

UNIT IV

Social Structure

Foundational Concept: Social and cultural differences influence well-being.

CHAPTER 10 Understanding Social Structure

CHAPTER 11 Demographic Characteristics and Processes

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CHAPTER 10

Understanding Social Structure



Read This Chapter to Learn About

- Social Structure and Development
- Social Institutions
- Culture

SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND DEVELOPMENT

There are two divergent forces that create social structure:

- **Agency** is the ability of a person (an **agent**) to act independently and individually. The agent typically seeks to maximize the efficacy of his or her actions.
- **Institution** provides the structure of the society within which the agent acts.

The two forces are in constant interaction and at times conflict with one another. The agent attempts to act individually, and the structure of institutions resists individual action. Some thinkers, such as the famous French sociologist Émile Durkheim, have believed that individual agency is definable only within the limits of the institution in which the agent lives. Others, such as the noted German sociologist Max Weber, have believed that the institution is built only through the actions of individual agents.

Theories of Social Structure

There are different viewpoints on the structure and function of society.

- **Functionalism** is a theoretical paradigm based on the idea that the parts of the society are separate but interrelated. Émile Durkheim likened society to the human

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body, each component acting separately, but critical to the functioning of the whole. A disruption in one area can disrupt the entire system. This view of society supports the status quo and attempts to avoid any disruptions in the system.

- ▶ **Conflict theory** is a contrasting view to functionalism. According to this theory, developed by the radical German philosopher Karl Marx, society is fundamentally in conflict because there is an uneven distribution of resources. Differences in prestige and resources create fundamental power struggles between groups of people. The divisiveness extends across gender, race, and socioeconomic status.
- ▶ **Symbolic interactionism** is yet another view of society. This theory focuses on how individuals interact with each other using symbols of social structure. The pioneering social psychologist George Mead (not to be confused with the anthropologist Margaret Mead) proposed that an individual's identity is developed through social interactions. These social interactions are refined by symbols that are defined by a society (e.g., Is long hair on men a norm or an anomaly? Is wearing white a symbol of a wedding or mourning? Are downcast eyes a sign of respect or lying?). These symbols set the stage for the interactions that create the individual.
- ▶ **Social constructionism** is a theory that attempts to address the fact that an individual needs to understand the world to act as an agent within it. Developed by the Canadian philosopher Ian Hacking, this theory holds that the understanding of the world is constructed not by the individual, but rather by the collection of all individuals who make up the society. The mechanism of this construction is the shared language among a society that creates a model for reality. The individual absorbs this construct of reality by living in the society and adopts this construction of reality for him- or herself.
- ▶ **Globalization** is a theory regarding the spread of culture that has gained increasing currency since the 1980s. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected across the areas of economics, communications, and travel, many sociologists have come to believe that individual cultural differences are falling away in favor of a single global world culture. Globalization has become an increasingly active field of study in sociology.

SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS

Each society develops its own institutions and determines how those institutions interact with its culture.

Education

The structure of education is societally determined. Not only does a society determine who receives the education (only the wealthy? only males? only children up to a certain

age?), but also the appropriate content of that education (rote memorization versus abstract problem solving, ancient versus modern languages, mathematics versus literature). Even the methodology of transmitting information is socially determined (e.g., books, online lectures, self-directed study versus directed course of study). The role of education may be viewed differently depending on the theoretical paradigm adopted. For functionalists, education may be seen as a way to reinforce the status quo. For conflict theorists, education may be viewed as a means either to reinforce inequalities or to distribute knowledge and begin to equalize differences among groups.

Family

Family is a social institution that is partly private but that also has a very public and political component. Identifying who is “family” and who is not depends on whether the family is primarily limited to the **nuclear family** or if it is defined to also include a broad network of genetically (and/or maritally) related individuals. Also, whether family is traced using matrilineal or patrilineal bloodlines is socially determined. Once it has been defined who is in the family, the roles of family members can be defined by society. Who can be married, how many individuals constitute a marriage, and what is the function of marriage (e.g., procreation, social or political connections, convergence of economic wealth) are very much political and public discussions. Each society’s answer to these questions also determines the status of offspring from sexual connections and how those offspring fit (or do not fit) into that society’s definition of family. Across almost every culture, family is one of the fundamental building blocks of society. However, who is included in that building block may vary greatly across cultures.

Religion

Religion and religious institutions can have a powerful effect on society. The impact can be on the structure of a society (e.g., prayer times, holidays, charity donations) and on a society’s worldview, traditions, and values via religious beliefs. Depending on the sociological viewpoint, religious institutions may enhance or degrade the cohesion of the society. According to conflict theorists, religion acts to maintain the inequalities inherent in society. Functionalists believe that religion enhances social cohesion by creating a sense of belonging as part of a collective consciousness.

Economic Institutions

Every society creates economic systems and institutions to perform and control the allocation of resources. Within each economic system there are three levels of production. **Primary production** includes producing or extracting raw goods and materials (e.g., farming and mining). **Secondary production** is the conversion of those raw goods

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into manufactured products for use or sale (e.g., turning trees into lumber for construction). **Tertiary production** (also called **the service sector**) is the share of the economy that is focused on providing services such as health care to other members of the community. The institutions that perform and regulate economic activity at each level can include business corporations of every size and function, banks, stock exchanges, and innumerable other institutions.

Government

There are also three primary types of government recognized by sociologists:

1. **Authoritarian government** is a system in which a ruling class of individuals controls the government with little input from the population.
2. **Totalitarian government** is a highly developed authoritarian system that controls society down to the minutiae of individuals' lives. The general population has little or no input into how government functions. Often this type of government is headed by a single individual whose power is virtually unlimited and who is supported by a cult of personality.
3. **Democratic government** is a system in which the general population actively participates by electing government officials.

There are variations on these themes in governments across the world, but these are the primary forms.

As the globalization paradigm suggests, government and economic institutions are becoming increasingly interconnected across the world. Despite the increasing globalization of these institutions, there is still a great deal of societal differences about the level of individual participation in government and the level of financial disparity in a society. Most global societies use some form of national government and also currency as part of the exchange for goods and services. However, smaller societies may still use community-level government for the establishment of social rules and use the barter system to arrange for the distribution of materials, goods, and resources.

CULTURE

Culture is a complex phenomenon that describes the beliefs, customs, language, and institutions that make up a community.

- **Material culture** describes the tangible objects that individuals use to describe or transmit their culture. Material culture objects may also have symbolic cultural meaning (generic jeans versus designer jeans). Material objects may be a mechanism for communication to others about the symbolic value of themselves or others.

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- **Symbolic culture** comprises the intangible aspects of a culture. **Beliefs** are the assumptions that a culture collectively holds about the surrounding world (e.g., people are fundamentally good). Beliefs give rise to a culture's **values** that determine the worth of ideas (e.g., it is important that people who commit crimes be evaluated for mental disorders). Collective actions of the society then arise from those values (e.g., an increase in mental health treatment availability). The symbolic culture also includes the cultural norms and the rituals that a culture uses to create group cohesion. The **norms** of a culture describe the daily rules of behavior that circumscribe the actions of members of a society and the rules of role expectation for individuals. **Rituals**, on the other hand, are unique behaviors that are not an ordinary part of everyday life. Rituals can be used to increase group cohesion and promote a sense of unity among group members.

Culture Versus Social Groups

An individual may belong to multiple social groups, but social groups are not necessarily equivalent to cultures. **Social groups** may be based on shared traits such as gender, socioeconomic status, or other common factors such as shared belief systems. Such groups are intrinsically social constructs that are based on the culture from which they stem. While individuals in these groups share similar experiences and shared group experiences are a critical component of culture, some sociologists argue that those shared experiences are not enough to be called a culture. **Cultures** must include not only shared social groupings, but also shared language, world construct, ideological beliefs, social norms, and values.

Humans are by nature pack animals. While individuality may be highly valued in some cultures, all cultures support positive interaction with other human beings. Humans evolved to engage in frequent social interactions and to rely on other members of the species. Humans across the world have created structures in their social interactions to increase ease of communication and interaction. Environmental and individual pressures altered the development of social cultures to develop the unique configurations of society and culture seen in the world today. It is the nature of culture to become increasingly complex over time.

