2 SEEING AND THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

2.1 Describe how individuals form and influence societies

2.2 Explain the social influence that other people have on our everyday lives

2.3 List social structures and institutions that influence us

2.4 Summarize three key perspectives on social order

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Three decades ago, ethnic violence erupted in the small African nation of Rwanda. The Hutu majority had begun a systematic program to exterminate the Tutsi minority. Soon, gruesome pictures of the tortured and dismembered bodies of Tutsi men, women, and children began to appear on television screens around the world. When it was over, more than 800,000 Tutsis had been slaughtered—half of whom died between April and July 1994. Surely, we thought, such horror must have been perpetrated by bands of vicious, crazed thugs who derived some sort of twisted pleasure from committing acts of unspeakable cruelty. Or maybe these were the extreme acts of angry soldiers, trained killers who were committed to destroying as completely as possible an enemy they considered subhuman.

To be sure, the Hutu militia, known as the *Interahamwe*, conducted mass "weeding" raids where they killed and maimed thousands. But much of the responsibility for these atrocities lay elsewhere, in a most unlikely place: among the ordinary, previously law-abiding Rwandan citizens who eventually became desensitized to the slaughter (Scull et al., 2016). Many of the participants in the genocide were the least likely brutes you could imagine. For instance, here's how one woman described her husband, a man responsible for many Tutsi deaths:

> He came home often. He never carried a weapon, not even his machete. I knew he was a leader. I knew the Hutus were out there cutting Tutsis. With me, he behaved nicely. He made sure we had everything we needed. . . . He was gentle with the children. . . . To me, he was the nice man I married. (as quoted in Rwandan Stories, 2011, p. 1)

Indeed, the tendency for a single individual to engage in an act of horrific brutality one minute and an act of kindness the next was commonplace. A Hutu man whose life was spared by a local Tutsi militia leader described people like his rescuer this way:

> Every person who killed people, you will also find that they saved one or two other people. . . . You'll find thousands if not hundreds of thousands of people in Rwanda who, on one hand were heavily involved in the killings, but also saved some individuals. (as quoted in Shealy, 2019, p. 1)

Pauline Nyiramasuhuko, a former social worker and the country's minister of family and women's affairs, promised the Tutsis in one village that they would be safe in a local stadium. When they arrived there, armed militia were waiting to kill them. She instructed one group of soldiers to burn alive a group of 70 women and girls, adding, "Before you kill the women, you need to rape them" (as quoted in Zimbardo, 2007, p. 13). In 2011, a United Nations tribunal found that she had used her political position to help abduct and kill uncounted Tutsi men, women, and children and sentenced her to life in prison (Simons, 2011).

Some of the most gruesome attacks occurred in churches and missions (Lacey, 2006). Two Benedictine nuns and a National University of Rwanda physics professor stood trial for their role in the killings. The nuns were accused of informing the military that Tutsi refugees had sought sanctuary in the church and of standing by as the soldiers massacred them. One nun allegedly provided the death squads with cans of gasoline, which were used to set fire to a building where 500 Tutsis were hiding. The professor was accused of drawing up a list for the killers of Tutsi employees and students at the university and then killing at least seven Tutsis himself (Simons, 2001). A Catholic priest was sentenced to 15 years in prison for ordering his church to be demolished by bulldozers while 2,000 ethnic Tutsis sought refuge there. Indeed, some have argued that Rwandan churches themselves were complicit in the genocide from the beginning (Longman, 2009; Rittner, 2004).

A report by the civil rights organization African Rights provides evidence that members of the medical profession were deeply involved too (Harris, 1996). The report details how doctors joined with militiamen to hunt down Tutsis, turning hospitals into slaughterhouses. Some helped soldiers drag sick and wounded refugees out of their beds to be killed. Others took advantage of their position of authority to organize roadblocks, distribute ammunition, and compile lists of Tutsi colleagues, patients, and neighbors to be sought out and slaughtered. Many doctors who didn't participate in the actual killing refused to treat wounded Tutsis and withheld food and water from refugees who sought sanctuary in hospitals. In fact, the president of Rwanda and the minister of health were both physicians who were eventually tried as war criminals.

Average, well-balanced people—teachers, social workers, priests and nuns devoted to the ideals of charity and mercy, and physicians trained to heal and save lives—had changed, almost overnight, into cold-hearted killers. How could something like this have happened? The answer to this question lies in the sociological claim that individual behavior is largely shaped by social forces and situational contingencies. The circumstances of large-scale ethnic hatred and war have the power to transform well-educated, "nice" people with no previous history of violence

into cruel butchers. Tragically, such forces were at work in many of the 20th and 21st centuries' most infamous examples of human brutality, such as the Nazi Holocaust during World War II and, more recently, large-scale ethnic massacres in Cambodia, Iraq, Bosnia, Burma, Kosovo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Darfur region of Sudan, Myanmar, and Syria, as well as Rwanda.

But social circumstances don't just create opportunities for brutality; they can also motivate ordinary people to engage in astounding and unexpected acts of heroism. The 2004 film *Hotel Rwanda* depicts the true story of Paul Rusesabagina, a hotel manager in the Rwandan capital, Kigali, who risked his own life to shelter more than a thousand Tutsi refugees from certain death. Rusesabagina was a middle-class Hutu married to a Tutsi and the father of four children. He was a businessman with an eye toward turning a profit and a taste for the finer things in life. But when the genocide began, he used his guile, international contacts, and even water from the swimming pool to keep the refugees alive.

In this chapter, I examine the process by which individuals construct society and the way people's lives are linked to the social environment in which they live. The relationship between the individual and society is a powerful one—each continually affects the other.

HOW INDIVIDUALS STRUCTURE SOCIETY

Up to this point, I have used the word *society* rather loosely. Formally, sociologists define **society** as a population living in the same geographic area who share a culture and a common identity and whose members are subject to the same political authority. Societies may consist of people with the same ethnic heritage or of hundreds of different groups who speak a multitude of languages. Some societies are highly industrialized and complex; others are primarily agricultural and relatively simple in structure. Some are very religious; others are distinctly secular.

According to the 19th-century French philosopher Auguste Comte, all societies, whatever their form, contain both forces for stability, which he called "social statics," and forces for change, which he called "social dynamics." Sometimes, however, people use the term *society* only to mean a static entity—a natural, permanent, and historical structure. They frequently talk about society "planning" or "shaping" our lives and describe it as a relatively unchanging set of organizations, institutions, systems, and cultural patterns into which successive generations of people are born and socialized.

As a result, sociology students often start out believing not only that society is powerfully influential (which, of course, it is) but also that it is something that exists "out there," completely separate and distinct from us (which it isn't). It is tempting to view society simply as a top-down initiator of human activity, a massive entity that methodically shapes the lives of all individuals within it like some gigantic puppeteer manipulating a bunch of marionettes. This characterization is weird but not entirely inaccurate. Society does exert influence on its members through certain identifiable structural features and historical circumstances. The concept of the sociological imagination discussed in Chapter 1 implies that structural forces beyond our direct control do shape our personal lives.

But this view is only one side of the sociological coin. The sociological imagination also encourages us to see that each individual has a role in forming a society and influencing the course of its history. As we navigate our social environments, we respond in ways that may modify the effects and even the nature of that environment (House, 1981). As one sociologist wrote more than 50 years ago,

> No [society], however massive it may appear in the present, existed in this massivity from the dawn of time. Somewhere along the line each one of its salient features was concocted by human beings. . . . Since all social systems were created by [people], it follows that [people] can also change them. (Berger, 1963, p. 128)

To fully understand society, then, we must see it as a human creation made up of people interacting with one another. Communication plays an important role in the construction of society. If we couldn't communicate with one another to reach an understanding about society's expectations, we couldn't live together. Through day-to-day conversation, we construct, reaffirm, experience, and alter the reality of our society. By responding to other people's messages, comments, and gestures in the expected manner, and by talking about social abstractions as real things, we help shape society (Shibutani, 1961).

Imagine two people sitting on a park bench discussing the spate of deadly school shootings in this country. According to the Center for Homeland Defense and Security (2021), there have been 1,700 school shooting incidents—resulting in more than 600 deaths and 1,600 injuries—since 1970. Although these numbers may be terrifying to parents of school-age children, such events are actually extremely rare. Consider, for instance, that more than 56 million children from pre-kindergarten through 12th grade attend school each day (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). In addition, only 1.2% of all homicides involving children between ages 5 and 18 occur at school, and only a very small subset of these are active shooter incidents (Satterly, 2014). The director of the National Center for Juvenile Justice stated a few years ago that, "especially in the younger grades, schools are the safest places they can be" (as quoted in Goldstein, 2018, p. A13). Nevertheless, public fear has led many school districts to enact "active shooter" readiness programs and survival drills for both teachers and students. Two-thirds of school districts conduct exercises to prepare for active shooters (Goldstein, 2018). There's even a new category of emergency for first responders called "intentional mass casualty events" (Williams, 2019).

Person A believes that all teachers—from elementary school to high school—should be armed. They argue that the only way to stop a bad guy with a gun who is determined to kill as many people as possible is to make sure that there are armed good guys around to stop the perpetrator. They point out that a teacher who is trained to use a gun can respond more quickly and effectively than a uniformed security guard. Person B believes that the best way to stop these massacres from happening is to enact stricter gun control laws so that it becomes harder for potential assailants to get their hands on lethal weapons. They point out that the United States has more guns—and more gun deaths—than any other country (Kristof & Marsh, 2017).

These two people obviously don't agree on the best way to prevent these tragedies from occurring. But merely by discussing the problem, they are acknowledging that it is real and

urgent. In talking about such matters, people give shape and substance to society's ideals and values (Hewitt, 1988).

Even something as apparently unchangeable as our society's past can be shaped and modified by individuals. We usually think of history as a fixed, unalterable collection of social events that occurred long ago; only in science fiction novels or those old *Back to the Future* movies can one go back and change the past. No one would question that the Declaration of Independence was signed on August 2, 1776; that John F. Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963; that hijackers flew passenger jets into the Pentagon and the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001; that the U.S. Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage on June 26, 2015; that a gunman killed 58 people and wounded 422 (the largest mass shooting, to date, in U.S. history) at an outdoor concert in Las Vegas on October 1, 2017; or that Joe Biden was certified by Congress as the 46th president of the United States on January 6, 2021, hours after pro-Trump rioters stormed the U.S. Capitol. Although such historical events themselves don't change, their meaning and relevance can. Consider the celebration in 1992 of the 500th anniversary of Columbus's voyage to the Americas. For generations, American schoolchildren have been taught that Columbus's 1492 "discovery" represented a triumphant step forward for Western civilization. We even have a holiday in his honor. However, increasing sensitivity to the past persecution of Native Americans has forced many people to reconsider the historical meaning of Columbus's journey. In fact, some historians now consider this journey and what followed it to be one of history's most dismal examples of reckless and deadly prejudice. Several states have even changed the name of Columbus Day to Indigenous People's Day. So, you see, history might best be regarded as a work in progress.

When we view society this way, we can begin to understand the role each of us has in maintaining or altering it. Sometimes the actions of ordinary individuals mobilize larger groups of people to collectively alter some aspect of society.

Perhaps you've heard of a young Pakistani named Malala Yousafzai. In 2009, when she was 11, Malala began writing a blog for the BBC detailing her life under the Taliban, who at the time were seeking to control the Swat Valley region of Pakistan, where she lived. She wrote about the importance of education for young girls, something the Taliban was trying to ban. As her blog gained a greater international following, she became more prominent, giving interviews in newspapers and on television. But her increased visibility also meant that she was becoming a greater threat to the Taliban. So, in October 2012, a gunman boarded Malala's school bus, walked directly up to her, and shot her in the face. She remained unconscious for days and was flown to a hospital in England. Not only did she survive the shooting, but she redoubled her efforts to advocate on behalf of girls' education all around the world. The assassination attempt received worldwide coverage and provoked an outpouring of international sympathy. The United Nations drafted a petition in her name calling on Pakistan—and other countries— to end educational discrimination against girls. Since then, she has spoken before the United Nations, met with world leaders, and, in 2014—at the ripe old age of 17—was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Although she has not been able to return to her home country since she was shot, her work and perseverance have spawned a global movement to ensure educational access for all girls. To date, the Malala Fund has raised $22 million for local education projects in

Afghanistan, Brazil, Ethiopia, India, Lebanon, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Turkey to secure girls' rights to a minimum of 12 years of free quality education (Malala Fund, 2021). In 2015, world leaders, meeting at the United Nations, followed Malala's lead and committed to delivering free, quality primary and secondary education for every child by 2030.

SOCIAL INFLUENCE: THE IMPACT OF OTHER PEOPLE ON OUR EVERYDAY LIVES

We live in a world with other people. Not the most stunningly insightful sentence you've ever read, I'm guessing. But it is key to understanding the sociology of human behavior. Our every-day lives are a collection of brief encounters, extended conversations, Zoom conferences, inti-mate interactions, and chance collisions with other people. In our early years, we may have our parents, siblings, uncles, aunts, and grandparents to contend with. Soon, we begin to form friendships with those outside our families. Over time, whether in-person or remotely, our lives also become filled with connections to others—classmates, teachers, co-workers, bosses, spiri-tual leaders, therapists—who are neither family nor friends but who have an enormous impact on us. And, of course, we have frequent experiences with total strangers: the barista at the local coffee shop who serves us our daily latte, the DoorDash driver who delivers meals from our favorite restaurant when we can't eat there in person, and the tech support specialist who helps us when our documents won't print or our iPads freeze.

If you think about it, understanding what it means to be alone requires that we know what it's like to be with other people. As I will discuss in Chapters 5 and 6, much of our private iden-tity—what we think of ourselves, the type of people we become, and the images of ourselves we project in public—comes from our contact with others.

Sociologists tell us that these encounters have a great deal of *social influence* over our lives. Whether we're aware of their doing so or not, other people affect our thoughts, likes, and dis-likes. Consider why certain songs, books, or films become blockbuster hits. We usually think their popularity is a consequence of a large number of people making their own independent decisions about what appeals to them. But research shows that popularity is a consequence of social influence (Salganik et al., 2006). If one object happens to be slightly more popular than others—such as a particular song that gets streamed a lot on Spotify—it tends to become more popular as more people are drawn to it. As one sociologist put it, "People tend to like what other people like" (Watts, 2007, p. 22). Similarly, the making of art is not just a function of the vision that exists in the minds of solitary artists, it is an enterprise in which many people—suppliers, dealers, critics, consumers, and creators—play a role in producing a piece that the community decides is "art." In this sense, even individual creativity cannot be understood outside its social and cultural context (Becker, 2008).

In a more direct sense, we often take other people's desires and concerns into account before we act. Perhaps you've decided to date someone, only to reconsider when you asked yourself, "Would my mother like this person?" Those who influence us may be in our immediate pres-ence or hover in our memories. They may be real or imagined, loved or despised. And their effects on us may be deliberate or accidental.

Imagine for a moment what your life would be like if you had never had contact with other people (assuming you could have survived this long!). You wouldn't know what love is, or hate or jealousy or compassion or gratitude. You wouldn't know if you were attractive or unattractive, bright or dumb, witty or boring. You'd lack some basic information too. You wouldn't know what day it was, how much a pound weighs, where Switzerland is, or how to read. Furthermore, you'd have no language, and because we use language to think, imagine, predict, plan, wonder, fantasize, and reminisce, you'd lack these abilities as well. In short, you'd lack the key experiences that make you a functioning human being.

Contact with people is essential to a person's social development, as became all the more apparent during the lockdown/quarantine days of the COVID-19 era. But there is much more to social life than simply bumping into others from time to time. We act and react to things and people in our environment as a result of the meaning we attach to them. At the sight of Mokolodi, my big goofy Labrador retriever, playfully barreling toward it, a squirrel instinctively runs away. A human, however, does not have such an automatic reaction. We've all learned from past experiences that some animals are approachable and others aren't. So we can think, "Do I know this dog? Is it friendly or mean? Does it want to lick my face or tear me limb from limb?" and respond accordingly. In short, we usually interpret events in our environment before we react.

The presence of other people may motivate you to improve your performance—for example, when the high quality of your tennis opponent makes you play the best match of your life. But their presence may at other times inhibit you—as when you lose your train of thought during an online oral presentation because your ex-boyfriend has just joined the meeting and is glowering at the camera. Other people's presence is also essential for the expression of certain feelings or bodily functions. We've all experienced the unstoppable urge to yawn after watching someone else yawn. But have you ever noticed the contagion of coughing that often breaks out in class during a lecture or exam? Research has shown that coughing tends to trigger coughing in those who hear it (as cited in Provine, 2012). And think about the fact that you can't tickle yourself. Being tickled is the product of a *social* interaction. Indeed, according to one study of laughter, people are about 30 times more likely to laugh when they're around other people than when they're alone (Provine, 2000).

Our personal contentment and generosity can be linked to others too. One study found that just knowing someone who is happy—whether a relative, friend, or acquaintance—significantly increases your own chances of happiness (Fowler & Christakis, 2008). Another found that shoppers are significantly happier when shopping with other people, no matter what they buy (Goldsmith, 2016). Such influence can be found in the online world as well. Twitter users prefer to follow other Twitter users who exhibit comparable moods. That is, happy users tend to retweet or reply to other happy users (Bollen et al., 2012). Research also suggests that the presence of female family members (wives, sisters, daughters, mothers) can make men more generous, compassionate, and empathetic. The founder of Microsoft, Bill Gates, once cited the inspiration provided by his (now ex-) wife and mother in setting up his charitable foundation, which has given away tens of billions of dollars.

The influence of others goes beyond emotions, behaviors, and performances. Even our physical well-being is affected by those around us. According to researchers in Japan, the risk of heart attack is three times higher among women who live with their husbands and their

husbands' parents than among women who just live with their husbands (as cited in Rabin, 2008). Similarly, a recent study of 2,000 American married couples found that people with happy spouses have fewer physical impairments, engage in more exercise, and rate their overall health as better than people with unhappy spouses (Chopik & O'Brien, 2016). In fact, three decades of research has shown that having a large network of friends can even increase life expectancy (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010).

Consider also the way people eat. Most of us assume that we eat when we're hungry and stop when we're full. But our eating tendencies reflect the social influences that surround us. For instance, when we eat with other people, we adjust our pace to their pace. We also tend to eat longer—and therefore more—when in groups than when we're by ourselves. One researcher found that, on average, people eat 35% more food when they're with one other person than when they're alone. That figure goes up to 75% more when eating with three other people (DeCastro, 1994, 2000). This may explain why a person's chances of becoming obese increase significantly when they have a close friend who is obese (Christakis & Fowler, 2007). As one researcher put it, "Weight can be inherited, but it can also be contagious" (Wansink, 2006, p. 99).

And, of course, other people can sometimes purposely sway our actions. I'm sure you've been in situations in which people have tried to persuade you to do things against your will or better judgment. Perhaps someone convinced you to steal a candy bar, skip your sociology class, or disregard the speed limit. On occasion, such social influence can be quite harmful.

Stanley Milgram: Ordinary People and Cruel Acts

In a classic piece of social research, social psychologist Stanley Milgram (1974) set out to determine how far people would go in obeying the commands of an authority. He designed an experimental situation in which a subject, on orders from an authoritative figure, flips a switch, apparently sending a 450-volt shock to an innocent victim.

The subjects responded to an advertisement seeking participants in a study on memory and learning. On a specified day, each subject arrived at the laboratory and was introduced to a stern-looking experimenter (Milgram) wearing a white lab coat. The subject was also introduced to another person who, unknown to the subject, was actually an accomplice of the experimenter.

Each subject was told they would play the role of "teacher" in an experiment examining the effects of punishment on learning; the other person would play the role of the "learner." The teacher was taken to a separate room that held an ominous-looking machine the researcher called a "shock generator." The learner was seated in another room out of the sight of the teacher and was supposedly strapped to an electrode from the shock generator.

The teacher read a series of word pairs (e.g., blue–sky, nice–day, wild–duck) to the learner. After reading the entire list, the teacher read the first word of a pair (e.g., blue) and four alternatives for the second word (e.g., sky, ink, box, lamp). The learner had to select the correct alternative. Following directions from the experimenter, who was present in the room, the teacher flipped a switch and shocked the learner whenever they gave an incorrect answer. The shocks began at the lowest level, 15 volts, and increased with each subsequent incorrect answer all the way up to the 450-volt maximum.

As instructed, all the subjects shocked the learner for each incorrect response. (Remember, the learner was an accomplice of the experimenter and was not actually being shocked.) As the experiment proceeded and the shocks became stronger, the teacher could hear cries from the learner. Most of the teachers, believing they were inflicting serious injury, became visibly upset and wanted to stop. The experimenter, however, ordered them to continue—and many did. Despite the tortured reactions of the victim, 65% of the subjects complied with the experimenter's demands and proceeded to the maximum, 450 volts.

Milgram repeated the study with a variety of subjects and even conducted it in different countries, including Germany and Australia. In each case, about two-thirds of the subjects were willing, under orders from the experimenter, to shock to the limit. Milgram didn't just show that people defer to authority from time to time. He showed just how powerful that tendency is (Blass, 2004). As we saw with the Rwandan genocide, given the right circumstances, ordinarily nice people can be compelled to do terrible things they wouldn't have done otherwise.

Milgram's research raises questions not only about why people would obey an unreasonable authority but also about what the rest of us think of those who do. A study of destructive obedience in the workplace—investigating actions such as dumping toxic waste in a river and manufacturing a defective automobile—found that the public is more likely to forgive those who are responsible when they are believed to be conforming to company policy or obeying the orders of a supervisor than when they are thought to be acting on their own (Hamilton & Sanders, 1995).

Milgram's study has generated a tremendous amount of controversy. For nearly half a century, this pivotal piece of research has been replicated, discussed, and debated by social scientists (Burger, 2009). It has made its way into popular culture, turning up in novels, plays, films, and songs (Blass, 2004). Although some researchers have found that in small groups people sometimes collectively rebel against what they perceive to be an unjust authority (Gamson et al., 1982), most others have replicated Milgram's original findings. In fact, one French study yielded even higher rates of obedience than Milgram found (81% compared to Milgram's 65%; Beauvois et al., 2012).

After all these years, Milgram's findings remain discomforting. It would be much easier to conclude that the acts of inhumanity we read about in our daily newspapers (such as soldiers raping civilians or killing unarmed noncombatants) are the products of defective or inherently evil individuals—a few "bad apples." All society would have to do, then, is identify, capture, and separate these psychopaths from the rest of us. But if Milgram is right—if most of us could commit ghastly acts of brutality given a certain combination of situational circumstances—then the only thing that distinguishes us from evildoers is our good fortune and our social environment.

SOCIETAL INFLUENCE: THE EFFECT OF SOCIAL STRUCTURE ON OUR EVERYDAY LIVES

If you stopped reading this chapter here, you'd be inclined to think that societies are made up of a bunch of people exerting all kinds of sway over one another. But social life is much more than that. Society is not just a sum of its human parts; it's also the way those parts are put together, related to each other, and organized (Coulson & Riddell, 1980). Statuses, roles,

groups, organizations, and institutions are the structural building blocks of society. Culture is the mortar that holds these blocks together. Although society is dynamic and constantly evolving, it has an underlying macrolevel structure that persists.

Statuses and Roles

One key element of any society is **status**—the named position that an individual within the society occupies. When most of us hear the word *status*, we tend to associate it with rank or prestige. But here we're talking about a status as any socially defined position a person can inhabit: cook, daughter, anthropologist, husband, Wordle player, electrician, Facebook friend, shoplifter, and so on. Some statuses may, in fact, be quite prestigious, such as prime minister or president. But others carry very little stature, such as gas station attendant or latte drinker. Some statuses require a tremendous amount of training, such as physician or astrophysicist; others, such as ice cream aficionado or hot dog lover, require little effort or none at all.

We all occupy many statuses at the same time. I am a college professor, but I am also a son, uncle, father, grandfather, brother, husband, friend, sushi lover, dog owner, occasional poker player, mediocre runner and swimmer with a bad hip, homeowner, crossword puzzle enthusiast, and author. My behavior at any given moment is dictated to a large degree by the status that's most important at that particular time. When I am training for a half marathon, my status as professor isn't particularly relevant. But if I decide to run in a race instead of showing up to proctor the final exam in my sociology course, I will be in big trouble!

Sociologists often distinguish between ascribed and achieved statuses. An **ascribed status** is a social position we acquire at birth or enter involuntarily later in life. Our race, sex, ethnicity, and identity as someone's child or grandchild are all ascribed statuses. As we get older, we enter the ascribed status of teenager and, eventually, old person. These aren't positions we choose to occupy. An **achieved status**, in contrast, is a social position we take on voluntarily or acquire through our own efforts or accomplishments, such as being a student or a spouse or an engineer.

Of course, the distinction between ascribed and achieved status is not always so clear. Some people become college students not because of their own efforts but because of parental pressure. Chances are the religion with which you identify is the one you inherited from your parents. However, many people decide to change their religious membership later in life. Moreover, as we'll see later in this book, certain ascribed statuses (sex, race, ethnicity, and age) directly influence our access to lucrative achieved statuses.

Whether ascribed or achieved, statuses are important sociologically. For one thing, we don't occupy statuses one at a time. Instead, we always inhabit several simultaneously. It's this intersection of statuses that often has a powerful effect on our lives. For instance, the feminist movement of the late 20th century was roundly criticized for assuming that all women experienced gender inequality similarly. In doing so, it ignored the different ways race and class combined to affect women's disadvantage in society. Or, think about how a Black man's interactions with police might differ from those of a Black woman.

In addition, statuses all come with a set of rights, obligations, behaviors, and duties that people occupying a certain position are expected or encouraged to perform. Each expectation is

referred to as a **role**. For instance, the role associated with the status "professor" includes teaching students, answering their questions, grading them impartially, and dressing appropriately. Any out-of-role behavior may be met with shock or suspicion. If I consistently showed up for class in a thong, tank top, and flip-flops that would certainly violate my "scholarly" image and call into question my ability to teach (not to mention my sanity).

Each person, as a result of skills, interests, and life experiences, defines roles differently. Students enter a class with the general expectation that their professor is knowledgeable about the subject and that the professor is going to teach them something. Each professor, however, may have a different method of meeting that expectation. Some professors are very animated; others remain stationary behind a podium. Some do not allow questions until after the lecture; others constantly encourage probing questions from students. Some are meticulous and organized; others are disheveled and absent-minded.

People engage in typical patterns of interaction based on the relationship between their roles and the roles of others. Employers are expected to interact with employees in a certain way, as are doctors with patients and salespeople with customers. In each case, actions are constrained by the role responsibilities and obligations associated with those particular statuses. We know, for instance, that lovers and spouses are supposed to interact with each other differently from the way acquaintances or friends are supposed to interact. In a parent–child relationship, both members are linked by certain rights, privileges, and obligations. Parents are responsible for providing their children with the basic necessities of life—food, clothing, shelter, and so forth. These expectations are so powerful that not meeting them may make the parents vulnerable to charges of negligence or abuse. Children, in turn, are expected to abide by their parents' wishes. Thus, interactions within a relationship are functions not only of the individual personalities of the people involved but also of the role requirements associated with the statuses they occupy.

We feel the power of role expectations most clearly when we have difficulty meeting them or when we experience the intersection of two or more conflicting statuses. Sociologists use the term **role strain** to refer to situations in which people lack the necessary resources to fulfill the demands of a particular role, such as when parents can't afford to provide their children with adequate food, clothing, or shelter. Sometimes this strain can be deadly. For instance, physicians are more than twice as likely to commit suicide as nonphysicians, and almost 10% of fourth-year medical students and first-year residents have had suicidal thoughts (as cited in Sinha, 2014). Why? Young doctors feel significant pressure to project intellectual and emotional confidence in the face of life-or-death situations. As one first-year resident put it, "We masquerade as strong and untroubled professionals even in our darkest and most self-doubting moments" (Sinha, 2014, p. A23). A doctor in the last year of medical school is usually expected to care for four patients at a time. But within a few months of graduation, that doctor will be required to oversee the treatment of perhaps 10 patients on any given day. This drastic increase in responsibility can lead to overwhelming role strain.

Role conflict describes situations in which people encounter tension in trying to cope with the demands of incompatible roles. People may feel frustrated in their efforts to do what they feel they're supposed to do when the role expectations of one status clash with the role

expectations of another. For instance, a mother (who also happens to be a prominent sociologist) may have an important out-of-town conference to attend (status of sociologist) on the same day her 10-year-old son is appearing as a talking pig in the school play (status of parent). Or a teenager who works hard at their job at the local ice cream shop (status of employee) may be frustrated when their buddies arrive and expect them to sit and chat or to give them free ice cream (status of friend).

Role conflict can sometimes raise serious ethical or legal concerns. For instance, in states that use lethal injection as a means of execution, it is necessary to have a licensed anesthesiologist present to ensure that the prisoner is unconscious when paralyzing and heart-stopping drugs are administered. Ordinarily, the role expectations of doctors emphasize ensuring the health and well-being of the people they treat. But when doctors are part of an execution team, they are expected to use their medical skills and judgment to make killing more humane and less painful. The American Medical Association condemns physicians' involvement in executions as unethical and unprofessional, stating that selecting injection sites, starting intravenous lines, and supervising the administration of lethal drugs violates a doctor's oath to heal or at least "do no harm." In fact, doctors who violate these guidelines face censure and perhaps even the loss of their license (Jauhar, 2017).

Groups

Societies are not simply composed of people occupying statuses and living in accordance with roles. Sometimes individuals form well-defined units called groups. A **group** is a set of people who interact more or less regularly with one another and who are conscious of their identity as a group. Your family, your colleagues at work, and any clubs or sports teams to which you belong are all social groups.

Groups are not just collections of people who randomly come together for some purpose. Their structure defines the relationships among members. When groups are large, enduring, and complex, each individual in the group is likely to occupy some named position or status—mother, president, supervisor, linebacker, and so forth.

Group membership can also be a powerful force behind one's future actions and thoughts. Sociologists distinguish between **in-groups**—the groups to which we belong and toward which we feel a sense of loyalty—and **out-groups**—the groups to which we don't belong and toward which we feel a certain amount of antagonism. For instance, a girl who is not a member of the popular clique at school, but wants to be, might structure many of her daily activities around gaining entry into that group.

In addition, like statuses and roles, groups come with a set of general expectations. A person's actions within a group are judged according to a conventional set of ideas about how things ought to be. For example, a co-worker who always arrives late for meetings or never takes their turn working an undesirable shift is violating the group's expectations and will be pressured to conform.

The smallest group, of course, is one that consists of two people, or a **dyad**. According to the renowned German sociologist Georg Simmel (1902/1950), dyads (marriages, close friendships,

etc.) are among the most meaningful and intense connections we have. The problem, though, is that dyads are by nature unstable. If one person decides to leave, the group completely collapses. Hence, it's not surprising that for society's most important dyads (i.e., marriages), a variety of legal, religious, and cultural restrictions are in place that make it difficult for people to dissolve them.

The addition of one person to a dyad—forming what Simmel called a **triad**—fundamentally changes the nature of the group. Although triads might appear more stable than dyads because the withdrawal of one person does not necessarily destroy the group, they develop other problems. If you're one of three children in your family, you already know that triads always contain the potential for a **coalition**—where two individuals pair up and perhaps conspire against the third.

Groups can also be classified by their influence on our everyday lives. A **primary group** consists of a small number of members who have direct contact with each other over a relatively long period of time. Emotional attachment is high in such groups, and members have intimate knowledge of each other's lives. Families and networks of close friends are primary groups. During the pandemic lockdown, interactional restrictions—such as not being within 6 feet of someone else—were usually eased for members of one's primary group. A **secondary group**, in contrast, is much more formal and impersonal. The group is established for a specific task, such as the production or sale of consumer goods, and members are less emotionally committed to one another. Their roles tend to be highly structured. Primary groups may form within secondary groups, as when close friendships form among co-workers, but in general, secondary groups require less emotional investment than primary groups.

Like societies, groups have a reality that is more than just the sum of their members; a change in a group's membership doesn't necessarily alter its basic structure. Secondary groups can endure changing membership relatively easily if some, or even all, individuals leave and new ones enter—as, for example, when the senior class in a high school graduates and is replaced the following year by a new group of students. However, change in primary groups—perhaps through divorce or death—produces dramatic effects on the structure and identity of the group, even though the group itself still exists.

Although people of the same race, gender, ethnicity, or religion are not social groups in the strictest sense of the term, they function like groups in that members share certain characteristics and interests. They become an important source of a person's identity. For instance, members of a particular racial or ethnic group may organize into a well-defined unit to fight for a political cause. The feelings of "we-ness" or "they-ness" generated by such group membership can be constructive or dangerous, encouraging pride and unity in some cases and anger, bitterness, and hatred toward outsiders in others.

Organizations

At an even higher level of complexity is a social unit called an **organization**, networks of statuses and groups created for a specific purpose. The International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Harvard University, Google, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Organization for Women, and the Methodist Church are all examples of organizations.

Organizations contain groups as well as individuals occupying clearly defined statuses and taking on clearly defined roles.

Some of the groups within organizations are transitory; some are more permanent. For instance, a university consists of individual classes that form at the beginning of a semester and disband at its end, as well as more permanent groups, such as the faculty, administration, secretarial staff, maintenance staff, and alumni.

Large, formal organizations are often characterized by a *hierarchical division of labor*. Each person in an organization occupies a position that has a specific set of duties and responsibilities, and those positions can be ranked according to their relative power and importance. At Subaru, for instance, assembly-line workers typically don't make hiring decisions or set budgetary policies, and the vice president in charge of marketing doesn't spray paint the underbodies of newly assembled Outbacks. In general, people occupy certain positions in an organization because they have the skills to do the job required of them. When a person can no longer meet the requirements of the job, they can be replaced without seriously affecting the functioning of the organization.

Organizations are a profoundly common and visible feature of everyday social life, as you'll see in Chapter 9. Most of us cannot acquire food, get an education, pray, undergo lifesaving surgery, or earn a salary without coming into contact with or becoming a member of some organization. To be a full-fledged member of modern society is to be deeply involved in some form of organizational life.

Why do you suppose it's so important that the people in this photo look alike? Do you think that similar appearance means they act and think alike too? Why is it important that their individuality be minimized in this situation? Can you think of times in your own life when your group membership totally overshadowed your individuality? What about the opposite? When do you find yourself emphasizing your individual identity over your group identity? How might a sociologist explain these two different experiences?

Boston Globe/Getty

Social Institutions

When stable sets of statuses, roles, groups, and organizations form, they provide the foundation for addressing fundamental societal needs. An enduring pattern of social life is called a **social institution**. Sociologists usually think of institutions as the building blocks that organize society. They are the patterned ways of solving the problems and meeting the requirements of a particular society. Although there may be conflict over what society "needs" and how best to fulfill those needs, all societies must have some systematic way of organizing the various aspects of everyday life.

Key social institutions in modern society include the family, education, economics, politics and law, and religion. Some sociologists add medicine and health care, the military, and the mass media to the list. I'll be talking about these social institutions throughout the book. But for now, here are some short descriptions:

Family. All societies must have a way of replacing their members, and reproduction is essential to the survival of human society as a whole. Within the institution of family, sexual relations among adults are regulated; people are cared for; children are born, protected, and socialized; and newcomers are provided with an identity—a lineage—that gives them a sense of belonging. Just how these activities are carried out varies from society to society. Indeed, different societies have different ideas about which relationships qualify for designation as family. But the institution of family, whatever its form, remains the hub of social life in virtually all societies (Turner, 1972).

Education. Young people need to be taught what it means to be a member of the society in which they live and how to survive in it. In small, simple societies, the family is the primary institution responsible for socializing new members into the culture. However, as societies become more complex, it becomes exceedingly difficult for a family to teach its members all they need to know to function and survive. Hence, most modern, complex societies have an elaborate system of schools—preschool, primary, secondary, postsecondary, professional—that not only create and disseminate knowledge and information but also train individuals for future careers and teach them their "place" in society.

Economy. From the beginning, human societies have faced the problems of securing enough food and protecting people from the environment (Turner, 1972). Today, modern societies have systematic ways of gathering resources, converting them into goods and commodities, and distributing them to members. In addition, societies provide ways of coordinating and facilitating the operation of this massive process. For instance, banks, accounting firms, insurance companies, stock brokerages, transportation agencies, and computer networks don't produce goods themselves but provide services that make the gathering, producing, and distributing of goods possible. To facilitate the distribution of both goods and services, economic institutions adopt a system of common currency and an identifiable mode of exchange. In some societies, the economy is driven by the value of efficient production and the need to maximize profits; in others, the collective well-being of the population is the primary focus.

Politics and Law. All societies face the problem of how to preserve order, avoid chaos, and make important social decisions. The legal system provides explicit laws or rules of conduct and mechanisms for enforcing those laws, settling disputes, and changing outdated laws or creating new ones (Turner, 1972). These activities take place within a larger system of governance that allocates and acknowledges power, authority, and leadership. In a democracy, the governance process includes the citizens, who have a say in who leads them; in a monarchy, kings or queens can claim that their birthright entitles them to positions of leadership. In some societies, the transfer of power is efficient and mannerly; in others, it is violent.

Religion. In the process of meeting the familial, educational, economic, and political needs of society, some individuals thrive, whereas others suffer. Hence, all societies also face the problem of providing their less successful members with a sense of purpose and meaning in their lives. Religion gives individuals a belief system for understanding their existence as well as a network of personal support in times of need. Although many members of a given society may actively reject religion, it remains one of the most enduring and powerful social institutions. Although religion provides enormous comfort to some people, it can also be a source of hatred and irreparable divisions.

Medicine and Health Care. One of the profoundly universal facts of human life is that people get sick and die. In some societies, healing the sick and managing the transition to death involves spiritual or supernatural intervention; other societies rely on science and modern technology. Most modern societies have established a complex system of health care to disseminate medical treatments. Doctors, nurses, hospitals, pharmacies, drug and health equipment manufacturers, medical researchers, epidemiologists, and patients all play an active role in the health care system.

Military. To deal with the possibility of attack from outside and the protection of national interests, many societies maintain an active military defense. However, militaries are used not only to defend societies but also, at times, to attack other countries in order to acquire land, resources, or power. In other cases, the military is used for political change, as when U.S. armed forces were mobilized to overthrow the government of Saddam Hussein in Iraq in 2003.

Mass Media. In very small, relatively close-knit societies, information can be shared through word of mouth. However, as societies become more complex, the dissemination of information requires a massive coordinated system. The modern mass media—radio, newspapers, television, and the Internet—provide coverage of important societal events so individuals can make informed decisions about their own lives. But the media do more than report events of local, national, and international significance. They also actively mold public opinion and project and reinforce a society's values.

You can see that the social institutions within a society are highly interrelated. Take, for instance, the connections between medicine and economics. A constant stream of recent studies has affirmed the presence of a dangerous "epidemic" in competitive football: traumatic head injuries. It's not uncommon for players—from high school to the pros—to sustain hits to the head equivalent to the impact of a 25-mph car crash. Some studies suggest that as many as 15% of players suffer some type of brain damage each season (as cited in Lehrer, 2012). In 2014, the National Football League (NFL) conceded that brain trauma will affect 1 in 3 professional

players after their careers end (Belson, 2014). In the past, players who "got their bell rung" were quickly resuscitated after such hits so they could be sent back into the game as quickly as possible. But it's clear now that the brain damage these hits cause can have lasting consequences including long-term memory loss, depression, mood disorders, violence, and suicidal tendencies—a condition known as chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE). According to one study, the risk of fatal degenerative brain disease among former NFL players is 3 times higher than same-age, nonfootball players in the general public; the risk of Alzheimer's disease is 4 times higher (Lehman et al., 2012). In 2017, researchers at Boston University found evidence of CTE in the brains of 110 out of 111 deceased NFL football players (Mez et al., 2017).

But football is a big business with far-reaching economic ties. The 32 NFL teams have a combined value of more than $97 billion, as much as all Major League Baseball and National Basketball Association teams *combined* (*Forbes*, 2020). At the college level, football is the number one revenue-generating activity for most large U.S. universities. So it's not surprising that with such deep economic investments, the football industry has been slow to heed medical research and take any sort of significant step to reduce the game's violence, and hence the likelihood of deadly brain injuries.
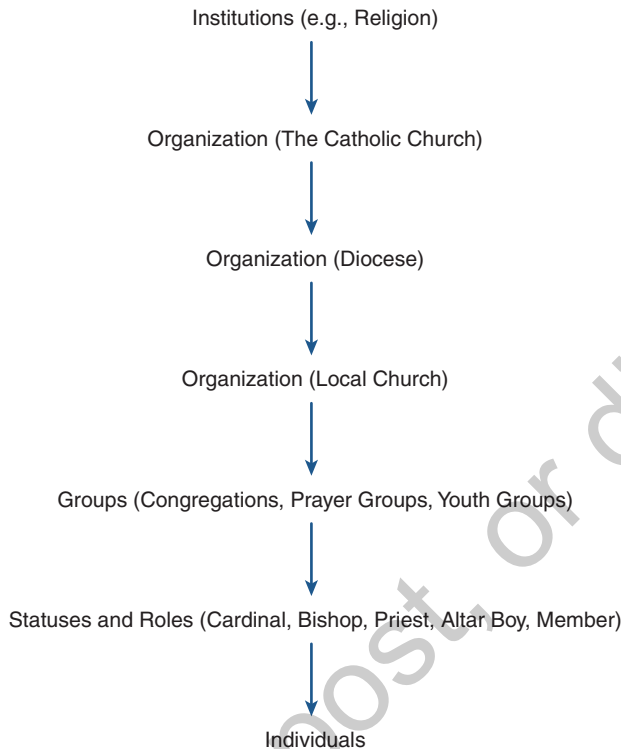
To individual members of society, social institutions appear natural, permanent, and inevitable. Most of us couldn't imagine life without a family. Nor could most of us fathom what society would be like without a stable system of government, a common currency, schools to educate our children, or an effective health care system. It is very easy, then, to think that institutions exist independently of people.

But one of the important themes that will be revisited throughout this book is that we each have a role to play in maintaining or changing social institutions, as when citizens alter the political shape of a country by voting out of office an administration with which they've grown displeased. Although the effects of changes can be felt at the organizational and institutional levels, they are ultimately initiated, implemented, or rejected, and, most important, experienced by individual people. The interrelationships between individuals and the various components of social structure can be seen in Exhibit 2.1.

Institutional influence is sometimes not so obvious. For instance, we usually think of nutrition as an inherent property of the foods we eat. Either something is good for us or it's bad for us, right? And we trust that the nutritional value of certain foods emerges from scientific discovery. We rarely consider the economic and political role that food companies play in shaping our tastes and our dietary standards (Pollan, 2007).

Despite alarming levels of hunger and food insecurity around the world (see Chapter 10), the United States has so much food that we could feed all our citizens twice over. Americans' food portions are famously massive compared to other countries. We have the highest per capita calorie consumption in the world (Food Oddity, 2019). And many of us regularly buy or prepare far more food than we actually need (hence the ubiquity of "doggie bags" and Tupperwared leftovers). The food industry is therefore highly competitive. But like all major industries, companies are beholden to their stockholders rather than to the consuming public. Marketing foods that are healthy and nutritious is a company's goal only if it can increase sales.

Soft drink companies have become especially adept at targeting young people with diverse marketing strategies. According to the Center for Science in the Public Interest (2017), these

EXHIBIT 2.1 ■ Social Structure and the Individual

Institutions (e.g., Religion)

↓

Organization (The Catholic Church)

↓

Organization (Diocese)

↓

Organization (Local Church)

↓

Groups (Congregations, Prayer Groups, Youth Groups)

↓

Statuses and Roles (Cardinal, Bishop, Priest, Altar Boy, Member)

↓

Individuals

companies spend nearly $400 million a year advertising their products to teenagers. Kids watching Nickelodeon or Nicktoons are exposed to 10 ads for junk food *per hour* (Center for Science in the Public Interest, 2019). By all accounts, it works. Young people's consumption of sugary soft drinks increases 10% with every additional 100 television ads they view.

In 2014, the U.S. Department of Agriculture released nutritional guidelines for snack foods sold in schools. The guidelines set minimum requirements for calories and fats allowed, encourage schools to offer low-fat and whole-grain snack foods, and limit the availability of sugary drinks. In 2015, the Food and Drug Administration began taking steps to remove artificial trans fat from processed foods, and General Mills removed artificial colors and flavors from its breakfast cereals. In 2020, however, the Trump administration announced plans to roll back U.S. school food nutrition standards, relaxing sodium limits, cutting the required levels of fruit and vegetables, and allowing more hamburgers, pizza, and fries (Dyer, 2020). It also refused to provide any recommendations to place limits on sugar intake.

No matter the ultimate outcome of these or future government actions, soft drink and food companies will likely continue to play a significant role in school district budgets. In this role, we can see how a child's food choices in school are linked deeply and profoundly to broader educational, political, and economic needs—often with less attention paid to nutritional considerations and individual health.

Culture

The most pervasive element of society is **culture**, which consists of the language, values, beliefs, rules, behaviors, and physical artifacts of a society. Think of it as a society's personality. Culture gives us codes of conduct—proper, acceptable ways of doing things. We usually don't think twice about it, yet it colors everything we experience.

Human societies would be chaotic and unlivable if they didn't have cultures that allow people to live together under the same set of general rules. But culture can also sometimes lead to tragedy. In 2012, an independent commission in Japan released the findings of its investigation of the nuclear disaster at the Fukushima power plant following the deadly 2011 earthquake and tsunami. The commission concluded that the disaster was human made and preventable, citing, among other things, certain elements of Japanese culture that suppress dissent and outside opinion. The chair of the commission put it this way:

> What must be admitted, very painfully, is that this was a disaster "Made in Japan." Its fundamental causes are to be found in the ingrained conventions of Japanese culture: our reflexive obedience; our reluctance to question authority; our devotion to "sticking with the program"; our groupism; and our . . . [narrow-mindedness]. (as quoted in Tabuchi, 2012, p. 7)

Culture is particularly apparent when someone questions it or acts in ways that violates its guidelines. Those who do not believe what the majority believes, see what the majority sees, or obey the same rules the majority obeys are likely to experience punishment, psychiatric attention, or social ostracism. I will discuss the power of culture in more detail in Chapter 4, but here we should look at two key aspects of culture that are thoroughly implicated in the workings of social structure and social influence: values and norms.

Values

Perhaps no word in the English language carries more baggage than *values*. People throw around terms such as *moral values*, *traditional values*, *family values*, and *American values* with little thought as to what they actually mean. Sociologically speaking, a **value** is a standard of judgment by which people decide on desirable goals and outcomes (Hewitt & Hewitt, 1986). Values represent the general criteria on which our lives and the lives of others can be judged. They justify the social rules that determine how we ought to behave. For instance, laws against theft clearly reflect the value we place on personal property.

Different societies emphasize different values. Success, independence, and individual achievement are seen as important values in U.S. society. In other societies, such as Vietnam, people are more likely to value group obligation and loyalty to family.

Some of the things we profess to value in the abstract may not, in fact, characterize our actual everyday experiences. For instance, we say that honesty and open communication are the foundational values of any strong relationship. But think of how many times you've lied to a romantic partner ("You were the most beautiful person in the room tonight" or "No, that dress does *not* make you look fat") in order to make them feel better about themselves. As one author put it, "If you want to have love in your life, you'd better be prepared to tell some lies and to

believe some lies" (Martin, 2015, p. 4). Likewise, all parents know that lying to their kids about everything from the arrival of Santa Claus to the horrible things that will happen if they don't eat their peas is a key component of raising a child.

Values within a society sometimes come into conflict. The value of privacy ("stay out of other people's business") and the value of kindness ("help others in need") may clash when we are trying to decide whether to help a stranger who seems to require assistance. Similarly, although the value of cooperation is held in high esteem in contemporary U.S. society, when someone is taking a final exam in a sociology class, cooperation is likely to be defined as cheating. When the key values that characterize a particular social institution come into conflict, the result may be widespread legal and moral uncertainty among individuals.

MICRO-MACRO CONNECTION

FAMILY PRIVACY CAN BE HAZARDOUS TO A CHILD'S HEALTH

One such conflict between values in a society involves the cultural value of family privacy. Contemporary U.S. life is built on the assumption that what a family does in the privacy of its home is, or at least should be, its own business. Family life, many people believe, is best left to family members, not to neighbors, the government, the courts, or other public agencies. Consequently, American families are endowed with significant autonomy—the right to make decisions about their future or about treatment of their members (see Chapter 7).

The cultural value we place on the well-being of children can sometimes come into direct conflict with the value of family privacy. Parents have never had complete freedom to do as they wish with their children. For instance, a Florida couple lost custody of their 3-year-old son when they decided to discontinue the child's potentially lifesaving cancer treatment because of the debilitating side effects. When the parents removed the child from the hospital and left the state, the county sheriff's office posted the following message on its Facebook page:

> A three-year-old boy who is believed to be missing and endangered. On April 22, 2019 the parents failed to bring in the child to a medically necessary hospital procedure. The parents have further refused to follow up with the life saving medical care the child needs. The parents have possible criminal child neglect charges pending. (as quoted in Flynn, 2019, p. 1)

But such dramatic attempts at interventions are rare. We may be horrified at the thought of a parent neglecting or even beating their child to the point of injury or death. But we're equally horrified, it seems, at the thought of the state intruding on parents' right to raise their children as they see fit. In the United States, parents have the legal right to direct the upbringing of their children, to determine the care they receive, and to use physical means to control their children's behavior. From a sociological perspective, injuring children can sometimes be the extreme outcome of the widely practiced and accepted belief that parents have the right to use physical punishment to discipline their own kids.

Concern with parents' privacy rights is often framed as a freedom-of-religion issue. Forty-seven states, for instance, allow parents to refuse certain medical procedures for their children on religious grounds, such as vaccinations, screenings for lead poisoning, and physical examinations. Six states even have statutes that excuse students with religious objections from simply studying about diseases in school (CHILD, 2016).

But it's unclear what ought to be done when parents' religious beliefs result in the injury or death of a child. Thirty-eight states and the District of Columbia allow religion as a defense in cases of child abuse or neglect. Idaho, Iowa, and Ohio allow religious defenses for manslaughter charges, and Delaware, West Virginia, and Arkansas permit religious defenses in cases of murder (CHILD, 2016). Since Idaho enacted a law in 1971 that parents had the legal right to deprive their children of lifesaving medical care on religious grounds, nearly 200 children have died in families with religious beliefs against medical intervention (Idahochildren.org, 2019).

The government does sometimes violate the religious privacy of a family when their beliefs lead to the death or injury of a member. For instance, in 2018, an Oregon couple pleaded guilty to negligent homicide and criminal mistreatment in the death of their new-born daughter. The girl was delivered at home 8 weeks premature and had stopped breathing hours after being born. In line with their church's teachings, the couple received no prenatal care and did not seek emergency medical care when the baby stopped breathing. Instead, they relied on prayer to help their daughter. They were the fifth set of parents from this church in the past 9 years to face criminal charges for failing to get medical attention for their children (Swenson, 2018). Such cases illustrate the profound effects of cultural and political values on the everyday lives of individuals. Situations such as these pit the privacy and autonomy of families against society's institutional responsibility to protect children and create new citizens.

Norms

A **norm** is a culturally defined rule of conduct. They specify what people should do and how they should pursue values. They tell us what is proper or necessary behavior within particular roles, groups, organizations, and institutions. Thousands of norms guide both the minor and grand details of our lives, from the bedroom to the classroom to the boardroom. You can see, then, that norms serve as the fundamental building blocks of social order.

Norms make our interactions with others reasonably predictable. In nonpandemic times, Americans expect that when they extend a hand to another person, that person will grasp it and a brief handshake will follow. They would be shocked if they held out their hand and the other person spit on it or grabbed it and wouldn't let go. In contrast, people in some societies commonly embrace or kiss each other's cheek as a form of greeting, even when involved in a formal business relationship. A hearty handshake in those societies may be interpreted as an insult. In Thailand, people greet each other by placing the palms of their hands together in front of their bodies and slightly bowing their heads. This greeting is governed by strict norms. Slight differences in the placement of one's hands reflect the social position of the other person—the higher the hands, the higher the position of the person being greeted. Norms like these make it easier to "live with others" in a relatively harmonious way (see Chapter 4).

Social Structure in a Global Context

A discussion of social structure would not be complete without acknowledging the fact that statuses, roles, groups, organizations, social institutions, and culture are sometimes influenced by broad societal and historical forces at work in the world. One such force with deep implications for contemporary society is **globalization**, the process through which people's lives all around the world become increasingly interconnected—economically, politically, environmentally, and culturally (see Chapter 9 for more detail). For instance, a few years ago, representatives of 170 countries signed a global deal that would phase out the use of hydrofluorocarbons—a substance used in cheap air conditioners that is linked to global climate change. While the move was meant to address the serious consequences of global warming, it had the effect of denying millions of poor people in India—one of the planet's hottest countries—the one affordable appliance they could buy to ease their heat-related suffering (Barry & Davenport, 2016).

The global reach of international financial institutions and foreign governments can be quite extensive. For instance, these entities often provide money to support the building of hydroelectric dams in poor countries. According to the World Commission on Dams, 1,600 such dams in 40 countries were under construction in 2000 (Bald, 2000). These projects were meant to strengthen societies by providing additional energy sources in areas where power was dangerously deficient. However, they frequently transformed individual lives, social institutions, and Indigenous cultures in a negative way. A dam built along the Moon River in Thailand destroyed forests that for centuries were villagers' free source of food, firewood, and medicinal herbs. With the flooding created behind the dam, local farmers lost not only their farmland but also the value of their knowledge of farming methods developed over centuries to adapt to the ebb and flow of the river. A multidam project along the Narmada River in India displaced more than 200,000 people and led to violent protests there. The Manantali Dam in Mali destroyed the livelihood of downstream farmers and has resulted in the spread of waterborne diseases (Fountain, 2005). None of these dams would have been built without the funding and political clout of global financial organizations and foreign corporations.

Cultures have rarely been completely isolated from outside influence, because throughout human history people have been moving from one place to another, spreading goods and ideas. What is different today, though, is the speed and scope of these interactions. Several decades ago, overnight mail service and direct long-distance telephone calls increased the velocity of cross-national communication. Advances in transportation technology have made international trade more cost-effective and international travel more accessible to ordinary citizens. And today, widely available high-speed wireless Internet has given people around the world instantaneous access to the cultural artifacts and ideals of other societies, no matter where they're located. Through social media and search engines, such as Google, Yahoo, and Bing, children in Beirut, Baltimore, or Beijing can easily and immediately mine unlimited amounts of the same information on every conceivable topic.

Clearly, societies are more interdependent than ever, and that interdependence matters for individuals around the world. Sometimes the effects are positive. Pharmaceutical breakthroughs in the United States or Europe, for instance, can save lives around the world. Globalization gives

us a chance to learn about other societies and learn from them. Other times, however, global influence can have disastrous consequences. Many of today's most pressing societal problems—widespread environmental devastation, large- and small-scale wars, economic crises, viral epidemics, and so on—are a function of globalization to some degree. Because of the relative ease of international travel, it only took about 2 months for the novel coronavirus to make its way around the world, forcing the World Health Organization to declare it a *global* pandemic.

In short, it is becoming increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to consider ourselves members of a single society unaffected by other societies. All of us are simultaneously members of our own society and citizens of a world community.

THREE PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL ORDER

The question of what holds all these elements of society together and how they combine to create social order has concerned sociologists for decades. Sociologists identify three broad intellectual orientations they often use to address this question: structural-functionalist, conflict, and symbolic interactionism (see Exhibit 2.2). Each of these perspectives has its advantages and shortcomings. Each is helpful in answering particular types of questions. For instance, structural functionalism is useful in showing us how and why large, macrolevel structures, such as organizations and institutions, develop and persist. The conflict perspective sheds light on the various sources of social inequality that exist in our own and other societies. And symbolic interactionism is helpful in explaining how individuals construct meaning to make sense of their social surroundings. At times, the perspectives complement one another; at other times, they contradict one another.

EXHIBIT 2.2 ■ Sociological Perspectives at a Glance		
Sociological Perspective	**Key Concepts**	**Main Assumption**
Structural functionalism	Manifest and latent functions Dysfunctions Social stability	Social institutions are structured to maintain stability and order in society
Conflict	Power Inequality Conflict Dominance	The various institutions in society promote inequality and conflict among groups of people
Symbolic interactionism	Symbolic communication Social interaction Subjective meaning	Society is structured and maintained through everyday interactions and people's subjective definitions of their worlds

Throughout the remaining chapters of this book, I will periodically return to these three perspectives—as well as several other perspectives—to apply them to specific social phenomena, experiences, and events.

The Structural-Functionalist Perspective

According to sociologists Talcott Parsons and Neil Smelser (1956), two theorists typically associated with the **structural-functionalist perspective**, a society is a complex system composed of various parts, much like a living organism. Just as the heart, lungs, and liver work together to keep an animal alive, so, too, do all the elements of a society's structure work together to keep society alive.

Social institutions play a key role in keeping a society stable. All societies require certain things to survive. They must ensure that the goods and services people need are produced and distributed; they must provide ways of dealing with conflicts between individuals, groups, and organizations; and they must provide ways to ensure that individuals are made a part of the existing culture.

As we saw earlier in this chapter, institutions allow societies to attain their goals, adapt to a changing environment, reduce tension, and recruit individuals into statuses and roles. Economic institutions, for instance, allow adaptation to dwindling supplies of natural resources or to competition from other societies. Educational institutions train people for the future statuses they will need to fill to keep society going. Religions help maintain the existence of society by reaffirming people's values and preserving social ties among individuals (Durkheim, 1915/1954).

Sociologist Robert Merton (1957) distinguishes between manifest and latent functions of social institutions. **Manifest functions** are the intended, obvious consequences of activities designed to help some part of the social system. For instance, the manifest function of going to college is to get an education and acquire the credentials necessary to establish a career. A **latent function** is the *unintended*, sometimes unrecognized, consequence of actions that coincidentally help the system. The latent function of going to college is to meet people and establish close, enduring friendships. In addition, college informally teaches students how to live on their own, away from their parents. It also provides important lessons in negotiating the intricacies of large bureaucracies—registering for classes, filling out forms, learning important school policies—so that students figure out how to "get things done" in an organization. These latent lessons will certainly help students who enter the equally large and bureaucratic world of work after they graduate (Galles, 1989).

From the structural-functionalist perspective, if an aspect of social life does not contribute to society's survival—that is, if it is *dys*functional—it will eventually disappear. Things that persist, even if they seem to be dangerous or disruptive, must somehow be contributing to the survival of society (Durkheim, 1915/1954). Take prostitution, for example. A practice so widely condemned and punished would appear to be dysfunctional for society. But prostitution has existed since human civilization began. Some structural-functionalists have suggested that prostitution satisfies sexual needs that may not be met through more socially acceptable means,

such as marriage. Customers can have their physical desires satisfied without having to establish the sort of emotional attachment to another person that would destroy a preexisting marriage, harm the institution of family, and ultimately threaten the entire society (Davis, 1937).

Structural functionalism was the dominant theoretical tradition in sociology for most of the 20th century, and it still shapes sociological thinking to a certain degree today. But it has been criticized for accepting existing social arrangements without examining how they might exploit or otherwise disadvantage certain groups or individuals within the society.

The Conflict Perspective

The **conflict perspective** addresses the deficiencies of structural functionalism by viewing the structure of society as a source of inequality that benefits some groups at the expense of other groups. Conflict sociologists are likely to see society not in terms of stability and acceptance but in terms of conflict and struggle. They focus not on how all the elements of society contribute to its smooth operation and continued existence but on how these elements promote divisions and inequalities. Social order arises not from the societal pursuit of harmony but from dominance and coercion. The family, government, religion, and other institutions foster and legitimate the power and privilege of some individuals or groups at the expense of others.

Karl Marx, perhaps the most famous scholar associated with the conflict perspective, focused exclusively on economic arrangements. He argued that all human societies are structured around the production of goods that people need to survive. The individuals or groups who control the means of production—land in an agricultural society, factories in an industrial society, computer networks and information in a postindustrial society—have the power to create and maintain social institutions that serve their interests. Hence, economic, political, and educational systems in a modern society support the interests of those who control the wealth (see Chapter 10).

Marx believed that when resources are limited or scarce, conflict between the "haves" and the "have-nots" is inevitable and creates a situation in which those in power must enforce social order. He said this conflict is not caused by greedy, exploitative individuals; rather, it is a by-product of a system in which those who benefit from inequality are motivated to act in ways that maintain it.

Contemporary conflict sociologists are interested in various sources of conflict and inequality. One version of the conflict perspective that has become particularly popular among sociologists in the past few decades is the **feminist perspective**. Feminist sociologists focus on gender as the most important source of conflict and inequality in social life. Compared with men, women in nearly every contemporary society have less power, influence, and opportunity. In families, especially in industrialized societies, women have traditionally been encouraged to perform unpaid household labor and childcare duties, whereas men have been free to devote their energy and attention to earning money and power in the economic marketplace. Women's lower wages when they do work outside the home are often justified by the assumption that their paid labor is secondary to that of their husbands'. But as women in many societies seek equality in education, politics, career, marriage, and other areas of social life, their activities inevitably affect

social institutions (see Chapter 12 for more details). The feminist perspective helps us understand the difficulties men and women face in their everyday lives as they experience the changes taking place in society.

Because this perspective focuses so much on struggle and competing interests, it tends to downplay or overlook the elements of society that different groups and individuals share. In addition, its emphasis on inequality has led some critics to argue that it is a perspective motivated by a particular political agenda and not the objective pursuit of knowledge.

Symbolic Interactionism

The structural-functionalist and the conflict perspectives differ in their assumptions about the nature of society, yet both analyze society mostly at the macro or structural level, focusing on societal patterns and the consequences they produce. In contrast, **symbolic interactionism** attempts to understand society and social structure through an examination of the microlevel interactions of people as individuals, pairs, or groups.

These forms of interaction take place within a world of symbolic communication. A **symbol** is something used to represent or stand for something else (Charon, 1998). It can be a physical object (engagement ring, standing for betrothal), a characteristic or property of objects (the pink color of an equal sign, standing for same-sex marriage rights), a gesture a thumb pointed up, standing for "everything's OK"), or a word (the letters d-o-g, standing for a particular type of household pet, or M-o-k-o-l-o-d-i, standing for *my* particular pet).

Symbols are created, modified, and used by people through their interactions with others. We concoct them and come to agree on what they should stand for. Our lives depend on such agreement. For instance, imagine how chaotic—not to mention dangerous—automobile travel would be if we didn't all agree that green stands for go and red stands for stop.

Symbols don't bear any necessary connection to nature. Rather, they're arbitrary human creations. There's nothing in the natural properties of "greenness" that automatically determines that green should stand for go. We could have decided long ago that purple meant go. It wouldn't have mattered as long as we all learned and understood this symbol.

Most human behavior is determined not by the objective details of a given situation but by the symbolic meanings people attach to them (Weber, 1947). When we interact with others, we constantly attempt to interpret what they mean and what they're up to. A gentle pat on the shoulder symbolizes one thing if it comes from someone with whom you are romantically involved but something quite different if it comes from your mother or your boss.

Society, therefore, is not a structure that exists independent of human action. It is "socially constructed," emerging from the countless symbolic interactions that occur each day between individuals. Each time I refer to "U.S. society," "the school system," "the global economy," "the threat of terrorism," "the alt-right movement," or "the Upton family" in my casual conversations with others, I am doing my part to reinforce the notion that these are real things. By examining how and why we interact with others, symbolic interactionism reveals how the everyday experiences of people help to construct and maintain social institutions and, ultimately, society itself.

This perspective reminds us that for all its structural elements, society is, in the end, people interacting with one another. But by highlighting these microlevel experiences, symbolic

interactionism runs the risk of ignoring the larger social patterns and structures that create the influential historical, institutional, and cultural settings for people's everyday interactions.

CONCLUSION

Living with others, within a social structure, influences many aspects of our everyday lives. But we must be cautious not to overstate the case. Although the fundamental elements of society are not merely the direct expressions of the personalities of individuals, we must also remember that people are more than "robots programmed by social structure" (Swanson, 1992, p. 94).

The lesson I hope you take from this chapter—and, in fact, from the entire book—is that the relationship between the individual and society is reciprocal. One cannot be understood without accounting for the other. Yes, this thing we call "society" touches our lives in intimate, important, and sometimes not altogether obvious ways. And yes, this influence is often beyond our immediate control. But society is not simply a "forbidding prison" that mechanically determines who we are and what we do (Berger, 1963). We as individuals can affect the very social structure that affects us. We can modify role expectations, change norms, create or destroy organizations, revolutionize institutions, and even alter the path of world history.

YOUR TURN

Alcohol occupies an important but problematic place in many societies. We decry its moral evils and physical dangers while simultaneously encouraging its use in times of leisure, celebration, despair, disappointment, anger, and worry.

The physical effects of being "under the influence"—vomiting, hangovers, liver damage—are a biological consequence of the presence of alcohol in the body. When a person's blood alcohol level reaches a certain point, that person will have trouble walking and talking; at a higher level, they will pass out and perhaps even die.

But is the social behavior we see in drunken people likewise reducible to a chemical reaction in the body? The traditional explanation for drunken behavior is that alcohol does something to the brain that reduces inhibitions. If this were true, though, drunken behavior would look the same everywhere. The fact is, social behavior under the influence of alcohol can vary from culture to culture. The way people handle themselves when drunk "is determined not by alcohol's toxic assault on the seat of moral judgment, conscience, or the like but by what their society makes of and imparts to them concerning the state of drunkenness" (MacAndrew & Edgerton, 1969, p. 165).

Ask people who grew up in a culture different from yours (e.g., students who grew up in a different country or in a different socioeconomic class or geographic region) how people behave when drunk. Do these behaviors differ from those you've observed? Have them describe their first drunken experience. Are there similarities or differences in how people are introduced to alcohol?

Also ask the same questions of people from different sexes, races, ethnic groups, and age groups. Are there variations in the "drunken experience" within a society? What do these

differences illustrate about the norms and values of these different groups? You might also ask some young children to describe how drunk people act. Are there any similarities in the images they have of drunkenness? Do you consider their ideas about drunkenness accurate? Where do you think their ideas about alcohol come from?

Use the results of these interviews to explain the role of social and societal influence on people's personal lives. Do you think your conclusions can be expanded to other private phenomena, such as sexual activity or religious experiences? Why or why not?

Note: All colleges and universities require that any student research project involving human subjects—even if it just entails asking people questions—be approved by a campus or departmental review committee. For instance, you will probably be required to show that your interviewees have consented to participate and that you've guaranteed that their identities will not be divulged. Make sure you talk to your instructor before proceeding with this exercise to see what steps you have to take in order to have it approved by the appropriate campus committee.

In a classic piece of social research, social psychologist Stanley Milgram (1974) set out to determine how far people would go in obeying the commands of an authority. He designed an experimental situation in which a subject, on orders from an authoritative figure, flips a switch, apparently sending a 450-volt shock to an innocent victim.

The subjects responded to an advertisement seeking participants in a study on memory and learning. On a specified day, each subject arrived at the laboratory and was introduced to a stern-looking experimenter (Milgram) wearing a white lab coat. The subject was also introduced to another person who, unknown to the subject, was actually an accomplice of the experimenter.

Each subject was told they would play the role of "teacher" in an experiment examining the effects of punishment on learning; the other person would play the role of the "learner." The teacher was taken to a separate room that held an ominous-looking machine the researcher called a "shock generator." The learner was seated in another room out of the sight of the teacher and was supposedly strapped to an electrode from the shock generator.

The teacher read a series of word pairs (e.g., blue–sky, nice–day, wild–duck) to the learner. After reading the entire list, the teacher read the first word of a pair (e.g., blue) and four alternatives for the second word (e.g., sky, ink, box, lamp). The learner had to select the correct alternative. Following directions from the experimenter, who was present in the room, the teacher flipped a switch and shocked the learner whenever they gave an incorrect answer. The shocks began at the lowest level, 15 volts, and increased with each subsequent incorrect answer all the way up to the 450-volt maximum.

As instructed, all the subjects shocked the learner for each incorrect response. (Remember, the learner was an accomplice of the experimenter and was not actually being shocked.) As the experiment proceeded and the shocks became stronger, the teacher could hear cries from the learner. Most of the teachers, believing they were inflicting serious injury, became visibly upset and wanted to stop. The experimenter, however, ordered them to continue—and many did. Despite the tortured reactions of the victim, 65% of the subjects complied with the experimenter's demands and proceeded to the maximum, 450 volts.

Milgram repeated the study with a variety of subjects and even conducted it in different countries, including Germany and Australia. In each case, about two-thirds of the subjects were willing, under orders from the experimenter, to shock to the limit. Milgram didn't just show

that people defer to authority from time to time. He showed just how powerful that tendency is (Blass, 2004). As we saw with the Rwandan genocide, given the right circumstances, ordinarily nice people can be compelled to do terrible things they wouldn't have done otherwise.

Milgram's research raises questions not only about why people would obey an unreasonable authority but also about what the rest of us think of those who do. A study of destructive obedience in the workplace—investigating actions such as dumping toxic waste in a river and manufacturing a defective automobile—found that the public is more likely to forgive those who are responsible when they are believed to be conforming to company policy or obeying the orders of a supervisor than when they are thought to be acting on their own (Hamilton & Sanders, 1995).

Milgram's study has generated a tremendous amount of controversy. For nearly half a century, this pivotal piece of research has been replicated, discussed, and debated by social scientists (Burger, 2009). It has made its way into popular culture, turning up in novels, plays, films, and songs (Blass, 2004). Although some researchers have found that in small groups people sometimes collectively rebel against what they perceive to be an unjust authority (Gamson et al., 1982), most others have replicated Milgram's original findings. In fact, one French study yielded even higher rates of obedience than Milgram found (81% compared to Milgram's 65%; Beauvois et al., 2012).

After all these years, Milgram's findings remain discomforting. It would be much easier to conclude that the acts of inhumanity we read about in our daily newspapers (such as soldiers raping civilians or killing unarmed noncombatants) are the products of defective or inherently evil individuals—a few "bad apples." All society would have to do, then, is identify, capture, and separate these psychopaths from the rest of us. But if Milgram is right—if most of us could commit ghastly acts of brutality given a certain combination of situational circumstances—then the only thing that distinguishes us from evildoers is our good fortune and our social environment.

CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS

- Although society exists as an objective fact, it is also created, reaffirmed, and altered through the day-to-day interactions of the very people it influences and controls.

- Humans are social beings. We look to others to help define and interpret particular situations. Other people can influence what we see, feel, think, and do.

- Society consists of socially recognizable combinations of individuals—relationships, groups, and organizations—as well as the products of human action—statuses, roles, culture, institutions, and broad societal forces, such as globalization.

- There are three major sociological perspectives. The structural-functionalist perspective focuses on the way various parts of society are structured and interrelated to maintain stability and order. The conflict perspective emphasizes how the various elements of society promote inequality and conflict among groups of people. Symbolic interactionism seeks to understand society and social structure through the interactions of people and the ways in which they subjectively define their worlds.

KEY TERMS

achieved status (p. 30)

ascribed status (p. 30)

coalition (p. 33)

conflict perspective (p. 45)

culture (p. 39)

dyad (p. 32)

feminist perspective (p. 45)

globalization (p. 42)

group (p. 32)

in-groups (p. 32)

latent function (p. 44)

manifest functions (p. 44)

norm (p. 41)

organization (p. 33)

out-groups (p. 32)

primary group (p. 33)

role (p. 31)

role conflict (p. 31)

role strain (p. 31)

secondary group (p. 35)

social institution (p. 23)

society (p. 23)

status (p. 30)

structural-functionalist perspective (p. 44)

symbol (p. 46)

symbolic interactionism (p. 46)

triad (p. 33)

value (p. 39)