

Social Interaction, Groups, and Social Structure

Defining and Reconstructing Reality

Elements of Social Structure

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Understanding Organizations



In the early 1970s, social psychologist Philip Zimbardo asked 70 male students at Stanford University to participate in an unorthodox experiment: a mock prison he had

set up in the basement of a campus building. Using a coin toss, Zimbardo assigned half the subjects to play the role of prisoner and half to act as prison guards. He told the “guards” to make up their own rules for running the prison, then waited to see what would happen.

The results both astonished and frightened Zimbardo. Virtually overnight, the guards became tough enforcers of the rules, shouting curt commands at the prisoners. Some became cruel and abusive; one even forced a prisoner into “solitary confinement” in a closet. The prisoners reacted just as swiftly: Some became depressed, apathetic, and helpless; others, rebellious and angry. In just six days, the situation became so intolerable that Zimbardo was forced to abandon the study. Given the anxiety and distress he had observed in the student prisoners, continuing the experiment would have been unethical (Zimbardo 2007; Zimbardo et al. 2003).

In this study, college students adopted predictable patterns of behavior (those expected of guards and prisoners) when they were placed together in a mock prison. Sociologists use the term **social interaction** to refer to the ways in which people respond to one another. Social interaction need not be face-to-face; talking over the telephone and communicating via e-mail are also forms of social interaction. In

Zimbardo's mock prison experiment, the social interactions between guards and prisoners were highly impersonal. Guards wore reflective sunglasses that made eye contact impossible and addressed prisoners by number rather than by name.

As in many real-life prisons, the simulated prison at Stanford had a social structure in which guards held virtually total control over prisoners. Formally defined, **social structure** is the way in which a society is organized into predictable relationships. Clearly, the prison's social structure influenced how the guards and prisoners interacted. As Zimbardo (et al. 2003:546) noted, it was a real prison "in the minds of the jailers and their captives." The experiment, conducted more than 35 years ago, has since been repeated—with similar findings—both in the United States and in other countries.

Zimbardo's experiment took on new relevance in 2004, in the wake of shocking revelations of prisoner abuse at the U.S.-run Abu Ghraib military facility in Iraq. Graphic photos showed U.S. soldiers humiliating naked Iraqi prisoners and threatening to attack them with police dogs. The structure of the wartime prison, coupled with intense pressure on military intelligence officers to secure information regarding terrorist plots, contributed to the breakdown in the guards' behavior. But Zimbardo himself noted that the guards' depraved conduct could have been predicted simply on the basis of his research (Zimbardo 2007:324–379).

The two concepts of social interaction and social structure are closely linked to groups and organizations. Often, social interactions take place in groups of friends, relatives, or co-workers or in formal organizations such as universities and prisons. Whatever the setting, an underlying social structure dictates the relationships among members of the group or organization and the ways in which they respond to one another. In this chapter we will study the five basic elements of social structure: statuses, social roles, groups, social networks, and social institutions such as the family, religion, and government. We'll also touch on a new element of social structure, *virtual worlds*. We'll see that functionalists, conflict theorists, and interactionists approach these institutions quite differently. Next, we'll examine how and why formal organizations, such as a corporation or the college you attend, came into existence, touching on Max Weber's model of the modern bureaucracy in the process. And we'll compare our modern social structure with simpler forms, using typologies developed by Émile Durkheim, Ferdinand Tönnies, and Gerhard Lenski.

Defining and Reconstructing Reality

How do we define our social reality? As an example, let's consider something as simple as how we regard tattoos. Even as recently as a few years ago, most of us in the United States considered tattoos to be "weird" or

“kooky.” We associated them with fringe countercultural groups, such as punk rockers, biker gangs, and skinheads. Among many people, a tattoo elicited an automatic negative response. Now, however, there are so many tattooed people, including society’s trendsetters and major sports figures, and the ritual of getting a tattoo has become so legitimized, that we regard tattoos differently. At this point, as a result of increased social interactions with tattooed people, tattoos look perfectly at home to us in a number of settings.

The ability to define social reality reflects a group’s power within a society. In fact, one of the most crucial aspects of the relationship between dominant and subordinate groups is the ability of the dominant or majority group to define a society’s values. Sociologist William I. Thomas (1923), an early critic of theories of racial and gender differences, recognized that the “definition of the situation” could mold the thinking and personality of the individual. Writing from an interactionist perspective, Thomas observed that people respond not only to the objective features of a person or situation but also to the *meaning* the person or situation has for them. For example, in Philip Zimbardo’s mock prison experiment, student “guards” and “prisoners” accepted the definition of the situation (including the traditional roles and behavior associated with being a guard or prisoner) and acted accordingly.

Let’s take a closer look at the elements of social structure that help to define social reality.

Elements of Social Structure

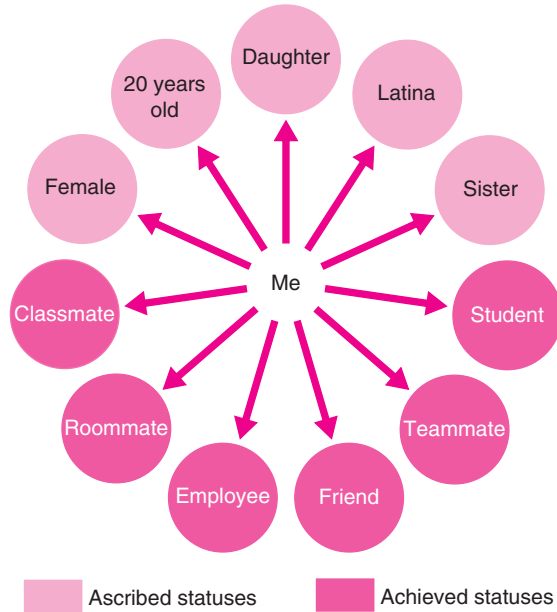
We can examine predictable social relationships in terms of five elements: statuses, social roles, groups, social networks, and social institutions. These elements make up a social structure just as a foundation, walls, and ceilings make up a building’s structure. The elements of social structure are developed through the lifelong process of socialization, described in Chapter 2.

STATUSES

We normally think of a person’s “status” as having to do with influence, wealth, and fame. However, sociologists use the term *status* to refer to any of the full range of socially defined positions within a large group or society, from the lowest to the highest position. Within our society, a person can occupy the status of president of the United States, fruit picker, son or daughter, violinist, teenager, resident of Minneapolis, dental technician, or neighbor. A person can hold a number of statuses at the same time.

Ascribed and Achieved Status Sociologists view some statuses as *ascribed* and others as *achieved* (see Figure 3–1). An *ascribed status* is

Figure 3–1
Social Statuses



Think About It

The person in this figure—"me"—occupies many positions in society, each of which involves distinct statuses. How would you define *your* statuses? Which have the most influence in your life?

"assigned" to a person by society without regard for the person's unique talents or characteristics. Generally, this assignment takes place at birth; thus, a person's racial background, gender, and age are all considered ascribed statuses. Though these characteristics are biological in origin, they are significant mainly because of the *social* meanings they have in our culture. Conflict theorists are especially interested in ascribed statuses, since they often confer privileges or reflect a person's membership in a subordinate group. The social meanings of race, ethnicity, and gender will be analyzed more fully in Chapters 6 and 7.

In most cases, we can do little to change an ascribed status. But we can attempt to change the traditional constraints associated with such statuses. For example, the Gray Panthers—an activist political group founded in 1971 to work for the rights of older people—have tried to modify society's negative and confining stereotypes of the elderly. As a result of their work and that of other groups supporting older citizens, the ascribed status of "senior citizen" is no longer as difficult for millions of older people.

Unlike ascribed statuses, an *achieved status* comes to us largely through our own efforts. Both "bank president" and "prison guard"

are achieved statuses, as are “lawyer,” “pianist,” “sorority member,” “convict,” and “social worker.” You must do something to acquire an achieved status—go to school, learn a skill, establish a friendship, or invent a new product. As we will see in the next section, our ascribed status heavily influences our achieved status. Being male, for example, decreases the likelihood that a person will consider becoming a child care worker.

Master Status Each person holds many different and sometimes conflicting statuses; some may connote higher social positions and some, lower positions. How, then, do others view one’s overall social position? According to sociologist Everett Hughes (1945), societies deal with such inconsistencies by agreeing that certain statuses are more important than others. A *master status* is a status that dominates others and thereby determines a person’s general position within society. For example, Arthur Ashe, who died of AIDS in 1993, had a remarkable career as a tennis star, but at the end of his life, his status as a well-known personality with AIDS may have outweighed his statuses as a retired athlete, an author, and a political activist. Throughout the world, many people with disabilities find that their status as “disabled” receives undue weight and overshadows their actual ability to perform successfully in meaningful employment.

Our society gives so much importance to race and gender that they often dominate our lives. These ascribed statuses frequently influence achieved status. The African American activist Malcolm X (1925–1965), an eloquent and controversial advocate of Black power and Black pride in the early 1960s, recalled that his feelings and perspectives changed dramatically when he was in eighth grade. His English teacher, a White man, advised him that his goal of becoming a lawyer was “no realistic goal for a nigger” and encouraged him instead to become a carpenter. Malcolm X (1964:37) found that his position as a Black man (ascribed status) was an obstacle to his dream of becoming a lawyer (achieved status). In the United States, the ascribed statuses of race and gender can function as master statuses that impact one’s potential to achieve a desired professional and social status.

SOCIAL ROLES

What Are Social Roles? Throughout our lives, we acquire what sociologists call *social roles*. A *social role* is a set of expectations for people who occupy a given social position or status. Thus, in the United States, we expect that cab drivers will know how to get around a city, that receptionists will be reliable in handling phone messages, and that police officers will take action if they see a citizen being threatened. With each distinctive social status—whether ascribed or achieved—come particular role expectations. However, actual performance varies

from individual to individual. One secretary may assume extensive administrative responsibilities, while another may focus on clerical duties. Similarly, in Philip Zimbardo's mock prison experiment, some students were brutal and sadistic guards, but others were not.

Roles are a significant component of social structure. Viewed from a functionalist perspective, roles contribute to a society's stability by enabling members to anticipate the behavior of others and to pattern their own actions accordingly. Yet social roles can also be dysfunctional, by restricting people's interactions and relationships. If we view a person only as a "police officer" or a "supervisor," it will be difficult to relate to the person as a friend or neighbor.

Role Conflict Imagine the delicate situation of a woman who has worked for a decade on an assembly line in an electrical plant, and has recently been named supervisor of her unit. How is this woman expected to relate to her longtime friends and co-workers? Should she still go out to lunch with them, as she has done almost daily for years? Is it her responsibility to recommend the firing of an old friend who cannot keep up with the demands of the assembly line?

Role conflict occurs when incompatible expectations arise from two or more social positions held by the same person. Fulfillment of the roles associated with one status may directly violate the roles linked to a second status. In the example just given, the newly promoted supervisor will most likely experience a sharp conflict between her social and occupational roles. Role conflicts call for important ethical choices. The new supervisor will have to make a difficult decision about how much allegiance she owes her friend and how much she owes her employers, who have given her supervisory responsibilities.

Another type of role conflict occurs when individuals move into occupations that are not common among people with their ascribed status. Male preschool teachers and female police officers experience this type of role conflict. In the latter case, female officers must strive to reconcile their workplace role in law enforcement with the societal view of a woman's role, which does not embrace many skills needed in police work. And while female police officers encounter sexual harassment, as women do throughout the labor force, they must also deal with the "code of silence," an informal norm that precludes their implicating fellow officers in wrongdoing (Fletcher 1995; S. Martin 1994).

Role Strain Role conflict describes the situation of a person dealing with the challenge of occupying two social positions simultaneously. However, even a single position can cause problems. Sociologists use the term **role strain** to describe the situation that occurs when the same social position imposes conflicting demands and expectations.

People who belong to minority cultures may experience role strain while working in the mainstream culture. Criminologist Larry Gould



If you were a male nurse, what aspects of role conflict would you need to consider? Now imagine you are a professional boxer and a woman. What conflicting role expectations might that involve? In both cases, how well do you think you would handle role conflict?

(2002) interviewed officers of the Navajo Nation Police Department about their relations with conventional law enforcement officials, such as sheriffs and FBI agents. Besides enforcing the law, Navajo Nation officers practice an alternative form of justice known as Peacemaking, in which they seek reconciliation between the parties to a crime. The officers expressed great confidence in Peacemaking, but worried that if they did not make arrests, other law enforcement officials would think they were too soft, or “just taking care of their own.” Regardless of the strength of their ties to traditional Navajo ways, all felt the strain of being considered “too Navajo” or “not Navajo enough.”

GROUPS

In sociological terms, a *group* is any number of people with similar norms, values, and expectations who interact with one another on a regular basis. The members of a women’s basketball team, of a hospital’s business office, or of a symphony orchestra constitute a group. However, the residents of a suburb would not be considered a group, since they rarely interact with one another at one time.

Every society is composed of many groups in which daily social interaction takes place. People seek out groups to establish friendships, to accomplish certain goals, and to fulfill the social roles they have acquired. Groups, then, play a vital part in a society’s social structure. Much of our social interaction takes place within groups and is influenced by their norms and sanctions. Being a teenager or a retired person takes on special meaning when you interact within a group designed for people with that particular status. The expectations associated with many social roles, including those accompanying the statuses of brother, sister, and student, become more clearly defined in the context of a group.

Primary and Secondary Groups Charles Horton Cooley (1902) coined the term *primary group* to refer to a small group characterized by intimate, face-to-face association and cooperation. The members of a street gang constitute a primary group; so do members of a family living in the same household, as well as a group of “sisters” in a college sorority.

Primary groups play a pivotal role both in the socialization process (see Chapter 2) and in the development of roles and statuses. Indeed, primary groups can be instrumental in a person’s day-to-day existence. When we find ourselves identifying closely with a group, it is probably a primary group.

We also participate in many groups that are not characterized by close bonds of friendship, such as large college classes and business associations. The term *secondary group* refers to a formal, impersonal group in which there is little social intimacy or mutual understanding (see Table 3–1). The distinction between primary and secondary groups is

Table 3-1 Comparison of Primary and Secondary Groups

Primary Group	Secondary Group
Generally small	Usually large
Relatively long period of interaction	Relatively short duration, often temporary
Intimate, face-to-face association	Little social intimacy or mutual understanding
Some emotional depth in relationships	Relationships generally superficial
Cooperative, friendly	Formal and impersonal

not always clear-cut. Some social clubs may become so large and impersonal that they no longer function as primary groups.

In-Groups and Out-Groups A group can hold special meaning for members because of its relationship to other groups. People in one group sometimes feel antagonistic to or threatened by another group, especially if that group is perceived as being different culturally or racially. Sociologists explain these “we” and “they” feelings using two terms first employed by William Graham Sumner (1906): *in-group* and *out-group*.

An *in-group* can be defined as any group or category to which people feel they belong. Simply put, it comprises everyone who is regarded as “we” or “us.” The in-group may be as narrow as a teenage clique or as broad as an entire society. The very existence of an in-group implies that there is an out-group viewed as “they” or “them.” An *out-group* is a group or category to which people feel they do *not* belong.

Conflict between in-groups and out-groups can turn violent. In 1999 two disaffected students at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, launched an attack on the school that left 15 students and teachers dead, including themselves. The gunmen, members of an out-group that other students referred to as the Trenchcoat Mafia, apparently resented the taunting of an in-group referred to as the Jocks. Similar episodes have occurred in schools across the nation, where rejected adolescents, overwhelmed by personal and family problems, peer group pressure, academic responsibilities, or media images of violence, have struck out against more popular classmates.

Reference Groups Both in-groups and primary groups can dramatically influence the way an individual thinks and behaves. Sociologists call any group that individuals use as a standard in evaluating themselves and their own behavior a *reference group*. For example, a high school student who aspires to join a social circle of hip-hop music devotees will pattern his or her behavior after that of the group. The student will begin

summing UP



Try putting yourself in the shoes of an out-group member. What does your in-group look like from that perspective?

dressing like these peers, downloading the same music, and hanging out at the same stores and clubs.

Reference groups have two basic purposes. First, they serve a normative function by setting and enforcing standards of conduct and belief. The high school student who wants the approval of the hip-hop crowd will have to follow the group's dictates, at least to some extent. Second, reference groups perform a comparison function by serving as a standard against which people can measure themselves and others. An actor will evaluate himself or herself against a reference group composed of others in the acting profession (Merton and Kitt 1950).

SOCIAL NETWORKS

Groups do not merely serve to define other elements of the social structure, such as roles and statuses; they also link the individual with the larger society. We all belong to a number of different groups and, through our acquaintances, make connections with people in different social circles. These connections are known as a *social network*—a series of social relationships that links a person directly to others and, through them, indirectly to still more people. Social networks can center on virtually any activity, from sharing job information to exchanging news and gossip or sharing sex. Some networks may constrain people by limiting the range of their interactions, yet networks can also empower people by making vast resources available to them (M. Jackson and Rogers 2007).

Involvement in social networks—commonly known as *networking*—is especially valuable in finding employment. Albert Einstein was successful in finding a job only when a classmate's father put him in touch with his future employer. These kinds of contacts—even those that are weak and distant—can be crucial in establishing social networks and facilitating the transmission of information.

In the workplace, networking pays off more for men than for women because of the traditional presence of men in leadership positions. One survey of executives found that 63 percent of the men used networking to find new jobs, compared to 41 percent of the women. Women were more likely than men to rely on classified advertisements to find jobs. Still, women at all levels of the paid labor force are beginning to make effective use of social networks. Now that many job advertisements have migrated to the Internet, new research is needed to determine whether gender differences will persist in both in-person and online networking (L. Flynn 2008; Henly 1999).

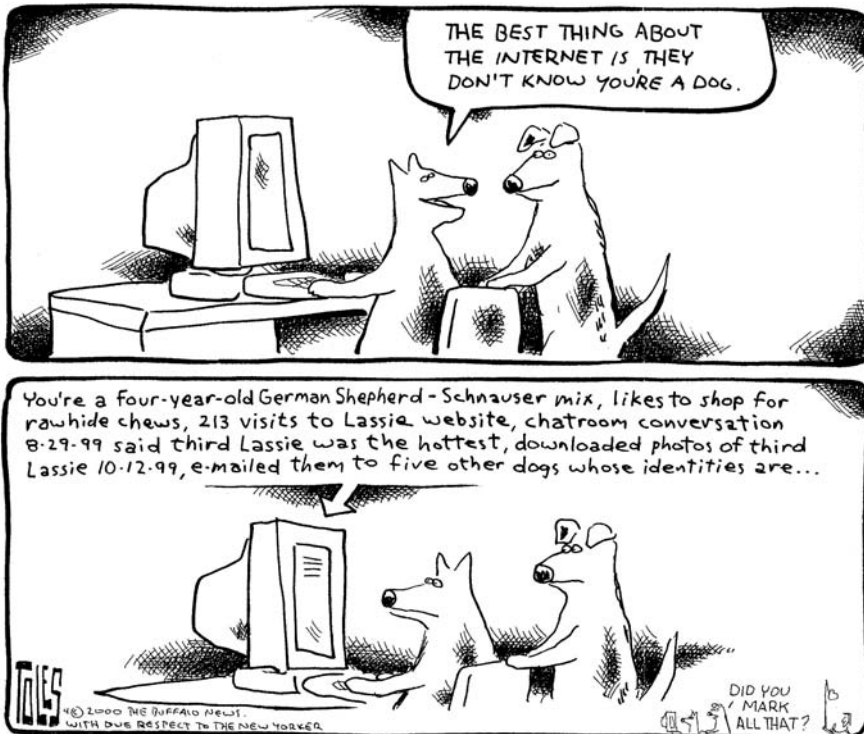
VIRTUAL WORLDS

Today, with recent advances in technology, people can maintain their social networks electronically; they don't need face-to-face contacts.

Whether through text-messaging, handheld devices, or social networking sites like Facebook, a significant amount of networking occurs online. Adolescents can now interact freely with distant friends, even under close scrutiny by parents or teachers. Without leaving their cubicles, employees with a taste for adventure can escape their work environments.

The future of virtual networking is difficult to imagine. Consider *Second Life* (SL), a virtual world that included about 12 million networked “players” as of January 2008. Nearly 400,000 of those players were active over a seven-day period. Participants in such a virtual world typically assume an *avatar*—that is, a three-dimensional model, two-dimensional icon, or constructed personality provided by the Internet site. (The term *avatar* originated in the 1980s in early computer games that featured role-playing.) The avatar that a person assumes may represent a very different looking-glass self from his or her actual identity. Once equipped with an avatar, a player goes about his or her life in the virtual world, establishing a business, even buying and decorating a home (Bainbridge 2007; *Second Life* 2008).

Just like real worlds, virtual worlds have become politicized and consumer-oriented. MySpace has been purchased by the global media giant News Corp, which has added targeted advertising to the site. If a



Even though you may not be totally sure whom you are “talking to” online, the Internet has added a massive new dimension to social interaction.

MySpace user confesses to liking tacos, a banner ad for Taco Bell may appear at the top of the page. And *Second Life* is now open to real-world corporations that want to “build” their stores in SL. The commercialization of these spaces has been met with a good deal of antagonism: Reebok has weathered a virtual nuclear bomb attack, and “customers” have been “shot” outside the American Apparel store. Elsewhere in SL, virtual protesters have paraded on behalf of a far-right French group in a confrontation with anti-Nazi protesters. And in 2007, Sweden became the first real-world country to place an “embassy” in SL (Burkeman 2007; A. Hamilton 2007; Semuels 2007).

As in the real world, untrustworthy businesses can be found in *Second Life*. “Zania Turner,” the avatar of a 33-year-old woman, could not resist the interest that her virtual money—bought with real money—could gather at *Second Life*’s Ginko Financial. One day her money, along with tens of thousands of dollars that others had deposited in Ginko, vanished. SL’s operators responded by shutting down the site’s virtual banks. Chaos followed as avatars flocked to the shuttered ATMs in a frenzied effort to exchange their virtual dollars for real currency (D. Talbot 2008).

Virtual life can and does migrate into real life. In 2007, college housing officials became worried when freshmen and their parents began checking out the Facebook profiles of prospective roommates. Soon, colleges were fielding requests for new roommates before students even arrived on campus. Concerns went far beyond tastes in music; the reservations expressed most often by parents included a potential roommate’s race, religion, and sexual orientation (Collura 2007).

Sociologist Manuel Castells (1997, 1998, 2000) views these emerging electronic social networks as fundamental to new organizations and the growth of existing businesses and associations. With other scholars, sociologists are now scrambling to understand these environments and their social processes. *Second Life* went public in 2003—a millennium ago in the world of cyberspace. Scholars worry that after the current period of transition, given the absence of a historical record, reconstructing these worlds as they existed when they were populated by only a hundred avatars, much less tens of thousands, will be impossible.

Finally, virtual networks can help to preserve real-world networks interrupted by war and other dislocations. In 2003, the deployment of U.S. troops in the Middle East increased many people’s reliance on e-mail. Today, digital photos and sound files accompany e-mail messages between soldiers and their families and friends. GIs can even view siblings’ graduations or children’s birthday parties live, via Webcams. And U.S. soldiers and Iraqi citizens have begun to post their opinions of the war in Iraq in online journals called Weblogs, or blogs. Though critics are skeptical of the identity of some of the authors, these postings have become yet another source of news about the war (Faith 2005; O’Connor 2004; Sisson 2007).



If you were deaf, what impact might instant messaging over the Internet have on you?

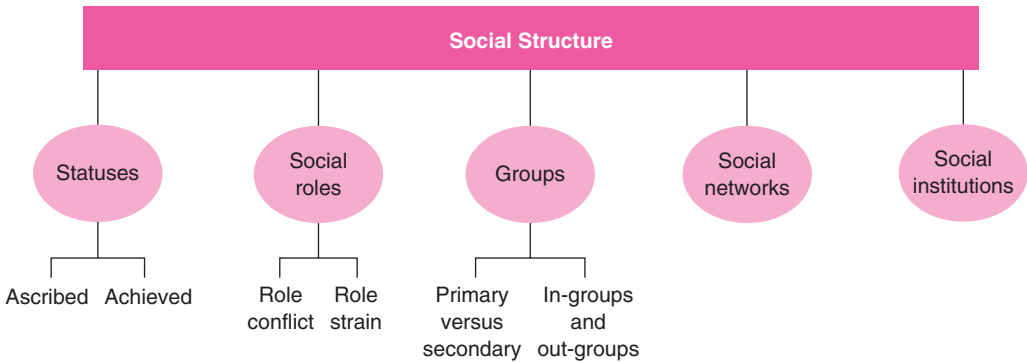


Figure 3–2

Social Structure: An Overview

SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS

The mass media, the government, the economy, the family, and the health care system are all examples of social institutions found in our society. *Social institutions* are organized patterns of beliefs and behavior centered on basic social needs, such as replacing personnel (the family) and preserving order (the government).

A close look at social institutions gives sociologists insight into the structure of a society. Consider religion, for example. The institution of religion adapts to the segment of society that it serves. Church work has very different meanings for ministers who serve a skid row area or a suburban middle-class community. Religious leaders assigned to a skid row mission will focus on tending to the ill and providing food and shelter. Clergy in the suburbs will focus on counseling those considering marriage and divorce, arranging youth activities, and overseeing cultural events. We will examine social institutions in more detail in Chapters 8 and 9. Figure 3–2 summarizes the five major elements of social structure.

Social Structure in Global Perspective

Modern societies are complex, especially when compared with earlier social arrangements. Sociologists Émile Durkheim, Ferdinand Tönnies, and Gerhard Lenski have offered three ways to contrast modern societies with simpler forms of social structure.

DURKHEIM’S MECHANICAL AND ORGANIC SOLIDARITIES

In his *Division of Labor* ([1893] 1933), Durkheim argued that social structure depends on the division of labor in a society—in other words, on the manner in which tasks are performed. Thus, a task such as providing food can be carried out almost totally by one individual, or it can be divided among many people. The latter pattern is typical of modern

societies, in which the cultivation, processing, distribution, and retailing of a single food item are performed by literally hundreds of people.

In societies in which there is minimal division of labor, a collective consciousness develops that emphasizes group solidarity. Durkheim termed this collective frame of mind *mechanical solidarity*, implying that all individuals perform the same tasks. In this type of society, no one needs to ask, “What do your parents do?” since all are engaged in similar work. Each person prepares food, hunts, makes clothing, builds homes, and so forth. Because people have few options regarding what to do with their lives, there is little concern for individual needs. Instead, the group is the dominating force in society. Both social interaction and negotiation are based on close, intimate, face-to-face social contacts. Since there is little specialization, there are few social roles.

As societies become more advanced technologically, they rely on greater division of labor. The person who cuts down timber is not the same person who puts up your roof. With increasing specialization, many different tasks must be performed by many different individuals—even in manufacturing a single item, such as a radio or stove. In general, social interactions become less personal than in societies characterized by mechanical solidarity. People begin relating to others on the basis of their social positions (“butcher,” “nurse”) rather than their distinctive human qualities. Because the overall social structure of the society continues to change, statuses and social roles are in perpetual flux.

Once society has become more complex and division of labor is greater, no individual can go it alone. Dependence on others becomes essential for group survival. In Durkheim’s terms, mechanical solidarity is replaced by *organic solidarity*, a collective consciousness resting on the need a society’s members have for one another. Durkheim chose the term *organic solidarity* because in his view, individuals become interdependent in much the same way as organs of the human body.

TÖNNIES’*S* GEMEINSCHAFT AND GESELLSCHAFT

Ferdinand Tönnies (1855–1936) was appalled by the rise of an industrial city in his native Germany during the late 1800s. In his view, the city marked a dramatic change from the ideal type of a close-knit community, which Tönnies termed *Gemeinschaft*, to that of an impersonal mass society, or *Gesellschaft* (Tönnies [1887] 1988).

The *Gemeinschaft* (pronounced guh-MINE-shoft) community is typical of rural life. It is a small community in which people have similar backgrounds and life experiences. Virtually everyone knows one another, so that social interactions are intimate and familiar, almost as one might find among kinfolk. A commitment to the larger social group and a sense of togetherness characterize the community. People relate to others in a personal way, not just as “clerk” or “manager.” With this personal interaction, however, comes little privacy.

Social control in the *Gemeinschaft* community is maintained through informal means, such as moral persuasion, gossip, and even gestures. These techniques work effectively because people genuinely care about how others feel toward them. Social change is relatively limited in the *Gemeinschaft*; the lives of members of one generation may be quite similar to those of their grandparents.

By contrast, the *Gesellschaft* (pronounced guh-ZELL-shoft) is an ideal type characteristic of modern urban life. Most people are strangers and feel little in common with other community residents. Relationships are governed by social roles that grow out of immediate tasks, such as purchasing a product or arranging a business meeting. Self-interest dominates, and little consensus exists concerning values or commitment to the group. As a result, social control must rely on more formal techniques, such as laws and legally defined punishments. Social change is an important aspect of life in the *Gesellschaft*; it can be strikingly evident, even within a single generation.

Table 3–2 summarizes the differences between the *Gemeinschaft* and the *Gesellschaft*. Sociologists have used these terms to compare social structures that stress close relationships with those that emphasize less

Table 3–2 Comparison of the *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*

<i>Gemeinschaft</i>	<i>Gesellschaft</i>
Rural life typifies this form	Urban life typifies this form
People share a feeling of community that results from their similar backgrounds and life experiences	People have little sense of commonality; their differences appear more striking than their similarities
Social interactions are intimate and familiar	Social interactions are likely to be impersonal and task-specific
People maintain a spirit of cooperation and unity of will	Self-interest dominates
Tasks and personal relationships cannot be separated	The task being performed is paramount; relationships are subordinate
People place little emphasis on individual privacy	Privacy is valued
Informal social control predominates	Formal social control is evident
People are not very tolerant of deviance	People are more tolerant of deviance
Emphasis is on ascribed statuses	Emphasis is on achieved statuses
Social change is relatively limited	Social change is very evident, even within a generation

Think About It

How would you classify the communities with which you are familiar? Are they more *Gemeinschaft* or *Gesellschaft*?

personal ties. It is easy to view the *Gemeinschaft* with nostalgia, as a far better way of life than the rat race of contemporary existence. However, the more intimate relationships of the *Gemeinschaft* come at a price. The prejudice and discrimination found there can be quite confining; ascribed statuses such as family background often outweigh a person's unique talents and achievements. In addition, the *Gemeinschaft* tends to distrust individuals who seek to be creative or just to be different.

LENSKI'S SOCIOCULTURAL EVOLUTION

Sociologist Gerhard Lenski takes a very different view of society and social structure. Rather than distinguishing between two opposite types of society, as Tönnies did, Lenski sees human societies as undergoing a process of change characterized by a dominant pattern known as *sociocultural evolution*. This term refers to long-term trends in societies resulting from the interplay of continuity, innovation, and selection (Nolan and Lenski 2009:357).

In Lenski's view, a society's level of technology is critical to the way it is organized. Lenski defines *technology* as "cultural information about the ways in which the material resources of the environment may be used to satisfy human needs and desires" (Nolan and Lenski 2006:361). The available technology does not completely define the form that a particular society and its social structure take. Nevertheless, a low level of technology may limit the degree to which a society can depend on such things as irrigation or complex machinery. As technology advances, society evolves from a preindustrial to an industrial and then a post-industrial stage.

Preindustrial Societies How does a preindustrial society organize its economy? If we know that, it is possible to categorize the society. The first type of preindustrial society to emerge in human history is the *hunting-and-gathering society*, in which people simply rely on whatever foods and fibers are readily available. Technology in such societies is minimal. Organized in groups, people move constantly in search of food. There is little division of labor into specialized tasks.

Hunting-and-gathering societies are composed of small, widely dispersed groups. Each group consists almost entirely of people related to one another. As a result, kinship ties are the source of authority and influence, and the social institution of the family takes on a particularly important role. Tönnies would certainly view such societies as examples of *Gemeinschaft*.

Since resources are scarce, there is relatively little inequality in hunting-and-gathering societies in terms of material goods. Social differentiation is based on ascribed statuses such as gender, age, and family background. By the close of the 20th century, the last hunting-and-gathering societies had virtually disappeared.

Horticultural societies, in which people plant seeds and crops rather than merely subsist on available foods, emerged about 10,000 to 12,000 years ago. Members of horticultural societies are much less nomadic than hunters and gatherers. They place greater emphasis on the production of tools and household objects. Yet their technology remains rather limited: They cultivate crops with the aid of digging sticks or hoes (Wilford 1997).

The last stage of preindustrial development is the **agrarian society**, which emerged about 5,000 years ago. As in horticultural societies, members of agrarian societies are engaged primarily in the production of food. However, the introduction of technological innovations such as the plow allows farmers to dramatically increase their crop yields. Farmers can cultivate the same fields over generations, allowing the emergence of still larger settlements.

Industrial Societies Although the Industrial Revolution did not topple monarchs, it produced changes every bit as significant as those resulting from political revolutions. The Industrial Revolution, which took place largely in England during the period 1760 to 1830, was a scientific revolution focused on the application of nonanimal (mechanical) sources of power to labor tasks. An **industrial society** is a society that depends on mechanization to produce its goods and services. Industrial societies rely on inventions that facilitate agricultural and industrial production, and on new sources of energy, such as steam.

As the Industrial Revolution proceeded, a new form of social structure emerged. Many societies underwent an irrevocable shift from an agrarian-oriented economy to an industrial base. No longer did a typical individual or a family make an entire product. Instead, specialization of tasks and manufacturing of goods became increasingly common. Workers, generally men but also women and even children, left their family homesteads to work in central locations such as factories.

The process of industrialization had distinctive social consequences. Families and communities could not continue to function as self-sufficient units. Individuals, villages, and regions began to exchange goods and services and to become interdependent. As people came to rely on the labor of members of other communities, the family lost its unique position as the source of power and authority. The need for specialized knowledge led to more formalized education, and education emerged as a social institution distinct from the family.

Postindustrial and Postmodern Societies When the concept of sociocultural evolution first appeared in the 1960s, sociologists paid relatively little attention to how maturing industrialized societies may change with the emergence of even more advanced forms of technology. Since then Lenski and other sociologists have studied the significant changes in the occupational structure of industrial societies as they shift

from manufacturing to service economies. Social scientists call these technologically advanced nations *postindustrial societies*, defined by sociologist Daniel Bell (1999) as societies whose economic systems are engaged primarily in the processing and control of information. The main output of a postindustrial society is services rather than manufactured goods. Large numbers of people become involved in occupations devoted to the teaching, generation, or dissemination of ideas.

Bell views this transition from industrial to postindustrial society as a positive development. He sees a general decline in organized working-class groups and a rise in interest groups concerned with such national issues as health, education, and the environment. Bell's outlook is functionalist because he portrays postindustrial society as basically consensual. Organizations and interest groups, he predicts, will engage in an open and competitive process of decision making. The level of conflict between diverse groups will diminish, strengthening social stability.

More recently, sociologists have gone beyond discussion of postindustrial societies to the postmodern society. A *postmodern society* is a technologically sophisticated society that is preoccupied with consumer goods and media images. Such societies consume goods and information on a mass scale. Postmodern theorists take a global perspective, noting the ways that aspects of culture cross national boundaries. For example, residents of the United States may listen to reggae music from Jamaica, eat sushi and other types of Japanese food, and wear clogs from Sweden. Table 3–3 summarizes the six stages of sociocultural evolution.

Table 3–3 Stages of Sociocultural Evolution

Societal Type	First Appearance	Characteristics
Hunting-and-gathering	Beginning of human life	Nomadic; reliance on readily available food and fibers
Horticultural	About 10,000 to 12,000 years ago	More settled; development of agriculture and limited technology
Agrarian	About 5,000 years ago	Larger, more stable settlements; improved technology and increased crop yields
Industrial	1760–1850	Reliance on mechanical power and new sources of energy; centralized workplaces; economic interdependence; formal education
Postindustrial	1960s	Reliance on services, especially the processing and control of information; expanded middle class
Postmodern	Latter 1970s	High technology; mass consumption of consumer goods and media images; cross-cultural integration

Durkheim, Tönnies, and Lenski present three visions of society's social structure. While they differ, each is useful, and this textbook will draw on all three. The sociocultural evolutionary approach emphasizes a historical perspective. It does not picture different types of social structure coexisting within the same society. Consequently, one would not expect a single society to include hunters and gatherers along with a post-modern culture. In contrast, Durkheim's and Tönnies's theories allow for the existence of different types of community—such as a *Gemeinschaft* and a *Gesellschaft*—in the same society. Thus, a rural New Hampshire community located 100 miles from Boston can be linked to the city by modern information technology. The main difference between these two theories is a matter of emphasis. While Tönnies emphasized the overriding concern in each type of community—one's own self-interest or the well-being of the larger society—Durkheim emphasized the division (or lack of division) of labor.

The work of these three thinkers reminds us that a major focus of sociology has been to identify changes in social structure and the consequences for human behavior. At the macro level, we see society shifting to more advanced forms of technology. The social structure becomes increasingly complex, and new social institutions emerge to assume some functions that once were performed by the family. On the micro level, these changes affect the nature of social interactions. Each individual takes on multiple social roles, and people come to rely more on social networks and less on kinship ties. As the social structure becomes more complex, people's relationships become more impersonal, transient, and fragmented. The development of formal organizations and bureaucracies, the subject of the next section, is another outcome of this process.

Understanding Organizations

FORMAL ORGANIZATIONS AND BUREAUCRACIES

As industrial and postmodern societies have shifted to more advanced forms of technology and their social structures have become more complex, our lives have become increasingly dominated by large secondary groups referred to as *formal organizations*. A **formal organization** is a group designed for a special purpose and structured for maximum efficiency. The United States Postal Service, the McDonald's fast-food chain, the Boston Pops orchestra, and the college you attend are all examples of formal organizations. Organizations vary in their size, specificity of goals, and degree of efficiency, but all are structured to facilitate the management of large-scale operations. All have a bureaucratic form of organization.

In our society, formal organizations fulfill an enormous variety of personal and societal needs, shaping the lives of every one of us. In

fact, formal organizations have become such a dominant force that we must create organizations to supervise other organizations, such as the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), which regulates the stock market. Though it sounds much more exciting to say that we live in a “computer age” than in an “age of formal organizations,” the latter is probably a more accurate description of our times (Azumi and Hage 1972; Etzioni 1964).

CHARACTERISTICS OF A BUREAUCRACY

A *bureaucracy* is a component of formal organization in which rules and hierarchical ranking are used to achieve efficiency. Rows of desks staffed by seemingly faceless people, endless lines and forms, impossibly complex language, and frustrating encounters with red tape—all these unpleasant images have combined to make *bureaucracy* a dirty word and an easy target in political campaigns. As a result, few people want to identify their occupation as “bureaucrat,” despite the fact that all of us perform various bureaucratic tasks. Elements of bureaucracy enter into almost every occupation in an industrial society.

Max Weber ([1913–1922] 1947) first directed researchers to the significance of bureaucratic structure. In an important sociological advance, Weber emphasized the basic similarity of structure and process found in the otherwise dissimilar enterprises of religion, government, education, and business. Weber saw bureaucracy as a form of organization quite different from the family-run business. For analytical purposes, he developed an ideal type of bureaucracy that would reflect the most characteristic aspects of all human organizations. By *ideal type* Weber meant a construct or model that serves as a measuring rod against which actual cases can be evaluated. In actuality, perfect bureaucracies do not exist; no real-world organization corresponds exactly to Weber’s ideal type.

Weber proposed that whether the purpose is to run a church, a corporation, or an army, the ideal bureaucracy displays five basic characteristics. A discussion of those characteristics, as well as the dysfunctions (or potential negative consequences) of a bureaucracy, follows. (Table 3–4 summarizes the discussion.)

1. **Division of Labor.** Specialized experts perform specific tasks. In your college bureaucracy, the admissions officer does not do the job of registrar; the guidance counselor doesn’t see to the maintenance of buildings. By working at a specific task, people are more likely to become highly skilled and carry out a job with maximum efficiency. This emphasis on specialization is so basic a part of our lives that we may not realize it is a fairly recent development in Western culture.

Although the division of labor has certainly enhanced the performance of many complex bureaucracies, in some cases it can lead to *trained incapacity*. That is, workers become so specialized that

Table 3–4 Characteristics of a Bureaucracy

Characteristic	Positive Consequence	Negative Consequence	
		For the Individual	For the Organization
Division of labor	Produces efficiency in large-scale organizations	Produces trained incapacity	Produces a narrow perspective
Hierarchy of authority	Clarifies who is in command	Deprives employees of a voice in decision making	Permits concealment of mistakes
Written rules and regulations	Let workers know what is expected of them	Stifle initiative and imagination	Lead to goal displacement
Impersonality	Reduces bias	Contributes to cold and uncaring atmosphere	Discourages loyalty to company
Employment based on technical qualifications	Discourages favoritism and reduces petty rivalries	Discourages ambition to improve oneself elsewhere	Fosters Peter Principle

they develop blind spots and fail to notice obvious problems. Even worse, they may not care about what is happening in the next department. Some observers believe that such developments have caused workers in the United States to become less productive on the job.

In some cases, the bureaucratic division of labor can have tragic results. In the wake of the coordinated attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, Americans wondered aloud how the FBI and CIA could have failed to detect the terrorists' elaborately planned operation. The problem, in part, turned out to be the division of labor between the FBI, which focuses on domestic matters, and the CIA, which operates overseas. Officials at these intelligence-gathering organizations, both of which are huge bureaucracies, are well known for jealously guarding information from one another. Subsequent investigations revealed that they knew about Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda terrorist network in the early 1990s. Unfortunately, five federal agencies—the CIA, FBI, National Security Agency, Defense Intelligence Agency, and National Reconnaissance Office—failed to share their leads on the network. Although the hijacking of the four commercial airliners used in the massive attacks may not have been preventable, the bureaucratic division of labor definitely hindered efforts to defend against terrorism and actually undermined U.S. national security.

2. **Hierarchy of Authority.** Bureaucracies follow the principle of hierarchy; that is, each position is under the supervision of a higher authority. A president heads a college bureaucracy; he or she selects members of the administration, who in turn hire their own staff. In the Roman Catholic Church, the pope is the supreme authority; under him sit cardinals, bishops, and so forth.

3. **Written Rules and Regulations.** What if your sociology professor gave your classmate an A for having such a friendly smile? You might think that wasn't fair—that it was “against the rules.” Through written rules and regulations, bureaucracies generally offer employees clear standards for an adequate (or exceptional) performance. In addition, procedures provide a valuable sense of continuity in a bureaucracy. Individual workers will come and go, but the organization's structure and past records give it a life of its own that outlives the services of any one bureaucrat.

Of course, rules and regulations can overshadow the larger goals of an organization to the point that they become dysfunctional. What if a hospital emergency room physician failed to treat a seriously injured person because he or she had no valid proof of U.S. citizenship? If blindly applied, rules no longer serve as a means to achieving an objective but instead become important (and perhaps too important) in their own right. Robert Merton (1968) has used the term *goal displacement* to refer to overzealous conformity to official regulations.

4. **Impersonality.** Max Weber wrote that in a bureaucracy, work is carried out *sine ira et studio*, “without hatred or passion.” Bureaucratic norms dictate that officials perform their duties without the personal consideration of people as individuals. Although this approach is intended to guarantee equal treatment for each person, it also contributes to the often cold and uncaring feeling associated with modern organizations. We typically think of big government and big business when we think of impersonal bureaucracies. But today even small firms use electronically automated menus to screen callers.



"Frankly, at this point in the flow chart,
we don't know what happens to these people..."

*A hierarchy of authority
may deprive individuals
of a voice in decision
making, but it does
clarify who supervises
whom.*

5. **Employment Based on Technical Qualifications.** Within the ideal bureaucracy, hiring is based on technical qualifications rather than on favoritism, and performance is measured against specific standards. Written personnel policies dictate who gets promoted; people often have a right to appeal if they believe that particular rules have been violated. Such procedures protect bureaucrats against arbitrary dismissal, provide a measure of security, and encourage loyalty to the organization.

Although ideally any bureaucracy will value technical and professional competence, personnel decisions do not always follow this ideal pattern. Bureaucratic dysfunctions have become well publicized, particularly because of the work of Laurence J. Peter. According to the *Peter Principle*, every employee within a hierarchy tends to rise to his or her level of incompetence (Peter and Hull 1969).

These five characteristics of bureaucracy, developed by Max Weber more than 80 years ago, describe an ideal type rather than offering a precise definition of an actual bureaucracy. Not every formal organization will possess all five of Weber's characteristics. In fact, actual bureaucratic organizations can vary widely.

BUREAUCRACY AND ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

How does bureaucratization affect the average individual who works in an organization? Early theorists of formal organizations tended to neglect this question. Max Weber, for example, focused on managerial personnel within bureaucracies but had little to say about workers in industry or clerks in government agencies.

According to the *classical theory* of formal organizations, also known as the *scientific management approach*, workers are motivated almost entirely by economic rewards. This theory stresses that only the physical constraints on workers limit their productivity. Therefore, workers are treated as a resource, much like the machines that began to replace them in the 20th century. Management attempts to achieve maximum work efficiency through scientific planning, established performance standards, and careful supervision of workers and production. Under the scientific management approach, planning includes efficiency studies but not studies of workers' attitudes or job satisfaction.

Not until workers organized unions—and forced management to recognize that they were not objects—did theorists of formal organizations begin to revise the classical approach. Along with management and administrators, social scientists became aware that informal groups of workers have an important impact on organizations. An alternative way of considering bureaucratic dynamics, the *human relations approach*, emphasizes the roles of people, communication, and participation within a bureaucracy. This type of analysis reflects the interest of interactionist theorists in small-group behavior. Unlike planning under the scientific

management approach, planning based on the human relations perspective focuses on workers' feelings, frustrations, and emotional need for job satisfaction (Perrow 1986).

Today, research on formal organizations is following new avenues. Among them are:

- The recent arrival of a small number of women and minority group members in high-level management
- In large corporations, the decision-making role of groups that lie outside the top ranks of leadership
- The loss of fixed boundaries in organizations that have outsourced key functions
- The role of the Internet and virtual worlds in influencing business and consumer preferences

Though research on organizations still embraces Max Weber's insights, then, it has gone well beyond them (S. Hamm 2007; Kleiner 2003; W. Scott 2004).

Sociology Matters

Sociology matters because it defines your social status in terms of a variety of social characteristics and groups.

- What is your ascribed status? What do you hope your achieved status will be someday? Do you have a master status, and if so, how might it impact your achievements?
- What primary and secondary groups do you belong to, and why? How do those groups affect your behavior?
- What social networks and institutions are you involved in? Do you belong to any virtual networks? What are the functions of those networks, and how can they help you?

CHAPTER RESOURCES

Summary

Through **social structure**, society is organized into predictable relationships that facilitate **social interaction**. The transmission of culture and even the survival of society depend on social interaction. This

chapter has presented the basic elements of social structure, from individual **statuses** and the **social roles** that go with them to **groups**, **social networks**, and **social institutions**. It has examined several theories of social structure and **formal organizations**, including **bureaucracies**.

1. An **ascribed status** is generally assigned to a person at birth, whereas an **achieved status** is attained largely through one's own effort. In the United States, ascribed statuses such as race and gender can function as **master statuses** that affect one's potential for achievement.
2. The statuses people carry determine the **social roles** they play. People who play more than one social role often suffer from **role conflict**, but even a single role can create **role strain**.
3. Much of our social behavior takes place within **groups**. When we find ourselves identifying closely with a group, it is probably a **primary group**. A **secondary group** is more formal and impersonal.
4. People tend to see the world in terms of **in-groups** (groups to which they belong) and **out-groups** (groups they do not belong to or identify with). **Reference groups** set and enforce standards of social conduct, allowing members to compare themselves to others.
5. Groups serve as links to **social networks** and their vast resources. Today, more and more networking is being done online, some of it in virtual worlds that exist only on the Internet.
6. **Social institutions**, such as government and the family, fulfill essential social functions that other groups cannot, such as preserving order and perpetuating society.
7. Émile Durkheim thought that social structure depends on the division of labor in a society. According to Durkheim, societies with minimal division of labor have a collective consciousness called **mechanical solidarity**; those with greater division of labor show an interdependence called **organic solidarity**.
8. The sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies contrasted the close-knit type of community that characterizes rural life, which he called **Gemeinschaft**, with the impersonal type of mass society that characterizes urban life, which he called **Gesellschaft**.
9. In his theory of **sociocultural evolution**, Gerhard Lenski linked the historical development of societies to the technological advances they achieved. Lenski traced their evolution from primitive **hunting-and-gathering societies** to modern-day **postindustrial** and **postmodern societies**.
10. As societies have become more complex, large **formal organizations** and **bureaucracies** have become more powerful and pervasive. Max Weber theorized that in its **ideal type**, every bureaucracy



has five basic characteristics: division of labor, hierarchical authority, written rules and regulations, impersonality, and employment based on technical qualifications.

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