chapter 3

IN THE BEGINNING of the last chapter, we saw how people feel both separate *and* connected, both different and the same. Sometimes, we want to "fit in," be just like everyone else—for example, when your professor scans the classroom looking for someone to call on for a question, and you put your eyes down, hoping not to be seen, to disappear into the class, to fit in without ever being noticed. Yet when you approach your professor at the end of the semester and ask for a letter of recommendation, you would feel a bit uncomfortable if your professor were to say, "You're just like all the other students." At that moment, you are likely to protest that you are a "unique individual," and that you cannot be seen as just like everyone else. You want to "stand out in the crowd." Or, when you create a page for yourself on Facebook, you are doing it because everybody is doing that these days, to fit in, to be in step with others, to be one of the crowd. Yet when you design it, you also want to stand out, to grab people's attention, so you will be seen as a unique person.

Society: Interactions, Groups, and Organizations

Sociologists do not want you to have to choose between "fitting in" and "standing out." You couldn't if you tried. We spend our lives both trying to fit in and trying to stand out; sometimes we succeed, and sometimes we fail. What's interesting to a sociologist is the choices you make about where to fit in or stand out, how you decide to go about fitting in or standing out, what

What's interesting to a sociologist is the choices you make about where to fit in or stand out, what the formal and informal criteria are for fitting in or standing out, and who gets to decide if you've been successful in the position you want to take.

the formal and informal criteria are for fitting in or standing out, and who gets to decide if you've been successful in the position you want to take. Fitting in and standing out are similar, after all. Both refer to something outside yourself. Both assume that you are referring to an "other"—another group or person that you either want to accept you or from which you want to separate yourself. You want to be seen as special, different, worth knowing and being with because you are *you*, and you don't want to be seen as *too* different, weird, or strange, because then people won't want to be with you.

Society: Putting Things in Context

Sociology is a way of seeing that can be described as "contextualizing"—that is, sociologists try to understand the social *contexts* in which our individual activity takes place, the other people with whom we interact, the dynamics of interaction, and the institutions in which that activity takes place. Sociologists are less concerned with the psychological motivations for your actions and more concerned with the forces that shape your motivation, the forces that push you in one direction and pull you in another, other people with whom you interact, and meanings you derive from the action. Understanding social behavior is a constant process of "contextualizing" that behavior—placing it in different frameworks to better understand its complexity. (The importance of the term *context* cannot be overstated. The American Sociological Association's new magazine, designed to present sociology's message to the wider public outside the field, is called *Contexts*. When this title was announced, the universal praise among sociologists indicated a collective nod of understanding.)

The chief context in which we try to place individuals, locate their identity, and chart their experiences is generally called society. But what is this thing called "society" that we study?

Some people don't even believe it exists. In 1987, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher caused an uproar when she told an interviewer "There's no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families" (Keay, 1987). Is society simply a collection of individuals, or is it something more than that?

Society can be defined *an organized collection of individuals and institutions, bounded by space in a coherent territory, subject to the same political authority, and organized through a shared set of cultural expectations and values*. But what does that mean? Let's look look at each element:

- *Organized collection of individuals and institutions*. Society isn't a random collection but purposive and organized, composed not only of individuals but of all the institutions (family, economy, religion, education) in which we find ourselves.
- *Bounded by space in a coherent territory*. This adds a spatial dimension to society. Society exists someplace, not only in our imaginations.

Did *you* know?

While no one can say for sure where society originated, human beings are, by definition, social creatures, so the origin of society is the origin of human life. But we can say where the word *society* came from: France. It comes from the French word *société*. This term has its origins from the Latin word *societas*, a "friendly association with others."

- *Subject to the same political authority.* Everyone in the same place is also subject to the same rules.
- *Organized through a shared set of cultural expectations and values*. Our behaviors are not only governed by what people expect of us but also motivated by common values.

The definition of society here is somewhat top heavy—that is, it rests on large-scale structures and institutions, territorial arrangements, and uniform political authority. But society doesn't arrive fully formed from out of the blue: Societies are made, constructed, built from the bottom up as well. In this chapter, we will look at the basic building blocks of society from the smallest elements (interactions) to coherent sets of interactions with particular members (groups) and within particular contexts (organizations). From the ground up, societies are composed of *structured social interactions*. Again, let's look at each of these terms individually:

- *Structured* means that our actions, our interactions with others, do not occur in a vacuum. Structured refers to the contexts in which we find ourselves—everything from our families and communities, to religious groups, to states and countries, and even to groups of countries. We act in the world in ways that are structured, which makes them (for the most part) predictable and orderly; our actions are, in large part, bound by norms and motivated by values.
- *Social* refers to the fact that we don't live alone; we live in groups, families, networks. Sociologists are interested in the social dynamics of our interaction, how we interact with others.
- *Interaction* refers to the ways we behave in relation to others. Even when we are just sitting around in our homes or dorm rooms with a bunch of friends, "doing nothing," we are interacting in structured, patterned ways.

These two definitions are complementary; they are the micro and the macro levels of society. Sociologists believe that society is greater than the sum of its parts. Sociologists examine those parts, from the individual to the largest institutions and organizations. Sociologists have discovered that even a small group of friends makes different decisions than the individual members would alone. And it doesn't end there. Groups are embedded in other groups, in social institutions, in identities, in cultures, in nation-states, until we come to that enormous edifice, society. It turns out to be not a mass of individuals at all but an intricate pattern of groups within groups. What's more, it's not the mere *fact* of different types of groups but how we interact with others in society that structures our behavior, our experiences, and even our selves.

Since the early twentieth century, sociologists have attempted to understand exactly how we "construct" a sense of self, an identity through our interaction with the world around us. Instead of being a "blank slate" on which society imprints its dictates, sociologists see individuals as actively engaged in the process. We create identities through our interactions with the world around us, using the materials (biological inheritance, cultural context, social position) that we have at hand. Our identities, sociologists believe, are socially constructed.

Sociologists use certain conceptual tools to understand the ways in which we construct these identities. Some, like *socialization,* refer to processes by which the culture incorporates individuals, makes the part of the collectivity. Other terms, like *roles, statuses, groups,* and *networks,* help us understand the ways in which individuals negotiate with others to create identities that feel stable, consistent, and permanent. Finally, other terms, like *organizations* and *institutions* describe more formal and stable patterns of interactions among many individuals that enable us to predict and control behavior. *Society* refers to the sum of all these other elements.

Societies cohere through social structure. **Social structure** is a complex framework, or structure, composed of both patterned social interactions and institutions that together both organize social life and provide the context for individual action. It consists of different positions, resources, groups, and relationships. Social structure is both formal and informal, fluid and fixed. It is both a web of affiliations that supports and sustains us and a solid walled concrete building from which we cannot escape.

The Social Construction of Reality

Social life is essentially patterns of **social interaction**—behaviors that are oriented toward other people. Other people are also interacting as well, and these near-infinite interactions cohere into patterns. While we are performing in the gigantic drama of social life, everyone around is also performing, trying to present the best role possible and trying to avoid losing face. Because everyone has different ideas, goals, beliefs, and expectations, how does it all fit together into a social world with some semblance of order? Commonsense knowledge—things that we take for granted as "obvious"—differs among people from different cultures and even among different people within the same culture. Even empirical data—what we see, hear, smell, and taste—differ. One person may watch a movie and be thrilled, another bored, and a third outraged.

There is no objective social reality, no one "true" way of interpreting the things that happen to us. The job of the physical scientist is to find out what is "true" about the physical world, but with no "true" social world, the job of the social scientist is to find out how people come to perceive something as true.

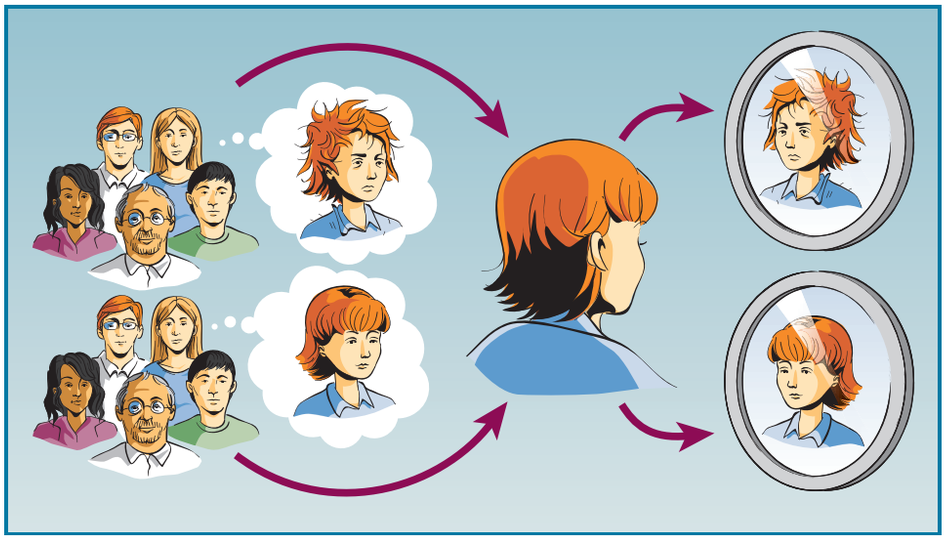
According to Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966), we "construct" social reality through social interaction. We follow conventions that everyone (or almost everyone) in the group learns to accept: that grandmothers and buddies are to be treated differently, for instance, or that teachers like students who express their own opinions. These conventions become social reality, "the way things are." We do not challenge them or even think about them very much.

Cooley and the Looking-Glass Self

One of the first sociologists to argue that the identity is formed through social interaction was Charles Horton Cooley (1864–1929), who coined the term **looking-glass self** to describe the process by which our identity develops (Cooley, 1902). He argued that we develop our looking-glass self or mirror self in three stages:

1. *We imagine how we appear to others around us.* We think other people see us as smart or stupid, good or bad. If a teacher scolds me for not knowing the answer, I will believe that the teacher thinks of me as stupid. Our conclusions do not need to be accurate—perhaps the teacher thinks that I am exceptionally intelligent and is just frustrated that I do not know the answer this time. Misinterpretations, mistakes, and misunderstandings can be just as powerful as truthful evaluations.
2. *We draw general conclusions based on the reactions of others.* If I imagine that many people think I am stupid, or just one important person (like a teacher or a parent), then I will conclude that I am indeed stupid.
3. *Based on our evaluations of others' reactions, we develop our sense of personal identity.* That is, I imagine that many people think I am stupid, so I "become"

FIGURE 3.1 **Cooley's Looking-Glass Self**



stupid or at least hide my intelligence. A favorable reaction in the "social mirror" leads to a positive self-concept; a negative reaction leads to a negative self-concept.

This is never a finished process. We are constantly meeting new people and getting new reactions, so we are revising our looking-glass self throughout our lives (Figure 3.1).

George Herbert Mead (1863–1931), a sociologist, believed that our self arises through taking on the role of others. Mead used interaction as the foundation for this theory of the construction of identity: We create a "self" through our interactions with others. (We will discuss Mead further in Chapter 5.) Mead said that there were two parts of the self, the "I" and the "me." The "I" is the self as subject, needs, desires, and impulses that are not channeled into any social activity, an agent, the self that thinks and acts. The "me" is self as object—the attitudes we internalize from interactions with others, the social self. We achieve our sense of self-awareness when we learn to distinguish the two.

Goffman and the "Dramaturgical" Self

Erving Goffman (1922–1982) went beyond the concept of the looking-glass self. He believed that our selves change not only because of other people's reactions but also because of the way we actively try to present ourselves to other people. Early in life, we learn to modify our behavior in accordance with what particular people expect of us. Perhaps when I am with my buddies, I tell vulgar jokes and playfully insult them, because they approve of this sort of behavior as a form of male bonding. However, I would never consider such behavior when I am visiting my grandmother: Then I am quiet and respectful. Goffman calls this **impression management** (1959). I am not merely responding to the reactions of others. I am actively trying to control how others perceive me by changing my behavior to correspond to an ideal of what they will find most appealing.

We change our behavior so easily and so often, without even thinking about it, that Goffman called his theory **dramaturgy.** Social life is like a stage play, with our performances changing according to the characters on stage at the moment. Everyone tries to give the best performance possible, to convince other "characters" that

he or she is corresponding to an ideal of the best grandchild, buddy, or whatever role is being played.

Our attempt to give the best possible performance is called **face work**, because when we make a mistake or do something wrong, we feel embarrassed, or "lose face." We are always in danger of losing face because no performance is perfect. We may not fully understand the role, we make be distracted by another role, or others may have a different idea of what the role should be like.

For example, students who come to the United States from some Asian countries often "lose face" in class because they believe that the "ideal student" should sit quietly and agree with everything the professor says, whereas in American colleges the "ideal student" is expected to ask questions, share personal opinions, and perhaps disagree with the professor. Potential pitfalls are endless, and we learn to avoid them only through years of observation and experimentation.

If we have little to lose during the scene, if the other "characters" are not very important to us or we don't have a lot of emotional investment in the role, we often "front," simply pretend to have a role that we do not. We may pretend to be an expert on gourmet cuisine to impress a date or a high school sports hero to impress our children. But the more important the role, the more adept we must become in playing the role.

How do we interact? What tools do we use?

Nonverbal Communication

One of the most important ways of constructing a social reality is through nonverbal communication: our body movements, gestures, and facial expressions, our placement in relation to others. There is evidence that some basic nonverbal gestures are universal, so they may be based in biological inheritance rather than socialization. Ekman and Friesen (1978) studied New Guinea natives who had almost no contact with Westerners and found that they identified facial expressions of six emotions (happiness, sadness, anger, disgust, fear, and surprise) in the same way that Westerners did. Later, they discovered that the facial expression associated with another emotion, contempt, was not culture specific either; it was recognized by people from Germany, Hong Kong, and Italy to West Sumatra, as well as the United States (Ekman and Friesen, 1986).

However, most facial expressions must be interpreted depending on social situations that vary from culture to culture and era to era and must be learned through socialization: a New Guinean and a Westerner would certainly disagree over what sort of smile people use when they are pretending to be unhappy over an incident but are really thrilled, or when they have hurt feelings but are trying not to show it.

Through socialization, observing and experimenting in a wide variety of social situations, we learn the conventions of nonverbal communication. What is a comfortable distance for standing near another person? It differs depending on whether the person is a friend, relative, or stranger, male or female, in private or in public. People raised in the Middle East are socialized to want a very close speaking distance, so close that you can feel the breath of your partner, and they often find people raised in the United States, accustomed to a farther distance, cool and unfriendly. One of my dorm mates in college, from India, sat so close that our knees or thighs touched, even when there was plenty of room. In the United States, that degree of closeness means romantic intimacy, or at least flirting, but he intended only a comfortable distance for talking. Fortunately, some strange looks (and perhaps a harsh word or two) soon socialized him into keeping his distance.

Did *you* know?

The rules of body language and gestures change from culture to culture, so it is understandable that mistakes happen. Sometimes they can ruin a cross-cultural friendship or business deal, or even cause a war:

- The "thumbs up" gesture is obscene in Australia and New Zealand.
- In Japan, the "OK" gesture is a request for money. It's obscene in Russia, Turkey, Greece, and Italy, and in France it signifies that you believe the speaker is "worthless."
- In the Middle East, it is rude to sit cross-legged (keep both feet on the ground) or to point with the index finger (use your fist instead).

Source: Axtell, R. E. *Do's and Taboos around the World*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1985.

Here's a good example of how nonverbal communication is a form of social "glue" that holds us together as a group and maintains social cohesion even in groups that are based on inequality: laughing. Theorists have often misunderstood laughter, assuming that it was a cognitive reaction: You hear a joke, you get the joke, you laugh at it—because the joke is funny. Laughter is not about getting the joke. It's about getting along. Researchers have found that about 80 to 90 percent of the time, laughter is social, not intellectual. Laughter is a powerful bonding tool that is used to signal readiness for friendship and reinforce group solidarity by mocking deviants or insulting outsiders. It also expresses who belongs where in the status hierarchy. Women tend to laugh more than men, and everyone laughs at jokes by the boss—even if the jokes he or she tells aren't funny. Maybe *especially* if they aren't funny (Tierney, 2007)!

▲ **Successful social interactions are governed by cultural conventions that are often unstated. If this theatre were nearly full, it would be perfectly acceptable to sit next to any of these people. But with the theatre nearly empty, it would be seen as a violation of personal space.**

Verbal Communication

Nonverbal communication is so subtle that it requires a great deal of socialization, but talking is not straightforward. Even the most inconsequential statements, a "hello" or "How are you?," can be full of subtle meanings. Harold Garfinkel (1967) asked his students to engage in conversations with family and friends that violated social norms. People frequently ask us "How are you?" as a polite greeting, and they expect to hear "Fine!" as a response, even if we are not fine at all (those who are really interested in our condition might ask "How are you feeling?" instead). But Garfinkel's students took the question at face value and asked for clarification: "How am I in regard to what? My health, my finances, my peace of mind? . . ." Their "victims" usually became annoyed or angry, without really knowing why: The students had violated a convention of social interaction that we depend on to maintain a coherent society. Garfinkel eventually developed an entire sociological tradition called **ethnomethodology** in which the researcher tried to expose the common unstated assumptions that enable such conversational shortcuts to work.

Patterns of Social Interaction

There are five basic patterns of social interaction, what sociologist Robert Nisbet (1970) calls the "molecular cement" that links individuals in groups from the smallest to the largest:

1. *Exchange*. According to sociologist Peter Blau (1964), exchange is the most basic form of social interaction: We give things to people after they give things to us or in expectation of receiving things in the future. In traditional societies, the exchange can take the form of extravagant gifts or violent retribution, but most often in modern societies, the exchange is symbolic: Smiles or polite words symbolize welcome or friendship , and vulgar gestures or harsh words are exchanged to symbolize hostility. Individuals, groups, organizations, and nations keep an informal running count of the kindnesses and slights they have received and act according to the "norm of reciprocity."

▲ **Group participation often leads individuals to do things they wouldn't ordinarily do. More than 5,000 Santas participated in the Santa Dash in Liverpool, England, in December 2006 to raise money for charities.**

2. *Cooperation.* The running counts of good and bad exchanges are forgotten when we must work together toward a common goal: growing food, raising children, and protecting our group from enemies. And building civilizations: Without cooperation, social organization more complex than a small group of family and friends would be impossible. In modern societies, our jobs are usually a tiny part of an enterprise requiring the cooperation of hundreds or thousands of people. Sometimes we can even be persuaded to abandon our own goals and interests in favor of group goals. Soldiers, police officers, and others may even be asked to sacrifice their lives.

3. *Competition.* Sometimes the goal is not one of common good: Several advertising agencies may be interested in a prized account, but only one will get the contract. When resources are limited, claimants must compete for them. In modern societies, competition is especially important in economies built around capitalism, but it affects every aspect of social life. Colleges compete for the best students; religious groups compete for members.

4. *Conflict.* In a situation of conflict, the competition becomes more intense and hostile, with the competitors actively hating each other and perhaps breaking social norms to acquire the prized goal. In its basic form, conflict can lead to violence, in the form of schoolyard fights, terrorist attacks, or the armed conflicts of nations. However, sociologist Lewis Coser argued that conflict can also be a source of solidarity. In cases of conflict, the members of each group will often develop closer bonds with each other in the face of the common enemy. Conflict can also lead to positive social change, as groups struggle to overcome oppression (Coser, 1956).

5. *Coercion.* The final form of social interaction is coercion, in which individuals or groups with social power, called the **superordinate**, use the threat of violence, deprivation, or some other punishment to control the actions of those with less power, called the **subordinate** (Simmel, 1908). Coercion is often combined with other forms of social interaction. For instance, we may obey the speed limit on the highway through coercion, the threat of getting a traffic ticket, as well as through cooperation, the belief that the speed limit has been set for the public good. A great deal of our interactions are coercive, though very often the threat is not violence but being laughed at, stared at, or otherwise embarrassed. Think of how hard you might find it to be friends with uncool people—not because you don't want to but because peer pressure is a powerful form of coercion.

Elements of Social Structure

Social life requires us to adopt many roles. We must behave according to the role of "parent" around our children, "student" while in class, and "employee" at work. We know the basic rules of the each role: that "students" sit in chairs facing a central podium or desk, keep quiet unless we raise our hands, and so on—but we also have a great deal of freedom, and as we become more experienced in playing the role, we can become quite creative. The particular emphasis or interpretation we give a role, our "style," is called **role performance**.

Sociologists use two terms, *status* and *role,* to describe the elementary forms of interaction in society.

Status

In everyday life we use the term *status* to refer to people who have a lot of money, power, and influence. But sociologists use **status** to refer to any social identity recognized as meaningful by the group or society. A status is a position that carries with it certain expectations, rights, and responsibilities. Being a Presbyterian, an English major, or a teenager are statuses in contemporary American society, but having red hair or liking pizza are not. Many statuses are identities that are fixed at birth, like race, sex, or ethnicity; others we enter and exit, like different age statuses or, perhaps, class.

Statuses change from culture to culture and over time. Having red hair was once a negative status, associated with being quick tempered, cruel, and possibly demonic. When pizza was first introduced into the United States in the early 1900s, only a few people knew what it was, and "liking pizza" was a status. Many statuses are identical to roles—son or daughter, student, teacher—but others, like residents of Missouri or cyberathlete, are more complex, based on a vast set of interlocking and perhaps contradictory roles (Merton, 1968). There are two kinds of statuses.

Ascribed Status. An **ascribed status** is a status that we receive involuntarily, without regard to our unique talents, skills, or accomplishments: for instance, our place of birth, parents, first language, ethnic background, gender, sexual identity, and age. Many ascribed statuses are based on genetics or physiology, so we can do little or nothing to change them. At various times in our lives, we will have an ascribed status based on our age, as child, teenager, young adult, and so on, whether we want it or not. We have the ascribed status as "male" or "female," whether we want it or not. Some people do expend a great deal of time and effort to change their appearance and physiological functioning, but they end up with a new ascribed status of "transsexual."

Sociologists find ascribed statuses interesting because they are often used to confer privilege and power. Some statuses (White, native born, young, male, heterosexual) are presented as "naturally" superior and others (non-White, immigrant, elderly, female, gay, or lesbian) as "naturally" inferior so often and so effectively that sometimes even people who have the "inferior" statuses agree with the resulting economic, political, and social inequality. Just what statuses are presented as superior and inferior differ from culture to culture and across eras.

Though we usually cannot change our ascribed statuses, we can work to change the characteristics associated with them. If being female or African American, both ascribed statuses, are negatively valued, then people can mobilize to change the perception of those statuses. Many of the "new social movements" of the twentieth century, such as the Civil Rights movement, the women's movement, and the gay/lesbian movement, were dedicated to changing a negative ascribed social status.

Did *you* know?

In the United States, the status of "elderly" is often negative, associated with being weak, feeble-minded, decrepit, and useless, but in China, the status is associated with wisdom and strength, so you might call a 25-year-old teacher "old teacher" to indicate respect.

Achieved Status. An **achieved status** is a status that we attain through talent, ability, effort, or other unique personal characteristics. Some of the more common achieved statuses are: being a high school or college graduate; being rich or poor; having a certain occupation; being married or in a romantic relationship; belonging to a church or club; being good at a sport, hobby, or leisure pursuit; or having a specific point of view on a social issue. If you like big band or heavy metal music, for instance, you have an achieved status.

Achieved statuses are often dependent on ascribed statuses. Fans of big band music tend to be considerably older than fans of rap. Some ascribed statuses make it more difficult to achieve other statuses. Race, gender, and ethnicity all affect our abilities to achieve certain statuses. The status of "male" vastly increases your likelihood of being hired as an airline pilot or dentist, and the status of "female" vastly increases your potential of being hired for a job involving child care. In the United States, while we profess a belief that achieved statuses should be the outcome of individual abilities, ascribed statuses continue to exert a profound influence on them. Social movements for equality often organize around a sense of injustice and seek to reduce the importance of ascribed statuses.

We are able to change achieved statuses. We can change jobs, religions, or political affiliations. We can learn new skills, develop new interests, meet new people, and change our minds about issues. In fact, we usually do. I have most of the same ascribed statuses now that I did when I was 16 years old (all except for age), but my achieved statuses are dramatically different: I have changed jobs, political views, taste in music, and favorite television programs.

In traditional societies, most statuses are ascribed. People are born rich or poor and expect to die rich or poor. They have the same jobs that their parents had and cannot even think of changing their religion because only one religion is practiced throughout the society. They dress the same and listen to the same songs and stories, so they can't even change their status based on artistic taste. However, in modern societies, we have many more choices, and more and more statuses are attained.

Master Status. When ascribed or achieved status is presumed so important that it overshadows all of the others, dominating our lives and controlling our position in society, it becomes a **master status** (Hughes, 1945). Being poor or rich tends to be a master status because it dramatically influences other areas of life, such as education, health, and family stability. People who have cancer or AIDS often find that all of the other statuses in their lives become subsidiary. They are not "college student" or

What do you think?

3.1

MyLab

Marital Status

When filling out forms, we're often asked to define our statuses; we are asked marital status, educational status, socioeconomic status, etc. Of course, statuses often differ by race or class. For example, the percentage of adults who are married varies according to race and class, and the General Social Survey shows trends in these variations. So, what do you think?

Are you currently—married, widowed, divorced, separated, or have you never been married?

- ❍ married
- ❍ widowed
- ❍ divorced
- ❍ separated
- ❍ never married

Go to the end of the chapter to compare your answers to national survey data.

Try It Exploring Master Status

Adapted from submission by Casey J. Cornelius, *Delta College.*

OBJECTIVE: Develop an understanding of the concept of master status by exploring your awareness of self-identification and perception of others.

STEP 1: Develop a personal advertisement.
Write a three- to four-line personal advertisement. Personal advertisements are usually written to introduce yourself to others who are looking for a potential mate who has similar desired characteristics. Keep in mind that you will be sharing your personal advertisement with others in class.

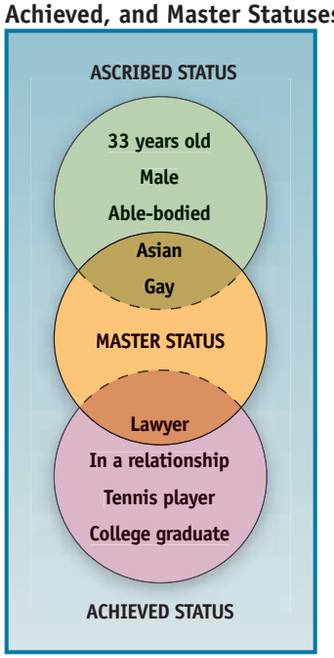
STEP 2: Share in class.
Your instructor may inform you when it is time to discuss in class, and each student may be asked to share. As you're listening to other students, think about the first two to three words they use to describe themselves. You may want to write them down as you are listening. Do you notice any patterns? How do most of the students in the class describe themselves? What roles do age, marital status, race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and occupation play in how we think about ourselves? What does all of this have to do with the concept of master status? After everyone has shared his or her personal advertisement, your instructor will lead the class in further discussions of these issues.

STEP 3: Write a reflection paper.
After class discussion, your instructor may assign a one- to two-page reflection paper about this learning activity. You may be asked to explore further the idea of master status and think about how it affects your interactions with others.

Please note that there are several different variations of this project, and your instructor will give you further directions should they be needed.

"Presbyterian" but "college student with cancer," "Presbyterian with cancer," or just "cancer patient." People who suddenly become disabled find that co-workers, acquaintances, and even their close friends ignore all their other statuses, seeing only "disabled." Other common master statuses are race, ethnicity, religion, and sexual identity (Figure 3.2). Members of ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities often complain that their associates treat them as representatives of their status rather than as individuals, asking "What do gay people think about this?" or "Why do Muslims do that?" but never about last night's ball game. Occupation may also be a master status; the first question you are likely to be asked at a gathering is, "What do you do for a living?"

FIGURE 3.2 **Ascribed, Achieved, and Master Statuses**



Roles

Social **roles** are sets of behaviors that are expected of a person who occupies a certain status. In the dramaturgical analogy, a social role is like the role an actor plays in a drama: It includes the physical presentation, props, and costume; the actor's motivation and perspective; and all the actor's lines, as well as the physical gestures, accent, and timing.

As in the theatrical world, our experience of roles is a negotiation between role *expectations* and role *performances*. We learn what sorts of behaviors are expected from specific roles, and then we perform those roles in conformity with those expectations. Our roles are constantly being evaluated: When we do them right, we may receive praise; when we do them wrong, we may be admonished or even punished. And if we begin to dislike the expectations that accompany a role, we may try to modify it to suit our needs, convince others that our performance is better than the expectations, or even reject the role altogether. Role expectations may be independent of the individuals who play them, but each individual does it slightly differently.

Because roles contain many different behaviors for use with different people in different situations, sometimes the behaviors contradict each other. We experience **role**

strain when the same role has demands and expectations that contradict each other, so we cannot possibly meet them all at once. For instance, the role of "student" might ask us to submit to the professor's authority *and* exercise independent thought. How can a single behavior fill both demands? In my first teaching job, I was 21 years old, and my students were middle-aged policemen. I noticed the students were having a tough time figuring out how to relate to me. On the one hand, they were students and I was the professor, so they knew they should act deferentially toward me. On the other hand, I was the age of their children, so they expected me to act deferentially toward them.

Role strain makes us feel worried, doubtful, and insecure, and it may force us to abandon the role altogether. Goode (1960) found that we often solve the problem of role strain by *compartmentalizing*, depending on subtle cues to decide if we should submit or exercise independent thought *right now* and often never even noticing the contradiction.

A related problem, **role conflict,** happens when we try to play different roles with extremely different or contradictory rules at the same time. If I am out with my buddies, playing the cool, irreverent role of "friend," and I see my teacher, who expects the quiet, obedient student, I may have a problem. If I suddenly become polite, I will lose face with my friends. If I remain irreverent, I will lose face with my teacher. Because everyone is playing multiple roles all the time, role conflict is a common problem. Once a student who came to my office to discuss a test grade brought her toddler twins with her. It was fascinating to watch her trying to balance the contradictory roles of "student" and "mommy" without losing face in either.

What happens when we must leave a role that is central to our identity? **Role exit** describes the process of adjustment that takes place when we move out of such a role. Sometimes we leave roles voluntarily: We change jobs or religions, get divorced and leave the "married" role, and so on. Sometimes we leave roles involuntarily: We change age groups (suddenly our parents say "You're not a kid anymore"), get arrested, get fired. Whether we leave voluntarily or involuntarily, we are likely to feel lost, confused, and sad. Helen Rose Fucs Ebaugh (1988) notes four stages in voluntarily exiting from significant social roles:

1. *Doubt.* We are frustrated, burned out, or just unhappy with our role.
2. *Search for alternatives.* We observe people in other roles or perhaps try them out ourselves temporarily. This may be a lifelong process.
3. *Departure.* Most people can identify a turning point, a specific moment or incident that marked their departure from the role, even though they might continue to play it for some time.
4. *New role.* It is very important to find a new role to take the place of the old. People who leave a role involuntarily must start the search for alternatives after departure, and it is quite likely that they will try out several new roles before finding one that they like.

Roles and statuses give us, as individuals, the tools we need to enter the social world. We feel grounded in our statuses; they give us roots. And our roles provide us with a playbook, a script, for any situation. We are ready to join others.

Ballplayer or babe? Women who enter traditionally male domains—from the operating room to the boardroom to the sport stadium—must constantly negotiate between different sets of role expectations. Jennie Finch may be an Olympic softball gold medalist and the holder of the NCAA record for most consecutive wins, but she still has to look like a cover girl to reaffirm traditional gender expectations. ▼

Groups

"The world is too much with us," the great British poet William Wordsworth once complained. He believed that immersion in the world kept us from the divine realm of nature. But sociologists are more likely to side with John Donne: "No man is an island, entire of itself . . ."

Even by yourself, sociologists believe, you are "in society." Brought up within culture, the very ideas you carry around about who you are and what you think and feel—these are already conditioned and shaped by society. It is our experience in society that makes us human.

Apart from individuals, then, the smallest unit of society is a group. To sociologists, a **group** is any assortment of people who share (or believe that they share) the same norms, values, and expectations And the smallest group is a **dyad,** a group of two. Anytime you meet with another person, you are in a group. And every time the configuration of people meeting changes, the group changes. Two different classes may have the same professor, the same subject matter, and most of the same students, but they comprise different groups, and they are often completely different environments. Groups can be formal organizations, with well-defined rules and procedures, or they may be informal, like friends, co-workers, or whoever happens to be hanging around at that moment.

A group can be very small, such as your immediate family and friends, or very large, such as your religion or nation, but the most significant groups in our lives are the ones so large that we don't personally know everyone, but small enough so we can feel that we play an important role in them: not your occupation, but your specific place of business; not all skateboarders in the world, but your specific skateboarding club.

Passengers on the airplane or the customers in a restaurant are not a group. Strictly speaking, they are a **crowd,** an aggregate of individuals who happen to be together but experience themselves as essentially independent. But the moment something goes wrong—the flight is cancelled or the service is inexplicably slow—they will start looking to each other for validation and emotional support, and chances are they will become a group. On the TV series *Lost*, an airplane crashes on a mysterious island in the South Pacific, and the survivors band together to fight a series of weird supernatural threats. On the airplane, they had been reading, napping, or staring into space, basically ignoring each other, but now they are becoming a group.

Groups differ from crowds in their **group cohesion,** the degree to which the individual members identify with each other and with the group. In a group with high cohesion, individual members will be more likely to follow the rules and less likely to drop out or defect to another group. Because every group, from business offices to religious cults to online newsgroups, wants to decrease deviance and keep the members from leaving, studies about how to increase cohesion have proliferated. It's not hard to do: You need to shift the group importance from second place to first place, transforming the office or cult into "a family," by forcing members to spend time together and make emotional connections. Wilderness retreats and "trust exercises" are meant to jump-start this connection. And you need to find a common enemy, a rival group or a scapegoat, someone for the group members to draw together to fight. The survivors on *Lost* have little to do but establish emotional intimacy, and they have a common enemy, the mysterious Others from the other side of the island.

Groups and Identity

Everyone belongs to many different groups: families, friends, co-workers, classmates, churches, clubs, organizations, plus less tangible groups. Are you a fan of blues music?

▲ **Even though this man may identify himself as a tennis player, co-workers, acquaintances, and even his close friends may ignore all of his other statuses, seeing only disabled, and thus force him to root his identity more firmly in that group.**

David Beckham? Even if you never seek out an organized club, you belong to the group of blues fans or soccer fans. Do you favor gun control? Even if you don't feel strongly about the issue, you belong to the group of people who favor gun control. Your gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, age, class, nationality, and even your hair color place you in groups and form part of your identity. Often our membership in a group is a core element of our identities. And other times, other people assume that just because we are members of a particular group, that this membership forms that core of identity—when it may, in fact, do nothing of the sort. Imagine an Asian American gay man who is an avid mountain biker. So avid, in fact, that he joins every mountain biking club in his community and is a central person in all its activities. It is the core of his identity, he believes. But without his bicycle, other people assume that the core of his identity is his membership in a racial and sexual group. "I'm a mountain biker, who happens to be Asian American and gay," he insists, "not a gay Asian American who happens to be a mountain biker." The various elements of our identity may fit together neatly or we may struggle to integrate them. And the rest of society must see our priorities the way we do, or we will experience conflict.

What's visible and invisible to us as a facet of our identity is often related to the organization of society. I recently asked my students in an introductory sociology class to list the five most important elements of their identities on a piece of paper. Every African American student listed their race as the first or second item, but not one White student listed being "White" anywhere on their answers. Every woman listed being a woman, but only 10 percent of men thought to put "male." And every gay or lesbian student listed sexual identity, but not one heterosexual student did. Virtually every student put his or her ethnicity, especially those who were Latino or Asian; among European Americans, only the Italian, Irish, and Russian put their ethnicity (no Germans, Swedes, French, or Swiss). The majority of Jews and Muslims listed religion; half of all Protestants put "Christian," but only 2 percent listed a denomination. And only a quarter of the Catholics listed Catholic.

Why would that be? Sociologists understand that identities based on group membership are not neutral, but hierarchically valued. Those identities that are most readily noticeable are those where we do not fit in with others, not those in which we are most like everyone else. We're more aware of where we stand out as different, not where we fit in.

Types of Groups

There are many different types of groups, depending on their composition, permanence, fluidity of boundaries, and membership criteria. You are born into some groups (family, race). In other groups, you may be born into the group, but membership also depends on your own activities and commitments, like ethnic or religious groups. Some are based entirely on expression of interest (clubs, fans), and others based on formal application for membership.

Primary and Secondary Groups. Small groups (small enough so that you know almost everybody) are divided into two types, primary and secondary. According to the sociologist Charles Horton Cooley (1909), **primary groups,** such as friends and family, come together for *expressive reasons:* They provide emotional support, love,

What do you think?

3.2

MyLab

Group Membership

The groups we belong to have a profound influence on our lives. With some groups, such as a church or political group, that influence is intentional; with other, less formal groups, it is less so. There are benefits to belonging to groups. For example, research shows that those with stronger social ties and networks lead happier, healthier lives. So, what do you think?

Are there any activities that you do with the same group of people on a regular basis, even if the group doesn't have a name, such as a bridge group, exercise group, or a group that meets to discuss individual or community problems?

- ❍ Yes
- ❍ No

Go to the end of the chapter to compare your answers with national survey data.

companionship, and security. **Secondary groups,** such as co-workers or club members, come together for *instrumental reasons:* They want to work together to meet common goals. Secondary groups are generally larger and make less of an emotional claim on your identity. In real life, most groups have elements of both: You may join the local chapter of the Green Party because you want to support its political agenda, but you are unlikely to stay involved unless you form some emotional connections with the other members.

In-Groups and Out-Groups. William Graham Sumner (1906) identified two different types of groups that depend on membership and affinity. An **in-group** is a group I feel positively toward and to which I actually belong. An **out-group** is one to which I don't belong and do not feel very positively toward. We may feel competitive or hostile toward members of an out-group. Often we think of members of out-groups as bad, wrong, inferior, or just weird, but the specific reactions vary greatly. An avid tennis player may enjoy a wonderful friendship or romance with someone who hates tennis, with only some occasional teasing to remind that friend that he or she belongs to an out-group.

Sometimes, groups attempt to create a sense of superiority for members of the in-group—or to constitute themselves as an in-group in the first place. For example, members of a club want to create an aura of importance to their weekly meetings. They may charge a massive "initiation" fee that only other rich people could afford to pay or insist that membership is only open to graduates of an Ivy League college. Creating an in-group can be conscious and deliberate. But for the in-group to be successful, members of the out-group (those not in the in-group) must actually want to join. Otherwise all those secret codes and handshakes just look silly.

Sometimes, however, especially when in-groups and out-groups are divided on the basis of race, nationality, gender, sexuality, or other ascribed status, reactions become more severe and violent. The Holocaust of World War II, the ethnic cleansings of

Armenia and Serbia, and the lynchings of the American South were all based on an in-group trying to control or eliminate out-groups.

In-groups and out-groups do not have to be built around any sort of socially meaningful characteristic. Gerald Suttles (1972), studying juvenile groups in Chicago housing projects, found that boys formed in-groups and out-groups based on whether the brick walls of their buildings were lighter or darker in color.

In the 1960s, an Iowa grade school teacher named Jane Elliot (Elliot, 1970; Verhaag, 1996) tried an experiment: She created an out-group from the students with blue eyes, telling the class that the lack of melanin in blue eyes made you inferior. Though she did not instruct the brown-eyed students to treat the blue-eyed students differently, she was horrified by how quickly the out-group was ostracized and became the butt of jokes, angry outbursts, and even physical attacks. What's more, she found that she could not call off the experiment: Blue-eyed children remained a detested out-group for the rest of the year!

Membership in a group changes your perception entirely. You become keenly aware of the subtle differences among the individual members of your group, which we call **in-group heterogeneity,** but tend to believe that all members of the out-group are exactly the same, which we call **out-group homogeneity** (Meissner, Brigham and Butz, 2005; Voci, 2000; Mullen and Hu, 1989; Quattrone, 1986). Researchers at my university asked some members of fraternities and sororities, as well as some dormitory residents, about the people in their own living group and the people in others. What were they like? Consistently, people said of their in-group that they were "too different," each member being "unique" and everyone "too diverse" to categorize (in-group heterogeneity). When asked about the other groups, though, they were quick to respond, "Oh, they're all jocks," or "That's the egghead nerd house" (out-group homogeneity).

The finding that we tend to perceive individual differences in our in-group and not perceive them in out-groups holds mainly in Western societies. It doesn't hold, or it holds only weakly, for China, Korea, and Japan. The Chinese, in particular, tend to believe too much that everyone is alike to perceive subtle differences (Quattrone, 1986; Quattrone and Jones, 1980).

Reference Groups. Our membership in groups not only provides us with a source of identity, but it also orients us in the world, like a compass. We *refer* to our group memberships as a way of navigating everyday life. We orient our behavior toward group norms and consider what group members would say before (or after) we act. A **reference group** is a group toward which we are so strongly committed or one that commands so much prestige that we orient our actions around what we perceive that group's perceptions would be. In some cases the reference group is the in-group, and the rest are "wannabes."

Ironically, one need not be a member of the reference group to have it so strongly influence your actions. In some cases, a reference group can be *negative*—as in when you think to yourself that you will do everything that the members of that other group do not like or when your identity becomes dependent on doing the opposite of what members of a group do. Some of these may be political (Nazis or the Ku Klux Klan are familiar negative reference groups), or simply competitive, like a neighboring clan, a fraternity, or students at another school.

In other cases, your reference group can be one to which you aspire. For example, assume that you have decided that despite your poor upbringing in rural Kentucky, you know you will eventually be one of the richest people in the world and will eventually be asked to go yachting with European aristocracy. You may feel this so strongly that you begin, while in college, to act as you imagine those in your

reference group act: You wear silk ascots and speak in a fake British accent. Despite the fact that your classmates might think you're a little bit strange, you are developing a reference group. It just happens to be one that no one else around you shares. In these cases, reference groups do not just guide your actions as a member of a group but guide your actions as a *future* member of a different group.

Your reference group and your membership groups are thus not always the same. Both reference groups and memberships groups will change over the course of your life, as your circumstances change as well.

▲ **One of the best illustrations of group dynamics is the high school clique. Cliques are organized around inclusion and exclusion—and who has the power to enforce it. In the hit movie *Mean Girls* (2004), Lindsay Lohan is reminded that only the most popular girls can eat their lunch at this table.**

Cliques. One of the best illustrations of group dynamics is the high school clique. All across the United States, middle and high school students seem to form the same groups: jocks, nerds, preps, skaters, posers, gang-bangers, wannabes, wiggers, princesses, stoners, brainiacs (Milner, 2006). Cliques are organized around inclusion and exclusion. Ranked hierarchically, those at the bottom are supposed to aspire to be in the cliques at the top. Cliques provide protection, elevate one's status, and teach outsiders a lesson. Many high schools are large enough to accommodate several cliques, and not belonging to the social pinnacle is not so painful, because there are so many other cliques to which you can belong (and you can more easily say you don't care what those people think). In smaller schools, though, exclusion from the most popular group may be a source of significant pain. In the late 1940s, sociologist James Coleman studied high school cliques and found, much to his distress, that popularity was not at all related to intelligence, that student norms, and clique composition, were the result of social factors alone. The "hidden curriculum" of social rankings continues today. Being smart may make you popular, but it is just as likely to have nothing to do with it. In fact, being smart can make you extremely unpopular.

Group Dynamics

Groups exhibit certain predictable dynamics and have certain characteristics. Often these dynamics are simply a function of formal characteristics—size or composition—and other times they are due more to their purpose.

When it comes to groups, size matters. Small groups, in which all members know each other and are able to interact simultaneously, exhibit different features than larger groups, in which your behaviors are not always observed by other members of your group. Large groups may be able to tolerate more diversity than small groups, although the bonds among small groups may be more intense than those in larger groups. Small groups may engage us the most, but larger groups are better able to influence others.

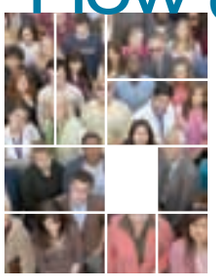
Every group, even the smallest, has a structure that sociologists can analyze and study. There is always a **leader,** someone in charge, whether that person was elected, appointed, or just informally took control, and a small number of **hardcore members,**

those with a great deal of power to make policy decisions. Leaders and hardcore members spend an enormous amount of time and energy on the group; it forms an important part of their identity. As a consequence, they have a vested interest in promoting the norms and values of the group. They are most likely to punish deviance among group members and to think negatively about other groups. Ordinary members split their time and energies among several groups, so they are not as likely to be strongly emotionally invested. They are more likely to commit minor acts of deviance, sometimes because they confuse the norms of the various groups they belong to and sometimes because they are not invested enough to obey every rule.

Conformity. The groups we belong to hold a powerful influence over our norms, values, and expectations. Group members yield to others the right to make decisions about their behavior, their ideas, and their beliefs. When we belong to a group, we prize conformity over "rocking the boat," even in minor decisions and even if the group is not very important to us.

Conformity may be required by the norms of the group. Some groups have formal requirements: For example, cadets at military schools often have their heads shaved on their enrollment, and members of some groups wear specific clothing or get identical tattoos. If you do not conform, you cannot be a member. Other times, however, we volunteer our conformity. We will often imitate the members of our reference group and use it as a "frame of reference" for self-evaluation and attitude formation (Deux and Wrightsman, 1988; Merton, 1968), even if we don't belong to it. For instance, you may have paid special attention to the popular clique in high school, and modeled your dress, talk, and other behaviors on them. Other common reference groups are attractive people, movie stars, or sports heroes. Marketing makes use of this dynamic, aiming to get the "opinion leaders" in selected reference groups to use, wear, or tout a product, in the hopes that others will imitate them (Gladwell, 1997; PBS, 2001). The most familiar example of group conformity is peer pressure.

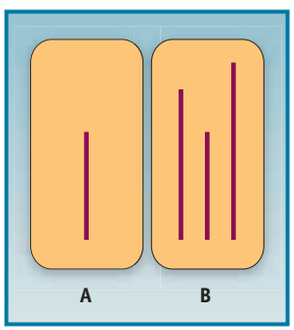
How do we know what we know?



Group Conformity

How can we observe these processes of conformity to group norms? In a classic experiment in social psychology (Asch, 1955), a group of strangers was gathered together under the pretense of testing their visual acuity. They were shown two cards, one with one line and one with three lines of different lengths. (In the group, however, only one person was really the subject of the experiment; all the rest were research assistants!) The group was then asked which of the lines on the second card matched the line on the first. When the subject was asked first, he or she answered correctly. (It didn't matter what others said.) But when the first group members to respond were the research assistants, they gave wrong answers, picking an obviously incorrect line and insisting it was the match.

Surprisingly, the test subjects would then most often give the wrong answers as well, preferring to follow the group norm rather than trust their own perceptions. When asked about it, some claimed that they felt uncomfortable but that they actually came to see the line they chose as the correct one. Psychologist Soloman Asch concluded that our desire to "fit in" is very powerful, even in a group that we don't belong to.



Psychologist Irving Janis called the process by which group members try to preserve harmony and unity in spite of their individual judgments **groupthink** (Janis, 1982). Sometimes groupthink can have negative or tragic consequences. For example, on January 28, 1986, the Space Shuttle *Challenger* exploded shortly after take-off, killing the seven astronauts aboard. A study afterward revealed that many of the NASA scientists in charge of the project believed that the O-ring seal on the booster rocket was unstable and that the shuttle was not ready to be launched, but they invariably deferred their judgments to the group. The project went on according to schedule (Heimann, 1993).

▲ **Group conformity and large bureaucratic organizations can often lead to a diffusion of responsibility—which leads people to claim they were "just following orders." Here, Field Marshal William Keiter testifies at the Nuremberg trials in 1946. He was hanged as a war criminal.**

Diffusion of Responsibility. One of the characteristics of large groups is that responsibility is diffused. The chain of command can be long enough, or authority can seem dispersed enough that any one individual, even the one who actually executes an order, may avoid taking responsibility for his or her actions. If you are alone somewhere and see a person in distress, you are far more likely to help that person than if you are in a big city with many other people streaming past.

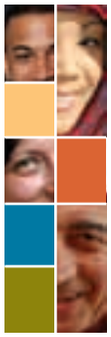
This dynamic leads to the problem of bystanders: those who witness something wrong, harmful, dangerous, or illegal, yet do nothing to intervene. In cases where there is one bystander, he or she is more likely to intervene than when there are more bystanders. In some cases, bystanders simply assume that as long as others are observing the problem, they are no more responsible than anyone else to intervene. Sometimes, bystanders are afraid that if they do get involved the perpetrators will turn on them; that is, they will become targets themselves. Bystanders often feel guilty or sheepish about their behavior.

In one of the most famous cases, a woman named Kitty Genovese in a quiet residential neighborhood in New York City was murdered outside her apartment building in 1964. Though she screamed as her attacker beat and stabbed her, more than 30 people looked out of their apartment windows and heard her screaming, and yet none called the police. When asked later, they said that they "didn't want to get involved" and that they "thought someone else would call the police, so it would be OK."

Stereotyping. Stereotyping is another dynamic of group life. **Stereotypes** are assumptions about what people are like or how they will behave based on their membership in a group. Often our stereotypes revolve around ascribed or attained statuses, but any group can be stereotyped. Think of the stereotypes we have of cheerleaders, jocks, and nerds. In the movie *High School Musical* (2006), members of each group try to downplay the stereotypes and be seen as full human beings: The jock/basketball star wants to be lead in the school play; his Black teammate is a wonderful chef, who can make a fabulous crème brûlée.

Sometimes you don't even need a single case to have a stereotype; you can get your associations from the media, from things people around you say, or from the simple tendency to think of out-groups as somehow bad or wrong. In Jane Elliott's experiment, the blue-eyed students were not associated with any negative characteristics at all until they became an out-group. Then they were stereotyped as stupid, lazy, shiftless, untrustworthy, and evil.

Stereotypes are so strong that we tend to ignore behaviors that don't fit. If we have a stereotype of teenagers as lazy and irresponsible, we will ignore hardworking,



Sociology and our World

Groups in Cyberspace

Newsgroups and bloggers often rail against "old media" as elitists and insiders who rely on status and social networks to get and do their jobs, keeping out the voices of "regular people." But are online groups such liberated spaces, where members are free of stifling norms and conformity to group behavior?

Sociologists find that group behavior in cyberspace can be just as patterned and policed as it is in the "real" social world. And newsgroups themselves can be among the strongest shapers of cybernorms and practices deemed appropriate for group membership. McLaughlin, Osborne, and Smith (1995) found that newsgroups consciously develop specific types of acceptable group behavior, and anyone who persists in "reproachable" acts will be threatened with expulsion and may ultimately be kicked out of the group.

Newsgroups, in fact, are such powerful enforcers of their own group norms that the vast majority of subscribers never venture beyond being "lurkers" who read postings but do not endeavor to respond with a message of their own. (One widely held newsgroup norm, in fact, is to follow a group for some time first, learning about its traditions and agenda before posting a message.) New members typically receive support materials that contain both technical advice and social instruction on appropriate conduct within the group. Files of "frequently asked questions" often strive to prevent new subscribers from cluttering up the network with queries or challenges to standards of group behavior (Croteau and Hoynes, 2003).

Such practices, McLaughlin and her colleagues (1995) argue, help reinforce the collective identities of electronic communities and protect them from newcomers who may pose a threat to them or the stability of the group.

responsible teenagers, maybe thinking of them as exceptions to the rule. Stereotypes are a foundation of *prejudice*, where we "prejudge" people based on their membership in a specific group. (We will discuss this more fully in Chapter 8.)

Social Networks

A **network** is a type of group that is both looser and denser than a formal group. Sociologist Georg Simmel used the term *web* to describe the way our collective membership in different groups constitutes our sense of identity.

Sociologists often use this metaphor to describe a network as a web of social relationships that connect people to each other, and, through those connections, with other people. A network is both denser than a group, with many more connecting nodes, and looser, in that people who are at some remove from you exert very little influence on your behavior.

Networks and Social Experience

The social connectedness of certain groups in the society can produce interaction patterns that have a lasting influence on the lives of people both within and without the network. For example, prep schools not only offer excellent educations but also afford social networks among wealthy children who acquire "cultural capital" (those mannerisms, behaviors, affectations that mark one as a member of the elite, as we discussed in Chapter 2) that prepares them for life among the elite (Cookson and Persell, 1985). Sociologist G. William Domhoff found that many of the boards of directors of the largest corporations in the world are composed of people who went to prep school together, or at least who went to the same Ivy League college (Domhoff, 2002).

Social networks provide support in times of stress or illness; however, some research finds that social networks are dependent on people's ability to offer something in exchange, such as fun, excitement, or a sparkling personality. Therefore, they tend to shrink precisely during the periods of stress and illness when they are needed the most (Fisher, 1982). If you are sick for a few days, you may be mobbed by friends armed with soup and get-well cards. But if your sickness lingers, you will gradually find yourself more alone.

Networks exert an important influence on the most crucial aspects of our lives; our membership in certain networks is often the vehicle by which we get established in a new country or city, meet the person with whom we fall in love, or get a job. Examine your own networks. There are your friends and relatives, your primary ties. Then there are those people whom you actually know, but who are a little less close—classmates and co-workers. These are your secondary ties. Together they form what sociologist Mark Granovetter (1973, 1974) calls your "strong ties"—people who actually know you. But your networks also include "weak ties"—people whom you may not know personally, but perhaps you know *of* them, or they know *of* you. They may have strong ties to one of your strong ties. By the time you would calculate your strong and weak ties, the numbers might reach into the thousands.

Interestingly, it is not only your strong ties that most influence your life, but possibly, centrally, your weak ties. Granovetter (1995) calls this "the strength of weak ties." While one might think strong interpersonal ties are more significant than weak ones because close friends are more interested than acquaintances in helping us, this may not be so, especially when what people need is information. Because our close friends tend to move in the same circles that we do, the information they receive overlaps considerably with what we already know. Acquaintances, by contrast, know people whom we do not and thus receive more novel information. This is in part because acquaintances are typically less similar to one another than close friends and in part because they spend less time together. Moving in different circles from ours, they connect us to a wider world.

For example, let's take two life-changing decisions: finding a romantic partner with whom you fall in love and getting a job. How do people typically find the person they expect to spend the rest of their lives with? Most often it is through being "fixed up" with a "friend of a friend"—a network in action. If that date works out, you are likely to thank your friend for the networking on your behalf; if it doesn't work out . . . well, let's just hope it works out. When initiating a job search, you won't typically find a job from a close friend or family member but again through a friend of a friend. This is why job search consultants stress the importance of networking.

Some new Internet companies, such as Match.com and Monster.com, seek to expand the range of your networking for jobs and romantic partners. In fact, young people have become network experts, having devised new and innovative ways to expand and manage their networks through interfaces with technology. Friendster, Facebook, MySpace, and other networks utilize the ever-expanding web of the Internet to create new network configurations with people whom you will never meet but rather get to know because they are a friend of a friend of a friend of a friend of—your friend.

Did *you* know?

MySpace has more than 110 million users. If MySpace were a country, it would be the eleventh largest country in the world, just behind Japan and ahead of Mexico.

Networks and Globalization

New technology, such as text messaging, satellite television, and especially the Internet, has allowed us to break the bounds of geography and form groups made up of people from all over the world. The Internet is especially important for people with very specialized interests or very uncommon beliefs: You are unlikely to find many

people in your hometown who collect antique soda bottles or who believe that Earth is flat, but you can go online and meet hundreds. People who are afraid or embarrassed to discuss their interests at home, such as practitioners of witchcraft or S&M, also find that they can feel safe in Internet message boards and chat rooms. However, there are also thousands of Internet groups formed around more conventional interests, such as sports or movie thrillers.

Message boards and chat rooms allow us more creativity in playing roles than we have in live interaction. Even in everyday social interactions, we often engage in impression management (Goffman, 1959), emphasizing some aspects of our lives and minimizing or ignoring others. We may pretend to have beliefs, interests, and skills that we do not, to fit better into a role. For instance, we may put "fluent in French" on our resumé to impress potential employers, when actually we can barely manage to ask for directions to the nearest Métro station. However, online we can adopt completely new roles and statuses, changing not only our skills and interests, but our age, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality at will. Researchers are still studying the impact of this fluidity on the sense of self.

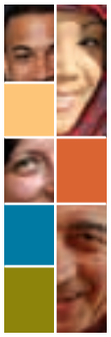
Social networks sustain us; they are what communities are made of. At the same time as our networks are expanding across the globe at the speed of light, there is also some evidence that these networks are shrinking. A recent study by sociologists found that Americans are far more socially isolated than we were even in the 1980s. Between 1985 and 2004 the size of the average network of confidants (someone with whom you discuss important issues) fell from just under three other people (2.94) to just over two people (2.08). And the number of people who said that there is no one with whom they discuss important issues nearly tripled. In 1985, the modal respondent (the most frequent response) was three; in 2004, the modal respondent had no confidants. Both kin (family) and nonkin (friendship) confidants were lost (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Brashears, 2006).

The sociological consequences of such increasing isolation are significant. Historically, we have seen cities as dangerously large and alienating, where individuals have to struggle to build networks of support. By contrast, rural life has been seen as sustaining us in the support networks of kin and friends in small towns. It is therefore surprising that in the United States suicide rates are significantly higher per capita in rural areas than in urban ones (Butterfield, 2005). Remember that Durkheim might have predicted this; because cities have greater "density," they offer more opportunities for sustaining support and social interaction.

MySpace and other networks utilize the ever-expanding web of the Internet to create new communities of "friends" whom you will never meet and to offer an opportunity to create the identity you want to present to the world. ▼

Source: Homepage from MySpace website, www.Myspace.com <http://www.Myspace.com>. Reprinted by permission.

On the other hand, in some ways, young people today are far *less* isolated than their parents might be. The Internet has provided users with a dizzying array of possible communities of potential confidants, friends, and acquaintances. People who have never met find love, romance, sex, and friendship in cyberspace. Some specific forums have been created to assist us—from finding potential cybersex partners to marriage-minded others. People report revealing things about themselves that they might not even tell their spouse. And some participants in these forums actually meet in person—and a few actually marry! Some sites, like Friendster, simply provide a network of people who know other people who know other people who . . . know you.



Sociology and our World

Facebook

Have you heard of Facebook? Probably. Millions of high school and college students are using the Facebook website. If they're a little younger, they might try MySpace.com, which accepts middle schoolers. Or they can use Friendster.com, tribe.net, or ConnectU. If they want more control over their online relationships, there's Ning, Vox, eSnips, or Dogster. All of these Internet services allow users to create online social circles by posting their photographs (and video clips), personal information, tastes, interests, blogs, and comments on everything from world events to music. They can search for others with similar tastes and interests, anywhere in the world, and others can search for them, adding them to their "Favorites," "List of Friends," and "Fans." They can join groups of the like minded: Facebook offers every conceivable group, from "Cracklin' Oat Bran Is [Good]" to "We Need to Have Sex in Widener [Library at Harvard University] before We Graduate." They can even engage in online, real-time chatting and arrange to meet each other in person.

According to a recent study, 87 percent of Americans between 12 and 17 years old are online, and more than half have uploaded personal information of some sort. Meeting people through clubs and sports has not gone out of style, but high schoolers today are just as likely to have friends who live a thousand miles away, whom they have never met in person (and probably never will). The Internet sites allow for the expression of unusual interests and opinions and allow for people who would be ostracized and alone at their high schools in "the middle of nowhere" to find a community.

Organizations

Organizations are large secondary groups designed to accomplish specific tasks in an efficient manner. They are thus defined by their (a) size—they are larger, more formal secondary groups, (2) purpose—they are purposive, intent to accomplish something, and (3) efficiency—they determine their strategies by how best to accomplish their goals. We typically belong to several organizations—corporations, schools and universities, churches and religious organizations, political parties. Organizations tend to last over time, and they are independent of the individuals who compose them. They develop their own formal and informal organizational "culture"—consisting of norms and values, routines and rituals, symbols and practices. They tend to maintain their basic structure over a long time to achieve their goals.

Types of Organizations

Sociologists categorize organizations in different ways. One of the most common is by the nature of membership. Sociologist Amitai Etzioni (1975) identified three types of organizations: normative, coercive, and utilitarian.

Normative Organizations. People join a normative organization to pursue some interest or to obtain some form of satisfaction that they consider worthwhile. **Normative organizations** are typically voluntary organizations; members receive no monetary rewards and often have to pay to join. Members therefore serve as unpaid workers; they participate because they believe in the goals of the organization. They can be service organizations (like Kiwanis), charitable organizations (like the Red Cross), or political parties or lobbying groups. Many political organizations, such as the Sierra Club, AARP, or the National Rifle Association are normative organizations: They seek to influence policies and people's lives.

Race, ethnicity, gender, and class all play a part in membership in voluntary organizations. In fact, many such organizations come into being to combat some groups' exclusion from other organizations! For example, the National Women's Suffrage Association came into being in 1869 to oppose the exclusion of women from the voting booth, just as the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE) was formed in 1942 to press for removal of racial discrimination in voting in the segregated South. Other organizations, such as the Ku Klux Klan in the late nineteenth century, were founded for the opposite reason, to keep newly freed Blacks from exercising their right to vote.

Because these organizations make no formal claims on one's time or energy, people tend to remain active members only as long as they feel the organization is serving their interests. With no formal controls, they may lose members as quickly as they gain them. Sometimes the groups dissolve when their immediate objectives have been secured, and individual members drift off to find other groups to join and other causes to embrace. The National Women's Suffrage Association had little reason to exist after women's suffrage was won in 1920; members became involved in other campaigns and other organizations.

Coercive Organizations. There are some organizations that you do not volunteer to join; you are forced to. **Coercive organizations** are organizations in which membership is not voluntary. Prisons, reform schools, and mental institutions are examples of coercive institutions. Coercive organizations tend to have very elaborate formal rules and severe sanctions for those seeking to exit voluntarily. They also tend to have elaborate informal cultures, as individuals try to create something that makes their experience a little bit more palatable.

Coercive institutions are sometimes what sociologist Erving Goffman (1961) called **total institutions.** A total institution is one that completely formally circumscribes your everyday life. Total institutions cut you off from life before you enter and seek to regulate every part of your behavior. They use what social theorist Michel Foucault called a "regime of surveillance"—constant scrutiny of everything you do.

Total institutions are fairly dichotomous: One is either an inmate or a "guard." Goffman argued that total institutions tend to follow certain methods to incorporate a new inmate. First, there is a ceremonial stripping of the "old self" to separate you from your former life: Your head may be shaved, your personal clothes may be replaced with a uniform, you may be given a number instead of your name. Once the "old" self is destroyed, the total institution tries to rebuild an identity through conformity with the institutional definition of what you should be like.

Goffman suggested, however, that even total institutions are not "total." Individuals confined to mental hospitals, prisoners, and other inmates often find some clandestine way to hold onto a small part of their prior existence, to remind them that they are not only inmates but also individuals. Small reminders of your former life enable inmates to retain a sense of individuality and dignity. A tattoo, a cross, a family photo—any of these can help the individual resist the total institution.

Total institutions use regimentation and uniformity to minimize individuality and replace it with a social, organizational self. ▼

Utilitarian Organizations. **Utilitarian organizations** are those to which we belong for a specific, instrumental purpose, a tangible material reward. To earn a living or to get an advanced degree, we enter a corporation or university. We may exercise some choice about which university or which corporation, but the materials rewards (a paycheck, a degree) are the primary motivation. A large

business organization is designed to generate revenues for the companies, profits for shareholders, and wages and salaries for employees. That's what they're there for. We remain in the organization as long as the material rewards we seek are available. If, suddenly, businesses ceased requiring college degrees for employment, and the only reason to stay in school were the sheer joy of learning, would you continue reading this book?

This typology distinguishes between three different types of organizations. But there is considerable overlap. For example, some coercive organizations also have elements of being utilitarian organizations. The recent trend to privatize mental hospitals and prisons, turning them into for-profit enterprises, has meant that the organizational goals are changed to earning a profit, and guards' motivations may become more pecuniary.

Also, individual motivations for entering the organizations may vary. For example, my stepbrother once joined several charitable organizations that were composed largely of wealthy supporters of women's rights. These were clearly normative organizations. When I asked him why he had joined (he wasn't particularly interested in women's rights), he replied that these organizations were known to have really pretty women members and "they give really good parties." The organization may have been normative; his motives were altogether utilitarian.

Are We a Nation of Joiners?

In his nineteenth-century study of America, *Democracy in America,* the French sociologist Alexis de Tocqueville called America "a nation of joiners." It was the breadth and scale of our organizations—everything from local civic organizations to large formal institutions—that gave American democracy its vitality. A century later, the celebrated historian Arthur Schlesinger (1944, p. 1) pointed out that it seems paradoxical "that a country famed for being individualistic should provide the world's greatest example of joiners." That is another sociological paradox: How we can be so individualistic *and* so collective minded—at the same time?

But recently it appears this has been changing. In a best-selling book, *Bowling Alone* (2000), political scientist Robert Putnam argued that the organizations that once composed daily life—clubs, churches, fraternal organizations, civic organizations—had been evaporating in American life. In the 1950s, two-thirds of Americans belonged to some civic organization, but today that percentage is less than one-third. It is especially among normative organizations that membership has decreased most dramatically.

For example, if your parents were born and raised in the United States, it is very likely that *their* parents (your grandparents) were members of the PTA and regularly went to functions at your school. It is very likely that your grandparents were members of local civic organizations, like Kiwanis, or a fraternal organization (like Elks or Masons). But it is far less likely that your parents are members. And very *unlikely* that you will join them.

Organizations: Race and Gender and Inequality?

We often think that organizations and bureaucracies are formal structures that are neutral. They have formal criteria for membership, promotion and various rewards, and to the extent that any member meets these criteria, the rules are followed without prejudice. Everyone, we believe, plays by the same rules.

What that ignores, however, is that the rules themselves may favor some groups over other groups. They may have been developed by some groups to make sure that they remain in power. What appear to be neutral criteria is also socially weighted in favor of some and against others.

▲ **Bureaucratic organizations are both rational systems and engines of inequality. Through formal rules, clear lines of authority, and structured roles, the "old boys' network" appears to be based strictly on merit.**

To give one example, membership in a political party was once restricted to those who could read and write, who paid a tax, and whose fathers were members of the party. This effectively excluded poor people, women, and Black people in the pre-Civil Rights South.

Sociologists of gender have identified many of the ways in which organizations reproduce gender inequality. In her now-classic work, *Men and Women of the Corporation,* Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1975) demonstrated that the differences in men's and women's behaviors in organizations had far less to do with their characteristics as individuals than it had to do with the structure of the organization. Organizational positions "carry characteristic images of the kinds of people that should occupy them," she argued, and those who do occupy them, whether women or men, exhibited those necessary behaviors. Though the criteria for evaluation of job performance, promotion, and effectiveness seem to be gender neutral, they are, in fact, deeply gendered. "While organizations were being defined as sex-neutral machines," she writes, "masculine principles were dominating their authority structures." The "gender" of the organization turns out to be male.

Here's an example. Many doctors complete college by age 21 or 22 and medical school by age 25 to 27 and then face three more years of internship and residency, during which time they are occasionally on call for long stretches of time, sometimes even two or three days straight. They thus complete their residencies by their late 20s or early 30s. Such a program is designed not for a doctor, but for a *male* doctor—one who is not pressured by the ticking of a biological clock, for whom the birth of children will not disrupt these time demands, and who may even have someone at home taking care of the children while he sleeps at the hospital. No wonder women in medical school—who number nearly one-half of all medical students today—often complain that they were not able to balance pregnancy and motherhood with their medical training.

Bureaucracy: Organization and Power

When we hear the word *bureaucracy,* we often think it means "red tape"—a series of increasingly complex hoops through which you have to jump to realize your goals. In our encounters with bureaucracies, we often experience them as either tedious or formidable obstacles that impede the purpose of the organization.

In a sense we're right. When we encounter a bureaucracy as an applicant, as one who seeks to do something, it can feel like the bureaucracy exists only the thwart our objectives. But if you were at the top of the bureaucracy, you might experience it as a smoothly functioning machine in which every part fits effortlessly and fluidly into every other part, a complex machine of rules and roles.

The sociologist is interested in both aspects of bureaucracies. A **bureaucracy** is a formal organization, characterized by a division of labor, a hierarchy of authority, formal rules governing behavior, a logic of rationality, and an impersonality of criteria. It is also a form of domination, by which those at the top stay at the top and those at the bottom believe in the legitimacy of the hierarchy. Part of the reason those at the bottom accept the legitimacy of the power of those at the top is that

bureaucracy appears to be simply a form of organization. But, as the great sociologist Max Weber understood, it is by embedding power in formal rules and procedures that it is most efficiently exercised. Bureaucracies are thus the most efficient organizations in getting things done *and* for maintaining the power of those at the top.

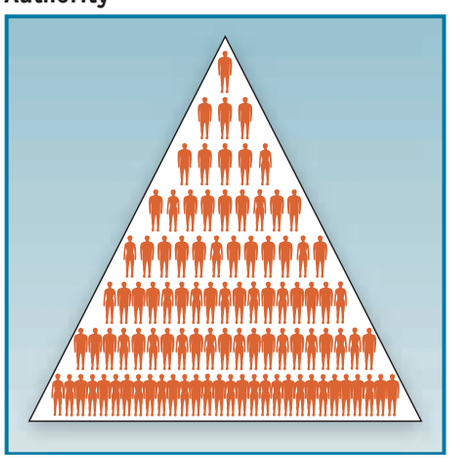
Characteristics of Bureaucracies. Max Weber is credited with first describing the essential characteristics of bureaucracies (Weber 1978 edition). While these characteristics are not necessarily found in every single bureaucratic organization, they represent the *ideal type* of bureaucracy, an abstract mental concept of what a pure version of the phenomenon (in this case a bureaucracy) would look like:

1. *Division of labor*. Each person in a bureaucratic organization has a specific role to play, a specific task to perform. People often become specialists, able to perform a few functions exceptionally well, but they might be unable to do what their colleagues or co-workers do.
2. *Hierarchy of authority*. Positions in a bureaucracy are arranged vertically, with a clear reporting structure, so that each person is under the supervision of another person. Those at the top have power over those below them, all along what is often called the "chain of command." The chain of command is impersonal; the slots held by individuals are independent of the individual occupying the position. If your supervisor leaves a position to move to another part of the company, you no longer report to that person. You report to the new holder of the position of supervisor. The hierarchy of a bureaucratic organization often resembles a pyramid (Figure 3.3).
3. *Rules and regulations*. Those in the hierarchy do not exert power on a whim: They follow clearly defined rules and regulations that govern the conduct of each specific position in the organization and define the appropriate procedures for the function of each unit and the organization as a whole. These rules and regulations are formalized, "codified" (organized into a coherent structure), and written down, which further reduces the individual discretion supervisors may have and increases the formal procedures of the organization.
4. *Impersonality*. Formal and codified rules and regulations and a hierarchy of positions (instead of people) lead to a very impersonal system. Members of bureaucratic organizations are detached and impersonal, and interactions are to be guided by instrumental criteria—what is the right and appropriate decision for the organization, according to its rules, not how a particular decision might make you feel. There is a strict separation of personal and official business and income.
5. *Career ladders*. Bureaucratic organizations have clearly marked paths for advancement, so that members who occupy lower positions on the hierarchy are aware of the formal requirements to advance. They thus are more likely to see their participation as "careers" rather than as "jobs" and further commit themselves to the smooth functioning of the organization. Formal criteria govern promotion and hiring; incumbents cannot leave their positions to their offspring.
6. *Efficiency*. The formality of the rules, the overarching logic of rationality, the clear chain of command, and the impersonal networks enable bureaucracies to be extremely efficient, coordinating the activities of a large number of people.

Did *you* know?

Although the French invented the word *bureaucracy*, the Chinese are credited with perfecting the practice. During the Song dynasty (AD 420–479), the emperor developed a centralized bureaucracy, staffed with civilian scholar-officials. This led to a much greater concentration of power than had ever been achieved before.

FIGURE 3.3 **Hierarchy of Authority**



How do we know what we know?

Do Formal or Informal Procedures Result in Greater Productivity?

Does the informal culture of bureaucracy enhance or detract from worker productivity? In a classic study of a Western Electric factory in Hawthorne, Illinois, in the 1930s, Elton Mayo and W. Lloyd Warner found that the informal worker culture ran parallel to the official factory norms. In the experiment, a group of 14 men who put together telephone-switching equipment were paid according to individual productivity. But their productivity did not increase because the men feared that the company would simply raise the expectations for everyone (Mayo, 1933; Roethlisgerberger & Dickson, 1939).

In another classic study, though, Peter Blau (1964) found informal culture increased both productivity and effectiveness. Blau studied a government office charged with investigating possible tax violations. When agents had questions about how to handle a particular case, the formal rules stated they should consult their supervisors. However, the agents feared this would make them look incompetent in the eyes of higher-ups. So, they asked their co-workers, violating the official rules. The result? Not only did they get concrete advice about ways to solve the problem, but the group then began to evolve a range of informal procedures that permitted more initiative and responsibility than the formal rules did, probably enhancing the quantity and quality of work the agents produced.

Formal procedures, according to Meyer and Rowan (1977), are often quite distant from the actual ways people work in bureaucratic organizations. People will often make a show of conforming to them and then proceed with their work using more informal methods. They may use "the rules" to justify the ways a task was carried out, then depart considerably from how things are supposed to be done in actually performing the tasks at hand.

Why do our experiences with bureaucracies often feel so unsatisfying? Why do we commonly criticize bureaucracies as too large, too unwieldy, and too impenetrable to be efficient forms of organization?

Problems with Bureaucracy

Bureaucracies exhibit many of the other problems of groups—groupthink, stereotypes, and pressure to conform. But as much as they make life more predictable and efficient, bureaucracies also exaggerate certain problems of all groups:

1. *Overspecialization.* Individuals may become so specialized in their tasks that they lose sight of the larger picture and the broader consequences of their actions.
2. *Rigidity and inertia.* Rigid adherence to rules makes the organization cumbersome and resistant to change and leads to a sense of alienation of personnel. This can make bureaucracies inefficient.
3. *Ritualism.* Formality, impersonality, and alienation can lead individuals to simply "go through the motions" instead of maintaining their commitment to the organization and its goals.
4. *Suppression of dissent.* With clear and formal rules and regulations, there is little room for individual initiative, alternate strategies, and even disagreement. Often bureaucracies are characterized by a hierarchy of "yes-men"; each incumbent simply says "yes" to his or her supervisor.
5. *The bureaucratic "Catch-22."* This phenomenon, named after a famous novel by Joseph Heller, refers to a process by which the bureaucracy creates more and

more rules and regulations, which result in greater complexity and overspecialization, which actually reduces coordination, which results in the creation of contradictory rules.

As a result of these problems, individual members of the bureaucratic organization may feel alienated and confused. Sociologist Robert Merton (1968) identified a specific personality type that he called the **bureaucratic personality** to describe those people who become more committed to following the correct procedures than they are in getting the job done. At times, these problems may drag the bureaucracy toward the very dynamics that the organization was supposed to combat. Instead of a smoothly functioning, formal, and efficient organizational machine, the bureaucracy can become large, chaotic, inefficient, and homogeneous.

Bureaucracy and Accountability. The mechanisms that enable bureaucracies to be efficient and formal enterprises also have the effect of reducing an individual's sense of accountability. In a chilling example, psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton (1986) studied doctors who worked at the Nazi death camps. His work shows how bureaucratic organizations can create a sense of alienation that shields people from the consequences of their own actions. In the massive bureaucratic death camps, where processing inmates for extermination was the "business" of the organization, doctors focused on (1) the internal formal administrative tasks that were germane only to their position in the hierarchy (making sure everything went smoothly), and (2) the informal culture of personal relationships among staff. Lifton describes how these doctors would often come home to their families after a "hard day at the office" and complain only about how a nurse wasn't feeling well or that another doctor was boasting about his car. In this way, Lifton says, the bureaucratic organization led the doctors to experience a form of "psychic numbing"—a psychological distancing from the human consequences of their actions—especially since their "day at the office" consisted of participation in mass murder.

Recall the last few times you've dealt with a bureaucracy. You may have pleaded your case and had a really, really good reason why you were asking them to bend a rule a little bit. And remember how frustrated you were when they waved you away, saying there is "nothing I can do," "my hands are tied," "I'm only following orders."

If you have ever been on the other side of the desk, though, and faced someone who is trying to plead an excuse, recall how comforting it might have felt that you could refer to specific rules in turning them down and how it supported you in doing your job. It may also have absolved you from feeling bad about it: "I would if I could, honest."

Bureaucracy and Democracy. Weber also identified another potential problem with bureaucracies: a formal structure of accountability that is, ironically, undemocratic. Elected officials are accountable to the public because they have fixed terms of office. They must stand for reelection after a specified term. But officeholders in a bureaucracy tend to stay on for many years, even for their entire careers. (Of course, you can be fired or dismissed by those above you, but your clients or subordinates have no power to remove you.)

There is another reason that bureaucracies do not tend to be democratic organizations. While the formal rules and regulations govern the conduct of each officeholder, at every rank, these rules are rarely applied at the top, where more informal and personal rules might apply. For example, those at the top of a bureaucratic hierarchy are likely to forgive minor transgressions when they are performed by their

Did *you* know?

Sociologists have found that two of our most "commonsense" adages about bureaucracy are mostly false: the "Peter Principle," which holds that "people rise in an organization to their level of incompetence" (Peter and Hull, 1969) and "Parkinson's Law," which holds that "work expands to fill the time available for its completion." Each may contain a grain of truth, but if they were right, most bureaucratic organizations would fail. Yet bureaucracies are generally successful. Evans and Rauch (1999) studied governments of 35 developing countries and found prosperity developed in those with central bureaucracies, so long as they hired on the basis of merit and offered workers rewarding work.

▲ **Bureaucracies depend on the impersonal application of rules. In the 2002 film *John Q*, a young father (played by Denzel Washington) is nearly driven to violence when his son needs a heart transplant and is denied treatment by a hospital administrator because the family has surpassed its annual limit on health insurance coverage. The father points to her heartlessness; the administrator points to the rules and believes her hands are clean.**

immediate colleagues and friends but are likely to punish underlings quite severely for the same infractions.

In addition, "old boys' networks" can circumvent the formal procedures of the bureaucracy, making sure that personal connections—the children of the bosses' friends or those who went to prep school with them—are favored candidates for jobs, promotions, or plum assignments. In this way, informal networks and cultures within bureaucracies, which can sometimes work to humanize conditions or enhance productivity, can in other situations perpetuate race, class, and gender inequalities. When questioned, the personnel department can point to the formal requirements for the job and declare that the person who got hired was simply the "best qualified" for it.

Bureaucracies appear rational and impersonal, and the criteria they employ are thought to be applied equally and uniformly. But that turns out to be more true at the bottom than at the top (Weber, 1978).

The "Iron Cage" of Bureaucracy. As a result of this difference between appearance and reality, Weber was deeply ambivalent about bureaucracy. On the one hand, bureaucracies are the most efficient, predictable organizations, and officials within them all approach their work rationally and according to formal rules and regulations. But on the other hand, the very mechanisms that make bureaucracies predictable, meaningful, efficient, and coherent, and enable those of us who participate in them to see clearly all the different lines of power and control, efficiency and accountability often lead those organizations to become their opposites. The organization becomes unpredictable, unwieldy, and unequal; officials become alienated, going through the motions with no personal stake in the outcome. The very things we thought would give meaning to our lives end up trapping us in what Weber called the "iron cage." The iron cage describes the increasing rationalization of social life that traps people in the rules, regulations, and hierarchies that they developed to make life sensible, predictable, and efficient. Ironically, mechanisms such as bureaucracies, which promised to illuminate all the elements of an organization, make life more transparent, and enable us to see with greater clarity could end up ushering in the "polar night of icy darkness." They could crush imagination and destroy the human spirit (Weber, 1958, p. 128).

Globalization and Organizations

In large complex societies, bureaucracies are the dominant form of organization. We deal with bureaucracies every day—when we pay our phone bill, register for classes on our campus, go to work in an office or factory, see a doctor, or have some interaction with a local, state, or federal government. And when we do, we act as *social actors*—we adopt roles, interact in groups, and collectively organize into organizations.

Groups and organizations are increasingly globalized. Global institutions like the World Bank, or International Monetary Fund, or even private commercial banks like UBS or Bank of America, are increasingly the institutional form in which people all over the world do their business. It is likely that if you have a checking account, it is at a major bank with branches in dozens of countries; 50 years ago, if you had a checking account at all, it would have been at the "Community Savings and Loan," and your banker would have known you by name. Most of your bank transactions will be done online, and if you call your bank, you'll probably be speaking to someone in another city—probably in another country. Political institutions like the United

Nations, or regional organizations like the European Union, attempt to bring different countries together under one bureaucratic organization and even a single monetary system (the euro).

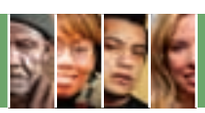
And, of course, even the reactions *against* globalization use the forms and institutions of globalization to resist it. Religious fundamentalists or political extremists who want to return to a more traditional society all use the Internet to recruit members. Global media organizations like Al Jazeera (a global Arabic Muslim media source, with TV and online outlets) spread a specific form of Islam as if it were the only form of Islam—and Moslems in Indonesia begin to act more like Moslems in Saudi Arabia. Every antiglobalization political group—from patriot groups on the far right to radical environmentalists on the far left—uses websites, bloggers, and Internet chat rooms to recruit and spread its message. Globalization may change some of the dynamics of groups and organizations—some new ones emerge and others fade—but the importance of groups and organizations in our daily lives cannot be overstated.

Groups 'R' Us: Groups and Interactions in the 21st Century

Although we belong to fewer groups than our parents might have, these groups may also be increasingly important in our lives, composing more and more the people with whom we interact and the issues with which we concern ourselves. We're lonelier than ever, and yet we continue to be a nation of joiners, and we locate ourselves still within the comfortable boundaries of our primary groups.

We live in a society composed of many different groups and many different cultures, subcultures, and countercultures, speaking different languages, with different kinship networks and different values and norms. It's noisy, and we rarely agree on anything. And yet we also live in a society where the overwhelming majority of people obey the same laws and are civil to one another and in which we respect the differences among those different groups. We live in a society characterized by fixed, seemingly intransigent hierarchy and a society in which people believe firmly in the idea of mobility; a society in which your fixed, ascribed characteristics (race, class, sex) are the single best determinants of where you will end up and a society in which we also believe anyone can make it if they work hard enough.

It is a noisy and seemingly chaotic world and also one that is predictable and relatively calm. The terms we have introduced in these two chapters—culture, society, roles, status, groups, interaction, and organizations—are the conceptual tools that sociologists use to make sense of this teeming tumult of disparate parts and this orderly coherence of interlocking pieces.



Chapter Review

1. *What do sociologists think about society?* Sociologists try to see the social context of individual lives. They look at how society influences people and how people construct society, as well as the interactions among individuals and the institutions in which these take place. These institutions, along with social interactions, form a social structure that organizes and provides context for social life.

2. *What is the social construction of reality?* Sociologists believe that there is no such thing as an objective reality. Instead, according to Berger and Luckman, we

construct reality through interaction. Cooley called the process by which our identity develops the looking-glass self. In his model, we develop our identity based on our evaluation of others' reactions. Goffman said we purposely try to control others' opinions of us through impression management. We also construct reality through communication, both verbal and nonverbal.

3. *What are the elements of social structure?* Social life is composed of statuses and roles. A status is a position in a group, and a role is the expectations for behavior that go along with a status. We have no choice over some statuses. These ascribed statuses include one's race and gender and are often used to justify inequality. Other statuses are achieved; that is, we attain them ourselves, although they are often dependent on ascribed statuses.

4. *What are groups?* A group is any assortment of people who share norms, values, and expectations. They can be large or small, formal or informal. Our group memberships are among the defining features of our lives, both for our definitions of self and others' ideas of who we are. Groups are primary, coming together for expressive reasons, or secondary, coming together for instrumental reasons. We also see groups in terms of in-groups, to which we belong, and out-groups, to which we do not belong. In-group–out-group rivalry can lead to dire consequences.

5. *How do groups function?* Groups often function based on their size, composition, and purpose. Groups have a powerful influence over their members, and a certain degree of conformity is required to be part of a group. Sometimes group membership leads to phenomena such as groupthink, diffusion of responsibility, and stereotyping, all of which can have negative consequences.

6. *What are organizations?* Organizations are large secondary groups that work efficiently toward a specific goal. If one joins because of interest, it is a normative organization, and participation is voluntary. However, some organizations are coercive, and they are often total institutions with formal rules. Organizations we belong to to attain a specific goal are called utilitarian organizations. Bureaucracies are a specific type of formal organization, with a division of labor, a hierarchy, formal rules, impersonality, and rationality. Bureaucracies have problems such as overspecialization, rigidity, and ritualism.

Key Terms

Achieved status (p. 77)
Ascribed status (p. 77)
Bureaucracy (p. 94)
Bureaucratic personality (p. 97)
Coercive organizations (p. 92)
Crowd (p. 81)
Dramaturgy (p. 73)
Dyad (p. 81)
Ethnomethodology (p. 75)
Face work (p. 74)
Group (p. 81)
Group cohesion (p. 81)
Groupthink (p. 87)
Hardcore members (p. 85)
Impression management (p. 73)
In-group (p. 83)
In-group heterogeneity (p. 84)
Leader (p. 85)
Looking-glass self (p. 72)
Master status (p. 78)
Network (p. 88)
Normative organizations (p. 91)
Organizations (p. 91)
Out-group (p. 83)
Out-group homogeneity (p. 84)
Primary groups (p. 82)
Reference group (p. 84)
Roles (p. 79)
Role conflict (p. 80)
Role exit (p. 80)
Role performance (p. 76)
Role strain (p. 79)
Secondary groups (p. 83)
Social interaction (p. 72)
Social structure (p. 72)
Society (p. 70)
Status (p. 77)
Stereotypes (p. 87)
Subordinate (p. 76)
Superordinate (p. 76)
Total institutions (p. 92)
Utilitarian organizations (p. 92)

What does America think?

3.1 Marital Status

These are actual survey data from the General Social Survey, 2004.

Are you currently—married, widowed, divorced, separated, or have you never been married? According to the General Social Survey, in 2004 about 60 percent of

U.S. adults were married. However, this varied dramatically by social class. Those in the upper class were far more likely to be married (79 percent) than those in the lower class (36.2 percent) and the results for those who were never married were inverse, 30.1 percent for lower class and 7.9 percent for upper class. With regard to race, White respondents were far more likely to be married (63.3 percent) then were Black respondents (41 percent).

CRITICAL THINKING | DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why does marital status vary by social class? What cultural values and experiences might contribute to the differences?
2. Why does marital status vary by race? What cultural values and historical experiences might contribute to the differences?

3.2 Group Membership

These are actual survey data from the General Social Survey, 2004.

Are there any activities that you do with the same group of people on a regular basis even if the group doesn't have a name, such as a bridge group, exercise group, or a group that meets to discuss individual or community problems?

Almost three-quarters of respondents reported not being part of a regular informal group. White respondents (29.3 percent) were more likely than Black respondents (19.1 percent) to be part of such a group. Those who were of another racial classification were least likely to report being part of a group (14.1 percent). There was no difference in group membership by gender.

CRITICAL THINKING | DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Were you surprised that so few respondents report being members of informal groups? Do you think these numbers reflect reality? Why do you think so few people belong to groups? Why do you think Black respondents were less likely to report belonging to an informal group than were White respondents?
2. What other benefits are there to group membership? Think about what kinds of groups you belong to and how you benefit from them.

▶ Go to this website to look further at the data. You can run your own statistics and crosstabs here: **http://sda.berkeley.edu/cgi-bin/hsda?harcsda+gss04**

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