SOCIETY IN FOCUS: AN INTRODUCTION TO SOCIOLOGY, 5/e

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SAMPLE CHAPTER

The pages of this Sample Chapter may have slight variations in final published form.
Fred’s hands perspire as he sits at the keyboard and prepares to type a response to Nina’s last correspondence. They have “known” each other for almost three months, and what started as a very casual acquaintance has blossomed into an important and caring relationship based on common interests, shared humor, mutual understanding, and, most important, love. Fred is ready to pop the big question, but he is nervous—in fact, he’s downright afraid. What if she says no? Or, more frightening, what if she says yes?

As a confidence builder, Fred rereads the ad that brought the two of them together: Attractive, single African American female in early twenties, likes bicycling, body surfing, long walks along the beach on warm moonlit nights seeking young attractive like-minded male for conversation, friendship, and whatever else may develop. I’m a 5-foot 8-inch, 115-pound aerobics instructor who has an open mind and will try almost anything once. If you’re interested, meet me poolside at the Cybercity Hotel (nonsmokers only, please). Ask for Naughty Nina.

How can Fred pose this important question? After all, he hasn’t been totally honest with her. He told her that he is vice president of accounting at a major firm but he is only 1 of 40 assistant accountants who work there. They celebrated when he passed the CPA exam a month ago. What will she do when she discovers he was actually so frightened that he didn’t even take the exam? Fred hates to admit it, but much of his relationship with Nina is based on deception.

Fred takes a deep breath, summons all his courage, and types: Nina, I think it is time we meet in person. What do you think? Love, Fred.

Fred’s consternation is nothing compared to the humor it produces at the other end when it is received by Nina. Nina is neither African American nor an aerobics instructor. And although Nina is indeed 5 feet 8 inches tall, he weighs a little over 175 pounds. While Fred may not have taken the CPA exam, “Nina,” whose real name is Frank, earned his
CPA on his thirty-fifth birthday. He and his wife and two daughters celebrated by going out to dinner that night. That was 32 years ago. Frank, now retired, gets bored, so while his wife watches television, he plays on the computer. For the last three months, he has “surf ed the Net” dropping in and out of chat rooms under various pseudonyms, including: Wicked Walt, The Iceman, Lovely Lucy, and one of his favorites, Naughty Nina. To date, “Nina” has received over 300 marriage proposals and more than 1,000 requests for personal meetings, and has provided dozens of hours of “harmless” entertainment for Frank.

There is no race . . . there is no age . . . there is no gender . . . On the World Wide Web, there are only minds . . . (popular television ad for the Internet)

It’s virtually impossible to determine precisely how many people in the United States and around the world have access to personal computers and at some time or another go online to use the Internet; the number changes daily—or, more accurately, by the minute. (See Map 5.1 for per capita Internet connections around the world.) We do know, however, that computers and the World Wide Web have dramatically altered our understanding of the world and how we interact with one another in our everyday lives. Think about the fictitious vignette involving Fred and “Nina.” Would such deception have been possible before the use of personal computers? Is the hoax perpetuated by “Nina” harmless fun? What are the possible consequences of such a hoax? Would you even categorize the correspondence between Fred and “Nina” as social interaction?

Sociologists know that age, race, ethnicity, sex, gender, and social class are but a few of the important variables that significantly affect how people interact in our everyday lives. Do these variables come into play when people interact over the Internet? If so, in what ways? Or, as one television advertisement for the Internet declares, is cyberspace a place where interaction can take place where these social characteristics do not matter? These and other questions immediately spring to mind when the vignette is viewed from a sociological perspective. The vignette also illustrates the guiding theme of this book: things are not necessarily what they seem. This may be especially true when it comes to social interaction in everyday life.

Social Structure

Despite the extraordinary complexity of social life in all contemporary societies, social relations are not random. If you look carefully, you will see that your life and virtually everyone’s life has certain patterns of social interaction that are repeated over and over again. Sociologists calls this social structure—the ordered relationships and patterned expectations that guide social interaction—and it is fundamental to life in all societies.

What would happen if these nearly invisible patterns of interaction were suddenly suspended? The authors discovered the answer when, during a visit to a large publishing company, a tornado alarm sounded. Until the alarm, our interactions with editors, salespersons, and business managers were fairly routine. Bureaucracies, of which the publishing company is one, give the appearance of rigid order, and this allows people to respond to others in predictable ways. We had fairly clear ideas of how we ought to
This map shows the number of Internet connections per 1 million inhabitants. Below are the latest estimated figures of the number of people on-line in each language zone (native speakers). Classification is by language instead of by country, since people speaking the same language form their own on-line community no matter what country they happen to live in.

### Internet Access Percentage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>World Internet Access, 2003</th>
<th>Total Population (in millions)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>220.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-English</td>
<td>292.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Russian</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total World</td>
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### Internet Connections: Hosts per Million Inhabitants

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<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Internet Access (in millions)</th>
<th>Percentage of World Online Population</th>
<th>Internet Access, 2003 (estimate in millions)</th>
<th>Total Population (in millions)</th>
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Thinking sociologically, how would you explain the dramatically unequal distribution of Internet connections around the globe?
behave in the presence of vice-presidents of the company and how to act in the presence of janitors and cafeteria workers, and they knew how to behave toward visiting professors. That is, until the siren began to roar.

In an instant, the tornado alert shattered the illusion of order. The alarm transformed us from visiting professors, editors, and salespersons to a seamless, faceless crowd. In the tornado drill, we found there were no vice-presidents, professors, cafeteria workers, or janitors. From our vantage point, in fact, there were neither clearcut roles nor expectations. Someone directed us to the basement, but no one had any idea who this person was. People who a moment earlier were in total command now were totally confused, and no matter how exalted their rank in the company, all blindly followed orders to proceed to the basement. A senior vice-president asked, “Where are we going? Is this a drill, or the real thing?” No one answered, because no one knew.

When we arrived in the basement, people stood in silence looking at co-workers as if they had never seen them before, each of us looking to others for cues as to which behaviors might be appropriate in the situation. It was apparent that although we were visitors, at that moment we could have taken charge of the situation and a hundred or more employees, including the company president, probably would have followed our orders. When the alarm ended, though, people returned to their offices and became editors and salespersons, and we again became prospective authors; we resumed our familiar routines as if nothing had happened. As sociologists, it was readily apparent that once social structure was restored, people assumed their social statuses and roles and went about the routine social interactions of their everyday lives.

**Statuses**

People often use the word *status* to refer to high social standing or prestige (he or she has high status or possesses status symbols, such as a Mercedes Benz or a Rolex). Sociologists define *status* as a *socially defined position in a social structure*. A status is not an individual possession, but rather a *relationship* to others. For example, the status of mother is socially meaningful only in relationship to the statuses of child or father. Statuses define a multitude of other relationships as well, including those of father-son, doctor-patient, teacher-student, and shopper-merchant. These and other statuses affect the expectations and behaviors of others, a person’s social identities, and even one’s sense of self.

**STATUS**

A socially defined position in a social structure.

**STATUS SET**

All of the statuses a person has at a given time.

**STATUS INCONSISTENCY**

Two or more statuses that a society deems contradictory.

**STATUS SET** Statuses, which may be ranked high or low, determine where a person fits in society. Moreover, every person occupies a variety of statuses and each status has an appropriate social context. Sociologists call *all of the statuses a person has at a given time* that person’s *status set*. In the course of a day, a woman may occupy the statuses of mother, Hispanic, friend, shopper, and attorney. The statuses that people occupy change not only according to social context, but over the life course as well. As a young person, a child may occupy the statuses of daughter, girl scout, soccer player, ballet student, and 4-H leader. In college, she may assume statuses such as college student, wife, and part-time worker. Figure 5.1 depicts some possible statuses of a female college student.

Usually a person’s statuses are more or less consistent, but occasionally a person occupies *two or more statuses that society deems contradictory*. This is called *status inconsistency*. For example, what if on the first day of class you discovered your college
sociology teacher was a 12-year-old? Would this affect your thinking about your professor and the class?

**ASCRIBED AND ACHIEVED STATUSES** Every society limits access to statuses. **Ascribed statuses** are statuses assigned to individuals without reference to their abilities or efforts, such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, and family background. Although these statuses greatly influence how a person is defined, they allow the individual few options or choices. Being born a member of the British Royal Family automatically entitles one to a number of highly ranked social positions should he or she desire to claim them. On the other hand, being born poor, black, and a Haitian refugee places severe limits on one’s chances of securing valued statuses.

Some societies allocate a great many statuses on the basis of ascription. For example, in the traditional Indian caste system, family background largely determined one’s occupation, marriage choice, neighborhood, political affiliation, and most statuses a person could claim during life. By contrast, modern industrial societies favor more competitive access to social positions.

**Achieved statuses** are statuses secured through effort and ability. College coach, church member, spouse, janitor, priest, juvenile delinquent, and fashion model are all examples of achieved statuses—statuses usually gained by education and training.

In all societies, a person’s ascribed statuses strongly influence those statuses he or she might achieve. For example, gender, age, and race have either restricted or boosted a person’s opportunities of gaining entry to a college, country club, job, or the position of President of the United States during most of the twentieth century.

**MASTER STATUSES** Usually, a particular status in an individual’s status set tends to dominate the thinking of others. This status is called a **master status**, a status that dominates all other statuses. It largely defines who that person is and his or her limitations and opportunities. Sometimes a person’s master status is revealed by self-definition. For example, if you ask a boy who he is, he will usually respond by noting his age and sex (“I am a 6-year-old boy”). Most people in college describe themselves as students, and the master status of most adult Americans is typically their occupation. Occupation is so important that many years after retirement, people continue to define themselves and others in terms of their former occupations—ex-professor, ex-nurse, or ex-auto worker. Likewise, students often identify themselves by their academic major—which identifies their future occupation.

Because rather strong expectations are attached to a person’s master status, they may have either positive or negative consequences. For example, if a person’s master status is surgeon or bank president, he or she typically gains access to many other social positions. That is, by virtue of their master statuses, surgeons and bank presidents may be asked to become church elders, members of the Rotary Club, girl scout troop leaders, and so on. By contrast, those with master statuses that are negatively labeled may be denied access to many social situations.

For example, the master status of judge is highly regarded. A judge with AIDS, however, is a person with AIDS, a master status with severe social limitations. Likewise, no matter what other statuses they may occupy, people with the status of ex-convict are usually labeled ex-convicts—ex-convict painters, ex-convict fathers, and ex-convict neighbors—and this master status denies them many opportunities. This is not always the case, however. Increasingly, in contemporary industrial societies deviant identities, such as “former substance abuser,” are being transformed into what J. David Brown (1991:219) called “professional ex-s,” who capitalize on a deviant past by transforming it from a liability to an occupational asset—in this case, for example, substance abuse counselors. The concept of master status is further developed in Chapter 7.

**Roles**

A status is a social category and as such is somewhat fixed. Roles, which are dynamic, bring statuses to life. As Ralph Linton (1936) put it, we occupy statuses, but we play roles.
A **role** is a set of expectations, rights, and duties that are attached to a particular status. Some sociologists use the metaphor of the theater to describe how roles influence social life (this is discussed later in this chapter in more detail). Like actors on a stage, all of us play roles in our daily lives—sons, friends, pizza deliverers, students, sorority sisters, and a multitude of other roles. Attached to each role is a script that tells us how we should behave toward others and how they should act toward us. But, as noted earlier, social life is far more complex than any stage, and in most roles people are allowed considerable latitude in how they interpret their "scripts."

Without roles, human social life would be almost impossible, for roles guide our interactions in virtually every social situation. For example, during a cross-country trip we depend on many people—gas station attendants, toll booth operators, fast-food clerks, and so on. Roles simplify the process of interaction because we do not have to base our actions on the unique personality of each individual with whom we interact. Rather, we respond to their roles, and they respond to ours. For example, in the role of traveler, when we arrive at a toll booth we have a duty to give the attendant the proper toll, and he or she is obligated to receive it and allow us to proceed. Think of what it would be like to travel if there were no clear guidelines in this one social arena, and we could never be sure how a particular toll booth operator might behave. With such uncertainty, we would make every effort to avoid toll roads altogether.

**ACTORS AND THEIR ROLES** Although expectations are attached to roles, the role performance, or how each occupant of a status fulfills his or her role, may vary widely. One reason is that people’s emotional commitment to and identification with roles may vary. A college athlete, for example, may never miss tennis or basketball practice but cuts classes regularly because he or she considers the student role to be of minor importance. Another reason role performance varies is that role expectations are usually flexible enough for individual interpretation. Some roles, for example the role of Buckingham Palace guard, allow a narrow range of individual expression. By contrast, artists are expected to be creative and as a result are given great latitude in how they behave. This too is restrictive, however, in that artists must be creative to be judged fully competent in the role. Box 5.1 examines a classic experiment in role playing that involved students “playing” the roles of prisoners and guards.

Most roles constrain certain behaviors but allow freedom of expression in others. For example, all toll booth operators must collect money, but expectations concerning their other behaviors are less clearly defined. Some are polite and cheerful; others are curt and abrasive. Although fast-food chains make an effort to standardize employee roles and minimize elements of personality as well as regional, class, and ethnic influences on role performances, they have not been entirely successful. This is because during interaction people continuously evaluate their performances by imagining how others view them, and adjust their behavior accordingly. This process, called role taking, gives the individual some influence in how a role is defined.

Role performance also may be affected by our knowledge of a role. The expectations for some roles, for example the roles of daughter and student, are widely understood. The expectations for many other roles, however, are ambiguous or unclear. Do you sometimes occupy roles that you play so rarely that you are uncertain how they should be played? How does this make you feel?

Some roles are entered into or discarded with little effort or commitment. At other times, in cases of **role distance**, people play a role but remain detached from it to avoid any negative aspects of the role. Erving Goffman used the example of adults riding a merry-go-round with their children to describe role distance. According to Goffman (1961b), because their adult role might be threatened if they appeared to enjoy the ride, adults typically express their detachment by exaggerating the performance of merry-go-round rider, or by acting bored and disinterested. How might students use role distance in the classroom? Might professors, too, sometimes use role distance during class? Can you think of other social situations that might require role distance? How about at a fast-food restaurant?

**Role embracement** occurs when a person’s sense of identity is partially influenced by a role. Sometimes **role merger** occurs when a role becomes central to a person’s identity and the person literally becomes the role he or she is playing. For example, one of the

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**ROLE**
A set of expectations, rights, and duties that are attached to a particular status.

**ROLE DISTANCE**
When people play a role but remain detached from it to avoid any negative aspects of the role.

**ROLE EMBRACEMENT**
When a person’s sense of identity is partially influenced by a role.

**ROLE MERGER**
When a role becomes central to a person’s identity and the person literally becomes the role he or she is playing.

**ROLE SET**
Multiple roles that are attached to almost every status.
Experiments in role playing rarely generate much controversy, but there is one major exception in the annals of social psychology: Philip Zimbardo’s notorious experiment on how roles affect prison behavior. During the early 1970s, in an attempt to understand what it means to be a prisoner or a prison guard, Zimbardo and his Stanford University colleagues screened over 70 volunteers who had answered an ad in a Palo Alto newspaper. They ended up with about two dozen young men whom they described as mature, emotionally stable, normal, intelligent, middle-class students from the United States and Canada—“the cream of the crop of this generation.”

Half were arbitrarily designated as prisoners by a flip of the coin; the others became guards in the experiment’s simulated prison. Researchers told the “guards” about the seriousness and danger of the situation and recommended that they create their own formal rules to maintain law, order, and respect during their eight-hour, three-man shifts. The “prisoners” were picked up at their homes by a city police officer in a squad car; they were searched, handcuffed, fingerprinted, booked at the Palo Alto station house, and taken blindfolded to the simulated jail. There they were stripped, deloused, put into a uniform, given a number, and placed, along with two other prisoners, into a cell that was to be their home for the next two weeks.

How did the experiment fare? Zimbardo had to discontinue the experiment after only six days because of the frightening behavior of the mock prisoners and guards. The students could no longer clearly distinguish where reality ended and their experimental roles began. Dramatic changes occurred in the thinking and behavior of virtually every subject. In less than a week, “self concepts were challenged and the ugliest, most base, pathological side of human nature surfaced,” wrote Zimbardo. The entire research team was horrified because the “guards” treated the “inmates” as if they were less than human; correspondingly, the “prisoners” acted like “servile, dehumanized robots who thought only of escape, of their own individual survival, and of their mounting hatred for the guards.”

Taking a Closer Look

Zimbardo’s study seems to suggest that there is a fundamental “pathology of imprisonment” that impacts on roles. In everyday life, are prisoners and guards antagonistic—as mainstream media cop shows would have us believe? Or are they generally cooperative, with the members of each group performing their roles with a great deal of “face work,” each cooperating to make the system work? If Zimbardo’s experiment was a true reflection of how guards and prisoners actually interact in prisons around the country, do you think prisons could work?

Is it possible the experiment might have had different results had guards and prisoners been not white men, but women, Latinos, or members of another minority group? Substitute one of these groups and describe how you think gender, ethnicity, or some other social factor could have produced different results.

and duties toward professors, classmates, roommates, friends, parents, employers, and many others in reciprocal roles. In everyday interaction, we play many roles simultaneously. Sometimes we move from role to role with relative ease. For example, during a conversation with a fellow student, do you sometimes shift from the role of classmate, to friend, to roommate in a matter of seconds based on the context of the conversation? Not all roles, however, are logically consistent.

**ROLE STRAIN AND ROLE CONFLICT** In cases of *role strain*, there are contradictory expectations and demands attached to a single role, which is quite common in everyday life. The student role offers a good example, for it includes numerous expectations that pull students in opposite directions. Professors expect students to study, but when friends visit they expect students to put away their books and talk or go out for fun. Your roommate may expect you to remain on campus during the weekend while your parents demand that you return home. In the course of our everyday interactions, all of us must make such difficult choices.

*Role conflict* occurs when a person cannot fulfill the roles of one status without violating those of another. Television dramas probably could not exist without role conflicts—such as the cop show favorite where a police officer responds to a burglary only to discover that the thief is a child, sibling, or close friend. One of the authors witnessed a dramatic example of role conflict during the 1968 urban riots following the death of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. He, another white soldier, and two African American National Guardsmen were assigned to an army patrol, and one of the first disturbances they were sent to investigate was in a neighborhood of one of the black soldiers. When they arrived on the scene, the protesters immediately spotted their neighbors and friends in uniform and shouted, “Hey, brother, what are you doing with the enemy? Take off those uniforms and join your brothers!” At that moment their roles of neighbor, friend, and fellow African American were clearly in direct conflict with the military role.

Role strain, conflict, and the choices they demand are important forces in social change. In everyday interaction people must tiptoe through a minefield of role conflicts and strains and make choices they may or may not wish to make. That people play their roles so well, and adhere so strongly to them despite the costs, tells us much about the power and necessity of roles. They provide the vital framework of social interaction that links individuals to others in reciprocal roles, patterned relationships, and social networks.

**Social Networks**

All of us fulfill many social roles, and a large part of our lives is spent developing a *social network*, which includes the total web of an individual’s relationships and group memberships. Social networks include our families, friends, and neighbors, as well as all other people and groups with whom we have ongoing relationships. People often create and maintain social networks for functional reasons, such as advancing their careers, for social support, and to promote a host of other interests and needs.

Social networks do not have clear boundaries, and their members may or may not interact on a regular basis. Moreover, people in social networks do not always have a sense that they belong together, nor do they necessarily have common aims and goals, as do members of a group. Nevertheless, social networks are a vital part of social structure and are extremely important in our everyday lives. Social networks radiate out from individuals and groups, and through them groups, organizations, and nations are bound together. Social networks also provide linkages between one individual and another, and then through other people’s social networks to still others, until, in theory, people everywhere are linked together.

Every person’s social network is unique. The social networks of husbands and wives differ, as do those of brothers and sisters. For example, a husband’s social network...
When you complete your degree, what is the best approach to finding a good job? Sociologists have conducted research on this subject for almost half a century, and survey results have been remarkably consistent. In Getting a Job, Mark Granovetter notes that there are three main ways to find professional jobs with high salaries and many benefits: direct application to businesses, using formal means (newspaper ads, the Internet, and employment agencies), and through personal contacts (social networks). Of the three, which do you think offers the best formula for success?

If you answered social networks, you are correct. Granovetter’s surveys revealed that people find almost 56 percent of all professional jobs through social networks compared to about 18 percent found by direct application. The classified ads, Internet, and employment agencies were a distant third: they were the source of only about 16 percent of people’s jobs. You need to know something more about social networks, however, if you want to conduct a successful job search.

Social networks can be characterized as consisting of either strong or weak ties. Those marked by strong ties are made up of close kin and friends, whereas weak ties usually involve acquaintances of various kinds, such as a friend of a friend and other distant acquaintances, whom we may see infrequently and barely know. Each kind of network provides its own advantages in the job search. For example, surveys have found that strong ties and close friends “are most likely to be used by job seekers who are unemployed or in a great need of a job” (Granovetter, 1995:149). When searching for professional jobs, weak ties that expand one’s circle of acquaintances as widely as possible usually offer a better chance of success.

Another way to find a job is to participate in as many organizations as possible—both business and voluntary, mindful that they, too, expand one’s social networks. One researcher contends that membership in neighborhood groups, hobby clubs, and other professional and social networks outside the firm may hold the key to finding and keeping a job in the highly competitive job markets of the future. As Charles Sabel (1991:43) wrote,

"Only those who participate in such multiple, loosely connected networks are likely to know when their current jobs are in danger, where new opportunities lie, and what skills are required in order to seize these opportunities. The more open corporate labor markets become, the greater the burden these networks will have to bear and the greater will be the economic compulsion to participate in the social activities they organize.

When it comes to getting a job, there is some truth to the old adage “It’s not what you know, but who you know.”

Taking a Closer Look

Upper-middle-class professionals are encouraged to join numerous organizations to boost their job prospects and career mobility. If this becomes every volunteer’s primary motivation for joining social clubs and organizations, how might this affect voluntary organizations like the League of Women Voters, the Girl Scouts, and the Rotary Club?


might include family members, neighbors, people in his car pool, co-workers, and members of his bowling league. A wife’s network overlaps with her husband’s to some extent; she and her husband share ties with some family members, neighbors, and friends. But her network may also include members of her car pool, her co-workers, and friends and acquaintances with whom she alone maintains a relationship.

Each person’s social network also includes two kinds of relationships. One kind, which is characterized by strong ties, is a relationship that is intimate, enduring, and defined by people of special importance. A person typically has strong ties to family members, some neighbors, and a small circle of intimate friends. People in this kind of network usually exert considerable influence on each other; they share information and resources and usually can be counted on if needed. In effect, they are a person’s primary social support system and provide “our security and sense of well-being, and even our health” (Fischer, 1982:3; Seeman et al., 1985).

A person’s network also includes weak ties to distant kin, co-workers, acquaintances, and even people who have only interacted through cyberspace on the Internet (Warschauer, 2003). While they are more tenuous and impersonal, they provide the individual with many contacts beyond family and friends that offer a wide range of information and services which would not be available otherwise (Granovetter, 1973). In Box 5.2 we examine the special importance of “weak ties” in finding a good job.
Social networks are useful to individuals and of critical importance in most societies. Contrary to popular thought, social networks are just as important to city dwellers as they are to rural folks. While urbanites are likely to have fewer family members in their social networks, they are nevertheless just as likely to use networks for procuring goods and services and finding jobs (Greeley, 2002). It is through social networks that information, knowledge, and resources are shared among individuals and groups. For example, many companies prefer these networks in hiring, and pay bonuses to employees for recruiting friends and acquaintances, believing social networks produce savings in screening costs (Fernandez et al., 2000). In both small-scale and complex societies, social networks can be very useful for such things as getting a promotion, mobilizing political support, gaining entry to a club, getting a date, or finding a marriage partner. For example, if you notice an attractive person in your sociology class you might announce in the personal ads of the school newspaper that you are interested in meeting the student. You usually will be far more successful, however, if you use social networks. While you may not know the other person, a friend or an acquaintance may know him or her, and through that contact (your friend’s network), the two of you may be introduced.

In addition to serving the needs of ordinary people, conflict theorists see social networks as being particularly useful to those at the top of the social hierarchy. Personal networks are influenced by gender, race, social class, and a variety of other social factors that can serve to expand or limit one’s access to information, resources, and power. The Navy Tailhook scandal in 1992, and the subsequent cover-up of the sexual abuse of women by members of the all-male association, is a powerful example of the dark side of a “good old boys” network.

In many societies networks composed exclusively of men who are members of dominant class, racial, and ethnic backgrounds routinely exclude women and minorities from becoming members of their clubs and associations, thereby denying them access to information and other resources. And, as John Scott (1991) noted for the larger political economy, “informal social networks of social connection” are becoming an increasingly important means through which corporate decision makers (and the capitalist class as a whole) maintain and reproduce their power and influence not only nationally but globally.

**Social Institutions**

A popular American television advertisement proudly proclaims that “Americans want to succeed, not just survive.” To most viewers the message was obvious: Americans had progressed beyond mere survival and were now concerned with the more lofty goals of prosperity and personal success. Nothing could be further from the truth. No society, America included, can ever take its survival for granted. To this end, all societies create **social institutions**—relatively enduring clusters of values, norms, social statuses, roles, and groups that address fundamental social needs.

Sociologists generally identify five major social institutions that exist in every society: family, education, religion, government, and the economy (Chapters 13, 14, 15, 16, and 17 provide in-depth looks at each of these institutions). These institutions along with the mass media and technomedia serve as powerful social forces that shape and alter our social structure and impact social interaction in our everyday lives.

**Social Interaction**

It may be tempting to argue that social roles, groups, institutions, and other social forces have such powerful influence on human behavior that we as individuals have virtually no choice but to do what society demands. Yet it is abundantly clear that while people often conform to social expectations, in everyday social interaction we also interpret the rules to suit ourselves, create and manipulate meaningful symbols, present ourselves to others in a variety of ways, and are constantly interpreting and redefining the meaning of our actions. These processes are what guide and provide meaning to the social interaction in our everyday lives.
Imagine that you are casually strolling across campus absorbed in thought. What happens when out of the corner of your eye you notice that someone lounging on a bench is looking at you? Does your behavior change in any way? Unless you are totally engrossed in thought, the answer is probably yes. There is a basic change as you and the other person acknowledge and respond to each other’s presence. This is but one of countless forms of social interaction—the mutual influence of two or more people on each other’s behavior—that profoundly affect our lives. Social interaction is the building block of the entire social order.

**Patterns of Social Interaction**

Sociologists recognize that among individuals, groups, organizations, and societies there are five fundamental patterns of social interaction: exchange, cooperation, competition, conflict, and coercion. Robert Nisbet (1970:50) described these elements as the “molecular cement” that binds people, groups, and societies together.

1. **Exchange.** Exchange is perhaps the most basic form of social interaction (Blau, 1963, 1964). Social exchange theorists maintain that our interactions with others are guided by the “profit motive”—that is, we seek to maximize rewards and minimize costs (Homans, 1961). Social exchange is based on the norm of reciprocity—that we help and not harm those who have helped us (Gouldner, 1960). This norm establishes the expectation that gifts, recognition, love, and other favors will be returned. In the course of a day, people exchange smiles, waves, and other simple courtesies. Exchanges of this kind are most often taken for granted—at least until people fail to meet our expectations. The norm of reciprocity, of course, has a negative side, which includes the expectation that hostilities, threats, social slights, and other acts meant to harm will be reciprocated.

   Exchange theorists believe that people, groups, organizations, and nations keep a running account of what they are owed and what they owe others. Top priority is given to exchange relationships with business partners, political allies, friends, kin, or lovers who provide the greatest benefits at the lowest costs. Because people have an interest in searching for the most favorable cost-benefit ratios in their dealings with others, relationships are forever shifting. Nevertheless, exchanges and ties of mutual obligation are a vital social glue.

2. **Cooperation.** Cooperation is a pattern of interaction in which individuals, groups, and societies work together to achieve shared goals. Cooperation is fundamental to human survival; without it social life would be impossible. Cooperation sustains routine, face-to-face encounters. It is also necessary if people are to make love, raise children, protect themselves, and make a living. Some societies place greater emphasis on cooperation than others. For example, the Japanese, whose norms and values promote sharing and “selflessness,” have dramatically altered the American version of baseball, which stresses individualism and encourages “stars” to stand out from the group. In Japan, people expect all players to exhibit wa, a sense of team spirit that obligates the individual to subordinate everything to the group. Team members always eat together and sleep together; one ex-player claimed that even the players’ sex lives might be sacrificed during the season to conserve energy for the team (Hillenbrand, 1989; Whiting, 1989).

3. **Competition.** Competition is much like cooperation, in that both individuals and groups strive to achieve a shared goal. It differs from cooperation, however, in that in competition, instead of joining with others to achieve valued goals, people or groups contest for them, recognizing that society’s prizes are in limited supply and only one person or group can attain them (Deaux and Wrightsman, 1984).

   Competitive relationships are especially common to capitalist economies and pervade almost all aspects of people’s lives. For example, corporations compete for customers, professional athletes vie for prizes, students compete for grades, political rivals contest for votes, and even pastors must win converts from competitors.

4. **Conflict.** Conflict is a pattern of interaction in which people or groups struggle to achieve a “commonly prized object or goal” (Nisbet, 1970:75). Conflict is especially
common when competitors violate rules and seek to gain their objective by any means available. Robert Nisbet (1970:76) wrote, “There is no group or relationship, however small and intimate, in which conflict does not occasionally occur.” We most often consider conflict to be opposed to human interests, harmful to the social order, and something to be avoided or resolved as quickly as possible. Yet, as conflict theorists emphasize, conflict has a positive side. It may enhance social solidarity, for nothing reduces conflicts and strains within a relationship (whether marital or between nations) better than an external threat (Simmel [1908] 1955; Coser, 1956; Nisbet, 1970). As Robert Nisbet (1970:76) observed, it also may serve as a vehicle for social change in which stagnant beliefs and values are dissolved, old tyrannies loosened, and individuals released to achieve new and higher goals.

5. Coercion. When people or groups are compelled to interact with each other, coercion is the glue that binds them together. Coercion is the actualization of the threat of force that those with power sometimes use to achieve their objectives. For example, in the United States, education is compulsory; children must attend school whether they want to or not. The relative strength of coercion as a cohesive force lies not so much in blatant expressions of power and authority as in the myriad expressions it may assume in everyday life. Ridicule, gossip, the silent treatment, and withdrawal of affection are but a handful of coercive devices people use in their daily interactions with others. Coercion involves an individual or group that dominates another, the superordinate, and a person or group that is dominated, the subordinate. There cannot be one without the other for, as Georg Simmel ([1908] 1955) noted, the behavior of one is conditioned by the other.

The five patterns of social interaction discussed here are neither distinctive nor mutually exclusive. In everyday life, there is a fine line between competition and conflict, coercion and exchange, and the same is true concerning other patterns of social interaction. For example, if a classmate asks you to help him or her move into the dorm, this is potentially an exchange relationship. But what if your boss asks you to help him or her move? Is this exchange or coercion? Certainly, power influences whether it is one or the other, but this may not be the only factor involved; people’s definitions, too, may strongly influence the nature of the interaction—what is exchange to one may be coercion to another. Consequently, much of our social interaction is guided by social perception and stereotypes.

Social Perception and Stereotypes

In addition to defining a situation, we must decide who we have encountered before we activate what we believe to be the appropriate self. We attempt to answer this question through social perception, which is a process by which we form impressions of others and ourselves. In everyday life, we both give off and receive cues about the kinds of persons we are. We do this in almost every situation: when we enter a class, during a stroll across campus, while shopping at the mall, or when trying to flag down a taxi. How we perceive others and how we are perceived by them depend on such symbolic elements as physical appearance, clothing, gestures, tone of voice, facial expressions, posture, and other elements that reveal our various statuses, attitudes, and expectations.

Social perception depends in part on our impressions of other people’s personal characteristics, such as whether they are attractive or ugly, good or bad, strong or weak. At the beginning of an encounter, people appear to devote considerable energy to discovering with whom they are dealing. Once people feel they have enough information, their attention to this assessment wanes, and early impressions continue to dominate their thinking and behavior (Dreben et al., 1979).
Our initial impressions of others also depend on our perceptions of people’s social identities. When we encounter others, we mentally make a checklist of their various statuses, such as gender, age, and race, as well as search for clues to their less obvious identities. We scan clothing, hair style, body posture, and hand and eye behaviors for clues to occupational identity, social class, group membership, and other social statuses. Since we cannot know everything about everyone we meet, we cut corners by fitting people into ready-made categories.

In everyday life, we use a variety of stereotypes, which are static and oversimplified ideas about a group or social category, that strongly influence our expectations and behaviors. In American society, there are stereotypes of women, men, jocks, the elderly, racial and ethnic minorities, college students, and countless other groups and social categories. When people are identified as belonging to a particular category, we assume they possess particular traits, and we act accordingly. Thus many people believe that redheads should be approached with caution, for they have hot tempers and can “explode at any time.” By the same measure, negative stereotypes influence our interactions with racial and ethnic groups. As we discuss more fully in Chapter 10, if Scots are believed to be cheap, Italians passionate, and African Americans violent, in the early stages of interaction people will respond to them as if they possess these and other traits associated with their group, whether or not they have them.

Where do these generalized perceptions and stereotypes of other groups and individuals come from? Many are formed spontaneously as we interact in specific social situations. Yet that experience alone cannot account for some of the powerful perceptions and stereotypes that many people hold toward certain groups and categories of people—some of whom they have never actually encountered personally. Many of these assumptions have been taught and learned through the process of socialization, discussed in Chapter 4, and help shape and influence our social acts.

**Social Acts**

When you wake up in the morning and prepare for school you perform many acts—solitary behaviors that seemingly affect no one but yourself. You might stretch and yawn, scratch yourself in a place that you would never touch in front of another person, look out the window, and eat a bowl of cereal. In everyday life such behaviors are common. But if we could examine everything we do in the course of a day, we would discover that social acts, which are behaviors influenced or shaped by the presence of others, are far more numerous and important. When people enter our presence, we alter our behavior based on their expectations and demands, or at least on what we think they will consider appropriate. Social acts include countless daily behaviors that are usually taken for granted—such behaviors as walking across campus, shopping at a mall (see Box 5.3 on interacting with Santa Claus at the mall), or merely standing in a crowded elevator. Whether we feel that an elevator is crowded or not is also socially and culturally determined, based on our attitudes and values regarding personal space.

**Personal Space and Nonverbal Communication**

Have you ever had anybody approach you to talk and you felt the uncontrollable urge to take a step backward to put more distance between you and him or her? Or, have you ever reached out to touch someone during conversation and they seemed very uncomfortable and withdrew? These are common occurrences, especially when people from different cultures interact with one another, or when people of different ages, sexes, races, or social classes interact. Each of us surrounds ourselves with an invisible “bubble” that constitutes what we consider our personal space, an area around our body that we reserve for ourselves, intimate acquaintances, and close friends. On occasion we must allow others to “invade” this personal space, for example, when a doctor examines us, or perhaps when we are standing on line or in a crowded elevator. These situations often make us uncomfortable, however, and may call for “defensive strategies” such as folding our arms across our chest, placing an obstacle (an umbrella, a briefcase, or a backpack) between us and the other person, or at the very least, avoiding eye contact and verbal communication.
Each year between Thanksgiving and Christmas, countless Santas magically appear at shopping malls across the country. Most observers see Santa’s visit as serving three obvious purposes: to help put people in the Christmas spirit, to amuse and entertain the public, and to make holiday shopping more fun. Sociologists, however, see much more, knowing that things are not necessarily what they seem. With this in mind, we decided to conduct team research and take a closer look at how people interact with Santa Claus at shopping malls.

Using the method of triangulation, we combined the qualitative techniques of ethnographic interviewing, nonparticipant observation, limited participant observation, and full participant observation at several shopping centers in small towns, medium-sized cities, and a large metropolitan area in the Midwest. Santa actors were observed and interviewed by both authors, who discussed with them their interactions with the public. At other times, both individually and as a team, the authors observed Santa’s interactions with the public and then interviewed mall visitors about their perceptions of the encounters. At one point, Thompson went “undercover,” donned the Santa Claus outfit, and played the role of Santa for an entire evening shift at one of the malls. Only Hickey, who observed the interactions, and the professional photographer working the Santa booth were aware that Santa was conducting sociological research.

What did we find? As you might guess, we learned several things that go well beyond the aforementioned three simple assumptions. Santa actors tended to be white, middle-aged or older men, although we observed a few college students, one or two African American men, and one woman who played Santa. Once inside the suit, however, virtually all Santas looked alike.

The public’s reactions to Santa were revealing, with the variables of age and sex the most influential in shaping the interaction. Young children and senior citizens became excited when they saw Santa, the younger children clearly believing in the fantasy character and the elderly seemingly enjoying playing along with the Santa fantasy. Among other age cohorts, noticeable differences emerged between males and females. Adult men, unless accompanied by young children, almost uniformly ignored Santa, refusing to wave, respond to his greetings of “Merry Christmas,” or otherwise acknowledge his presence. Adult women, by contrast, seemed quite comfortable waving to Santa and often stopped to speak or sometimes even shouted a greeting across the mall. Teenagers were the most interesting group. It seemed important to them to use Santa to demonstrate publicly that they were no longer children. Boys either tried to ignore Santa (like adult men) or (especially if in groups) felt compelled to ridicule Santa, pull on his beard, or otherwise publicly challenge the Santa fantasy. Teenage girls openly flirted with Santa; many sat on his lap and posed for pictures; many seemed to use Santa to confirm that they were budding young women who were more interested in the man in the Santa suit than in his fantasy role.

Taking a Closer Look

Given the discussion of social interaction in this chapter, why did teenage boys feel compelled to publically challenge the Santa Claus fantasy?

Anthropologist Edward Hall (1959) discovered that Americans tend to surround themselves not with one, but with four “invisible bubbles” and identified four different zones of comfort regarding social interaction (see Figure 5.3):

1. **Intimate distance.** For most Americans this distance extends from the body outward approximately 18 inches. Generally we protect this space fiercely and allow it to be penetrated only by loved ones, very close friends, and our family pets. In the course of our daily interactions, this intimate zone is generally reserved for hugging, kissing, lovemaking, or comforting. Occasionally, medical professionals such as doctors, nurses, and dentists must invade this intimate space, sometimes making us feel rather uncomfortable. When strangers invade this space, we are likely to defend the space and our bodies by either retreating to a safer and more comfortable distance or by striking out in defense. Criminologists and law enforcement officials, for example, know that deaths by stabbing and strangulation are more likely to have been committed by intimates, family members, or friends than total strangers, because of the nature of intimacy involved in the crime.

2. **Personal distance.** This zone tends to extend from approximately 18 inches from the body out to about 4 or 5 feet. While not reserved for intimates, we tend to feel most comfortable allowing friends and acquaintances within this space for any length of time. Generally when we are being introduced to people for the first time, we like to maintain somewhere between 2 to 4 feet between our bodies and theirs, not coincidentally the most comfortable distance for two people to shake hands. Again, criminologists and police figure that if a person is shot from this distance that the perpetrator was probably a friend or family member.

3. **Social distance.** A distance of 4 or 5 feet out to approximately 12 feet is commonly used for impersonal and formal interactions. This is a common distance used in job interviews (sitting across a 36-inch desk with each person approximately a foot from it), for example. It also is the distance that podiums are usually set from the front row to separate speakers and audience, and if you observe the professor in your classroom, probably about the distance from which he or she lectures or leads class discussions. Shootings from this distance are as likely to have been committed by casual acquaintances or total strangers as friends or family members.

4. **Public distance.** This distance, beyond 12 feet, is open to just about anybody and rarely do we feel threatened when somebody is 12 or more feet away from us. We can walk past total strangers, acknowledging them only with a glance or a nod, or ignoring them altogether if we choose to do so. Secret Service agents and bodyguards like to keep this much distance between dignitaries and the general public. Killings that take place from this distance often involve total strangers, as in the case of drive-by shootings, or random sniper shootings.

As we mentioned earlier, these “comfort zones” identified by Hall vary greatly from one culture to another and within cultures when people of different age, race, sex, and social class categories interact. Middle Easterners, for example, have much smaller distance requirements for casual interaction and men often embrace or kiss on the cheek. Americans generally greet one another with a handshake whereas Asians usually bow.
cheek when introduced for the first time—something that makes American men very uncomfortable. Despite living in a very densely populated country, the Japanese often maintain a larger social space when interacting with strangers. When two Japanese men are introduced, they bow toward one another, an act that requires a distance of about 6 feet to prevent bumping heads.

In the United States, women are generally far more comfortable touching, hugging, or kissing one another than are men, and women generally will allow other women within their intimate distance, something a man rarely allows from another man, even if they are blood related. Also, not all men are comfortable with the same amount of personal and social distance. We found, for example, in our research on the demeanor of contemporary cowboys, that cowboys out on the Great Plains have a much larger “invisible bubble” surrounding them, and although they will allow others closer to them on their side, they generally keep 5 to 6 feet (coincidentally, about the length of a horse) between them and others during face-to-face interaction (Hickey and Thompson, 1988).

The difference in attitudes toward personal space between the sexes can cause some awkward situations. For example, if a woman touches a man, he often misreads this gesture as a sexual overture because she has invaded his intimate space; hence, he considers it an intimate gesture—something she may not have intended at all. Similarly, older people often feel comfortable touching younger people, but children often feel uncomfortable approaching adults they do not know. While members of the lower socioeconomic classes often hug one another, embrace upon meeting, and feel comfortable in close proximity, members of the upper class usually maintain a “proper” distance between themselves and others, especially when interacting with members of lower social classes. All of these examples involve nonverbal communication—the body movements, gestures, and facial expressions that we use to communicate with others. Smiles, nods, winks, eye contact, hand gestures, and other forms of nonverbal communication can be just as important, if not more so, than words in shaping our interactions with others. They are especially important in helping social actors to define social situations and give meaning to everyday interactions.

DEFINITION OF THE SITUATION
The idea that when people define situations as real they become real in their consequences.

**NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION**
The body movements, gestures, and facial expressions that we use to communicate with others.

Defining Social Situations

When we interact with others, we are constantly defining and redefining the social situation in order to provide meaning to our actions and theirs. As we noted in Chapter 1, William I. Thomas (1928) contended that a critical element of everyday social interaction involves creating a **definition of the situation**, the idea that when people define situations as real they become real in their consequences. For example, do you consider your sociology class to be interesting, informing, and exciting? If so, you probably read all the assignments, come to class regularly, and eagerly participate in class discussions. And, guess what? Your sociology class is interesting, informing, and exciting. On the other hand, if you think a class is dull, boring, and a waste of time, you probably do not read the assignments, go to class, or participate in class. Consequently, that class is indeed dull, boring, and a waste of your time. Of course, not everybody defines situations in the same way. So, a class that is fun and exciting to some is dull and boring to others, and vice versa.

Also, because we are constantly defining and redefining social situations in ways that are meaningful to us, we always run the risk of misinterpreting other people’s actions, especially their nonverbal forms of communications. Did that girl just wink at me, or does she have something in her eye? Did that person just hold up their index finger toward me, or was it the middle finger? Does holding up two fingers signify victory, peace, or simply the number two? Certainly, the meanings imputed to these actions and gestures become critical in shaping the meaning of our present and future interactions with others. How we define social situations becomes an important part of our presentation of ourselves to others and how we attempt to manage their impressions of us. In that sense, to paraphrase Shakespeare, life becomes much like a drama, with each of us performing various roles on the stage of life.
Dramaturgy: Presentation of Self and Impression Management

We probably all have been encouraged to “put our best foot forward” when meeting somebody for the first time. Similarly, we have all heard that “you only get one chance to make a first impression.” These admonitions acknowledge that much of our day-to-day interaction constitutes a performance—one that is judged by others and, as a result, has tremendous impact on how we are viewed by others and how we view ourselves. As we noted in Chapter 1, Erving Goffman (1922–1982) introduced the theoretical framework of *dramaturgical analysis*, which uses the analogy of the theater to analyze social behavior as a way of understanding these social performances. Dramaturgical analysis focuses on the ways we present ourselves to others and our attempts to manage our impressions of us in a favorable light.

In everyday life, some interactions are simple and direct and people’s behaviors are fairly predictable. Casual greetings are a good example. Most other face-to-face interactions, however, require more of participants, and people’s responses may be highly variable. According to symbolic interactionists, who study how symbols, language, and gestures shape social behavior, we do not respond directly to individuals, events, acts, and objects, but to our images of them (McCall and Simmons, 1979:66). As Herbert Blumer (1969a) wrote, in social interaction the key to a person’s response is how he or she organizes, defines, and interprets another’s behaviors. William Swann (1998:399) noted that people’s identities and self-views are not like bowling balls that are unaffected by either people or objects they encounter in their travels. For people, the exact opposite is true; we are acutely sensitive to those with whom we share ongoing relationships. This may explain the remarkable consistency of “self” over time—even over a lifetime. People usually cling to their self-views because dramatic changes would disrupt relationships with those we deem important—in some cases, even relationships with others that may sustain negative self-views and behaviors (Swann, 1998).

Many everyday interactions appear as if they were scripted minidramas, in which people encounter one another, assess each other’s personal and social characteristics, assume identities, and behave in appropriate ways. Given the complexity of most social situations and the fact that spontaneity and surprise are integral features of virtually all social interactions, however, improvisation is usually required (Flaherty, 1990).

Using the analogy of the theater, *dramaturgy* analyzes social interaction as though participants were actors in an ongoing drama. Dramaturgy, however, emphasizes that in real life “actors” passively accept neither the definition of the situation nor the identities granted by others. Instead, people take an active part in social interaction, manipulating it to their perceived advantage. Erving Goffman (1959) called this *impression management*, ways that people use revelation and concealment to make a favorable impression on others.

Dramaturgists note that people not only have an interest in presenting their best “selves” to others but also tacitly agree to support each other’s performances and help each other maintain face. Teamwork requires that people regularly overlook or ignore poor performances (a professor who stutters), embarrassing acts (a growling stomach), and deceits (excuses for being late). Also, we may sometimes be called on to do remedial work or help out by agreeing with others, even though we may totally disagree with their definition of the situation. Why we do these things should be obvious. When a “bad actor’s” performance is called into question, the entire social interaction may be threatened. Few cultures are more aware of this fact than the group-oriented Japanese, who recognize that when emotional outbursts occur, those present must realign their behaviors to suit the individual’s goals, rather than those of the group.

Daniel and Cheryl Albas (1988) provide an example of impression management that is very familiar to college students everywhere—when graded exams are returned in class. They called their research report “Aces and Bombers,” noting that students who receive As want to tell others about their success—and they usually do—whereas those who receive D’s and F’s take great pains to cover up their failure. Can you think of some of the ways that aces and bombers might accomplish these goals, using your sociology class as an example?
Ethnomethodology: The “Taken-for Granted” Aspects of Interaction

The self that we present in one social situation may be totally inappropriate in another. This discrepancy is illustrated in a series of experiments conducted by Harold Garfinkel (1967) who introduced [ethnomethodology](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethnomethodology), which literally means *people’s methods*, or is more generally described as a *way of analyzing the “taken-for-granted” aspects that give meaning to social interaction*. Ethnomethodologists contend that much of what transpires when we interact with others relies on unspoken and commonly understood assumptions about the meanings of our words and actions. For example, when walking across campus, you often pass somebody who may nod and say, “What’s up?” You probably nod in response and say, “not much,” and go on about your business. What really transpired in that brief conversation? Basically, two people just acknowledged one another in an informal greeting and response. What would have happened, however, if you had no understanding of the taken-for-granted aspects of the other person’s question? When he or she asked, “What’s up?” what if you had stopped and replied “the sky is up and so is the North Pole, at least on a map.” No doubt your fellow actor would either think you were incredibly stupid, or a smart aleck, and probably the next time you passed him or her on campus you would be totally ignored to avoid such an awkward situation again. Occasionally these types of interactional miscues occur when people from other cultures or with language barriers interact with one another. One of the authors vividly remembers, for instance, a situation when he casually asked a Chinese student entering class, “What’s happenin’?” and the student paused, got a very concerned look on his face, and then somberly responded, “Students are being massacred in Tiananmen Square by soldiers because they are demonstrating for human rights.” Not exactly how the author meant to greet the student—a situation that required what Goffman called remedial work, an explanation that clarified the situation and put both the author and the student more at ease before class began.

To illustrate the taken-for-granted aspects of everyday interaction, Garfinkel had his students act as though they were boarders when they returned home from college during a visit, instead of behaving as sons or daughters. Pretending to be strangers in their own homes, the experiments tended to last only a few minutes because parents could not comprehend why their children were behaving so courteously and formally, and so “out of character.” In some cases, tempers flared, and parental responses included, “What’s the matter? Are you sick? Are you out of your mind or are you just stupid?” (Garfinkel, 1967:47).

In today’s world the presentation of self, impression management, and the taken-for-granted aspects of interaction now involve interacting through cyberspace. As our opening vignette involving Fred and “Nina” illustrated, the advent of the technomedia has dramatically affected social interaction in our everyday lives.

**Social Interaction, Mass Media, and the Technomedia**

Mass media and the technomedia have had tremendous influence in shaping social interaction in our everyday lives. Clearly, our social perceptions and stereotypes have been largely shaped by portrayals of institutions (i.e., family, education, religion, the economy, and government) and various categories of people on television. In later chapters we explore these media portrayals, especially television dramas and situation comedies, and how they have shaped our perceptions of the various institutions in some detail.

Today, perhaps no genre of television programming is more popular than the so-called “reality” shows. Virtually every night of the week at least one, if not all, of the major networks, and several cable stations offer some type of “reality” programming. *Survivor*, *Big Brother*, *The Real World*, *Meet My Folks*, *The Bachelor*, *The Bachelorette*, *Paradise Hotel*, *Temptation Island*, and a host of other programs put noncelebrities in both conventional and unconventional social situations while viewers watch their every move and sometimes become involved in these programs by calling in or logging on to specialized...
websites. Program participants live together, date, have sex, argue, fight, and in some cases compete for prizes of over a million dollars. Viewers “interact” with the people on these programs by helping to select their mates or determining whether they remain in the competition or are “voted off” the show. For many Americans and other people around the world, participants in these programs vicariously become friends, enemies, partners, and adversaries. Social attitudes, values, beliefs, norms, and stereotypes are simultaneously reinforced, challenged, questioned, redefined, and shattered.

From a sociological perspective, however, the question looms as to whose reality is this? What lasting impact do these programs have on our values, attitudes, beliefs, and norms? To what extent is the so-called reality displayed in these programs shaped and altered by television producers, directors, film editors, and corporate sponsors? More important, how do these programs affect our social interactions with others in our everyday lives? And remember, television is but one form of the ever increasing technomedia that influence our day-to-day interactions with others.

The technomedia, especially the Internet, have expanded our daily social interactions from personal face-to-face encounters to the realm of cyberspace and interaction in virtual communities. On-line shopping allows people to browse and shop from the comfort of their own homes without the need to interact with salespeople or other customers. E-mail, chat rooms, and other forms of communication through cyberspace have made letter writing almost a lost art, and despite the widespread use of cellular phones, with widespread computer access, even the telephone is losing its importance as a means of communication. Moreover, as our opening vignette with Fred and “Nina” illustrated, on the World Wide Web people can be practically anybody they want. Thus, influential variables and potential barriers to social interaction, such as age, race, ethnicity, sex, gender, social class, and others are at least temporarily suspended as people interact with one another through cyberspace.

In an experiment in an upper-middle-class suburb of Toronto, Canadian residents were provided with high-speed Internet services to create a virtual community that became known as “Netville” to see if widespread access to the Internet promoted or reduced community social interaction. The study found that those who used the Internet most extensively developed broader social networks, but these networks and most of the interaction over the Net did not contribute to creating a so-called global community, because most of the online communications were within the boundaries of the original community or with residents who lived within a 50- to 100-mile radius (Hampton and Wellman, 2002; Warschauer, 2003).

The influence of mass media and especially technomedia on social interaction will increase in the future and we discuss this in the “Looking to the Future” section of this chapter. How sociologists view this influence, and analyze social interaction in general, however, varies greatly depending upon which often major sociological perspectives they use.

Sociological Approaches to Interaction in Everyday Life

We have discussed social interaction in our everyday lives. Sociologists view interaction differently, depending on which theoretical perspective they adopt.
The Structural Functionalist Approach

According to functionalists, for society to exist, whether it is a colony of ants, a pack of dogs, a swarm of bees, or a human society, it must have a structure—patterned and recurrent relationships among group members. Much of social life is repetitive and enduring. A university, for example, is stable because it is structured. It has a president, vice-presidents, department heads, and specialists in many areas, and all have fairly clear ideas about their rights and duties relative to other members of the campus community. People are hired and fired, some retire and others die, yet the university endures. To some, this suggests that social structures, whether families, schools, or sororities, are relatively rigid and changeless structures.

Functionalists take a similar approach to social institutions: institutions are basic to the proper functioning of contemporary societies. Therefore, institutions provide the framework for social interaction in our everyday lives. Of all social institutions, the family is perhaps the most important. It regulates sexual activity and it produces new members and socializes and cares for them. In some societies families also transmit cultural knowledge, but in modern societies the educational institution fulfills the basic need of training each new generation. The economic institution produces and distributes goods and services, the political institution provides order and defense, and the religious institution fulfills the social need for meaning, social solidarity, and control. Religion (and the family) provided for the health of people in small-scale societies, but in modern industrial societies the medical institution, which includes a relatively stable cluster of norms and values, medical specialists, administrators, insurance companies, and other groups and organizations, maintains people’s health.

To functionalists, institutions are a society’s blueprint for solving basic needs, and any particular institutional structure channels experience along certain lines; it prohibits certain possibilities, tolerates or ignores others, and encourages still others (Williams, 1970). To say that a social arrangement is “institutionalized” means it is deeply embedded in the fabric of a group or society and is surrounded by customary beliefs, values, and norms. Institutions provide solutions to what are defined as long-term problems, and as such they are comfortable and familiar. Institutions provide the illusion of order and stability that is necessary if people are to have and rear children, plan, build, and invest in the future.

Analyzing interaction at the macro level, functionalists focus primarily on the first two patterns of social interaction we introduced earlier in this chapter: exchange and cooperation. In this view of “you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours,” if a friend or roommate helps you study for an algebra exam, you may reciprocate later by typing his or her sociology research paper, or by letting him or her borrow your favorite sweater. From the functionalist perspective, interaction is governed by the norm of reciprocity and people tend to cooperate as much as possible to ensure smooth day-to-day interaction as well as the perpetuation of their society and the survival of the species.

The Conflict Perspective

Conflict theorists disagree with this line of reasoning, noting that it is a fiction that institutional arrangements benefit all individuals and society as a whole. Instead, institutional arrangements grant a disproportionate share of wealth, power, and privilege to certain individuals and classes, and it is they who seek to maintain the status quo by defining particular institutional arrangements—whether slavery, feudalism, or the capitalist system—as vitally important to “society.”

Conflict theorists agree that society is structured but emphasize that roles, statuses, and institutions do not exist for the good of “society.” Instead, they are used by superordinates to exploit and dominate subordinates as well to maintain and perpetuate elite wealth, power, and privilege. Conflict theorists agree with functionalists on one point, however; once institutional patterns develop into a coherent system, their “common sense” logic may come to pervade all social institutions and make them highly resistant to change. Moreover, linkages among institutional complexes reinforce conservative tendencies. For example, the dominance of the economic complex in American society reflects its multiple ties to virtually all other institutional complexes (Form, 1990). Hence, changing the American economic institution would require more than economic change, because capitalism pervades every American institution: the economy empha-
sizes free enterprise, and religion free will; the family system promotes high mobility and individual choice; the educational system stresses competition and being first; the mass media glorify stars and heroes, and the political system, with its democratic ideology, emphasizes the personal “character” of political candidates, as well as “one person one vote.” Conflict theorists argue that it is impossible to understand human behavior without reference to social stratification, for people’s positions in the social hierarchy influence virtually everything they think and do. From the conflict perspective, roles such as teacher and business owner have advantages and in various ways are used to exploit those in linked roles—student and worker. Social networks and institutions operate in much the same way. In each case, those at higher levels in the social hierarchy use their wealth, power, and influence to dominate and exploit those at lower levels—whether locally, nationally, or globally.

Conflict theorists also tend to view social interaction from a macro level, but they focus on the last three patterns discussed earlier: competition, conflict, and coercion. From the conflict perspective, the unequal distribution of power and economic resources shape not only institutional configurations, but influence our day-to-day, face-to-face interactions with one another. From this viewpoint, social classes as well as individuals enter interactions with different vested interests and different goals. In this “dog-eat-dog” view of the world, the strong and powerful use daily interaction to dominate those who are weaker and less powerful. In contrast to the functionalist view, from this perspective, survival of the individual, society, and the species resides not in cooperation but in intense competition, with the “fittest” becoming the ultimate winner.

The Symbolic Interactionist Approach

Symbolic interactionists contend that all of social life—including social institutions—are in a constant state of flux. This is because people continually define and redefine relationships, and even those social arrangements that appear to be deeply embedded in social structure change. For example, American religious institutions are undergoing radical changes as more women enter divinity schools, especially elite schools that play a major role in shaping public opinion.

By the 1990s, more than half of the student seminarians at Yale and Harvard were women, and they and other female seminarians across the country have begun to reshape traditional notions of gender and liturgical practices, in some cases those that are centuries old (Woodward, 1989). For example, in 1989, the Reverend Barbara Harris was consecrated the first female bishop in the Anglican church. Female seminarians, priests, and ministers also have made substantive changes in the language of the church. At many seminaries generic nouns such as “mankind” have been replaced with “humankind” and “God ‘the Father’ is acceptable only if twinned with God ‘the Mother’, [or] God ‘the parent’” (Woodward, 1989:59).

Interactionists contend that there is more flexibility in roles and relationships and much greater possibility for change than either functionalists or conflict theorists would allow. Interactionists stress that human social structure is built of collections of people who interact with one another according to expectations rather than certainties. This results in a constant reordering of society as people in interaction define and redefine social relationships and expectations change.

Because symbolic interactionists focus on the micro-level day-to-day, face-to-face interactions of individuals, much of this chapter has emphasized the interactionist approach. Personal space, nonverbal communication, definition of the situation, dramaturgical analysis, presentation of self, impression management, and ethnomethodology are all important elements of the symbolic interactionist perspective. Interactionists primarily view social structure and social institutions as mutually agreed-upon fabrications of social interaction. The seeming permanence of these institutions and their impact on our daily lives relies on us, as social actors, continuing to define them as stable and important. The stock market, for example, seemingly a stable aspect of the American economic institutions, fluctuates daily, based far less on economic earnings and corporate profits than on investors’ faith in the market and their belief that it is a wise and sage investment. The stock market crash of 1929 and the more recent “crashes”
in the 1980s and the early 2000s reflect waning consumer confidence in the market. When people define the market as “unsafe” and an unwise investment, they take their money out of the market, sending the Dow Jones Index and NASDAQ plunging to all-time lows. On the other hand, when consumer confidence is high and investors view the market as a wise and safe place to put their money, prices soar, and the stock indexes reach record highs. Even the most highly educated economic analysts now admit that it is the public’s definition of the situation that governs the economy more than the so-called law of supply and demand or other standards economic principles.

Social Interaction in the Twenty-First Century

If recent decades are any indication, the future of social interaction in our everyday lives promises some fascinating possibilities. As society changes so rapidly, new statuses and roles emerge on a daily basis and our constantly increasing status and role sets provide more potential for role strain and role conflicts than ever before. Social institutions, once thought of as stable and enduring aspects of society, now undergo rapid change and are continually being defined and redefined on an ongoing basis. Governments and regimes are toppled, maps become obsolete, the meaning of family is redefined, and social stereotypes are simultaneously reinforced and shattered on a daily basis. The future promises more instability in social institutions as we know them and the impact on our daily lives will be substantial.

As our opening vignette illustrated, perhaps no single aspect of society has more dramatically influenced and changed social interaction in our daily lives than the new technomedia. Manuel Castells (2002:xx) noted that the new “Internet Society” is:

...a social structure built on networks. But not any kinds of networks, since social networks have been an important dimension of social life since the origins of humankind. The networks that characterize contemporary social organization are information networks powered by microelectronics-based information technology. . . . The emerging pattern is one of self-directed networking . . . it does not substitute for face-to-face sociability or for social participation. It adds to it.

The impact of technomedia on social interaction will increase in the future as more technological developments alter our ability to communicate with one another locally, nationally, and around the globe. Parents can monitor their baby’s every activity whether in the next room or at work across town by the use of two-way radios, video cameras, and computer programs. Elementary school children as well as university students wear pagers and carry digital cellular phones and other electronic devices that keep them in contact with babysitters, parents, friends, drug dealers, parole officers, and anybody else with whom they feel the need to communicate. Computers and the Internet have revolutionized contemporary education (see Chapter 14 for details) and the use of e-mail, on-line chat rooms, and the creation of virtual communities have permanently altered our abilities to communicate and interact with others in our everyday lives. Certainly in the future, these and other technological advancements will create more and not fewer changes in our interaction capabilities.

We posed the question at the beginning of this chapter as to whether the communications between Fred and “Nina” should even be categorized as social interacting. Is a person sitting all alone in front of a computer engaged in social interaction? If so, how does this type of interaction differ from face-to-face interaction? What happens to those ever important variables such as age, race, ethnicity, sex, gender, and social class that traditionally have had such powerful influence on social interaction in our daily lives? Howard Rheingold (2002:xxviii) poses some additional questions that will be of increasing interest to sociologists in the future:

- Does using the Internet make people happier or unhappier?
- Is the Internet empowering, or is it a tool of social control?
Is the Internet addicting?
Does virtual community erode face-to-face community?

Based on the reading of this chapter and your personal experiences, how would you answer these questions? Do technology and technicians hold the key to the future? Some in the popular media lend strong support to the idea that technological advances eventually will solve all social problems and ultimately produce utopian societies. Others believe dystopian societies are more likely and that unbridled technological change will eventually lead to environmental destruction and global terrorism and war. Visions of the future, however, are never passive reflections of historical reality, but are often self-fulfilling prophecies that influence and shape the future.

Summary

The basic elements of social structure that provide the framework for interaction are statuses, role networks, and institutions.

Social interactions tend to fall into patterns of: exchange, cooperation, competition, conflict, or coercion.

Much of the social interaction in our everyday lives is guided by social perception and stereotypes.

Personal space and nonverbal communication play important roles in shaping and influencing our interactions with others.

During social interaction, we continually define and redefine situations in such a way as to give meaning to the interaction.

Dramaturgy uses the analogy of the theater to analyze interaction as social performances involving the presentation of self and impression management.

Ethnomethodology examines the taken-for-granted aspects of social interaction showing how we “fill in the gaps” and use common understandings to interact with others.

The mass media and technomedia have had tremendous influence on social interaction and will continue to alter social institutions and the ways we interact with one another in the future.

Structural functionalists tend to focus on exchange and cooperation as the most important aspects of interaction, while conflict theorists emphasize competition, conflict, and coercion. Meanwhile symbolic interactionists focus on the micro-level aspects of day-to-day, face-to-face interaction and how actors manipulate symbols to give meaning to their actions and the actions of others.

In the future, increased technology and the ability to “interact” through cyberspace will redefine the meaning of social interaction in our everyday lives.

Key Terms

achieved status (p. 123)
ascribed statuses (p. 123)
definition of the situation (p. 134)
dramaturgy (p. 135)
ethnomethodology (p. 136)
impression management (p. 135)
master status (p. 123)
nonverbal communication (p. 134)
personal space (p. 131)
role (p. 124)
role conflict (p. 126)
role distance (p. 124)
role embracement (p. 124)
role merger (p. 124)
role set (p. 124)
role strain (p. 126)
social acts (p. 131)
social institutions (p. 128)
social interaction (p. 129)
social network (p. 126)
social perception (p. 130)
social structure (p. 120)
status (p. 122)
status inconsistency (p. 122)
status set (p. 122)
stereotypes (p. 131)

Additional Online Resources for This Chapter

- Practice Tests: Multiple Choice, True/False, and Essay Questions
- Flashcards: Key Terms
- Crossword Puzzles (Test Knowledge of Terms and Concepts)
- Suggested Readings
- Weblinks
- Student Activities for In-Class or Homework
- Interactive Maps
- ContentSelect Research Database for Sociology

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