will hold the office of president. Each of the three branches of the U.S. government—the executive, judicial, and legislative—is held in check by the other branches.

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16.4: Politics in the United States

How To Define Politics

When describing a nation's politics, we should define the term. We may associate the term with freedom, power, corruption, or rhetoric. Political science looks at politics as the interaction between citizens and their government. Sociology studies politics as a means to understand the underlying social norms and values of a group. A society's political structure and practices provide insight into the distribution of power and wealth, as well as larger philosophical and cultural beliefs. A cursory sociological analysis of U.S. politics might suggest that Americans' desire to promote equality and democracy on a theoretical level is at odds with the nation's real-life capitalist orientation.

Lincoln's famous phrase "of the people, by the people, for the people" is at the heart of the U.S. system and sums up its most essential aspect: that citizens willingly and freely elect representatives they believe will look out for their best interests. Although many Americans take free elections for granted, it is a vital foundation of any democracy. When the U.S. government was formed, however, African Americans and women were denied the right to vote. Each of these groups struggled to secure the same suffrage rights as their White male counterparts, yet this history fails to inspire some Americans to show up at the polls and cast their ballots. Problems with the democratic process, including limited voter turnout, require us to more closely examine complex social issues that influence political participation.

Voter Participation

Voter participation is essential to the success of the U.S. political system. Although many Americans are quick to complain about laws and political leadership, in any given election year roughly half the population does not vote (United States Elections Project 2010). Some years have seen even lower turnouts; in 2010, for instance, only 37.8 percent of the population participated in the electoral process (United States Elections Project 2011). Poor turnout can skew election results, particularly if one age or socioeconomic group is more diligent in its efforts to make it to the polls.

Certain voting advocacy groups work to improve turnout. Vote.org focuses on absentee voting, mail-in voting, and similar practices. Native Vote is an organization that strives to inform Native Americans about upcoming elections and encourages their participation. National Council of La Raza and Voto Latino strive to improve voter turnout among the Latino population. William Frey, author of Diversity Explosion, points out that the number of Hispanic people, Asian people, and multiracial populations is expected to double in the next forty years (Balz 2014).

Race, Gender, and Class Issues

Although recent records have shown more minorities voting now than ever before, this trend is still fairly new. Historically, African Americans and other minorities have been underrepresented at the polls. Black men were not allowed to vote at all until after the Civil War, and Black women gained the right to vote along with other women only with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. For years, African Americans who were brave enough to vote were discouraged by discriminatory legislation, passed in many southern states, which required poll taxes and literacy tests of prospective voters. Literacy tests were not outlawed until 1965, when President Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act.

The 1960s saw other important reforms in U.S. voting. Shortly before the Voting Rights Act was passed, the 1964 U.S. Supreme Court case *Reynolds v. Sims* changed the nature of elections. This landmark decision reaffirmed the notion of "one person, one vote," a concept holding that all people's votes should be counted equally. Before this decision, unequal distributions of population enabled small groups of people in sparsely populated rural areas to have as much voting power as the denser populations of urban areas. After *Reynolds v. Sims*, districts were redrawn so that they would include equal numbers of voters.

Unfortunately, in June 2013 the Supreme Court repealed several important aspects of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, ruling that southern states no longer need the stricter scrutiny that was once required to prohibit racial discrimination in voting practices in the South. Following this decision, several states moved forward with voter identification laws that had previously been banned by federal courts. Officials in Texas, Mississippi, and Alabama claim that new identification (ID) laws are needed to reduce voter fraud. Opponents point to the Department of Justice statistics indicating that only twenty-six voters, of 197 million voters in federal elections, were found guilty of voter fraud between 2002 and 2005. "Contemporary voter identification laws are trying to solve a

problem that hasn't existed in over a century" (Campbell, 2012). Opponents further note that new voter ID laws disproportionately affect minorities and the poor, potentially prohibiting them from exercising their right to vote.

Equal Voting Power?

Evidence suggests that legal protection of voting rights does not directly translate into equal voting power. Relative to their presence in the U.S. population, women and racial/ethnic minorities are underrepresented in the U.S. Congress. White men still dominate both houses. And until the inauguration of Barack Obama in 2009, all U.S. presidents had been White men.

Like race and ethnicity, social class also has influenced voting practices. Voting rates among lower-educated, lower-paid workers are lower than for people with higher socioeconomic status that fosters a system in which people with more power and access to resources have the means to perpetuate their power. Several explanations have been offered to account for this difference (Raymond 2010). Workers in low-paying service jobs might find it harder to get to the polls because they lack flexibility in their work hours and quality daycare to look after children while they vote. Because a larger share of racial and ethnic minorities is employed in such positions, social class may be linked to race and ethnicity influencing voting rates. New requirements for specific types of voter identification in some states are likely to compound these issues, because it may take additional time away from work, as well as additional child care or transportation, for voters to get the needed IDs. The impact on minorities and the impoverished may cause a further decrease in voter participation. Attitudes play a role as well. Some people of low socioeconomic status or minority race/ethnicity doubt their vote will count or voice will be heard because they have seen no evidence of their political power in their communities. Many believe that what they already have is all they can achieve.

As suggested earlier, money can carry a lot of influence in U.S. democracy. But there are other means to make one's voice heard. Free speech can be influential, and people can participate in the democratic system through volunteering with political advocacy groups, writing to elected officials, sharing views in a public forum such as a blog or letter to the editor, forming or joining cause-related political organizations and interest groups, participating in public demonstrations, and even running for a local office.

The Judicial System

The third branch of the U.S. government is the judicial system, which consists of local, state, and federal courts. The U.S. Supreme Court is the highest court in the United States, and it has the final say on decisions about the constitutionality of laws that citizens challenge. As noted earlier, some rulings have a direct impact on the political system, such as recent decisions about voter identification and campaign financing. Other Supreme Court decisions affect different aspects of society, and they are useful for sociological study because they help us understand cultural changes. One example is a recent and highly controversial case that dealt with the religious opposition of Hobby Lobby Stores Inc. to providing employees with specific kinds of insurance mandated by the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. Another example is same-sex marriage cases, which were expected to be heard by the Court; however, the Court denied review of these cases in the fall of 2014. For now, the rulings of federal district courts stand, and states can continue to have differing outcomes on same-sex marriage for their citizens.

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16.5: Theoretical Perspectives on Government and Power

Functionalism

According to functionalism, the government has four main purposes: planning and directing society, meeting social needs, maintaining law and order, and managing international relations. According to functionalism, all aspects of society serve a purpose.

Functionalists view government and politics as a way to enforce norms and regulate conflict. Functionalists see active social change, such as the sit-in on Wall Street, as undesirable because it forces change and, as a result, undesirable things that might have to be compensated for. Functionalists seek consensus and order in society. Dysfunction creates social problems that lead to social change. For instance, functionalists would see monetary political contributions as a way of keeping people connected to the democratic process. This would be in opposition to a conflict theorist who would see this financial contribution as a way for the rich to perpetuate their own wealth.

Conflict Theory

Conflict theory focuses on the social inequalities and power difference within a group, analyzing society through this lens. Philosopher and social scientist Karl Marx was a seminal force in developing the conflict theory perspective; he viewed social structure, rather than individual personality characteristics, as the cause of many social problems, such as poverty and crime. Marx believed that conflict between groups struggling to either attain wealth and power or keep the wealth and power they had was inevitable in a capitalist society, and conflict was the only way for the underprivileged to eventually gain some measure of equality.

C. Wright Mills (1956) elaborated on some of Marx's concepts, coining the phrase power elite to describe what he saw as the small group of powerful people who control much of a society. Mills believed the power elite use government to develop social policies that allow them to keep their wealth. Contemporary theorist G. William Domhoff (2011) elaborates on ways in which the power elite may be seen as a subculture whose members follow similar social patterns such as joining elite clubs, attending select schools, and vacationing at a handful of exclusive destinations.

Even before there were modern nation-states, political conflicts arose among competing societies or factions of people. Vikings attacked continental European tribes in search of loot, and, later, European explorers landed on foreign shores to claim the resources of indigenous groups. Conflicts also arose among competing groups within individual sovereignties, as evidenced by the bloody French Revolution. Nearly all conflicts in the past and present, however, are spurred by basic desires: the drive to protect or gain territory and wealth, and the need to preserve liberty and autonomy.

According to sociologist and philosopher Karl Marx, such conflicts are necessary, although ugly, steps toward a more egalitarian society. Marx saw a historical pattern in which revolutionaries toppled elite power structures, after which wealth and authority became more evenly dispersed among the population, and the overall social order advanced. In this pattern of change through conflict, people tend to gain greater personal freedom and economic stability (1848).

Modern-day conflicts are still driven by the desire to gain or protect power and wealth, whether in the form of land and resources or in the form of liberty and autonomy. Internally, groups within the U.S. struggle within the system, by trying to achieve the outcomes they prefer. Political differences over budget issues, for example, led to the recent shutdown of the federal government, and alternative political groups, such as the Tea Party, are gaining a significant following.



Figure 16.5.1: Cairo's Tahrir Square during Egypt's 2011 Arab Spring. Public space can become a site of collective action, where shared grievances, political identities, and demands for social change are organized and made visible. (Tahrir Square, Egypt, by Jonathan Rashad via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under CC BY 4.0)

The Arab Spring exemplifies oppressed groups acting collectively to change their governmental systems, seeking both greater liberty and greater economic equity. Some nations, such as Tunisia, have successfully transitioned to governmental change; others, like Egypt, have not yet reached consensus on a new government.

Unfortunately, the change process in some countries reached the point of active combat between the established government and the portion of the population seeking change, often called revolutionaries or rebels. Libya and Syria are two such countries; the multifaceted nature of the conflict, with several groups competing for their own desired ends, makes creation of a peaceful resolution more challenging.

Popular uprisings of citizens seeking governmental change have occurred this year in Bosnia, Brazil, Greece, Iran, Jordan, Portugal, Spain, Turkey, Ukraine, and most recently in Hong Kong. Although much smaller in size and scope, demonstrations occurred in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd in the summer of 2020. Some of these and related demonstrations went on for months. Small numbers of these protests or protesters were violent, and many leaders in both the protest movement and government acknowledge that the protests had changed focus to reflect general anti-government sentiments, rather than focusing on racial justice.

Symbolic Interactionism

Other sociologists study government and power by relying on the framework of symbolic interactionism, which is grounded in the works of Max Weber and George H. Mead.

Symbolic interactionism, as it pertains to government, focuses its attention on figures, emblems, or individuals that represent power and authority. Many diverse entities in larger society can be considered symbolic: trees, doves, wedding rings. Images that represent the power and authority of the United States include the White House, the eagle, and the American flag. The Seal of the President of the United States, along with the office in general, incites respect and reverence in many Americans.

Symbolic interactionists are not interested in large structures such as the government. As micro-sociologists, they are more interested in the face-to-face aspects of politics. In reality, much of politics consists of face-to-face backroom meetings and lobbyist efforts. What the public often sees is the front porch of politics that is sanitized by the media through gatekeeping.

Symbolic interactionists are most interested in the interaction between these small groups who make decisions, or in the case of some recent congressional committees, demonstrate the inability to make any decisions at all. The heart of politics is the result of interaction between individuals and small groups over periods of time. These meetings produce new meanings and perspectives that individuals use to make sure there are future interactions.

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16.6: Key Terms

Glossary

- **absolute monarchies** | governments wherein a monarch has absolute or unmitigated power
- **anarchy** | the absence of any organized government
- **authority** | power that people accept because it comes from a source that is perceived as legitimate
- **charismatic authority** | power legitimized on the basis of a leader's exceptional personal qualities
- **constitutional monarchies** | national governments that recognize monarchs but require these figures to abide by the laws of a greater constitution
- **democracy** | a form of government that provides all citizens with an equal voice or vote in determining state policy
- **dictatorship** | a form of government in which a single person (or a very small group) wields complete and absolute authority over a government or populace after the dictator rises to power, usually through economic or military might
- **monarchy** | a form of government in which a single person (a monarch) rules until that individual dies or abdicates the throne
- **oligarchy** | a form of government in which power is held by a small, elite group
- **one person** | a concept holding that each person's vote should be counted equally
- **patrimonialism** | a type of authority wherein military and administrative factions enforce the power of the master
- **politics** | a means of studying a nation's or group's underlying social norms as values as evidenced through its political structure and practices
- **power** | the ability to exercise one's will over others
- **power elite** | a small group of powerful people who control much of a society
- **rational-legal authority** | power that is legitimized by rules, regulations, and laws
- **representative democracy** | a government wherein citizens elect officials to represent their interests
- **totalitarian dictatorship** | an extremely oppressive form of dictatorship in which most aspects of citizens' lives are controlled by the leader
- **traditional authority** | power legitimized on the basis of long-standing customs

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16.7: Short Answer

Critical Thinking Questions

1. Explain why leaders as divergent as Hitler and Jesus Christ are both categorized as charismatic authorities.
2. Why do people accept traditional authority figures even though these types of leaders have limited means of enforcing their power?
3. Charismatic leaders are among the most fascinating figures in history. Select a charismatic leader about whom you wish to learn more and conduct online research to find out about this individual. Then write a paragraph describing the personal qualities that led to this person's influence, considering the society in which he or she emerged.
4. Do you feel the United States has become an oligarchy? Why, or why not?
5. Explain how an absolute monarchy differs from a dictatorship.
6. In which form of government do average citizens have the least political power? What options might they have for exerting political power under this type of regime?
7. If the percentage of Asian Americans in Congress is far below the percentage of Asian Americans in the United States, does that mean Asian Americans lack political power? Why or why not?
8. Explain how a voter's social class can affect his or her voting practices.
9. Besides voting, how can U.S. citizens influence political processes and outcomes? Which of these strategies have you personally used?
10. What is one criticism of functionalism?
11. Explain what is meant by the term power elite. Consider its original intention as coined by C. Wright Mills as well as your understanding of it.

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16.8: Further Research

Additional Learning Resources

- Want to learn more about sociologists at work in the real world? Read an online overview of sociological perspectives on disenfranchisement of people convicted of felonies.
- The 1965 Voting Rights Act was preceded by Lyndon Johnson's signing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Both articles were instrumental in establishing equal rights for African Americans.
- Functionalism is a complex philosophical theory that pertains to a variety of disciplines beyond sociology. Visit the entry devoted to functionalism on *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* for a more comprehensive overview.

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16.10: Accessible Text Descriptions

Figure 16.1: Roadmap

A horizontal instructional diagram titled “Government and Politics as a Way of Understanding Power, Representation, and Justice.” Beneath the title, three large light-gray arrows point from left to right. Each arrow contains a dark teal circle with white text organized around the guiding questions why, who, and how.

The first circle is labeled “The ‘WHY’” and explains why government and politics matter. They reveal who holds power, whose needs receive priority, how rights and resources are distributed, and how inequality and justice are produced or challenged.

The second circle is labeled “The ‘WHO’” and identifies the people and groups involved. These include voters and nonvoters, leaders and public officials, political parties and social movements, groups that are represented, and voices that are excluded from decision-making.

The third circle is labeled “The ‘HOW’” and explains how sociologists study government and politics. They examine authority, laws, institutions, elections, parties, political participation, representation, social values, inequality, and change.

Overall, the diagram presents government and politics as social processes through which power is organized, interests are represented or marginalized, and competing ideas about rights, resources, and justice are negotiated.

Figure 16.1.1: Florida Voting Rights

A five-step flowchart explains how voting rights in Florida changed from disenfranchisement to partial restoration and then to renewed restriction.

1. Step 1, Felony Disenfranchisement in Florida: The chart begins with the long-standing exclusion of many people with felony convictions from voting. It notes that nearly 1.7 million people were unable to vote and that this policy had a disproportionate impact on Black Floridians and low-income communities.
2. Step 2, 2018 Referendum / Amendment 4: Voters in Florida approved Amendment 4, which restored voting rights to many people after completion of their sentences. This step represents a major expansion of formal political inclusion.
3. Step 3, 2019 Legislative Response: The Florida legislature responded by requiring payment of fines, fees, and restitution before voting rights could be restored. This added a financial condition to reenfranchisement and changed how Amendment 4 worked in practice.
4. Step 4, Practical Outcome: Many people remained unable to vote even after completing their sentences because they still owed legal financial obligations or could not easily determine what they owed. The diagram emphasizes that formal restoration did not necessarily lead to actual access to voting.
5. Step 5, Sociological Questions: The final panel raises broader sociological questions: Who has power? Who counts as a full citizen? How do race, class, punishment, and law shape political participation? These questions encourage analysis of how inequality and state power affect democratic inclusion.

Arrows connect each stage from left to right, showing a process in which an apparent expansion of rights is followed by new legal barriers. The summary statement at the bottom explains that the Florida voting rights case shows how law, punishment, race, and class can shape access to citizenship and political participation.

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17: POPULATION, URBANIZATION, AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Introduction

Population, urbanization, and the environment are deeply connected social processes. Where people live, how communities grow, how cities are organized, and how societies use natural resources all shape everyday life. These patterns influence access to housing, transportation, education, jobs, clean air, clean water, and public space. They also reveal important inequalities: some communities benefit from development and environmental protection, while others carry the greatest burdens of pollution, displacement, overcrowding, or climate-related risk.

Sociologists study these issues not only as matters of numbers, geography, or nature, but as social questions. Population growth, migration, suburbanization, urban inequality, environmental degradation, and climate change are shaped by institutions, policies, economic systems, cultural values, and global power relations. This chapter introduces students to the sociological study of population, urban life, and the environment, showing how these topics help us understand both local communities and global inequality.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- Define key concepts related to demography, urbanization, and environmental sociology.
- Describe major population trends, including fertility, mortality, migration, and population growth.
- Explain how urbanization shapes social life, inequality, and community development.
- Analyze the relationship between environmental problems and patterns of social inequality.
- Evaluate how sociological perspectives help us understand population change, urban life, and environmental challenges.



Figure 17.1: Population, urbanization, and the environment shape where people live, what resources they can access, and who faces environmental harm. (Marx Gomez-Liendo via ChatGPT). Access alternative description for Figure 17.1.

Why, Who, and How

This chapter asks why population, cities, and the environment matter for sociology. These issues affect where people live, what resources they can access, how communities change, and who is most vulnerable to environmental harm. It examines how sociologists study these patterns by looking at demographic data, urban development, migration, environmental inequality, and

the social organization of space. Finally, it asks who is most affected by these processes, paying close attention to differences by class, race, gender, nation, and region. By the end of the chapter, students should be able to see population change, urbanization, and environmental problems not as isolated issues, but as connected parts of social life.

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17.1: Case Study and Vignette

Environmental Inequality

Hydraulic fracturing, commonly known as fracking, is a method used to extract oil and natural gas from shale rock. The process involves drilling deep into the earth and injecting a high-pressure mixture of water, sand, and chemicals into rock formations to release trapped energy resources. To energy companies and many policymakers, fracking represents an important technological breakthrough: it has expanded access to domestic oil and natural gas, lowered some energy costs, and contributed to job creation in particular regions. Supporters also argue that natural gas produces fewer air emissions than coal when burned, making it appear to be a “cleaner” bridge fuel in the transition away from coal.

At the same time, fracking raises serious environmental and social concerns. The process requires large amounts of water, and once that water is mixed with chemicals, it can become unsafe for human or animal consumption. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has found that hydraulic fracturing activities can affect drinking water resources under some circumstances, especially when spills, poor well construction, wastewater handling, or water withdrawals create risks for nearby communities (Environmental Protection Agency, 2016). Fracking has also been associated with seismic concerns, although the U.S. Geological Survey notes that most induced earthquakes connected to oil and gas activity are caused not directly by fracking itself, but by the underground disposal of wastewater from oil and gas production (USGS, n.d.).

A Town Divided by an Energy Boom

Imagine a small town located near a newly developed shale gas field. For years, the town struggled with unemployment, declining public services, and young people leaving in search of work. When energy companies arrive, some residents welcome them. New jobs appear. Local restaurants, hotels, and trucking companies see more business. The town government receives new tax revenue, and some landowners earn money by leasing their property.

But not everyone experiences the boom in the same way. Families living closest to drilling sites worry about truck traffic, noise, air quality, and possible water contamination. Some residents notice changes in their well water and wonder whether it is safe to drink. Others feel pressured to accept environmental risks because the town needs jobs. Meanwhile, workers in nearby coal communities face a different problem: as natural gas becomes cheaper, demand for coal continues to fall, accelerating job loss in an industry already transformed by automation and decline.

In this town, fracking is not simply an environmental issue or an economic issue. It is both. It raises difficult sociological questions: Who benefits from energy development? Who carries the risks? Whose voices count when decisions are made? And what responsibilities do governments, corporations, and communities have when economic growth creates environmental harm?

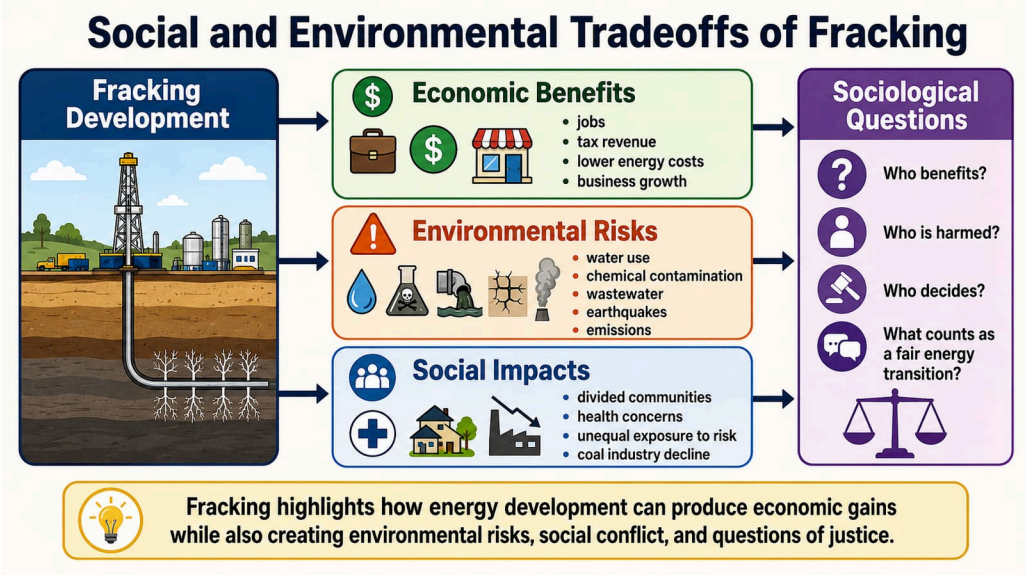


Figure 17.1.1: Fracking can create jobs, tax revenue, lower energy costs, and business growth while also increasing environmental risks, community conflict, health concerns, and unequal exposure to harm. (Marx Gomez-Liendo via ChatGPT). Access alternative description for Figure 17.1.1.

This case illustrates one of the central themes of this chapter: population, urbanization, and the environment are never just "natural" or technical issues. They are also social issues shaped by power, inequality, policy, economic systems, and collective decision-making. Fracking may create jobs and lower energy costs, but it can also place environmental burdens on particular communities. These burdens are not always distributed equally. Low-income communities, rural communities, Indigenous communities, and communities with less political influence may have fewer resources to resist unwanted development or demand environmental protections.

Fracking also shows how environmental decisions connect different regions and industries. The growth of natural gas production has contributed to the decline of coal, an industry already affected by automation and long-term economic restructuring. Coal communities in states such as West Virginia, Kentucky, and Pennsylvania have experienced job loss, population decline, and weakening local economies. From a sociological perspective, this raises an important question: when one industry expands and another contracts, what happens to the workers, families, and towns left behind?

Sociological Approaches

The case also connects to global population growth and energy demand. The world reached 8 billion people on November 15, 2022, according to the United Nations, making questions of energy, housing, water, waste, and environmental sustainability even more urgent. As more people require electricity, transportation, food, housing, and consumer goods, societies face difficult choices about how to balance economic development with environmental protection. The key sociological question is not simply whether energy production is necessary, but how energy systems are organized, who controls them, and how their costs and benefits are distributed.

Different sociological perspectives help us interpret this case. A functionalist might ask how energy production contributes to the stability of society by powering homes, businesses, transportation, and public institutions. From this view, fracking may be understood as part of a larger system that helps meet energy needs and supports economic activity. A conflict theorist, however, would focus on inequality: corporations may profit from extraction while nearby communities face pollution, health risks, or displacement. This perspective would ask whether environmental harms are being shifted onto groups with less political and economic power. A symbolic interactionist might examine how people talk about fracking in everyday life. For example, one group may describe it as "energy independence" and "job creation," while another may describe it as "contamination," "risk," or "environmental injustice." These meanings shape public debate and influence whether people see fracking as progress, danger, or both.

As you read this chapter, keep returning to the tensions raised by this case. How much environmental risk should a community accept in exchange for economic growth? Who should decide whether fracking is worth it: corporations, governments, local residents, scientists, workers, or all of these groups together? If natural gas weakens the coal industry, do coal workers and their

communities deserve public support during the transition? And more broadly, how can societies meet the needs of a growing population without deepening environmental inequality?

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17.2: Demography and Population

Fertility, Mortality, Migration

Between 2011 and 2012, we reached a population milestone of 7 billion humans on the earth's surface. The rapidity with which this happened demonstrated an exponential increase from the time it took to grow from 5 billion to 6 billion people. In short, the planet is filling up. We'll have 8 billion people in this decade. While the population is increasing overall, there are certain countries and regions where growth is slowing. Relocation and migration also change the makeup and quantity of people in an area. In order to properly understand these dynamics and make decisions regarding them, we turn to demography, or the study of populations. Three critical aspects of demography are fertility, mortality, and migration.

The fertility rate of a society is a measure noting the number of children born. The fertility number is generally lower than the fecundity number, which measures the potential number of children that could be born to women of childbearing age. Sociologists measure fertility using the crude birthrate (the number of live births per 1,000 people per year). Just as fertility measures childbearing, the mortality rate is a measure of the number of people who die. The crude death rate is a number derived from the number of deaths per 1,000 people per year. When analyzed together, fertility and mortality rates help researchers understand the overall growth occurring in a population.

Another key element in studying populations is the movement of people into and out of an area. Migration may take the form of immigration, which describes movement into an area to take up permanent residence, or emigration, which refers to movement out of an area to another place of permanent residence. Migration might be voluntary (as when college students study abroad), involuntary (as when Syrians evacuated war-torn areas), or forced (as when many Native American tribes were removed from the lands they'd lived in for generations).

Big Picture: Mass Migration Crises



Figure 17.2.1: Densely crowded chain-link holding areas and limited personal space illustrate people's experiences in immigration detention centers. (Overcrowding of families by Department of Homeland Security via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under PDM 1.0)

At least once during each of the last three Presidential administrations, the United States has faced a crisis at its southern border. While images of children in crowded holding areas, covered in piles of shiny plastic emergency blankets, were often associated with the Trump Presidency, Presidents Obama and Biden saw children in the same conditions. The holding facilities, described as cages by some and often referred to as "perreras" (dog kennels) or "hieleras" (ice boxes) by the migrating people, are meant to be temporary stopovers while people await hearings or related refugee processes. But during

a number of occasions, the number of people crossing the border was so large – including, at times, tens of thousands of children – that the system became overwhelmed. The conditions are deplorable. The outcomes are uncertain. But the people cross the border anyway.

How did we get here? Bipartisan legislation passed in 2008 guarantees unaccompanied minors a hearing with an immigration judge where they may request asylum based on a "credible" fear of persecution or torture (U.S. Congress 2008). In some cases, these children are looking for relatives and can be placed with family while awaiting a hearing on their immigration status; in other cases, they become involved with the foster system or are placed in of the 170 housing facilities run by nonprofit or for-profit groups. Finally, for people who turn 18 while still in the process, they may be transferred to detention centers, sometimes on their birthday (Montoya-Galvez 2021). Many people in America were either accepting or unaware of these policies and situations until crises occurred in 2014 and 2018-19. At those points of incredible influxes of migrant children, border control, refugee services, and advocacy organizations were overwhelmed by the surge. Both the Obama and Trump administrations pushed for changes in laws or guidelines for enforcement (Gomez 2014 and Kanno-Youngs 2020).

The Obama administration sought to make the decision process faster. In 2014, over 50,000 unaccompanied minors were taken into custody, creating the backlog discussed above. The Trump administration sought to discourage immigration through policies such as separating parents and children who arrived together. The policy was decried by members of Trump's own party, as well as many other organizations, and was eventually dealt a series of legal blows before the President reversed it. Later investigations determined that hundreds, if not thousands, of children remained separated from their parents for extended periods of time (Spagat 2019).

While the situations at the border are extremely threatening to children's health and safety, people and policymakers in the United States are divided on how to address the situation. In many cases, these children are fleeing various kinds of violence and extreme poverty. The U.S. government has repeatedly indicated that the best way to avoid these crises is to address those conditions in the migrants' home countries. But even with financial aid for those nations and pressure on their governments to crack down on illegal activity, it is unlikely that the situation will change quickly or consistently. The Biden administration may not be the last to face a surge of immigrant children at its border.

A functional perspective theorist might focus on the dysfunctions caused by the sudden influx of underage asylum seekers, while a conflict perspective theorist might look at the way social stratification influences how the members of a developed country are treating the lower-status migrants from less-developed countries in Latin America. An interactionist theorist might see significance in the attitude of those protesting the presence of migrant children. Which theoretical perspective makes the most sense to you?

Population Growth

Changing fertility, mortality, and migration rates make up the total population composition, a snapshot of the demographic profile of a population. This number can be measured for societies, nations, world regions, or other groups. The population composition includes the sex ratio, the number of men for every hundred women, as well as the population pyramid, a picture of population distribution by sex and age.

Table 17.2.1 Varying Fertility and Mortality Rated by Country: As the table illustrates, countries vary greatly in fertility rates and mortality rates—the components that make up a population composition. This data is from 2018, and changes occur continually. For example, in 2014, the number of children per adult woman in Afghanistan was 5.4 – generally an average of one more child per family. And the U.S. was slightly higher at 2.0 (World Bank 2019)

Country	Population (in millions)	Fertility Rate (number of children per adult women)	Mortality Rate (per 1,000 births)	Sex Ratio Male to Female
Afghanistan	38.4	4.4	48	1.05
Finland	5.52	1.4	2.0	1.04
United States of America	32.8	1.7	5.7	0.97

Comparing the three countries in Table 20.1 reveals that there are more men than women in Afghanistan and Finland, whereas the reverse is true in the United States. Afghanistan also has significantly higher fertility and mortality rates than either of the

other two countries. In all three cases, the fertility rates have dropped in recent years, but Afghanistan's drop (from 5.4 children per woman to 4.4) will likely be the most impactful (World Bank 2019). Do these statistics surprise you? How do you think the population makeup affects the political climate and economics of the different countries?

Demographic Theories

Sociologists have long looked at population issues as central to understanding human interactions. Below we will look at four theories about population that inform sociological thought: Malthusian, zero population growth, cornucopian, and demographic transition theories.

Malthusian Theory

Thomas Malthus (1766–1834) was an English clergyman who made dire predictions about earth's ability to sustain its growing population. According to Malthusian theory, three factors would control human population that exceeded the earth's carrying capacity, or how many people can live in a given area considering the amount of available resources. Malthus identified these factors as war, famine, and disease (Malthus 1798). He termed them "positive checks" because they increase mortality rates, thus keeping the population in check. They are countered by "preventive checks," which also control the population but by reducing fertility rates; preventive checks include birth control and celibacy. Thinking practically, Malthus saw that people could produce only so much food in a given year, yet the population was increasing at an exponential rate. Eventually, he thought people would run out of food and begin to starve. They would go to war over increasingly scarce resources and reduce the population to a manageable level, and then the cycle would begin anew.

Of course, this has not exactly happened. The human population has continued to grow long past Malthus's predictions. So what happened? Why didn't we die off? There are three reasons sociologists believe we are continuing to expand the population of our planet. First, technological increases in food production have increased both the amount and quality of calories we can produce per person. Second, human ingenuity has developed new medicine to curtail death from disease. Finally, the development and widespread use of contraception and other forms of family planning have decreased the speed at which our population increases. But what about the future? Some still believe Malthus was correct and that ample resources to support the earth's population will soon run out.

Zero Population Growth

A neo-Malthusian researcher named Paul Ehrlich brought Malthus's predictions into the twentieth century. However, according to Ehrlich, it is the environment, not specifically the food supply, that will play a crucial role in the continued health of the planet's population (Ehrlich 1968). Ehrlich's ideas suggest that the human population is moving rapidly toward complete environmental collapse, as privileged people use up or pollute a number of environmental resources such as water and air. He advocated for a goal of zero population growth (ZPG), in which the number of people entering a population through birth or immigration is equal to the number of people leaving it via death or emigration. While support for this concept is mixed, it is still considered a possible solution to global overpopulation.

Cornucopian Theory

Of course, some theories are less focused on the pessimistic hypothesis that the world's population will meet a detrimental challenge to sustaining itself. Cornucopian theory scoffs at the idea of humans wiping themselves out; it asserts that human ingenuity can resolve any environmental or social issues that develop. As an example, it points to the issue of food supply. If we need more food, the theory contends, agricultural scientists will figure out how to grow it, as they have already been doing for centuries. After all, in this perspective, human ingenuity has been up to the task for thousands of years and there is no reason for that pattern not to continue (Simon 1981).

Demographic Transition Theory

Whether you believe that we are headed for environmental disaster and the end of human existence as we know it, or you think people will always adapt to changing circumstances, we can see clear patterns in population growth. Societies develop along a predictable continuum as they evolve from unindustrialized to postindustrial. Demographic transition theory (Caldwell and Caldwell 2006) suggests that future population growth will develop along a predictable four-stage model.

In Stage 1, birth, death, and infant mortality rates are all high, while life expectancy is short. An example of this stage is the 1800s in the United States. As countries begin to industrialize, they enter Stage 2, where birth rates are higher while infant mortality and the death rates drop. Life expectancy also increases. Afghanistan is currently in this stage. Stage 3 occurs once a society is thoroughly industrialized; birth rates decline, while life expectancy continues to increase. Death rates continue to decrease. Mexico's population is at this stage. In the final phase, Stage 4, we see the postindustrial era of a society. Birth and death rates are low, people are healthier and live longer, and society enters a phase of population stability. Overall population may even decline. For example, Sweden is considered to be in Stage 4.

The United Nations Population Fund (2008) categorizes nations as high fertility, intermediate fertility, or low fertility. The United Nations (UN) anticipates the population growth will triple between 2011 and 2100 in high-fertility countries, which are currently concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa. For countries with intermediate fertility rates (the United States, India, and Mexico all fall into this category), growth is expected to be about 26 percent. And low-fertility countries like China, Australia, and most of Europe will actually see population declines of approximately 20 percent. The graphs below illustrate this trend.

The "Graying" of the United States

The United States is experiencing a major demographic shift sometimes called the graying of the population. This refers to the growing share of older adults in the population, especially as fertility rates decline and life expectancy remains relatively high. In the United States, older adults are projected to outnumber children under 18 by 2034. This shift raises sociological questions about health care, caregiving, Social Security, housing, disability, loneliness, poverty, and intergenerational responsibility.

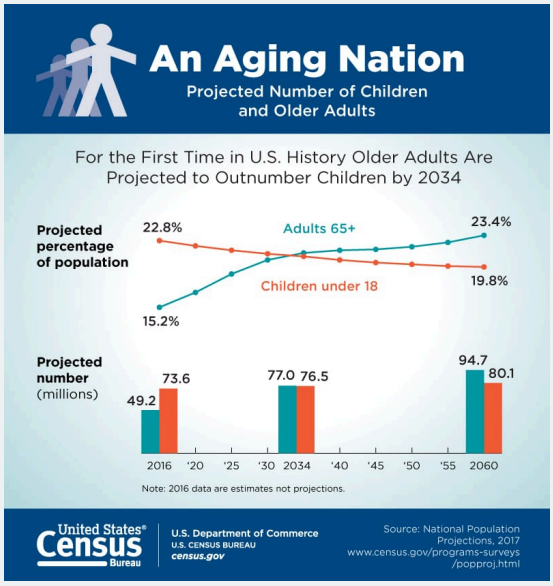


Figure 17.2.2: Current projections show the share of adults age 65 and older rising as the share of children declines, with older adults expected to outnumber children for the first time in U.S. history by 2034. (The Graying of America by unknown author via U.S. Census Bureau is licensed under PDM 1.0). Access alternative description for Figure 17.2.1.

Changes in U.S. Immigration Patterns and Attitudes

Worldwide patterns of migration have changed, though the United States remains the most popular destination. From 1990 to 2013, the number of migrants living in the United States increased from one in six to one in five (The Pew Research Center 2013). Overall, the United States is home to about 45 million foreign-born people, while only about 3 million U.S. citizens lived abroad. Of foreign-born citizens emigrating to the United States, 55 percent originated in Latin America and the Caribbean. However, over the past few years, more people from Asian countries have entered than from Latin American ones (Budiman 2020).

While there are more foreign-born people residing in the United States legally, as of 2017 about 10.5 million resided here without legal status (Budiman 2020). Most immigrants in the U.S. live in either Texas, Florida, or California.

Even before policy changes and COVID-19 affected refugee admittance, a relatively small number of people formally entered the

country as refugees. In 2016, about 85,000 refugees were admitted to the U.S. (of over one million total immigrants), with the largest portion arriving from the Democratic Republic of Congo; in 2020, the number of refugees was reduced to 18,000.

Most citizens agree that our national immigration policies are need adjustment. More than two-thirds (69 percent) of those in a recent national survey believed illegal immigrants should have a path to citizenship provided they meet other requirements, such as paying taxes and passing a background check. Even more people (72 percent) supported passing a DREAM Act, which would allow people who immigrated as children to earn citizenship. In both parts of the survey, majorities of both Republicans and Democrats as well as independents supported the pathway to citizenship (Vox and Data for Progress 2021).

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17.3: Urbanization

The Growth of Cities

Urbanization is the study of the social, political, and economic relationships in cities, and someone specializing in urban sociology studies those relationships. In some ways, cities can be microcosms of universal human behavior, while in others they provide a unique environment that yields its own brand of human behavior. There is no strict dividing line between rural and urban; rather, there is a continuum where one bleeds into the other. However, once a geographically concentrated population has reached approximately 100,000 people, it typically behaves like a city regardless of what its designation might be.

According to sociologist Gideon Sjoberg (1965), there are three prerequisites for the development of a city: First, good environment with fresh water and a favorable climate; second, advanced technology, which will produce a food surplus to support nonfarmers; and third, strong social organization to ensure social stability and a stable economy. Most scholars agree that the first cities were developed somewhere in ancient Mesopotamia, though there are disagreements about exactly where. Most early cities were small by today's standards, and the largest was most likely Rome, with about 650,000 inhabitants (Chandler and Fox 1974). The factors limiting the size of ancient cities included lack of adequate sewage control, limited food supply, and immigration restrictions. For example, serfs were tied to the land, and transportation was limited and inefficient. Today, the primary influence on cities' growth is economic forces. Since the recent economic recession reduced housing prices, researchers have been waiting to see what happens to urban migration patterns in response.

Urbanization in the United States

Urbanization in the United States proceeded rapidly during the Industrial Era. As more and more opportunities for work appeared in factories, workers left farms (and the rural communities that housed them) to move to the cities. From mill towns in Massachusetts to tenements in New York, the industrial era saw an influx of poor workers into U.S. cities. At various times throughout the country's history, certain demographic groups, from post-Civil War southern Black people to more recent immigrants, have made their way to urban centers to seek a better life in the city.

Sociology in the Real World: Managing Refugees and Asylum-Seekers in the Modern World

In 2013, the number of refugees, asylum-seekers, and internally displaced people worldwide exceeded 50 million people for the first time since the end of World War II. Half these people were children. A refugee is defined as an individual who has been forced to leave his or her country in order to escape war, persecution, or natural disaster, while asylum-seekers are those whose claim to refugee status has not been validated. An internally displaced person, on the other hand, is neither a refugee nor an asylum-seeker. Displaced persons have fled their homes while remaining inside their country's borders.

The war in Syria caused most of the 2013 increase, forcing 2.5 million people to seek refugee status while internally displacing an additional 6.5 million. Violence in Central African Republic and South Sudan also contributed a large number of people to the total (The United Nations Refugee Agency 2014).

The refugees need help in the form of food, water, shelter, and medical care, which has worldwide implications for nations contributing foreign aid, the nations hosting the refugees, and the non-government organizations (NGOs) working with individuals and groups on site (The United Nations Refugee Agency 2014). Where will this large moving population, including sick, elderly, children, and people with very few possessions and no long-term plan, go?

Suburbs and Exurbs

As cities grew more crowded, and often more impoverished and costly, more and more people began to migrate back out of them. But instead of returning to rural small towns (like they'd resided in before moving to the city), these people needed close access to the cities for their jobs. In the 1850s, as the urban population greatly expanded and transportation options improved, suburbs developed. Suburbs are the communities surrounding cities, typically close enough for a daily commute in, but far enough away to allow for more space than city living affords. The bucolic suburban landscape of the early twentieth century has largely

disappeared due to sprawl. Suburban sprawl contributes to traffic congestion, which in turn contributes to commuting time. And commuting times and distances have continued to increase as new suburbs developed farther and farther from city centers. Simultaneously, this dynamic contributed to an exponential increase in natural resource use, like petroleum, which sequentially increased pollution in the form of carbon emissions.

As the suburbs became more crowded and lost their charm, those who could afford it turned to the exurbs, communities that exist outside the ring of suburbs and are typically populated by even wealthier families who want more space and have the resources to lengthen their commute. Together, the suburbs, exurbs, and metropolitan areas all combine to form a metropolis. New York was the first U.S. megalopolis, a huge urban corridor encompassing multiple cities and their surrounding suburbs. These metropolises use vast quantities of natural resources and are a growing part of the U.S. landscape.

Social Policy and Debate: Suburbs Are Not All White Picket Fences: The Banlieues of Paris

What makes a suburb a suburb? Simply, a suburb is a community surrounding a city. But when you picture a suburb in your mind, your image may vary widely depending on which nation you call home. In the United States, most consider the suburbs home to upper— and middle—class people with private homes. In other countries, like France, the suburbs––or "banlieues"–– are synonymous with housing projects and impoverished communities. In fact, the banlieues of Paris are notorious for their ethnic violence and crime, with higher unemployment and more residents living in poverty than in the city center. Further, the banlieues have a much higher immigrant population, which in Paris is mostly Arabic and African immigrants. This contradicts the clichéd U.S. image of a typical white-picket-fence suburb.

In 2005, serious riots broke out in the banlieue of Clichy-sous-Bois after two boys were electrocuted while hiding from the police. They were hiding, it is believed, because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time, near the scene of a break-in, and they were afraid the police would not believe in their innocence. Only a few days earlier, interior minister Nicolas Sarkozy (who later became president), had given a speech touting new measures against urban violence and referring to the people of the banlieue as "rabble" (BBC 2005). After the deaths and subsequent riots, Sarkozy reiterated his zero-tolerance policy toward violence and sent in more police. Ultimately, the violence spread across more than thirty towns and cities in France. Thousands of cars were burned, many hundreds of people were arrested, and both police and protesters suffered serious injuries.

Then-President Jacques Chirac responded by pledging more money for housing programs, jobs programs, and education programs to help the banlieues solve the underlying problems that led to such disastrous unrest. But none of the newly launched programs were effective. Sarkozy ran for president on a platform of tough regulations toward young offenders, and in 2007 the country elected him. More riots ensued as a response to his election. In 2010, Sarkozy promised "war without mercy" against the crime in the banlieues (France24 2010). Six years after the Clichy-sous-Bois riot, circumstances are no better for those in the banlieues.

As the Social Policy & Debate feature illustrates, the suburbs also have their share of socio-economic problems. In the United States, White flight refers to the migration of economically secure White people from racially mixed urban areas and toward the suburbs. This occurred throughout the twentieth century, due to causes as diverse as the legal end of racial segregation established by *Brown v. Board of Education* to the Mariel boatlift of people fleeing Cuba for Miami. Current trends include middle-class African-American families following White flight patterns out of cities, while affluent White people return to cities that have historically had a majority of Black people. The result is that the issues of race, socio-economics, neighborhoods, and communities remain complicated and challenging.

Urbanization around the World

During the Industrial Era, there was a growth spurt worldwide. The development of factories brought people from rural to urban areas, and new technology increased the efficiency of transportation, food production, and food preservation. For example, from the mid-1670s to the early 1900s, London's population increased from 550,000 to 7 million (Old Bailey Proceedings Online 2011). Global favorites like New York, London, and Tokyo are all examples of postindustrial cities. As cities evolve from manufacturing-based industrial to service- and information-based postindustrial societies, gentrification becomes more common. Gentrification occurs when members of the middle and upper classes enter and renovate city areas that have been historically less affluent while the poor urban underclass are forced by resulting price pressures to leave those neighborhoods for increasingly decaying portions of the city.

Globally, 55 percent of the world's people currently reside in urban areas, with the most urbanized region being North America

(82 percent), followed by Latin America/the Caribbean (81 percent), with Europe coming in third (74 percent). In comparison, Africa is only 40 percent urbanized, though one of its nations, Nigeria, is projected to significantly urbanize in the coming years. With 37 million people, Tokyo is the world's largest city by population, and New Delhi is the second largest with 29 million. The world's most densely populated cities are now largely concentrated in the global south, a marked change from several decades ago when the biggest cities were found in the global north. In the next forty years, the biggest global challenge for urbanized populations, particularly in less developed countries, will be to achieve development that occurs without depleting or damaging the natural environment, also called sustainable development (United Nations 2018).

Theoretical Perspectives on Urbanization

The issues of urbanization play significant roles in the study of sociology. Race, economics, and human behavior intersect in cities. Let's look at urbanization through the sociological perspectives of functionalism and conflict theory. Functional perspectives on urbanization generally focus on the ecology of the city, while conflict perspective tends to focus on political economy.

Human ecology is a functionalist field of study that looks at the relationship between people and their built and natural physical environments (Park 1915). Generally speaking, urban land use and urban population distribution occur in a predictable pattern once we understand how people relate to their living environment. For example, in the United States, we have a transportation system geared to accommodate individuals and families in the form of interstate highways built for cars. In contrast, most parts of Europe emphasize public transportation such as high-speed rail and commuter lines, as well as walking and bicycling. The challenge for a human ecologist working in U.S. urban planning is to design landscapes and waterscapes with natural beauty, while also figuring out how to provide for free-flowing transport of innumerable vehicles, not to mention parking!

The concentric zone model (Burgess 1925) is perhaps the most famous example of human ecology. This model views a city as a series of concentric circular areas, expanding outward from the center of the city, with various "zones" invading adjacent zones (as new categories of people and businesses overrun the edges of nearby zones) and succeeding (then after invasion, the new inhabitants repurpose the areas they have invaded and push out the previous inhabitants). In this model, Zone A, in the heart of the city, is the center of the business and cultural district. Zone B, the concentric circle surrounding the city center, is composed of formerly wealthy homes split into cheap apartments for new immigrant populations; this zone also houses small manufacturers, pawn shops, and other marginal businesses. Zone C consists of the homes of the working class and established ethnic enclaves. Zone D holds wealthy homes, white-collar workers, and shopping centers. Zone E contains the estates of the upper class (in the exurbs) and the suburbs.

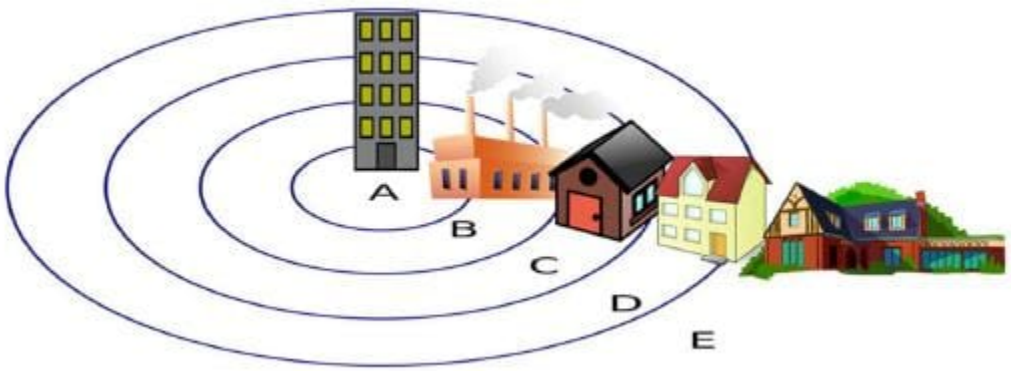


Figure 17.3.1: The diagram represents a city organized into five outward-expanding zones, moving from a dense urban and industrial center toward lower-density residential areas. (Burgess Model by Zeimusu via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under PDM 1.0). Access alternative description for Figure 17.3.1.

In contrast to the functionalist approach, theoretical models in the conflict perspective focus on the way urban areas change according to specific decisions made by political and economic leaders. These decisions generally benefit the middle and upper classes while exploiting the working and lower classes.

For example, sociologists Feagin and Parker (1990) suggested three factors by which political and economic leaders control urban growth. First, these leaders work alongside each other to influence urban growth and decline, determining where money flows and how land use is regulated. Second, exchange value and use value of land are balanced to favor the middle and upper classes

so that, for example, public land in poor neighborhoods may be rezoned for use as industrial land. Finally, urban development is dependent on both structure (groups such as local government) and agency (individuals including businessmen and activists), and these groups engage in a push-pull dynamic that determines where and how land is actually used. For example, Not In My Back Yard (NIMBY) movements are more likely to emerge in middle and upper-class neighborhoods as engaged citizens protest poor environmental practices they fear will affect them, so these groups have more control over the use of local land.

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17.4: The Environment and Society

Welcome to the Anthropocene!

The Anthropocene is a term used to describe the idea that human activity has become a major force shaping Earth's climate, ecosystems, and landscapes. This concept is useful because it helps us see that environmental problems are not separate from society. Population growth, urbanization, industrial production, transportation, agriculture, energy use, and consumption all affect the planet. Your slide deck connects this idea to planetary boundaries, biodiversity loss, and the demand for food, water, and natural resources.

However, some scholars argue that the word Anthropocene can be misleading if it suggests that "humanity" as a whole is equally responsible for environmental crisis. Not all people, nations, corporations, or social groups have contributed to environmental destruction in the same way. For example, a low-income community living near pollution, an Indigenous community defending land from extraction, and a multinational fossil fuel company do not have the same power or responsibility. This is why Jason W. Moore and other scholars ask whether terms like Capitalocene may better explain the crisis by focusing on capitalism, colonialism, extraction, and unequal power relations rather than "humans" in general (Moore, 2016). Moore's edited volume challenges the simple separation between "Nature" and "Society" and instead asks us to understand environmental crisis as part of the relationship between nature, history, capitalism, and power.

Counter-hegemonic Concepts

Instead of saying, "humans caused the environmental crisis," they ask more specific sociological questions: Which humans? Which economic systems? Which histories of colonization? Which forms of labor? Which technologies? Which ways of living with nonhuman nature? These alternative terms can be called counter-hegemonic concepts because they challenge the dominant story:

- Capitalocene means the "age of capital." This concept argues that the main problem is not humanity in general, but a global economic system organized around profit, endless growth, cheap labor, cheap energy, and the extraction of nature (Moore, 2016). From this view, climate change and biodiversity loss are connected to capitalism's long history of treating land, labor, water, forests, minerals, and fossil fuels as resources to be used for accumulation.
- Plantationocene focuses on the plantation as a historical system of ecological and social destruction. Plantations reorganized land into monocultures, relied on enslaved and coerced labor, displaced Indigenous peoples, and created racialized systems of extraction. This concept helps students connect environmental crisis to colonialism, slavery, land theft, racial capitalism, and the transformation of diverse ecosystems into profit-oriented landscapes (Haraway, 2015; Davis et al., 2019).
- Chthulucene is Donna Haraway's term for thinking beyond human-centered stories. Instead of focusing only on humans, capitalism, or technology, this concept emphasizes that humans live in deep relationships with animals, plants, fungi, bacteria, soil, water, and other forms of life. Haraway uses this term to encourage responsibility, interdependence, and "making kin" with human and nonhuman others (Haraway, 2015, 2016).
- Technocene highlights the role of technology, machines, infrastructures, and industrial systems in transforming the planet. This concept is useful because environmental problems are not only caused by individual choices, but also by large technological systems such as fossil fuel infrastructure, highways, factories, dams, chemical industries, and digital supply chains (Bonneuil & Fressoz, 2016).
- Thanatocene comes from the Greek word thanatos, meaning death. It focuses on the environmental role of war, militarism, weapons production, and military infrastructures. This concept reminds us that environmental destruction is not only linked to consumer society or industry, but also to organized violence, empire, and the military use of land, energy, and technology (Bonneuil & Fressoz, 2016).
- Wasteocene focuses on waste and disposability. It asks why some communities, workers, bodies, and places are treated as disposable while others benefit from systems of production and consumption. This concept is useful for studying landfills, toxic waste, e-waste, polluted neighborhoods, and global waste flows (Armiero, 2021).
- Black Anthropocene highlights the racial and colonial dimensions of environmental crisis. Kathryn Yusoff argues that the Anthropocene cannot be understood without examining slavery, colonialism, extraction, geology, and anti-Blackness. This concept helps us see that environmental history is also a history of racialized violence, land dispossession, mining, labor exploitation, and unequal exposure to harm (Yusoff, 2018).

The subfield of environmental sociology studies all the above in a specific way: the way humans interact with their environments. This field is closely related to human ecology, which focuses on the relationship between people and their built and natural environment. This is an area that is garnering more attention as extreme weather patterns and policy battles over climate change dominate the news. A key factor of environmental sociology is the concept of carrying capacity, which describes the maximum amount of life that can be sustained within a given area. While this concept can refer to grazing lands or to rivers, we can also apply it to the earth as a whole.

Big Picture: Two Contrasting Views Around The Commons

You might have heard the expression "the tragedy of the commons." In 1968, an article of the same title written by Garrett Hardin described how a common pasture was ruined by overgrazing. But Hardin was not the first to notice the phenomenon. Back in the 1800s, Oxford economist William Forster Lloyd looked at the devastated public grazing commons and the unhealthy cattle subject to such limited resources, and saw, in essence, that the carrying capacity of the commons had been exceeded. However, since no one was held responsible for the land (as it was open to all), no one was willing to make sacrifices to improve it. Cattle grazers benefitted from adding more cattle to their herds, but they did not have to take on the responsibility of the lands that were being damaged by overgrazing. So there was an incentive for them to add more head of cattle, and no incentive for restraint.

Satellite photos of Africa taken in the 1970s showed this practice to dramatic effect. The images depicted a dark irregular area of more than 300 square miles. There was a large fenced area, where plenty of grass was growing. Outside the fence, the ground was bare and devastated. The reason was simple: the fenced land was privately owned by informed farmers who carefully rotated their grazing animals and allowed the fields to lie fallow periodically. Outside the fence was land used by nomads. Like the herdsmen in 1800s Oxford, the nomads increased their heads of cattle without planning for its impact on the greater good. The soil eroded, the plants died, then the cattle died, and, ultimately, some of the people died.

How does this lesson affect those of us who don't need to graze our cattle? Well, like the cows, we all need food, water, and clean air to survive. With the increasing world population and the ever-larger megalopolises with tens of millions of people, the limit of the earth's carrying capacity is called into question. When too many take while giving too little thought to the rest of the population, whether cattle or humans, the result is usually tragedy.

Nonetheless, the tragedy of the commons is not the only way to understand shared resources. Hardin's argument suggests that people will usually overuse common resources unless access is restricted through private ownership or strong external control. But later scholars, especially political economists, and Nobel Prize winner Elinor Ostrom, challenged this assumption. Ostrom showed that communities around the world have often developed rules, norms, and systems of cooperation to manage shared resources without destroying them. In other words, the problem is not simply that resources are shared. The problem is how they are governed, who participates in decision-making, and whether communities have fair and effective ways to hold one another accountable.

Climate Change

While you might be more familiar with the phrase "global warming," climate change is the term now used to refer to long-term shifts in temperatures due to human activity and, in particular, the release of greenhouse gases into the environment. The planet as a whole is warming, but the term climate change acknowledges that the short-term variations in this process can include both higher and lower temperatures, despite the overarching trend toward warmth.

Climate change is a deeply controversial subject, despite decades of scientific research and a high degree of scientific consensus that supports its existence. For example, according to NASA scientists, 2020 essentially tied with 2016 as the warmest year on record, continuing the overall trend of increasing worldwide temperatures (NASA 2021). One effect of climate change is more extreme weather. There are increasingly more record-breaking weather phenomena, from the number of Category 4 hurricanes to the amount of snowfall in a given winter. These extremes, while they make for dramatic television coverage, can cause immeasurable damage to crops, property, and lives.

So why is there a controversy? Until relatively recently, the United States was very divided on the existence of climate change as an immediate threat, as well as whether or not human activity causes or contributes to it. But now it appears that the U.S. has joined the ranks of many countries where citizens are concerned about climate change; the nation is divided on what to do about it.

Research conducted in 2020 and 2021 indicated that at least 60 percent of Americans believe climate change is a real and immediate threat (UNDP 2021 and Global Strategy Group 2021). Citizens are also more supportive of clean energy and taking part in international efforts, such as the Paris Climate Accord, which is intended to engage countries in actions to limit the activity that leads to climate change. What's changed these opinions? It may be that younger people are more represented in these polls, and they tend to support climate change initiatives more consistently. It may be that the continued severity of weather and the costly and widespread impact is more difficult to ignore than it was previously. And part of the changing opinions might be driven by the prevalence of green energy sources, from wind power to solar power to electric cars, which are more evident to people across the country. However, deep divides remain. The addition of clean energy producers, such as offshore wind farms, typically meet stiff local opposition (similar to the "not in my backyard" discussion earlier in the chapter). And any punitive or price-raising methods of controlling emissions are unlikely to be welcome by U.S. citizens. Finally, global agreements like the Paris Accord will have limited impact because they are not strictly enforceable.

World systems analysis suggests that while, historically, core nations (like the United States and Western Europe) were the greatest source of greenhouse gases, they have now evolved into postindustrial societies. Industrialized semi-peripheral and peripheral nations are releasing increasing quantities of greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide. The core nations, now post-industrial and less dependent on greenhouse-gas-causing industries, wish to enact strict protocols regarding the causes of global warming, but the semi-peripheral and peripheral nations rightly point out that they only want the same economic chance to evolve their economies. Since they were unduly affected by the progress of core nations, if the core nations now insist on "green" policies, they should pay offsets or subsidies of some kind. There are no easy answers to this conflict. It may well not be "fair" that the core nations benefited from ignorance during their industrial boom.

Pollution

Pollution describes what happens when contaminants are introduced into an environment (water, air, land) at levels that are damaging. Environments can often sustain a limited amount of contaminants without marked change, and water, air, and soil can “heal” themselves to a certain degree. However, once contaminant levels reach a certain point, the results can be catastrophic.

Water

Typhoid, cholera, and diarrhea from unsafe water kill hundreds of thousands of children each year, and over 160 million children suffer from malnutrition and growth issues due to water issues. An estimated 3 billion people do not have access to clean water at home for hand-washing (CDC 2016). Consider the impact of that, knowing that many of those without water for hand-washing live in agricultural societies in which they work with animals or live in cities with many other people.

The water crisis is exacerbated by many of the other issues we've discussed. Global pandemics, pollution, and climate change all have more severe impacts when coupled with lack of access to clean water. Finally, the cost of obtaining that clean water can interfere with other important aspects of survival and social mobility. Children serve as water haulers, traveling long distances on foot to collect potable water for their family. Those same children (as well as those who similarly collect firewood) are less able to focus on their education, either missing school or not completing the associated work (Water.org 2021). Regular water hauling–which for some people involves carrying 20 kilograms (40 pounds) for 30 minutes or more–also has negative effects on people's bodies, especially pregnant women who often undertake the task. The situation is only getting more dire as the global population increases. Water is a key resource battleground in the twenty-first century.

As every child learns in school, 70 percent of earth is made of water. Despite that figure, there is a finite amount of water usable by humans and it is constantly used and reused in a sustainable water cycle. The way we use this abundant natural resource, however, renders much of it unsuitable for consumption and unable to sustain life. Oil and natural gas production, discussed at the beginning of the chapter, require so much water that there's no safe place to put the wastewater other than deep underground. But more common activities use far more water than many people understand. The immense amount of water to produce almonds (8 percent of California's water supply, equating to roughly one gallon per individual almond) has made headlines, as have the 37 gallons that it takes to produce a cup of coffee. But all crops and livestock have a "water footprint." Dairy milk is actually known to take more water to produce than does almond milk, for example. And steak may take up to 900 gallons of water to produce (WaterCalculuator.org 2020).

Those water costs are important to consider, particularly if the crops are produced in a part of the world where access to safe water is also an issue. But reducing irrigation water usage for U.S. crops would have very limited effects in sub-Saharan Africa. Most experts focus on improving water quality and sanitation in general, as well as reducing the distance people need to travel in order to obtain safe water.

Water pollution has always been a byproduct of industrialization, increased population, and urbanization. Cleveland's Cuyahoga River caught fire several times due to pollution, and was part of what inspired the United States' turn to cleaner water. Other countries are currently undergoing the same crises. As a consequence of population concentrations, water close to human settlements is frequently polluted with untreated or partially treated human waste (sewage), chemicals, radioactivity, and levels of heat sufficient to create large “dead zones” incapable of supporting aquatic life. The methods of food production used by many core nations rely on liberal doses of nitrogen and pesticides, which end up back in the water supply. In some cases, water pollution affects the quality of the aquatic life consumed by water and land animals. As we move along the food chain, the pollutants travel from prey to predator. Since humans consume at all levels of the food chain, we ultimately consume the carcinogens, such as mercury, accumulated through several branches of the food web.

Soil

You might have read *The Grapes of Wrath* in English class at some point in time. Steinbeck’s tale of the Joads, driven out of their home by the Dust Bowl, is still playing out today. In China, as in Depression-era Oklahoma, over-tilling soil in an attempt to expand agriculture has resulted in the disappearance of large patches of topsoil.

Soil erosion and desertification are just two of the many forms of soil pollution. In addition, all the chemicals and pollutants that harm our water supplies can also leach into soil with similar effects. Brown zones where nothing can grow are common results of soil pollution. One demand the population boom makes on the planet is a requirement for more food to be produced. The so-called “Green Revolution” in the 1960s saw chemists and world aid organizations working together to bring modern farming methods, complete with pesticides, to developing countries. The immediate result was positive: food yields went up and burgeoning populations were fed. But as time has gone on, these areas have fallen into even more difficult straits as the damage done by modern methods leave traditional farmers with less than they had to start.

Dredging certain beaches in an attempt to save valuable beachfront property from coastal erosion has resulted in greater storm impact on shorelines, and damage to beach ecosystems (Turneffe Atoll Trust 2008). These dredging projects have damaged reefs, sea grass beds, and shorelines and can kill off large swaths of marine life. Ultimately, this damage threatens local fisheries, tourism, and other parts of the local economy.

Garbage



Figure 17.4.1: Patterns of consumption, inadequate waste systems, corporate production, and unequal environmental regulation shift ecological harm onto particular places and communities. (Beach in Sharm el-Naga, Egypt by Vberger is licensed under PDM 1.0)

Where is your last cell phone? What about the one before that? Or the huge old television set your family had before flat screens became popular? For most of us, the answer is a sheepish shrug. We don’t pay attention to the demise of old items, and since electronics drop in price and increase in innovation at an incredible clip, we have been trained by their manufacturers to upgrade frequently.

Garbage creation and control are major issues for most core and industrializing nations, and it is quickly becoming one of the most critical environmental issues faced in the United States. People in the United States buy products, use them, and then throw them away. Did you dispose of your old electronics according to government safety guidelines? Chances are good you didn't even know there are guidelines. Multiply your electronics times a few million, take into account the numerous toxic chemicals they contain, and then imagine either burying those chemicals in the ground or lighting them on fire.

Those are the two primary means of waste disposal in the United States: landfill and incineration. When it comes to getting rid of dangerous toxins, neither is a good choice. Styrofoam and plastics that many of us use every day do not dissolve in a natural way. Burn them, and they release carcinogens into the air. Their improper incineration (intentional or not) adds to air pollution and increases smog. Dump them in landfills, and they do not decompose. As landfill sites fill up, we risk an increase in groundwater contamination.

Big Picture: What Should Apple (and Friends) Do about E-Waste?

The mountains of broken plastic and rusty metal that plague the environment are not the most problematic types of garbage. E-waste or obsolete, broken, and worn-out electronics is the fastest growing segment of garbage production in the world. It is made up of household appliances, batteries, control devices, computers, phones, and similar products. Ironically, one of the largest potential e-waste problems will come from expended solar panels, which, although only a fraction of total waste, will require a complex recycling process (Stone 2020). All of these products have toxic chemicals and dangerous metals in them, as well as a significant amount of plastic that does not biodegrade.

So where do they go? Many companies ship their e-waste to developing nations in Africa and Asia to be "recycled." While they are, in some senses, recycled, the result is not exactly clean. In fact, it is one of the dirtiest jobs around. Overseas, without the benefit of environmental regulation, e-waste dumps become a kind of boomtown for entrepreneurs willing to sort through endless stacks of broken-down electronics for tiny bits of valuable copper, silver, and other precious metals. Unfortunately, in their hunt, these workers are exposed to deadly toxins.

Governments are beginning to take notice of the impending disaster, and the European Union, as well as the state of California, put stricter regulations in place. These regulations both limit the amount of toxins allowed in electronics and address the issue of end-of-life recycling. But not surprisingly, corporations, while insisting they are greening their process, often fight stricter regulations. Meanwhile, many environmental groups, including the activist group Greenpeace, have taken up the cause. Greenpeace states that it is working to get companies to:

1. measure and reduce emissions with energy efficiency, renewable energy, and energy policy advocacy
2. make greener, efficient, longer lasting products that are free of hazardous substances
3. reduce environmental impacts throughout company operations, from choosing production materials and energy sources right through to establishing global take-back programs for old products (Greenpeace 2011). Companies like Amazon, Samsung, Canon, Sprint, and Dell are noted for effective and forward-thinking programs (Sadoff 2019).

Air

China's fast-growing economy and burgeoning industry have translated into notoriously poor air quality. Smog hangs heavily over the major cities, sometimes grounding aircraft that cannot navigate through it. Pedestrians and cyclists wear air-filter masks to protect themselves. In Beijing, citizens are skeptical that the government-issued daily pollution ratings are trustworthy. Increasingly, they are taking their own pollution measurements in the hopes that accurate information will galvanize others to action. Given that some days they can barely see down the street, they hope action comes soon (Papenfuss 2011).

Humanity, with its growing numbers, use of fossil fuels, and increasingly urbanized society, is putting too much stress on the earth's atmosphere. The amount of air pollution varies from locale to locale, and you may be more personally affected than you realize. How often do you check air quality reports before leaving your house? Depending on where you live, this question can sound utterly strange or like an everyday matter. Along with oxygen, most of the time we are also breathing in soot, hydrocarbons, carbon, nitrogen, and sulfur oxides.

Much of the pollution in the air comes from human activity. How many college students move their cars across campus at least once a day? Who checks the environmental report card on how many pollutants each company throws into the air before purchasing a cell phone? Many of us are guilty of taking our environment for granted without concern for how everyday decisions add up to a long-term global problem. How many minor adjustments can you think of, like walking instead of driving, that would

reduce your overall carbon footprint?

Remember the “tragedy of the commons.” Each of us is affected by air pollution. But like the herder who adds one more head of cattle to realize the benefits of owning more cows but who does not have to pay the price of the overgrazed land, we take the benefit of driving or buying the latest cell phones without worrying about the end result. Air pollution accumulates in the body, much like the effects of smoking cigarettes accumulate over time, leading to more chronic illnesses. And in addition to directly affecting human health, air pollution affects crop quality as well as heating and cooling costs. In other words, we all pay a lot more than the price at the pump when we fill up our tank with gas.

Toxic and Radioactive Waste

Radioactivity is a form of air pollution. While nuclear energy promises a safe and abundant power source, increasingly it is looked upon as a danger to the environment and to those who inhabit it. We accumulate nuclear waste, which we must then keep track of long term and ultimately figure out how to store the toxic waste material without damaging the environment or putting future generations at risk.

The 2011 earthquake in Japan illustrates the dangers of even safe, government-monitored nuclear energy. When disaster occurs, how can we safely evacuate the large numbers of affected people? Indeed, how can we even be sure how far the evacuation radius should extend? Radiation can also enter the food chain, causing damage from the bottom (phytoplankton and microscopic soil organisms) all the way to the top. Once again, the price paid for cheap power is much greater than what we see on the electric bill.



Figure 17.4.2: Rapid technological turnover and consumer demand generate hazardous waste whose environmental and health costs are often shifted onto workers and marginalized communities. (E-Waste in the Alley (Silver Spring, MD) by takomabibelot via flickr is licensed under PDM 1.0)

The enormous oil disaster that hit the Louisiana Gulf Coast in 2010 is just one of a high number of environmental crises that have led to toxic residue. They include the pollution of the Love Canal neighborhood of the 1970s to the Exxon *Valdez* oil tanker crash of 1989, the Chernobyl disaster of 1986, and Japan’s Fukushima nuclear plant incident following the earthquake in 2011. Often, the stories are not newsmakers, but simply an unpleasant part of life for the people who live near toxic sites such as Centralia, Pennsylvania and Hinkley, California. In many cases, people in these neighborhoods can be part of a cancer cluster without realizing the cause.

Risk Society

Sociologist Ulrich Beck used the term risk society to describe a society where many of the dangers people face are created by human decisions, technology, industry, and economic systems rather than by nature alone. In other words, modern societies do not just produce goods, jobs, and new technologies; they also produce risks such as pollution, climate change, toxic waste, unsafe working conditions, industrial accidents, and health hazards (Beck, 1992).

A key point is that these risks are not shared equally. Some communities are more exposed to environmental dangers because of where they live, how much money they have, what kinds of jobs they do, or how much political power they can exercise. For example, a wealthy neighborhood may have more resources to oppose a polluting facility, while a low-income community may be expected to live near highways, factories, waste sites, or contaminated water. This is why risk is also a sociological issue: it is connected to inequality, power, and decision-making.

Beck's idea also helps us see that environmental problems are political. Questions that may seem technical, such as where to build a landfill, how to regulate chemicals, or how much pollution is "acceptable," are really questions about whose health matters, whose knowledge counts, and who has to live with the consequences.

Environmental Racism

Environmental racism refers to the way in which minority group neighborhoods (populated primarily by people of color and members of low socioeconomic groups) are burdened with a disproportionate number of hazards, including toxic waste facilities, garbage dumps, and other sources of environmental pollution and foul odors that lower the quality of life. All around the globe, members of minority groups bear a greater burden of the health problems that result from higher exposure to waste and pollution. This can occur due to unsafe or unhealthy work conditions where no regulations exist (or are enforced) for poor workers, or in neighborhoods that are uncomfortably close to toxic materials.

The statistics on environmental racism are shocking. Research shows that it pervades all aspects of African Americans' lives: environmentally unsound housing, schools with asbestos problems, facilities and playgrounds with lead paint. A twenty-year comparative study led by sociologist Robert Bullard determined "race to be more important than socioeconomic status in predicting the location of the nation's commercial hazardous waste facilities" (Bullard et al. 2007). His research found, for example, that Black children are five times more likely to have lead poisoning (the leading environmental health threat for children) than their White counterparts, and that a disproportionate number of people of color reside in areas with hazardous waste facilities (Bullard et al. 2007). Sociologists with the project are examining how environmental racism is addressed in the long-term cleanup of the environmental disasters caused by Hurricane Katrina.

Sociology in the Real World: Native American Tribes and Environmental Racism

Native Americans are unquestionably victims of environmental racism. The Commission for Racial Justice found that about 50 percent of all Native Americans live in communities with uncontrolled hazardous waste sites (Asian Pacific Environmental Network 2002). There's no question that, worldwide, indigenous populations are suffering from similar fates.

For Native American tribes, the issues can be complicated—and their solutions hard to attain—because of the complicated governmental issues arising from a history of institutionalized disenfranchisement. Unlike other racial minorities in the United States, Native American tribes are sovereign nations. However, much of their land is held in "trust," meaning that "the federal government holds title to the land in trust on behalf of the tribe" (Bureau of Indian Affairs 2012). Some instances of environmental damage arise from this crossover, where the U.S. government's title has meant it acts without approval of the tribal government. Other significant contributors to environmental racism as experienced by tribes are forcible removal and burdensome red tape to receive the same reparation benefits afforded to non-Indians.

To better understand how this happens, let's consider a few example cases. The home of the Skull Valley Band of Goshute Indians was targeted as the site for a high-level nuclear waste dumping ground, amid allegations of a payoff of as high as $200 million (Kamps 2001). Keith Lewis, an indigenous advocate for Native American rights, commented on this buyout, after his people endured decades of uranium contamination, saying that "there is nothing moral about tempting a starving man with money" (Kamps 2001). In another example, the Western Shoshone's Yucca Mountain area has been pursued by mining companies for its rich uranium stores, a threat that adds to the existing radiation exposure this area suffers from U.S. and

British nuclear bomb testing (Environmental Justice Case Studies 2004). In the "four corners" area where Colorado, Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico meet, a group of Hopi and Navajo families have been forcibly removed from their homes so the land could be mined by the Peabody Mining Company for coal valued at $10 billion (American Indian Cultural Support 2006). Years of uranium mining on the lands of the Navajo of New Mexico have led to serious health consequences, and reparations have been difficult to secure; in addition to the loss of life, people's homes and other facilities have been contaminated (Frosch 2009). In yet another case, members of the Chippewa near White Pine, Michigan, were unable to stop the transport of hazardous sulfuric acid across reservation lands, but their activism helped bring an end to the mining project that used the acid (Environmental Justice Case Studies 2004).

These examples are only a few of the hundreds of incidents that Native American tribes have faced and continue to battle against. Sadly, the mistreatment of the land's original inhabitants continues via this institution of environmental racism. How might the work of sociologists help draw attention to—and eventually mitigate—this social problem?

Why does environmental racism exist? The reason is simple. Those with resources can raise awareness, money, and public attention to ensure that their communities are unsullied. This has led to an inequitable distribution of environmental burdens. Another method of keeping this inequity alive is NIMBY protests. Chemical plants, airports, landfills, and other municipal or corporate projects are often the subject of NIMBY demonstrations. And equally often, the NIMBYists win, and the objectionable project is moved closer to those who have fewer resources to fight it.

Just Sustainability

Environmental solutions are often described as "green," "clean," or "sustainable." But a sociological perspective asks an additional question: sustainable for whom? A technology or policy may reduce one environmental problem while creating new social or environmental harms somewhere else. This is why it is important to think about just sustainability, which means looking at whether environmental solutions are not only ecologically helpful, but also socially fair.

Professor Alastair Iles uses the phrase "degrees of just sustainability" to show that technological alternatives are not simply good or bad. Instead, we can evaluate them on a spectrum. Some solutions may be more sustainable than older technologies, but still reproduce inequality, expose workers to danger, damage ecosystems, or shift environmental burdens onto marginalized communities (Iles, 2013). In other words, a solution can be environmentally promising in one place while creating harm in another.

Electric cars are a useful example. They are often presented as a cleaner alternative to gasoline-powered cars because they can reduce some transportation-related emissions. However, producing electric cars also requires batteries, minerals, energy, and labor. Some battery materials may be toxic for manufacturing workers. Mining for minerals such as lithium can affect fragile ecosystems and Indigenous communities, including in parts of the Bolivian and Chilean Andes. If multinational corporations benefit while local communities experience displacement, water stress, or environmental damage, then the technology may be "green" but not fully just (Iles, 2013).

This does not mean that electric cars, renewable energy, or other green technologies should be rejected. Rather, it means we should ask deeper sociological questions: Who produces the technology? Who profits from it? Who does the labor? Whose land and resources are used? Who is exposed to pollution or risk? Who gets access to the benefits? A more just form of sustainability would reduce environmental harm while also protecting workers, respecting Indigenous rights, supporting local communities, and reducing inequality.

Thinking in terms of just sustainability helps us move beyond the idea that technology alone will solve environmental problems. Social change also requires fair policies, democratic decision-making, stronger environmental protections, and attention to global inequality. A truly sustainable future must be both ecological and social: it must protect the planet while also protecting the people and communities most affected by environmental change.

Alternative Environmental Futures

Environmental problems can feel overwhelming, but environmental sociology also asks us to study the alternatives people are already imagining and building. There are alternatives everywhere, and we can find examples across the Global North and Global South. Please note these categories are not perfect geographic labels. They are a way to talk about unequal histories of industrialization, colonialism, wealth, extraction, pollution, and environmental responsibility.

In the Global North, many alternatives focus on reducing overconsumption, challenging endless economic growth, and rebuilding community life. Conviviality means creating tools, institutions, and technologies that help people live more freely and cooperatively, rather than making them dependent on large systems they cannot control (Illich, 1973). Degrowth argues that wealthy societies need to reduce unnecessary production and consumption while improving well-being, care, public services, and ecological balance (Kallis, 2018). Transition Networks are local community projects that prepare for a future with less dependence on fossil fuels by strengthening local food systems, renewable energy, repair cultures, and community resilience (Hopkins, 2008). The Great Transition refers to a larger global shift toward a future based on human solidarity, ecological sustainability, and democratic change rather than business as usual (Raskin et al., 2002). The Ecozoic Era, associated with Thomas Berry, imagines a new period in which human societies learn to live as part of Earth's systems rather than as forces that dominate or damage them (Berry, 1999). The Great Turning, associated with Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone, describes the shift from an industrial growth society to a life-sustaining society through activism, new institutions, and changes in values (Macy & Johnstone, 2012).

In the Global South, many alternatives emerge from struggles against colonialism, land dispossession, extractivism, debt, dependency, and unequal development. Post-development questions the idea that all societies should follow the same Western model of "progress," especially when that model is based on economic growth, consumerism, and resource extraction (Kothari et al., 2019). Decoloniality asks how colonial power continues after formal colonialism through knowledge, institutions, race, culture, economics, and development models; it also asks how communities can recover and create other ways of knowing and living (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Buen Vivir, often translated as "living well," comes from Latin American and Indigenous debates and emphasizes community, reciprocity, ecological balance, and respect for nature rather than individual accumulation or endless growth (Gudynas, 2011). Post-extractivism refers to moving away from economies that depend heavily on mining, fossil fuels, monoculture agriculture, and the export of raw materials, while building more democratic and sustainable livelihoods (Gudynas, 2013). Producing the Common means treating land, water, knowledge, care, public services, and shared resources as things people can govern collectively, rather than as commodities controlled only by markets or distant authorities (Dardot & Laval, 2019).

Together, these alternatives show that sustainability is not only about cleaner technology. It is also about changing relationships among people, economies, communities, and the environment. A society can build solar panels, electric cars, and recycling programs while still reproducing inequality if it ignores workers, Indigenous communities, pollution, land rights, and unequal consumption. These alternatives encourage us to ask deeper questions: What kind of future are we building? Who gets to participate in deciding that future? Who benefits from environmental change? And whose lives, lands, and knowledge are protected? These themes are at the core of what some activists and scholars have called *civilizational transitions*.

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17.5: Key Terms

Glossary

- **asylum-seekers** | those whose claim to refugee status have not been validated
- **cancer cluster** | a geographic area with high levels of cancer within its population
- **carrying capacity** | the amount of people that can live in a given area considering the amount of available resources
- **climate change** | long-term shifts in temperature and climate due to human activity
- **concentric zone model** | a model of human ecology that views cities as a series of circular rings or zones
- **cornucopian theory** | a theory that asserts human ingenuity will rise to the challenge of providing adequate resources for a growing population
- **demographic transition theory** | a theory that describes four stages of population growth, following patterns that connect birth and death rates with stages of industrial development
- **demography** | the study of population
- **e-waste** | the disposal of broken, obsolete, and worn-out electronics
- **environmental racism** | the burdening of economically and socially disadvantaged communities with a disproportionate share of environmental hazards
- **environmental sociology** | the sociological subfield that addresses the relationship between humans and the environment
- **exurbs** | communities that arise farther out than the suburbs and are typically populated by residents of high socioeconomic status
- **fertility rate** | a measure noting the actual number of children born
- **fracking** | hydraulic fracturing, a method used to recover gas and oil from shale by drilling down into the earth and directing a high-pressure mixture of water, sand, and proprietary chemicals into the rock
- **gentrification** | the entry of upper- and middle-class residents to city areas or communities that have been historically less affluent
- **human ecology** | a functional perspective that looks at the relationship between people and their built and natural environment
- **internally displaced person** | someone who fled his or her home while remaining inside the country's borders
- **Malthusian theory** | a theory asserting that population is controlled through positive checks (war, famine, disease) and preventive checks (measures to reduce fertility)
- **megalopolis** | a large urban corridor that encompasses several cities and their surrounding suburbs and exurbs
- **metropolis** | the area that includes a city and its suburbs and exurbs
- **mortality rate** | a measure of the number of people in a population who die
- **NIMBY** | "Not In My Back Yard," the tendency of people to protest poor environmental practices when those practices will affect them directly
- **pollution** | the introduction of contaminants into an environment at levels that are damaging
- **population composition** | a snapshot of the demographic profile of a population based on fertility, mortality, and migration rates
- **population pyramid** | a graphic representation that depicts population distribution according to age and sex
- **refugee** | an individual who has been forced to leave their country in order to escape war, persecution, or natural disaster
- **sex ratio** | the ratio of men to women in a given population
- **suburbs** | the communities surrounding cities, typically close enough for a daily commute
- **sustainable development** | development that occurs without depleting or damaging the natural environment
- **urban sociology** | the subfield of sociology that focuses on the study of urbanization
- **urbanization** | the study of the social, political, and economic relationships of cities
- **white flight** | the migration of economically secure white people from racially mixed urban areas toward the suburbs
- **zero population growth** | a theoretical goal in which the number of people entering a population through birth or immigration is equal to the number of people leaving it via death or emigration

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17.6: Short Answer

Critical Thinking Questions

1. Given what we know about population growth, what do you think of China's policy that limits the number of children a family can have? Do you agree with it? Why, or why not? What other ways might a country of over 1.3 billion people manage its population?
2. Describe the effect of immigration or emigration on your life or in a community you have seen. What are the positive effects? What are the negative effects?
3. What responsibility does the United States have toward underage asylum-seekers?
4. What are the differences between the suburbs and the exurbs, and who is most likely to live in each?
5. How will the growth in urban populations affect the world over the next ten years?
6. Considering the concentric zone model, what type of zone were you raised in? Is this the same or different as that of earlier generations in your family? What type of zone do you reside in now? Do you find that people from one zone stereotype those from another? If so, how?
7. After reading this section, will you change the way you treat your household waste? Explain.
8. How do you think the issue of e-waste should be dealt with? Should the responsibility fall to the companies that make the products or the consumer who buys them? Would your buying habits be different if you had to pay to recycle old electronics?
9. Can you think of a modern example of the tragedy of the commons, where public use without accountability has created a negative outcome?
10. NIMBY protests occur when concerned citizens band together to speak up against something that will impact them negatively. Is this a positive or negative trend? Give an example of a NIMBY protest and whether you support it or not.

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17.7: Further Research

Additional Learning Resources

- To learn more about population concerns, from contemporary zero population growth (ZPG) advocacy to United Nations population reports, visit the Population Connection website.
- Explore population data by age and sex from the U.S. Census Bureau International Database. Select different countries and years and use the population pyramids or age tables to compare population patterns and changes over time.
- Interested in learning more about the latest research in the field of human ecology? Visit the Society for Human Ecology web site to discover what's emerging in this field.
- Getting from place to place in urban areas might be more complicated than you think. Read the latest on pedestrian-traffic concerns at the Streetsblog web site.
- Visit the Cleanups in My Community web site to see where environmental hazards have been identified in your backyard, and what is being done about them.
- What is your carbon footprint? Find out using the carbon footprint calculator. **Note:** This resource may not be accessible to assistive technologies.
- What is your water footprint? Find out using the water footprint calculator. **Note:** This resource may not be accessible to assistive technologies.
- The Global Footprint Network describes its open data platform as a way to explore National Footprint and Biocapacity Accounts data. It is useful for comparing patterns of consumption, resource demand, ecological deficit, and global inequality.
- The Earth Overshoot Day marks the point in the year when humanity's demand for ecological resources exceeds what Earth can regenerate that year. The website is useful for discussing sustainability, overconsumption, ecological limits, and the kinds of solutions that could "move the date."
- The Environmental Justice Atlas documents socio-environmental conflicts around the world, including conflicts over pollution, extraction, land, water, infrastructure, and community health. **Note:** This resource may not be accessible to assistive technologies.

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17.9: Accessible Text Descriptions

Figure 17.1: Roadmap

A horizontal instructional diagram titled “Population, Urbanization, and the Environment as a Way of Understanding Social Space and Environmental Change.” Beneath the title, three large light-gray arrows point from left to right. Each arrow contains a dark teal circle with white text organized around three guiding questions: why, who, and how.

The first circle is labeled “The ‘WHY’” and explains why the topic matters. Population patterns, urbanization, and environmental conditions shape where people live, their access to resources, changes within communities, vulnerability to harm, and the ways social life becomes connected across places.

The second circle is labeled “The ‘WHO’” and identifies who is affected. This includes city residents and migrants, communities and regions, and groups whose experiences differ according to class, race, gender, nationality, and geographic location.

The third circle is labeled “The ‘HOW’” and explains how sociologists study these issues. They analyze demographic data, urban development, migration patterns, environmental inequality, and the social organization of space.

Overall, the diagram presents population, urbanization, and environmental change as interconnected processes that shape social relationships, access to resources, exposure to environmental risks, and the organization of communities and regions.

Figure 17.1.1: Tradeoffs of Fracking

A flowchart shows how fracking development can generate economic benefits while also creating environmental risks and social consequences.

On the left, a panel labeled Fracking Development shows a drilling site and an underground cross-section of the fracking process. From this starting point, arrows lead to three connected categories. The first category is Economic Benefits. This section lists possible benefits associated with fracking, including jobs, tax revenue, lower energy costs, and business growth. These items highlight why fracking is often promoted as a source of economic opportunity and regional development.

The second category is Environmental Risks. This section identifies several environmental concerns linked to fracking, including water use, chemical contamination, wastewater, earthquakes, and emissions. These risks point to possible harm to land, water, air, and surrounding ecosystems.

The third category is Social Impacts. This section lists broader social consequences, including divided communities, health concerns, unequal exposure to risk, and coal industry decline. These points emphasize that the effects of fracking are not evenly distributed and may create conflict, uncertainty, and unequal burdens across communities.

Arrows from these three categories lead to a final panel labeled Sociological Questions. This panel asks: Who benefits? Who is harmed? Who decides? What counts as a fair energy transition? These questions encourage sociological analysis of power, inequality, justice, and the social meaning of environmental decision-making. A summary statement at the bottom explains the diagram's overall point: fracking highlights how energy development can produce economic gains while also creating environmental risks, social conflict, and questions of justice.

Figure 17.2.2: The Graying of America

An infographic titled “An Aging Nation: Projected Number of Children and Older Adults” presents U.S. Census Bureau projections comparing children under age 18 with adults age 65 and older from 2016 through 2060.

A central statement reads: “For the First Time in U.S. History Older Adults Are Projected to Outnumber Children by 2034.”

The upper line graph shows the projected percentage of the U.S. population in each age group. The orange line represents children under 18, while the teal line represents adults age 65 and older.

In 2016, children accounted for 22.8 percent of the population, compared with 15.2 percent for adults age 65 and older. Over time, the share of children is projected to decline gradually, while the share of older adults is projected to rise. The two groups reach approximately equal shares around 2034, when older adults are projected to begin outnumbering children. By 2060, adults age 65 and older are projected to represent 23.4 percent of the population, compared with 19.8 percent for children.

The lower bar chart shows projected population totals in millions for selected years:

- In 2016, there were an estimated 49.2 million adults age 65 and older and 73.6 million children.
- In 2034, the two groups are projected to be nearly equal, with 77.0 million older adults and 76.5 million children.
- In 2060, the older population is projected to reach 94.7 million, compared with 80.1 million children.

A note explains that the 2016 figures are estimates rather than projections. The source is the U.S. Census Bureau's National Population Projections, 2017.

Figure 17.3.1: Concentric Zone Model

A simplified diagram shows five concentric oval zones labeled A, B, C, D, and E, arranged from the center outward.

- Zone A, at the center, contains a tall multistory building, representing the dense central area of the city.
- Zone B, immediately outside the center, contains a factory with smokestacks, representing an industrial or transitional area near the urban core.
- Zone C contains a small, closely spaced house, suggesting older or higher-density residential development near employment and industry.
- Zone D contains a larger detached house, representing a lower-density residential neighborhood farther from the city center.
- Zone E, the outermost zone, contains a large home surrounded by greenery, suggesting a suburban or peripheral residential area with more land and open space.

Overall, the diagram illustrates a concentric model of urban development in which land use and housing patterns change with distance from the central city, moving from dense commercial and industrial activity toward increasingly spacious residential areas.

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18: SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Introduction

This chapter explores how people come together to create change through collective behavior, social movements, and broader social transformation. We will examine why individuals join crowds and movements, how organized efforts can challenge existing social structures, and how events such as technological advances, environmental changes, and grassroots activism reshape society. From spontaneous collective actions to organized movements like Occupy Wall Street, this chapter highlights the many ways people influence the direction of social change and the lasting impact these efforts can have on communities and society as a whole.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- Describe the characteristics of collective behavior, crowds, masses, publics, social movements, and social change using key sociological concepts
- Differentiate among the major theories of collective behavior and social movements, and explain how they help interpret historical and contemporary events
- Analyze historical or contemporary examples of social movements to determine how collective action has influenced social institutions, public policy, and social change.
- Evaluate the factors that contribute to the success or failure of social movements and assess their impact on society using sociological evidence and theoretical perspectives.

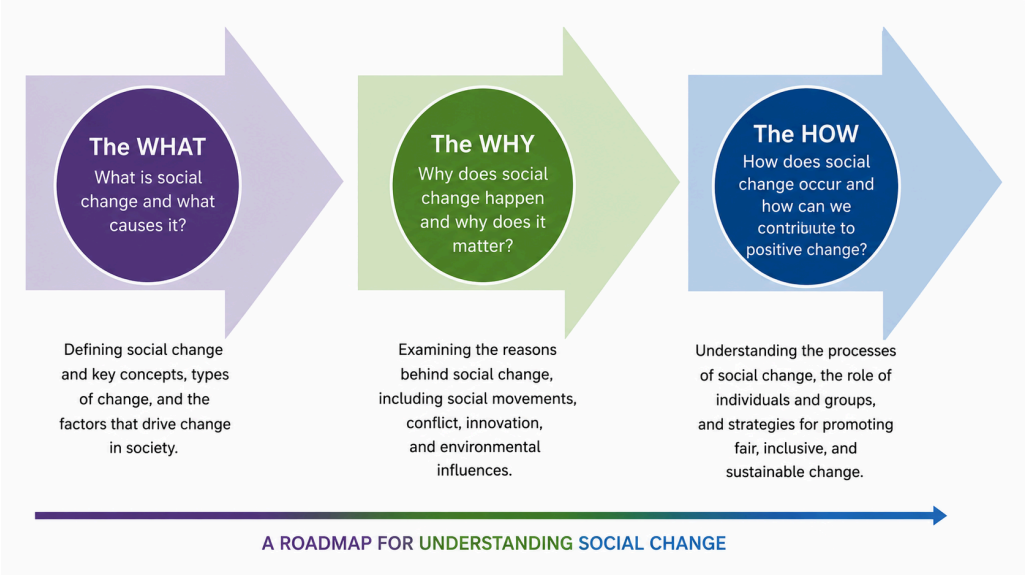


Figure 18.1: How change is defined, what social forces drive it, and how individuals and groups can help shape inclusive and lasting transformation are matters of sociological examination. (Jayanti Roy via ChatGPT). Access alternative description for Figure 18.1.

Why, Who, and How

Social movements and social change can be examined through three guiding questions: what, why, and how. The “what” asks how sociologists define social change, how societies change over time, and what distinguishes gradual transformation from rapid or disruptive change. It also introduces the cultural, technological, demographic, political, economic, and environmental forces that can alter institutions, relationships, values, and everyday life. The “why” explores why change occurs and why some issues generate collective action while others do not. Sociologists examine how inequality, conflict, innovation, population

shifts, environmental pressures, and changing cultural expectations create both demands for change and resistance to it. Social movements are especially important because they transform shared grievances into organized action, public claims, and sustained challenges to existing institutions. The “how” considers the processes through which social change develops and the roles played by individuals, communities, organizations, governments, and social movements. This includes studying leadership, networks, resources, framing, protest strategies, political opportunities, and the use of media and technology. It also asks how movements gain support, encounter opposition, influence laws and public opinion, and promote forms of change that are fair, inclusive, and sustainable. Together, these questions help us understand social change not as an automatic or purely natural process, but as the outcome of ongoing struggles over power, meaning, resources, and the direction of society.

18.1: Case Study and Vignette

18.2: Collective Behavior

18.3: Social Movements

18.4: Social Change

18.5: Key Terms

18.6: Short Answer

18.7: Further Research

18.8: References

18.9: Accessible Text Description

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18.1: Case Study and Vignette

The U.S. Civil Rights Movement

In the 1950s and 1960s, the United States experienced one of the most significant social movements in its history. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality, African Americans across much of the country continued to face racial segregation, discrimination, voter suppression, and unequal access to education, employment, housing, and public accommodations. Many people believed that these injustices could not continue, and ordinary citizens began organizing to demand change.

What started as local acts of resistance gradually evolved into a nationwide movement for civil rights. One of the most recognized moments occurred in 1955, when Rosa Parks refused to surrender her seat to a White passenger on a segregated bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Her arrest sparked the Montgomery Bus Boycott, a year-long protest led by local community members and a young minister named Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The success of the boycott demonstrated that organized, nonviolent collective action could challenge long-standing systems of inequality.

Over the next decade, the movement expanded through peaceful marches, sit-ins, freedom rides, voter registration drives, and large public demonstrations. Students organized lunch counter sit-ins across the South, thousands of volunteers risked their safety to register Black voters, and hundreds of thousands of people gathered at the 1963 March on Washington, where Dr. King delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. Churches, labor unions, student organizations, and community groups all played vital roles, illustrating that successful social movements depend on the collective efforts of many individuals working toward a shared goal.



Figure 18.1.1: A desegregated bus in Montgomery, Alabama, symbolizes how the civil rights movement challenged racial segregation in public transportation through sustained collective action and legal change. (Rosa Parks by UPI via Wikimedia Commons is licensed under PDM 1.0)

The Civil Rights Movement achieved profound and lasting social change. Public pressure and sustained activism contributed to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed discrimination in public accommodations and employment, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which removed many barriers that had prevented African Americans from exercising their right to vote. These legislative victories represented more than legal reforms—they reflected a fundamental shift in American society's understanding of equality, citizenship, and civil rights.

The movement also had effects far beyond its immediate goals. It inspired later social movements advocating for women's rights, disability rights, LGBTQ+ rights, environmental protection, and other causes around the world. It demonstrated that ordinary people, working together through organized collective action, can challenge powerful institutions, reshape public opinion, and influence laws and social norms.

Ordinary People, Extraordinary Change

The Civil Rights Movement demonstrates that social change rarely results from one leader or event alone. It emerges through sustained collective action involving community organizing, shared grievances, strategic leadership, institutional networks, and the willingness of ordinary people to take risks. Boycotts, sit-ins, freedom rides, voter registration campaigns, marches, and legal challenges worked together to disrupt segregation, influence public opinion, and pressure political institutions. Although the movement achieved major legislative victories, it also reminds us that changing laws does not automatically eliminate deeply rooted social inequalities.

What social issue today do you believe has the potential to create lasting social change? What types of collective action would be necessary to bring about that change?

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18.2: Collective Behavior

Forms of Collective Behavior

Flash mobs are examples of collective behavior, noninstitutionalized activity in which several or many people voluntarily engage. Other examples are a group of commuters traveling home from work and a population of teens adopting a favorite singer's hairstyle. In short, collective behavior is any group behavior that is not mandated or regulated by an institution. There are three primary forms of collective behavior: the crowd, the mass, and the public.

It takes a fairly large number of people in close proximity to form a crowd (Lofland 1993). Examples include a group of people attending an Ani DiFranco concert, tailgating at a Patriots game, or attending a worship service. Turner and Killian (1993) identified four types of crowds. Casual crowds consist of people who are in the same place at the same time but who aren't really interacting, such as people standing in line at the post office. Conventional crowds are those who come together for a scheduled event that occurs regularly, like a religious service. Expressive crowds are people who join together to express emotion, often at funerals, weddings, or the like. The final type, acting crowds**,** focuses on a specific goal or action, such as a protest movement or riot.

In addition to the different types of crowds, collective groups can also be identified in two other ways. A mass is a relatively large number of people with a common interest, though they may not be in close proximity (Lofland 1993), such as players of the popular Facebook game Farmville. A public, on the other hand, is an unorganized, relatively diffused group of people who share ideas, such as the Libertarian political party. While these two types of crowds are similar, they are not the same. To distinguish between them, remember that members of a mass share interests, whereas members of a public share ideas.

Sociology in the Real World: Flash Mobs and Challenges

In March 2014, a group of musicians got together in a fish market in Odessa for a spontaneous performance of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" from his Ninth Symphony. While tensions were building over Ukraine's efforts to join the European Union, and even as Russian troops had taken control of the Ukrainian airbase in Belbek, the Odessa Philharmonic Orchestra and Opera Chorus tried to lighten the troubled times for shoppers with music and song. Spontaneous gatherings like this are called flash mobs. They are often recorded or live streamed, and are sometimes planned to celebrate an event or person.

While flash mobs are often intensely designed and rehearsed in order to give the impression of spontaneity, challenges don't always go according to plan: Cinnamon is too intense, buckets may fall on people's heads, or a bottle breaks on the floor. But successes and failures on social media can tie people together. Challenges can lead to chats, recollections, and repeats.

Humans seek connections and shared experiences. Perhaps experiencing a flash mob event enhances this bond. It certainly interrupts our otherwise mundane routine with a reminder that we are social animals.

Theoretical Perspectives on Collective Behavior

Early collective behavior theories (LeBon 1895; Blumer 1969) focused on the irrationality of crowds. Eventually, those theorists who viewed crowds as uncontrolled groups of irrational people were supplanted by theorists who viewed the behavior some crowds engaged in as the rational behavior of logical beings.

Emergent-Norm Perspective

Sociologists Ralph Turner and Lewis Killian (1993) built on earlier sociological ideas and developed what is known as emergent norm theory. They believe that the norms experienced by people in a crowd may be disparate and fluctuating. They emphasize the importance of these norms in shaping crowd behavior, especially those norms that shift quickly in response to changing external factors. Emergent norm theory asserts that, in this circumstance, people perceive and respond to the crowd situation with their particular (individual) set of norms, which may change as the crowd experience evolves. This focus on the individual component of interaction reflects a symbolic interactionist perspective.

For Turner and Killian, the process begins when individuals suddenly find themselves in a new situation, or when an existing situation suddenly becomes strange or unfamiliar. For example, think about human behavior during Hurricane Katrina. New Orleans was decimated and people were trapped without supplies or a way to evacuate. In these extraordinary circumstances, what outsiders saw as "looting" was defined by those involved as seeking needed supplies for survival. Normally, individuals would not wade into a corner gas station and take canned goods without paying, but given that they were suddenly in a greatly changed situation, they established a norm that they felt was reasonable.

Once individuals find themselves in a situation ungoverned by previously established norms, they interact in small groups to develop new guidelines on how to behave. According to the emergent-norm perspective, crowds are not viewed as irrational, impulsive, uncontrolled groups. Instead, norms develop and are accepted as they fit the situation. While this theory offers insight into why norms develop, it leaves undefined the nature of norms, how they come to be accepted by the crowd, and how they spread through the crowd.

Value-Added Theory

Neil Smelser's (1962) meticulous categorization of crowd behavior, called value-added theory**,** is a perspective within the functionalist tradition based on the idea that several conditions must be in place for collective behavior to occur. Each condition adds to the likelihood that collective behavior will occur. The first condition is *structural conduciveness,* which occurs when people are aware of the problem and have the opportunity to gather, ideally in an open area. *Structural strain*, the second condition, refers to people's expectations about the situation at hand being unmet, causing tension and strain. The next condition is the *growth and spread of a generalized belief*, wherein a problem is clearly identified and attributed to a person or group.

Fourth, *precipitating factors* spur collective behavior; this is the emergence of a dramatic event. The fifth condition is *mobilization for action*, when leaders emerge to direct a crowd to action. The final condition relates to action by the agents. Called *social control*, it is the only way to end the collective behavior episode (Smelser 1962).

A real-life example of these conditions occurred after the fatal police shooting of teenager Michael Brown, an unarmed eighteen-year-old African American, in Ferguson, MO on August 9, 2014. The shooting drew national attention almost immediately. A large group of mostly Black, local residents assembled in protest—a classic example of structural conduciveness. When the community perceived that the police were not acting in the people's interest and were withholding the name of the officer, structural strain became evident. A growing generalized belief evolved as the crowd of protesters were met with heavily armed police in military-style protective uniforms accompanied by an armored vehicle. The precipitating factor of the arrival of the police spurred greater collective behavior as the residents mobilized by assembling a parade down the street. Ultimately they were met with tear gas, pepper spray, and rubber bullets used by the police acting as agents of social control. The element of social control escalated over the following days until August 18, when the governor called in the National Guard.

Assembling Perspective

Interactionist sociologist Clark McPhail (1991) developed assembling perspective**,** another system for understanding collective behavior that credited individuals in crowds as rational beings. Unlike previous theories, this theory refocuses attention from collective behavior to collective action. Remember that collective behavior is a noninstitutionalized gathering, whereas collective action is based on a shared interest. McPhail's theory focused primarily on the processes associated with crowd behavior, plus the lifecycle of gatherings. He identified several instances of convergent or collective behavior, as shown on the chart below.

Table 18.2.1*: Clark McPhail identified various circumstances of convergent and collective behavior (McPhail 1991).*

Type of crowd	Description	Example
Convergence clusters	Family and friends who travel together	Carpooling parents take several children to the movies
Convergent orientation	Group all facing the same direction	A semi-circle around a stage
Collective vocalization	Sounds or noises made collectively	Screams on a roller coaster
Collective verbalization	Collective and simultaneous participation in a speech or song	Pledge of Allegiance in the school classroom

Type of crowd	Description	Example
Collective gesticulation	Body parts forming symbols	The YMCA dance
Collective manipulation	Objects collectively moved around	Holding signs at a protest rally
Collective locomotion	The direction and rate of movement to the event	Children running to an ice cream truck

As useful as this is for understanding the components of how crowds come together, many sociologists criticize its lack of attention on the large cultural context of the described behaviors, instead focusing on individual actions.

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18.3: Social Movements

Levels of Social Movements

Social movements are purposeful, organized groups that strive to work toward a common social goal. While most of us learned about social movements in history classes, we tend to take for granted the fundamental changes they caused —and we may be completely unfamiliar with the trend toward global social movements. But from the antitobacco movement that has worked to outlaw smoking in public buildings and raise the cost of cigarettes, to political uprisings throughout the Arab world, movements are creating social change on a global scale.

Movements happen in our towns, in our nation, and around the world. Let's take a look at examples of social movements, from local to global. No doubt you can think of others on all of these levels, especially since modern technology has allowed us a near-constant stream of information about the quest for social change around the world.

Local

Local social movements typically refer to those in cities or towns, but they can also affect smaller constituencies, such as college campuses. Sometimes colleges are smaller hubs of a national movement, as seen during the Vietnam War protests or the Black Lives Matter protests. Other times, colleges are managing a more local issue. In 2012, The Cooper Union in New York City announced that, due to financial mismanagement and unforeseen downturns from the Great Recession, the college had a massive shortfall; it would be forced to charge tuition for the first time. To students at most other colleges, tuition would not seem out of line, but Cooper Union was founded (and initially funded) under the principle that it would not charge tuition. When the school formally announced the plan to charge tuition, students occupied a building and, later, the college president's office. Student action eventually contributed to the president's resignation and a financial recovery plan in partnership with the state attorney general.

Another example occurred in Wisconsin. After announcing a significant budget shortfall, Governor Scott Walker put forth a financial repair bill that would reduce the collective bargaining abilities of unions and other organizations in the state. (Collective bargaining was used to attain workplace protections, benefits, healthcare, and fair pay.) Faculty at the state's college system were not in unions, but teaching assistants, researchers, and other staff had regularly collectively bargained. Faced with the prospect of reduced job protections, pay, and benefits, the staff members began one of the earliest protests against Walker's action, by protesting on campus and sending an ironic message of love to the governor on Valentine's Day. Over time, these efforts would spread to other organizations in the state.

State

The most impactful state-level protest would be to cease being a state, and organizations in several states are working toward that goal. Texas secession has been a relatively consistent movement since about 1990. The past decade has seen an increase in rhetoric and campaigns to drive interest and support for a public referendum (a direct vote on the matter by the people). The Texas Nationalist Movement, Texas Secede!, and other groups have provided formal proposals and programs designed to make the idea seem more feasible. Texit has become a widely used nickname and hashtag for the movement. And in February 2021, a bill was introduced to hold a referendum that would begin formal discussions on creating an independent nation—though the bill's sponsor indicated that it was mainly intended to begin conversation and evaluations rather than directly lead to secession (De Alba 2021).

States also get involved before and after national decisions. The legalization of same-sex marriage throughout the United States led some people to feel their religious beliefs were under attack. Following swiftly upon the heels of the Supreme Court Obergefell ruling, the Indiana legislature passed a Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA, pronounced "rifra"). Originally crafted decades ago with the purpose of preserving the rights of minority religious people, more recent RFRA laws allow individuals, businesses, and other organizations to decide whom they will serve based on religious beliefs. For example, Arkansas's 2021 law allowed doctors to refuse to treat patients based on the doctor's religious beliefs (Associated Press 2021). In this way, state-level organizations and social movements are responding to a national decision.

Global

Social organizations worldwide take stands on such general areas of concern as poverty, sex trafficking, and the use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in food. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are sometimes formed to support such movements, such as the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movement (FOAM). Global efforts to reduce poverty are represented by the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief (OXFAM), among others. The Fair Trade movement exists to protect and support food producers in developing countries. Occupy Wall Street, although initially a local movement, also went global throughout Europe and, as the chapter's introductory photo shows, the Middle East.

Types of Social Movements

We know that social movements can occur on the local, national, or even global stage. Are there other patterns or classifications that can help us understand them? Sociologist David Aberle (1966) addresses this question by developing categories that distinguish among social movements based on what they want to change and how much change they want. Reform movements seek to change something specific about the social structure. Examples include antinuclear groups, Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), the Dreamers movement for immigration reform, and the Human Rights Campaign's advocacy for Marriage Equality. Revolutionary movements seek to completely change every aspect of society. These include the 1960s counterculture movement, including the revolutionary group The Weather Underground, as well as anarchist collectives. Texas Secede! is a revolutionary movement. Religious/Redemptive movements are "meaning seeking," and their goal is to provoke inner change or spiritual growth in individuals. Organizations pushing these movements include Heaven's Gate or the Branch Davidians. The latter is still in existence despite government involvement that led to the deaths of numerous Branch Davidian members in 1993. Alternative movements are focused on self-improvement and limited, specific changes to individual beliefs and behavior. These include trends like transcendental meditation or a macrobiotic diet. Resistance movements seek to prevent or undo change to the social structure. The Ku Klux Klan, the Minutemen, and pro-life movements fall into this category.

Stages of Social Movements

Later sociologists studied the lifecycle of social movements—how they emerge, grow, and in some cases, die out. Blumer (1969) and Tilly (1978) outline a four-stage process. In the *preliminary stage*, people be the issue and raise awareness. In the *institutionalize*come aware of an issue, and leaders emerge. This is followed by the *coalescence stage* when people join together and organize in order to publiciz*ation stage*, the movement no longer requires grassroots volunteerism: it is an established organization, typically with a paid staff. When people fall away and adopt a new movement, the movement successfully brings about the change it sought, or when people no longer take the issue seriously, the movement falls into the *decline stage*. Each social movement discussed earlier belongs in one of these four stages. Where would you put them on the list?

Social Media and Social Movements



Figure 18.3.1: These activists are calling for "Climate Justice Now!" Are these activists most likely to have a larger impact through people who see their sign from the shore, or through people who will see pictures of their event on social media? (Paddle in Seattle by Backbone_campaign via flickr is licensed under CC BY 4.0)

As we have mentioned throughout this text, and likely as you have experienced in your life, social media is a widely used mechanism in social movements. In the Groups and Organizations chapter, we discussed Tarana Burke first using "Me Too" in

2006 on a major social media venue of the time (MySpace). The phrase later grew into a massive movement when people began using it on Twitter to drive empathy and support regarding experiences of sexual harassment or sexual assault. In a similar way, Black Lives Matter began as a social media message after George Zimmerman was acquitted in the shooting death of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, and the phrase burgeoned into a formalized (though decentralized) movement in subsequent years.

Social media has the potential to dramatically transform how people get involved in movements ranging from local school district decisions to presidential campaigns. As discussed above, movements go through several stages, and social media adds a dynamic to each of them. In the the *preliminary stage*, people become aware of an issue, and leaders emerge. Compared to movements of 20 or 30 years ago, social media can accelerate this stage substantially. Issue awareness can spread at the speed of a click, with thousands of people across the globe becoming informed at the same time. In a similar vein, those who are savvy and engaged with social media may emerge as leaders, even if, for example, they are not great public speakers.

At the next stage, the *coalescence stage*, social media is also transformative. Coalescence is the point when people join together to publicize the issue and get organized. President Obama's 2008 campaign was a case study in organizing through social media. Using Twitter and other online tools, the campaign engaged volunteers who had typically not bothered with politics. Combined with comprehensive data tracking and the ability to micro-target, the campaign became a blueprint for others to build on. The 2020 elections featured a level of data analysis and rapid response capabilities that, while echoing the Obama campaign's early work, made the 2008 campaign look quaint. The campaigns and political analysts could measure the level of social media interaction following any campaign stop, debate, statement by the candidate, news mention, or any other event, and measure whether the tone or "sentiment" was positive or negative. Political polls are still important, but social media provides instant feedback and opportunities for campaigns to act, react, or—on a daily basis—ask for donations based on something that had occurred just hours earlier (Knowledge at Wharton 2020).

Hashtags and Activism

Interestingly, social media can have interesting outcomes once a movement reaches the *institutionalization* stage. In some cases, a formal organization might exist alongside the hashtag or general sentiment, as is the case with Black Lives Matter. At any one time, BLM is essentially three things: a structured organization, an idea with deep and personal meaning for people, and a widely used phrase or hashtag. It's possible that users of the hashtag are not referring to the formal organization. It's even possible that people who hold a strong belief that Black lives matter do not agree with all of the organization's principles or its leadership. And in other cases, people may be very aligned with all three contexts of the phrase. Social media is still crucial to the social movement, but its interplay is both complex and evolving.

In a similar way, MeToo activists, including Tarana Burke herself, have sought to clarify the interweaving of different aspects of the movement. She told the Harvard Gazette in 2020: "I think we have to be careful about what we're calling the movement. And I think one of the things I've learned in the last two years is that folks don't really understand what a movement is or how it's defined. The people using the hashtag on the internet were the impetus for Me Too being put into the public sphere. The media coverage of the viralness of Me Too and the people being accused are media coverage of a popular story that derived from the hashtag. The movement is the work that our organization and others like us are doing to both support survivors and move people to action" (Walsh 2020).

Sociologists have identified high-risk activism, such as the civil rights movement, as a "strong-tie" phenomenon, meaning that people are far more likely to stay engaged and not run home to safety if they have close friends who are also engaged. The people who dropped out of the movement—who went home after the danger became too great—did not display any less ideological commitment. But they lacked the strong-tie connection to other people who were staying. Social media had been considered "weak-tie" (McAdam 1993 and Brown 2011). People follow or friend people they have never met. Weak ties are important for our social structure, but they seemed to limit the level of risk we'll take on their behalf. For some people, social media remains that way, but for others it can relate to or build stronger ties. For example, if people, who had for years known each other only through an online group, meet in person at an event, they may feel far more connected at that event and afterward than people who had never interacted before. And as we discussed in the Groups chapter, social media itself, even if people never meet, can bring people into primary group status, forming stronger ties.

Another way to consider the impact of social media on activism is through something that may or may not be emotional, has little implications regarding tie strength, and may be fleeting rather than permanent, but still be one of the largest considerations of any formal social movement: money. Returning to politics, think of the massive amounts of campaign money raised in each election cycle through social media. In the 2020 Presidential election and its aftermath, hundreds of millions of dollars were raised through social media. Likewise, 55 percent of people who engage with nonprofits through social media take some sort of action; and for 60 percent of them (or 33 percent of the total) that action is to give money to support the cause (Nonprofit Source

2020).

Theoretical Perspectives on Social Movements

Most theories of social movements are called collective action theories, indicating the purposeful nature of this form of collective behavior. The following three theories are but a few of the many classic and modern theories developed by social scientists.

Resource Mobilization

McCarthy and Zald (1977) conceptualize resource mobilization theory as a way to explain movement success in terms of the ability to acquire resources and mobilize individuals. Resources are primarily time and money, and the more of both, the greater the power of organized movements. Numbers of social movement organizations (SMOs), which are single social movement groups, with the same goals constitute a social movement industry (SMI). Together they create what McCarthy and Zald (1977) refer to as "the sum of all social movements in a society."

Resource Mobilization and the Civil Rights Movement

An example of resource mobilization theory is activity of the civil rights movement in the decade between the mid 1950s and the mid 1960s. Social movements had existed before, notably the Women's Suffrage Movement and a long line of labor movements, thus constituting an existing social movement sector, which is the multiple social movement industries in a society, even if they have widely varying constituents and goals. The civil rights movement had also existed well before Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat to a white man. Less known is that Parks was a member of the NAACP and trained in leadership (A&E Television Networks, LLC. 2014). But her action that day was spontaneous and unplanned (Schmitz 2014). Her arrest triggered a public outcry that led to the famous Montgomery bus boycott, turning the movement into what we now think of as the "civil rights movement" (Schmitz 2014).

Mobilization had to begin immediately. Boycotting the bus made other means of transportation necessary, which was provided through car pools. Churches and their ministers joined the struggle, and the protest organization In Friendship was formed as well as The Friendly Club and the Club From Nowhere. A social movement industry, which is the collection of the social movement organizations that are striving toward similar goals, was growing.

Martin Luther King Jr. emerged during these events to become the charismatic leader of the movement, gained respect from elites in the federal government, and aided by even more emerging SMOs such as the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), among others. Several still exist today. Although the movement in that period was an overall success, and laws were changed (even if not attitudes), the "movement" continues. So do struggles to keep the gains that were made, even as the U.S. Supreme Court has recently weakened the Voter Rights Act of 1965, once again making it more difficult for Black Americans and other minorities to vote.

Framing/Frame Analysis

Over the past several decades, sociologists have developed the concept of frames to explain how individuals identify and understand social events and which norms they should follow in any given situation (Goffman 1974; Snow et al. 1986; Benford and Snow 2000). Imagine entering a restaurant. Your “frame” immediately provides you with a behavior template. It probably does not occur to you to wear pajamas to a fine-dining establishment, throw food at other patrons, or spit your drink onto the table. However, eating food at a sleepover pizza party provides you with an entirely different behavior template. It might be perfectly acceptable to eat in your pajamas and maybe even throw popcorn at others or guzzle drinks from cans.

Successful social movements use three kinds of frames (Snow and Benford 1988) to further their goals. The first type, diagnostic framing, states the problem in a clear, easily understood way. When applying diagnostic frames, there are no shades of gray: instead, there is the belief that what “they” do is wrong and this is how “we” will fix it. The anti-gay marriage movement is an example of diagnostic framing with its uncompromising insistence that marriage is only between a man and a woman. Prognostic framing, the second type, offers a solution and states how it will be implemented. Some examples of this frame, when looking at the issue of marriage equality as framed by the anti-gay marriage movement, include the plan to restrict marriage to “one man/one woman” or to allow only “civil unions” instead of marriages. As you can see, there may be many competing prognostic frames even within social movements adhering to similar diagnostic frames. Finally, motivational framing is the call to action: what should

you do once you agree with the diagnostic frame and believe in the prognostic frame? These frames are action-oriented. In the gay marriage movement, a call to action might encourage you to vote “no” on Proposition 8 in California (a move to limit marriage to male-female couples), or conversely, to contact your local congressperson to express your viewpoint that marriage should be restricted to male-female couples.

With so many similar diagnostic frames, some groups find it best to join together to maximize their impact. When social movements link their goals to the goals of other social movements and merge into a single group, a frame alignment process (Snow et al. 1986) occurs—an ongoing and intentional means of recruiting participants to the movement.

This frame alignment process has four aspects: bridging, amplification, extension, and transformation. *Bridging* describes a “bridge” that connects uninvolved individuals and unorganized or ineffective groups with social movements that, though structurally unconnected, nonetheless share similar interests or goals. These organizations join together to create a new, stronger social movement organization. Can you think of examples of different organizations with a similar goal that have banded together?

In the *amplification* model, organizations seek to expand their core ideas to gain a wider, more universal appeal. By expanding their ideas to include a broader range, they can mobilize more people for their cause. For example, the Slow Food movement extends its arguments in support of local food to encompass reduced energy consumption, pollution, obesity from eating more healthfully, and more.

In *extension*, social movements agree to mutually promote each other, even when the two social movement organization’s goals don’t necessarily relate to each other’s immediate goals. This often occurs when organizations are sympathetic to each others’ causes, even if they are not directly aligned, such as women’s equal rights and the civil rights movement.

Transformation means a complete revision of goals. Once a movement has succeeded, it risks losing relevance. If it wants to remain active, the movement has to change with the transformation or risk becoming obsolete. For instance, when the women’s suffrage movement gained women the right to vote, members turned their attention to advocating equal rights and campaigning to elect women to office. In short, transformation is an evolution in the existing diagnostic or prognostic frames that generally achieves a total conversion of the movement.

New Social Movement Theory

New social movement theory, a development of European social scientists in the 1950s and 1960s, attempts to explain the proliferation of postindustrial and postmodern movements that are difficult to analyze using traditional social movement theories. Rather than being one specific theory, it is more of a perspective that revolves around understanding movements as they relate to politics, identity, culture, and social change. Some of these more complex interrelated movements include ecofeminism, which focuses on the patriarchal society as the source of environmental problems, and the transgender rights movement. Sociologist Steven Buechler (2000) suggests that we should be looking at the bigger picture in which these movements arise—shifting to a macro-level, global analysis of social movements.

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18.4: Social Change

Causes of Social Change

Collective behavior and social movements are just two of the forces driving social change, which is the change in society created through social movements as well as external factors. Essentially, any disruptive shift in the status quo, be it intentional or random, human-caused or natural, can lead to social change.

Throughout this text, we have discussed various causes and effects of social change. Below is a recap of some major drivers, including technology, social institutions, population, and the environment. Alone or in combination, these agents can disturb, improve, disrupt, or otherwise influence society.

Technology

Some would say that improving technology has made our lives easier. Imagine what your day would be like without the Internet, the automobile, or electricity. In *The World Is Flat*, Thomas Friedman (2005) argues that technology is a driving force behind globalization, while the other forces of social change (social institutions, population, environment) play comparatively minor roles. He suggests that we can view globalization as occurring in three distinct periods. First, globalization was driven by military expansion, powered by horsepower and wind power. The countries best able to take advantage of these power sources expanded the most, and exert control over the politics of the globe from the late fifteenth century to around the year 1800. The second shorter period from approximately 1800 C.E. to 2000 C.E. consisted of a globalizing economy. Steam and rail power were the guiding forces of social change and globalization in this period. Finally, Friedman brings us to the post-millennial era. In this period of globalization, change is driven by technology, particularly the Internet (Friedman 2005).

Technology can change other societal forces. For example, advances in medical technology allow people to live longer, have more children, and survive some natural disasters or problems. Advances in agricultural technology have allowed us to alter food products, which impacts our health as well as the environment. A given technology can create beneficiaries, but that same technology—especially if it is disruptive—can lead others to lose their jobs, suffer from pollution, or be monitored or victimized.

The digital divide—the increasing gap between the technological haves and have-nots—exists both locally and globally. Added security issues include theft of personal information, cyber aggression, and loss of privacy. The constant change in technology leads to an almost inevitable lack of preparation for new risks on both personal and societal scales.

Sociology in the Real World: Crowdsourcing: Using the Web to Get Things Done

Millions of people today walk around with their heads tilted toward a small device held in their hands. Perhaps you are reading this textbook on a phone or tablet. People in developed societies now take communication technology for granted. How has this technology affected social change in our society and others? One very positive way is crowdsourcing.

Thanks to the web, digital crowdsourcing is the process of obtaining needed services, ideas, or content by soliciting contributions from a large group of people, and especially from an online community rather than from traditional employees or suppliers. Web-based companies such as Kickstarter have been created precisely for the purposes of raising large amounts of money in a short period of time, notably by sidestepping the traditional financing process. This book, or virtual book, is the product of a kind of crowdsourcing effort. It has been written and reviewed by several authors in a variety of fields to give you free access to a large amount of data produced at a low cost. The most common example of crowdsourced data is Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia, which is the result of thousands of volunteers adding and correcting material.

Perhaps the most striking use of crowdsourcing is disaster relief. By tracking tweets and e-mails and organizing the data in order of urgency and quantity, relief agencies can address the most urgent calls for help, such as for medical aid, food, shelter, or rescue. On January 12, 2010 a devastating earthquake hit the nation of Haiti. By January 25, a crisis map had been created from more than 2,500 incident reports, and more reports were added every day. The same technology was used to assist victims of the Japanese earthquake and tsunami in 2011.

The Darker Side of Technology: Electronic Aggression in the Information Age

The U.S. Center for Disease Control (CDC) uses the term "electronic aggression" to describe "any type of harassment or bullying that occurs through e-mail, a chat room, instant messaging, a website (including blogs), or text messaging" (CDC, n.d.) We generally think of this as cyberbullying. A 2011 study by the U.S. Department of Education found that 27.8 percent of students aged twelve through eighteen reported experiencing bullying. From the same sample 9 percent specifically reported having been a victim of cyberbullying (Robers et al. 2013).

Cyberbullying represents a powerful change in modern society. William F. Ogburn (1922) might have been describing it nearly a century ago when he defined "cultural lag," which occurs when material culture precedes nonmaterial culture. That is, society may not fully comprehend all the consequences of a new technology and so may initially reject it (such as stem cell research) or embrace it, sometimes with unintended negative consequences (such as pollution).

Cyberbullying is a special feature of the Internet. Unique to electronic aggression is that it can happen twenty-four hours a day, every day; it can reach a child (or an adult) even though she or he might otherwise feel safe in a locked house. The messages and images may be posted anonymously and to a very wide audience, and they might even be impossible to trace. Finally, once posted, the texts and images are very hard to delete. Its effects range from the use of alcohol and drugs to lower self-esteem, health problems, and even suicide (CDC, n.d.).

Social Institutions

Each change in a single social institution leads to changes in all social institutions. For example, the industrialization of society meant that there was no longer a need for large families to produce enough manual labor to run a farm. Further, new job opportunities were in close proximity to urban centers where living space was at a premium. The result is that the average family size shrunk significantly.

This same shift toward industrial corporate entities also changed the way we view government involvement in the private sector, created the global economy, provided new political platforms, and even spurred new religions and new forms of religious worship like Scientology. It has also informed the way we educate our children: originally schools were set up to accommodate an agricultural calendar so children could be home to work the fields in the summer, and even today, teaching models are largely based on preparing students for industrial jobs, despite that being an outdated need. A shift in one area, such as industrialization, means an interconnected impact across social institutions.

Population

Population composition is changing at every level of society. Births increase in one nation and decrease in another. Some families delay childbirth while others start bringing children into their folds early. Population changes can be due to random external forces, like an epidemic, or shifts in other social institutions, as described above. But regardless of why and how it happens, population trends have a tremendous interrelated impact on all other aspects of society.

In the United States, we are experiencing an increase in our senior population as Baby Boomers retire, which will in turn change the way many of our social institutions are organized. For example, there is an increased demand for housing in warmer climates, a massive shift in the need for elder care and assisted living facilities, and growing incidence of elder abuse. Retiring Boomers may also lead to labor or expertise shortages, and (as discussed extensively in the chapter on Aging and the Elderly) healthcare costs will increase to become a larger and larger portion of our economy.

Globally, often the countries with the highest fertility rates are least able to absorb and attend to the needs of a growing population. Family planning is a large step in ensuring that families are not burdened with more children than they can care for. On a macro level, the increased population, particularly in the poorest parts of the globe, also leads to increased stress on the planet's resources.

The Environment

As discussed extensively in the chapter on Population, Urbanization, and the Environment, changes in the environment and our interaction with it can have promising or devastating effects. Access to safe water is a primary determinant of health and prosperity. And as human populations expand in more vulnerable areas while natural disasters occur with more frequency, we see an increase in the number of people affected by those disasters.

Overall health and wellbeing are deeply affected by the environment even in urbanized areas. Many types of cancers, which are collectively the leading cause of death in higher-income countries, have environmental influences (Mahase 2019).

Sociology in the Real World: Hurricane Katrina: When It All Comes Together

The four key elements that affect social change that are described in this chapter are the environment, technology, social institutions, and population. In 2005, New Orleans was struck by a devastating hurricane. But it was not just the hurricane that was disastrous. It was the converging of all four of these elements, and the text below will connect the elements by putting the words in parentheses.

Before Hurricane Katrina (environment) hit, poorly coordinated evacuation efforts had left about 25 percent of the population, almost entirely African Americans who lacked private transportation, to suffer the consequences of the coming storm (demographics). Then "after the storm, when the levees broke, thousands more [refugees] came. And the city buses, meant to take them to proper shelters, were underwater" (Sullivan 2005). No public transportation was provided, drinking water and communications were delayed, and FEMA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (institutions), was headed by an appointee with no real experience in emergency management. Those who were eventually evacuated did not know where they were being sent or how to contact family members. African Americans were sent the farthest from their homes. When the displaced began to return, public housing had not been reestablished, yet the Superdome stadium, which had served as a temporary disaster shelter, had been rebuilt. Homeowners received financial support, but renters did not.

As it turns out, it was not entirely the hurricane that cost the lives of 1,500 people, but the fact that the city's storm levees (technology), which had been built too low and which failed to meet numerous other safety specifications, gave way, flooding the lower portions of the city, occupied almost entirely by African Americans.

Journalist Naomi Klein, in her book The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism, presents a theory of a "triple shock," consisting of an initial disaster, an economic shock that replaces public services with private (for-profit) ones, and a third shock consisting of the intense policing of the remaining public. Klein supports her claim by quoting then-Congressman Richard Baker as saying, "We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn't do it, but God did." She quotes developer Joseph Canizaro as stating, "I think we have a clean sheet to start again. And with that clean sheet we have some very big opportunities."

One clean sheet was that New Orleans began to replace public schools with charters, breaking the teachers' union and firing all public school teachers (Mullins 2014). Public housing was seriously reduced and the poor were forced out altogether or into the suburbs far from medical and other facilities (The Advocate 2013). Finally, by relocating African Americans and changing the ratio of African Americans to whites, New Orleans changed its entire demographic makeup.

Modernization

Modernization describes the processes that increase the amount of specialization and differentiation of structure in societies resulting in the move from an undeveloped society to a developed, technologically driven society (Irwin 1975). By this definition, the level of modernity within a society is judged by the sophistication of its technology, particularly as it relates to infrastructure, industry, and the like. However, it is important to note the inherent ethnocentric bias of such assessment. Why do we assume that those living in semi-peripheral and peripheral nations would find it so wonderful to become more like the core nations? Is modernization always positive?

One contradiction of all kinds of technology is that they often promise time-saving benefits, but somehow fail to deliver. How many times have you ground your teeth in frustration at an Internet site that refused to load or at a dropped call on your cell phone? Despite time-saving devices such as dishwashers, washing machines, and, now, remote control vacuum cleaners, the average amount of time spent on housework is the same today as it was fifty years ago. And the dubious benefits of 24/7 e-mail and immediate information have simply increased the amount of time employees are expected to be responsive and available. While once businesses had to travel at the speed of the U.S. postal system, sending something off and waiting until it was received before the next stage, today the immediacy of information transfer means there are no such breaks.

Further, the Internet bought us information, but at a cost. The morass of information means that there is as much poor information available as trustworthy sources. There is a delicate line to walk when core nations seek to bring the assumed benefits of modernization to more traditional cultures. For one, there are obvious procapitalist biases that go into such attempts, and it

is short-sighted for western governments and social scientists to assume all other countries aspire to follow in their footsteps. Additionally, there can be a kind of neo-liberal defense of rural cultures, ignoring the often crushing poverty and diseases that exist in peripheral nations and focusing only on a nostalgic mythology of the happy peasant. It takes a very careful hand to understand both the need for cultural identity and preservation as well as the hopes for future growth.

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18.5: Key Terms

Glossary

- acting crowds | crowds of people who are focused on a specific action or goal
- alternative movements | social movements that limit themselves to self-improvement changes in individuals
- assembling perspective | a theory that credits individuals in crowds as behaving as rational thinkers and views crowds as engaging in purposeful behavior and collective action
- casual crowds | people who share close proximity without really interacting
- collective behavior | a noninstitutionalized activity in which several people voluntarily engage
- conventional crowds | people who come together for a regularly scheduled event
- crowd | a fairly large number of people who share close proximity
- crowdsourcing | the process of obtaining needed services, ideas, or content by soliciting contributions from a large group of people
- diagnostic framing | a the social problem that is stated in a clear, easily understood manner
- emergent norm theory | a perspective that emphasizes the importance of social norms in crowd behavior
- expressive crowds | crowds who share opportunities to express emotions
- flash mob | a large group of people who gather together in a spontaneous activity that lasts a limited amount of time frame
- alignment process | using bridging, amplification, extension, and transformation as an ongoing and intentional means of recruiting participants to a movement
- mass | a relatively large group with a common interest, even if they may not be in close proximity
- modernization | the process that increases the amount of specialization and differentiation of structure in societies
- motivational framing | a call to action
- new social movement theory | a theory that attempts to explain the proliferation of postindustrial and postmodern movements that are difficult to understand using traditional social movement theories
- NGO | nongovernmental organizations working globally for numerous humanitarian and environmental causes
- prognostic framing | social movements that state a clear solution and a means of implementation
- public | an unorganized, relatively diffuse group of people who share ideas
- reform movements | movements that seek to change something specific about the social structure
- religious/redemptive movements | movements that work to promote inner change or spiritual growth in individuals
- resistance movements | those who seek to prevent or undo change to the social structure
- resource mobilization theory | a theory that explains social movements' success in terms of their ability to acquire resources and mobilize individuals
- revolutionary movements | movements that seek to completely change every aspect of society
- social change | the change in a society created through social movements as well as through external factors like environmental shifts or technological innovations
- social movement | a purposeful organized group hoping to work toward a common social goal
- social movement industry | the collection of the social movement organizations that are striving toward similar goals
- social movement organization | a single social movement group
- social movement sector | the multiple social movement industries in a society, even if they have widely varying constituents and goals
- value-added theory | a functionalist perspective theory that posits that several preconditions must be in place for collective behavior to occur

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18.6: Short Answer

Critical Thinking Questions

1. Discuss the differences between a mass and a crowd. What is an example of each? What sets them apart? What do they share in common?
2. Can you think of a time when your behavior in a crowd was dictated by the circumstances? Give an example of emergent-norm perspective, using your own experience.
3. Discuss the differences between an acting crowd and a collective crowd. Give examples of each.
4. Imagine you are at a rally protesting nuclear energy use. Walk us through the hypothetical rally using the value-added theory, imagining it meets all the stages.
5. Think about a social movement industry dealing with a cause that is important to you. How do the different social movement organizations of this industry seek to engage you? Which techniques do you respond to? Why?
6. Do you think social media is an important tool in creating social change? Why, or why not? Defend your opinion.
7. Describe a social movement in the decline stage. What is its issue? Why has it reached this stage?
8. Consider one of the major social movements of the twentieth century, from civil rights in the United States to Gandhi's nonviolent protests in India. How would technology have changed it? Would change have come more quickly or more slowly? Defend your opinion.
9. Discuss the digital divide in the context of modernization. Is there a real concern that poorer communities are lacking in technology? Why, or why not?
10. Which theory do you think better explains the global economy: dependency theory (global inequity is due to the exploitation of peripheral and semi-peripheral nations by core nations) or modernization theory? Remember to justify your answer and provide specific examples.
11. Do you think that modernization is good or bad? Explain, using examples.

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18.7: Further Research

Additional Learning Resources

- The Global Nonviolent Action Database at Swarthmore College contains more than 1,200 case studies from over 100 countries, allowing you to compare movements, their goals, strategies, and outcomes.
- Explore the Martin Luther King, Jr. Encyclopedia from Stanford University's King Institute to learn more about the people, organizations, campaigns, and events that shaped the movement.
- The International Center on Nonviolent Conflict's Academic Online Curriculum offers articles, videos, case studies, and learning modules examining civil resistance and the dynamics of collective action around the world.
- The Commons Social Change Library brings together free resources on social movements, organizing, campaign strategy, nonviolence, activism, and social change from around the world.

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Figure 18.1: Roadmap

The diagram presents a roadmap for understanding social change using three large arrows arranged from left to right, illustrating a progression from understanding what social change is, to why it occurs, and finally how it happens.

The first arrow, colored purple, is labeled "The WHAT." Inside the arrow is the question, "What is social change and what causes it?" Beneath the arrow, the description explains that this section introduces the definition of social change, key sociological concepts, different types of social change, and the social, cultural, technological, and environmental factors that drive change in society.

The second arrow, shown in green, is labeled "The WHY." It asks, "Why does social change happen and why does it matter?" The accompanying text explains that this section explores the reasons behind social change, including the influence of social movements, conflict, innovation, demographic shifts, and environmental forces. It emphasizes why understanding these forces is important for interpreting changes within society.

The third arrow, displayed in blue, is labeled "The HOW." It asks, "How does social change occur and how can we contribute to positive change?" The text below explains that this section focuses on the processes through which change occurs, the roles of individuals, groups, institutions, and social movements, and the ways communities can promote fair, inclusive, and sustainable social change.

A horizontal arrow runs along the bottom of the graphic from left to right, reinforcing the idea of forward movement and progression through the chapter. Centered above this arrow is the title, "A Roadmap for Understanding Social Change," emphasizing that the chapter builds from foundational concepts to deeper analysis and practical application. Together, the three sections provide students with a structured framework for understanding how societies change, why those changes occur, and how individuals and collective action can influence the future.

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