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Introduction to

Soci- ology 3e.



FIGURE 12.1 New opportunities, laws, and attitudes have opened the door for people to take on roles that are not traditionally associated with their gender. But despite this progress, many people are misunderstood or mistreated based on gender.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

12.1 Sex, Gender, Identity, and Expression

12.2 Gender and Gender Inequality

12.3 Sexuality

INTRODUCTION Imagine that there's a fire in a building nearby. As you watch the flames and smoke pour out of windows, you also watch firefighters run inside. Minutes go by and more people arrive--crowds, news trucks, ambulances. Firefighters working the hoses start pointing to a top-floor window, where a lone member of their crew emerges half-pulling, half-carrying a victim of the fire. Behind them, through the window, you can see the fire in the background, flames that the firefighter must have pushed through to get to the victim. Eventually, others reach them with large ladders, and they bring the nearly unconscious victim down to the street.

Close up, you can see the heroic firefighter is covered in dirt and soot. A large gash is visible in their suit, and they're immediately given medical attention. As the EMTs pull off the firefighters' helmet, you're surprised to see features you identify as a woman's. You had just assumed the person was a man, but you were incorrect.

You wouldn't be alone. For centuries, nearly all firefighters had been men. As a child, saying fireman and firemen may have been perfectly appropriate, because all the people you met in the profession were, in fact,

men. But as with many professions that were formerly almost exclusively gender-specific, firefighting has become more integrated.

What does that mean for the people in those professions? They must endure physical challenges, overcome stereotypes about any physical limitations, and likely deal with a culture built over a long time to appeal to and serve the needs of men. As they train, firefighters may be yelled at and undergo levels of punishment for not achieving the necessary standards. Does the dynamic of those interactions change when a man in a superior position is for the first time giving orders and issuing reprimands to people of another gender? Should they be able to treat women the same way they treated men? What would be equal in that situation?

Consider another profession. What would you think about if you witnessed a young woman by a man? Is she fulfilling the role society may assume for her? Does it matter that the person spraying her is a man, and that he has a degree of control over her?

Military police and security personnel are required to be pepper sprayed at least once during their training. The logic goes: They may have to utilize this deterrent against other people, and so they should have experienced it. While there are no guarantees that the future enforcement officer will use the substances judiciously, having experienced the painful effects of pepper spray is deemed more likely to produce a level of empathy and restraint.

But is this what she signed up for? Assuming that these military personnel have undergone some level of training prior to this event—they've invested their lives and others have invested in them—could she turn back? How would her peers react? How would her family and others react?

Saving someone from a burning building takes a degree of courage and ability that is very rare, regardless of gender. Voluntary pepper spraying is an extreme situation, again regardless of gender. But gender plays a role in how we see the people involved in both situations. Gender and sexuality are among the most powerful and impactful elements of people's identities, and drive the way they see the world and the way the world sees them. People of different genders go through difficult circumstances and events based partly on their role in society—a role that they do not often define for themselves. And when people express, identify, or outwardly display signs that they do not fit in a societies, established categories, they may face exclusion and discrimination.

12.1 Sex, Gender, Identity, and Expression

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Define and differentiate between sex and gender
- Define and discuss what is meant by gender identity
- Distinguish the meanings of different sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions



FIGURE 12.2 While the biological differences between males and females are fairly straightforward, the social and cultural aspects of being a man or woman can be complicated. (Credit: Mapbox Uncharted ERG /flickr)

When filling out a document such as a job application or school registration form, you are often asked to provide your name, address, phone number, birth date, and sex or gender. But have you ever been asked to provide your sex *and* your gender? Like most people, you may not have realized that sex and gender are not the same. However, sociologists and most other social scientists view them as conceptually distinct. **Sex** refers to physical or physiological differences between males and females, including both primary sex characteristics (the reproductive system) and secondary characteristics such as height and muscularity. **Gender** refers to behaviors, personal traits, and social positions that society attributes to being female or male.

A person's sex, as determined by their biology, does not always correspond with their gender. Therefore, the terms *sex* and *gender* are not interchangeable. A baby who is born with male genitalia will most likely be identified as male. As a child or adult, however, they may identify with the feminine aspects of culture. Since the term *sex* refers to biological or physical distinctions, characteristics of sex will not vary significantly between different human societies. Generally, persons of the female sex, regardless of culture, will eventually menstruate and develop breasts that can lactate. Characteristics of gender, on the other hand, may vary greatly between different societies. For example, in U.S. culture, it is considered feminine (or a trait of the female gender) to wear a dress or skirt. However, in many Middle Eastern, Asian, and African cultures, sarongs, robes, or gowns are considered masculine. The kilt worn by a Scottish man does not make him appear feminine in that culture.

The dichotomous or binary view of gender (the notion that someone is either male or female) is specific to certain cultures and is not universal. In some cultures gender is viewed as fluid. In the past, some anthropologists used the term *berdache* to refer to individuals who occasionally or permanently dressed and lived as a different gender. The practice has been noted among certain Native American tribes (Jacobs, Thomas, and Lang 1997). Samoan culture accepts what Samoans refer to as a “third gender.” *Fa’afafine*, which translates as “the way of the woman,” is a term used to describe individuals who are born biologically male but embody both masculine and feminine traits. *Fa’afafines* are considered an important part of Samoan culture. Individuals from other cultures may mislabel their sexuality because *fa’afafines* have a varied sexual life that may include men and women (Poasa 1992).



SOCIAL POLICY AND DEBATE

The Legalese of Sex and Gender

The terms *sex* and *gender* have not always been differentiated in the English language. It was not until the 1950s that U.S. and British psychologists and other professionals formally began distinguishing between sex and gender. Since then, professionals have increasingly used the term *gender* (Moi 2005). By the end of the twenty-first century, expanding the proper usage of the term *gender* to everyday language became more challenging—particularly where legal language is concerned. In an effort to clarify usage of the terms *sex* and *gender*, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia wrote in a 1994 briefing, “The word *gender* has acquired the new and useful connotation of cultural or attitudinal characteristics (as opposed to physical characteristics) distinctive to the sexes. That is to say, *gender* is to *sex* as *feminine* is to *female* and *masculine* is to *male*” (*J.E.B. v. Alabama*, 144 S. Ct. 1436 [1994]). Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg had a different take, however. She freely swapped them in her briefings so as to avoid having the word “*sex*” pop up too often. Ginsburg decided on this approach earlier in her career while she was arguing before the Supreme court; her Columbia Law School secretary suggested it to Ginsburg, saying that when “those nine men” (the Supreme Court justices), “hear that word and their first association is not the way you want them to be thinking” (Block 2020).

More recently, the word “*sex*” was a key element of the landmark Supreme Court case affirming that the Civil Rights Act's workplace protections applied to LGBTQ people. Throughout the case documents and discussions, the term and its meanings are discussed extensively. In his decision statement, Justice Neil Gorsuch wrote, “It is impossible to discriminate against a person for being homosexual or transgender without discriminating ... based on *sex*” (Supreme Court 2020). Dissenting justices and commentators felt that Gorsuch and the other justices in the majority were recalibrating the original usage of the term. The arguments about the language itself, which occupy much of the Court's writings on the matter, are further evidence of the evolving nature of the words, as well as their significance.

Sexuality and Sexual Orientation

A person's **sexuality** is their capacity to experience sexual feelings and attraction. Studying sexual attitudes and practices is a particularly interesting field of sociology because sexual behavior and attitudes about sexual behavior have cultural and societal influences and impacts. As you will see in the Relationships, Marriage, and Family chapter, each society interprets sexuality and sexual activity in different ways, with different attitudes about premarital sex, the age of sexual consent, homosexuality, masturbation, and other sexual behaviors (Widmer 1998).

A person's **sexual orientation** is their physical, mental, emotional, and sexual attraction to a particular sex (male and/or female). Sexual orientation is typically divided into several categories: *heterosexuality*, the attraction to individuals of the other sex; *homosexuality*, the attraction to individuals of the same sex; *bisexuality*, the attraction to individuals of either sex; *asexuality*, a lack of sexual attraction or desire for sexual contact; *pansexuality*, an attraction to people regardless of sex, gender, gender identity, or gender expression; *omnisexuality*, an attraction to people of all sexes, genders, gender identities, and gender expressions that considers the person's gender, and *queer*, an umbrella term used to describe sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. Other categories may not refer to a sexual attraction, but rather a romantic one. For example, an *aromantic* person does not experience romantic attraction; this is different from asexuality, which refers to a lack of sexual attraction. And some sexual orientations do not refer to gender in their description, though those who identify as having that orientation may feel attraction to a certain gender. For example, *demisexual* refers to someone who feels a sexual attraction to someone only after they form an emotional bond; the term itself doesn't distinguish among gender identities, but the person may feel attraction based on gender (PFLAG 2021). It is important to acknowledge and understand that many of these orientations exist on a spectrum, and there may be no specific term to describe how an individual feels. Some terms

have been developed to address this—such as *graysexual* or *grayromantic*—but their usage is a personal choice (Asexual Visibility and Education Network 2021).

People who are attracted to others of a different gender are typically referred to as "straight," and people attracted to others of the same gender are typically referred to as "gay" for men and "lesbian" for women. As discussed, above, however, there are many more sexual and romantic orientations, so the term "gay," for example, should not be used to describe all of them. Proper terminology includes the acronyms LGBT and LGBTQ, which stands for "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender" (and "Queer" or "Questioning" when the Q is added). In other cases, people and organizations may add "I" to represent Intersex people (described below), and "A" for Asexual or Aromantic people (or sometimes for "Allies"), as well as one "P" to describe Pansexual people and sometimes another "P" to describe Polysexual people. Finally, some people and organizations add a plus sign (+) to represent other possible identities or orientations. Sexuality and gender terminology are constantly changing, and may mean different things to different people; they are not universal, and each individual defines them for themselves (UC Davis LGBTQIA Resource Center 2020). Finally, a person who does not fully understand all of these terms can still be supportive of people who have those orientations or others; in fact, advocacy and support organizations indicate it is much better to admit you don't know something than to make assumptions or apply an incorrect label to someone (GLAAD 2021).

While the descriptions above are evidence of a vast degree of diversity, the United States and many other countries are heteronormative societies, meaning many people assume **heterosexual** orientation is biologically determined and is the default or normal type of orientation. While awareness and acceptance of different sexual orientations and identities seems to be increasing, the influence of a heteronormative society can lead LGBTQ people to be treated like "others," even by people who do not deliberately seek to cause them harm. This can lead to significant distress (Boyer 2020). Causes of these heteronormative behaviors and expectations are tied to implicit biases; they can be especially harmful for children and young adults (Tompkins 2017).

There is not a wealth of research describing exactly when people become aware of their sexual orientation. According to current scientific understanding, individuals are usually aware of their sexual orientation between middle childhood and early adolescence (American Psychological Association 2008). They do not have to participate in sexual activity to be aware of these emotional, romantic, and physical attractions; people can be celibate and still recognize their sexual orientation, and may have very different experiences of discovering and accepting their sexual orientation. Some studies have shown that a percentage of people may start to have feelings related to attraction or orientation at ages nine or ten, even if these feelings are not sexual (Calzo 2018). At the point of puberty, some may be able to announce their sexual orientation, while others may be unready or unwilling to make their sexual orientation or identity known since it goes against society's historical norms (APA 2008). And finally, some people recognize their true sexual orientation later in life—in their 30s, 40s, and beyond.

There is no scientific consensus regarding the exact reasons why an individual holds a specific sexual orientation. Research has been conducted to study the possible genetic, hormonal, developmental, social, and cultural influences on sexual orientation, but there has been no evidence that links sexual orientation to one factor (APA 2008). Alfred Kinsey was among the first to conceptualize sexuality as a continuum rather than a strict dichotomy of gay or straight. He created a six-point rating scale that ranges from exclusively heterosexual to exclusively homosexual. See the figure below. In his 1948 work *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, Kinsey writes, "Males do not represent two discrete populations, heterosexual and homosexual. The world is not to be divided into sheep and goats ... The living world is a continuum in each and every one of its aspects" (Kinsey 1948). Many of Kinsey's specific research findings have been criticized or discredited, but his influence on future research is widely accepted.

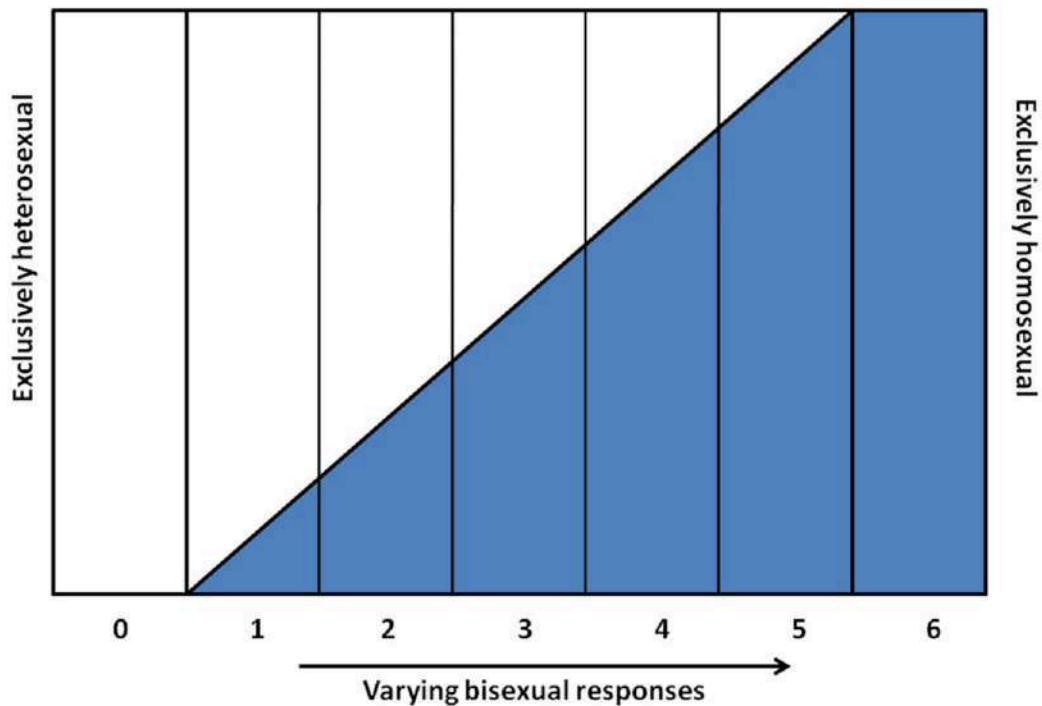


FIGURE 12.3 The Kinsey scale indicates that sexuality can be measured by more than just heterosexuality and homosexuality.

Later scholarship by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick expanded on Kinsey's notions. She coined the term "homosocial" to oppose "homosexual," describing nonsexual same-sex relations. Sedgwick recognized that in U.S. culture, males are subject to a clear divide between the two sides of this continuum, whereas females enjoy more fluidity. This can be illustrated by the way women in the United States can express homosocial feelings (nonsexual regard for people of the same sex) through hugging, handholding, and physical closeness. In contrast, U.S. males refrain from these expressions since they violate the heteronormative expectation that male sexual attraction should be exclusively for females. Research suggests that it is easier for women violate these norms than men, because men are subject to more social disapproval for being physically close to other men (Sedgwick 1985).

Because of the deeply personal nature of sexual orientation, as well as the societal biases against certain orientations, many people may question their sexual orientation before fully accepting it themselves. In a similar way, parents may question their children's sexual orientation based on certain behaviors. Simply viewing the many web pages and discussion forums dedicated to people expressing their questions makes it very clear that sexual orientation is not always clear. Feelings of guilt, responsibility, rejection, and simple uncertainty can make the process and growth very challenging. For example, a woman married to a man who recognizes that she is asexual, or a man married to a woman who recognizes that he is attracted to men, may both have extreme difficulty coming to terms with their sexuality, as well as disclosing it to others. At younger ages, similarly challenging barriers and difficulties exist. For example, adolescence can be a difficult and uncertain time overall, and feelings of different or changing orientation or nonconformity can only add to the challenges (Mills-Koonce 2018).

Gender Roles

As we grow, we learn how to behave from those around us. In this socialization process, children are introduced to certain roles that are typically linked to their biological sex. The term **gender role** refers to society's concept of how men and women are expected to look and how they should behave. These roles are based on norms, or standards, created by society. In U.S. culture, masculine roles are usually associated with

strength, aggression, and dominance, while feminine roles are usually associated with passivity, nurturing, and subordination. Role learning starts with socialization at birth. Even today, our society is quick to outfit male infants in blue and girls in pink, even applying these color-coded gender labels while a baby is in the womb.

One way children learn gender roles is through play. Parents typically supply boys with trucks, toy guns, and superhero paraphernalia, which are active toys that promote motor skills, aggression, and solitary play. Daughters are often given dolls and dress-up apparel that foster nurturing, social proximity, and role play. Studies have shown that children will most likely choose to play with “gender appropriate” toys (or same-gender toys) even when cross-gender toys are available because parents give children positive feedback (in the form of praise, involvement, and physical closeness) for gender normative behavior (Caldera, Huston, and O’Brien 1998). As discussed in the Socialization chapter, some parents and experts become concerned about young people becoming too attached to these stereotypical gender roles.



FIGURE 12.4 Childhood activities and instruction, like this father-daughter duck-hunting trip, can influence people's lifelong views on gender roles. (Credit: Tim Miller, USFWS Midwest Region/flickr)

The drive to adhere to masculine and feminine gender roles continues later in life, in a tendency sometimes referred to as “occupational sorting” (Gerdeman 2019). Men tend to outnumber women in professions such as law enforcement, the military, and politics. Women tend to outnumber men in care-related occupations such as childcare, healthcare (even though the term “doctor” still conjures the image of a man), and social work. These occupational roles are examples of typical U.S. male and female behavior, derived from our culture’s traditions. Adherence to these roles demonstrates fulfillment of social expectations but not necessarily personal preference (Diamond 2002); sometimes, people work in a profession because of societal pressure and/or the opportunities afforded to them based on their gender.

Historically, women have had difficulty shedding the expectation that they cannot be a “good mother” and a “good worker” at the same time, which results in fewer opportunities and lower levels of pay (Ogden 2019). Generally, men do not share this difficulty: Since the assumed role of a man as a father does not seem to conflict with their perceived work role, men who are fathers (or who are expected to become fathers) do not

face the same barriers to employment or promotion (González 2019). This is sometimes referred to as the "motherhood penalty" versus the "fatherhood premium," and is prevalent in many higher income countries (Bygren 2017). These concepts and their financial and societal implications will be revisited later in the chapter.

Gender Identity

U.S. society allows for some level of flexibility when it comes to acting out gender roles. To a certain extent, men can assume some feminine roles and women can assume some masculine roles without interfering with their gender identity. **Gender identity** is a person's deeply held internal perception of one's gender.

Transgender people's sex assigned at birth and their gender identity are not necessarily the same. A transgender woman is a person who was assigned male at birth but who identifies and/or lives as a woman; a transgender man was assigned female at birth but lives as a man. While determining the size of the transgender population is difficult, it is estimated that 1.4 million adults (Herman 2016) and 2 percent of high school students in the U.S. identify as transgender (Johns 2019). The term "transgender" does not indicate sexual orientation or a particular gender expression, and we should avoid making assumptions about people's sexual orientation based on knowledge about their gender identity (GLAAD 2021).



FIGURE 12.5 Actress Laverne Cox is the first openly transgender person to play a transgender character on a major show. She won a producing Emmy and was nominated four times for the Best Actress Emmy. She is also an advocate for LGBTQ issues outside of her career, such as in this "Ain't I a Woman?" speaking tour. (Credit: modification of work by "KOMUnews_Flickr"/Flickr)

Some transgender individuals may undertake a process of transition, in which they move from living in a way that is more aligned with the sex assigned at birth to living in a way that is aligned with their gender identity. Transitioning may take the form of social, legal or medical aspects of someone's life, but not everyone undertakes any or all types of transition. Social transition may involve the person's presentation, name, pronouns, and relationships. Legal transition can include changing their gender on government or other official documents, changing their legal name, and so on. Some people may undergo a physical or medical

transition, in which they change their outward, physical, or sexual characteristics in order for their physical being to better align with their gender identity (UCSF Transgender Care 2019). They may also be known as male-to-female (MTF) or female-to-male (FTM). Not all transgender individuals choose to alter their bodies: many will maintain their original anatomy but may present themselves to society as another gender. This is typically done by adopting the dress, hairstyle, mannerisms, or other characteristic typically assigned to another gender. It is important to note that people who cross-dress, or wear clothing that is traditionally assigned to a gender different from their biological sex, are not necessarily transgender. Cross-dressing is typically a form of self-expression or personal style, and it does not indicate a person's gender identity or that they are transgender (TSER 2021).



FIGURE 12.6 The most widely known transgender pride flag was designed by transgender woman and U.S. Navy veteran Monica Helms. Other designers have different interpretation of the transgender flag, and other groups within the LGBTQ community have their own flags and symbols. Interestingly, Gilbert Baker, the designer of the first widely adopted pride flag, made a point to avoid trademark or other limits on the flag, so that it could be reinterpreted and reused by others. (Credit: crudmucosa/flickr)

There is no single, conclusive explanation for why people are transgender. Transgender expressions and experiences are so diverse that it is difficult to identify their origin. Some hypotheses suggest biological factors such as genetics or prenatal hormone levels as well as social and cultural factors such as childhood and adulthood experiences. Most experts believe that all of these factors contribute to a person's gender identity (APA 2008).

Intersex is a general term used to describe people whose sex traits, reproductive anatomy, hormones, or chromosomes are different from the usual two ways human bodies develop. Some intersex traits are recognized at birth, while others are not recognizable until puberty or later in life (interACT 2021). While some intersex people have physically recognizable features that are described by specific medical terms, intersex people and newborns are healthy. Most in the medical and intersex community reject unnecessary surgeries intended to make a baby conform to a specific gender assignment; medical ethicists indicate that any surgery to alter intersex characteristics or traits—if desired—should be delayed until an individual can decide for themselves (Behrens 2021). If a physical trait or medical condition prohibits a baby from urinating or

performing another bodily function (which is very rare), then a medical procedure such as surgery will be needed; in other cases, hormonal issues related to intersex characteristics may require medical intervention. Intersex and transgender are not interchangeable terms; many transgender people have no intersex traits, and many intersex people do not consider themselves transgender. Some intersex people believe that intersex people should be included within the LGBTQ community, while others do not (Koyama n.d.).

Those who identify with the sex they were assigned at birth are often referred to as *cisgender*, utilizing the Latin prefix "cis," which means "on the same side." (The prefix "trans" means "across.") Because they are in the majority and do not have a potential component to transition, many cisgender people do not self-identify as such. As with transgender people, the term or usage of cisgender does not indicate a person's sexual orientation, gender, or gender expression (TSER 2021). And as many societies are heteronormative, they are also *cisnormative*, which is the assumption or expectation that everyone is cisgender, and that anything other than cisgender is not normal.

The language of sexuality, sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression is continually changing and evolving. In order to get an overview of some of the most commonly used terms, explore the Trans Student Educational Resources Online Glossary: <http://openstax.org/r/tsero>

When individuals do not feel comfortable identifying with the gender associated with their biological sex, then they may experience gender dysphoria. **Gender dysphoria** is a diagnostic category in the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5) that describes individuals who do not identify as the gender that most people would assume they are. This dysphoria must persist for at least six months and result in significant distress or dysfunction to meet DSM-5 diagnostic criteria. In order for children to be assigned this diagnostic category, they must verbalize their desire to become the other gender. It is important to note that not all transgender people experience gender dysphoria, and that its diagnostic categorization is not universally accepted. For example, in 2019, the World Health Organization reclassified "gender identity disorder" as "gender incongruence," and categorized it under sexual health rather than a mental disorder. However, health and mental health professionals indicate that the presence of the diagnostic category does assist in supporting those who need treatment or help.

People become aware that they may be transgender at different ages. Even if someone does not have a full (or even partial) understanding of gender terminology and its implications, they can still develop an awareness that their gender assigned at birth does not align with their gender identity. Society, particularly in the United States, has been reluctant to accept transgender identities at any age, but we have particular difficulty accepting those identities in children. Many people feel that children are too young to understand their feelings, and that they may "grow out of it." And it is true that some children who verbalize their identification or desire to live as another gender may ultimately decide to live in alignment with their assigned gender. But if a child consistently describes themselves as a gender (or as both genders) and/or expresses themselves as that gender over a long period of time, their feelings cannot be attributed to going through a "phase" (Mayo Clinic 2021).

Some children, like many transgender people, may feel pressure to conform to social norms, which may lead them to suppress or hide their identity. Experts find evidence of gender dysphoria—the long-term distress associated with gender identification—in children as young as seven (Zaliznyak 2020). Again, most children have a limited understanding of the social and societal impacts of being transgender, but they can feel strongly that they are not aligned with their assigned sex. And considering that many transgender people do not come out or begin to transition until much later in life—well into their twenties—they may live for a long time under that distress.

Discrimination Against LGBTQ people

Recall from the chapter on Crime and Deviance that the FBI's hate crime data indicates that crimes against LGBTQ people have been increasing, and that those crimes account for nearly one in five hate crimes

committed in the United States (FBI 2020). While the disbanding of anti-LGBTQ laws in the United States has reduced government or law enforcement oppression or abuse, it has not eliminated it. In other countries, however, LGBTQ people can face even more danger. Reports from the United Nations, Human Rights Watch, and the International Lesbian, Gay, Trans, and Intersex Association (ILGA) indicate that many countries impose penalties for same-sex relationships, gender nonconformity, and other acts deemed opposed to the cultural or religious observances of the nation. As of 2020, six United Nations members imposed the death penalty for consensual same-sex acts, and another 61 countries penalized same sex acts, through jail time, corporal punishment (such as lashing), or other measures. These countries include prominent United States allies such as the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia (both of which can legally impose the death penalty for same-sex acts). Some nearby nations criminalize same-sex relations: Barbados can impose lifetime imprisonment for same-sex acts, and Jamaica, St. Kitts and Nevis, and Saint Lucia have lesser penalties, though Saint Lucia's government indicates it does not enforce those laws (ILGA 2020). Even when the government criminal code does not formalize anti-LGBTQ penalties, local ordinances or government agents may have wide discretion. For example, many people fleeing Central American countries do so as a result of anti-LGBTQ violence, sometimes at the hands of police (Human Rights Watch 2020).

Such severe treatment at the hands of the government is no longer the case in the United States. But until the 1960s and 1970s, every state in the country criminalized same-sex acts, which allowed the military to dishonorably discharge gay veterans (stripping them of all benefits) and law enforcement agencies to investigate and detain people suspected of same-sex acts. Police regularly raided bars and clubs simply for allowing gay and lesbian people to dance together. Public decency laws allowed police to arrest people if they did not wear clothing aligning with the typical dress for their biological sex. Criminalization of same-sex acts began to unravel at the state level in the 1960's and 1970s, and was fully invalidated in a 2003 Supreme Court decision.

Hate crimes and anti-LGBTQ legislation are overt types of discrimination, but LGBTQ people are also treated differently from straight and cisgender people in schools, housing, and in healthcare. This can have effects on mental health, employment and financial opportunities, and relationships. For example, more than half of LGBTQ adults and 70 percent of those who are transgender or gender nonconforming report experiencing discrimination from a health care professional; this leads to delays or reluctance in seeking care or preventative visits, which has negative health outcomes (American Heart Association 2020). Similarly, elderly LGBTQ people are far less likely to come out to healthcare professionals than are straight or cisgender people, which may also lead to healthcare issues at an age that is typically highly reliant on medical care (Foglia 2014).

Much of this discrimination is based on stereotypes and misinformation. Some is based on **heterosexism**, which Herek (1990) suggests is both an ideology and a set of institutional practices that privilege heterosexuals and heterosexuality over other sexual orientations. Much like racism and sexism, heterosexism is a systematic disadvantage embedded in our social institutions, offering power to those who conform to heterosexual orientation while simultaneously disadvantaging those who do not. *Homophobia*, an extreme or irrational aversion to LGB people or people thought to be LGB people, accounts for further stereotyping and discrimination. *Transphobia* is a fear, hatred, or dislike of transgender people, and/or prejudice and discrimination against them by individuals or institutions.

Fighting discrimination and being an ally



FIGURE 12.7 Hashtags, pride parades, and other activism are important elements of supporting LGBTQ people, but most experts and advocates agree that some of the most important steps are ones taken internally to better educate ourselves, and on interpersonal levels with friends, coworkers, and family members. (Credit: Lars Verket/flickr)

Major policies to prevent discrimination based on sexual orientation have not come into effect until recent years. In 2011, President Obama overturned “don’t ask, don’t tell,” a controversial policy that required gay and lesbian people in the US military to keep their sexuality undisclosed. In 2015, the Supreme Court ruled in the case of *Obberfell vs. Hodges* that the right to civil marriage was guaranteed to same-sex couples. And, as discussed above, in the landmark 2020 Supreme Court decision added sexual orientation and gender identity as categories protected from employment discrimination by the Civil Rights Act. At the same time, laws passed in several states permit some level of discrimination against same-sex couples and other LGBTQ people based on a person's individual religious beliefs or prejudices.

Supporting LGBTQ people requires effort to better understand them without making assumptions. Understand people by listening, respecting them, and by remembering that every person—LGBTQ or otherwise— is different. Being gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, or asexual is not a choice, but the way a person expresses or reveals that reality is their choice. Your experience or knowledge of other LGBTQ people (even your own experience if you are LGBTQ) cannot dictate how another person feels or acts. Finally, as discussed in the Race and Ethnicity chapter, intersectionality means that people are defined by more than their gender identity and sexual orientation. People from different age groups, races, abilities, and experiences within the LGBTQ community have different perspectives and needs.

While each individual has their own perspective, respecting their feelings and protecting their equality and wellbeing does have some common elements. These include referring to a person as they would like to be referred to, including the avoidance of abbreviations or slang terms unless you are sure they accept them. For example, many people and organizations (including those referenced in this chapter) use the abbreviation “trans” to represent transgender people, but a non-transgender person should not use that abbreviation unless they know the person or subject is comfortable with it. Respect also includes people's right to privacy: One person should never out a person to someone else or assume that someone is publicly out. LGBTQ allies can

support everyone's rights to be equal and empowered members of society, including within organizations, institutions, and even individual classrooms.

Supporting others may require a change in mindset and practice. For example, if a transgender person wants to be referred to by a different name, or use different pronouns, it might take some getting used to, especially if you have spent years referring to the person by another name or by other pronouns. However, making the change is worthwhile and not overly onerous.

You can learn more about being an ally through campus, government, and organizational resources like the Human Rights Campaign's guide <https://www.hrc.org/resources/being-an-lgbtq-ally>

Language is an important part of culture, and it has been evolving to better include and describe people who are not gender-binary. In many languages, including English, pronouns are gendered. That is, pronouns are intended to identify the gender of the individual being referenced. English has traditionally been binary, providing only “he/him/his,” for male subjects and “she/her/hers,” for female subjects.

This binary system excludes those who identify as neither male nor female. The word “they,” which was used for hundreds of years as a singular pronoun, is more inclusive. As a result, in fact, Merriam Webster selected this use of “they” as Word of the Year for 2019. “They” and other pronouns are now used to reference those who do not identify as male or female on the spectrum of gender identities.

Gender inclusive language has impacts beyond personal references. In biology, anatomy, and healthcare, for example, people commonly refer to organs or processes with gender associations. However, more accurate and inclusive language avoids such associations. For example, *women* do not produce eggs; *ovaries* produce eggs. *Men* are not more likely to be color-blind; those with *XY chromosomes* are more likely to be color blind (Gender Inclusive Biology 2019).

Beyond the language of gender, the language of society and culture itself can be either a barrier or an opening to inclusivity. Societal norms are important sociological concepts, and behaviors outside of those norms can lead to exclusion. By disassociating gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation from the concept of norms, we can begin to eliminate the implicit and explicit biases regarding those realities. In everyday terms, this can take the form of avoiding references to what is normal or not normal in regard to sexuality or gender (Canadian Public Health Association 2019).

12.2 Gender and Gender Inequality

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Explain the influence of socialization on gender roles in the United States
- Explain the stratification of gender in major American institutions
- Provide examples of gender inequality in the United States
- Describe the rise of feminism in the United States
- Describe gender from the view of each sociological perspective



FIGURE 12.8 Traditional images of U.S. gender roles reinforce the idea that women should be subordinate to men. (Credit: Sport Suburban/flickr)

Gender and Socialization

The phrase “boys will be boys” is often used to justify behavior such as pushing, shoving, or other forms of aggression from young boys. The phrase implies that such behavior is unchangeable and something that is part of a boy’s nature. Aggressive behavior, when it does not inflict significant harm, is often accepted from boys and men because it is congruent with the cultural script for masculinity. The “script” written by society is in some ways similar to a script written by a playwright. Just as a playwright expects actors to adhere to a prescribed script, society expects women and men to behave according to the expectations of their respective gender roles. Scripts are generally learned through a process known as socialization, which teaches people to behave according to social norms.

Socialization

Children learn at a young age that there are distinct expectations for boys and girls. Cross-cultural studies reveal that children are aware of gender roles by age two or three. At four or five, most children are firmly entrenched in culturally appropriate gender roles (Kane 1996). Children acquire these roles through socialization, a process in which people learn to behave in a particular way as dictated by societal values, beliefs, and attitudes. For example, society often views riding a motorcycle as a masculine activity and, therefore, considers it to be part of the male gender role. Attitudes such as this are typically based on stereotypes, oversimplified notions about members of a group. Gender stereotyping involves overgeneralizing about the attitudes, traits, or behavior patterns of women or men. For example, women may be thought of as too timid or weak to ride a motorcycle.



FIGURE 12.9 Although our society may have a stereotype that associates motorcycles with men, women make up a sizable portion of the biker community. (Credit: Robert Couse-Baker/flickr)

Gender stereotypes form the basis of sexism. **Sexism** refers to prejudiced beliefs that value one sex over another. It varies in its level of severity. In parts of the world where women are strongly undervalued, young girls may not be given the same access to nutrition, healthcare, and education as boys. Further, they will grow up believing they deserve to be treated differently from boys (UNICEF 2011; Thorne 1993). While it is illegal in the United States when practiced as discrimination, unequal treatment of women continues to pervade social life. It should be noted that discrimination based on sex occurs at both the micro- and macro-levels. Many sociologists focus on discrimination that is built into the social structure; this type of discrimination is known as institutional discrimination (Pincus 2008).

Gender socialization occurs through four major agents of socialization: family, education, peer groups, and mass media. Each agent reinforces gender roles by creating and maintaining normative expectations for gender-specific behavior. Exposure also occurs through secondary agents such as religion and the workplace. Repeated exposure to these agents over time leads men and women into a false sense that they are acting naturally rather than following a socially constructed role.

Family is the first agent of socialization. There is considerable evidence that parents socialize sons and daughters differently. Generally speaking, girls are given more latitude to step outside of their prescribed gender role (Coltrane and Adams 2004; Kimmel 2000; Raffaelli and Ontai 2004). However, differential socialization typically results in greater privileges afforded to sons. For instance, boys are allowed more autonomy and independence at an earlier age than daughters. They may be given fewer restrictions on appropriate clothing, dating habits, or curfew. Sons are also often free from performing domestic duties such as cleaning or cooking and other household tasks that are considered feminine. Daughters are limited by their expectation to be passive and nurturing, generally obedient, and to assume many of the domestic responsibilities.

Even when parents set gender equality as a goal, there may be underlying indications of inequality. For example, boys may be asked to take out the garbage or perform other tasks that require strength or toughness, while girls may be asked to fold laundry or perform duties that require neatness and care. It has been found that fathers are firmer in their expectations for gender conformity than are mothers, and their expectations are stronger for sons than they are for daughters (Kimmel 2000). This is true in many types of activities, including preference for toys, play styles, discipline, chores, and personal achievements. As a result, boys tend

to be particularly attuned to their father's disapproval when engaging in an activity that might be considered feminine, like dancing or singing (Coltrane and Adams 2008). Parental socialization and normative expectations also vary along lines of social class, race, and ethnicity. African American families, for instance, are more likely than Caucasians to model an egalitarian role structure for their children (Staples and Boulin Johnson 2004).

The reinforcement of gender roles and stereotypes continues once a child reaches school age. Until very recently, schools were rather explicit in their efforts to stratify boys and girls. The first step toward stratification was segregation. Girls were encouraged to take home economics or humanities courses and boys to take math and science.

Studies suggest that gender socialization still occurs in schools today, perhaps in less obvious forms (Lips 2004). Teachers may not even realize they are acting in ways that reproduce gender differentiated behavior patterns. Yet any time they ask students to arrange their seats or line up according to gender, teachers may be asserting that boys and girls should be treated differently (Thorne 1993).

Even in levels as low as kindergarten, schools subtly convey messages to girls indicating that they are less intelligent or less important than boys. For example, in a study of teacher responses to male and female students, data indicated that teachers praised male students far more than female students. Teachers interrupted girls more often and gave boys more opportunities to expand on their ideas (Sadker and Sadker 1994). Further, in social as well as academic situations, teachers have traditionally treated boys and girls in opposite ways, reinforcing a sense of competition rather than collaboration (Thorne 1993). Boys are also permitted a greater degree of freedom to break rules or commit minor acts of deviance, whereas girls are expected to follow rules carefully and adopt an obedient role (Ready 2001).

Mimicking the actions of significant others is the first step in the development of a separate sense of self (Mead 1934). Like adults, children become agents who actively facilitate and apply normative gender expectations to those around them. When children do not conform to the appropriate gender role, they may face negative sanctions such as being criticized or marginalized by their peers. Though many of these sanctions are informal, they can be quite severe. For example, a girl who wishes to take karate class instead of dance lessons may be called a “tomboy” and face difficulty gaining acceptance from both male and female peer groups (Ready 2001). Boys, especially, are subject to intense ridicule for gender nonconformity (Coltrane and Adams 2004; Kimmel 2000).

Mass media serves as another significant agent of gender socialization. In television and movies, women tend to have less significant roles and are often portrayed as wives or mothers. When women are given a lead role, it often falls into one of two extremes: a wholesome, saint-like figure or a malevolent, hypersexual figure (Etaugh and Bridges 2003). This same inequality is pervasive in children's movies (Smith 2008). Research indicates that in the ten top-grossing G-rated movies released between 1991 and 2013, nine out of ten characters were male (Smith 2008).

Television commercials and other forms of advertising also reinforce inequality and gender-based stereotypes. Women are almost exclusively present in ads promoting cooking, cleaning, or childcare-related products (Davis 1993). Think about the last time you saw a man star in a dishwasher or laundry detergent commercial. In general, women are underrepresented in roles that involve leadership, intelligence, or a balanced psyche. Of particular concern is the depiction of women in ways that are dehumanizing, especially in music videos. Even in mainstream advertising, however, themes intermingling violence and sexuality are quite common (Kilbourne 2000).

Social Stratification and Inequality

Stratification refers to a system in which groups of people experience unequal access to basic, yet highly valuable, social resources. There is a long history of gender stratification in the United States. When looking to the past, it would appear that society has made great strides in terms of abolishing some of the most blatant

forms of gender inequality (see timeline below) but underlying effects of male dominance still permeate many aspects of society.

- Before 1809—Women could not execute a will
- Before 1840—Women were not allowed to own or control property
- Before 1920—Women were not permitted to vote
- Before 1963—Employers could legally pay a woman less than a man for the same work
- Before 1973—Women did not have the right to a safe and legal abortion (Imbornoni 2009)

The Pay Gap

Despite making up nearly half (49.8 percent) of payroll employment, men vastly outnumber women in authoritative, powerful, and, therefore, high-earning jobs (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). Even when a woman's employment status is equal to a man's, she will generally make only 81 cents for every dollar made by her male counterpart (Payscale 2020). Women in the paid labor force also still do the majority of the unpaid work at home. On an average day, 84 percent of women (compared to 67 percent of men) spend time doing household management activities (U.S. Census Bureau 2011). This double duty keeps working women in a subordinate role in the family structure (Hochschild and Machung 1989).

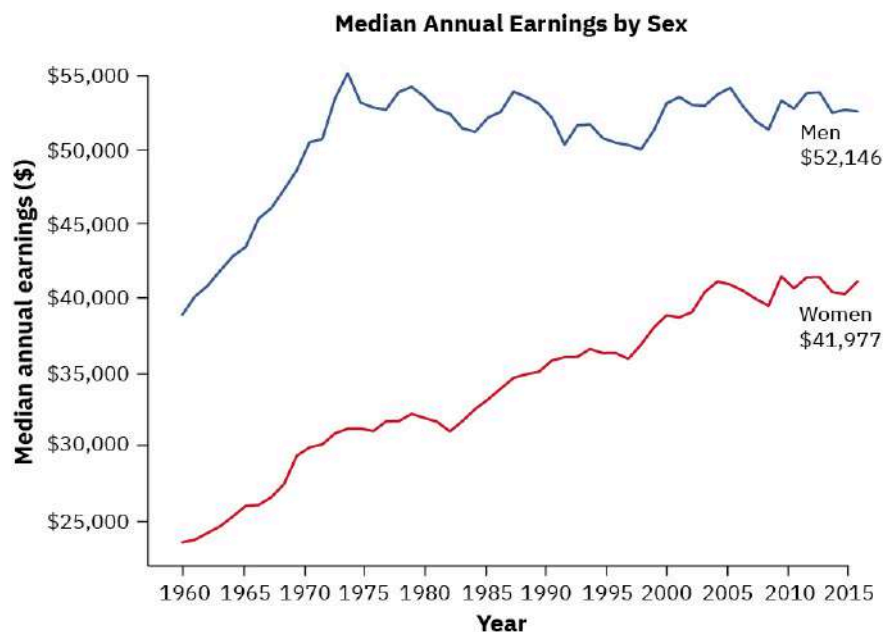


FIGURE 12.10 In 2017 men's overall median earnings were \$52,146 and women's were \$41,977. This means that women earned 80.1% of what men earned in the United States. (Credit: Women's Bureau, U.S. Department of Labor)

Gender stratification through the division of labor is not exclusive to the United States. According to George Murdock's classic work, *Outline of World Cultures* (1954), all societies classify work by gender. When a pattern appears in all societies, it is called a cultural universal. While the phenomenon of assigning work by gender is universal, its specifics are not. The same task is not assigned to either men or women worldwide. But the way each task's associated gender is valued is notable. In Murdock's examination of the division of labor among 324 societies around the world, he found that in nearly all cases the jobs assigned to men were given greater prestige (Murdock and White 1968). Even if the job types were very similar and the differences slight, men's work was still considered more vital.



FIGURE 12.11 In some cultures, women do all of the household chores with no help from men, as doing housework is a sign of weakness, considered by society as a feminine trait. (Credit: Evil Erin/flickr)

Part of the gender pay gap can be attributed to unique barriers faced by women regarding work experience and promotion opportunities. A mother of young children is more likely to drop out of the labor force for several years or work on a reduced schedule than is the father. As a result, women in their 30s and 40s are likely, on average, to have less job experience than men. This effect becomes more evident when considering the pay rates of two groups of women: those who did *not* leave the workforce and those who did: In the United States, childless women with the same education and experience levels as men are typically paid with closer (but not exact) parity to men. However, women with families and children are paid less: Mothers are recommended a 7.9 percent lower starting salary than non-mothers, which is 8.6 percent lower than men (Correll 2007).

This evidence points to levels of discrimination that go beyond behaviors by individual companies or organizations. As discussed earlier in the gender roles section, many of these gaps are rooted in America's social patterns of discrimination, which involve the roles that different genders play in child-rearing, rather than individual discrimination by employers in hiring and salary decisions. On the other hand, legal and ethical practices demand that organizations do their part to promote more equity among all genders.

The Glass Ceiling

The idea that women are unable to reach the executive suite is known as the glass ceiling. It is an invisible barrier that women encounter when trying to win jobs in the highest level of business. At the beginning of 2021, for example, a record 41 of the world's largest 500 companies were run by women. While a vast improvement over the number twenty years earlier – where only two of the companies were run by women – these 41 chief executives still only represent eight percent of those large companies (Newcomb 2020).

Why do women have a more difficult time reaching the top of a company? One idea is that there is still a stereotype in the United States that women aren't aggressive enough to handle the boardroom or that they tend to seek jobs and work with other women (Reiners 2019). Other issues stem from the gender biases based on gender roles and motherhood discussed above.

Another idea is that women lack mentors, executives who take an interest and get them into the right meetings

and introduce them to the right people to succeed (Murrell & Blake-Beard 2017).

Women in Politics

One of the most important places for women to help other women is in politics. Historically in the United States, like many other institutions, political representation has been mostly made up of White men. By not having women in government, their issues are being decided by people who don't share their perspective. The number of women elected to serve in Congress has increased over the years, but does not yet accurately reflect the general population. For example, in 2018, the population of the United States was 49 percent male and 51 percent female, but the population of Congress was 78.8 percent male and 21.2 percent female (Manning 2018). Over the years, the number of women in the federal government has increased, but until it accurately reflects the population, there will be inequalities in our laws.

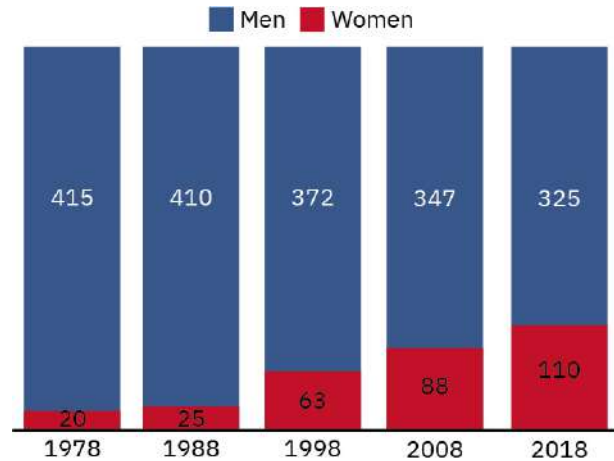


FIGURE 12.12 Breakdown of Congressional Membership by Gender. 2021 saw a record number of women in Congress, with 120 women serving in the House and 24 serving in the Senate. Gender representation has been steadily increasing over time, but is not close to being equal. (Credit: Based on data from Center for American Women in Politics, Rutgers University)

Movements for Change: Feminism

One of the underlying issues that continues to plague women in the United States is **misogyny**. This is the hatred of or, aversion to, or prejudice against women. Over the years misogyny has evolved as an ideology that men are superior to women in all aspects of life. There have been multiple movements to try and fight this prejudice.

In 1963, writer and feminist Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique* in which she contested the post-World War II belief that it was women's sole destiny to marry and bear children. Friedan's book began to raise the consciousness of many women who agreed that homemaking in the suburbs sapped them of their individualism and left them unsatisfied. In 1966, the National Organization for Women (NOW) formed and proceeded to set an agenda for the *feminist movement*. Framed by a statement of purpose written by Friedan, the agenda began by proclaiming NOW's goal to make possible women's participation in all aspects of American life and to gain for them all the rights enjoyed by men.

Feminists engaged in protests and actions designed to bring awareness and change. For example, the New York Radical Women demonstrated at the 1968 Miss America Pageant in Atlantic City to bring attention to the contest's—and society's—exploitation of women. The protestors tossed instruments of women's oppression, including high-heeled shoes, curlers, girdles, and bras, into a "freedom trash can." News accounts incorrectly described the protest as a "bra burning," which at the time was a way to demean and trivialize the issue of women's rights (Gay 2018).

Other protests gave women a more significant voice in a male-dominated social, political, and entertainment

climate. For decades, *Ladies Home Journal* had been a highly influential women's magazine, managed and edited almost entirely by men. Men even wrote the advice columns and beauty articles. In 1970, protesters held a sit-in at the magazine's offices, demanding that the company hire a woman editor-in-chief, add women and non-White writers at fair pay, and expand the publication's focus.

Feminists were concerned with far more than protests, however. In the 1970s, they opened battered women's shelters and successfully fought for protection from employment discrimination for pregnant women, reform of rape laws (such as the abolition of laws requiring a witness to corroborate a woman's report of rape), criminalization of domestic violence, and funding for schools that sought to counter sexist stereotypes of women. In 1973, the U.S. Supreme Court in *Roe v. Wade* invalidated a number of state laws under which abortions obtained during the first three months of pregnancy were illegal. This made a nontherapeutic abortion a legal medical procedure nationwide.

Gloria Steinem had pushed through gender barriers to take on serious journalism subjects, and had emerged as a prominent advocate for women's rights. Through her work, Steinem met Dorothy Pittman-Hughes, who had founded New York City's first shelter for domestic violence victims as well as the city's Agency for Child Development. Together they founded *Ms. Magazine*, which avoided articles on homemaking and fashion in favor of pieces on women's rights and empowerment. *Ms.* showcased powerful and accomplished women such as Shirley Chisholm and Sissy Farenthold, and was among the first publications to bring domestic violence, sexual harassment, and body image issues to the national conversation (Pogrebrin 2011).

Many advances in women's rights were the result of women's greater engagement in politics. For example, Patsy Mink, the first Asian American woman elected to Congress, was the co-author of the Education Amendments Act of 1972, Title IX of which prohibits sex discrimination in education. Mink had been interested in fighting discrimination in education since her youth, when she opposed racial segregation in campus housing while a student at the University of Nebraska. She went to law school after being denied admission to medical school because of her gender. Like Mink, many other women sought and won political office, many with the help of the National Women's Political Caucus (NWPC). In 1971, the NWPC was formed by Bella Abzug, Gloria Steinem, Shirley Chisholm, and other leading feminists to encourage women's participation in political parties, elect women to office, and raise money for their campaign.



FIGURE 12.13 “Unbought and Unbossed”: Shirley Chisholm was the first Black United States Congresswoman, the co-founder of the Congressional Black Caucus, and a candidate for a major-party Presidential nomination.

Shirley Chisholm personally took up the mantle of women's involvement in politics. Born of immigrant parents, she earned degrees from Brooklyn College and Columbia University, and began a career in early childhood education and advocacy. In the 1950's she joined various political action groups, worked on election

campaigns, and pushed for housing and economic reforms. After leaving one organization over its refusal to involve women in the decision-making process, she sought to increase gender and racial diversity within political and activist organizations throughout New York City. In 1968, she became the first Black woman elected to Congress. Refusing to take the quiet role expected of new Representatives, she immediately began sponsoring bills and initiatives. She spoke out against the Vietnam War, and fought for programs such as Head Start and the national school lunch program, which was eventually signed into law after Chisholm led an effort to override a presidential veto. Chisholm would eventually undertake a groundbreaking presidential run in 1972, and is viewed as paving the way for other women, and especially women of color, achieving political and social prominence (Emmrich 2019).

Theoretical Perspectives on Gender

Sociological theories help sociologists to develop questions and interpret data. For example, a sociologist studying why middle-school girls are more likely than their male counterparts to fall behind grade-level expectations in math and science might use a feminist perspective to frame her research. Another scholar might proceed from the conflict perspective to investigate why women are underrepresented in political office, and an interactionist might examine how the symbols of femininity interact with symbols of political authority to affect how women in Congress are treated by their male counterparts in meetings.

Structural Functionalism

Structural functionalism has provided one of the most important perspectives of sociological research in the twentieth century and has been a major influence on research in the social sciences, including gender studies. Viewing the family as the most integral component of society, assumptions about gender roles within marriage assume a prominent place in this perspective.

Functionalists argue that gender roles were established well before the pre-industrial era when men typically took care of responsibilities outside of the home, such as hunting, and women typically took care of the domestic responsibilities in or around the home. These roles were considered functional because women were often limited by the physical restraints of pregnancy and nursing and unable to leave the home for long periods of time. Once established, these roles were passed on to subsequent generations since they served as an effective means of keeping the family system functioning properly.

When changes occurred in the social and economic climate of the United States during World War II, changes in the family structure also occurred. Many women had to assume the role of breadwinner (or modern hunter-gatherer) alongside their domestic role in order to stabilize a rapidly changing society. When the men returned from war and wanted to reclaim their jobs, society fell back into a state of imbalance, as many women did not want to forfeit their wage-earning positions (Hawke 2007).

Conflict Theory

According to conflict theory, society is a struggle for dominance among social groups (like women versus men) that compete for scarce resources. When sociologists examine gender from this perspective, we can view men as the dominant group and women as the subordinate group. According to conflict theory, social problems are created when dominant groups exploit or oppress subordinate groups. Consider the Women's Suffrage Movement or the debate over women's "right to choose" their reproductive futures. It is difficult for women to rise above men, as dominant group members create the rules for success and opportunity in society (Farrington and Chertok 1993).

Friedrich Engels, a German sociologist, studied family structure and gender roles. Engels suggested that the same owner-worker relationship seen in the labor force is also seen in the household, with women assuming the role of the proletariat. This is due to women's dependence on men for the attainment of wages, which is even worse for women who are entirely dependent upon their spouses for economic support. Contemporary conflict theorists suggest that when women become wage earners, they can gain power in the family structure

and create more democratic arrangements in the home, although they may still carry the majority of the domestic burden, as noted earlier (Rismanand and Johnson-Sumerford 1998).

Feminist Theory

Feminist theory is a type of conflict theory that examines inequalities in gender-related issues. It uses the conflict approach to examine the maintenance of gender roles and inequalities. Radical feminism, in particular, considers the role of the family in perpetuating male dominance. In patriarchal societies, men's contributions are seen as more valuable than those of women. Patriarchal perspectives and arrangements are widespread and taken for granted. As a result, women's viewpoints tend to be silenced or marginalized to the point of being discredited or considered invalid.

Sanday's study of the Indonesian Minangkabau (2004) revealed that in societies some consider to be matriarchies (where women comprise the dominant group), women and men tend to work cooperatively rather than competitively regardless of whether a job is considered feminine by U.S. standards. The men, however, do not experience the sense of bifurcated consciousness under this social structure that modern U.S. females encounter (Sanday 2004).

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism aims to understand human behavior by analyzing the critical role of symbols in human interaction. This is certainly relevant to the discussion of masculinity and femininity. Imagine that you walk into a bank hoping to get a small loan for school, a home, or a small business venture. If you meet with a male loan officer, you may state your case logically by listing all the hard numbers that make you a qualified applicant as a means of appealing to the analytical characteristics associated with masculinity. If you meet with a female loan officer, you may make an emotional appeal by stating your good intentions as a means of appealing to the caring characteristics associated with femininity.

Because the meanings attached to symbols are socially created and not natural, and fluid, not static, we act and react to symbols based on the current assigned meaning. The word *gay*, for example, once meant "cheerful," but by the 1960s it carried the primary meaning of "homosexual." In transition, it was even known to mean "careless" or "bright and showing" (Oxford American Dictionary 2010). Furthermore, the word *gay* (as it refers to a person), carried a somewhat negative and unfavorable meaning fifty years ago, but it has since gained more neutral and even positive connotations. When people perform tasks or possess characteristics based on the gender role assigned to them, they are said to be **doing gender**. This notion is based on the work of West and Zimmerman (1987). Whether we are expressing our masculinity or femininity, West and Zimmerman argue, we are always "doing gender." Thus, gender is something we do or perform, not something we are.

In other words, both gender and sexuality are socially constructed. The **social construction of sexuality** refers to the way in which socially created definitions about the cultural appropriateness of sex-linked behavior shape the way people see and experience sexuality. This is in marked contrast to theories of sex, gender, and sexuality that link male and female behavior to **biological determinism**, or the belief that men and women behave differently due to differences in their biology.

SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Being Male, Being Female, and Being Healthy

In 1971, Broverman and Broverman conducted a groundbreaking study on the traits mental health workers ascribed to males and females. When asked to name the characteristics of a female, the list featured words such as unaggressive, gentle, emotional, tactful, less logical, not ambitious, dependent, passive, and neat. The list of male characteristics featured words such as aggressive, rough, unemotional, blunt, logical, direct, active, and

sloppy (Seem and Clark 2006). Later, when asked to describe the characteristics of a healthy person (not gender specific), the list was nearly identical to that of a male.

This study uncovered the general assumption that being female is associated with being somewhat unhealthy or not of sound mind. This concept seems extremely dated, but in 2006, Seem and Clark replicated the study and found similar results. Again, the characteristics associated with a healthy male were very similar to that of a healthy (genderless) adult. The list of characteristics associated with being female broadened somewhat but did not show significant change from the original study (Seem and Clark 2006). This interpretation of feminine characteristic may help us one day better understand gender disparities in certain illnesses, such as why one in eight women can be expected to develop clinical depression in her lifetime (National Institute of Mental Health 1999). Perhaps these diagnoses are not just a reflection of women's health, but also a reflection of society's labeling of female characteristics, or the result of institutionalized sexism.

12.3 Sexuality

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Differentiate among attitudes associated with sex and sexuality
- Describe sex education issues in the United States
- Discuss theoretical perspectives on sex and sexuality



FIGURE 12.14 Sexual practices can differ greatly among groups. Recent trends include the finding that married couples have sex more frequently than do singles and that 27 percent of married couples in their 30s have sex at least twice a week (NSSHB 2010). (Credit: epSos.de/flickr)

Sexual Attitudes and Practices

In the area of sexuality, sociologists focus their attention on sexual attitudes and practices, not on physiology or anatomy. As mentioned earlier, **sexuality** is viewed as a person's capacity for sexual feelings. Studying sexual attitudes and practices is a particularly interesting field of sociology because sexual behavior is a cultural universal. Throughout time and place, the vast majority of human beings have participated in sexual

relationships (Broude 2003). Each society, however, interprets sexuality and sexual activity in different ways. Many societies around the world have different attitudes about premarital sex, the age of sexual consent, homosexuality, masturbation, and other sexual behaviors (Widmer, Treas, and Newcomb 1998). At the same time, sociologists have learned that certain norms are shared among most societies. The incest taboo is present in every society, though which relative is deemed unacceptable for sex varies widely from culture to culture. For example, sometimes the relatives of the father are considered acceptable sexual partners for a woman while the relatives of the mother are not. Likewise, societies generally have norms that reinforce their accepted social system of sexuality.

What is considered “normal” in terms of sexual behavior is based on the mores and values of the society. Societies that value monogamy, for example, would likely oppose extramarital sex. Individuals are socialized to sexual attitudes by their family, education system, peers, media, and religion. Historically, religion has been the greatest influence on sexual behavior in most societies, but in more recent years, peers and the media have emerged as two of the strongest influences, particularly among U.S. teens (Potard, Courtois, and Rusch 2008). Let us take a closer look at sexual attitudes in the United States and around the world.

Sexuality around the World

Cross-national research on sexual attitudes in industrialized nations reveals that normative standards differ across the world. For example, several studies have shown that Scandinavian students are more tolerant of premarital sex than are U.S. students (Grose 2007). A study of 37 countries reported that non-Western societies—like China, Iran, and India—valued chastity highly in a potential mate, while Western European countries—such as France, the Netherlands, and Sweden—placed little value on prior sexual experiences (Buss 1989).

Even among Western cultures, attitudes can differ. For example, according to a 33,590-person survey across 24 countries, 89 percent of Swedes responded that there is nothing wrong with premarital sex, while only 42 percent of Irish responded this way. From the same study, 93 percent of Filipinos responded that sex before age 16 is always wrong or almost always wrong, while only 75 percent of Russians responded this way (Widmer, Treas, and Newcomb 1998). Sexual attitudes can also vary within a country. For instance, 45 percent of Spaniards responded that homosexuality is always wrong, while 42 percent responded that it is never wrong; only 13 percent responded somewhere in the middle (Widmer, Treas, and Newcomb 1998).

Of industrialized nations, several European nations are thought to be the most liberal when it comes to attitudes about sex, including sexual practices and sexual openness. Sweden, for example, has very few regulations on sexual images in the media, and sex education, which starts around age six, is a compulsory part of Swedish school curricula. Switzerland, Belgium, Iceland, Denmark, and The Netherlands have similar policies. Their more open approach to sex has helped countries avoid some of the major social problems associated with sex. For example, rates of teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease are among the world’s lowest in Switzerland and the Netherlands – lower than other European countries and far lower than the United States (Grose 2007 and Dutch News 2017). It would appear that these approaches are models for the benefits of sexual freedom and frankness. However, implementing their ideals and policies regarding sexuality in other, more politically conservative, nations would likely be met with resistance.

Sexuality in the United States

The United States prides itself on being the land of the “free,” but it is rather restrictive when it comes to its citizens’ general attitudes about sex compared to other industrialized nations. In an international survey, 25 percent of U.S. respondents stated that premarital sex is always wrong, while the average among the 24 countries surveyed was 17 percent, with less than ten percent of respondents from France, Germany, and Spain saying premarital sex was unacceptable (Chamie 2018). Similar discrepancies were found in questions about the condemnation of sex before the age of 16, extramarital sex, and homosexuality, with total disapproval of these acts being 12, 13, and 11 percent higher, respectively, in the United States, than the

study's average (Widmer, Treas, and Newcomb 1998). U.S. culture is particularly restrictive in its attitudes about sex when it comes to women and sexuality.

It is widely believed that men are more sexual than are women. In fact, there was a popular notion that men think about sex every seven seconds. Research, however, suggests that men think about sex an average of 19 times per day, which is closer to once an hour, compared to 10 times per day for women (Fisher, Moore, and Pittenger 2011).

Belief that men have—or have the right to—more sexual urges than women creates a double standard. Ira Reiss, a pioneer researcher in the field of sexual studies, defined the *double standard* as prohibiting premarital sexual intercourse for women but allowing it for men (Reiss 1960). This standard has evolved into allowing women to engage in premarital sex only within committed love relationships, but allowing men to engage in sexual relationships with as many partners as they wish without condition (Milhausen and Herold 1999). Due to this double standard, a woman is likely to have fewer sexual partners in her life time than a man. According to a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) survey, the average thirty-five-year-old woman has had three opposite-sex sexual partners while the average thirty-five-year-old man has had twice as many (Centers for Disease Control 2011).

The future of a society's sexual attitudes may be somewhat predicted by the values and beliefs that a country's youth expresses about sex and sexuality. Data from the most recent National Survey of Family Growth reveals that 70 percent of boys and 78 percent of girls ages fifteen to nineteen said they “agree” or “strongly agree” that “it’s okay for an unmarried female to have a child” (National Survey of Family Growth 2013). In a separate survey, 65 percent of teens stated that they “strongly agreed” or “somewhat agreed” that although waiting until marriage for sex is a nice idea, it’s not realistic (NBC News 2005). This does not mean that today’s youth have given up traditional sexual values such as monogamy. Nearly all college men (98.9 percent) and women (99.2 percent) who participated in a 2002 study on sexual attitudes stated they wished to settle down with one mutually exclusive sexual partner at some point in their lives, ideally within the next five years (Pedersen et al. 2002).

Sex Education

One of the biggest controversies regarding sexual attitudes is sexual education in U.S. classrooms. Unlike many other countries, sex education is not required in all public school curricula in the United States. The heart of the controversy is not about whether sex education should be taught in school (studies have shown that only seven percent of U.S. adults oppose sex education in schools); it is about the *type* of sex education that should be taught.

Much of the debate is over the issue of abstinence as compared to a comprehensive sex education program. Abstinence-only programs focus on avoiding sex until marriage and/or delaying it as long as possible. So they do not focus on other types of prevention of unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections. As a result, according to the Sexuality and Information Council of the United States, only 38 percent of high schools and 14 percent of middle schools across the country teach all 19 topics identified as critical for sex education by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Janfaza 2020).

Research suggests that while government officials may still be debating about the content of sexual education in public schools, the majority of U.S. adults are not. Two-thirds (67 percent) of Americans say education about safer sexual practices is more effective than abstinence-only education in terms of reducing unintended pregnancies. A slightly higher percentage—69 percent—say that emphasizing safer sexual practices and contraception in sexuality education is a better way to reduce the spread of STIs than is emphasizing abstinence (Davis 2018).

Even with these clear majorities in favor of comprehensive education, the Federal government offers roughly \$85 million per year to communities that will drive abstinence-only sex education (Columbia Public Health 2017 a). The results, as stated earlier, are relatively clear: the United States has nearly four times the rate of

teenage pregnancy than a country like Germany, which has a comprehensive sex education program.

In a similar educational issue not necessarily related to sexuality, researchers and public health advocates find that young girls feel underprepared for puberty. Ages of first menstruation (menarche) and breast development are continually declining in the United States, but education about these changes typically doesn't begin until middle school, which is generally too late. Young people indicate concerns about misinformation and discomfort during the informal conversations about the topics with friends, sisters, or mothers (Columbia Public Health 2017 b)

Sociological Perspectives on Sex and Sexuality

Sociologists representing all three major theoretical perspectives study the role sexuality plays in social life today. Scholars recognize that sexuality continues to be an important and defining social location and that the manner in which sexuality is constructed has a significant effect on perceptions, interactions, and outcomes.

Structural Functionalism

When it comes to sexuality, functionalists stress the importance of regulating sexual behavior to ensure marital cohesion and family stability. Since functionalists identify the family unit as the most integral component in society, they maintain a strict focus on it at all times and argue in favor of social arrangements that promote and ensure family preservation.

Functionalists such as Talcott Parsons (1955) have long argued that the regulation of sexual activity is an important function of the family. Social norms surrounding family life have, traditionally, encouraged sexual activity within the family unit (marriage) and have discouraged activity outside of it (premarital and extramarital sex). From a functionalist point of view, the purpose of encouraging sexual activity in the confines of marriage is to intensify the bond between spouses and to ensure that procreation occurs within a stable, legally recognized relationship. This structure gives offspring the best possible chance for appropriate socialization and the provision of basic resources.

From a functionalist standpoint, homosexuality cannot be promoted on a large-scale as an acceptable substitute for heterosexuality. If this occurred, procreation would eventually cease. Thus, homosexuality, if occurring predominantly within the population, is dysfunctional to society. This criticism does not take into account the increasing legal acceptance of same-sex marriage, or the rise in gay and lesbian couples who choose to bear and raise children through a variety of available resources.

Conflict Theory

From a conflict theory perspective, sexuality is another area in which power differentials are present and where dominant groups actively work to promote their worldview as well as their economic interests. Recently, we have seen the debate over the legalization of gay marriage intensify nationwide.

For conflict theorists, there are two key dimensions to the debate over same-sex marriage—one ideological and the other economic. Dominant groups (in this instance, heterosexuals) wish for their worldview—which embraces traditional marriage and the nuclear family—to win out over what they see as the intrusion of a secular, individually driven worldview. On the other hand, many gay and lesbian activists argue that legal marriage is a fundamental right that cannot be denied based on sexual orientation and that, historically, there already exists a precedent for changes to marriage laws: the 1960s legalization of formerly forbidden interracial marriages is one example.

From an economic perspective, activists in favor of same-sex marriage point out that legal marriage brings with it certain entitlements, many of which are financial in nature, like Social Security benefits and medical insurance (Solmonese 2008). Denial of these benefits to gay couples is wrong, they argue. Conflict theory suggests that as long as heterosexuals and homosexuals struggle over these social and financial resources, there will be some degree of conflict.

Symbolic Interactionism

Interactionists focus on the meanings associated with sexuality and with sexual orientation. Since femininity is devalued in U.S. society, those who adopt such traits are subject to ridicule; this is especially true for boys or men. Just as masculinity is the symbolic norm, so too has heterosexuality come to signify normalcy. Prior to 1973, the American Psychological Association (APA) defined homosexuality as an abnormal or deviant disorder. Interactionist labeling theory recognizes the impact this has made. Before 1973, the APA was powerful in shaping social attitudes toward homosexuality by defining it as pathological. Today, the APA cites no association between sexual orientation and psychopathology and sees homosexuality as a normal aspect of human sexuality (APA 2008).

Recall Cooley's "looking-glass self," which suggests that self develops as a result of our interpretation and evaluation of the responses of others (Cooley 1902). Constant exposure to derogatory labels, jokes, and pervasive homophobia would lead to a negative self-image, or worse, self-hate. The CDC reports that homosexual youths (as referred to in the study) who experience high levels of social rejection are six times more likely to have high levels of depression and eight times more likely to have attempted suicide (CDC 2011).

Queer Theory

Queer Theory is an interdisciplinary approach to sexuality studies that identifies Western society's rigid splitting of gender into male and female roles and questions the manner in which we have been taught to think about sexual orientation. According to Jagose (1996), Queer [Theory] focuses on mismatches between anatomical sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation, not just division into male/female or homosexual/heterosexual. By calling their discipline "queer," scholars reject the effects of labeling; instead, they embraced the word "queer" and reclaimed it for their own purposes. The perspective highlights the need for a more flexible and fluid conceptualization of sexuality—one that allows for change, negotiation, and freedom. This mirrors other oppressive schemas in our culture, especially those surrounding gender and race (Black versus White, male versus female).

Queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argued against U.S. society's monolithic definition of sexuality and its reduction to a single factor: the sex of someone's desired partner. Sedgwick identified dozens of other ways in which people's sexualities were different, such as:

- Even identical genital acts mean very different things to different people.
- Sexuality makes up a large share of the self-perceived identity of some people, a small share of others'.
- Some people spend a lot of time thinking about sex, others little.
- Some people like to have a lot of sex, others little or none.
- Many people have their richest mental/emotional involvement with sexual acts that they don't do, or don't even want to do.
- Some people like spontaneous sexual scenes, others like highly scripted ones, others like spontaneous-sounding ones that are nonetheless totally predictable.
- Some people experience their sexuality as deeply embedded in a matrix of gender meanings and gender differentials. Others do not (Sedgwick 1990).

Thus, theorists utilizing queer theory strive to question the ways society perceives and experiences sex, gender, and sexuality, opening the door to new scholarly understanding.

Throughout this chapter we have examined the complexities of gender, sex, and sexuality. Differentiating between sex, gender, and sexual orientation is an important first step to a deeper understanding and critical analysis of these issues. Understanding the sociology of sex, gender, and sexuality will help to build awareness of the inequalities experienced by subordinate categories such as women, homosexuals, and transgender individuals.

Key Terms

biological determinism the belief that men and women behave differently due to inherent sex differences related to their biology

doing gender the performance of tasks based upon the gender assigned to us by society and, in turn, ourselves

DOMA Defense of Marriage Act, a 1996 U.S. law explicitly limiting the definition of “marriage” to a union between one man and one woman and allowing each individual state to recognize or deny same-sex marriages performed in other states

double standard the concept that prohibits premarital sexual intercourse for women but allows it for men

gender a term that refers to social or cultural distinctions of behaviors that are considered male or female

gender dysphoria a condition listed in the DSM-5 in which people whose gender at birth is contrary to the one they identify with. This condition replaces “gender identity disorder”

gender identity a person’s deeply held internal perception of his or her gender

gender role society’s concept of how men and women should behave

glass ceiling an invisible barrier that women encounter when trying to win jobs in the highest level of business

heterosexism an ideology and a set of institutional practices that privilege heterosexuals and heterosexuality over other sexual orientations

homophobia an extreme or irrational aversion to homosexuals

intersex people born with sex characteristics (including genitals, gonads and chromosome patterns) that do not fit typical binary notions of male or female bodies.

misogyny the hatred of or, aversion to, or prejudice against women

pay gap the difference in earnings between men and women

sex a term that denotes the presence of physical or physiological differences between males and females

sexism the prejudiced belief that one sex should be valued over another

sexual orientation a person’s physical, mental, emotional, and sexual attraction to a particular sex (male or female)

sexuality a person’s capacity for sexual feelings

social construction of sexuality socially created definitions about the cultural appropriateness of sex-linked behavior which shape how people see and experience sexuality

transgender an adjective that describes individuals who identify with the behaviors and characteristics that are other than their biological sex

Section Summary

12.1 Sex, Gender, Identity, and Expression

The terms “sex” and “gender” refer to two different identifiers. Sex denotes biological characteristics differentiating males and females, while gender denotes social and cultural characteristics of masculine and feminine behavior. Sex and gender are not always synchronous. Individuals who strongly identify with the opposing gender are considered transgender.

12.2 Gender and Gender Inequality

Children become aware of gender roles in their earliest years, and they come to understand and perform these roles through socialization, which occurs through four major agents: family, education, peer groups, and mass media. Socialization into narrowly prescribed gender roles results in the stratification of males and females. The impacts of discrimination and inequality have deep implications for economics, social mobility, and political power. The feminist movement undertook protests, improvement programs, and political focus in order to improve equality and the lives of women. Each sociological perspective offers a valuable view for understanding how and why gender inequality occurs in our society.

12.3 Sexuality

When studying sex and sexuality, sociologists focus their attention on sexual attitudes and practices, not on physiology or anatomy. Norms regarding gender and sexuality vary across cultures. In general, the United States tends to be fairly conservative in its sexual attitudes. As a result, programs such as sex education are often limited or selective in what topics they cover.

Section Quiz

12.1 Sex, Gender, Identity, and Expression

1. The terms “masculine” and “feminine” refer to a person’s _____.
 - a. sex
 - b. gender
 - c. both sex and gender
 - d. none of the above
2. The term _____ refers to society's concept of how men and women are expected to act and how they should behave.
 - a. gender role
 - b. gender bias
 - c. sexual orientation
 - d. sexual attitudes
3. Research indicates that individuals are aware of their sexual orientation _____.
 - a. at infancy
 - b. in early adolescence
 - c. in early adulthood
 - d. in late adulthood

12.2 Gender and Gender Inequality

4. Which of the following is the best example of a gender stereotype?
 - a. Women are typically shorter than men.
 - b. Men do not live as long as women.
 - c. Women tend to be overly emotional, while men tend to be levelheaded.
 - d. Men hold more high-earning, leadership jobs than women.
5. Which of the following is the best example of the role peers play as an agent of socialization for school-aged children?
 - a. Children can act however they wish around their peers because children are unaware of gender roles.
 - b. Peers serve as a support system for children who wish to act outside of their assigned gender roles.
 - c. Peers tend to reinforce gender roles by criticizing and marginalizing those who behave outside of their assigned roles.
 - d. None of the above

6. To which theoretical perspective does the following statement most likely apply: Women continue to assume the responsibility in the household along with a paid occupation because it keeps the household running smoothly, i.e., at a state of balance?
 - a. Conflict theory
 - b. Functionalism
 - c. Feminist theory
 - d. Symbolic interactionism
7. Only women are affected by gender stratification.
 - a. True
 - b. False
8. According to the symbolic interactionist perspective, we “do gender”:
 - a. during half of our activities
 - b. only when they apply to our biological sex
 - c. only if we are actively following gender roles
 - d. all of the time, in everything we do
9. Misogyny is:
 - a. A certain kind of spa treatment
 - b. One’s biological sex
 - c. How we know our gender roles
 - d. the hatred of or, aversion to, or prejudice against women
10. Which of the following factors can affect the pay gap?
 - a. having children
 - b. lower education level
 - c. being married
 - d. all of the above
11. The idea that gender inequality comes from the division of labor fits with which Sociological theory?
 - a. Symbolic Interactionism
 - b. Functionalism
 - c. Conflict Theory
 - d. Feminist Theory
12. Prior to the 19th Amendment being ratified, women were not considered a legal person on their own.
 - a. True
 - b. False
13. In the 115th Congress of the United States, what percentage of the elected officials were women?
 - a. 10.5%
 - b. 21.2%
 - c. 30.4%
 - d. 50%

12.3 Sexuality

14. Of these, which country is thought to be the most liberal in its attitudes toward sex?
 - a. United States
 - b. Sweden
 - c. Mexico
 - d. Ireland
15. Compared to most Western societies, U.S. sexual attitudes are considered _____.
 - a. conservative
 - b. liberal
 - c. permissive
 - d. free
16. Sociologists associate sexuality with _____.
 - a. heterosexuality
 - b. homosexuality
 - c. biological factors
 - d. a person's capacity for sexual feelings
17. According to national surveys, most U.S. parents support which type of sex education program in school?
 - a. Abstinence only
 - b. Abstinence plus sexual safety
 - c. Sexual safety without promoting abstinence
 - d. No sex education
18. Which theoretical perspective stresses the importance of regulating sexual behavior to ensure marital cohesion and family stability?
 - a. Functionalism
 - b. Conflict theory
 - c. Symbolic interactionism
 - d. Queer theory

Short Answer

12.1 Sex, Gender, Identity, and Expression

1. Why do sociologists find it important to differentiate between sex and gender? What importance does the differentiation have in modern society?
2. How is children's play influenced by gender roles? Think back to your childhood. How "gendered" were the toys and activities available to you? Do you remember gender expectations being conveyed through the approval or disapproval of your playtime choices?

12.2 Gender and Gender Inequality

3. In what way do parents treat sons and daughters differently? How do sons and daughters typically respond to this treatment?
4. What can be done to lessen the effects of gender stratification in the workplace? How does gender stratification harm both men and women?
5. Why is it important to have women in political roles?
6. What can be done to narrow the pay gap for women?

12.3 Sexuality

7. Identify three examples of how U.S. society is heteronormative.
8. Consider the types of derogatory labeling that sociologists study and explain how these might apply to discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

Further Research

12.1 Sex, Gender, Identity, and Expression

To learn about what organizations are doing to improve diversity and social justice education for young people, review [Learning For Justice's educational materials \(http://openstax.org/r/learning_for_justice\)](http://openstax.org/r/learning_for_justice).

For more information on gender identity and advocacy for transgender individuals see the [Global Action for Trans Equality web site \(http://openstax.org/l/trans_equality\)](http://openstax.org/l/trans_equality).

12.2 Gender and Gender Inequality

Learn more about Women's Rights movements in the United States. (http://openstax.org/r/womens_rights_movements)

12.3 Sexuality

To learn about different approaches to sex education, visit [Advocates for Youth \(http://openstax.org/r/sex_education\)](http://openstax.org/r/sex_education).

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FIGURE 13.1 Older people, especially family members, can foster a connection between our past and present and help build our memories and identities. But they sometimes need unexpected help, which they do not always accept. (Credit: PWRDF/flickr)

CHAPTER OUTLINE

13.1 Who Are the Elderly? Aging in Society

13.2 The Process of Aging

13.3 Challenges Facing the Elderly

13.4 Theoretical Perspectives on Aging

INTRODUCTION 9-year old twins Osiris and Joli loved making meals with Bibi, their grandmother. Osiris loved the cooking; Joli loved stealing the ingredients. The kids didn't get very involved with the chicken, but perked up with the fufu and almost took over the dough balls. Bibi yelled at Joli to stop eating raw batter, but she didn't mean it.

Bibi loved having them around. She sang mash-ups of 90s songs and big band music, mixing in funny mentions of their day-to-day lives. As she prepped the cassava, she'd throw the discarded pieces in a waste bowl like she was playing basketball. Bibi told them a story about how one of her schoolteachers was was so young that all the students thought she was one of them. "So when she told us her last name, I thought it was her first name and called her by it. So she sent me outside for punishment!"

The kids burst into peals of laughter. Bibi joined in as she moved a pan.

Suddenly the stove erupted in flame. The oil in the pan had spilled over. Bibi grabbed a glass of water on the table. Joli screamed at her to stop, but Bibi had already thrown the water onto the oil. The flames flared and splattered across the stove and onto the counter. A paper towel caught fire. Everyone was screaming. Osiris and Joli's mother, Gloria, was in the room a moment later. Pushing Bibi away, she turned off the stove and threw a towel on some of the flames. She took a fire extinguisher from the cabinet and, after a few seconds of fiddling with the pin and hose, emptied it onto the fire.

"Mom!" Gloria yelled. "Why would you put water on an oil fire? You know that's the last thing to do!"

Bibi, in the corner, seemed to hold on to the wall to remain standing. She shook her head and looked at the children. "It's a fire. You put water on it."

"No you don't. You taught me never to do that. You told me to use salt...anything but water. You could have burned down the house!"

Bibi was crying. She looked at the children and sank toward the floor. "I don't remember that. I'm so sorry. It's a fire, I thought. Put water on it." Gloria sent the children out of the room and sat her mother down.

Aside from the scare from the fire, why might Bibi be crying? What difficulties do older people face in undertaking day-to-day activities? What difficulties do their family members face? In this chapter, we will explore the identities and issues of older people in our societies, and consider our attitudes and obligations toward them.

13.1 Who Are the Elderly? Aging in Society

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Differentiate between the major senior age groups (young-old, middle-old, and old-old)
- Describe the "graying of the United States" as the population experiences increased life expectancies
- Examine aging as a global issue



FIGURE 13.2 Elderly people may not always conform to society's expectations of their attitudes or their abilities. While we don't know whether or not these marathon participants are running competitively, it's clear the older person in the foreground is ahead of many younger people. (Credit: Mike Kaden/flickr)

Think of U.S. movies and television shows you have watched recently. Did any of them feature older actors and actresses? What roles did they play? How were these older actors portrayed? Were they cast as main characters in a love story? Did they seem fully capable, safe, productive, and happy? Or were they a challenge to those

around them? Were they grouchy or overly set in their ways?

Many media portrayals of the elderly reflect negative cultural attitudes toward aging. In the United States, society tends to glorify youth and associate it with beauty and sexuality. In comedies, the elderly are often associated with grumpiness or hostility. Rarely do the roles of older people convey the fullness of life experienced by seniors—as employees, lovers, or the myriad roles they have in real life. What values does this reflect?

One hindrance to society’s fuller understanding of aging is that people rarely understand the process of aging until they reach old age themselves. This lack of understanding is in stark contrast to our perspective on childhood, something we’ve all experienced. And as is often the case with a lack of knowledge or understanding, it leads to myths, assumptions, and stereotypes about elderly people and the aging process. While stereotypes associated with race and gender may lead to more critical thought and sensitivity, many people accept age stereotypes without question (Levy 2002). Consider this: At your school or workplace, you have likely had the opportunity (or may be required) to attend workshops on racial equity, cultural sensitivity, sexual harassment, and so on. But even though the elderly are all around us (and increasing in number every day), very few institutions conduct similar workshops or forums about the elderly. Each culture has a certain set of expectations and assumptions about aging, all of which are part of our socialization.

While the landmarks of maturing into adulthood are a source of pride, often celebrated at major milestones like First Communion, Bar Mitzvah, or Quinceañera, signs of natural aging can be cause for shame or embarrassment. Some people avoid acknowledging their aging by rejecting help when they need it, which can lead to physical injury or problems obtaining needed items or information. For example, when vaccinations for the COVID-19 virus became available, U.S. seniors who didn’t have help from family and friends lagged significantly in receiving vaccines; this occurred despite of the fact that seniors were known to be the highest risk group and were the most susceptible to illness and death if they were infected (Graham 2021). Those elderly people who were resistant to reach out for help may have waited too long, and their neighbors or other community members may not have known they needed the help. Why would they take this risk? Researchers aim to uncover the motivations and challenges that may result in these circumstances and behavior.

Gerontology is a field of science that seeks to understand the process of aging and the challenges encountered as seniors grow older. Gerontologists investigate age, aging, and the aged. Gerontologists study what it is like to be an older adult in a society and the ways that aging affects members of a society. As a multidisciplinary field, gerontology includes the work of medical and biological scientists, social scientists, and even financial and economic scholars.

Social gerontology refers to a specialized field of gerontology that examines the social (and sociological) aspects of aging. Researchers focus on developing a broad understanding of the experiences of people at specific ages, such as mental and physical wellbeing, plus age-specific concerns such as the process of dying. Social gerontologists work as social researchers, counselors, community organizers, and service providers for older adults. Because of their specialization, social gerontologists are in a strong position to advocate for older adults.

Scholars in these disciplines have learned that “aging” reflects not only the physiological process of growing older but also our attitudes and beliefs about the aging process. You’ve likely seen online calculators that promise to determine your “real age” as opposed to your chronological age. These ads target the notion that people may “feel” a different age than their actual years. Some sixty-year-olds feel frail and elderly, while some eighty-year-olds feel sprightly.

Equally revealing is that as people grow older they define “old age” in terms of greater years than their current age (Logan 1992). Many people want to postpone old age and regard it as a phase that will never arrive. For example, many older Americans keep working well past what people consider retirement age, due to financial pressures or in order to remain, in their eyes, useful. Some older adults even succumb to stereotyping their

own age group (Rothbaum 1983).

In the United States, the experience of being elderly has changed greatly over the past century. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, many U.S. households were home to multigenerational families, and the experiences and wisdom of elders was respected. They offered wisdom and support to their children and often helped raise their grandchildren (Sweetser 1984).

Multigenerational U.S. families began to decline after World War II, and their numbers reached a low point around 1980, but they are consistently on the rise. A 2010 Pew Research Center analysis of census data found that 49 million people in the United States lived in a family household with at least two adult generations—or a grandparent and at least one other generation a record at the time. By 2016, that number had grown to 64 million people living in multigenerational households, roughly 20 percent of the population (Cohn 2018).

Attitudes toward the elderly have also been affected by large societal changes that have happened over the past 100 years. Researchers believe industrialization and modernization have contributed greatly to lowering the power, influence, and prestige the elderly once held. On the other hand, the sheer numbers of elderly people in certain societies can have other effects, such as older people's influence on policies and politics based on their voting influence.

The elderly have both benefited and suffered from these rapid social changes. In modern societies, a strong economy created new levels of prosperity for many people. Healthcare has become more widely accessible, and medicine has advanced, which allows the elderly to live longer. However, older people are not as essential to the economic survival of their families and communities as they were in the past.

Studying Aging Populations



FIGURE 13.3 How old are these people? In modern U.S. society, appearance is not a reliable indicator of age. In addition to genetic differences, health habits, hair dyes, and attitudes make traditional signs of aging increasingly unreliable. (Credit: Jason Hargrove/flickr)

Since its creation in 1790, the U.S. Census Bureau has been tracking age in the population. Age is an important factor to analyze with accompanying demographic figures, such as income and health. The population chart below shows projected age distribution patterns for the next several decades.

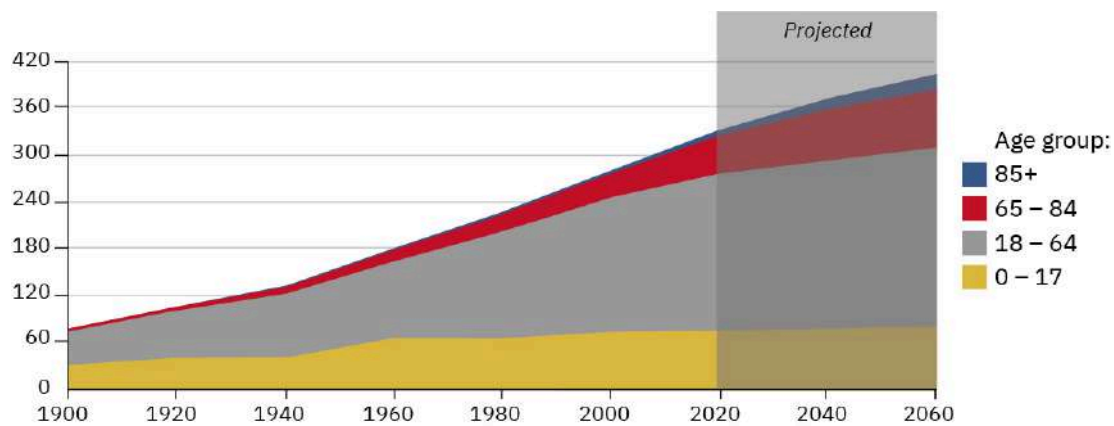


FIGURE 13.4 This population chart shows the population size of people in different age groups. The youngest age group, at the bottom, remains largely static. The 18-64 age group has been growing and will continue to do so. But most notable is the increasing size of the third tier (orange) representing ages 65-84. As the chapter discusses, this group is growing significantly, shown by the increasing share of the overall graph it takes up. Also of note is the group at the very top, which is also growing in size. (For comparison, can you even detect the line representing 85+ on the left side of the graph, closer to the year 1900?) (Credit: US Census Bureau.)

Statisticians use data to calculate the median age of a population, that is, the number that marks the halfway point in a group's age range. In the United States, the median age is about forty (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). That means that about half of the people in the United States are under forty and about half are over forty. This median age has been increasing, which indicates the population as a whole is growing older.

A **cohort** is a group of people who share a statistical or demographic trait. People belonging to the same age cohort were born in the same time frame. Understanding a population's age composition can point to certain social and cultural factors and help governments and societies plan for future social and economic challenges.

Sociological studies on aging might help explain the difference between Native American age cohorts and the general population. While Native American societies have a strong tradition of revering their elders, they also have a lower life expectancy because of lack of access to healthcare and high levels of mercury in fish, which is a traditional part of their diet.

Phases of Aging: The Young-Old, Middle-Old, and Old-Old

In the United States, all people over eighteen years old are considered adults, but there is a large difference between a person who is twenty-one years old and a person who is forty-five years old. More specific breakdowns, such as “young adult” and “middle-aged adult,” are helpful. In the same way, groupings are helpful in understanding the elderly. The elderly are often lumped together to include everyone over the age of sixty-five. But a sixty-five-year-old's experience of life is much different from a ninety-year-old's.

The United States' older adult population can be divided into three life-stage subgroups: the young-old (approximately sixty-five to seventy-four years old), the middle-old (ages seventy-five to eighty-four years old), and the old-old (over age eighty-five). Today's young-old age group is generally happier, healthier, and financially better off than the young-old of previous generations. In the United States, people are better able to prepare for aging because resources are more widely available.

Also, many people are making proactive quality-of-life decisions about their old age while they are still young. In the past, family members made care decisions when an elderly person reached a health crisis, often leaving the elderly person with little choice about what would happen. The elderly are now able to choose housing, for example, that allows them some independence while still providing care when it is needed. Living wills, retirement planning, and medical power of attorney are other concerns that are increasingly handled in advance.

The Graying of the United States



FIGURE 13.5 Senior citizens are an important political constituency, and they may use their age to their advantage. Originating in Canada in the late 1980s, groups of Raging Grannies have protested nuclear weapons, the Iraq War, pesticides, genetically modified foods, and racial injustice. (Credit: Brave New Films/flickr)

What does it mean to be elderly? Some define it as an issue of physical health, while others simply define it by chronological age. The U.S. government, for example, typically classifies people aged sixty-five years old as elderly, at which point citizens are eligible for federal benefits such as Social Security and Medicare. The World Health Organization has no standard, other than noting that sixty-five years old is the commonly accepted definition in most core nations, but it suggests a cut-off somewhere between fifty and fifty-five years old for semi-peripheral nations, such as those in Africa (World Health Organization 2012). AARP (formerly the American Association of Retired Persons) cites fifty as the eligible age of membership. It is interesting to note AARP's name change; by taking the word "retired" out of its name, the organization can broaden its base to any older people in the United States, not just retirees. This is especially important now that many people are working to age seventy and beyond.

There is an element of social construction, both local and global, in the way individuals and nations define who is elderly; that is, the shared meaning of the concept of elderly is created through interactions among people in society. As the table demonstrates, different generations have varying perspectives on aging. Researchers asked questions about the ages at which people reach certain milestones or new categories in life. Members of the Baby Boom generation indicate that a person is officially "old" when they turn 73 years old. Millennials, a much younger group, felt that people became old when they turned 59. The same survey asked questions about the end of youth and the prime of life (Emling 2017). Interestingly, Boomers and GenXers both felt that youth "ended" by age 31 and that the prime of life didn't start until many years later. Millennials felt that people reached the prime of life at age 36, *before* youth ended at age 40. It's worth noting that at the time of the survey, the Millennials were all 36 and younger.

	Boomer response	Gen X response	Millennial response
At what age does youth end?	31	31	40
At what age is the prime of life?	50	47	36
At what age is someone old?	73	65	59

TABLE 13.1 A survey conducted by the U.S. Trust gathered opinion data on the aging milestones and categories. Boomers, Gen X people, and Millennials had generally different views.

Demographically, the U.S. population has undergone a massive shift both in the overall population of elderly people and their share of the total population. Both are significant and impactful on major policy decisions and day-to-day life. In 1900, the population of U.S. people over sixty-five years old was 3 million, representing about 4 percent of the total population. That number increased to 33 million in 1994, and was roughly 12 percent of the total population (Hobbs 1994). By 2016 that number had grown to 49 million, about 15 percent of the total population (U.S. Census Bureau 2018). This is a greater than tenfold increase in the elderly population, compared to a mere tripling of both the total population and of the population under sixty-five years old (Hobbs 1994). This increase has been called “the graying of America,” a term that describes the phenomenon of a larger and larger percentage of the population getting older and older. There are several reasons why the United States is graying so rapidly. One of these is **life expectancy**: the average number of years a person born today may expect to live. When we review Census Bureau statistics grouping the elderly by age, it is clear that in the United States, at least, we are living longer. In 2010, there were about 80,000 centenarians in the United States alone. They make up one of the fastest-growing segments of the population (Boston University School of Medicine 2014).

It is interesting to note that not all people in the United States age equally. Most glaring is the difference between men and women; as [Figure 13.6](#) shows, women have longer life expectancies than men. In 2010, there were ninety sixty-five-year-old men per one hundred sixty-five-year-old women. However, there were only eighty seventy-five-year-old men per one hundred seventy-five-year-old women, and only sixty eighty-five-year-old men per one hundred eighty-five-year-old women. Nevertheless, as the graph shows, the sex ratio actually increased over time, indicating that men are closing the gap between their life spans and those of women (U.S. Census Bureau 2010).

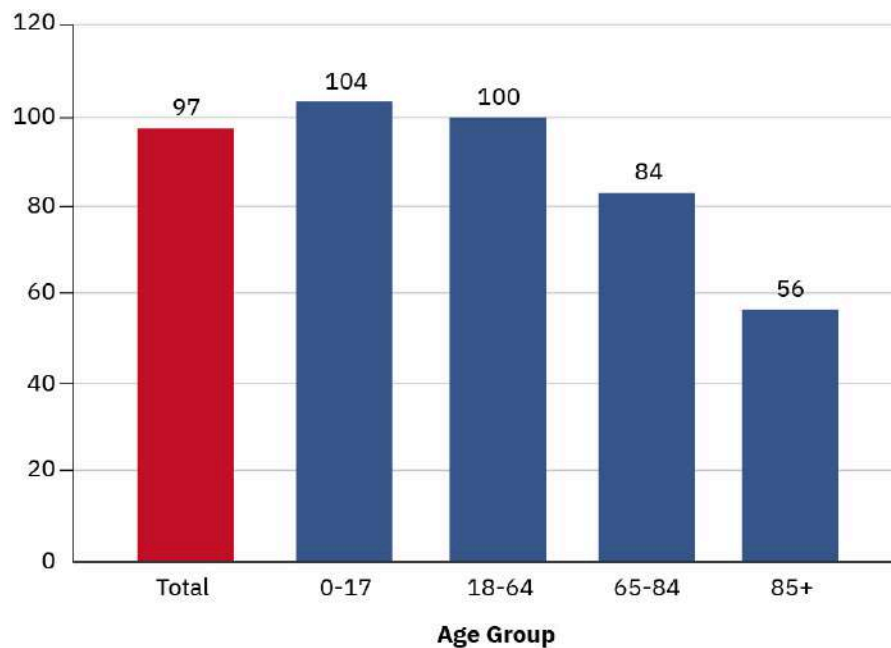


FIGURE 13.6 This U.S. Census graph shows the number of males per 100 females. However, over the past two decades, men have narrowed the percentage by which women outlive them. (Credit: the U.S. Census Bureau)

Baby Boomers

Of particular interest to gerontologists today is the population of **Baby Boomers**, the cohort born between 1946 and 1964 and now reaching their 60s and 70s. Coming of age in the 1960s and early 1970s, the baby boom generation was the first group of children and teenagers with their own spending power and therefore their own marketing power (Macunovich 2000). As this group has aged, it has redefined what it means to be young, middle-aged, and now old. People in the Boomer generation do not want to grow old the way their grandparents did; the result is a wide range of products designed to ward off the effects—or the signs—of aging. Previous generations of people over sixty-five were “old.” Baby Boomers are in “later life” or “the third age” (Gilleard and Higgs 2007).

The baby boom generation is the cohort driving much of the dramatic increase in the over-sixty-five population. [Figure 13.7](#) shows a comparison of the U.S. population by age and gender between 2000 and 2010. The biggest bulge in the pyramid (representing the largest population group) moves up the pyramid over the course of the decade; in 2000, the largest population group was age thirty-five to fifty-five. In 2010, that group was age forty-five to sixty-five, meaning the oldest baby Boomers were just reaching the age at which the U.S. Census considers them elderly. By 2030, all Baby Boomers will be age 65 and older, and represent the largest group of elderly people.

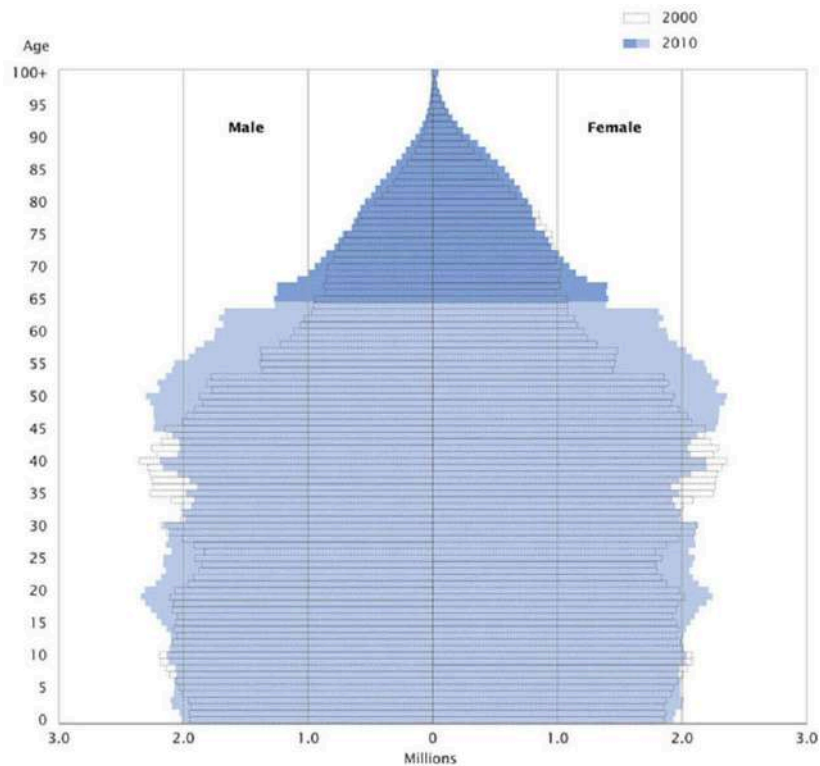


FIGURE 13.7 Population by Age and Sex: 2000 and 2010. In this U.S. Census pyramid chart, the baby boom bulge was aged thirty-five to fifty-five in 2000. In 2020, they were aged fifty-five to seventy-five. (Credit: the U.S. Census Bureau)

This aging of the Baby Boom cohort has serious implications for our society. Healthcare is one of the areas most impacted by this trend. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, healthcare spending is projected to grow by 5.5 percent each year from now until 2027. The portion of government spending on Medicare (a program in which the government covers some costs of healthcare for the elderly) is expected to increase from 3 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2009 to 8 percent of GDP in 2030, and to 15 percent in 2080 (CMS 2018).

Certainly, as Boomers age, they will put increasing burdens on the entire U.S. healthcare system. The American Geriatrics Society notes that from 2013-2025, there will be a 45 percent increase in demand for physicians who specialize in geriatrics. As a result, over 33,000 specialists will be needed to fill the healthcare needs in 2025. And in 2020, there were only 6,320 such specialists in the United States (AGS 2021).

Unlike the elderly of previous generations, Boomers do not expect that turning sixty-five means their active lives are over. They are not willing to abandon work or leisure activities, but they may need more medical support to keep living vigorous lives. This desire of a large group of over-sixty-five-year-olds wanting to continue with a high activity level is driving innovation in the medical industry (Shaw n.d.).

The economic impact of aging Boomers is also an area of concern for many observers. Although the baby boom generation earned more than previous generations and enjoyed a higher standard of living, they did not adequately prepare for retirement. According to most retirement and investment experts, in order to maintain their accustomed lifestyle, people need to save ten times their annual income before retiring. (Note: That's income, not salary.) So if a person has an income of \$60,000 per year, they should have saved \$600,000. If they made \$100,000 per year, they should have saved \$1 million. But most Baby Boomers have only saved an estimated \$144,000, and only 40 percent have saved more than \$250,000 (Gravier 2021). The causes of these shortfalls are varied, and include everything from lavish spending to economic recession to companies folding and reducing pension payments. Higher education costs increased significantly while many Baby Boomers

were sending their children to college. No matter what the cause, many retirees report a great deal of stress about running out of money.

Just as some observers are concerned about the possibility of Medicare being overburdened, Social Security is considered to be at risk. Social Security is a government-run retirement program funded primarily through payroll taxes. With enough people paying into the program, there should be enough money for retirees to take out. But with the aging Boomer cohort starting to receive Social Security benefits and fewer workers paying into the Social Security trust fund, economists warn that the system will collapse by the year 2037. A similar warning came in the 1980s; in response to recommendations from the Greenspan Commission, the retirement age (the age at which people could start receiving Social Security benefits) was raised from sixty-two to sixty-seven and the payroll tax was increased. A similar hike in retirement age, perhaps to seventy, is a possible solution to the current threat to Social Security.

Aging around the World



FIGURE 13.8 Cultural values and attitudes can shape people’s experience of aging. (Credit: Tom Coppen/flickr)

The United States is certainly not alone regarding its aging population; in fact, it doesn’t even have the fastest-growing group of elderly people. In 2019, the world had 703 million people aged 65 years or over. By 2050, that number is projected to double to 1.5 billion. One in six people in the world will be 65 or over (United Nations 2020).

This percentage is expected to increase and will have a huge impact on the **dependency ratio**: the number of citizens not in the labor force (young, disabled, or elderly) to citizens in the labor force (Bartram and Roe 2005). One country that will soon face a serious aging crisis is China, which is on the cusp of an “aging boom”—a period when its elderly population will dramatically increase. The number of people above age sixty in China today is about 178 million, which amounts to 13.3 percent of its total population (Xuequan 2011). By 2050, nearly a third of the Chinese population will be age sixty or older, which will put a significant burden on the labor force and impact China’s economic growth (Bannister, Bloom, and Rosenberg 2010). On a more global scale, the dependency ratio is projected to more than double in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, Northern Africa and Western Asia, and Central and Southern Asia.

As healthcare improves and life expectancy increases across the world, elder care will be an emerging issue. Wienclaw (2009) suggests that with fewer working-age citizens available to provide home care and long-term assisted care to the elderly, the costs of elder care will increase.

Worldwide, the expectation governing the amount and type of elder care varies from culture to culture. For

example, in Asia the responsibility for elder care lies firmly on the family (Yap, Thang, and Traphagan 2005). This is different from the approach in most Western countries, where the elderly are considered independent and are expected to tend to their own care. It is not uncommon for family members to intervene only if the elderly relative requires assistance, often due to poor health. Even then, caring for the elderly is considered voluntary. In the United States, decisions to care for an elderly relative are often conditionally based on the promise of future returns, such as inheritance or, in some cases, the amount of support the elderly provided to the caregiver in the past (Hashimoto 1996).

These differences are based on cultural attitudes toward aging. In China, several studies have noted the attitude of **filial piety** (deference and respect to one's parents and ancestors in all things) as defining all other virtues (Hsu 1971; Hamilton 1990). Cultural attitudes in Japan prior to approximately 1986 supported the idea that the elderly deserve assistance (Ogawa and Retherford 1993). However, seismic shifts in major social institutions (like family and economy) have created an increased demand for community and government care. For example, the increase in women working outside the home has made it more difficult to provide in-home care to aging parents, which leads to an increase in the need for government-supported institutions (Raikhola and Kuroki 2009).

In the United States, by contrast, many people view caring for the elderly as a burden. Even when there is a family member able and willing to provide for an elderly family member, 60 percent of family caregivers are employed outside the home and are unable to provide the needed support. At the same time, however, many middle-class families are unable to bear the financial burden of “outsourcing” professional healthcare, resulting in gaps in care (Bookman and Kimbrel 2011). It is important to note that even within the United States not all demographic groups treat aging the same way. While most people in the United States are reluctant to place their elderly members into out-of-home assisted care, demographically speaking, the groups least likely to do so are Latinos, African Americans, and Asians (Bookman and Kimbrel 2011).

Globally, the United States and other core nations are fairly well equipped to handle the demands of an exponentially increasing elderly population. However, peripheral and semi-peripheral nations face similar increases without comparable resources. Poverty among elders is a concern, especially among elderly women. The feminization of the aging poor, evident in peripheral nations, is directly due to the number of elderly women in those countries who are single, illiterate, and not a part of the labor force (Mujahid 2006).

In 2002, the Second World Assembly on Aging was held in Madrid, Spain, resulting in the Madrid Plan, an internationally coordinated effort to create comprehensive social policies to address the needs of the worldwide aging population. The plan identifies three themes to guide international policy on aging: 1) publicly acknowledging the global challenges caused by, and the global opportunities created by, a rising global population; 2) empowering the elderly; and 3) linking international policies on aging to international policies on development (Zelenev 2008).

The Madrid Plan has not yet been successful in achieving all its aims. However, it has increased awareness of the various issues associated with a global aging population, as well as raising the international consciousness to the way that the factors influencing the vulnerability of the elderly (social exclusion, prejudice and discrimination, and a lack of socio-legal protection) overlap with other developmental issues (basic human rights, empowerment, and participation), leading to an increase in legal protections (Zelenev 2008).

13.2 The Process of Aging

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Explain the biological, social, and psychological changes that occur in aging
- Describe the birth of the field of geriatrics
- Examine attitudes toward death and dying and how they affect the elderly
- Name the five stages of grief developed by Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross

As human beings grow older, they go through different phases or stages of life. It is helpful to understand aging in the context of these phases. A **life course** is the period from birth to death, including a sequence of predictable life events such as physical maturation. Each phase comes with different responsibilities and expectations, which of course vary by individual and culture. Children love to play and learn, looking forward to becoming preteens. As preteens begin to test their independence, they are eager to become teenagers. Teenagers anticipate the promises and challenges of adulthood. Adults become focused on creating families, building careers, and experiencing the world as independent people. Finally, many adults look forward to old age as a wonderful time to enjoy life without as much pressure from work and family life. In old age, grandparenthood can provide many of the joys of parenthood without all the hard work that parenthood entails. And as work responsibilities abate, old age may be a time to explore hobbies and activities that there was no time for earlier in life. But for other people, old age is not a phase that they look forward to. Some people fear old age and do anything to “avoid” it by seeking medical and cosmetic fixes for the natural effects of age. These differing views on the life course are the result of the cultural values and norms into which people are socialized, but in most cultures, age is a master status influencing self-concept, as well as social roles and interactions.

Through the phases of the life course, dependence and independence levels change. At birth, newborns are dependent on caregivers for everything. As babies become toddlers and toddlers become adolescents and then teenagers, they assert their independence more and more. Gradually, children come to be considered adults, responsible for their own lives, although the point at which this occurs is widely varied among individuals, families, and cultures.

As Riley (1978) notes, aging is a lifelong process and entails maturation and change on physical, psychological, and social levels. Age, much like race, class, and gender, is a hierarchy in which some categories are more highly valued than others. For example, while many children look forward to gaining independence, Packer and Chasteen (2006) suggest that even in children, age prejudice leads to a negative view of aging. This, in turn, can lead to a widespread segregation between the old and the young at the institutional, societal, and cultural levels (Hagestad and Uhlenberg 2006).

SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Dr. Ignatz Nascher and the Birth of Geriatrics

In the early 1900s, a New York physician named Dr. Ignatz Nascher coined the term **geriatrics**, a medical specialty that focuses on the elderly. He created the word by combining two Greek words: *geron* (old man) and *iatrikos* (medical treatment). Nascher based his work on what he observed as a young medical student, when he saw many acutely ill elderly people who were diagnosed simply as “being old.” There was nothing medicine could do, his professors declared, about the syndrome of “old age.”

Nascher refused to accept this dismissive view, seeing it as medical neglect. He believed it was a doctor’s duty to prolong life and relieve suffering whenever possible. In 1914, he published his views in his book *Geriatrics: The Diseases of Old Age and Their Treatment* (Clarfield 1990). Nascher saw the practice of caring for the elderly as separate from the practice of caring for the young, just as pediatrics (caring for children) is different from caring for grown adults (Clarfield 1990).

Nascher had high hopes for his pioneering work. He wanted to treat the aging, especially those who were poor and had no one to care for them. Many of the elderly poor were sent to live in “almshouses,” or public old-age homes (Cole 1993). Conditions were often terrible in these almshouses, where the aging were often sent and just forgotten.

As hard as it might be to believe today, Nascher’s approach was once considered unique. At the time of his death, in 1944, he was disappointed that the field of geriatrics had not made greater strides. In what ways are the

elderly better off today than they were before Nascher's ideas gained acceptance?

Biological Changes



FIGURE 13.9 Aging can be a visible, public experience. Canes, scooters, and other necessities are recognized signs of aging. Because of the meanings that culture assigns to these changes, people believe that being older means being in physical decline. Many older people, however, remain healthy, active, and happy. (Credit: Phil Dolby/flickr)

Each person experiences age-related changes based on many factors. Biological factors, such as molecular and cellular changes, are called **primary aging**, while aging that occurs due to controllable factors, such as lack of physical exercise and poor diet, is called **secondary aging** (Whitbourne and Whitbourne 2010).

Most people begin to see signs of aging after fifty years old, when they notice the physical markers of age. Skin becomes thinner, drier, and less elastic. Wrinkles form. Hair begins to thin and gray. Men prone to balding start losing hair. The difficulty or relative ease with which people adapt to these changes is dependent in part on the meaning given to aging by their particular culture. A culture that values youthfulness and beauty above all else leads to a negative perception of growing old. Conversely, a culture that reveres the elderly for their life experience and wisdom contributes to a more positive perception of what it means to grow old.

The effects of aging can feel daunting, and sometimes the fear of physical changes (like declining energy, food sensitivity, and loss of hearing and vision) is more challenging to deal with than the changes themselves. The way people perceive physical aging is largely dependent on how they were socialized. If people can accept the changes in their bodies as a natural process of aging, the changes will not seem as frightening.

According to the federal Administration on Aging (2011), in 2009 fewer people over sixty-five years old assessed their health as “excellent” or “very good” (41.6 percent) compared to those aged eighteen to sixty-four (64.4 percent). Evaluating data from the National Center for Health Statistics and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Administration on Aging found that from 2006 to 2008, the most frequently reported health issues for those over sixty-five years old included arthritis (50 percent), hypertension (38 percent), heart disease (32 percent), and cancer (22 percent). About 27 percent of people age sixty and older are considered obese by current medical standards. Parker and Thorslund (2006) found that while the trend is toward steady improvement in most disability measures, there is a concomitant increase in functional impairments (disability) and chronic diseases. At the same time, medical advances have reduced some of the disabling effects of those diseases (Crimmins 2004).

Some impacts of aging are gender-specific. Some of the disadvantages aging women face arise from long-standing social gender roles. For example, Social Security favors men over women, inasmuch as women do not earn Social Security benefits for the unpaid labor they perform (usually at home) as an extension of their gender roles. In the healthcare field, elderly female patients are more likely than elderly men to see their healthcare concerns trivialized (Sharp 1995) and are more likely to have their health issues labeled psychosomatic (Munch 2004). Another female-specific aspect of aging is that mass-media outlets often depict elderly females in terms of negative stereotypes and as less successful than older men (Bazzini and McIntosh 1997).

For men, the process of aging—and society's response to and support of the experience—may be quite different. The gradual decrease in male sexual performance that occurs as a result of primary aging is medicalized and constructed as needing treatment (Marshall and Katz 2002) so that a man may maintain a sense of youthful masculinity. On the other hand, aging men have fewer opportunities to assert their masculine identities in the company of other men (for example, through sports participation) (Drummond 1998). And some social scientists have observed that the aging male body is depicted in the Western world as genderless (Spector-Mersel 2006).



FIGURE 13.10 Aging is accompanied by a host of biological, social, and psychological changes. Depending on their health, older people can engage in the same activities they always have, or even try new ones. (Credit: Forest Service Alaska Region/flickr)

Social and Psychological Changes

Male or female, growing older means confronting the psychological issues that come with entering the last phase of life. Young people moving into adulthood take on new roles and responsibilities as their lives expand, but an opposite arc can be observed in old age. What are the hallmarks of social and psychological change?

Retirement—the withdrawal from paid work at a certain age—is a relatively recent idea. Up until the late nineteenth century, people worked about sixty hours a week until they were physically incapable of continuing. Following the American Civil War, veterans receiving pensions were able to withdraw from the workforce, and the number of working older men began declining. A second large decline in the number of working men began in the post-World War II era, probably due to the availability of Social Security, and a third large decline in the 1960s and 1970s was probably due to the social support offered by Medicare and the increase in Social Security benefits (Munnell 2011).

In the twenty-first century, most people hope that at some point they will be able to stop working and enjoy the fruits of their labor. But do we look forward to this time or fear it? When people retire from familiar work

routines, some easily seek new hobbies, interests, and forms of recreation. Many find new groups and explore new activities, but others may find it more difficult to adapt to new routines and loss of social roles, losing their sense of self-worth in the process.

Each phase of life has challenges that come with the potential for fear. Erik H. Erikson (1902–1994), in his view of socialization, broke the typical lifespan into eight phases. Each phase presents a particular challenge that must be overcome. In the final stage, old age, the challenge is to embrace integrity over despair. Some people are unable to successfully overcome the challenge. They may have to confront regrets, such as being disappointed in their children's lives or perhaps their own. They may have to accept that they will never reach certain career goals. Or they must come to terms with what their career success has cost them, such as time with their family or declining personal health. Others, however, are able to achieve a strong sense of integrity and are able to embrace the new phase in life. When that happens, there is tremendous potential for creativity. They can learn new skills, practice new activities, and peacefully prepare for the end of life.

For some, overcoming despair might entail remarriage after the death of a spouse. A study conducted by Kate Davidson (2002) reviewed demographic data that asserted men were more likely to remarry after the death of a spouse and suggested that widows (the surviving female spouse of a deceased male partner) and widowers (the surviving male spouse of a deceased female partner) experience their postmarital lives differently. Many surviving women enjoyed a new sense of freedom, since they were living alone for the first time. On the other hand, for surviving men, there was a greater sense of having lost something, because they were now deprived of a constant source of care as well as the focus of their emotional life.

Aging and Sexuality



FIGURE 13.11 In *Harold and Maude*, a 1971 cult classic movie, a twenty-something young man falls in love with a seventy-nine-year-old woman. The world disapproves. (Credit: luckyjackson/flickr)

Although it is sometimes difficult to have an open, public national dialogue about aging and sexuality, the reality is that our sexual selves do not disappear after age sixty-five. People continue to enjoy sex—and not always safe sex—well into their later years. In fact, some research suggests that as many as one in five new cases of AIDS occurs in adults over sixty-five years old (Hillman 2011).

In some ways, old age may be a time to enjoy sex more, not less. For women, the elder years can bring a sense of relief as the fear of an unwanted pregnancy is removed and the children are grown and taking care of themselves. However, while we have expanded the number of psycho-pharmaceuticals to address sexual dysfunction in men, it was not until recently that the medical field acknowledged the existence of female sexual dysfunctions (Bryant 2004). Additional treatments have been developed or applied to address sexual desire or dysfunction, which sometimes leads members of both sexes to believe that problems are easily

resolved. But emotional and social factors play an important role, and medications on their own cannot resolve all issues (Nonacs 2018).

Aging and sexuality also concerns relationships between people of different ages, referred to as age-gap relationships by researchers. These types of relationships are certainly not confined to the elderly, but people often make assumptions about elderly people in romantic relationships with younger people (and vice versa). Research into age-gap relationships indicates that social pressure can have impacts on relationship commitment or lead to break ups. The life stages of the people can also have impacts, especially if one of them is elderly and the other is not (Karantzas 2018). A relationship between a 30-year-old and a 45-year-old most likely involves fewer discussions about serious health issues and retirement decisions than one between a 55-year-old and a 70-year-old. Both have 15-year age gaps, but the circumstances are quite different.



SOCIOLOGY IN THE REAL WORLD

Aging “Out:” LGBTQ Seniors



FIGURE 13.12 As same-sex marriage becomes a possibility, many gay and lesbian couples are finally able to tie the knot—sometimes as seniors—after decades of waiting. (Credit: Fibonacci Blue/flickr).

How do different groups in our society experience the aging process? Are there any experiences that are universal, or do different populations have different experiences? An emerging field of study looks at how lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) people experience the aging process and how their experience differs from that of other groups or the dominant group. This issue is expanding with the aging of the baby boom generation; not only will aging boomers represent a huge bump in the general elderly population but also the number of LGBTQ seniors is expected to double by 2030 (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al. 2011).

A recent study titled *The Aging and Health Report: Disparities and Resilience among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Older Adults* finds that LGBTQ older adults have higher rates of disability and depression than their heterosexual peers. They are also less likely to have a support system that might provide elder care: a partner and supportive children (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al. 2011). Even for those LGBTQ seniors who are partnered, some states do not recognize a legal relationship between two people of the same sex, which reduces their legal protection and financial options.

As they transition to assisted-living facilities, LGBTQ people have the added burden of “disclosure management:”

the way they share their sexual and relationship identity. In one case study, a seventy-eight-year-old lesbian woman lived alone in a long-term care facility. She had been in a long-term relationship of thirty-two years and had been visibly active in the LGBTQ community earlier in her life. However, in the long-term care setting, she was much quieter about her sexual orientation. She “selectively disclosed” her sexual identity, feeling safer with anonymity and silence (Jenkins et al. 2010). A study from the National Senior Citizens Law Center reports that only 22 percent of LGBTQ older adults expect they could be open about their sexual orientation or gender identity in a long-term care facility. Even more telling is the finding that only 16 percent of non-LGBTQ older adults expected that LGBTQ people could be open with facility staff (National Senior Citizens Law Center 2011).

Same-sex marriage—a civil rights battleground that is being fought in many states—can have major implications for the way the LGBTQ community ages. With marriage comes the legal and financial protection afforded to opposite-sex couples, as well as less fear of exposure and a reduction in the need to “retreat to the closet” (Jenkins et al. 2010). Changes in this area are coming slowly, and in the meantime, advocates have many policy recommendations for how to improve the aging process for LGBTQ individuals. These recommendations include increasing federal research on LGBTQ elders, increasing (and enforcing existing) laws against discrimination, and amending the federal Family and Medical Leave Act to cover LGBTQ caregivers (Grant 2009).

Death and Dying



FIGURE 13.13 A young man sits at the grave of his great-grandmother. (Credit: Sara Goldsmith/flickr)

For most of human history, the standard of living was significantly lower than it is now. Humans struggled to survive with few amenities and very limited medical technology. The risk of death due to disease or accident was high in any life stage, and life expectancy was low. As people began to live longer, death became associated with old age.

For many teenagers and young adults, losing a grandparent or another older relative can be the first loss of a loved one they experience. It may be their first encounter with **grief**, a psychological, emotional, and social response to the feelings of loss that accompanies death or a similar event.

People tend to perceive death, their own and that of others, based on the values of their culture. While some may look upon death as the natural conclusion to a long, fruitful life, others may find the prospect of dying frightening to contemplate. People tend to have strong resistance to the idea of their own death, and strong

emotional reactions of loss to the death of loved ones. Viewing death as a loss, as opposed to a natural or tranquil transition, is often considered normal in the United States.

What may be surprising is how few studies were conducted on death and dying prior to the 1960s. Death and dying were fields that had received little attention until a psychologist named Elisabeth Kübler-Ross began observing people who were in the process of dying. As Kübler-Ross witnessed people's transition toward death, she found some common threads in their experiences. She observed that the process had five distinct stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. She published her findings in a 1969 book called *On Death and Dying*. The book remains a classic on the topic today.

Kübler-Ross found that a person's first reaction to the prospect of dying is *denial*: this is characterized by the person's not wanting to believe he or she is dying, with common thoughts such as "I feel fine" or "This is not really happening to me." The second stage is *anger*, when loss of life is seen as unfair and unjust. A person then resorts to the third stage, *bargaining*: trying to negotiate with a higher power to postpone the inevitable by reforming or changing the way he or she lives. The fourth stage, psychological *depression*, allows for resignation as the situation begins to seem hopeless. In the final stage, a person adjusts to the idea of death and reaches *acceptance*. At this point, the person can face death honestly, by regarding it as a natural and inevitable part of life and can make the most of their remaining time.

The work of Kübler-Ross was eye-opening when it was introduced. It broke new ground and opened the doors for sociologists, social workers, health practitioners, and therapists to study death and help those who were facing death. Kübler-Ross's work is generally considered a major contribution to **thanatology**: the systematic study of death and dying.

Of special interests to thanatologists is the concept of "dying with dignity." Modern medicine includes advanced medical technology that may prolong life without a parallel improvement to the quality of life one may have. In some cases, people may not want to continue living when they are in constant pain and no longer enjoying life. Should patients have the right to choose to die with dignity? Dr. Jack Kevorkian was a staunch advocate for **physician-assisted suicide**: the voluntary or physician-assisted use of lethal medication provided by a medical doctor to end one's life. This right to have a doctor help a patient die with dignity is controversial. In the United States, Oregon was the first state to pass a law allowing physician-assisted suicides. In 1997, Oregon instituted the Death with Dignity Act, which required the presence of two physicians for a legal assisted suicide. This law was successfully challenged by U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft in 2001, but the appeals process ultimately upheld the Oregon law. As of 2019, seven states and the District of Columbia have passed similar laws allowing physician assisted suicide.

The controversy surrounding death with dignity laws is emblematic of the way our society tries to separate itself from death. Health institutions have built facilities to comfortably house those who are terminally ill. This is seen as a compassionate act, helping relieve the surviving family members of the burden of caring for the dying relative. But studies almost universally show that people prefer to die in their own homes (Lloyd, White, and Sutton 2011). Is it our social responsibility to care for elderly relatives up until their death? How do we balance the responsibility for caring for an elderly relative with our other responsibilities and obligations? As our society grows older, and as new medical technology can prolong life even further, the answers to these questions will develop and change.

The changing concept of **hospice** is an indicator of our society's changing view of death. Hospice is a type of healthcare that treats terminally ill people when "cure-oriented treatments" are no longer an option (Hospice Foundation of America 2012b). Hospice doctors, nurses, and therapists receive special training in the care of the dying. The focus is not on getting better or curing the illness, but on passing out of this life in comfort and peace. Hospice centers exist as a place where people can go to die in comfort, and increasingly, hospice services encourage at-home care so that someone has the comfort of dying in a familiar environment, surrounded by family (Hospice Foundation of America 2012a). While many of us would probably prefer to avoid thinking of the end of our lives, it may be possible to take comfort in the idea that when we do approach

death in a hospice setting, it is in a familiar, relatively controlled place.

13.3 Challenges Facing the Elderly

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Interpret the historical and current trends of poverty among elderly populations
- Recognize ageist thinking and ageist attitudes in individuals and institutions
- Identify risks factors and outcomes regarding mistreatment and abuse of elderly individuals

Aging comes with many challenges. The loss of independence is one potential part of the process, as are diminished physical ability and age discrimination. The term **senescence** refers to the aging process, including biological, emotional, intellectual, social, and spiritual changes. This section discusses some of the challenges we encounter during this process.

As already observed, many older adults remain highly self-sufficient. Others require more care. Because the elderly typically no longer hold jobs, finances can be a challenge. And due to cultural misconceptions, older people can be targets of ridicule and stereotypes. The elderly face many challenges in later life, but they do not have to enter old age without dignity.

Poverty



FIGURE 13.14 While elderly poverty rates showed an improvement trend for decades, the 2008 recession has changed some older people's financial futures. Some who had planned a leisurely retirement have found themselves at risk of late-age destitution. (Credit: (a) Michael Cohen/flickr; Photo (b) Alex Proimos/flickr)

For many people in the United States, growing older once meant living with less income. In 1960, almost 35 percent of the elderly existed on poverty-level incomes. A generation ago, the nation's oldest populations had the highest risk of living in poverty.

At the start of the twenty-first century, the older population was putting an end to that trend. Among people over sixty-five years old, the poverty rate fell from 30 percent in 1967 to 9.7 percent in 2008, well below the national average of 13.2 percent (U.S. Census Bureau 2009). However, given the subsequent recession, which severely reduced the retirement savings of many while taxing public support systems, how are the elderly affected? According to the Kaiser Commission on Medicaid and the Uninsured, the national poverty rate among the elderly had risen to 14 percent by 2010 (Urban Institute and Kaiser Commission 2010).

Before the recession hit, what had changed to cause a reduction in poverty among the elderly? What social patterns contributed to the shift? For several decades, a greater number of women joined the workforce. More married couples earned double incomes during their working years and saved more money for their

retirement. Private employers and governments began offering better retirement programs. By 1990, senior citizens reported earning 36 percent more income on average than they did in 1980; that was five times the rate of increase for people under age thirty-five (U.S. Census Bureau 2009).

In addition, many people were gaining access to better healthcare. New trends encouraged people to live more healthful lifestyles by placing an emphasis on exercise and nutrition. There was also greater access to information about the health risks of behaviors such as cigarette smoking, alcohol consumption, and drug use. Because they were healthier, many older people continue to work past the typical retirement age and provide more opportunity to save for retirement. Will these patterns return once the recession ends? Sociologists will be watching to see. In the meantime, they are realizing the immediate impact of the recession on elderly poverty.

During the recession, older people lost some of the financial advantages that they'd gained in the 1980s and 1990s. From October 2007 to October 2009 the values of retirement accounts for people over age fifty lost 18 percent of their value. The sharp decline in the stock market also forced many to delay their retirement (Administration on Aging 2009).

Ageism



FIGURE 13.15 Are these street signs humorous or offensive? What shared assumptions make them humorous? Or is memory loss too serious to be made fun of? (Credit: Tumbleweed/flickr)

Driving to the grocery store, Peter, twenty-three years old, got stuck behind a car on a four-lane main artery through his city's business district. The speed limit was thirty-five miles per hour, and while most drivers sped along at forty to forty-five mph, the driver in front of him was going the minimum speed. Peter tapped on his horn. He tailgated the driver. Finally, Peter had a chance to pass the car. He glanced over. Sure enough, Peter thought, a gray-haired old man guilty of "DWE," driving while elderly.

At the grocery store, Peter waited in the checkout line behind an older woman. She paid for her groceries, lifted her bags of food into her cart, and toddled toward the exit. Peter, guessing her to be about eighty years old, was reminded of his grandmother. He paid for his groceries and caught up with her.

"Can I help you with your cart?" he asked.

"No, thank you. I can get it myself," she said and marched off toward her car.

Peter's responses to both older people, the driver and the shopper, were prejudiced. In both cases, he made unfair assumptions. He assumed the driver drove cautiously simply because the man was a senior citizen, and he assumed the shopper needed help carrying her groceries just because she was an older woman.

Responses like Peter's toward older people are fairly common. He didn't intend to treat people differently based on personal or cultural biases, but he did. **Ageism** is discrimination (when someone acts on a prejudice) based on age. Dr. Robert Butler coined the term in 1968, noting that ageism exists in all cultures (Brownell). Ageist attitudes and biases based on stereotypes reduce elderly people to inferior or limited positions.

Ageism can vary in severity. Peter's attitudes are probably seen as fairly mild, but relating to the elderly in ways that are patronizing can be offensive. When ageism is reflected in the workplace, in healthcare, and in assisted-living facilities, the effects of discrimination can be more severe. Ageism can make older people fear losing a job, feel dismissed by a doctor, or feel a lack of power and control in their daily living situations.

In early societies, the elderly were respected and revered. Many preindustrial societies observed **gerontocracy**, a type of social structure wherein the power is held by a society's oldest members. In some countries today, the elderly still have influence and power and their vast knowledge is respected. Reverence for the elderly is still a part of some cultures, but it has changed in many places because of social factors.

In many modern nations, however, industrialization contributed to the diminished social standing of the elderly. Today wealth, power, and prestige are also held by those in younger age brackets. The average age of corporate executives was fifty-nine years old in 1980. In 2008, the average age had lowered to fifty-four years old (Stuart 2008). Some older members of the workforce felt threatened by this trend and grew concerned that younger employees in higher level positions would push them out of the job market. Rapid advancements in technology and media have required new skill sets that older members of the workforce are less likely to have.

Changes happened not only in the workplace but also at home. In agrarian societies, a married couple cared for their aging parents. The oldest members of the family contributed to the household by doing chores, cooking, and helping with child care. As economies shifted from agrarian to industrial, younger generations moved to cities to work in factories. The elderly began to be seen as an expensive burden. They did not have the strength and stamina to work outside the home. What began during industrialization, a trend toward older people living apart from their grown children, has become commonplace. As you saw in the opening, children of older people can also feel guilt, sadness, and sometimes anger at both taking care of aging parents and with accepting that their parents are losing their abilities. Living apart, especially if an older person is moved to a nursing home or other facility, can often exacerbate these issues.

Mistreatment and Abuse

Mistreatment and abuse of the elderly is a major social problem. As expected, with the biology of aging, the elderly sometimes become physically frail. This frailty renders them dependent on others for care—sometimes for small needs like household tasks, and sometimes for assistance with basic functions like eating and toileting. Unlike a child, who also is dependent on another for care, an elder is an adult with a lifetime of experience, knowledge, and opinions—a more fully developed person. This makes the care-providing situation more complex.

Elder abuse occurs when a caretaker intentionally deprives an older person of care or harms the person in his or her charge. Caregivers may be family members, relatives, friends, health professionals, or employees of senior housing or nursing care. The elderly may be subject to many different types of abuse.

In a 2009 study on the topic led by Dr. Ron Acierno, the team of researchers identified five major categories of elder abuse: 1) physical abuse, such as hitting or shaking, 2) sexual abuse, including rape and coerced nudity, 3) psychological or emotional abuse, such as verbal harassment or humiliation, 4) neglect or failure to provide adequate care, and 5) financial abuse or exploitation (Acierno 2010).

The National Center on Elder Abuse (NCEA), a division of the U.S. Administration on Aging, also identifies abandonment and self-neglect as types of abuse. [Table 13.2](#) shows some of the signs and symptoms that the NCEA encourages people to notice.

Type of Abuse	Signs and Symptoms
Physical abuse	Bruises, untreated wounds, sprains, broken glasses, lab findings of medication overdose
Sexual abuse	Bruises around breasts or genitals, torn or bloody underclothing, unexplained venereal disease
Emotional/psychological abuse	Being upset or withdrawn, unusual dementia-like behavior (rocking, sucking)
Neglect	Poor hygiene, untreated bed sores, dehydration, soiled bedding
Financial	Sudden changes in banking practices, inclusion of additional names on bank cards, abrupt changes to will
Self-neglect	Untreated medical conditions, unclean living area, lack of medical items like dentures or glasses

TABLE 13.2 Signs of Elder Abuse The National Center on Elder Abuse encourages people to watch for these signs of mistreatment. (Credit: National Center on Elder Abuse)

How prevalent is elder abuse? Two recent U.S. studies found that roughly one in ten elderly people surveyed had suffered at least one form of elder abuse. Some social researchers believe elder abuse is underreported and that the number may be higher. The risk of abuse also increases in people with health issues such as dementia (Kohn and Verhoek-Oftedahl 2011). Older women were found to be victims of verbal abuse more often than their male counterparts.

In Acierno's study, which included a sample of 5,777 respondents aged sixty and older, 5.2 percent of respondents reported financial abuse, 5.1 percent said they'd been neglected, and 4.6 endured emotional abuse (Acierno 2010). The prevalence of physical and sexual abuse was lower at 1.6 and 0.6 percent, respectively (Acierno 2010).

Other studies have focused on the caregivers to the elderly in an attempt to discover the causes of elder abuse. Researchers identified factors that increased the likelihood of caregivers perpetrating abuse against those in their care. Those factors include inexperience, having other demands such as jobs (for those who weren't professionally employed as caregivers), caring for children, living full-time with the dependent elder, and experiencing high stress, isolation, and lack of support (Kohn and Verhoek-Oftedahl 2011).

A history of depression in the caregiver was also found to increase the likelihood of elder abuse. Neglect was more likely when care was provided by paid caregivers. Many of the caregivers who physically abused elders were themselves abused—in many cases, when they were children. Family members with some sort of dependency on the elder in their care were more likely to physically abuse that elder. For example, an adult child caring for an elderly parent while at the same time depending on some form of income from that parent, is considered more likely to perpetrate physical abuse (Kohn and Verhoek-Oftedahl 2011).

A survey in Florida found that 60.1 percent of caregivers reported verbal aggression as a style of conflict resolution. Paid caregivers in nursing homes were at a high risk of becoming abusive if they had low job satisfaction, treated the elderly like children, or felt burnt out (Kohn and Verhoek-Oftedahl 2011). Caregivers who tended to be verbally abusive were found to have had less training, lower education, and higher likelihood of depression or other psychiatric disorders. Based on the results of these studies, many housing facilities for

seniors have increased their screening procedures for caregiver applicants.

BIG PICTURE

World War II Veterans



FIGURE 13.16 World War II (1941–1945) veterans and members of an Honor Flight from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, visit the National World War II Memorial in Washington, DC. Most of these men and women were in their late teens or twenties when they served. (Credit: Sean Hackbarth/flickr)

World War II was a defining event in recent human history, and set the stage for America to become an economic and military superpower. Over 16 million Americans served in the war—an enormous amount on any scale, but especially significant considering that the U.S. had almost 200 million fewer people than it does today. That sizable and significant group is aging. Many are in their eighties and nineties, and many others have already passed on. Of the 16 million, less than 300,000 are alive. Data suggest that by 2036, there will be no living veterans of WWII (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs).

When these veterans came home from the war and ended their service, little was known about posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These heroes did not receive the mental and physical healthcare that could have helped them. As a result, many of them, now in old age, are dealing with the effects of PTSD. Research suggests a high percentage of World War II veterans are plagued by flashback memories and isolation, and that many “self-medicate” with alcohol.

Research has found that veterans of any conflict are more than twice as likely as nonveterans to commit suicide, with rates highest among the oldest veterans. Reports show that WWII-era veterans are four times as likely to take their own lives as people of the same age with no military service (Glantz 2010).

In May 2004, the National World War II Memorial in Washington, DC, was completed and dedicated to honor those who served during the conflict. Dr. Earl Morse, a physician and retired Air Force captain, treated many WWII veterans. He encouraged them to visit the memorial, knowing it could help them heal. Many WWII veterans expressed interest in seeing the memorial. Unfortunately, many were in their eighties and were neither physically nor financially able to travel on their own. Dr. Morse arranged to personally escort some of the veterans and enlisted volunteer pilots who would pay for the flights themselves. He also raised money, insisting the veterans pay nothing. By the end of 2005, 137 veterans, many using wheelchairs, had made the trip. The

Honor Flight Network was up and running.

As of 2017, the Honor Flight Network had flown more than 200,000 U.S. veterans of World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War to Washington. The round-trip flights leave for day-long trips from over 140 airports in thirty states, staffed by volunteers who care for the needs of the elderly travelers (Honor Flight Network 2021).

13.4 Theoretical Perspectives on Aging

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Compare and contrast sociological theoretical perspectives on aging

What roles do individual senior citizens play in your life? How do you relate to and interact with older people? What role do they play in neighborhoods and communities, in cities and in states? Sociologists are interested in exploring the answers to questions such as these through three different perspectives: functionalism, symbolic interactionism, and conflict theory.

Functionalism

Functionalists analyze how the parts of society work together. Functionalists gauge how society's parts are working together to keep society running smoothly. How does this perspective address aging? The elderly, as a group, are one of society's vital parts.

Functionalists find that people with better resources who stay active in other roles adjust better to old age (Crosnoe and Elder 2002). Three social theories within the functional perspective were developed to explain how older people might deal with later-life experiences.



FIGURE 13.17 Does being old mean disengaging from the world? (Credit: Candida Performa/Wikimedia Commons)

The earliest gerontological theory in the functionalist perspective is **disengagement theory**, which suggests that withdrawing from society and social relationships is a natural part of growing old. There are several main points to the theory. First, because everyone expects to die one day, and because we experience physical and mental decline as we approach death, it is natural to withdraw from individuals and society. Second, as the elderly withdraw, they receive less reinforcement to conform to social norms. Therefore, this withdrawal allows a greater freedom from the pressure to conform. Finally, social withdrawal is gendered, meaning it is experienced differently by men and women. Because men focus on work and women focus on marriage and family, when they withdraw they will be unhappy and directionless until they adopt a role to replace their accustomed role that is compatible with the disengaged state (Cummings and Henry 1961).

The suggestion that old age was a distinct state in the life course, characterized by a distinct change in roles and activities, was groundbreaking when it was first introduced. However, the theory is no longer accepted in its classic form. Criticisms typically focus on the application of the idea that seniors universally naturally withdraw from society as they age, and that it does not allow for a wide variation in the way people experience aging (Hothschild 1975).

The social withdrawal that Cummings and Henry recognized (1961), and its notion that elderly people need to find replacement roles for those they've lost, is addressed anew in **activity theory**. According to this theory, activity levels and social involvement are key to this process, and key to happiness (Havinghurst 1961; Neugarten 1964; Havinghurst, Neugarten, and Tobin 1968). According to this theory, the more active and involved an elderly person is, the happier he or she will be. Critics of this theory point out that access to social opportunities and activity are not equally available to all. Moreover, not everyone finds fulfillment in the presence of others or participation in activities. Reformulations of this theory suggest that participation in informal activities, such as hobbies, are what most affect later life satisfaction (Lemon, Bengtson, and Petersen 1972).

According to **continuity theory**, the elderly make specific choices to maintain consistency in internal (personality structure, beliefs) and external structures (relationships), remaining active and involved throughout their elder years. This is an attempt to maintain social equilibrium and stability by making future decisions on the basis of already developed social roles (Atchley 1971; Atchley 1989). One criticism of this theory is its emphasis on so-called "normal" aging, which marginalizes those with chronic diseases such as Alzheimer's.

**SOCIOLOGY IN THE REAL WORLD****The Graying of American Prisons**

FIGURE 13.18 Would you want to spend your retirement here? A growing elderly prison population requires asking questions about how to deal with senior inmates. (Credit: Claire Rowland/Wikimedia Commons)

The COVID-19 pandemic placed a particular burden on prison populations and government officials who manage them. Many people unfamiliar with American prisons may have assumed this concern was due to the obvious: Prisons are by definition confined spaces, where space and freedom are in short supply. Incarcerated people often share cells, restrooms, and other facilities. These are all contributing factors to the grave concerns about prisoners and COVID. But they were all exacerbated by the one overall comorbidity for the coronavirus: age.

Just like elderly people outside of prison generally suffered the most from the disease, the same age group was highly susceptible in prison. Perhaps the most dire circumstance is the size and percentage of that age group in prison. By the time the pandemic hit, the population of people over 50 in American prisons was, for the first time in history, larger than every other age group, and nearly 200,000 people in correctional facilities were 55 and over. That portion of the prison population tripled from 2000 to 2016 (Li 2020).

Two factors contribute significantly to this country's aging prison population. One is the tough-on-crime reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, when mandatory minimum sentencing and "three strikes" policies sent many people to jail for thirty years to life, even when the third strike was a relatively minor offense. Many of today's elderly prisoners are those who were incarcerated thirty years ago for life sentences. The other factor influencing today's aging prison population is the aging of the overall population. As discussed in the section on aging in the United States, the percentage of people over sixty-five years old is increasing each year due to rising life expectancies and the aging of the Baby Boom generation.

So why should it matter that the elderly prison population is growing so swiftly? As discussed in the section on the process of aging, growing older is accompanied by a host of physical problems, like failing vision, mobility, and hearing. Chronic illnesses like heart disease, arthritis, and diabetes also become increasingly common as people age, whether they are in prison or not. In many cases, elderly prisoners are physically incapable of committing a violent—or possibly any—crime. Is it ethical to keep them locked up for the short remainder of their lives? And is it practical?

Aging inmates require far more healthcare, which places massive burdens on prison budgets and expenditures. When the healthcare costs are considered, some officials estimate the costs of incarcerating an aging person to be three times higher than to keep a younger person in prison. On the flip side, reducing prison sentences in Maryland saved an estimated \$185 million over five years. When considering that many of these elderly people have served the majority of their sentence and generally pose a lower risk to society, many people in the corrections system itself advocate for releasing them early (Reese 2019).

Conflict Perspective



FIGURE 13.19 At a public protest, older people make their voices heard. In advocating for themselves, they help shape public policy and alter the allotment of available resources. (Credit: longislandwins/flickr)

Theorists working the conflict perspective view society as inherently unstable, an institution that privileges the powerful wealthy few while marginalizing everyone else. According to the guiding principle of conflict theory, social groups compete with other groups for power and scarce resources. Applied to society's aging population, the principle means that the elderly struggle with other groups—for example, younger society members—to retain a certain share of resources. At some point, this competition may become conflict.

For example, some people complain that the elderly get more than their fair share of society's resources. In hard economic times, there is great concern about the huge costs of Social Security and Medicare. One of every four tax dollars, or about 28 percent, is spent on these two programs. In 1950, the federal government paid \$781 million in Social Security payments. Now, the payments are 870 times higher. In 2008, the government paid \$296 billion (Statistical Abstract 2011). The medical bills of the nation's elderly population are rising dramatically. While there is more care available to certain segments of the senior community, it must be noted that the financial resources available to the aging can vary tremendously by race, social class, and gender.

There are three classic theories of aging within the conflict perspective. **Modernization theory** (Cowgill and Holmes 1972) suggests that the primary cause of the elderly losing power and influence in society are the

parallel forces of industrialization and modernization. As societies modernize, the status of elders decreases, and they are increasingly likely to experience social exclusion. Before industrialization, strong social norms bound the younger generation to care for the older. Now, as societies industrialize, the nuclear family replaces the extended family. Societies become increasingly individualistic, and norms regarding the care of older people change. In an individualistic industrial society, caring for an elderly relative is seen as a voluntary obligation that may be ignored without fear of social censure.

The central reasoning of modernization theory is that as long as the extended family is the standard family, as in preindustrial economies, elders will have a place in society and a clearly defined role. As societies modernize, the elderly, unable to work outside of the home, have less to offer economically and are seen as a burden. This model may be applied to both the developed and the developing world, and it suggests that as people age they will be abandoned and lose much of their familial support since they become a nonproductive economic burden.

Another theory in the conflict perspective is **age stratification theory** (Riley, Johnson, and Foner 1972). Though it may seem obvious now, with our awareness of ageism, age stratification theorists were the first to suggest that members of society might be stratified by age, just as they are stratified by race, class, and gender. Because age serves as a basis of social control, different age groups will have varying access to social resources such as political and economic power. Within societies, behavioral age norms, including norms about roles and appropriate behavior, dictate what members of age cohorts may reasonably do. For example, it might be considered deviant for an elderly woman to wear a bikini because it violates norms denying the sexuality of older females. These norms are specific to each age strata, developing from culturally based ideas about how people should “act their age.”

Thanks to amendments to the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA), which drew attention to some of the ways in which our society is stratified based on age, U.S. workers no longer must retire upon reaching a specified age. As first passed in 1967, the ADEA provided protection against a broad range of age discrimination and specifically addressed termination of employment due to age, age specific layoffs, advertised positions specifying age limits or preferences, and denial of healthcare benefits to those over sixty-five years old (U.S. EEOC 2012).

Age stratification theory has been criticized for its broadness and its inattention to other sources of stratification and how these might intersect with age. For example, one might argue that an older white male occupies a more powerful role, and is far less limited in his choices, compared to an older white female based on his historical access to political and economic power.

Finally, **exchange theory** (Dowd 1975), a rational choice approach, suggests we experience an increased dependence as we age and must increasingly submit to the will of others because we have fewer ways of compelling others to submit to us. Indeed, inasmuch as relationships are based on mutual exchanges, as the elderly become less able to exchange resources, they will see their social circles diminish. In this model, the only means to avoid being discarded is to engage in resource management, like maintaining a large inheritance or participating in social exchange systems via child care. In fact, the theory may depend too much on the assumption that individuals are calculating. It is often criticized for affording too much emphasis to material exchange and devaluing nonmaterial assets such as love and friendship.



FIGURE 13.20 The subculture of aging theory posits that the elderly create their own communities because they have been excluded from other groups. (Credit: Ignacio Palomo Duarte/flickr)

Symbolic Interactionism

Generally, theories within the symbolic interactionist perspective focus on how society is created through the day-to-day interaction of individuals, as well as the way people perceive themselves and others based on cultural symbols. This microanalytic perspective assumes that if people develop a sense of identity through their social interactions, their sense of self is dependent on those interactions. A woman whose main interactions with society make her feel old and unattractive may lose her sense of self. But a woman whose interactions make her feel valued and important will have a stronger sense of self and a happier life.

Symbolic interactionists stress that the changes associated with old age, in and of themselves, have no inherent meaning. Nothing in the nature of aging creates any particular, defined set of attitudes. Rather, attitudes toward the elderly are rooted in society.

One microanalytical theory is Rose's (1962) **subculture of aging theory**, which focuses on the shared community created by the elderly when they are excluded (due to age), voluntarily or involuntarily, from participating in other groups. This theory suggests that elders will disengage from society and develop new patterns of interaction with peers who share common backgrounds and interests. For example, a group consciousness may develop within such groups as AARP around issues specific to the elderly like the Medicare "doughnut hole," focused on creating social and political pressure to fix those issues. Whether brought together by social or political interests, or even geographic regions, elders may find a strong sense of community with their new group.

Another theory within the symbolic interaction perspective is **selective optimization with compensation theory**. Baltes and Baltes (1990) based their theory on the idea that successful personal development throughout the life course and subsequent mastery of the challenges associated with everyday life are based on the components of selection, optimization, and compensation. Though this happens at all stages in the life course, in the field of gerontology, researchers focus attention on balancing the losses associated with aging with the gains stemming from the same. Here, aging is a process and not an outcome, and the goals (compensation) are specific to the individual.

According to this theory, our energy diminishes as we age, and we select (selection) personal goals to get the most (optimize) for the effort we put into activities, in this way making up for (compensation) the loss of a

wider range of goals and activities. In this theory, the physical decline postulated by disengagement theory may result in more dependence, but that is not necessarily negative, as it allows aging individuals to save their energy for the most meaningful activities. For example, a professor who values teaching sociology may participate in a phased retirement, never entirely giving up teaching, but acknowledging personal physical limitations that allow teaching only one or two classes per year.

Swedish sociologist Lars Tornstam developed a symbolic interactionist theory called **gerotranscendence**: the idea that as people age, they transcend the limited views of life they held in earlier times. Tornstam believes that throughout the aging process, the elderly become less self-centered and feel more peaceful and connected to the natural world. Wisdom comes to the elderly, Tornstam's theory states, and as the elderly tolerate ambiguities and seeming contradictions, they let go of conflict and develop softer views of right and wrong (Tornstam 2005).

Tornstam does not claim that everyone will achieve wisdom in aging. Some elderly people might still grow bitter and isolated, feel ignored and left out, or become grumpy and judgmental. Symbolic interactionists believe that, just as in other phases of life, individuals must struggle to overcome their own failings and turn them into strengths.

Key Terms

- activity theory** a theory which suggests that for individuals to enjoy old age and feel satisfied, they must maintain activities and find a replacement for the statuses and associated roles they have left behind as they aged
- age stratification theory** a theory which states that members of society are stratified by age, just as they are stratified by race, class, and gender
- ageism** discrimination based on age
- baby Boomers** people in the United States born between approximately 1946 and 1964
- centenarians** people 100 years old or older
- cohort** a group of people who share a statistical or demographic trait
- continuity theory** a theory which states that the elderly make specific choices to maintain consistency in internal (personality structure, beliefs) and external structures (relationships), remaining active and involved throughout their elder years
- dependency ratio** the number of nonproductive citizens (young, disabled, elderly) to productive working citizens
- disengagement theory** a theory which suggests that withdrawing from society and social relationships is a natural part of growing old
- elder abuse** the act of a caretaker intentionally depriving an older person of care or harming the person in their charge
- exchange theory** a theory which suggests that we experience an increased dependence as we age and must increasingly submit to the will of others, because we have fewer ways of compelling others to submit to us
- filial piety** deference and respect to one's parents and ancestors in all things
- geriatrics** a medical specialty focusing on the elderly
- gerontocracy** a type of social structure wherein the power is held by a society's oldest members
- gerontology** a field of science that seeks to understand the process of aging and the challenges encountered as seniors grow older
- gerotranscendence** the idea that as people age, they transcend limited views of life they held in earlier times
- grief** a psychological, emotional, and social response to the feelings of loss that accompanies death or a similar event
- hospice** healthcare that treats terminally ill people by providing comfort during the dying process
- life course** the period from birth to death, including a sequence of predictable life events
- life expectancy** the number of years a newborn is expected to live
- modernization theory** a theory which suggests that the primary cause of the elderly losing power and influence in society are the parallel forces of industrialization and modernization
- physician-assisted suicide** the voluntary use of lethal medication provided by a medical doctor to end one's life
- primary aging** biological factors such as molecular and cellular changes
- secondary aging** aging that occurs due to controllable factors like exercise and diet
- selective optimization with compensation theory** a theory based on the idea that successful personal development throughout the life course and subsequent mastery of the challenges associated with everyday life are based on the components of selection, optimization, and compensation
- senescence** the aging process, including biological, intellectual, emotional, social, and spiritual changes
- social gerontology** a specialized field of gerontology that examines the social (and sociological) aspects of aging
- subculture of aging theory** a theory that focuses on the shared community created by the elderly when they are excluded (due to age), voluntarily or involuntarily, from participating in other groups
- supercentenarians** people 110 of age or older
- thanatology** the systematic study of death and dying

Section Summary

13.1 Who Are the Elderly? Aging in Society

The social study of aging uses population data and cohorts to predict social concerns related to aging populations. In the United States, the population is increasingly older (called “the graying of the United States”), especially due to the baby Boomer segment. Global studies on aging reveal a difference in life expectancy between core and peripheral nations as well as a discrepancy in nations’ preparedness for the challenges of increasing elderly populations.

13.2 The Process of Aging

Old age affects every aspect of human life: biological, social, and psychological. Although medical technology has lengthened life expectancies, it cannot eradicate aging and death. Cultural attitudes shape the way our society views old age and dying, but these attitudes shift and evolve over time.

13.3 Challenges Facing the Elderly

As people enter old age, they face challenges. Ageism, which involves stereotyping and discrimination against the elderly, leads to misconceptions about their abilities. Although elderly poverty has been improving for decades, many older people may be detrimentally affected by the 2008 recession. Some elderly people grow physically frail and, therefore, dependent on caregivers, which increases their risk of elder abuse.

13.4 Theoretical Perspectives on Aging

The three major sociological perspectives inform the theories of aging. Theories in the functionalist perspective focus on the role of elders in terms of the functioning of society as a whole. Theories in the conflict perspective concentrate on how elders, as a group, are at odds with other groups in society. And theories in the symbolic interactionist perspective focus on how elders’ identities are created through their interactions.

Section Quiz

13.1 Who Are the Elderly? Aging in Society

- In most countries, elderly women _____ than elderly men.
 - are mistreated less
 - live a few years longer
 - suffer fewer health problems
 - deal with issues of aging better
- America’s baby Boomer generation has contributed to all of the following except:
 - Social Security’s vulnerability
 - improved medical technology
 - Medicaid being in danger of going bankrupt
 - rising Medicare budgets
- The measure that compares the number of men to women in a population is _____.
 - cohort
 - sex ratio
 - baby Boomer
 - disengagement

4. The “graying of the United States” refers to _____.
 - a. the increasing percentage of the population over sixty-five years old
 - b. faster aging due to stress
 - c. dissatisfaction with retirement plans
 - d. increased health problems such as Alzheimer’s
5. What is the approximate median age of the United States?
 - a. eighty-five
 - b. sixty-five
 - c. thirty-seven
 - d. eighteen

13.2 The Process of Aging

6. Thanatology is the study of _____.
 - a. life expectancy
 - b. biological aging
 - c. death and dying
 - d. adulthood
7. In Erik Erikson’s developmental stages of life, with which challenge must older people struggle?
 - a. Overcoming despair to achieve integrity
 - b. Overcoming role confusion to achieve identity
 - c. Overcoming isolation to achieve intimacy
 - d. Overcoming shame to achieve autonomy
8. Who wrote the book *On Death and Dying*, outlining the five stages of grief?
 - a. Ignatz Nascher
 - b. Erik Erikson
 - c. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross
 - d. Carol Gilligan
9. For individual people of a certain culture, the life course is _____.
 - a. the average age they will die
 - b. the lessons they must learn
 - c. the length of a typical bereavement period
 - d. the typical sequence of events in their lives
10. In the United States, life expectancy rates in recent decades have _____.
 - a. continued to gradually rise
 - b. gone up and down due to global issues such as military conflicts
 - c. lowered as healthcare improves
 - d. stayed the same since the mid-1960s

13.3 Challenges Facing the Elderly

11. Today in the United States the poverty rate of the elderly is _____.
 - a. lower than at any point in history
 - b. increasing
 - c. decreasing
 - d. the same as that of the general population

12. Which action reflects ageism?
- Enabling WWII veterans to visit war memorials
 - Speaking slowly and loudly when talking to someone over age sixty-five years old
 - Believing that older people drive too slowly
 - Living in a culture where elders are respected
13. Which factor most increases the risk of an elderly person suffering mistreatment?
- Bereavement due to widowhood
 - Having been abusive as a younger adult
 - Being frail to the point of dependency on care
 - The ability to bestow a large inheritance on survivors
14. If elderly people suffer abuse, it is most often perpetrated by _____.
- spouses
 - caregivers
 - lawyers
 - strangers
15. Veterans are two to four times more likely to _____ as people who did not serve in the military.
- be a victim of elder abuse
 - commit suicide
 - be concerned about financial stresses
 - be abusive toward care providers

13.4 Theoretical Perspectives on Aging

16. Which assertion about aging in men would be made by a sociologist following the functionalist perspective?
- Men view balding as representative of a loss of strength.
 - Men tend to have better retirement plans than women.
 - Men have life expectancies three to five years shorter than women.
 - Men who remain active after retirement play supportive community roles.
17. An older woman retires and completely changes her life. She is no longer raising children or working. However, she joins the YWCA to swim every day. She serves on the Friends of the Library board. She is part of a neighborhood group that plays Bunco on Saturday nights. Her situation most closely illustrates the _____ theory.
- activity
 - continuity
 - disengagement
 - gerotranscendence
18. An older man retires from his job, stops golfing, and cancels his newspaper subscription. After his wife dies, he lives alone, loses touch with his children, and stops seeing old friends. His situation most closely illustrates the _____ theory.
- activity
 - continuity
 - disengagement
 - gerotranscendence

19. What is the primary driver of modernization theory?
 - a. Industrialization
 - b. Aging
 - c. Conflict
 - d. Interactions
20. The Age Discrimination in Employment Act counteracts which theory?
 - a. Modernization
 - b. Conflict
 - c. Disengagement
 - d. Age stratification

Short Answer

13.1 Who Are the Elderly? Aging in Society

1. Baby Boomers have been called the “Me Generation.” Do you know any baby Boomers? In what way do they exemplify their generation?
2. What social issues involve age disaggregation (breakdowns into groups) of a population? What kind of sociological studies would consider age an important factor?
3. Conduct a mini-census by counting the members of your extended family, and emphasize age. Try to include three or four generations, if possible. Create a table and include total population plus percentages of each generation. Next, begin to analyze age patterns in your family. What issues are important and specific to each group? What trends can you predict about your own family over the next ten years based on this census? For example, how will family members’ needs and interests and relationships change the family dynamic?

13.2 The Process of Aging

4. Test Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s five stages of grief. Think of someone or something you have lost. You might consider the loss of a relationship, possession, or aspect of your self-identity. For example, perhaps you dissolved a childhood friendship, sold your car, or got a bad haircut. For even a small loss, did you experience all five stages of grief? If so, how did the expression of each stage manifest? Did the process happen slowly or rapidly? Did the stages occur out of order? Did you reach acceptance? Try to recall the experience and analyze your own response to loss. Does your experience facilitate your empathizing with the elderly?
5. What do you think it will be like to be ten, twenty, and fifty years older than you are now? What facts are your assumptions based on? Are any of your assumptions about getting older false? What kind of sociological study could you establish to test your assumptions?
6. What is your relationship to aging and to time? Look back on your own life. How much and in what ways did you change in ten years and in twenty years? Does a decade seem like a long time or a short time in a life span? Now apply some of your ideas to the idea of aging. Do you think older people share similar experiences as they age?

13.3 Challenges Facing the Elderly

7. Make a list of all the biases, generalizations, and stereotypes about elderly people that you have seen or heard. Include everything, no matter how small or seemingly trivial. Try to rate the items on your list. Which statements can be considered myths? Which frequently turn into discrimination?
8. Have you known any person who experienced prejudice or discrimination based on age? Think of someone who has been denied an experience or opportunity simply for being too old. Write the story as a case study.

9. Think of an older person you know well, perhaps a grandparent, other relative, or neighbor. How does this person defy certain stereotypes of aging?
10. Older people suffer discrimination, and often, so do teenagers. Compare the discrimination of the elderly to that of teenagers. What do the groups share in common and how are they different?

13.4 Theoretical Perspectives on Aging

11. Remember Madame Jeanne Calment of France was the world's oldest living person until she died at 122 years old? Consider her life experiences from all three sociological points of view. Analyze her situation as if you were a functionalist, a symbolic interactionist, and a conflict theorist.
12. Which lifestyle do you think is healthiest for aging people—activity, continuity, or disengagement theories? What are the pros and cons of each theory? Find examples of real people who illustrate the theories, either from your own experience or your friends' relationships with older people. Do your examples show positive or negative aspects of the theory they illustrate?

Further Research

13.1 Who Are the Elderly? Aging in Society

Gregory Bator founded the television show *Graceful Aging* and then developed a web site offering short video clips from the show. The purpose of *Graceful Aging* is to both inform and entertain, with clips on topics such as sleep, driving, health, safety, and legal issues. Bator, a lawyer, works on counseling seniors about their legal needs. Log onto [Graceful Aging \(http://openstax.org/l/graceful_aging\)](http://openstax.org/l/graceful_aging) for a visual understanding of aging.

13.2 The Process of Aging

Read the article "[A Study of Sexuality and Health among Older Adults in the United States](http://openstax.org/l/New_England_journal_medicine)" (http://openstax.org/l/New_England_journal_medicine).

13.3 Challenges Facing the Elderly

Veterans who served in the U.S. Armed Forces during various conflicts represent cohorts. Veterans share certain aspects of life in common. To find information on veteran populations and how they are aging, study the information on the web site of the [U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs \(http://openstax.org/l/Dep_Veterans_Affairs\)](http://openstax.org/l/Dep_Veterans_Affairs).

Learn more about the [Honor Flight Network \(http://openstax.org/l/honor_flight\)](http://openstax.org/l/honor_flight), the organization offering trips to national war memorials in Washington, DC, at no cost to the veterans.

13.4 Theoretical Perspectives on Aging

New Dynamics of Aging is a web site produced by an interdisciplinary team at the University of Sheffield. It is supposedly the largest research program on aging in the United Kingdom to date. In studying the experiences of aging and factors that shape aging, including behaviors, biology, health, culture, history, economics, and technology, researchers are promoting healthy aging and helping dispel stereotypes. [Learn more by logging onto it's website here \(http://openstax.org/l/new_dynamics_aging\)](http://openstax.org/l/new_dynamics_aging).

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FIGURE 14.1 If we see a young couple in a park, what do we assume about them? Are our assumptions based on what we see, or what we've experienced? (Credit: Jaroslav A. Polák/flickr)

CHAPTER OUTLINE

14.1 What Is Marriage? What Is a Family?

14.2 Variations in Family Life

14.3 Challenges Families Face

INTRODUCTION Elena and Cam met through friends when they were in their early twenties. Elena had been out of college for two years and worked in the city procurement office; she took graduate classes in operations management, but she'd need a few more years to finish her Master's. Cam had received extensive computing training while in the Navy, and was a database architect at an insurance company.

In their first few years of dating, the idea of marriage came up mostly through other people. Friends' weddings seemed like monthly events, and "who's next?" small talk was unavoidable. Elena's grandmother and aunts added to the chorus; they talked about their home country, where women were married with a couple of children by the time they reached Elena's age. (Elena often pointed out that they were wrong, and the average age of marriage had been climbing for decades.) These pressures were pretty minor at first. They came in the form of jokes, wedding dress texts, and the occasional insult about Cam's salary. But every once in a while someone would sit Elena down for a serious talk, or corner Cam while he was at a family gathering.

Most of Elena's family predicted that things would change when she earned her graduate degree and could

“focus on her family.” Things did change; Elena became compliance officer for the office of city services, resulting in almost a ten percent increase in her salary. Cam became a supervisor three months later. They moved out of their apartment, which was in Cam’s mother’s garage, and into their own place downtown. They were happy. They were committed to each other. They didn’t get married.

Five years later, Elena and Cam were still living downtown, but they’d traded their rental for a condo. Aside from work, they co-founded a nonprofit where Elena taught financial literacy and Cam ran computing boot camps for recent immigrants and refugees. Maybe it was the hundreds of children they met through the organization, or maybe it was seeing their friends’ kids, or maybe it was being in her thirties, but Elena realized she wanted to be a mother. They started the adoption process, and eighteen months later welcomed a young girl who had been born in another country.

When did Elena and Cam become a family? Was it when they moved in together? When they adopted the child? Does their not being married matter?

14.1 What Is Marriage? What Is a Family?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Describe society’s current understanding of family
- Recognize changes in marriage and family patterns
- Differentiate between lines of descent and residence



FIGURE 14.2 If you asked a small child who is in their family, their response might depend more on their living arrangements than on their understanding of formal family structures.

Marriage and family are key structures in many societies. Many of us learn from a young age that finding and joining the right person is a key to happiness and security. We’re told that children need two parents. Many of the tax laws, medical laws, retirement benefit laws, and banking and loan processes seem to favor or assume marriage. Should those assumptions be changed? Is marriage still the foundation of the family and our society?

In 1960, 66 percent of households in America were headed by a married couple. That meant that most children grew up in such households, as did their friends and extended families. Marriage could certainly be seen as the foundation of the culture. By 2010, that number of households headed by married couples had dropped to 45 percent (Luscombe 2014). The approximately 20 percent drop is more than just a statistic; it has significant practical effects. It means that nearly every child in most parts of America is either in or is close to a family that is not headed by a married couple. It means that teachers and counselors and even people who meet children in a restaurant can’t assume they live with two married parents. Some view this decline as a

problem with outcomes related to values, crime, financial strength, and mental health. Sociologists may study that viewpoint to determine if it is actually true.

What is marriage? Not even sociologists are able to agree on a single meaning. For our purposes, we'll define **marriage** as a legally recognized social contract between two people, traditionally based on a sexual relationship and implying a permanence of the union. In practicing cultural relativism, we should also consider variations, such as whether a legal union is required, whether more than two people can be involved, or whether the marriage is a religious one or a civil one.

Sociologists are interested in the relationship between the institution of marriage and the institution of family because, historically, marriages are what create a family, and families are the most basic social unit upon which society is built. Both marriage and family create status roles that are sanctioned by society.

The question of what constitutes a family may be an even more difficult one to answer; it's a prime area of debate in family sociology, as well as in politics and religion. Social conservatives tend to define the family in terms of structure with each family member filling a certain role (like father, mother, or child). Sociologists, on the other hand, tend to define family more in terms of the manner in which members relate to one another than on a strict configuration of status roles. Here, we'll define **family** as a socially recognized group (usually joined by blood, marriage, cohabitation, or adoption) that forms an emotional connection and serves as an economic unit of society. Sociologists identify different types of families based on how one enters into them. A **family of orientation** refers to the family into which a person is born. A **family of procreation** describes one that is formed through marriage. These distinctions have cultural significance related to issues of lineage.

Drawing on two sociological paradigms, the sociological understanding of what constitutes a family can be explained by symbolic interactionism as well as functionalism. These two theories indicate that families are groups in which participants view themselves as family members and act accordingly. In other words, families are groups in which people come together to form a strong primary group connection and maintain emotional ties to one another over a long period of time. Such families may include groups of close friends or teammates. In addition, the functionalist perspective views families as groups that perform vital roles for society—both internally (for the family itself) and externally (for society as a whole). Families provide for one another's physical, emotional, and social well-being. Parents care for and socialize children. Later in life, adult children often care for elderly parents. While interactionism helps us understand the subjective experience of belonging to a “family,” functionalism illuminates the many purposes of families and their roles in the maintenance of a balanced society (Parsons and Bales 1956). We will go into more detail about how these theories apply to family in the following pages.

Challenges Families Face

People in the United States as a whole are somewhat divided when it comes to determining what does and what does not constitute a family. In a 2010 survey conducted by professors at the University of Indiana, nearly all participants (99.8 percent) agreed that a husband, wife, and children constitute a family. Ninety-two percent stated that a husband and a wife without children still constitute a family. The numbers drop for less traditional structures: unmarried couples with children (83 percent), unmarried couples without children (39.6 percent), gay male couples with children (64 percent), and gay male couples without children (33 percent) (Powell et al. 2010). This survey revealed that children tend to be the key indicator in establishing “family” status: the percentage of individuals who agreed that unmarried couples and gay couples constitute a family nearly doubled when children were added.

The study also revealed that 60 percent of U.S. respondents agreed that if you consider yourself a family, you are a family (a concept that reinforces an interactionist perspective) (Powell 2010). The government, however, is not so flexible in its definition of “family.” The U.S. Census Bureau defines a family as “a group of two people or more (one of whom is the householder) related by birth, marriage, or adoption and residing together” (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). While this structured definition can be used as a means to consistently track family-

related patterns over several years, it excludes individuals such as cohabitating unmarried couples. Legality aside, sociologists would argue that the general concept of family is more diverse and less structured than in years past. Society has given more leeway to the design of a family making room for what works for its members (Jayson 2010).

Family is, indeed, a subjective concept, but it is a fairly objective fact that family (whatever one's concept of it may be) is very important to people in the United States. In a 2010 survey by Pew Research Center in Washington, DC, 76 percent of adults surveyed stated that family is “the most important” element of their life—just one percent said it was “not important” (Pew Research Center 2010). It is also very important to society. President Ronald Reagan notably stated, “The family has always been the cornerstone of American society. Our families nurture, preserve, and pass on to each succeeding generation the values we share and cherish, values that are the foundation of our freedoms” (Lee 2009). While the design of the family may have changed in recent years, the fundamentals of emotional closeness and support are still present. Most responders to the Pew survey stated that their family today is at least as close (45 percent) or closer (40 percent) than the family with which they grew up (Pew Research Center 2010).

As you may have seen in the chapter on Aging and the Elderly, different generations have varying living situations and views on aging. The same goes for living situations with family. The Pew Research Center analyzed living situation of 40-year-olds from different generations. At that age, Millennials indicated that 45 percent of them were not living in a family of their own. In contrast, when Gen Xers and Baby Boomers were about 40 years old (around 2003 and 1987, respectively), an average of 33 percent of them lived outside of a family (Barroso 2020). The dynamic of nearly a 50-50 split between family/non-family for Millennials is very different from a two-third/one third split of Boomers and Gen X.

The data also show that women are having children later in life and that men are much less likely to live in a household with their own children. In 2019, 32 percent of Millennial men were living in a household with their children, compared to 41 percent of Gen X men in 2003 and 44 percent of Boomer men in 1987 (Barroso 2020). Again, the significant drop off in parenting roles likely has an impact on attitudes toward family.

Alongside the debate surrounding what constitutes a family is the question of what people in the United States believe constitutes a marriage. Many religious and social conservatives believe that marriage can only exist between a man and a woman, citing religious scripture and the basics of human reproduction as support. Social liberals and progressives, on the other hand, believe that marriage can exist between two consenting adults—be they a man and a woman, or a woman and a woman—and that it would be discriminatory to deny such a couple the civil, social, and economic benefits of marriage.

Marriage Patterns

With single parenting and **cohabitation** (when a couple shares a residence but not a marriage) becoming more acceptable in recent years, people may be less motivated to get married. In a recent survey, 39 percent of respondents answered “yes” when asked whether marriage is becoming obsolete (Pew Research Center 2010). The institution of marriage is likely to continue, but some previous patterns of marriage will become outdated as new patterns emerge. In this context, cohabitation contributes to the phenomenon of people getting married for the first time at a later age than was typical in earlier generations (Glezer 1991). Furthermore, marriage will continue to be delayed as more people place education and career ahead of “settling down.”

One Partner or Many?

People in the United States typically equate marriage with **monogamy**, when someone is married to only one person at a time. In many countries and cultures around the world, however, having one spouse is not the only form of accepted marriage, even if it is the most common. **Polygamy**, or being married to more than one person at a time, is accepted to varying degrees around the world, with most polygamous societies existing in northern Africa and east Asia (OECD 2019). Instances of polygamy are almost exclusively in the form of a man being married to more than one woman at the same time, rather than a woman being married to more than

one man (Altman and Ginat 1996).

While the majority of societies accept polygamy, the majority of people do not practice it. Even in the regions where it is most common, only an average of 11 percent of the population lives in arrangements that include more than one spouse (Kramer 2020). In these relationships, the husbands are often older, wealthy, high-status men (Altman and Ginat 1996). The average plural marriage involves no more than three wives. Negev Bedouin men in Israel, for example, typically have two wives, although it is acceptable to have up to four (Graver 2008). As urbanization increases in these cultures, polygamy is likely to decrease as a result of greater access to mass media, technology, and education (Altman and Ginat 1996).

In the United States, polygamy is illegal. A recent Gallup poll showed that 21 percent of people believe polygamy is morally acceptable, which is a major increase since earlier versions of the same poll. But the poll also found that polygamy was among the least acceptable behaviors considered in the study; for example, polygamy was far less acceptable than consensual sex between teenagers, though it was more acceptable than a married person having an affair (Brenan 2020). The act of entering into marriage while still married to another person is referred to as **bigamy** and is considered a felony in most states.

Residency and Lines of Descent

When considering one's lineage, most people in the United States look to both their father's and mother's sides. Both paternal and maternal ancestors are considered part of one's family. This pattern of tracing kinship is called **bilateral descent**. Note that **kinship**, or one's traceable ancestry, can be based on blood or marriage or adoption. Sixty percent of societies, mostly modernized nations, follow a bilateral descent pattern.

Unilateral descent (the tracing of kinship through one parent only) is practiced in the other 40 percent of the world's societies, with high concentration in pastoral cultures (O'Neal 2006).

There are three types of unilateral descent: **patrilineal**, which follows the father's line only; **matrilineal**, which follows the mother's side only; and **ambilineal**, which follows either the father's only or the mother's side only, depending on the situation. In patrilineal societies, such as those in rural China and India, only males carry on the family surname. This gives males the prestige of permanent family membership while females are seen as only temporary members (Harrell 2001). U.S. society assumes some aspects of patrilineal descent. For instance, most children assume their father's last name even if the mother retains her birth name.

In matrilineal societies, inheritance and family ties are traced to women. Matrilineal descent is common in Native American societies, notably the Crow and Cherokee tribes. In these societies, children are seen as belonging to the women and, therefore, one's kinship is traced to one's mother, grandmother, great grandmother, and so on (Mails 1996). In ambilineal societies, which are most common in Southeast Asian countries, parents may choose to associate their children with the kinship of either the mother or the father. This choice may be based on the desire to follow stronger or more prestigious kinship lines or on cultural customs such as men following their father's side and women following their mother's side (Lambert 2009).

Tracing one's line of descent to one parent rather than the other can be relevant to the issue of residence. In many cultures, newly married couples move in with, or near to, family members. In a **patrilocal residence** system it is customary for the wife to live with (or near) her husband's blood relatives (or family of orientation). Patrilocal systems can be traced back thousands of years. In a DNA analysis of 4,600-year-old bones found in Germany, scientists found indicators of patrilocal living arrangements (Haak et al 2008). Patrilocal residence is thought to be disadvantageous to women because it makes them outsiders in the home and community; it also keeps them disconnected from their own blood relatives. In China, where patrilocal and patrilineal customs are common, the written symbols for maternal grandmother (*wáipá*) are separately translated to mean "outsider" and "women" (Cohen 2011).

Similarly, in **matrilocal residence** systems, where it is customary for the husband to live with his wife's blood relatives (or her family of orientation), the husband can feel disconnected and can be labeled as an outsider. The Minangkabau people, a matrilocal society that is indigenous to the highlands of West Sumatra in

Indonesia, believe that home is the place of women and they give men little power in issues relating to the home or family (Joseph and Najmabadi 2003). Most societies that use patrilocal and patrilineal systems are patriarchal, but very few societies that use matrilineal and matrilineal systems are matriarchal, as family life is often considered an important part of the culture for women, regardless of their power relative to men.

Stages of Family Life



FIGURE 14.3 The ability for parents to socialize and the types of events they can attend is often influenced by the ages and characteristics of their children. Preparing to go out with a four-year-old is usually much easier than doing so with a four-month-old, but the four-year-old needs to be watched more carefully. As children grow and families have more children, and perhaps include extended families, members' lives and perspective change. (Credit: Elvert Barnes/flickr)

As we've established, the concept of family has changed greatly in recent decades. Historically, it was often thought that many families evolved through a series of predictable stages. Developmental or "stage" theories used to play a prominent role in family sociology (Strong and DeVault 1992). Today, however, these models have been criticized for their linear and conventional assumptions as well as for their failure to capture the diversity of family forms. While reviewing some of these once-popular theories, it is important to identify their strengths and weaknesses.

The set of predictable steps and patterns families experience over time is referred to as the **family life cycle**. One of the first designs of the family life cycle was developed by Paul Glick in 1955. In Glick's original design, he asserted that most people will grow up, establish families, rear and launch their children, experience an "empty nest" period, and come to the end of their lives. This cycle will then continue with each subsequent generation (Glick 1989). Glick's colleague, Evelyn Duvall, elaborated on the family life cycle by developing these classic stages of family (Strong and DeVault 1992):

Stage Theory		
Stage	Family Type	Children
1	Marriage Family	Childless
2	Procreation Family	Children ages 0 to 2.5
3	Preschooler Family	Children ages 2.5 to 6
4	School-age Family	Children ages 6–13
5	Teenage Family	Children ages 13–20
6	Launching Family	Children begin to leave home
7	Empty Nest Family	“Empty nest”; adult children have left home

TABLE 14.1 This table shows one example of how a “stage” theory might categorize the phases a family goes through.

The family life cycle was used to explain the different processes that occur in families over time. Sociologists view each stage as having its own structure with different challenges, achievements, and accomplishments that transition the family from one stage to the next. For example, the problems and challenges that a family experiences in Stage 1 as a married couple with no children are likely much different than those experienced in Stage 5 as a married couple with teenagers. The success of a family can be measured by how well they adapt to these challenges and transition into each stage. While sociologists use the family life cycle to study the dynamics of family over time, consumer and marketing researchers have used it to determine what goods and services families need as they progress through each stage (Murphy and Staples 1979).

As early “stage” theories have been criticized for generalizing family life and not accounting for differences in gender, ethnicity, culture, and lifestyle, less rigid models of the family life cycle have been developed. One example is the **family life course**, which recognizes the events that occur in the lives of families but views them as parting terms of a fluid course rather than in consecutive stages (Strong and DeVault 1992). This type of model accounts for changes in family development, such as the fact that in today’s society, childbearing does not always occur with marriage. It also sheds light on other shifts in the way family life is practiced. Society’s modern understanding of family rejects rigid “stage” theories and is more accepting of new, fluid models.



SOCIOLOGY IN THE REAL WORLD

The Evolution of Television Families

Whether you grew up watching the Huxtables, the Simpsons, the Kardashians, or the Johnsons, most of the drama or comedy you saw involved the relationships, tensions, challenges, and sometimes ridiculousness of family life. You may have also seen a great deal of change. The 1960s was the height of the suburban U.S. nuclear family on television with shows such as *The Donna Reed Show* and *Father Knows Best*. While some shows of this era portrayed single parents (*My Three Sons* and *Bonanza*, for instance), the single status almost always resulted from being widowed—not divorced or unwed.

Although family dynamics in real U.S. homes were changing, the expectations for families portrayed on television

were not. The United States' first reality show, *An American Family* aired on PBS in 1973. The show chronicled Bill and Pat Loud and their children. During the series, the oldest son, Lance, announced to the family that he was gay, and at the series' conclusion, Bill and Pat decided to divorce. Although the Loud's union was among the 30 percent of marriages that ended in divorce in 1973, the family was featured on the cover of the March 12 issue of *Newsweek* with the title "The Broken Family" (Ruoff 2002).

Less traditional family structures in sitcoms gained popularity in the 1980s with shows such as *Diff'rent Strokes* (a widowed man with two adopted African American sons) and *One Day at a Time* (a divorced woman with two teenage daughters). Still, traditional families such as those in *Family Ties* and *The Cosby Show* dominated the ratings. The late 1980s and the 1990s saw the introduction of the dysfunctional family. Shows such as *Roseanne*, *Married with Children*, and *The Simpsons* portrayed traditional nuclear families, but in a much less flattering light than those from the 1960s did (Museum of Broadcast Communications 2011).

In the early 2000s, the nontraditional family has become somewhat of a tradition in television. While many situation comedies focus on single men and women without children, those that do portray families often stray from the classic structure: they include unmarried and divorced parents, adopted children, gay or lesbian couples, and multigenerational households.

In 2009, ABC emphasized the changes in family dynamics with their choice of title for *Modern Family*. The show follows an extended family that includes a divorced and remarried father with one stepchild and his biological adult children—one of whom is in a traditional two-parent household, and the other who is a gay man in a committed relationship raising an adopted daughter. *Black-ish*, which portrays an extended family of African Americans, has at many times dealt with the issue implied by its name: That sometimes what it means to be Black can bring issues of interpretation conflict, especially across generations. For example, the children of the central family have shown interest in "blending in" with their White friends, which brings negative reactions from their grandparents.

Other shows, such as *Shameless*, interweave family diversity with complex and painful issues such as addiction. The series has a large cast of characters representing different groups, and central to the series are the roles of children, rather than parents, as family leaders. "The families on shows like this one aren't as idealistic, but they remain relatable," states television critic Maureen Ryan. "The most successful shows, comedies especially, have families that you can look at and see parts of your family in them" (Respers France 2010).

14.2 Variations in Family Life

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Recognize variations in family life
- Explain the prevalence and unique characteristics of single parents, blended families, foster care, cohabitation, same-sex couples, and unmarried individuals
- Discuss the social impact of changing family structures

The combination of husband, wife, and children that 99.8 percent of people in the United States believe constitutes a family is not representative of 99.8 percent of U.S. families. According to 2010 census data, only 66 percent of children under seventeen years old live in a household with two married parents. This is a decrease from 77 percent in 1980 (U.S. Census 2011). This two-parent family structure is known as a **nuclear family**, referring to married parents and children as the nucleus, or core, of the group. Recent years have seen a rise in variations of the nuclear family with the parents not being married. Three percent of children live with two cohabiting parents (U.S. Census 2011).



FIGURE 14.4 Military families sometimes have to endure long parental absences. The other parent or other family members, including older siblings, often take on more responsibility during deployments. The serving parent faces stress and detachment when they are away. (Credit: The National Guard.)

Single Parents, Blended Families, and Foster Families

Single-parent households are on the rise. In 2017, 32 percent of children lived with a single parent only, up from 25 percent in 2008. Of that 32 percent, 21 percent live with their mother. Four percent live with their father, which is a percentage that is growing in share; in 1968, for example, only one percent of children lived with a solo father, and three percent lived with a solo father in 2008 (Livingston 2018).

About 16 percent of children are living in blended families, those with step parents and/or step-siblings. This number has remained relatively stable since the 1980s when the Census Bureau began reliably measuring it. Four percent of children live in families with couples who are not married. (That number is partially composed of parents in same-sex relationships who were previously prohibited from getting married.)

In some cases, parents can no longer care for their children. In 2018, three million children lived with a guardian who was neither their biological nor adoptive parent. The causes range from parental mental health issues, drug use, or incarceration, as well as physical or sexual abuse of the children by the parent, or abandonment by the parent. The wide array of causes leads to a similarly wide array of arrangements and types of people and organizations involved. About half of these children live with grandparents, and about 20 percent live with other relatives (ChildStats 2019). Sometimes a grandparent or other relative temporarily assumes care of children, perhaps informally, while other times the arrangement is longer term and the state or city child welfare or similar department is involved.

25 percent of children who do not live with an adoptive or biological parent live with nonrelatives, including foster parents, temporary guardians, or people in other types of relationships with the child or the child's parents. Non-relative foster parents are state-certified adults, who care for children under the guidance and supervision of a relevant agency. Foster parents comply with guideline and are provided with financial support for the children they care for. (Sometimes the term foster parent refers to a relative who cares for the children under agency guidelines, and sometimes these "kinship" foster parents are also provided financial support.)

When children are placed into foster care or other non-parental care, agencies and families usually do their best to keep siblings together. Brothers and sisters usually provide each other with someone to navigate social

challenges and provide continuity over time. Studies have shown that siblings placed together show more closeness to their foster caregivers and like living in the foster home more than those not placed with a sibling (Hegar and Rosenthal, 2011). Separating siblings can cause them to worry about each other or their birth families, and slows acceptance of their new home (Affronti, Rittner, & Semanchin Jones, 2015).

Siblings sometimes play more of a parental role themselves, especially when there are large age gaps or if there are very young children involved. These older siblings may take on some parental responsibilities during a divorce or when children are sent to live with others. "Parentified" siblings may have trouble navigating the complexities of parental roles when they themselves are often still very young. These experiences can actually be traumatic and lead to compulsive disorders as well as lifelong issues with relationships and self-care (Lamothe 2017)

Changes in the traditional family structure raise questions about how such societal shifts affect children. U.S. Census statistics have long shown that children living in homes with both parents grow up with more financial and educational advantages than children who are raised in single-parent homes (U.S. Census 1997). Parental marital status seems to be a significant indicator of advancement in a child's life. Children living with a divorced parent typically have more advantages than children living with a parent who never married; this is particularly true of children who live with divorced fathers. This correlates with the statistic that never-married parents are typically younger, have fewer years of schooling, and have lower incomes (U.S. Census 1997). Six in ten children living with only their mother live near or below the poverty level. Of those being raised by single mothers, 69 percent live in or near poverty compared to 45 percent for divorced mothers (U.S. Census 1997). Though other factors such as age and education play a role in these differences, it can be inferred that marriage between parents is generally beneficial for children.

Cohabitation

Living together before or in lieu of marriage is a growing option for many couples. Cohabitation is when a man and woman live together in a sexual relationship without being married. In 2018, 15 percent of young adults ages 25-34 live with an unmarried partner, up from 12 percent 10 years ago (Gurrentz 2018). This surge in cohabitation is likely due to the decrease in social stigma pertaining to the practice. 69 percent of surveyed Americans believe it is acceptable for adults to live together if they are not currently married or do not plan to get married, while 16 percent say it is acceptable only if they plan to get married. (Horowitz 2019).

Cohabiting couples may choose to live together in an effort to spend more time together or to save money on living costs. Many couples view cohabitation as a "trial run" for marriage. 66 percent of married couples who cohabited but were not engaged saw cohabitation as a step toward marriage. And 44 percent of cohabiting adults who are not yet engaged or married see moving in with their partner as a step toward marriage (Horowitz 2019).

While couples may use this time to "work out the kinks" of a relationship before they wed, the most recent research has found that cohabitation has little effect on the success of a marriage. In fact, those who do not cohabitate before marriage have slightly better rates of remaining married for more than ten years (Jayson 2010). Cohabitation may contribute to the increase in the number of men and women who delay marriage. The median age for marriage is the highest it has ever been since the U.S. Census kept records—age twenty-six for women and age twenty-eight for men (U.S. Census 2010).

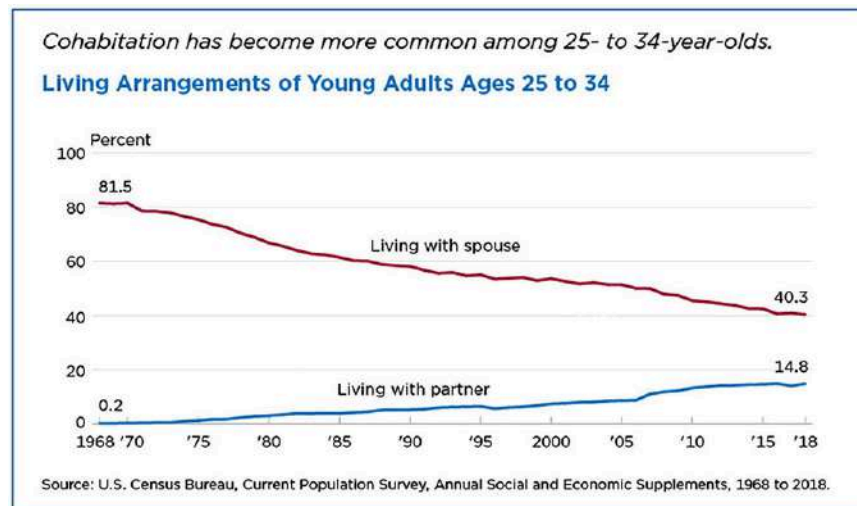


FIGURE 14.5 As shown by this graph of marital status percentages among young adults, more young people are choosing to delay or opt out of marriage, while the number of people living with a partner has increased. The overall number of people living with either a spouse or a partner has also declined. (Credit: U.S. Census Bureau)

Same-Sex Couples



FIGURE 14.6 After being together for 23 years, Phyllis Siegel (standing) and Connie Kopolev were the first same-sex couple to marry in New York City. (Credit: TJ Sengal/flickr)

The number of same-sex couples has grown significantly in the past decade. The U.S. Census Bureau reported 594,000 same-sex couple households in the United States, a 50 percent increase from 2000. This increase is a result of more coupling, the growing social acceptance of LGBTQ people, and a subsequent increase in people's willingness to share more about their identity. Nationally, same-sex couple households make up 1.5 percent of the total partner-headed households in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau 2020). When the 2015 Obergefell vs. Hodges Supreme Court decision legalized same-sex marriage throughout the United States, all federally

mandated spousal rights and benefits began apply to same-sex married couples. These have impacts on Social Security and veterans benefits, family leave, and so on. For example, when same-sex marriage was not legal, an LGBTQ person couldn't take the same type of family leave as an opposite sex spouse could if their partner became ill, and could even be prohibited from visiting their partner in the hospital.

In terms of demographics, same-sex couples are not very different from opposite-sex couples. Same-sex couple households have an average age of 52 and an average annual household income of about \$107,000; opposite-sex couple households have an average age of 59 and an average household income of \$97,000. Same-sex couples are less likely to have children under 18-years-old, with a rate of 14 percent compared to 38 percent of opposite-sex couples; note these include both married and unmarried couples (Census Bureau 2020).

In an analysis of 81 parenting studies, sociologists found no quantifiable data to support the notion that opposite-sex parenting is any better than same-sex parenting. Children of lesbian couples, however, were shown to have slightly lower rates of behavioral problems and higher rates of self-esteem (Biblarz and Stacey 2010). Prior to the nationwide legalization, studies also showed that the rate of suicide among high school students declined in states where same-sex marriage was legal. Suicide is the second-highest cause of death among high school students, and it is a tragic outcome for LGBTQ teenagers who feel unaccepted or vulnerable. The evidence indicates that the legalization of same-sex marriage had positive outcomes for the emotional and mental wellbeing of LGBTQ people (Johns Hopkins University 2017).

Staying Single

About three-in-ten American adults report that they are single, meaning that they are neither married nor in a committed relationship. That group varies greatly by age and gender. Half of men below age 30 are single, compared with about a quarter of men between ages 30-64. About 30 percent of women under 30 are single, and that drops to 19 percent for women between 30 and 60 years-old. There are also differences among racial lines, with White and Hispanic adults less likely to be single than are Black people. Single individuals are found in higher concentrations in large cities or metropolitan areas, with New York City being one of the highest.

Although both single men and single women report social pressure to get married, women are subject to greater scrutiny. Single women are often portrayed as unhappy or in some way lacking something they should have. Single men, on the other hand, are typically portrayed as lifetime bachelors who cannot settle down or simply “have not found the right girl.” Single women report feeling insecure and displaced in their families when their single status is disparaged (Roberts 2007). However, single women older than thirty-five years old report feeling secure and happy with their unmarried status, as many women in this category have found success in their education and careers. In general, women feel more independent and more prepared to live a large portion of their adult lives without a spouse or domestic partner than they did in the 1960s (Roberts 2007).

The decision to marry or not to marry can be based on a variety of factors including religion and cultural expectations. Asian individuals are the most likely to marry, while African Americans are the least likely to marry (Venugopal 2011). Additionally, individuals who place no value on religion are more likely to be unmarried than those who place a high value on religion. For Black women, however, the importance of religion made no difference in marital status (Bakalar 2010). In general, being single is not a rejection of marriage; rather, it is a lifestyle that does not necessarily include marriage.

SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Deceptive Divorce Rates

It is often cited that half of all marriages end in divorce. This statistic has made many people cynical when it comes to marriage, but it is misleading. Let's take a closer look at the data.

Using National Center for Health Statistics data from 2003 that show a marriage rate of 7.5 (per 1000 people) and a divorce rate of 3.8, it would appear that exactly one half of all marriages failed (Hurley 2005). This reasoning is deceptive, however, because instead of tracing actual marriages to see their longevity (or lack thereof), this compares what are unrelated statistics: that is, the number of marriages in a given year does not have a direct correlation to the divorces occurring that same year. Research published in the *New York Times* took a different approach—determining how many people had ever been married, and of those, how many later divorced. The result? According to this analysis, U.S. divorce rates have only gone as high as 41 percent (Hurley 2005). Another way to calculate divorce rates would be through a cohort study. For instance, we could determine the percentage of marriages that are intact after, say, five or seven years, compared to marriages that have ended in divorce after five or seven years. Sociological researchers must remain aware of research methods and how statistical results are applied. As illustrated, different methodologies and different interpretations can lead to contradictory, and even misleading, results.

Theoretical Perspectives on Marriage and Family

Sociologists study families on both the macro and micro level to determine how families function. Sociologists may use a variety of theoretical perspectives to explain events that occur within and outside of the family.

Functionalism

When considering the role of family in society, functionalists uphold the notion that families are an important social institution and that they play a key role in stabilizing society. They also note that family members take on status roles in a marriage or family. The family—and its members—perform certain functions that facilitate the prosperity and development of society.

Sociologist George Murdock conducted a survey of 250 societies and determined that there are four universal residual functions of the family: sexual, reproductive, educational, and economic (Lee 1985). According to Murdock, the family (which for him includes the state of marriage) regulates sexual relations between individuals. He does not deny the existence or impact of premarital or extramarital sex, but states that the family offers a socially legitimate sexual outlet for adults (Lee 1985). This outlet gives way to reproduction, which is a necessary part of ensuring the survival of society.

Once children are produced, the family plays a vital role in training them for adult life. As the primary agent of socialization and enculturation, the family teaches young children the ways of thinking and behaving that follow social and cultural norms, values, beliefs, and attitudes. Parents teach their children manners and civility. A well-mannered child reflects a well-mannered parent.

Parents also teach children gender roles. Gender roles are an important part of the economic function of a family. In each family, there is a division of labor that consists of instrumental and expressive roles. Men tend to assume the instrumental roles in the family, which typically involve work outside of the family that provides financial support and establishes family status. Women tend to assume the expressive roles, which typically involve work inside of the family which provides emotional support and physical care for children (Crano and Aronoff 1978). According to functionalists, the differentiation of the roles on the basis of sex ensures that families are well balanced and coordinated. When family members move outside of these roles, the family is thrown out of balance and must recalibrate in order to function properly. For example, if the father assumes an expressive role such as providing daytime care for the children, the mother must take on an instrumental role such as gaining paid employment outside of the home in order for the family to maintain balance and function.

Conflict Theory

Conflict theorists are quick to point out that U.S. families have been defined as private entities, the consequence of which has been to leave family matters to only those within the family. Many people in the United States are resistant to government intervention in the family: parents do not want the government to

tell them how to raise their children or to become involved in domestic issues. Conflict theory highlights the role of power in family life and contends that the family is often not a haven but rather an arena where power struggles can occur. This exercise of power often entails the performance of family status roles. Conflict theorists may study conflicts as simple as the enforcement of rules from parent to child, or they may examine more serious issues such as domestic violence (spousal and child), sexual assault, marital rape, and incest.

The first study of marital power was performed in 1960. Researchers found that the person with the most access to value resources held the most power. As money is one of the most valuable resources, men who worked in paid labor outside of the home held more power than women who worked inside the home (Blood and Wolfe 1960). Conflict theorists find disputes over the division of household labor to be a common source of marital discord. Household labor offers no wages and, therefore, no power. Studies indicate that when men do more housework, women experience more satisfaction in their marriages, reducing the incidence of conflict (Coltrane 2000). In general, conflict theorists tend to study areas of marriage and life that involve inequalities or discrepancies in power and authority, as they are reflective of the larger social structure.

Symbolic Interactionism

Interactionists view the world in terms of symbols and the meanings assigned to them (LaRossa and Reitzes 1993). The family itself is a symbol. To some, it is a father, mother, and children; to others, it is any union that involves respect and compassion. Interactionists stress that family is not an objective, concrete reality. Like other social phenomena, it is a social construct that is subject to the ebb and flow of social norms and ever-changing meanings.

Consider the meaning of other elements of family: “parent” was a symbol of a biological and emotional connection to a child; with more parent-child relationships developing through adoption, remarriage, or change in guardianship, the word “parent” today is less likely to be associated with a biological connection than with whoever is socially recognized as having the responsibility for a child’s upbringing. Similarly, the terms “mother” and “father” are no longer rigidly associated with the meanings of caregiver and breadwinner. These meanings are more free-flowing through changing family roles.

Interactionists also recognize how the family status roles of each member are socially constructed, playing an important part in how people perceive and interpret social behavior. Interactionists view the family as a group of role players or “actors” that come together to act out their parts in an effort to construct a family. These roles are up for interpretation. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a “good father,” for example, was one who worked hard to provide financial security for his children. Today, a “good father” is one who takes the time outside of work to promote his children’s emotional well-being, social skills, and intellectual growth—in some ways, a much more daunting task.

14.3 Challenges Families Face

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Describe the social and interpersonal impact of divorce
- Describe the social and interpersonal impact of family abuse

As the structure of family changes over time, so do the challenges families face. Events like divorce and remarriage present new difficulties for families and individuals. Other long-standing domestic issues such as abuse continue to strain the health and stability of today’s families.

Divorce and Remarriage

Divorce, while fairly common and accepted in modern U.S. society, was once a word that would only be whispered and was accompanied by gestures of disapproval. In 1960, divorce was generally uncommon, affecting only 9.1 out of every 1,000 married persons. That number more than doubled (to 20.3) by 1975 and peaked in 1980 at 22.6. Over the last quarter century, divorce rates have dropped steadily and are now similar

to those in 1970 (Wang 2020). The dramatic increase in divorce rates after the 1960s has been associated with the liberalization of divorce laws, as well as the shift in societal makeup due to women increasingly entering the workforce (Michael 1978). The decrease in divorce rates can be attributed to three probable factors: First, an increase in the age at which people get married, and second, an increased level of education among those who marry—both of which have been found to promote greater marital stability. The third factor is that the marriage rate itself is going down, and with it the divorce rate. In 2019, there were 16.3 new marriages for every 1,000 women age 15 and over in the United States, down from 17.6 in 2009 (Anderson 2020).

Divorce does not occur equally among all people in the United States; some segments of the U.S. population are more likely to divorce than others. According to the American Community Survey (ACS), men and women in the Northeast and Midwest have the lowest rates of divorce. The South generally has the highest rate of divorce. Divorce rates are likely higher in the South because marriage rates are higher and marriage occurs at younger-than-average ages in this region. In the Northeast, the marriage rate is lower and first marriages tend to be delayed; therefore, the divorce rate is lower (Reynolds 2020). Note that these are generalizations. For example, the District of Columbia has a high marriage rate but among the lowest divorce rate (Anderson 2020).

So what causes divorce? While more young people are choosing to postpone or opt out of marriage, those who enter into the union do so with the expectation that it will last. A great deal of marital problems can be related to stress, especially financial stress. According to researchers participating in the University of Virginia's National Marriage Project, couples who enter marriage without a strong asset base (like a home, savings, and a retirement plan) are 70 percent more likely to be divorced after three years than are couples with at least \$10,000 in assets. This is connected to factors such as age and education level that correlate with low incomes.

The addition of children to a marriage creates added financial and emotional stress. Research has established that marriages enter their most stressful phase upon the birth of the first child (Popenoe and Whitehead 2007). This is particularly true for couples who have multiples (twins, triplets, and so on). Married couples with twins or triplets are 17 percent more likely to divorce than those with children from single births (McKay 2010). Another contributor to the likelihood of divorce is a general decline in marital satisfaction over time. As people get older, they may find that their values and life goals no longer match up with those of their spouse (Popenoe and Whitehead 2004).

Divorce is thought to have a cyclical pattern. Children of divorced parents are 40 percent more likely to divorce than children of married parents. And when we consider children whose parents divorced and then remarried, the likelihood of their own divorce rises to 91 percent (Wolfinger 2005). This might result from being socialized to a mindset that a broken marriage can be replaced rather than repaired (Wolfinger 2005). That sentiment is also reflected in the finding that when both partners of a married couple have been previously divorced, their marriage is 90 percent more likely to end in divorce (Wolfinger 2005).



FIGURE 14.7 A study from Radford University indicated that bartenders are among the professions with the highest divorce rates (38.4 percent). Other traditionally low-wage industries (like restaurant service, custodial employment, and factory work) are also associated with higher divorce rates. (Aamodt and McCoy 2010). (Credit: Daniel Lobo/flickr)

About 15 percent of all married couples involve one partner who is in their second marriage while the other partner is in their first marriage. About 9 percent of married couples are both in their second marriage. (U.S. Census Bureau 2015). The vast majority (91 percent) of remarriages occur after divorce; only 9 percent occur after death of a spouse (Kreider 2006). Most men and women remarry within five years of a divorce, with the median length for men (three years) being lower than for women (4.4 years). This length of time has been fairly consistent since the 1950s. The majority of those who remarry are between the ages of twenty-five and forty-four (Kreider 2006). The general pattern of remarriage also shows that White people are more likely to remarry than Black people.

Marriage the second time around (or third or fourth) can be a very different process than the first. Remarriage lacks many of the classic courtship rituals of a first marriage. In a second marriage, individuals are less likely to deal with issues like parental approval, premarital sex, or desired family size (Elliot 2010). In a survey of households formed by remarriage, a mere 8 percent included only biological children of the remarried couple. Of the 49 percent of homes that include children, 24 percent included only the woman's biological children, 3 percent included only the man's biological children, and 9 percent included a combination of both spouse's children (U.S. Census Bureau 2006).

Children of Divorce and Remarriage

Divorce and remarriage can be stressful on partners and children alike. Divorce is often justified by the notion that children are better off in a divorced family than in a family with parents who do not get along. However, long-term studies determine that to be generally untrue. Research suggests that while marital conflict does not provide an ideal childrearing environment, going through a divorce can be damaging. Children are often confused and frightened by the threat to their family security. They may feel responsible for the divorce and attempt to bring their parents back together, often by sacrificing their own well-being (Amato 2000). Only in high-conflict homes do children benefit from divorce and the subsequent decrease in conflict. The majority of divorces come out of lower-conflict homes, and children from those homes are more negatively impacted by the stress of the divorce than the stress of unhappiness in the marriage (Amato 2000). Studies also suggest that stress levels for children are not improved when a child acquires a stepfamily through marriage. Although there may be increased economic stability, stepfamilies typically have a high level of interpersonal conflict

(McLanahan and Sandefur 1994).

Children's ability to deal with a divorce may depend on their age. Research has found that divorce may be most difficult for school-aged children, as they are old enough to understand the separation but not old enough to understand the reasoning behind it. Older teenagers are more likely to recognize the conflict that led to the divorce but may still feel fear, loneliness, guilt, and pressure to choose sides. Infants and preschool-age children may suffer the heaviest impact from the loss of routine that the marriage offered (Temke 2006).

Proximity to parents also makes a difference in a child's well-being after divorce. Boys who live or have joint arrangements with their fathers show less aggression than those who are raised by their mothers only. Similarly, girls who live or have joint arrangements with their mothers tend to be more responsible and mature than those who are raised by their fathers only. Nearly three-fourths of the children of parents who are divorced live in a household headed by their mother, leaving many boys without a father figure residing in the home (U.S. Census Bureau 2011b). Still, researchers suggest that a strong parent-child relationship can greatly improve a child's adjustment to divorce (Temke 2006).

There is empirical evidence that divorce has not discouraged children in terms of how they view marriage and family. A blended family has additional stress resulting from combining children from the current and previous relationships. The blended family may also have a parent that has different discipline techniques. In a survey conducted by researchers from the University of Michigan, about three-quarters of high school seniors said it was "extremely important" to have a strong marriage and family life. And over half believed it was "very likely" that they would be in a lifelong marriage (Popenoe and Whitehead 2007). These numbers have continued to climb over the last twenty-five years.

Violence and Abuse

Violence and abuse are among the most disconcerting of the challenges that today's families face. Abuse can occur between spouses, between parent and child, as well as between other family members. The frequency of violence among families is difficult to determine because many cases of spousal abuse and child abuse go unreported. In any case, studies have shown that abuse (reported or not) has a major impact on families and society as a whole.

Domestic Violence

Domestic violence is a significant social problem in the United States. It is often characterized as violence between household or family members, specifically spouses. To include unmarried, cohabitating, and same-sex couples, family sociologists have created the term **intimate partner violence (IPV)**. (Note that healthcare and support personnel, researchers, or victims may use these terms or related ones interchangeably to refer to the same general issue of violence, aggression, and abuse.) Women are the primary victims of intimate partner violence. It is estimated that one in five women has experienced some form of IPV in her lifetime (compared to one in seven men) (Catalano 2007). IPV may include physical violence, such as punching, kicking, or other methods of inflicting physical pain; sexual violence, such as rape or other forced sexual acts; threats and intimidation that imply either physical or sexual abuse; and emotional abuse, such as harming another's sense of self-worth through words or controlling another's behavior. IPV often starts as emotional abuse and then escalates to other forms or combinations of abuse (Centers for Disease Control 2012). IPV includes stalking as well as technological violence (sometimes called cyber aggression), which is committed through communications/social networks or which uses cameras or other technologies to harm victims or control their behavior (Watkins 2016).



FIGURE 14.8 Many people have experienced intimate partner violence. Note that while data like this are important to consider and hopefully build awareness around IPV, there are gaps in both reporting and information gathering. For example, less information is known about IPV against transgender people, but analysis of various sources indicate that it is 1.7 times more likely to be committed against transgender people than against cisgender people, as described below. (Credit: Centers for Disease Control)

Beyond its tragic outcomes and damaging long-term effects, sociologists and other researchers seeking to understand and prevent IPV and support victims may find a wide variance in the data.

On a global scale, intimate partners kill over 130 women each day. The UN Office of Drugs and Crime reported that, “women continue to pay the highest price as a result of gender inequality, discrimination and negative stereotypes... They are also the most likely to be killed by intimate partners and family” (Doom 2018).

The types of violence can vary significantly according to gender. In 2010, of IPV acts that involved physical actions against women, 57 percent involved physical violence only; 9 percent involved rape and physical violence; 14 percent involved physical violence and stalking; 12 percent involved rape, physical violence, and stalking; and 4 percent involved rape only (CDC 2011). This is vastly different than IPV abuse patterns for men, which show that nearly all (92 percent) physical acts of IPV take the form of physical violence and fewer than 1 percent involve rape alone or in combination (Catalano 2007). Perpetrators of IPV work to establish and maintain dependence in order to hold power and control over their victims, making them feel stupid, crazy, or ugly—in some way worthless.

IPV affects different segments of the population at different rates. The rate of IPV for Native American and Alaskan Native women is higher than any other race (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2017). The rate of IPV for Black women (4.6 per 1,000 persons over the age of twelve) is higher than that for White women (3.1). These numbers have been fairly stable for both racial groups over the last ten years.

Accurate statistics on IPV are difficult to determine, as it is estimated that more than half of nonfatal IPV goes unreported. It is not until victims choose to report crimes that patterns of abuse are exposed. Most victims studied stated that abuse had occurred for at least two years prior to their first report (Carlson, Harris, and Holden 1999). Also, studies and research methods apply a range of categories, which makes comparative or reinforcing data difficult to obtain. For example, some studies may only ask about IPV in two categories (for example, physical and sexual violence only) and may find fewer respondents reporting IPV than do studies that add psychological abuse, stalking, and technological violence.

Sometimes abuse is reported to police by a third party, but it still may not be confirmed by victims. A study of domestic violence incident reports found that even when confronted by police about abuse, 29 percent of victims denied that abuse occurred. Surprisingly, 19 percent of their assailants were likely to admit to abuse (Felson, Ackerman, and Gallagher 2005). According to the National Criminal Victims Survey, victims cite varied reasons why they are reluctant to report abuse, as shown in the table below.

Reason Abuse Is Unreported	% Females	% Males
Considered a Private Matter	22	39
Fear of Retaliation	12	5
To Protect the Abuser	14	16
Belief That Police Won't Do Anything	8	8

TABLE 14.2 This chart shows reasons that victims give for why they fail to report abuse to police authorities (Catalano 2007).

IPV against LGBTQ people is generally higher than it is against non-LGBTQ people. Gay men report experiencing IPV in their lifetimes less often (26 percent) than straight men (29 percent) or bisexual men (37 percent). 44 percent of lesbian women report experiencing some type of IPV in their lifetime, compared to 35 percent of straight women. 61 percent of bisexual women report experiencing IPV, a much higher rate than any other sexual orientation frequently studied.

Studies regarding intimate partner violence against transgender people are relatively limited, but several are ongoing. A meta-analysis of available information indicated that physical IPV had occurred in the lifetimes of 38 percent of transgender people, and 25 percent of transgender people had experienced sexual IPV in their lifetimes. Compared with cisgender individuals, transgender individuals were 1.7 times more likely to experience any IPV (Peitzmeier 2020).

Many college students encounter IPV, as well. Overall, psychological violence seems to be the type of IPV college students face most frequently, followed by physical and/or sexual violence (Cho & Huang, 2017). Of high schoolers who report being in a dating relationship, 10% experience physical violence by a boyfriend or girlfriend, 7% experience forced sexual intercourse, and 11% experience sexual dating violence. Seven percent of women and four percent of men who experience IPV are victimized before age 18 (NCJRS 2017). IPV victimization during young adulthood, including the college years, is likely to lead to continuous victimization in adulthood, possibly throughout a lifetime (Greenman & Matsuda, 2016)

Child Abuse

Children are among the most helpless victims of abuse. In 2010, there were more than 3.3 million reports of child abuse involving an estimated 5.9 million children (Child Help 2011). Three-fifths of child abuse reports are made by professionals, including teachers, law enforcement personnel, and social services staff. The rest are made by anonymous sources, other relatives, parents, friends, and neighbors.

Child abuse may come in several forms, the most common being neglect (78.3 percent), followed by physical abuse (10.8 percent), sexual abuse (7.6 percent), psychological maltreatment (7.6 percent), and medical neglect (2.4 percent) (Child Help 2011). Some children suffer from a combination of these forms of abuse. The majority (81.2 percent) of perpetrators are parents; 6.2 percent are other relatives.

Infants (children less than one year old) were the most victimized population with an incident rate of 20.6 per 1,000 infants. This age group is particularly vulnerable to neglect because they are entirely dependent on parents for care. Some parents do not purposely neglect their children; factors such as cultural values, standard of care in a community, and poverty can lead to hazardous level of neglect. If information or assistance from public or private services are available and a parent fails to use those services, child welfare services may intervene (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services).



FIGURE 14.9 Dr. Michael C. Irving’s monument for child abuse survivors is composed of handprints and messages of people who have been victims of abuse. (Credit: Harvey K/flickr)

Infants are also often victims of physical abuse, particularly in the form of violent shaking. This type of physical abuse is referred to as **shaken-baby syndrome**, which describes a group of medical symptoms such as brain swelling and retinal hemorrhage resulting from forcefully shaking or causing impact to an infant’s head. A baby’s cry is the number one trigger for shaking. Parents may find themselves unable to soothe a baby’s concerns and may take their frustration out on the child by shaking him or her violently. Other stress factors, such as a poor economy, unemployment, and general dissatisfaction with parental life, may contribute this type of abuse. While there is no official central registry of shaken-baby syndrome statistics, it is estimated that each year 1,400 babies die or suffer serious injury from being shaken (Barr 2007).



SOCIAL POLICY AND DEBATE

Corporal Punishment

Physical abuse in children may come in the form of beating, kicking, throwing, choking, hitting with objects, burning, or other methods. Injury inflicted by such behavior is considered abuse even if the parent or caregiver did not intend to harm the child. Other types of physical contact that are characterized as discipline (spanking, for example) are not considered abuse as long as no injury results (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2008).

This issue is rather controversial among modern-day people in the United States. While some parents feel that physical discipline, or corporal punishment, is an effective way to respond to bad behavior, others feel that it is a form of abuse. According to a poll conducted by ABC News, 65 percent of respondents approve of spanking and 50 percent said that they sometimes spank their child.

Tendency toward physical punishment may be affected by culture and education. Those who live in the South are more likely than those who live in other regions to spank their child. Those who do not have a college education are also more likely to spank their child (Crandall 2011). Currently, 23 states officially allow spanking in the school system; however, many parents may object and school officials must follow a set of clear guidelines when administering this type of punishment (Crandall 2011). Studies have shown that spanking is not an effective form of punishment and may lead to aggression by the victim, particularly in those who are spanked at a young age (Berlin 2009).

Child abuse occurs at all socioeconomic and education levels and crosses ethnic and cultural lines. Just as child abuse is often associated with stresses felt by parents, including financial stress, parents who demonstrate resilience to these stresses are less likely to abuse (Samuels 2011). Young parents are typically

less capable of coping with stresses, particularly the stress of becoming a new parent. Teenage mothers are more likely to abuse their children than their older counterparts. As a parent's age increases, the risk of abuse decreases. Children born to mothers who are fifteen years old or younger are twice as likely to be abused or neglected by age five than are children born to mothers ages twenty to twenty-one (George and Lee 1997).

Drug and alcohol use is also a known contributor to child abuse. Children raised by substance abusers have a risk of physical abuse three times greater than other kids, and neglect is four times as prevalent in these families (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2011). Other risk factors include social isolation, depression, low parental education, and a history of being mistreated as a child. Approximately 30 percent of abused children will later abuse their own children (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2006).

The long-term effects of child abuse impact the physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing of a child. Injury, poor health, and mental instability occur at a high rate in this group, with 80 percent meeting the criteria of one or more psychiatric disorders, such as depression, anxiety, or suicidal behavior, by age twenty-one. Abused children may also suffer from cognitive and social difficulties. Behavioral consequences will affect most, but not all, of child abuse victims. Children of abuse are 25 percent more likely, as adolescents, to suffer from difficulties like poor academic performance and teen pregnancy, or to engage in behaviors like drug abuse and general delinquency. They are also more likely to participate in risky sexual acts that increase their chances of contracting a sexually transmitted disease (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2006). Other risky behaviors include drug and alcohol abuse. As these consequences can affect the health care, education, and criminal systems, the problems resulting from child abuse do not just belong to the child and family, but to society as a whole.

Key Terms

- ambilineal** a type of unilateral descent that follows either the father's or the mother's side exclusively
- bigamy** the act of entering into marriage while still married to another person
- bilateral descent** the tracing of kinship through both parents' ancestral lines
- cohabitation** the act of a couple sharing a residence while they are not married
- extended family** a household that includes at least one parent and child as well as other relatives like grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins
- family** socially recognized groups of individuals who may be joined by blood, marriage, or adoption and who form an emotional connection and an economic unit of society
- family life course** a sociological model of family that sees the progression of events as fluid rather than as occurring in strict stages
- family life cycle** a set of predictable steps and patterns families experience over time
- family of orientation** the family into which one is born
- family of procreation** a family that is formed through marriage
- intimate partner violence (IPV)** violence that occurs between individuals who maintain a romantic or sexual relationship
- kinship** a person's traceable ancestry (by blood, marriage, and/or adoption)
- marriage** a legally recognized contract between two or more people in a sexual relationship who have an expectation of permanence about their relationship
- matrilineal descent** a type of unilateral descent that follows the mother's side only
- matrilocal residence** a system in which it is customary for a husband to live with the his wife's family
- monogamy** the act of being married to only one person at a time
- nuclear family** two parents (traditionally a married husband and wife) and children living in the same household
- patrilineal descent** a type of unilateral descent that follows the father's line only
- patrilocal residence** a system in which it is customary for the a wife to live with (or near) the her husband's family
- polyandry** a form of marriage in which one woman is married to more than one man at one time
- polygamy** the state of being committed or married to more than one person at a time
- polygyny** a form of marriage in which one man is married to more than one woman at one time
- shaken-baby syndrome** a group of medical symptoms such as brain swelling and retinal hemorrhage resulting from forcefully shaking or impacting an infant's head
- unilateral descent** the tracing of kinship through one parent only.

Section Summary

14.1 What Is Marriage? What Is a Family?

Sociologists view marriage and families as societal institutions that help create the basic unit of social structure. Both marriage and a family may be defined differently—and practiced differently—in cultures across the world. Families and marriages, like other institutions, adapt to social change.

14.2 Variations in Family Life

People's concepts of marriage and family in the United States are changing. Increases in cohabitation, same-sex partners, and singlehood are altering of our ideas of marriage. Similarly, single parents, same-sex parents, cohabitating parents, and unwed parents are changing our notion of what it means to be a family. While most children still live in opposite-sex, two-parent, married households, that is no longer viewed as the only type of nuclear family.

14.3 Challenges Families Face

Today's families face a variety of challenges, specifically to marital stability. While divorce rates have decreased in the last twenty-five years, many family members, especially children, still experience the negative effects of divorce. Children are also negatively impacted by violence and abuse within the home, with nearly 6 million children abused each year.

Section Quiz

14.1 What Is Marriage? What Is a Family?

1. Sociologists tend to define family in terms of
 - a. how a given society sanctions the relationships of people who are connected through blood, marriage, or adoption
 - b. the connection of bloodlines
 - c. the status roles that exist in a family structure
 - d. how closely members adhere to social norms
2. Research suggests that people generally feel that their current family is _____ than the family they grew up with.
 - a. less close
 - b. more close
 - c. at least as close
 - d. none of the above
3. A woman being married to two men would be an example of:
 - a. monogamy
 - b. polygyny
 - c. polyandry
 - d. cohabitation
4. A child who associates his line of descent with his father's side only is part of a _____ society.
 - a. matrilineal
 - b. bilateral
 - c. matrilineal
 - d. patrilineal
5. Which of the following is a criticism of the family life cycle model?
 - a. It is too broad and accounts for too many aspects of family.
 - b. It is too narrowly focused on a sequence of stages.
 - c. It does not serve a practical purpose for studying family behavior.
 - d. It is not based on comprehensive research.

14.2 Variations in Family Life

6. The majority of U.S. children live in:
 - a. two-parent households
 - b. one-parent households
 - c. no-parent households
 - d. multigenerational households

7. According to the study cited by the U.S. Census Bureau, children who live with married parents grow up with more advantages than children who live with:
 - a. a divorced parent
 - b. a single parent
 - c. a grandparent
 - d. all of the above
8. Couples who cohabitate before marriage are _____ couples who did not cohabitate before marriage to be married at least ten years.
 - a. far more likely than
 - b. far less likely than
 - c. slightly less likely than
 - d. equally as likely as
9. Same-sex couple households account for _____ percent of U.S. households.
 - a. 1
 - b. 10
 - c. 15
 - d. 30
10. The median age of first marriage has _____ in the last fifty years.
 - a. increased for men but not women
 - b. decreased for men but not women
 - c. increased for both men and women
 - d. decreased for both men and women

14.3 Challenges Families Face

11. Current divorce rates are:
 - a. at an all-time high
 - b. at an all-time low
 - c. steadily increasing
 - d. steadily declining
12. Children of divorced parents are _____ to divorce in their own marriage than children of parents who stayed married.
 - a. more likely
 - b. less likely
 - c. equally likely
13. In general, children in _____ households benefit from divorce.
 - a. stepfamily
 - b. multigenerational
 - c. high-conflict
 - d. low-conflict

14. Which of the following is true of intimate partner violence (IPV)?
 - a. IPV victims are more frequently men than women.
 - b. One in ten women is a victim of IPV.
 - c. Nearly half of instances of IPV involve drugs or alcohol.
 - d. Rape is the most common form of IPV.
15. Which type of child abuse is most prevalent in the United States?
 - a. Physical abuse
 - b. Neglect
 - c. Shaken-baby syndrome
 - d. Verbal mistreatment

Short Answer

14.1 What Is Marriage? What Is a Family?

1. According to research, what are people's general thoughts on family in the United States? How do they view nontraditional family structures? How do you think these views might change in twenty years?
2. Explain the difference between bilateral and unilateral descent. Using your own association with kinship, explain which type of descent applies to you?

14.2 Variations in Family Life

3. Explain the different variations of the nuclear family and the trends that occur in each.
4. Why are some couples choosing to cohabitate before marriage? What effect does cohabitation have on marriage?

14.3 Challenges Families Face

5. Explain how financial status impacts marital stability. What other factors are associated with a couple's financial status?
6. Explain why more than half of IPV goes unreported? Why are those who are abused unlikely to report the abuse?

Further Research

14.1 What Is Marriage? What Is a Family?

For more information on family development and lines of descent, visit the [New England Historical Genealogical Society's web site \(http://openstax.org/l/American_Ancestors\)](http://openstax.org/l/American_Ancestors), American Ancestors, and find out how genealogies have been established and recorded since 1845.

14.2 Variations in Family Life

For more statistics on marriage and family, see the Forum on Child and Family Statistics at http://openstax.org/l/child_family_statistics, as well as the American Community Survey, the Current Population Survey, and the U.S. Census decennial survey at [the U.S. Census Bureau's web site \(http://openstax.org/l/Dep_Veterans_Affairs\)](http://openstax.org/l/Dep_Veterans_Affairs).

14.3 Challenges Families Face

To find more information on child abuse, visit the [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services web site \(http://openstax.org/l/child_welfare\)](http://openstax.org/l/child_welfare) to review documents provided by the Child Welfare Information Gateway.

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FIGURE 15.1 Religions come in many forms, such as this large megachurch. (Credit: ToBeDaniel/Wikimedia Commons)

CHAPTER OUTLINE

15.1 The Sociological Approach to Religion

15.2 World Religions

15.3 Religion in the United States

INTRODUCTION Why do sociologists study religion? For centuries, humankind has sought to understand and explain the “meaning of life.” Many philosophers believe this contemplation and the desire to understand our place in the universe are what differentiate humankind from other species. Religion, in one form or another, has been found in all human societies since human societies first appeared. Archaeological digs have revealed ritual objects, ceremonial burial sites, and other religious artifacts. Social conflict and even wars often result from religious disputes. To understand a culture, sociologists must study its religion.

What is religion? Pioneer sociologist Émile Durkheim described it with the ethereal statement that it consists of “things that surpass the limits of our knowledge” (1915). He went on to elaborate: Religion is “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say set apart and forbidden, beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community, called a church, all those who adhere to them” (1915). Some people associate religion with places of worship (a synagogue or church), others with a practice (confession or meditation), and still others with a concept that guides their daily lives (like dharma or sin). All these people can agree that **religion** is a system of beliefs, values, and practices concerning what a person holds sacred or considers to be spiritually significant.

Does religion bring fear, wonder, relief, explanation of the unknown or control over freedom and choice? How do our religious perspectives affect our behavior? These are questions sociologists ask and are reasons they study religion. What are peoples' conceptions of the profane and the sacred? How do religious ideas affect the real-world reactions and choices of people in a society?

Religion can also serve as a filter for examining other issues in society and other components of a culture. For example, after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and later in during the rise and predominant of the terrorist group ISIS, it became important for teachers, church leaders, and the media to educate Americans about Islam to prevent stereotyping and to promote religious tolerance. Sociological tools and methods, such as surveys, polls, interviews, and analysis of historical data, can be applied to the study of religion in a culture to help us better understand the role religion plays in people's lives and the way it influences society.

15.1 The Sociological Approach to Religion

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Discuss the historical view of religion from a sociological perspective
- Describe how the major sociological paradigms view religion



FIGURE 15.2 Universality of religious practice, such as these prayers at the The Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, can create bonds among people who would otherwise be strangers. Muslim people around the world pray five times each day while facing the direction of the Kaaba in Mecca (pictured in Section 15.2). Beyond the religious observance, such a unifying act can build a powerful sense of community. (Credit: Arian Zwegers/flickr).

From the Latin *religio* (respect for what is sacred) and *religare* (to bind, in the sense of an obligation), the term religion describes various systems of belief and practice that define what people consider to be sacred or spiritual (Fasching and deChant 2001; Durkheim 1915). Throughout history, and in societies across the world, leaders have used religious narratives, symbols, and traditions in an attempt to give more meaning to life and understand the universe. Some form of religion is found in every known culture, and it is usually practiced in a public way by a group. The practice of religion can include feasts and festivals, intercession with God or gods, marriage and funeral services, music and art, meditation or initiation, sacrifice or service, and other aspects of culture.

While some people think of religion as something individual because religious beliefs can be highly personal, religion is also a social institution. Social scientists recognize that religion exists as an organized and integrated set of beliefs, behaviors, and norms centered on basic social needs and values. Moreover, religion is a cultural universal found in all social groups. For instance, in every culture, funeral rites are practiced in

some way, although these customs vary between cultures and within religious affiliations. Despite differences, there are common elements in a ceremony marking a person's death, such as announcement of the death, care of the deceased, disposition, and ceremony or ritual. These universals, and the differences in the way societies and individuals experience religion, provide rich material for sociological study.

In studying religion, sociologists distinguish between what they term the experience, beliefs, and rituals of a religion. **Religious experience** refers to the conviction or sensation that we are connected to “the divine.” This type of communion might be experienced when people pray or meditate. **Religious beliefs** are specific ideas members of a particular faith hold to be true, such as that Jesus Christ was the son of God, or that reincarnation exists. Another illustration of religious beliefs is the creation stories we find in different religions. **Religious rituals** are behaviors or practices that are either required or expected of the members of a particular group, such as bar mitzvah or confession of sins (Barkan and Greenwood 2003).

The History of Religion as a Sociological Concept

In the wake of nineteenth century European industrialization and secularization, three social theorists attempted to examine the relationship between religion and society: Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Karl Marx. They are among the founding thinkers of modern sociology.

As stated earlier, French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) defined religion as a “unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things” (1915). To him, sacred meant extraordinary—something that inspired wonder and that seemed connected to the concept of “the divine.” Durkheim argued that “religion happens” in society when there is a separation between the profane (ordinary life) and the sacred (1915). A rock, for example, isn't sacred or profane as it exists. But if someone makes it into a headstone, or another person uses it for landscaping, it takes on different meanings—one sacred, one profane.

Durkheim is generally considered the first sociologist who analyzed religion in terms of its societal impact. Above all, he believed religion is about community: It binds people together (social cohesion), promotes behavior consistency (social control), and offers strength during life's transitions and tragedies (meaning and purpose). By applying the methods of natural science to the study of society, Durkheim held that the source of religion and morality is the collective mind-set of society and that the cohesive bonds of social order result from common values in a society. He contended that these values need to be maintained to maintain social stability.

But what would happen if religion were to decline? This question led Durkheim to posit that religion is not just a social creation but something that represents the power of society: When people celebrate sacred things, they celebrate the power of their society. By this reasoning, even if traditional religion disappeared, society wouldn't necessarily dissolve.

Whereas Durkheim saw religion as a source of social stability, German sociologist and political economist Max Weber (1864–1920) believed it was a precipitator of social change. He examined the effects of religion on economic activities and noticed that heavily Protestant societies—such as those in the Netherlands, England, Scotland, and Germany—were the most highly developed capitalist societies and that their most successful business leaders were Protestant. In his writing *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), he contends that the Protestant work ethic influenced the development of capitalism. Weber noted that certain kinds of Protestantism supported the pursuit of material gain by motivating believers to work hard, be successful, and not spend their profits on frivolous things. (The modern use of “work ethic” comes directly from Weber's Protestant ethic, although it has now lost its religious connotations.)

The Protestant Work Ethic in the Information Age

Max Weber (1904) posited that, in Europe in his time, Protestants were more likely than Catholics to value capitalist ideology, and believed in hard work and savings. He showed that Protestant values directly influenced the rise of capitalism and helped create the modern world order. Weber thought the emphasis on community in Catholicism versus the emphasis on individual achievement in Protestantism made a difference. His century-old claim that the Protestant work ethic led to the development of capitalism has been one of the most important and controversial topics in the sociology of religion. In fact, scholars have found little merit to his contention when applied to modern society (Greeley 1989).

What does the concept of work ethic mean today? The work ethic in the information age has been affected by tremendous cultural and social change, just as workers in the mid- to late nineteenth century were influenced by the wake of the Industrial Revolution. Factory jobs tend to be simple, uninvolved, and require very little thinking or decision making on the part of the worker. Today, the work ethic of the modern workforce has been transformed, as more thinking and decision making is required. Employees also seek autonomy and fulfillment in their jobs, not just wages. Higher levels of education have become necessary, as well as people management skills and access to the most recent information on any given topic. The information age has increased the rapid pace of production expected in many jobs.

On the other hand, the “McDonaldization” of the United States (Hightower 1975; Ritzer 1993), in which many service industries, such as the fast-food industry, have established routinized roles and tasks, has resulted in a “discouragement” of the work ethic. In jobs where roles and tasks are highly prescribed, workers have no opportunity to make decisions. They are considered replaceable commodities as opposed to valued employees. During times of recession, these service jobs may be the only employment possible for younger individuals or those with low-level skills. The pay, working conditions, and robotic nature of the tasks dehumanizes the workers and strips them of incentives for doing quality work.

Working hard also doesn’t seem to have any relationship with Catholic or Protestant religious beliefs anymore, or those of other religions; information age workers expect talent and hard work to be rewarded by material gain and career advancement.

German philosopher, journalist, and revolutionary socialist Karl Marx (1818–1883) also studied the social impact of religion. He believed religion reflects the social stratification of society and that it maintains inequality and perpetuates the status quo. For him, religion was just an extension of working-class (proletariat) economic suffering. He famously argued that religion “is the opium of the people” (1844).

For Durkheim, Weber, and Marx, who were reacting to the great social and economic upheaval of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century in Europe, religion was an integral part of society. For Durkheim, religion was a force for cohesion that helped bind the members of society to the group, while Weber believed religion could be understood as something separate from society. Marx considered religion inseparable from the economy and the worker. Religion could not be understood apart from the capitalist society that perpetuated inequality. Despite their different views, these social theorists all believed in the centrality of religion to society.

Theoretical Perspectives on Religion



FIGURE 15.3 Functionalists believe religion meets many important needs for people, including group cohesion and companionship. Hindu pilgrims come from far away to Ram Kund, a holy place in the city of Nashik, India. One of the rituals performed is intended to bring salvation to the souls of people who have passed away. What need is this practice fulfilling? (Credit: Arian Zweegers/flickr)

Modern-day sociologists often apply one of three major theoretical perspectives. These views offer different lenses through which to study and understand society: functionalism, symbolic interactionism, and conflict theory. Let's explore how scholars applying these paradigms understand religion.

Functionalism

Functionalists contend that religion serves several functions in society. Religion, in fact, depends on society for its existence, value, and significance, and vice versa. From this perspective, religion serves several purposes, like providing answers to spiritual mysteries, offering emotional comfort, and creating a place for social interaction and social control.

In providing answers, religion defines the spiritual world and spiritual forces, including divine beings. For example, it helps answer questions like, “How was the world created?” “Why do we suffer?” “Is there a plan for our lives?” and “Is there an afterlife?” As another function, religion provides emotional comfort in times of crisis. Religious rituals bring order, comfort, and organization through shared familiar symbols and patterns of behavior.

One of the most important functions of religion, from a functionalist perspective, is the opportunities it creates for social interaction and the formation of groups. It provides social support and social networking and offers a place to meet others who hold similar values and a place to seek help (spiritual and material) in times of need. Moreover, it can foster group cohesion and integration. Because religion can be central to many people's concept of themselves, sometimes there is an “in-group” versus “out-group” feeling toward other religions in our society or within a particular practice. On an extreme level, the Inquisition, the Salem witch trials, and anti-Semitism are all examples of this dynamic. Finally, religion promotes social control: It reinforces social norms such as appropriate styles of dress, following the law, and regulating sexual behavior.

Conflict Theory

Conflict theorists view religion as an institution that helps maintain patterns of social inequality. For example,

the Vatican has a tremendous amount of wealth, while the average income of Catholic parishioners is small. According to this perspective, religion has been used to support the “divine right” of oppressive monarchs and to justify unequal social structures, like India’s caste system.

Conflict theorists are critical of the way many religions promote the idea that believers should be satisfied with existing circumstances because they are divinely ordained. This power dynamic has been used by Christian institutions for centuries to keep poor people poor and to teach them that they shouldn’t be concerned with what they lack because their “true” reward (from a religious perspective) will come after death. Conflict theorists also point out that those in power in a religion are often able to dictate practices, rituals, and beliefs through their interpretation of religious texts or via proclaimed direct communication from the divine.



FIGURE 15.4 Many religions, including the Catholic faith, have long prohibited women from becoming spiritual leaders. Feminist theorists focus on gender inequality and promote leadership roles for women in religion. (Credit: Wikimedia Commons)

The feminist perspective is a conflict theory view that focuses specifically on gender inequality. In terms of religion, feminist theorists assert that, although women are typically the ones to socialize children into a religion, they have traditionally held very few positions of power within religions. A few religions and religious denominations are more gender equal, but male dominance remains the norm of most.



SOCIOLOGY IN THE REAL WORLD

Rational Choice Theory: Can Economic Theory Be Applied to Religion?

How do people decide which religion to follow, if any? How does one pick a church or decide which denomination “fits” best? Rational choice theory (RCT) is one way social scientists have attempted to explain these behaviors. The theory proposes that people are self-interested, though not necessarily selfish, and that people make rational choices—choices that can reasonably be expected to maximize positive outcomes while minimizing negative outcomes. Sociologists Roger Finke and Rodney Stark (1988) first considered the use of RCT to explain some aspects of religious behavior, with the assumption that there is a basic human need for religion in terms of providing belief in a supernatural being, a sense of meaning in life, and belief in life after death. Religious explanations of these concepts are presumed to be more satisfactory than scientific explanations, which may help to account for the continuation of strong religious connectedness in countries such as the United States, despite predictions of some competing theories for a great decline in religious affiliation due to modernization and religious pluralism.

Another assumption of RCT is that religious organizations can be viewed in terms of “costs” and “rewards.” Costs are not only monetary requirements, but are also the time, effort, and commitment demands of any particular religious organization. Rewards are the intangible benefits in terms of belief and satisfactory explanations about life,

death, and the supernatural, as well as social rewards from membership. RCT proposes that, in a pluralistic society with many religious options, religious organizations will compete for members, and people will choose between different churches or denominations in much the same way they select other consumer goods, balancing costs and rewards in a rational manner. In this framework, RCT also explains the development and decline of churches, denominations, sects, and even cults; this limited part of the very complex RCT theory is the only aspect well supported by research data.

Critics of RCT argue that it doesn't fit well with human spiritual needs, and many sociologists disagree that the costs and rewards of religion can even be meaningfully measured or that individuals use a rational balancing process regarding religious affiliation. The theory doesn't address many aspects of religion that individuals may consider essential (such as faith) and further fails to account for agnostics and atheists who don't seem to have a similar need for religious explanations. Critics also believe this theory overuses economic terminology and structure and point out that terms such as "rational" and "reward" are unacceptably defined by their use; they would argue that the theory is based on faulty logic and lacks external, empirical support. A scientific explanation for *why* something occurs can't reasonably be supported by the fact that it *does* occur. RCT is widely used in economics and to a lesser extent in criminal justice, but the application of RCT in explaining the religious beliefs and behaviors of people and societies is still being debated in sociology today.

Symbolic Interactionism

Rising from the concept that our world is socially constructed, symbolic interactionism studies the symbols and interactions of everyday life. To interactionists, beliefs and experiences are not sacred unless individuals in a society regard them as sacred. The Star of David in Judaism, the cross in Christianity, and the crescent and star in Islam are examples of sacred symbols. Interactionists are interested in what these symbols communicate. Because interactionists study one-on-one, everyday interactions between individuals, a scholar using this approach might ask questions focused on this dynamic. The interaction between religious leaders and practitioners, the role of religion in the ordinary components of everyday life, and the ways people express religious values in social interactions—all might be topics of study to an interactionist.



FIGURE 15.5 The symbols of fourteen religions are depicted here. In no particular order, they represent Judaism, Wicca, Taoism, Christianity, Confucianism, Baha'i, Druidism, Islam, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Shinto, Jainism, Sikhism, and Buddhism. Can you match the symbol to the religion? What might a symbolic interactionist make of these symbols? (Credit: ReligiousTolerance.org)

15.2 World Religions

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Explain the differences between various types of religious organizations
- Classify religion, like animism, polytheism, monotheism, and atheism
- Describe several major world religions



FIGURE 15.6 Cultural traditions may emerge from religious traditions, or may influence them. People from the same branch of Christianity may celebrate holidays very differently based on where they live. In this image from Guatemala, women dress as if for a funeral as they play a prominent role in a Holy Week (Semana Santa) procession. Even in other nearby Central American countries, the procession may look different from this one.

The major religions of the world (Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Confucianism, Christianity, Taoism, and Judaism) differ in many respects, including how each religion is organized and the belief system each upholds. Other differences include the nature of belief in a higher power, the history of how the world and the religion began, and the use of sacred texts and objects.

Types of Religious Organizations

Religions organize themselves—their institutions, practitioners, and structures—in a variety of fashions. For instance, when the Roman Catholic Church emerged, it borrowed many of its organizational principles from the ancient Roman military and turned senators into cardinals, for example. Sociologists use different terms, like *ecclesia*, *denomination*, and *sect*, to define these types of organizations. Scholars are also aware that these definitions are not static. Most religions transition through different organizational phases. For example, Christianity began as a cult, transformed into a sect, and today exists as an *ecclesia*.

Cults, like sects, are new religious groups. In the United States today this term often carries pejorative connotations. However, almost all religions began as cults and gradually progressed to levels of greater size and organization. The term cult is sometimes used interchangeably with the term new religious movement (NRM). The new term may be an attempt to lessen the negativity that the term ‘cult’ has amassed.

Controversy exists over whether some groups are cults, perhaps due in part to media sensationalism over groups like polygamous Mormons or the Peoples Temple followers who died at Jonestown, Guyana. Some groups that are controversially labeled as cults today include the Church of Scientology and the Hare Krishna movement.

A **sect** is a small and relatively new group. Most of the well-known Christian denominations in the United States today began as sects. For example, the Methodists and Baptists protested against their parent Anglican

Church in England, just as Henry VIII protested against the Catholic Church by forming the Anglican Church. From “protest” comes the term Protestant.

Occasionally, a sect is a breakaway group that may be in tension with larger society. They sometimes claim to be returning to “the fundamentals” or to contest the veracity of a particular doctrine. When membership in a sect increases over time, it may grow into a denomination. Often a sect begins as an offshoot of a denomination, when a group of members believes they should separate from the larger group.

Some sects do not grow into denominations. Sociologists call these **established sects**. Established sects, such as the Amish or Jehovah’s Witnesses fall halfway between sect and denomination on the ecclesia–cult continuum because they have a mixture of sect-like and denomination-like characteristics.

A **denomination** is a large, mainstream religious organization, but it does not claim to be official or state sponsored. It is one religion among many. For example, Baptist, African Methodist Episcopal, Catholic, and Seventh-day Adventist are all Christian denominations.

The term **ecclesia**, originally referring to a political assembly of citizens in ancient Athens, Greece, now refers to a congregation. In sociology, the term is used to refer to a religious group that most all members of a society belong to. It is considered a nationally recognized, or official, religion that holds a religious monopoly and is closely allied with state and secular powers. The United States does not have an ecclesia by this standard; in fact, this is the type of religious organization that many of the first colonists came to America to escape.

There are many countries in Europe, Asia, Central and South America, and Africa that are considered to have an official state-church. Most of their citizens share similar beliefs, and the state-church has significant involvement in national institutions, which includes restricting the behavior of those with different belief systems. The state-church of England is the Church of England or the Anglican Church established in the 16th century by King Henry VIII. In Saudi Arabia, Islamic law is enforced, and public display of any other religion is illegal. Using this definition then, it can be said that the major Abrahamic systems of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, are ecclesia; in some regions, they are considered a state-church.



FIGURE 15.7 How might you classify the Mennonites? As a cult, a sect, or a denomination? (Credit: Frenkieb/flickr)

One way to remember these religious organizational terms is to think of cults, sects, denominations, and ecclesia representing a continuum, with increasing influence on society, where cults are least influential and ecclesia are most influential.

Types of Religions

Scholars from a variety of disciplines have strived to classify religions. One widely accepted categorization that helps people understand different belief systems considers what or who people worship (if anything). Using this method of classification, religions might fall into one of these basic categories, as shown in [Table 15.1](#).

Religious Classification	What/Who Is Divine	Example
Polytheism	Multiple gods	Belief systems of the ancient Greeks and Romans
Monotheism	Single god	Judaism, Islam
Atheism	No deities	Atheism
Animism	Nonhuman beings (animals, plants, natural world)	Indigenous nature worship (Shinto)

TABLE 15.1 One way scholars have categorized religions is by classifying what or who they hold to be divine.

Religious Classification	What/Who Is Divine	Example
Totemism	Human-natural being connection	Ojibwa (Native American) beliefs

TABLE 15.1 One way scholars have categorized religions is by classifying what or who they hold to be divine.

Note that some religions may be practiced—or understood—in various categories. For instance, the Christian notion of the Holy Trinity (God, Jesus, Holy Spirit) defies the definition of **monotheism**, which is a religion based on belief in a single deity, to some scholars. Similarly, many Westerners view the multiple manifestations of Hinduism’s godhead as **polytheistic**, which is a religion based on belief in multiple deities,, while Hindus might describe those manifestations are a monotheistic parallel to the Christian Trinity. Some Japanese practice Shinto, which follows **animism**, which is a religion that believes in the divinity of nonhuman beings, like animals, plants, and objects of the natural world, while people who practice **totemism** believe in a divine connection between humans and other natural beings.

It is also important to note that every society also has nonbelievers, such as **atheists**, who do not believe in a divine being or entity, and agnostics, who hold that ultimate reality (such as God) is unknowable. While typically not an organized group, atheists and agnostics represent a significant portion of the population. It is important to recognize that being a nonbeliever in a divine entity does not mean the individual subscribes to no morality. Indeed, many Nobel Peace Prize winners and other great humanitarians over the centuries would have classified themselves as atheists or agnostics.

The World’s Religions and Philosophies

Religions have emerged and developed across the world. Some have been short-lived, while others have persisted and grown. In this section, we will explore seven of the world’s major religions.

Hinduism

The oldest religion in the world, Hinduism originated in the Indus River Valley about 4,500 years ago in what is now modern-day northwest India and Pakistan. It arose contemporaneously with ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian cultures. With roughly one billion followers, Hinduism is the third-largest of the world’s religions. Hindus believe in a divine power that can manifest as different entities. Three main incarnations—Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva—are sometimes compared to the manifestations of the divine in the Christian Trinity.

Multiple sacred texts, collectively called the Vedas, contain hymns and rituals from ancient India and are mostly written in Sanskrit. Hindus generally believe in a set of principles called dharma, which refer to one’s duty in the world that corresponds with “right” actions. Hindus also believe in karma, or the notion that spiritual ramifications of one’s actions are balanced cyclically in this life or a future life (reincarnation).

Buddhism

Buddhism was founded by Siddhartha Gautama around 500 B.C.E. Siddhartha was said to have given up a comfortable, upper-class life to follow one of poverty and spiritual devotion. At the age of thirty-five, he famously meditated under a sacred fig tree and vowed not to rise before he achieved enlightenment (*bodhi*). After this experience, he became known as Buddha, or “enlightened one.” Followers were drawn to Buddha’s teachings and the practice of meditation, and he later established a monastic order.

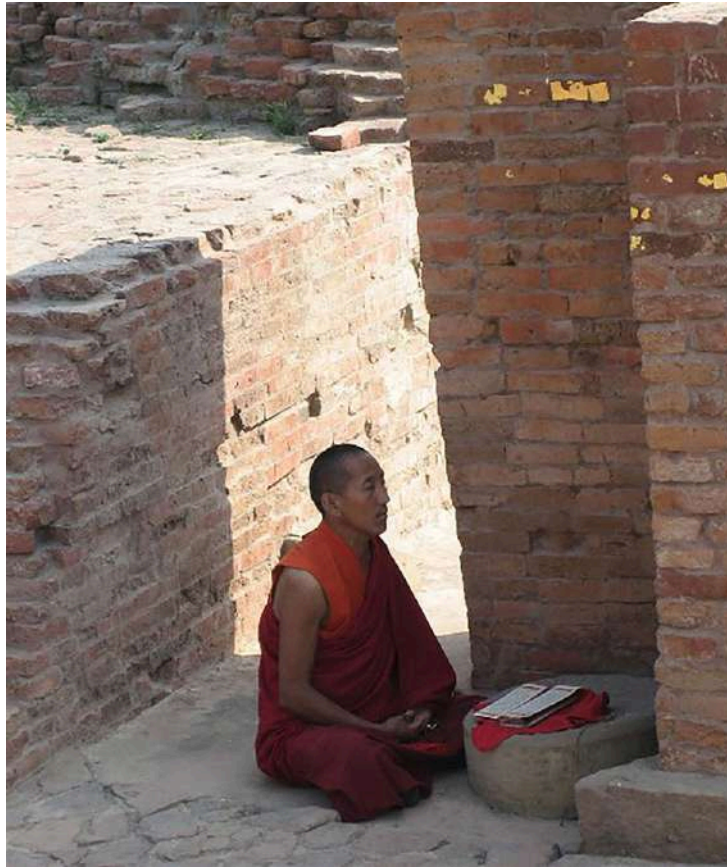


FIGURE 15.8 Meditation is an important practice in Buddhism. A Tibetan monk is shown here engaged in solitary meditation. (Credit: Prince Roy/flickr)

Buddha’s teachings encourage Buddhists to lead a moral life by accepting the four Noble Truths: 1) life is suffering, 2) suffering arises from attachment to desires, 3) suffering ceases when attachment to desires ceases, and 4) freedom from suffering is possible by following the “middle way.” The concept of the “middle way” is central to Buddhist thinking, which encourages people to live in the present and to practice acceptance of others (Smith 1991). Buddhism also tends to deemphasize the role of a godhead, instead stressing the importance of personal responsibility (Craig 2002).

Confucianism

Confucianism was developed by Kung Fu-Tzu (Confucius), who lived in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E. An extraordinary teacher, his lessons—which were about self-discipline, respect for authority and tradition, and *jen* (the kind treatment of every person)—were collected in a book called the *Analects*.

Many consider Confucianism more of a philosophy or social system than a religion because it focuses on sharing wisdom about moral practices but doesn’t involve any type of specific worship; nor does it have formal objects. In fact, its teachings were developed in context of problems of social anarchy and a near-complete deterioration of social cohesion. Dissatisfied with the social solutions put forth, Kung Fu-Tzu developed his own model of religious morality to help guide society (Smith 1991).

Taoism

In Taoism, the purpose of life is inner peace and harmony. Tao is usually translated as “way” or “path.” The founder of the religion is generally recognized to be a man named Laozi, who lived sometime in the sixth century B.C.E. in China. Taoist beliefs emphasize the virtues of compassion and moderation.

The central concept of *tao* can be understood to describe a spiritual reality, the order of the universe, or the

way of modern life in harmony with the former two. The ying-yang symbol and the concept of polar forces are central Taoist ideas (Smith 1991). Some scholars have compared this Chinese tradition to its Confucian counterpart by saying that “whereas Confucianism is concerned with day-to-day rules of conduct, Taoism is concerned with a more spiritual level of being” (Feng and English 1972).

Judaism

After their Exodus from Egypt in the thirteenth century B.C.E., Jews, a nomadic society, became monotheistic, worshipping only one God. The Jews’ covenant, or promise of a special relationship with Yahweh (God), is an important element of Judaism. Abraham, a key figure in the foundation of the Jewish faith, is also recognized as a foundation of Christianity and Islam, resulting in the three religions and a few others being referred to as “Abrahamic.” The sacred Jewish text is the Torah, which Christians also follow as the first five books of the Bible. Talmud refers to a collection of sacred Jewish oral interpretation of the Torah. Jews emphasize moral behavior and action in this world as opposed to beliefs or personal salvation in the next world. Since Moses was a leader of the Jewish people when he recorded the Ten Commandments, their culture is interwoven with that of other religions and of governments who adhere to “Judeo-Christian values.”

Jewish people may identify as an ethnic group as well as a religion (Glauz-Todrank 2014). After numerous invasions and wars in the Jewish homeland, culminating in the destruction of the Second Temple, Jewish people relocated to other parts of the world in what is known as the Jewish Diaspora. Large populations settled in Europe, and eventually migrated to the United States. Though a contemporary Jewish person's ancestors may hail from Eastern Europe, the Middle East, or the Iberian Peninsula, many identify themselves as people of Jewish origin, rather than indicating the nation from which their ancestors emigrated (Chervyakov 2010). Today, Jewish people are the second-largest religious group in the United States (Pew Research Center 2018), and the United States is also home to the second largest population of Jewish people, with Israel having the largest.

Islam

Islam is monotheistic religion, and it follows the teaching of the prophet Muhammad, born in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, in 570 C.E. Muhammad is seen only as a prophet, not as a divine being, and he is believed to be the messenger of Allah (God), who is divine. The followers of Islam are called Muslims.

Islam means “peace” and “submission.” The sacred text for Muslims is the Qur’an (or Koran). As with Christianity’s Old Testament, many of the Qur’an stories are shared with the Jewish faith. Divisions exist within Islam, but all Muslims are guided by five beliefs or practices, often called “pillars”: 1) Allah is the only god, and Muhammad is his prophet, 2) daily prayer, 3) helping those in poverty, 4) fasting as a spiritual practice, and 5) pilgrimage to the holy center of Mecca.

About one-fifth of the world’s population identifies as Muslim. While there is a significant concentration of Muslim people in the Middle East, they span the globe. The most country with the most Muslim people is Indonesia, an island country in Southeast Asia. In the United States, Muslim people make up the third-largest religious group after Christian and Jewish people, and that population is expected to become larger than the U.S. Jewish population by about 2040 (Pew Research Center 2018).



FIGURE 15.9 One of the cornerstones of Muslim practice is journeying to the religion’s most sacred place, Mecca. The cube structure is the Kaaba (also spelled Ka’bah or Kabah). (Credit: Raeky/flickr)

Christianity

Today the largest religion in the world, Christianity began 2,000 years ago in Palestine, with Jesus of Nazareth, a leader who taught his followers about *caritas* (charity) or treating others as you would like to be treated yourself.

The sacred text for Christians is the Bible. While Jews, Christians, and Muslims share many of same historical religious stories, their beliefs verge. In their shared sacred stories, it is suggested that the son of God—a messiah—will return to save God’s followers. While Christians believe that he already appeared in the person of Jesus Christ, Jews and Muslims disagree. While they recognize Christ as an important historical figure, their traditions don’t believe he’s the son of God, and their faiths see the prophecy of the messiah’s arrival as not yet fulfilled.



FIGURE 15.10 The renowned Howard Gospel Choir of Howard University is made up of students, alumni, and community members. It performs on campus and throughout the world, such as this performance in Ukraine. (Credit: US Embassy Kyiv Ukraine/flickr)

The largest group of Christians in the United States are members of the Protestant religions, including members of the Baptist, Episcopal, Lutheran, Methodist, Pentecostal, and other churches. However, more

people identify as Catholic than any one of those individual Protestant religions (Pew Research Center, 2020).

Different Christian groups have variations among their sacred texts. For instance, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, an established Christian sect, also uses the Book of Mormon, which they believe details other parts of Christian doctrine and Jesus' life that aren't included in the Bible. Similarly, the Catholic Bible includes the Apocrypha, a collection that, while part of the 1611 King James translation, is no longer included in Protestant versions of the Bible. Although monotheistic, many Christians describe their god through three manifestations that they call the Holy Trinity: the father (God), the son (Jesus), and the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is a term Christians often use to describe religious experience, or how they feel the presence of the sacred in their lives. One foundation of Christian doctrine is the Ten Commandments, which decry acts considered sinful, including theft, murder, and adultery.

15.3 Religion in the United States

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Give examples of religion as an agent of social change
- Describe current U.S. trends including megachurches, stances on LGBTQ rights, and religious identification.



FIGURE 15.11 Religion and religious observance play a key role in every life stage, deepening its emotional and cognitive connections. Many religions have a ceremony or sacrament to bring infants into the faith, as this Baptism does for Christians. In Judaism, adolescents transition to adulthood through ceremonies like the Bat Mitzvah or Bar Mitzvah. And many couples cement their relationship through religious marriage ceremonies, as did these members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. (Credit: a: John Ragai/flickr; b: Michele Pace/flickr; c: kristin klein/flickr)

In examining the state of religion in the United States today, we see the complexity of religious life in our society, plus emerging trends like the rise of the megachurch, secularization, and the role of religion in social change.

Religion and Social Change

Religion has historically been an impetus for and a barrier against social change. With Gutenberg's invention of the printing press, spreading ideas became far easier to share. Many pamphlets for all sorts of interests were printed, but one of Gutenberg's greatest contributions may have been mass producing the Christian Bible. The translation of sacred texts into everyday, nonscholarly language empowered people to shape their religions. However, printers did not just work for the Church. They printed many other texts, including those that were not aligned with Church doctrine. Martin Luther had his complaints against the Church (the 95 Theses) printed in 1517, which allowed them to be distributed throughout Europe. His convictions eventually led to the Protestant Reformation, which revolutionized not only the Church, but much of Western civilization. Disagreements between religious groups and instances of religious persecution have led to wars and genocides. The United States is no stranger to religion as an agent of social change. In fact, many of the United States' early European arrivals were acting largely on religious convictions when they were driven to settle in the United States.

Liberation Theology

Liberation theology began as a movement within the Roman Catholic Church in the 1950s and 1960s in Latin America, and it combines Christian principles with political activism. It uses the church to promote social change via the political arena, and it is most often seen in attempts to reduce or eliminate social injustice, discrimination, and poverty. A list of proponents of this kind of social justice (although some pre-date liberation theory) could include Francis of Assisi, Leo Tolstoy, Martin Luther King Jr., and Desmond Tutu.

Although begun as a moral reaction against the poverty caused by social injustice in that part of the world, today liberation theology is an international movement that encompasses many churches and denominations. Liberation theologians discuss theology from the point of view of the poor and the oppressed, and some interpret the scriptures as a call to action against poverty and injustice. In Europe and North America, feminist theology has emerged from liberation theology as a movement to bring social justice to women.



SOCIAL POLICY AND DEBATE

Religious Leaders and the Rainbow of Gay Pride

What happens when a religious leader officiates a gay marriage against denomination policies? What about when that same minister defends the action in part by coming out and making her own lesbian relationship known to the church?

In the case of the Reverend Amy DeLong, it meant a church trial. Some leaders in her denomination assert that homosexuality is incompatible with their faith, while others feel this type of discrimination has no place in a modern church (Barrick 2011).

As the LGBTQ community increasingly earns basic civil rights, how will religious communities respond? Many religious groups have traditionally discounted LGBTQ sexualities as “wrong.” However, these organizations have moved closer to respecting human rights by, for example, increasingly recognizing women as an equal gender. The Episcopal Church, a Christian sect comprising about 2.3 million people in the United States, has been far more welcoming to LGBTQ people. Progressing from a supportive proclamation in 1976, the Episcopal Church in the USA declared in 2015 that its clergy could preside over and sanction same-sex marriages (HRC 2019). The decision was not without its detractors, and as recently as 2020 an Episcopal bishop (a senior leader) in upstate New York was dismissed for prohibiting same-sex marriages in his diocese. (NBC, 2020). Lutheran and Anglican denominations also support the blessing of same-sex marriages, though they do not necessarily offer them the full recognition of opposite-sex marriages.

Catholic Church leader Pope Francis has been pushing for a more open church, and some Catholic bishops have been advocating for a more “gay-friendly” church (McKenna, 2014). For these and some other policies, Pope Francis has met vocal resistance from Church members and some more conservative bishops, while other Catholic bishops have supported same-sex marriages.

American Jewish denominations generally recognize and support the blessing of same-sex marriages, and Jewish rabbis have been supporters of LGBTQ rights from the Civil Rights era. In other religions, such as Hinduism, which does not have a governing body common to other religions, LGBTQ people are generally welcomed, and the decision to perform same-sex marriages is at the discretion of individual priests.

Megachurches

A **megachurch** is a Christian church that has a very large congregation averaging more than 2,000 people who attend regular weekly services. As of 2009, the largest megachurch in the United States was in Houston Texas, boasting an average weekly attendance of more than 43,000 (Bogan 2009). Megachurches exist in other parts of the world, especially in South Korea, Brazil, and several African countries, but the rise of the megachurch in the United States is a fairly recent phenomenon that has developed primarily in California, Florida, Georgia,

and Texas.

Since 1970 the number of megachurches in this country has grown from about fifty to more than 1,000, most of which are attached to the Southern Baptist denomination (Bogan 2009). Approximately six million people are members of these churches (Bird and Thumma 2011). The architecture of these church buildings often resembles a sport or concert arena. The church may include jumbotrons (large-screen televisual technology usually used in sports arenas to show close-up shots of an event). Worship services feature contemporary music with drums and electric guitars and use state-of-the-art sound equipment. The buildings sometimes include food courts, sports and recreation facilities, and bookstores. Services such as child care and mental health counseling are often offered.

Typically, a single, highly charismatic pastor leads the megachurch; at present, most are male. Some megachurches and their preachers have a huge television presence, and viewers all around the country watch and respond to their shows and fundraising.

Besides size, U.S. megachurches share other traits, including conservative theology, evangelism, use of technology and social networking (Facebook, Twitter, podcasts, blogs), hugely charismatic leaders, few financial struggles, multiple sites, and predominantly white membership. They list their main focuses as youth activities, community service, and study of the Scripture (Hartford Institute for Religion Research b).

Secularization

Historical sociologists Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Karl Marx and psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud anticipated secularization and claimed that the modernization of society would bring about a decrease in the influence of religion. Weber believed membership in distinguished clubs would outpace membership in Protestant sects as a way for people to gain authority or respect.

Conversely, some people suggest secularization is a root cause of many social problems, such as divorce, drug use, and educational downturn. One-time presidential contender Michele Bachmann even linked Hurricane Irene and the 2011 earthquake felt in Washington D.C. to politicians' failure to listen to God (Ward 2011). Similar statements have been made about Hurricane Harvey being the result of Houston's progressivism and for the city electing a lesbian mayor.

While some the United States seems to be increasingly secular, that change is occurring with a concurrent rise in fundamentalism. Compared to other democratic, industrialized countries, the United States is generally perceived to be a fairly religious nation. Whereas 65 percent of U.S. adults in a 2009 Gallup survey said religion was an important part of their daily lives, the numbers were lower in Spain (49 percent), Canada (42 percent), France (30 percent), the United Kingdom (27 percent), and Sweden (17 percent) (Crabtree and Pelham 2009).

Secularization interests social observers because it entails a pattern of change in a fundamental social institution. Much has been made about the rising number of people who identify as having no religious affiliation, which in a 2019 Pew Poll reached a new high of 26 percent, up from 17 percent in 2009 (Pew Research Center, 2020). But the motivations and meanings of having "no religion" vary significantly. A person who is a part of a religion may make a difficult decision to formally leave it based on disagreements with the organization or the tenets of the faith. Other people may simply "drift away," and decide to no longer identify themselves as members of a religion. Some people are not raised as a part of a religion, and therefore make a decision whether or not to join one later in life. And finally, a growing number of people identify as spiritual but not religious (SBNR) and they may pray, meditate, and even celebrate holidays in ways quite similar to people affiliated with formal religions; they may also find spirituality through other avenues that range from nature to martial arts. Sociologists and other social scientists may study these motivations and their impact on aspects of individuals' lives, as well as cultural and group implications.

In addition to the identification and change regarding people's religious affiliation, religious observance is also interesting. Researchers analyze the depth of involvement in formal institutions, like attending worship, and

informal or individual practices. As shown in [Table 15.2](#), of the religions surveyed, members of the Jehovah's Witness religion attend religious services more regularly than members of other religions in the United States. A number of Protestant religions also have relatively high attendance. Regular attendance at services may play a role in building social structure and acceptance of new people into the general community.

Religious tradition	At least once a week	Once or twice a month/a few times a year	Seldom/never
Buddhist	18%	50%	31%
Catholic	39%	40%	20%
Evangelical Protestant	58%	30%	12%
Hindu	18%	60%	21%
Historically Black Protestant	53%	36%	10%
Jehovah's Witness	85%	11%	3%
Jewish	19%	49%	31%
Mainline Protestant	33%	43%	24%
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints	77%	14%	9%
Muslim	45%	31%	22%
Orthodox Christian	31%	54%	15%
Unaffiliated (religious “nones”)	4%	24%	72%

TABLE 15.2 A survey of U.S. adults asked about regularity of religious service attendance. (Credit: Pew Research Center, 2020)



SOCIOLOGY IN THE REAL WORLD

Thank God for that Touchdown: Separation of Church and State

Imagine three public universities with football games scheduled on Saturday. At University A, a group of students in the stands who share the same faith decide to form a circle amid the spectators to pray for the team. For fifteen minutes, people in the circle share their prayers aloud among their group. At University B, the team ahead at halftime decides to join together in prayer, giving thanks and seeking support from God. This lasts for the first ten minutes of halftime on the sidelines of the field while spectators watch. At University C, the game program includes, among its opening moments, two minutes set aside for the team captain to share a prayer of his choosing with the spectators.

In the tricky area of separation of church and state, which of these actions is allowed and which is forbidden? In our three fictional scenarios, the last example is against the law while the first two situations are perfectly acceptable.

In the United States, a nation founded on the principles of religious freedom (many settlers were escaping religious persecution in Europe), how stringently do we adhere to this ideal? How well do we respect people's right to practice any belief system of their choosing? The answer just might depend on what religion you practice.

In 2003, for example, a lawsuit escalated in Alabama regarding a monument to the Ten Commandments in a public building. In response, a poll was conducted by *USA Today*, CNN, and Gallup. Among the findings: 70 percent of people approved of a Christian Ten Commandments monument in public, while only 33 percent approved of a monument to the Islamic Qur'an in the same space. Similarly, survey respondents showed a 64 percent approval of social programs run by Christian organizations, but only 41 percent approved of the same programs run by Muslim groups (Newport 2003).

These statistics suggest that, for most people in the United States, freedom of religion is less important than the religion under discussion. And this is precisely the point made by those who argue for separation of church and state. According to their contention, any state-sanctioned recognition of religion suggests endorsement of one belief system at the expense of all others—contradictory to the idea of freedom of religion.

So what violates separation of church and state and what is acceptable? Myriad lawsuits continue to test the answer. In the case of the three fictional examples above, the issue of spontaneity is key, as is the existence (or lack thereof) of planning on the part of event organizers.

The next time you're at a state event—political, public school, community—and the topic of religion comes up, consider where it falls in this debate.

Key Terms

- animism** the religion that believes in the divinity of nonhuman beings, like animals, plants, and objects of the natural world
- atheism** the belief in no deities
- cults** religious groups that are small, secretive, and highly controlling of members and have a charismatic leader
- denomination** a large, mainstream religion that is not sponsored by the state
- ecclesia** a religion that is considered the state religion
- established sects** sects that last but do not become denominations
- liberation theology** the use of a church to promote social change via the political arena
- megachurch** a Christian church that has a very large congregation averaging more than 2,000 people who attend regular weekly services
- monotheism** a religion based on belief in a single deity
- polytheism** a religion based on belief in multiple deities
- religion** a system of beliefs, values, and practices concerning what a person holds to be sacred or spiritually significant
- religious beliefs** specific ideas that members of a particular faith hold to be true
- religious experience** the conviction or sensation that one is connected to “the divine”
- religious rituals** behaviors or practices that are either required for or expected of the members of a particular group
- sect** a small, new offshoot of a denomination
- totemism** the belief in a divine connection between humans and other natural beings

Section Summary

15.1 The Sociological Approach to Religion

Religion describes the beliefs, values, and practices related to sacred or spiritual concerns. Social theorist Émile Durkheim defined religion as a “unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things” (1915). Max Weber believed religion could be a force for social change. Karl Marx viewed religion as a tool used by capitalist societies to perpetuate inequality. Religion is a social institution, because it includes beliefs and practices that serve the needs of society. Religion is also an example of a cultural universal, because it is found in all societies in one form or another. Functionalism, conflict theory, and interactionism all provide valuable ways for sociologists to understand religion.

15.2 World Religions

Sociological terms for different kinds of religious organizations are, in order of decreasing influence in society, ecclesia, denomination, sect, and cult. Religions can be categorized according to what or whom its followers worship. Some of the major, and oldest, of the world’s religions and related philosophies include Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. In the United States, the most widespread religions are Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.

15.3 Religion in the United States

Liberation theology combines Christian principles with political activism to address social injustice, discrimination, and poverty. Megachurches are those with a membership of more than 2,000 regular attendees, and they are a vibrant, growing and highly influential segment of U.S. religious life. While the numbers of people who identify as having no religious affiliation is rising in the United States, individual motivations and ways of identifying may vary significantly.

Section Quiz

15.1 The Sociological Approach to Religion

1. In what ways does religion serve the role of a social institution?
 - a. Religions have a complex and integrated set of norms.
 - b. Religious practices and beliefs are related to societal values.
 - c. Religions often meet several basic needs.
 - d. All of the above
2. A cultural universal is something that:
 - a. addresses all aspects of a group's behavior
 - b. is found in all cultures
 - c. is based on social norms
 - d. may or may not be of value in meeting social needs
3. Which of the main theoretical perspectives would approach religion from the micro-level, studying how religion impacts an individual's sense of support and well-being?
 - a. Functionalism
 - b. Symbolic interactionism
 - c. Conflict theory
 - d. Feminism
4. Which perspective most emphasizes the ways in which religion helps keep the social system running smoothly?
 - a. Functional perspective
 - b. Symbolic interactionist perspective
 - c. Conflict perspective
 - d. Feminist perspective
5. Which socialist perspective most emphasizes the ways in which religion helps to maintain social inequalities within a society?
 - a. Functional
 - b. Symbolic interactionist
 - c. Conflict theory
 - d. Feminist perspective
6. Which of the following do the functionalist and conflict perspectives share?
 - a. Position that religion relates to social control, enforcing social norms
 - b. Emphasis on religion as providing social support
 - c. Belief that religion helps explain the mysteries of life
 - d. None of the above
7. The Protestant work ethic was viewed in terms of its relationship to:
 - a. evolution and natural selection
 - b. capitalism
 - c. determinism
 - d. prejudice and discrimination

15.2 World Religions

8. What are some denominations of the Christian Protestant church?
 - a. Catholic and Jewish
 - b. Jehovah's Witnesses and Presbyterians
 - c. Scientology and Hare Krishna
 - d. Methodist and Seventh-day Adventist
9. A sect:
 - a. has generally grown so large that it needs new buildings and multiple leaders
 - b. often believes it must split from the larger group to return to important fundamentals
 - c. is another term for a cult
 - d. All of the above
10. The main difference between an ecclesia and a denomination is:
 - a. the number of followers or believers is much larger for denominations
 - b. the geographical location varies for ecclesia versus denominations
 - c. ecclesia are state-sponsored and considered an official religion
 - d. there are no important differences; the terms are interchangeable
11. Some controversial groups that may be mislabeled as cults include:
 - a. Scientology and the Hare Krishna
 - b. the Peoples Temple and Heaven's Gate
 - c. the Branch Davidians and the Manson Family
 - d. Quakers and Pentecostals
12. In what part of the world have Confucianism and Taoism been primarily practiced?
 - a. India
 - b. Europe
 - c. China
 - d. The Middle East
13. Many stories in the sacred text of Judaism are:
 - a. referred to as the Apocrypha
 - b. oral traditions only because Judaism has no sacred text
 - c. shared by Christianity and Islam
 - d. no longer part of the Torah
14. What do Christianity and Islam have in common?
 - a. Both believe in a single supreme god.
 - b. Both share many of the same stories in their central religious texts.
 - c. Both believe in an afterlife.
 - d. All of the above

15.3 Religion in the United States

15. Social scientists refer to the use of a church to combat social injustice in the political realm as:
 - a. the protestant work ethic
 - b. conflict management
 - c. liberation theology
 - d. justice work

16. Megachurches tend to have:
- a variety of male and female clergy
 - numerous buildings in which to meet
 - high attendance for only a limited time
 - large arenas where services are held

Short Answer

15.1 The Sociological Approach to Religion

- List some ways that you see religion having social control in the everyday world.
- What are some sacred items that you're familiar with? Are there some objects, such as cups, candles, or clothing, that would be considered profane in normal settings but are considered sacred in special circumstances or when used in specific ways?
- Consider a religion that you are familiar with, and discuss some of its beliefs, behaviors, and norms. Discuss how these meet social needs. Then, research a religion that you don't know much about. Explain how its beliefs, behaviors, and norms are like/unlike the other religion.

15.2 World Religions

- Consider the different types of religious organizations in the United States. What role did ecclesia play in the history of the United States? How have sects tended to change over time? What role do cults have today?
- What is your understanding of monotheism versus polytheism? How might your ideology be an obstacle to understanding the theism of another religion you're unfamiliar with?
- In U.S. society, do you believe there is social stratification that correlates with religious beliefs? What about within the practitioners of a given religion? Provide examples to illustrate your point.

15.3 Religion in the United States

- Do you believe the United States is becoming more secularized or more fundamentalist? Comparing your generation to that of your parents or grandparents, what differences do you see in the relationship between religion and society? What would popular media have you believe is the state of religion in the United States today?

Further Research

15.1 The Sociological Approach to Religion

For more discussion on the study of sociology and religion, check out [The Immanent Frame](http://openstax.org/l/immanent_frame/) (http://openstax.org/l/immanent_frame/) is a forum for the exchange of ideas about religion, secularism, and society by leading thinkers in the social sciences and humanities.

[Read more about functionalist views on religion here \(http://openstax.org/l/Grinnell_functionalism\)](http://openstax.org/l/Grinnell_functionalism). [Read more about women in the clergy here \(http://openstax.org/l/women_clergy\)](http://openstax.org/l/women_clergy).

Some would argue that the Protestant work ethic is still alive and well in the United States. [Read British historian Niall Ferguson's view here \(http://openstax.org/l/Protestant_work_ethic\)](http://openstax.org/l/Protestant_work_ethic).

15.2 World Religions

PBS's *Frontline* explores "the life of Jesus and the rise of Christianity" in this [in-depth documentary \(http://openstax.org/l/PBS_Frontline\)](http://openstax.org/l/PBS_Frontline). View the piece in its entirety here: .

For more insight on Confucianism, read [the Analects by Confucius \(http://openstax.org/l/Confucius_Analects\)](http://openstax.org/l/Confucius_Analects). For a primer on Judaism, read [Judaism 101 \(http://openstax.org/l/Jew_FAQ\)](http://openstax.org/l/Jew_FAQ).

Sorting through the different Christian denominations can be a daunting task. To help clarify these groups, go to [this page with information on Christian denominations \(http://openstax.org/l/Christian_denominations\)](http://openstax.org/l/Christian_denominations).

15.3 Religion in the United States

What is a megachurch and how are they changing the face of religion? Read “[Exploring the Megachurch Phenomena: Their Characteristics and Cultural Context](http://openstax.org/l/megachurch)” (<http://openstax.org/l/megachurch>).

Curious about the LGBT religious movement? Visit the [Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation \(GLAAD\)](http://openstax.org/l/GLAAD) (<http://openstax.org/l/GLAAD>) and [Human Rights Campaign \(HRC\)](http://openstax.org/l/human_rights_campaign) (http://openstax.org/l/human_rights_campaign) web sites for current news about the growing inclusion of LGBT citizens into their respective religious communities, both in the pews and from the pulpit.

How do Christians feel about gay marriage? How many Mormons are there in the United States? Check out [the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life \(http://openstax.org/l/Pew_Forum\)](http://openstax.org/l/Pew_Forum), a research institute examining U.S. religious trends.

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FIGURE 16.1 High school and college graduation often marks a milestone for families, friends, and even the wider community. Education, however, occurs in many venues and with far ranging outcomes. (Credit: Kevin Dooley/flickr)

CHAPTER OUTLINE

16.1 Education around the World

16.2 Theoretical Perspectives on Education

16.3 Issues in Education

INTRODUCTION “What the educator does in teaching is to make it possible for the students to become themselves” (Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*). David Simon, in his book *Social Problems and the Sociological Imagination: A Paradigm for Analysis* (1995), points to the notion that social problems are, in essence, contradictions—that is, statements, ideas, or features of a situation that are opposed to one another. Consider then, that one of the greatest expectations in U.S. society is that to attain any form of success in life, a person needs an education. In fact, a college degree is rapidly becoming an expectation at many levels of success, not merely an enhancement to our occupational choices. And, as you might expect, the number of people graduating from college in the United States continues to rise dramatically.

The contradiction, however, lies in the fact that the more impactful a college degree has become, the harder it has become to achieve it. The cost of getting a college degree has risen sharply since the mid-1980s, while many important forms of government support have barely increased.

The net result is that those who do graduate from college are likely to begin a career in debt. As of 2009, a typical student’s loans amounted to around \$23,000. Ten years later, the average amount of debt for students who took loans grew to over \$30,000. The overall national student loan debt topped \$1.6 trillion in 2020, according to the Federal Reserve. These rising costs and risky debt burdens have led to a number of diverse proposals for solutions. Some call for cancelling current college debt and making more colleges free to

qualifying students. Others advocate for more focused and efficient education in order to achieve needed career requirements more quickly. Employers, seeking both to widen their applicant pool and increase equity among their workforce, have increasingly sought ways to eliminate unnecessary degree requirements: If a person has the skills and knowledge to do the job, they have more access to it (Kerr 2020).

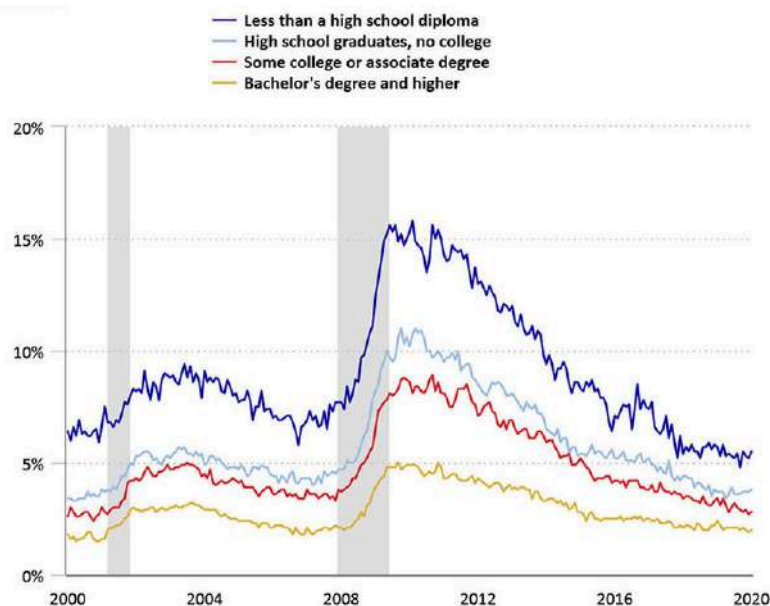


FIGURE 16.2 Unemployment rates for people age 25 and older by educational attainment. As can be seen in the graph, the overall unemployment rate began falling in 2009 after it peaked during the financial crisis and continued its downward trend through the decade from 2010 to 2020. (This graph does not account for the unemployment spike during the COVID-19 pandemic.) Note the differences in educational attainment and their impact on unemployment. People with bachelor's degrees have always had the lowest levels of unemployment, while those without a high school diploma have always had the highest level. (Credit: Bureau of Labor Statistics)

Is a college degree still worth it? Lifetime earnings among those with a college degree are, on average, still much higher than for those without. A 2019 Federal Reserve report indicated that, on average, college graduates earn \$30,000 per year more than non-college graduates. Also, that wage gap has nearly doubled in the past 40 years (Abel 2019).

Is the wage advantage enough to overcome the potential debt? And what's behind those averages? Remember, since the \$30,000 is an average, it also confirms what we see from other data: That certain people and certain college majors earn far more than others. As a result, earning a college degree in a field that has a smaller wage advantage over non-college graduates might not seem “worth it.”

But is college worth more than money?

A student earning Associate's and Bachelor's degrees generally will often take a wide array of courses, including many outside of their major. The student is exposed to a fairly broad range of topics, from mathematics and the physical sciences to history and literature, the social sciences, and music and art through introductory and survey-styled courses. It is in this period that the student's world view is, it is hoped, expanded. Then, when they begin the process of specialization, it is with a much broader perspective than might be otherwise. This additional “cultural capital” can further enrich the life of the student, enhance their ability to work with experienced professionals, and build wisdom upon knowledge. Over two thousand years ago, Socrates said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” The real value of an education, then, is to enhance our skill at self-examination. Education, its impact, and its costs are important not just to sociologists, but to policymakers, employers, and of course to parents.

16.1 Education around the World

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Identify differences in educational resources around the world
- Describe the concept of universal access to education



FIGURE 16.3 These students in Cambodia have a relatively informal classroom setting. Other schools, both nearby and around the world, have very different environments and practices. (Credit: Nguyen Hun Vu/flickr)

Education is a social institution through which members of a society are taught basic academic knowledge, learning skills, and cultural norms. Every nation in the world is equipped with some form of education system, though those systems vary greatly. The major factors that affect education systems are the resources and money that are utilized to support those systems in different nations. As you might expect, a country's wealth has much to do with the amount of money spent on education. Countries that do not have such basic amenities as running water are unable to support robust education systems or, in many cases, any formal schooling at all. The result of this worldwide educational inequality is a social concern for many countries, including the United States.

International differences in education systems are not solely a financial issue. The value placed on education, the amount of time devoted to it, and the distribution of education within a country also play a role in those differences. For example, students in South Korea spend 220 days a year in school, compared to the 180 days a year of their United States counterparts (Pellissier 2010).

Then there is the issue of educational distribution and changes within a nation. The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) is administered to samples of fifteen-year-old students worldwide. In 2010, the results showed that students in the United States had fallen from fifteenth to twenty-fifth in the rankings for science and math (National Public Radio 2010). The same program showed that by 2018, U.S. student achievement had remained on the same level for mathematics and science, but had shown improvements in reading. In 2018, about 4,000 students from about 200 high schools in the United States took the PISA test (OECD 2019).

Analysts determined that the nations and city-states at the top of the rankings had several things in common. For one, they had well-established standards for education with clear goals for all students. They also recruited teachers from the top 5 to 10 percent of university graduates each year, which is not the case for most countries (National Public Radio 2010).

Finally, there is the issue of social factors. One analyst from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the organization that created the PISA test, attributed 20 percent of performance differences and the United States' low rankings to differences in social background. Researchers noted that educational

resources, including money and quality teachers, are not distributed equitably in the United States. In the top-ranking countries, limited access to resources did not necessarily predict low performance. Analysts also noted what they described as “resilient students,” or those students who achieve at a higher level than one might expect given their social background. In Shanghai and Singapore, the proportion of resilient students is about 70 percent. In the United States, it is below 30 percent. These insights suggest that the United States’ educational system may be on a descending path that could detrimentally affect the country’s economy and its social landscape (National Public Radio 2010).

BIG PICTURE

Education in Finland

With public education in the United States under such intense criticism, why is it that Singapore, South Korea, and especially Finland (which is culturally most similar to us), have such excellent public education? Over the course of thirty years, the country has pulled itself from among the lowest rankings by the Organization of Economic Cooperation (OECD) to first in 2012, and remains, as of 2014, in the top five. Contrary to the rigid curriculum and long hours demanded of students in South Korea and Singapore, Finnish education often seems paradoxical to outside observers because it appears to break a lot of the rules we take for granted. It is common for children to enter school at seven years old, and children will have more recess and less hours in school than U.S. children—approximately 300 less hours. Their homework load is light when compared to all other industrialized nations (nearly 300 fewer hours per year in elementary school). There are no gifted programs, almost no private schools, and no high-stakes national standardized tests (Laukkanen 2008; Lynell Hancock 2011).

Prioritization is different than in the United States. There is an emphasis on allocating resources for those who need them most, high standards, support for special needs students, qualified teachers taken from the top 10 percent of the nation’s graduates and who must earn a Master’s degree, evaluation of education, balancing decentralization and centralization.

“We used to have a system which was really unequal,” stated the Finnish Education Chief in an interview. “My parents never had a real possibility to study and have a higher education. We decided in the 1960s that we would provide a free quality education to all. Even universities are free of charge. Equal means that we support everyone and we’re not going to waste anyone’s skills.” As for teachers, “We don’t test our teachers or ask them to prove their knowledge. But it’s true that we do invest in a lot of additional teacher training even after they become teachers” (Gross-Loh 2014).

Yet over the past decade Finland has consistently performed among the top nations on the PISA. Finland’s school children didn’t always excel. Finland built its excellent, efficient, and equitable educational system in a few decades from scratch, and the concept guiding almost every educational reform has been equity. The Finnish paradox is that by focusing on the bigger picture for all, Finland has succeeded at fostering the individual potential of most every child.

“We created a school system based on equality to make sure we can develop everyone’s potential. Now we can see how well it’s been working. Last year the OECD tested adults from twenty-four countries measuring the skill levels of adults aged sixteen to sixty-five on a survey called the PIAAC (Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies), which tests skills in literacy, numeracy, and problem solving in technology-rich environments. Finland scored at or near the top on all measures.”

Formal and Informal Education

As already mentioned, education is not solely concerned with the basic academic concepts that a student learns in the classroom. Societies also educate their children, outside of the school system, in matters of

everyday practical living. These two types of learning are referred to as formal education and informal education.

Formal education describes the learning of academic facts and concepts through a formal curriculum. Arising from the tutelage of ancient Greek thinkers, centuries of scholars have examined topics through formalized methods of learning. Education in earlier times was only available to the higher classes; they had the means for access to scholarly materials, plus the luxury of leisure time that could be used for learning. The Industrial Revolution and its accompanying social changes made education more accessible to the general population. Many families in the emerging middle class found new opportunities for schooling.

The modern U.S. educational system is the result of this progression. Today, basic education is considered a right and responsibility for all citizens. Expectations of this system focus on formal education, with curricula and testing designed to ensure that students learn the facts and concepts that society believes are basic knowledge.

In contrast, **informal education** describes learning about cultural values, norms, and expected behaviors by participating in a society. This type of learning occurs both through the formal education system and at home. Our earliest learning experiences generally happen via parents, relatives, and others in our community. Through informal education, we learn important life skills that help us get through the day and interact with each other, including how to dress for different occasions, how to perform regular tasks such as shopping for and preparing food, and how to keep our bodies clean. Many professional tasks and local customs are learned informally, as well.



FIGURE 16.4 Children showing younger siblings how to serve food is an example of informal education. (Credit: Tim Pierce/flickr)

Cultural transmission refers to the way people come to learn the values, beliefs, and social norms of their culture. Both informal and formal education include cultural transmission. For example, a student will learn about cultural aspects of modern history in a U.S. History classroom. In that same classroom, the student might learn the cultural norm for asking a classmate out on a date through passing notes and whispered conversations.

Access to Education

Another global concern in education is **universal access**. This term refers to people's equal ability to participate in an education system. On a world level, access might be more difficult for certain groups based on class or gender (as was the case in the United States earlier in the nation's history, a dynamic we still struggle

to overcome). The modern idea of universal access arose in the United States as a concern for people with disabilities. In the United States, one way in which universal education is supported is through federal and state governments covering the cost of free public education. Of course, the way this plays out in terms of school budgets and taxes makes this an often-contested topic on the national, state, and community levels.

Rank	State	Education Spending Per Student
1	New York	\$24,040
2	District of Columbia	\$22,759
3	Connecticut	\$20,635
4	New Jersey	\$20,021
5	Vermont	\$19,340
6	Alaska	\$17,726
7	Massachusetts	\$17,058
8	New Hampshire	\$16,893
9	Pennsylvania	\$16,395
10	Wyoming	\$16,224
11	Rhode Island	\$16,121
12	Illinois	\$15,741
13	Delaware	\$15,639
14	Hawaii	\$15,242
15	Maryland	\$14,762
16	Maine	\$14,145
17	North Dakota	\$13,758
18	Ohio	\$13,027
19	Washington	\$12,995
20	Minnesota	\$12,975
21	California	\$12,498
22	Nebraska	\$12,491
23	Michigan	\$12,345

TABLE 16.1 How does state spending affect educational opportunities? (EducationData.org 2018)

Rank	State	Education Spending Per Student
24	Wisconsin	\$12,285
25	Virginia	\$12,216
26	Oregon	\$11,920
27	Iowa	\$11,732
28	Montana	\$11,680
29	Kansas	\$11,653
30	Louisiana	\$11,452
31	West Virginia	\$11,334
32	Kentucky	\$11,110
33	South Carolina	\$10,856
34	Missouri	\$10,810
34	Georgia	\$10,810
36	Indiana	\$10,262
37	Colorado	\$10,202
38	Arkansas	\$10,139
39	South Dakota	\$10,073
40	Alabama	\$9,696
41	Texas	\$9,606
42	New Mexico	\$9,582
43	Tennessee	\$9,544
44	Nevada	\$9,417
45	North Carolina	\$9,377
46	Florida	\$9,346

TABLE 16.1 How does state spending affect educational opportunities? (EducationData.org 2018)

Rank	State	Education Spending Per Student
47	Mississippi	\$8,935
48	Oklahoma	\$8,239
49	Arizona	\$8,239
50	Idaho	\$7,771
51	Utah	\$7,628

TABLE 16.1 How does state spending affect educational opportunities? (EducationData.org 2018)

A precedent for universal access to education in the United States was set with the 1972 U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia’s decision in *Mills v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia*. This case was brought on the behalf of seven school-age children with special needs who argued that the school board was denying their access to free public education. The school board maintained that the children’s “exceptional” needs, which included intellectual disabilities, precluded their right to be educated for free in a public school setting. The board argued that the cost of educating these children would be too expensive and that the children would therefore have to remain at home without access to education.

This case was resolved in a hearing without any trial. The judge, Joseph Cornelius Waddy, upheld the students’ right to education, finding that they were to be given either public education services or private education paid for by the Washington, D.C., board of education. He noted that

Constitutional rights must be afforded citizens despite the greater expense involved ... the District of Columbia’s interest in educating the excluded children clearly must outweigh its interest in preserving its financial resources. ... The inadequacies of the District of Columbia Public School System whether occasioned by insufficient funding or administrative inefficiency, certainly cannot be permitted to bear more heavily on the “exceptional” or handicapped child than on the normal child (*Mills v. Board of Education* 1972).

Today, the optimal way to include people with disabilities students in standard classrooms is still being researched and debated. “Inclusion” is a method that involves complete immersion in a standard classroom, whereas “mainstreaming” balances time in a special-needs classroom with standard classroom participation. There continues to be social debate surrounding how to implement the ideal of universal access to education.

16.2 Theoretical Perspectives on Education

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Define manifest and latent functions of education
- Explain and discuss how functionalism, conflict theory, feminism, and interactionism view issues of education

While it is clear that education plays an integral role in individuals’ lives as well as society as a whole, sociologists view that role from many diverse points of view. Functionalists believe that education equips people to perform different functional roles in society. Conflict theorists view education as a means of widening the gap in social inequality. Feminist theorists point to evidence that sexism in education continues to prevent women from achieving a full measure of social equality. Symbolic interactionists study the dynamics of the classroom, the interactions between students and teachers, and how those affect everyday life. In this section, you will learn about each of these perspectives.

Functionalism

Functionalists view education as one of the more important social institutions in a society. They contend that education contributes two kinds of functions: manifest (or primary) functions, which are the intended and visible functions of education; and latent (or secondary) functions, which are the hidden and unintended functions.

Manifest Functions

There are several major manifest functions associated with education. The first is socialization. Beginning in preschool and kindergarten, students are taught to practice various societal roles. The French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), who established the academic discipline of sociology, characterized schools as “socialization agencies that teach children how to get along with others and prepare them for adult economic roles” (Durkheim 1898). Indeed, it seems that schools have taken on this responsibility in full.

This socialization also involves learning the rules and norms of the society as a whole. In the early days of compulsory education, students learned the dominant culture. Today, since the culture of the United States is increasingly diverse, students may learn a variety of cultural norms, not only that of the dominant culture.

School systems in the United States also transmit the core values of the nation through manifest functions like social control. One of the roles of schools is to teach students conformity to law and respect for authority. Obviously, such respect, given to teachers and administrators, will help a student navigate the school environment. This function also prepares students to enter the workplace and the world at large, where they will continue to be subject to people who have authority over them. Fulfillment of this function rests primarily with classroom teachers and instructors who are with students all day.



FIGURE 16.5 The teacher’s authority in the classroom is a way in which education fulfills the manifest functions of social control. (Credit: US Department of Education/flickr)

Education also provides one of the major methods used by people for upward social mobility. This function is referred to as **social placement**. College and graduate schools are viewed as vehicles for moving students closer to the careers that will give them the financial freedom and security they seek. As a result, college students are often more motivated to study areas that they believe will be advantageous on the social ladder. A student might value business courses over a class in Victorian poetry because she sees business class as a

stronger vehicle for financial success.

Latent Functions

Education also fulfills latent functions. As you well know, much goes on in a school that has little to do with formal education. For example, you might notice an attractive fellow student when he gives a particularly interesting answer in class—catching up with him and making a date speaks to the latent function of courtship fulfilled by exposure to a peer group in the educational setting.

The educational setting introduces students to social networks that might last for years and can help people find jobs after their schooling is complete. Of course, with social media such as Facebook and LinkedIn, these networks are easier than ever to maintain. Another latent function is the ability to work with others in small groups, a skill that is transferable to a workplace and that might not be learned in a homeschool setting.

The educational system, especially as experienced on university campuses, has traditionally provided a place for students to learn about various social issues. There is ample opportunity for social and political advocacy, as well as the ability to develop tolerance to the many views represented on campus. In 2011, the Occupy Wall Street movement swept across college campuses all over the United States, leading to demonstrations in which diverse groups of students were unified with the purpose of changing the political climate of the country.

Manifest Functions: Openly stated functions with intended goals	Latent Functions: Hidden, unstated functions with sometimes unintended consequences
Socialization	Courtship
Transmission of culture	Social networks
Social control	Group work
Social placement	Creation of generation gap
Cultural innovation	Political and social integration

TABLE 16.2 Manifest and Latent Functions of Education According to functionalist theory, education contributes both manifest and latent functions.

Functionalists recognize other ways that schools educate and enculturate students. One of the most important U.S. values students in the United States learn is that of individualism—the valuing of the individual over the value of groups or society as a whole. In countries such as Japan and China, where the good of the group is valued over the rights of the individual, students do not learn as they do in the United States that the highest rewards go to the “best” individual in academics as well as athletics. One of the roles of schools in the United States is fostering self-esteem; conversely, schools in Japan focus on fostering social esteem—the honoring of the group over the individual.

In the United States, schools also fill the role of preparing students for competition in life. Obviously, athletics foster a competitive nature, but even in the classroom students compete against one another academically. Schools also fill the role of teaching patriotism. Students recite the Pledge of Allegiance each morning and take history classes where they learn about national heroes and the nation’s past.



FIGURE 16.6 Starting each day with the Pledge of Allegiance is one way in which students are taught patriotism. According to a number of court rulings, students in the United States cannot be compelled to recite or salute during the Pledge. (Credit: SC National Guard/flickr)

Another role of schools, according to functionalist theory, is that of **sorting**, or classifying students based on academic merit or potential. The most capable students are identified early in schools through testing and classroom achievements. Such students are placed in accelerated programs in anticipation of successful college attendance.

Functionalists also contend that school, particularly in recent years, is taking over some of the functions that were traditionally undertaken by family. Society relies on schools to teach about human sexuality as well as basic skills such as budgeting and job applications—topics that at one time were addressed by the family.

Conflict Theory

Conflict theorists do not believe that public schools reduce social inequality. Rather, they believe that the educational system reinforces and perpetuates social inequalities that arise from differences in class, gender, race, and ethnicity. Where functionalists see education as serving a beneficial role, conflict theorists view it more negatively. To them, educational systems preserve the status quo and push people of lower status into obedience.



FIGURE 16.7 Conflict theorists see the education system as a means by which those in power stay in power. (Credit: Thomas Ricker/flickr)

The fulfillment of one's education is closely linked to social class. Students of low socioeconomic status are generally not afforded the same opportunities as students of higher status, no matter how great their academic ability or desire to learn. Picture a student from a working-class home who wants to do well in school. On a Monday, he's assigned a paper that's due Friday. Monday evening, he has to babysit his younger sister while his divorced mother works. Tuesday and Wednesday, he works stocking shelves after school until 10:00 p.m. By Thursday, the only day he might have available to work on that assignment, he's so exhausted he can't bring himself to start the paper. His mother, though she'd like to help him, is so tired herself that she isn't able to give him the encouragement or support he needs. And since English is her second language, she has difficulty with some of his educational materials. They also lack a computer and printer at home, which most of his classmates have, so they have to rely on the public library or school system for access to technology. As this story shows, many students from working-class families have to contend with helping out at home, contributing financially to the family, poor study environments and a lack of support from their families. This is a difficult match with education systems that adhere to a traditional curriculum that is more easily understood and completed by students of higher social classes.

Such a situation leads to social class reproduction, extensively studied by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. He researched how **cultural capital**, or cultural knowledge that serves (metaphorically) as currency that helps us navigate a culture, alters the experiences and opportunities available to French students from different social classes. Members of the upper and middle classes have more cultural capital than do families of lower-class status. As a result, the educational system maintains a cycle in which the dominant culture's values are rewarded. Instruction and tests cater to the dominant culture and leave others struggling to identify with values and competencies outside their social class. For example, there has been a great deal of discussion over what standardized tests such as the SAT truly measure. Many argue that the tests group students by cultural ability rather than by natural intelligence.

The cycle of rewarding those who possess cultural capital is found in formal educational curricula as well as in the **hidden curriculum**, which refers to the type of nonacademic knowledge that students learn through informal learning and cultural transmission. This hidden curriculum reinforces the positions of those with higher cultural capital and serves to bestow status unequally.

Conflict theorists point to **tracking**, a formalized sorting system that places students on "tracks" (advanced versus low achievers) that perpetuate inequalities. While educators may believe that students do better in tracked classes because they are with students of similar ability and may have access to more individual

attention from teachers, conflict theorists feel that tracking leads to self-fulfilling prophecies in which students live up (or down) to teacher and societal expectations (Education Week 2004).

To conflict theorists, schools play the role of training working-class students to accept and retain their position as lower members of society. They argue that this role is fulfilled through the disparity of resources available to students in richer and poorer neighborhoods as well as through testing (Lauen and Tyson 2008).

IQ tests have been attacked for being biased—for testing cultural knowledge rather than actual intelligence. For example, a test item may ask students what instruments belong in an orchestra. To correctly answer this question requires certain cultural knowledge—knowledge most often held by more affluent people who typically have more exposure to orchestral music. Though experts in testing claim that bias has been eliminated from tests, conflict theorists maintain that this is impossible. These tests, to conflict theorists, are another way in which education does not provide opportunities, but instead maintains an established configuration of power.

Feminist Theory

Feminist theory aims to understand the mechanisms and roots of gender inequality in education, as well as their societal repercussions. Like many other institutions of society, educational systems are characterized by unequal treatment and opportunity for women. Almost two-thirds of the world's 862 million illiterate people are women, and the illiteracy rate among women is expected to increase in many regions, especially in several African and Asian countries (UNESCO 2005; World Bank 2007).

Women in the United States have been relatively late, historically speaking, to be granted entry to the public university system. In fact, it wasn't until the establishment of Title IX of the Education Amendments in 1972 that discriminating on the basis of sex in U.S. education programs became illegal. In the United States, there is also a post-education gender disparity between what male and female college graduates earn. A study released in May 2011 showed that, among men and women who graduated from college between 2006 and 2010, men out-earned women by an average of more than \$5,000 each year. First-year job earnings for men averaged \$33,150; for women the average was \$28,000 (Godofsky, Zukin, and van Horn 2011). Similar trends are seen among salaries of professionals in virtually all industries.

When women face limited opportunities for education, their capacity to achieve equal rights, including financial independence, are limited. Feminist theory seeks to promote women's rights to equal education (and its resultant benefits) across the world.



SOCIOLOGY IN THE REAL WORLD

Grade Inflation: When Is an A Really a C?

In 2019, news emerged of a criminal conspiracy regarding wealthy and, in some cases, celebrity parents who illegally secured college admission for their children. Over 50 people were implicated in the scandal, including employees from prestigious universities; several people were sentenced to prison. Their activity included manipulating test scores, falsifying students' academic or athletic credentials, and acquiring testing accommodations through dishonest claims of having a disability.

One of the questions that emerged at the time was how the students at the subject of these efforts could succeed at these challenging and elite colleges. Meaning, if they couldn't get in without cheating, they probably wouldn't do well. Wouldn't their lack of preparation quickly become clear?

Many people would say no. First, many of the students involved (the children of the conspirators) had no knowledge or no involvement of the fraud; those students may have been admitted anyway. But there may be another safeguard for underprepared students at certain universities: grade inflation.

Grade inflation generally refers to a practice of awarding students higher grades than they have earned. It reflects

the observation that the relationship between letter grades and the achievements they reflect has been changing over time. Put simply, what used to be considered C-level, or average, now often earns a student a B, or even an A.

Some, including administrators at elite universities, argue that grade inflation does not exist, or that there are other factors at play, or even that it has benefits such as increased funding and elimination of inequality (Boleslavsky 2014). But the evidence reveals a stark change. Based on data compiled from a wide array of four-year colleges and universities, a widely cited study revealed that the number of A grades has been increasing by several percentage points per decade, and that A's were the most common grade awarded (Jaschik 2016). In an anecdotal case, a Harvard dean acknowledged that the median grade there was an A-, and the most common was also an A. Williams College found that the number of A+ grades had grown from 212 instances in 2009-10 to 426 instances in 2017-18 (Berlinsky-Schine 2020). Princeton University took steps to reduce inflation by limiting the number of A's that could be issued, though it then reversed course (Greason 2020).

Why is this happening? Some cite the alleged shift toward a culture that rewards effort instead of product, i.e., the amount of work a student puts in raises the grade, even if the resulting product is poor quality. Another oft-cited contributor is the pressure for instructors to earn positive course evaluations from their students. Finally, many colleges may accept a level of grade inflation because it works. Analysis and formal experiments involving graduate school admissions and hiring practices showed that students with higher grades are more likely to be selected for a job or a grad school. And those higher-grade applicants are still preferred even if decision-maker knows that the applicant's college may be inflating grades (Swift 2013). In other words, people with high GPA at a school with a higher average GPA are preferred over people who have a high GPA at a school with a lower average GPA.

Ironically, grade inflation is not simply a college issue. Many of the same college faculty and administrators who encounter or engage in some level of grade inflation may lament that it is also occurring at high schools (Murphy 2017).

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism sees education as one way that labeling theory is seen in action. A symbolic interactionist might say that this labeling has a direct correlation to those who are in power and those who are labeled. For example, low standardized test scores or poor performance in a particular class often lead to a student who is labeled as a low achiever. Such labels are difficult to “shake off,” which can create a self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton 1968).

In his book *High School Confidential*, Jeremy Iversen details his experience as a Stanford graduate posing as a student at a California high school. One of the problems he identifies in his research is that of teachers applying labels that students are never able to lose. One teacher told him, without knowing he was a bright graduate of a top university, that he would never amount to anything (Iversen 2006). Iversen obviously didn't take this teacher's false assessment to heart. But when an actual seventeen-year-old student hears this from a person with authority over her, it's no wonder that the student might begin to “live down to” that label.

The labeling with which symbolic interactionists concern themselves extends to the very degrees that symbolize completion of education. **Credentialism** embodies the emphasis on certificates or degrees to show that a person has a certain skill, has attained a certain level of education, or has met certain job qualifications. These certificates or degrees serve as a symbol of what a person has achieved, and allows the labeling of that individual.

Indeed, as these examples show, labeling theory can significantly impact a student's schooling. This is easily seen in the educational setting, as teachers and more powerful social groups within the school dole out labels that are adopted by the entire school population.

16.3 Issues in Education

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Identify historical and contemporary issues in education
- Discuss the impacts of educational equality efforts
- Explain important United States government actions and programs in education

As schools strive to fill a variety of roles in their students' lives, many issues and challenges arise. Students walk a minefield of bullying, violence in schools, the results of declining funding, changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and other problems that affect their education. When Americans are asked about their opinion of public education on the Gallup poll each year, reviews are mixed at best (Saad 2008). Schools are no longer merely a place for learning and socializing. With the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* ruling in 1954, schools became a repository of much political and legal action that is at the heart of several issues in education.

Equal Education

Until the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, schools had operated under the precedent set by *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896, which allowed racial segregation in schools and private businesses (the case dealt specifically with railroads) and introduced the much maligned phrase “separate but equal” into the U.S. lexicon. The 1954 *Brown v. Board* decision overruled this, declaring that state laws that had established separate schools for Black and White students were, in fact, unequal and unconstitutional.

While the ruling paved the way toward civil rights, it was also met with contention in many communities. In Arkansas in 1957, the governor mobilized the state National Guard to prevent Black students from entering Little Rock Central High School. President Eisenhower, in response, sent members of the 101st Airborne Division from Kentucky to uphold the students' right to enter the school. In 1963, almost ten years after the ruling, Governor George Wallace of Alabama used his own body to block two Black students from entering the auditorium at the University of Alabama to enroll in the school. Wallace's desperate attempt to uphold his policy of “segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever,” stated during his 1963 inauguration (PBS 2000) became known as the “Stand in the Schoolhouse Door.” He refused to grant entry to the students until a general from the Alabama National Guard arrived on President Kennedy's order.



FIGURE 16.8 President Eisenhower sent members of the 101st Airborne Division from Kentucky to escort Black students into Little Rock Central High School after the governor of Arkansas tried to deny them entry. (Credit: the U.S. Army)

Presently, students of all races and ethnicities are permitted into schools, but there remains a troubling gap in the equality of education they receive. The long-term socially embedded effects of racism—and other discrimination and disadvantage—have left a residual mark of inequality in the nation’s education system. Students from wealthy families and those of lower socioeconomic status do not receive the same opportunities.

Today’s public schools, at least in theory, are positioned to help remedy those gaps. Predicated on the notion of universal access, this system is mandated to accept and retain all students regardless of race, religion, social class, and the like. Moreover, public schools are held accountable to equitable per-student spending (Resnick 2004). Private schools, usually only accessible to students from high-income families, and schools in more affluent areas generally enjoy access to greater resources and better opportunities. In fact, some of the key predictors for student performance include socioeconomic status and family background. Children from families of lower socioeconomic status often enter school with learning deficits they struggle to overcome throughout their educational tenure. These patterns, uncovered in the landmark Coleman Report of 1966, are still highly relevant today, as sociologists still generally agree that there is a great divide in the performance of white students from affluent backgrounds and their nonwhite, less affluent, counterparts (Coleman 1966).

The findings in the Coleman Report were so powerful that they brought about two major changes to education in the United States. The federal **Head Start program**, which is still active and successful today, was developed to give low-income students an opportunity to make up the preschool deficit discussed in Coleman’s findings. The program provides academic-centered preschool to students of low socioeconomic status.

Transfers and Busing

In the years following *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Southern states were not alone in their resistance to change. In New York City, schools in lower-income neighborhoods had less experienced teachers, inadequate facilities, and lower spending per student than did schools in higher-income neighborhoods, even though all of the schools were in the same district. In 1958, Activist Mae Mallory, with the support of grassroots advocate Ella Baker and the NAACP, led a group of parents who kept their children out of school, essentially boycotting

the district. She and the rest of the group, known as the Harlem Nine, were publicly chastised and pursued by the judicial system. After several decisions and appeals, the culminating legal decision found that the city was effectively segregating schools, and that students in certain neighborhoods were still receiving a “discriminatorily inferior education.” New York City, the nation’s largest school district, enacted an open transfer policy that laid the groundwork for further action (Jeffries 2012).

With the goal of further desegregating education, courts across the United States ordered some school districts to begin a program that became known as “busing.” This program involved bringing students to schools outside their neighborhoods (and therefore schools they would not normally have the opportunity to attend) to bring racial diversity into balance. This practice was met with a great deal of public resistance from people on both sides dissatisfied with White students traveling to inner city schools and minority students being transported to schools in the suburbs.

No Child Left Behind and Every Student Succeeds

In 2001, the Bush administration passed the **No Child Left Behind Act**, which requires states to test students in grades three through eight. The results of those tests determine eligibility to receive federal funding. Schools that do not meet the standards set by the Act run the risk of having their funding cut. Sociologists and teachers alike have contended that the impact of the No Child Left Behind Act is far more negative than positive, arguing that a “one size fits all” concept cannot apply to education.

As a result of widespread criticism, many of the national aspects of the act were gradually altered, and in 2015 they were essentially eliminated. That year, Congress passed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The law decreases the federal role in education. Annual testing is still required, but the achievement and improvement accountability is shifted to the states, which must submit plans and goals regarding their approaches to the U.S. Department of Education for approval. While this aspect of ESSA was delayed for several years under the Trump administration, the Department of Education announced in April, 2020 that Massachusetts had become the first to have its plans approved. The COVID-19 pandemic delayed many states’ further action in terms of ESSA approval.

New Views On Standardized Tests

The funding tie-in of the No Child Left Behind Act has led to the social phenomenon commonly called “teaching to the test,” which describes when a curriculum focuses on equipping students to succeed on standardized tests, to the detriment of broader educational goals and concepts of learning. At issue are two approaches to classroom education: the notion that teachers impart knowledge that students are obligated to absorb, versus the concept of student-centered learning that seeks to teach children not facts, but problem solving abilities and learning skills. Both types of learning have been valued in the U.S. school system. The former, to critics of “teaching to the test,” only equips students to regurgitate facts, while the latter, to proponents of the other camp, fosters lifelong learning and transferable work skills.

The Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and the American College Testing (ACT) have for decades served as rites of passage for millions of high school students. Colleges utilize the scores as benchmarks in the admissions process. Since the tests have been important in college admissions, many families place significant emphasis on preparing for them.

However, the disparity in how much money families are able to spend on that preparation results in inequities. SAT/ACT-prep courses and tutors are expensive, and not everyone can afford them. As a result, the inequity found in K-12 education may extend to college.

For years, college admissions programs have been taking these disparities into account, and have based admissions on factors beyond standardized test scores. However, issues with the tests remain. In 2020, a slate of highly selective colleges eliminated their standardized test requirement for admission, and, in 2021 several colleges expanded and extended their “test-optional” approach.

Students With Disabilities

Since the 1978 implementation of what would become the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), states and local districts have continually increased their investment in the quality of education for students with disabilities. The Act's reauthorization, coupled with No Child Left Behind, added requirements and guidance for states and school districts. Until that point in time, students with intellectual or other disabilities had been steadily improving their achievement, graduation rates, and success in post-high school endeavors. However, significant disparities existed (and persist today) based on race, ethnicity, and also on geography. Beyond the quality of education for students with disabilities, the disparity was often most noticeable in the classification of those students. States varied on which disabilities received services, and how much support was provided.

Many students with dyslexia, ADHD, and other disorders are either not diagnosed, not taken seriously, or not given as much support as they require in order to succeed. This can extend into adulthood. For example, ADHD was for years considered only a children's disease, something that people "grew out of." But the disorder can impact people at any age, something that many educators and even some doctors are not aware of.

No Child Left Behind's focus on standards and standardized testing extended to students with disabilities as well. A core goal was that students with disabilities would work toward the same standards and take the same tests (with accommodations, if needed) as did students without disabilities. The outcomes were mixed. Test performance for students with disabilities increased, but so did drop outs. There was also evidence that some schools were less welcoming to students with disabilities, as a way to increase average scores (National Council on Disabilities 2004).

In general, programs have improved to the point that students with disabilities are graduating from high school at a national average of about 73 percent. This is lower than the average graduation rate for students in all populations, which is 88 percent, but it is a vast improvement over previous decades (NCES 2020). However, several issues remain. First, students from lower-income and areas and states with lower education budgets still are offered far fewer services; they graduate high school at a much lower rate than the average. Second, because identification remains a major gap, many students with disabilities may be in the "mainstream" population but are not supported as well as they should be. Even when this group gets to college, they may be starting with a lower level of preparation (Samuels 2019).

School Choice

As we have seen, education is not equal, and people have varied needs. Parents, guardians, and child advocates work to obtain the best schooling for children, which may take them outside the traditional environment.

Public school alternatives to traditional schools include vocational schools, special education schools, magnet schools, charter schools, alternative schools, early college schools, and virtual schools. Private school options may include religious and non-religious options, as well as boarding schools. In some locations, a large number of students engage in these options. For example, in North Carolina, one in five students does not attend a traditional public school (Hui 2019).

Homeschooling refers to children being educated in their own homes, typically by a parent, instead of in a traditional public or private school system. Proponents of this type of education argue that it provides an outstanding opportunity for student-centered learning while circumventing problems that plague today's education system. Opponents counter that homeschooled children miss out on the opportunity for social development that occurs in standard classroom environments and school settings.

School choice advocates promote the idea that more choice allows parents and students a more effective educational experience that is right for them. They may choose a nontraditional school because it is more aligned with their philosophy, because they've been bullied or had other trouble in their neighborhood school, or because they want to prepare for a specific career (American Federation for Children 2017). School choice

opponents may argue that while the alternative schools may be more effective for those students who need them and are fortunate enough to get in, the money would be better spent in general public schools.

Remote and Hybrid Schooling

The COVID-19 pandemic was among the most disruptive events in American education. You likely have your own stories, successes, failures, and preferences based on your experiences as students, parents, and family members. Educators at every level went through stages of intense stress, lack of information, and difficult choices. In many cities and states, families, school districts, governments, and health departments found themselves on different sides of debates. Countless arguments raged over attendance, mental health, instructional quality, safety, testing, academic integrity, and the best ways to move forward as the situation began to improve.

College students and their families went through similar disruptions and debates, compounded by the fact that many students felt that the high costs of particular colleges were not worth it. Overall college enrollment dipped significantly during the pandemic (Koenig 2020).

At the time of this writing, the sociological and educational impact of the pandemic is difficult to assess, though many are studying it. Overall data indicates that most outcomes are negative. Students underperformed, stress and mental health problems increased, and overall plans and pathways were interrupted. Perhaps most damaging was that the pandemic amplified many of the other challenges in education, meaning that under-resourced districts and underserved students were impacted even more severely than others. On the other hand, once instructors and students adapted to the technological and social differences, many began to employ new techniques to ensure more caretaking, connection, differentiated instruction, and innovation. Most agree that education will be changed for years following the pandemic, but it might not all be for the worse.

Key Terms

- credentialism** the emphasis on certificates or degrees to show that a person has a certain skill, has attained a certain level of education, or has met certain job qualifications
- cultural capital** cultural knowledge that serves (metaphorically) as currency to help one navigate a culture
- cultural transmission** the way people come to learn the values, beliefs, and social norms of their culture
- education** a social institution through which a society's children are taught basic academic knowledge, learning skills, and cultural norms
- formal education** the learning of academic facts and concepts
- grade inflation** the idea that the achievement level associated with an A today is notably lower than the achievement level associated with A-level work a few decades ago
- Head Start program** a federal program that provides academically focused preschool to students of low socioeconomic status
- hidden curriculum** the type of nonacademic knowledge that people learn through informal learning and cultural transmission
- informal education** education that involves learning about cultural values, norms, and expected behaviors through participation in a society
- No Child Left Behind Act** an act that requires states to test students in prescribed grades, with the results of those tests determining eligibility to receive federal funding
- social placement** the use of education to improve one's social standing
- sorting** classifying students based on academic merit or potential
- tracking** a formalized sorting system that places students on "tracks" (advanced, low achievers) that perpetuate inequalities
- universal access** the equal ability of all people to participate in an education system

Section Summary

16.1 Education around the World

Educational systems around the world have many differences, though the same factors—including resources and money—affect every educational system. Educational distribution is a major issue in many nations, including in the United States, where the amount of money spent per student varies greatly by state. Education happens through both formal and informal systems; both foster cultural transmission. Universal access to education is a worldwide concern.

16.2 Theoretical Perspectives on Education

The major sociological theories offer insight into how we understand education. Functionalists view education as an important social institution that contributes both manifest and latent functions. Functionalists see education as serving the needs of society by preparing students for later roles, or functions, in society. Conflict theorists see schools as a means for perpetuating class, racial-ethnic, and gender inequalities. In the same vein, feminist theory focuses specifically on the mechanisms and roots of gender inequality in education. The theory of symbolic interactionism focuses on education as a means for labeling individuals.

16.3 Issues in Education

As schools continue to fill many roles in the lives of students, challenges arise. Historical issues include the racial desegregation of schools, marked by the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* ruling. In today's diverse educational landscape, socioeconomic status and diversity remain at the heart of issues in education. Students with disabilities have improved outcomes compared to previous decades, but issues with identifying and serving varied needs remain. Other educational issues that impact society include school choice and standardized testing.

Section Quiz

16.1 Education around the World

- What are the major factors that affect education systems throughout the world?
 - Resources and money
 - Student interest
 - Teacher interest
 - Transportation
- What do nations that are top-ranked in science and math have in common?
 - They are all in Asia.
 - They recruit top teachers.
 - They spend more money per student.
 - They use cutting-edge technology in classrooms.
- Informal education _____.
 - describes when students teach their peers
 - refers to the learning of cultural norms
 - only takes place at home
 - relies on a planned instructional process
- Learning from classmates that most students buy lunch on Fridays is an example of _____.
 - cultural transmission
 - educational access
 - formal education
 - informal education
- The 1972 case *Mills v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia* set a precedent for _____.
 - access to education
 - average spending on students
 - desegregation of schools
 - teacher salary

16.2 Theoretical Perspectives on Education

- Which of the following is *not* a manifest function of education?
 - Cultural innovation
 - Courtship
 - Social placement
 - Socialization
- Because she plans on achieving success in marketing, Tammie is taking courses on managing social media. This is an example of _____.
 - cultural innovation
 - social control
 - social placement
 - socialization

8. Which theory of education focuses on the ways in which education maintains the status quo?
 - a. Conflict theory
 - b. Feminist theory
 - c. Functionalist theory
 - d. Symbolic interactionism
9. Which theory of education focuses on the labels acquired through the educational process?
 - a. Conflict theory
 - b. Feminist theory
 - c. Functionalist theory
 - d. Symbolic interactionism
10. What term describes the assignment of students to specific education programs and classes on the basis of test scores, previous grades, or perceived ability?
 - a. Hidden curriculum
 - b. Labeling
 - c. Self-fulfilling prophecy
 - d. Tracking
11. Functionalist theory sees education as serving the needs of _____.
 - a. families
 - b. society
 - c. the individual
 - d. all of the above
12. Rewarding students for meeting deadlines and respecting authority figures is an example of _____.
 - a. a latent function
 - b. a manifest function
 - c. informal education
 - d. transmission of moral education
13. What term describes the separation of students based on merit?
 - a. Cultural transmission
 - b. Social control
 - c. Sorting
 - d. Hidden curriculum
14. Conflict theorists see sorting as a way to _____.
 - a. challenge gifted students
 - b. perpetuate divisions of socioeconomic status
 - c. help students who need additional support
 - d. teach respect for authority
15. Conflict theorists see IQ tests as being biased. Why?
 - a. They are scored in a way that is subject to human error.
 - b. They do not give children with learning disabilities a fair chance to demonstrate their true intelligence.
 - c. They don't involve enough test items to cover multiple intelligences.
 - d. They reward affluent students with questions that assume knowledge associated with upper-class culture.

16.3 Issues in Education

16. *Plessy v. Ferguson* set the precedent that _____.
 - a. racial segregation in schools was allowed
 - b. separate schools for Black and White students were unconstitutional
 - c. students do not have a right to free speech in public schools
 - d. students have a right to free speech in public schools
17. Public schools must guarantee that _____.
 - a. all students graduate from high school
 - b. all students receive an equal education
 - c. per-student spending is equitable
 - d. the amount spent on each student is equal to that spent regionally
18. Key predictors for student success include _____.
 - a. how many school-age siblings the student has
 - b. socioeconomic status and family background
 - c. the age of the student when she or he enters kindergarten
 - d. how many students attend the school
19. Allowing a student to move to the next grade regardless of whether or not they have met the requirements for that grade is called _____.
 - a. affirmative action
 - b. social control
 - c. social promotion
 - d. socialization

Short Answer

16.1 Education around the World

1. Has there ever been a time when your formal and informal educations in the same setting were at odds? How did you overcome that disconnect?
2. Do you believe free access to schools has achieved its intended goal? Explain.

16.2 Theoretical Perspectives on Education

3. Thinking of your school, what are some ways that a conflict theorist would say that your school perpetuates class differences?
4. Which sociological theory best describes your view of education? Explain why.
5. Based on what you know about symbolic interactionism and feminist theory, what do you think proponents of those theories see as the role of the school?

16.3 Issues in Education

6. Is busing a reasonable method of serving students from diverse backgrounds? If not, suggest and support an alternative.

Further Research

16.1 Education around the World

Though it's a struggle, education is continually being improved in the developing world. To learn how educational programs are being fostered worldwide, explore the [Education section of the Center for Global](#)

Development's website (http://openstax.org/l/center_global_development).

16.2 Theoretical Perspectives on Education

Can tracking actually improve learning? This 2009 [article from *Education Next*](http://openstax.org/l/education_next) (http://openstax.org/l/education_next) explores the debate with evidence from Kenya.

The [National Center for Fair & Open Testing \(FairTest\)](http://openstax.org/l/fair_test) (http://openstax.org/l/fair_test) is committed to ending the bias and other flaws seen in standardized testing. Their mission is to ensure that students, teachers, and schools are evaluated fairly. You can learn more about their mission, as well as the latest in news on test bias and fairness, at their website.

16.3 Issues in Education

Whether or not students in public schools are entitled to free speech is a subject of much debate. In the public school system, there can be a clash between the need for a safe learning environment and the guarantee to free speech granted to U.S. citizens. You can learn more about this complicated issue on this [web page about the First Amendment in schools](http://openstax.org/l/center_public_education) (http://openstax.org/l/center_public_education).

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FIGURE 17.1 In 2018, Florida voters made a decision regarding the voting rights of people convicted of a felony. The referendum took a direct measure of the people's will, rather than navigating through representative process. However, passing a referendum and enacting the laws to carry it out are two different processes, which Floridians came to understand when the state government attached further obligations and restrictions to voting rights.

- 17.1** Power and Authority
- 17.2** Forms of Government
- 17.3** Politics in the United States
- 17.4** Theoretical Perspectives on Government and Power

Many believe that voting is a privilege to be granted to "upstanding" citizens. The 14th Amendment gives government the right to restrict voting for those who have "participated in rebellion or other crime." As of 2021, 48 states had some type of restrictions for people with felony convictions, though the vast majority of

those permit people to vote upon completion of their sentence (ACLU 2021). At the time of the 2018 referendum, Florida had almost 1.7 million people unable to vote due to felony convictions, which was roughly ten percent of its total population; to put it another way, Florida had more disenfranchised people than any other state (Lewis 2018). Many statewide Florida elections are decided by only a few percentage points. For example, the last three elections for governor were decided by less than two percent of the vote.

Disenfranchisement laws affect people of certain races, ethnicities, and socioeconomic status more significantly than other groups. For example, in Florida, 23 percent of Black people were unable to vote because of felony convictions (Brennan Center 2020).

Despite the overwhelming majority of citizens who supported the change, the Florida governor and legislature effectively blocked the referendum's implementation. In early 2019, less than two weeks after the resolution went into effect, the government passed a law indicating that voting would only be allowed for convicted felons who served their sentences and had also paid all fines and penalties owed to the state. The effect was significant: Fines associated with sentences can be quite large, and people with felony convictions have major issues with employment. The law severely diminished the referendum's effect. By the time of the 2020 Presidential election, about 700,000 people with felony convictions, who had served their sentences, still could not vote.

Many in Florida felt that their referendum clearly indicated the people's choice, and their power had been taken. On the other hand, the legislators indicated that they were obtaining money owed to the state, and that the brief, 140-word referendum didn't specify the method of implementation. Florida is going through a conflict that has faced the nation from its earliest days: Who has the right to make decisions? Who has the power?

17.1 Power and Authority

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Define and differentiate between power and authority
- Identify and describe the three types of authority



FIGURE 17.2 Government buildings are built to symbolize authority, but they also represent a specific perspective or message. The Capitol Complex in Bangladesh, Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, was designed to capture the essence of an entirely new country. Rather than the fortress-like, Greek- and Roman-inspired structures of many government buildings, architect Louis Kahn set the rounded, asymmetrical, modern complex within an artificial lake, with many open spaces exposed to the elements (Credit: Lykantrop/Wikimedia Commons)

The world has almost 200 countries. Many of those countries have states or provinces with their own governments. In some countries such as the United States and Canada, Native Americans and First Nations have their own systems of government in some relationship with the federal government. Just considering those thousands of different entities, it's easy to see what differentiates governments. What about what they have in common? Do all of them serve the people? Protect the people? Increase prosperity?

The answer to those questions might be a matter of opinion, perspective, and circumstance. However, one reality seems clear: Something all governments have in common is that they exert control over the people they govern. The nature of that control—what we will define as power and authority—is an important feature of society.

Sociologists have a distinctive approach to studying governmental power and authority that differs from the perspective of political scientists. For the most part, political scientists focus on studying how power is distributed in different types of political systems. They would observe, for example, that the United States' political system is divided into three distinct branches (legislative, executive, and judicial), and they would explore how public opinion affects political parties, elections, and the political process in general. Sociologists, however, tend to be more interested in the influences of governmental power on society and in how social conflicts arise from the distribution of power. Sociologists also examine how the use of power affects local, state, national, and global agendas, which in turn affect people differently based on status, class, and socioeconomic standing.

What Is Power?



FIGURE 17.3 Nazi leader Adolf Hitler was one of the most powerful and destructive dictators in modern history. He is pictured here with fascist Benito Mussolini of Italy. (Credit: U.S. National Archives and Records Administration)

For centuries, philosophers, politicians, and social scientists have explored and commented on the nature of power. Pittacus (c. 640–568 B.C.E.) opined, “The measure of a man is what he does with power,” and Lord Acton perhaps more famously asserted, “Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely” (1887). Indeed, the concept of power can have decidedly negative connotations, and the term itself is difficult to define.

Many scholars adopt the definition developed by German sociologist Max Weber, who said that **power** is the ability to exercise one’s will over others (Weber 1922). Power affects more than personal relationships; it shapes larger dynamics like social groups, professional organizations, and governments. Similarly, a government’s power is not necessarily limited to control of its own citizens. A dominant nation, for instance, will often use its clout to influence or support other governments or to seize control of other nation states. Efforts by the U.S. government to wield power in other countries have included joining with other nations to form the Allied forces during World War II, entering Iraq in 2002 to topple Saddam Hussein’s regime, and imposing sanctions on the government of North Korea in the hopes of constraining its development of nuclear weapons.

Endeavors to gain power and influence do not necessarily lead to violence, exploitation, or abuse. Leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Mohandas Gandhi, for example, commanded powerful movements that effected positive change without military force. Both men organized nonviolent protests to combat corruption and injustice and succeeded in inspiring major reform. They relied on a variety of nonviolent protest strategies, such as rallies, sit-ins, marches, petitions, and boycotts.

Modern technology has made such forms of nonviolent reform easier to implement. Often, protesters can use cell phones and the Internet to disseminate information and plans to masses of protesters in a rapid and efficient manner. Some governments like Myanmar, China, and Russia tamp down communication and protest through platform bans or Internet blocks (see the Media and Technology chapter for more information). But in the Arab Spring uprisings of 2010–11, for example, Twitter feeds and other social media helped protesters

coordinate their movements, share ideas, and bolster morale, as well as gain global support for their causes. Social media was also important in getting accurate accounts of the demonstrations out to the world, in contrast to many earlier situations in which government control of the media censored news reports. Notice that in these examples, the users of power were the citizens rather than the governments. They found they had power because they were able to exercise their will over their own leaders. Thus, government power does not necessarily equate to absolute power.



FIGURE 17.4 Young people and students were among the most ardent supporters of democratic reform in the recent Arab Spring. Social media also played an important role in rallying grassroots support. (Credit: cjb22/flickr)

BIG PICTURE

Social Media as a Terrorist Tool

British aid worker, Alan Henning, was the fourth victim of the Islamic State (known as ISIS or ISIL) to be beheaded before video cameras in a recording titled, “Another Message to America and Its Allies,” which was posted on YouTube and pro-Islamic state Twitter feeds in the fall of 2014. Henning was captured during his participation in a convoy taking medical supplies to a hospital in conflict-ravaged northern Syria. His death was publicized via social media, as were the earlier beheadings of U.S. journalists Jim Foley and Steven Sotloff and British aid worker David Haines. The terrorist groups also used social media to demand an end to intervention in the Middle East by U.S., British, French, and Arab forces.

An international coalition, led by the United States, has been formed to combat ISIS in response to this series of publicized murders. France and the United Kingdom, members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and Belgium are seeking government approval through their respective parliaments to participate in airstrikes. The specifics of target locations are a key point, however, and they emphasize the delicate and political nature of current conflict in the region. Due to perceived national interest and geopolitical dynamics, Britain and France are more willing to be a part of airstrikes on ISIS targets in Iran and likely to avoid striking targets in Syria. Several Arab nations are a part of the coalition, including Bahrain, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. Turkey, another NATO member, has not announced involvement in airstrikes, presumably because ISIS

is holding forty-nine Turkish citizens hostage.

U.S. intervention in Libya and Syria is controversial, and it arouses debate about the role of the United States in world affairs, as well as the practical need for, and outcome of, military action in the Middle East. Experts and the U.S. public alike are weighing the need for fighting terrorism in its current form of the Islamic State and the bigger issue of helping to restore peace in the Middle East. Some consider ISIS a direct and growing threat to the United States if left unchecked. Others believe U.S. intervention unnecessarily worsens the Middle East situation and prefer that resources be used at home rather than increasing military involvement in an area of the world where they believe the United States has intervened long enough.

Types of Authority

The protesters in Tunisia and the civil rights protesters of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s day had influence apart from their position in a government. Their influence came, in part, from their ability to advocate for what many people held as important values. Government leaders might have this kind of influence as well, but they also have the advantage of wielding power associated with their position in the government. As this example indicates, there is more than one type of authority in a community.

Authority refers to accepted power—that is, power that people agree to follow. People listen to authority figures because they feel that these individuals are worthy of respect. Generally speaking, people perceive the objectives and demands of an authority figure as reasonable and beneficial, or true.

A citizen's interaction with a police officer is a good example of how people react to authority in everyday life. For instance, a person who sees the flashing red and blue lights of a police car in his rearview mirror usually pulls to the side of the road without hesitation. Such a driver most likely assumes that the police officer behind him serves as a legitimate source of authority and has the right to pull him over. As part of her official duties, the police officer then has the power to issue a speeding ticket if the driver was driving too fast. If the same officer, however, were to command the driver to follow her home and mow her lawn, the driver would likely protest that the officer does not have the authority to make such a request.

Not all authority figures are police officers, elected officials or government authorities. Besides formal offices, authority can arise from tradition and personal qualities. Economist and sociologist Max Weber realized this when he examined individual action as it relates to authority, as well as large-scale structures of authority and how they relate to a society's economy. Based on this work, Weber developed a classification system for authority. His three types of authority are traditional authority, charismatic authority and legal-rational authority (Weber 1922).

	Traditional	Charismatic	Legal-Rational
Source of Power	Legitimized by long-standing custom	Based on a leader's personal qualities	Authority resides in the office, not the person
Leadership Style	Historic personality	Dynamic personality	Bureaucratic officials
Example	Patriarchy (traditional positions of authority)	Napoleon, Jesus Christ, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Jr.	U.S. presidency and Congress Modern British Parliament

TABLE 17.1 Weber's Three Types of Authority Max Weber identified and explained three distinct types of authority:

Traditional Authority

According to Weber, the power of **traditional authority** is accepted because that has traditionally been the case; its legitimacy exists because it has been accepted for a long time. Britain's Queen Elizabeth, for instance, occupies a position that she inherited based on the traditional rules of succession for the monarchy. People adhere to traditional authority because they are invested in the past and feel obligated to perpetuate it. In this type of authority, a ruler typically has no real force to carry out his will or maintain his position but depends primarily on a group's respect.

A more modern form of traditional authority is **patrimonialism**, which is traditional domination facilitated by an administration and military that are purely personal instruments of the master (Eisenberg 1998). In this form of authority, all officials are personal favorites appointed by the ruler. These officials have no rights, and their privileges can be increased or withdrawn based on the caprices of the leader. The political organization of ancient Egypt typified such a system: when the royal household decreed that a pyramid be built, every Egyptian was forced to work toward its construction.

Traditional authority can be intertwined with race, class, and gender. In most societies, for instance, men are more likely to be privileged than women and thus are more likely to hold roles of authority. Similarly, members of dominant racial groups or upper-class families also win respect more readily. In the United States, the Kennedy family, which has produced many prominent politicians, exemplifies this model.

Charismatic Authority

Followers accept the power of **charismatic authority** because they are drawn to the leader's personal qualities. The appeal of a charismatic leader can be extraordinary, and can inspire followers to make unusual sacrifices or to persevere in the midst of great hardship and persecution. Charismatic leaders usually emerge in times of crisis and offer innovative or radical solutions. They may even offer a vision of a new world order. Hitler's rise to power in the postwar economic depression of Germany is an example.

Charismatic leaders tend to hold power for short durations, and according to Weber, they are just as likely to be tyrannical as they are heroic. Diverse male leaders such as Hitler, Napoleon, Jesus Christ, César Chávez, Malcolm X, and Winston Churchill are all considered charismatic leaders. Because so few women have held dynamic positions of leadership throughout history, the list of charismatic female leaders is comparatively short. Many historians consider figures such as Joan of Arc, Margaret Thatcher, and Mother Teresa to be charismatic leaders.

Rational-Legal Authority

According to Weber, power made legitimate by laws, written rules, and regulations is termed **rational-legal authority**. In this type of authority, power is vested in a particular rationale, system, or ideology and not necessarily in the person who implements the specifics of that doctrine. A nation that follows a constitution applies this type of authority. On a smaller scale, you might encounter rational-legal authority in the workplace via the standards set forth in the employee handbook, which provides a different type of authority than that of your boss.

Of course, ideals are seldom replicated in the real world. Few governments or leaders can be neatly categorized. Some leaders, like Mohandas Gandhi for instance, can be considered charismatic *and* legal-rational authority figures. Similarly, a leader or government can start out exemplifying one type of authority and gradually evolve or change into another type.

17.2 Forms of Government

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Define common forms of government, such as monarchy, oligarchy, dictatorship, and democracy
- Compare common forms of government and identify real-life examples of each



FIGURE 17.5 After becoming the leader of the Indian National Congress, Mohandas Ghandi employed a range of nonviolent methods to gain better rights and treatment for women and poor people and especially for the independence of India. He used fasting as a form of protest, and was imprisoned by the ruling British government (Credit: Elliot and Fry/Wikimedia Commons)

Most people generally agree that **anarchy**, or the absence of organized government, does not facilitate a desirable living environment for society, but it is much harder for individuals to agree upon the particulars of how a population should be governed. Throughout history, various forms of government have evolved to suit the needs of changing populations and mindsets, each with pros and cons. Today, members of Western society hold that democracy is the most just and stable form of government, although former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill once declared to the House of Commons, “Indeed it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time” (Shapiro 2006).

Monarchy

Even though people in the United States tend to be most aware of Great Britain’s royals, many other nations also recognize kings, queens, princes, princesses, and other figures with official royal titles. The power held by these positions varies from one country to another. Strictly speaking, a **monarchy** is a government in which a single person (a monarch) rules until he or she dies or abdicates the throne. Usually, a monarch claims the rights to the title by way of hereditary succession or as a result of some sort of divine appointment or calling. As mentioned above, the monarchies of most modern nations are ceremonial remnants of tradition, and individuals who hold titles in such sovereignties are often aristocratic figureheads.

A few nations today, however, are run by governments wherein a monarch has absolute or unmitigated power. Such nations are called **absolute monarchies**. Although governments and regimes are constantly changing across the global landscape, it is generally safe to say that most modern absolute monarchies are concentrated in the Middle East and Africa. The small, oil-rich nation of Oman, for instance, is an example of an absolute

monarchy. In this nation, Sultan Qaboos bin Said ruled from the 1970s until his death in 2020, when his cousin, Haitham bin Tariq, became Sultan. The Sultan creates all laws, appoints all judges, and has no formal check on their power. Living conditions and opportunities for Oman's citizens have improved to the point that the UN ranked the nation as the most improved in the world in the past (UNDP 2010), but many citizens who live under the reign of an absolute ruler must contend with oppressive or unfair policies that are installed based on the unchecked whims or political agendas of that leader.

In today's global political climate, monarchies far more often take the form of **constitutional monarchies**, governments of nations that recognize monarchs but require these figures to abide by the laws of a greater constitution. Many countries that are now constitutional monarchies evolved from governments that were once considered absolute monarchies. In most cases, constitutional monarchies, such as Great Britain and Canada, feature elected prime ministers whose leadership role is far more involved and significant than that of its titled monarchs. In spite of their limited authority, monarchs endure in such governments because people enjoy their ceremonial significance and the pageantry of their rites.



FIGURE 17.6 Qaboos bin Said ruled Oman as its absolute monarch for fifty years, and oversaw the country's development from a relatively isolated nation to one that uses its vast supplies of oil to build wealth and influence. Queen Noor of Jordan is the dowager queen of this constitutional monarchy and has limited political authority. Queen Noor is American by birth, but relinquished her citizenship when she married. She is a noted global advocate for Arab-Western relations. (Credit A: Wikimedia Commons; B: Skoll World Forum/flickr)

Oligarchy

The power in an **oligarchy** is held by a small, elite group. Unlike in a monarchy, members of an oligarchy do not necessarily achieve their statuses based on ties to noble ancestry. Rather, they may ascend to positions of power because of military might, economic power, or similar circumstances.

The concept of oligarchy is somewhat elusive; rarely does a society openly define itself as an oligarchy. Generally, the word carries negative connotations and conjures notions of a corrupt group whose members make unfair policy decisions in order to maintain their privileged positions. Many modern nations that claim to be democracies are really oligarchies. In fact, some prominent journalists, such as Paul Krugman, who won a Nobel laureate prize in economics, have labeled the United States an oligarchy, pointing to the influence of large corporations and Wall Street executives on U.S. policy (Krugman 2011). Other political analysts assert that all democracies are really just “elected oligarchies,” or systems in which citizens must vote for an individual who is part of a pool of candidates who come from the society's elite ruling class (Winters 2011).

Oligarchies have existed throughout history, and today many consider Russia an example of oligarchic political structure. After the fall of communism, groups of business owners captured control of this nation's natural resources and have used the opportunity to expand their wealth and political influence. Once an oligarchic power structure has been established, it can be very difficult for middle- and lower-class citizens to advance

their socioeconomic status.



SOCIAL POLICY AND DEBATE

Is the United States an Oligarchy?



FIGURE 17.7 The Breakers, the famous Newport, Rhode Island, home of the Vanderbilts, is a powerful symbol of the extravagant wealth that characterized the Gilded Age. (Credit: ckramer/flickr)

The American Gilded Age saw the rise and dominance of ultra-rich families such as the Vanderbilts, Rockefellers, and Carnegies, and the wealthy often indulged in absurd luxuries. One example is a lavish dinner party hosted for a pampered pet dog who attended wearing a \$15,000 diamond collar (PBS Online 1999). At the same time, most Americans barely scraped by, living below what was considered the poverty level.

Some scholars believe that the United States has now embarked on a second gilded age, pointing out that the 400 wealthiest American families now own more than the ‘lower’ 150 million Americans put together (Zucman 2019), and that the top 1% own more than the bottom 50%.

Wealthy individuals and corporations are major political donors. Based on campaign finance reform legislation in 1971 and 2002, political campaign contributions were regulated and limited; however, the 2012 Supreme Court decision in the case of *Citizens United versus the Federal Election Commission* repealed many of those restrictions. The Court ruled that contributions of corporations and unions to Political Action Committees (PACs) are a form of free speech that cannot be abridged and so cannot be limited or disclosed. Opponents believe this is potentially a step in promoting oligarchy in the United States; the ultra-wealthy and those who control the purse strings of large corporations and unions will, in effect, be able to elect their candidate of choice through their unlimited spending power, as well as influence policy decisions, appointments to nonelected government jobs, and other forms of political power. Krugman (2011) says, “We have a society in which money is increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few people, and in which that concentration of income and wealth threatens to make us a democracy in name only.”

How will that threat be fully assessed? And just because a small group of people can exert influence, do they? And does that influence work?

Wealthy people, and the companies and or industries they represent, use lobbying groups, think tanks, and legislative consulting group to directly influence policy. Investigations have compiled the widespread use and promotion of "model legislation," in which a lobbyist or industry group writes a bill that lawmakers then promote on their own. USA Today/Arizona Republic found that from 2010-18, over 10,000 bills were pushed through legislatures after being written and promoted by outside groups. These laws often thwart the will of the voters, or place the interests of a very small group of people above those of everyone else. For example, the interestingly titled Asbestos Transparency Bill was written by the asbestos industry to help protect it from lawsuits (O'Dell 2019). The same organizations also identify, train, manage, and compensate expert witnesses to testify on their behalf in front of various legislative and regulatory bodies.

Does it work? Political scientists studied who benefits from laws and policies, and found that 78 percent of Congress's decisions benefit the top 10 percent of Americans. Note that those same laws sometimes benefit other Americans as well. But only 5 percent of laws and policies have been shown to benefit the larger 90 percent of people while not benefiting the wealthiest Americans (Represent.US 2014).

Dictatorship

Power in a **dictatorship** is held by a single person (or a very small group) that wields complete and absolute authority over a government and population. Like some absolute monarchies, dictatorships may be corrupt and seek to limit or even eradicate the liberties of the general population. Dictators use a variety of means to perpetuate their authority. Economic and military might, as well as intimidation and brutality are often foremost among their tactics; individuals are less likely to rebel when they are starving and fearful. Many dictators start out as military leaders and are conditioned to the use of violence against opposition.

Some dictators also possess the personal appeal that Max Weber identified with a charismatic leader. Subjects of such a dictator may believe that the leader has special ability or authority and may be willing to submit to his or her authority. The late Kim Jong-Il, North Korean dictator, and his successor, Kim Jong-Un, exemplify this type of charismatic dictatorship.

Some dictatorships do not align themselves with any particular belief system or ideology; the goal of this type of regime is usually limited to preserving the authority of the dictator. A **totalitarian dictatorship** is even more oppressive and attempts to control all aspects of its subjects' lives; including occupation, religious beliefs, and number of children permitted in each family. Citizens may be forced to publicly demonstrate their faith in the regime by participating in marches and demonstrations.

Some "benevolent" dictators, such as Napoleon and Anwar Sadat, are credited with advancing their people's standard of living or exercising a moderate amount of evenhandedness. Others grossly abuse their power. Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler, Saddam Hussein, Cambodia's Pol Pot, and Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe, for instance, are heads of state who earned a reputation for leading through fear and intimidation.



FIGURE 17.8 Dictator Kim Jong-Il of North Korea was a charismatic leader of an absolute dictatorship. His followers responded emotionally to the death of their leader in 2011. (Credit: babeltrave/flickr)

Democracy

A **democracy** is a form of government that strives to provide all citizens with an equal voice, or vote, in determining state policy, regardless of their level of socioeconomic status. Another important fundamental of the democratic state is the establishment and governance of a just and comprehensive constitution that delineates the roles and responsibilities of leaders and citizens alike.

Democracies, in general, ensure certain basic rights for their citizens. First and foremost, citizens are free to organize political parties and hold elections. Leaders, once elected, must abide by the terms of the given nation's constitution and are limited in the powers they can exercise, as well as in the length of the duration of their terms. Most democratic societies also champion freedom of individual speech, the press, and assembly, and they prohibit unlawful imprisonment. Of course, even in a democratic society, the government constrains citizens' total freedom to act however they wish. A democratically elected government does this by passing laws and writing regulations that, at least ideally, reflect the will of the majority of its people.

Although the United States champions the democratic ideology, it is not a “pure” democracy. In a purely democratic society, all citizens would vote on all proposed legislation, and this is not how laws are passed in the United States. There is a practical reason for this: a pure democracy would be hard to implement. Thus, the United States is a constitution-based federal republic in which citizens elect representatives to make policy decisions on their behalf. The term **representative democracy**, which is virtually synonymous with *republic*, can also be used to describe a government in which citizens elect representatives to promote policies that favor their interests. In the United States, representatives are elected at local and state levels, and the votes of the Electoral College determine who will hold the office of president. Each of the three branches of the U.S. government—the executive, judicial, and legislative—is held in check by the other branches.

17.3 Politics in the United States

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Explain the significance of “one person, one vote” in determining U.S. policy
- Discuss how voter participation affects politics in the United States
- Explore the influence of race, gender, and class issues on the voting process



FIGURE 17.9 Americans' voting rights are a fundamental element of the U.S. democratic structure. In elections people care about, the turnout can be very high, and people go to great lengths to ensure their vote is counted. (Credit: GPA Photo Archive/flickr)

When describing a nation's politics, we should define the term. We may associate the term with freedom, power, corruption, or rhetoric. Political science looks at politics as the interaction between citizens and their government. Sociology studies **politics** as a means to understand the underlying social norms and values of a group. A society's political structure and practices provide insight into the distribution of power and wealth, as well as larger philosophical and cultural beliefs. A cursory sociological analysis of U.S. politics might suggest that Americans' desire to promote equality and democracy on a theoretical level is at odds with the nation's real-life capitalist orientation.

Lincoln's famous phrase “of the people, by the people, for the people” is at the heart of the U.S. system and sums up its most essential aspect: that citizens willingly and freely elect representatives they believe will look out for their best interests. Although many Americans take free elections for granted, it is a vital foundation of any democracy. When the U.S. government was formed, however, African Americans and women were denied the right to vote. Each of these groups struggled to secure the same suffrage rights as their White male counterparts, yet this history fails to inspire some Americans to show up at the polls and cast their ballots. Problems with the democratic process, including limited voter turnout, require us to more closely examine complex social issues that influence political participation.

Voter Participation

Voter participation is essential to the success of the U.S. political system. Although many Americans are quick to complain about laws and political leadership, in any given election year roughly half the population does not vote (United States Elections Project 2010). Some years have seen even lower turnouts; in 2010, for instance, only 37.8 percent of the population participated in the electoral process (United States Elections Project 2011). Poor turnout can skew election results, particularly if one age or socioeconomic group is more diligent in its efforts to make it to the polls.

Certain voting advocacy groups work to improve turnout. Vote.org focuses on absentee voting, mail-in voting,

and similar practices. Native Vote is an organization that strives to inform Native Americans about upcoming elections and encourages their participation. National Council of La Raza and Voto Latino strive to improve voter turnout among the Latino population. William Frey, author of *Diversity Explosion*, points out that the number of Hispanic people, Asian people, and multiracial populations is expected to double in the next forty years (Balz 2014).

Race, Gender, and Class Issues

Although recent records have shown more minorities voting now than ever before, this trend is still fairly new. Historically, African Americans and other minorities have been underrepresented at the polls. Black men were not allowed to vote at all until after the Civil War, and Black women gained the right to vote along with other women only with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. For years, African Americans who were brave enough to vote were discouraged by discriminatory legislation, passed in many southern states, which required poll taxes and literacy tests of prospective voters. Literacy tests were not outlawed until 1965, when President Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act.

The 1960s saw other important reforms in U.S. voting. Shortly before the Voting Rights Act was passed, the 1964 U.S. Supreme Court case *Reynolds v. Sims* changed the nature of elections. This landmark decision reaffirmed the notion of “**one person, one vote**,” a concept holding that all people’s votes should be counted equally. Before this decision, unequal distributions of population enabled small groups of people in sparsely populated rural areas to have as much voting power as the denser populations of urban areas. After *Reynolds v. Sims*, districts were redrawn so that they would include equal numbers of voters.

Unfortunately, in June 2013 the Supreme Court repealed several important aspects of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, ruling that southern states no longer need the stricter scrutiny that was once required to prohibit racial discrimination in voting practices in the South. Following this decision, several states moved forward with voter identification laws that had previously been banned by federal courts. Officials in Texas, Mississippi, and Alabama claim that new identification (ID) laws are needed to reduce voter fraud. Opponents point to the Department of Justice statistics indicating that only twenty-six voters, of 197 million voters in federal elections, were found guilty of voter fraud between 2002 and 2005. “Contemporary voter identification laws are trying to solve a problem that hasn’t existed in over a century” (Campbell, 2012). Opponents further note that new voter ID laws disproportionately affect minorities and the poor, potentially prohibiting them from exercising their right to vote.

Evidence suggests that legal protection of voting rights does not directly translate into equal voting power. Relative to their presence in the U.S. population, women and racial/ethnic minorities are underrepresented in the U.S. Congress. White men still dominate both houses. And until the inauguration of Barack Obama in 2009, all U.S. presidents had been White men.

Like race and ethnicity, social class also has influenced voting practices. Voting rates among lower-educated, lower-paid workers are lower than for people with higher socioeconomic status that fosters a system in which people with more power and access to resources have the means to perpetuate their power. Several explanations have been offered to account for this difference (Raymond 2010). Workers in low-paying service jobs might find it harder to get to the polls because they lack flexibility in their work hours and quality daycare to look after children while they vote. Because a larger share of racial and ethnic minorities is employed in such positions, social class may be linked to race and ethnicity influencing voting rates. New requirements for specific types of voter identification in some states are likely to compound these issues, because it may take additional time away from work, as well as additional child care or transportation, for voters to get the needed IDs. The impact on minorities and the impoverished may cause a further decrease in voter participation. Attitudes play a role as well. Some people of low socioeconomic status or minority race/ethnicity doubt their vote will count or voice will be heard because they have seen no evidence of their political power in their communities. Many believe that what they already have is all they can achieve.

As suggested earlier, money can carry a lot of influence in U.S. democracy. But there are other means to make one's voice heard. Free speech can be influential, and people can participate in the democratic system through volunteering with political advocacy groups, writing to elected officials, sharing views in a public forum such as a blog or letter to the editor, forming or joining cause-related political organizations and interest groups, participating in public demonstrations, and even running for a local office.

The Judicial System

The third branch of the U.S. government is the judicial system, which consists of local, state, and federal courts. The U.S. Supreme Court is the highest court in the United States, and it has the final say on decisions about the constitutionality of laws that citizens challenge. As noted earlier, some rulings have a direct impact on the political system, such as recent decisions about voter identification and campaign financing. Other Supreme Court decisions affect different aspects of society, and they are useful for sociological study because they help us understand cultural changes. One example is a recent and highly controversial case that dealt with the religious opposition of Hobby Lobby Stores Inc. to providing employees with specific kinds of insurance mandated by the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. Another example is same-sex marriage cases, which were expected to be heard by the Court; however, the Court denied review of these cases in the fall of 2014. For now, the rulings of federal district courts stand, and states can continue to have differing outcomes on same-sex marriage for their citizens.

17.4 Theoretical Perspectives on Government and Power

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Differentiate the ways that functionalists, conflict theorists, and interactionists view government and politics

Sociologists rely on organizational frameworks or paradigms to make sense of their study of sociology; already there are many widely recognized schemas for evaluating sociological data and observations. Each paradigm looks at the study of sociology through a unique lens. The sociological examination of government and power can thus be evaluated using a variety of perspectives that help the evaluator gain a broader perspective. Functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism are a few of the more widely recognized philosophical stances in practice today.

Functionalism

According to functionalism, the government has four main purposes: planning and directing society, meeting social needs, maintaining law and order, and managing international relations. According to functionalism, all aspects of society serve a purpose.

Functionalists view government and politics as a way to enforce norms and regulate conflict. Functionalists see active social change, such as the sit-in on Wall Street, as undesirable because it forces change and, as a result, undesirable things that might have to be compensated for. Functionalists seek consensus and order in society. Dysfunction creates social problems that lead to social change. For instance, functionalists would see monetary political contributions as a way of keeping people connected to the democratic process. This would be in opposition to a conflict theorist who would see this financial contribution as a way for the rich to perpetuate their own wealth.

Conflict Theory

Conflict theory focuses on the social inequalities and power difference within a group, analyzing society through this lens. Philosopher and social scientist Karl Marx was a seminal force in developing the conflict theory perspective; he viewed social structure, rather than individual personality characteristics, as the cause of many social problems, such as poverty and crime. Marx believed that conflict between groups struggling to either attain wealth and power or keep the wealth and power they had was inevitable in a capitalist society, and conflict was the only way for the underprivileged to eventually gain some measure of equality.

C. Wright Mills (1956) elaborated on some of Marx's concepts, coining the phrase **power elite** to describe what he saw as the small group of powerful people who control much of a society. Mills believed the power elite use government to develop social policies that allow them to keep their wealth. Contemporary theorist G. William Domhoff (2011) elaborates on ways in which the power elite may be seen as a subculture whose members follow similar social patterns such as joining elite clubs, attending select schools, and vacationing at a handful of exclusive destinations.

Conflict Theory in Action



FIGURE 17.10 Although military technology has evolved considerably over the course of history, the fundamental causes of conflict among nations remain essentially the same. (Credit: Wikimedia Commons)

Even before there were modern nation-states, political conflicts arose among competing societies or factions of people. Vikings attacked continental European tribes in search of loot, and, later, European explorers landed on foreign shores to claim the resources of indigenous groups. Conflicts also arose among competing groups within individual sovereignties, as evidenced by the bloody French Revolution. Nearly all conflicts in the past and present, however, are spurred by basic desires: the drive to protect or gain territory and wealth, and the need to preserve liberty and autonomy.

According to sociologist and philosopher Karl Marx, such conflicts are necessary, although ugly, steps toward a more egalitarian society. Marx saw a historical pattern in which revolutionaries toppled elite power structures, after which wealth and authority became more evenly dispersed among the population, and the overall social order advanced. In this pattern of change through conflict, people tend to gain greater personal freedom and economic stability (1848).

Modern-day conflicts are still driven by the desire to gain or protect power and wealth, whether in the form of land and resources or in the form of liberty and autonomy. Internally, groups within the U.S. struggle within the system, by trying to achieve the outcomes they prefer. Political differences over budget issues, for example, led to the recent shutdown of the federal government, and alternative political groups, such as the Tea Party, are gaining a significant following.

The Arab Spring exemplifies oppressed groups acting collectively to change their governmental systems, seeking both greater liberty and greater economic equity. Some nations, such as Tunisia, have successfully transitioned to governmental change; others, like Egypt, have not yet reached consensus on a new

government.

Unfortunately, the change process in some countries reached the point of active combat between the established government and the portion of the population seeking change, often called revolutionaries or rebels. Libya and Syria are two such countries; the multifaceted nature of the conflict, with several groups competing for their own desired ends, makes creation of a peaceful resolution more challenging.

Popular uprisings of citizens seeking governmental change have occurred this year in Bosnia, Brazil, Greece, Iran, Jordan, Portugal, Spain, Turkey, Ukraine, and most recently in Hong Kong. Although much smaller in size and scope, demonstrations occurred in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd in the summer of 2020. Some of these and related demonstrations went on for months. Small numbers of these protests or protesters were violent, and many leaders in both the protest movement and government acknowledge that the protests had changed focus to reflect general anti-government sentiments, rather than focusing on racial justice.

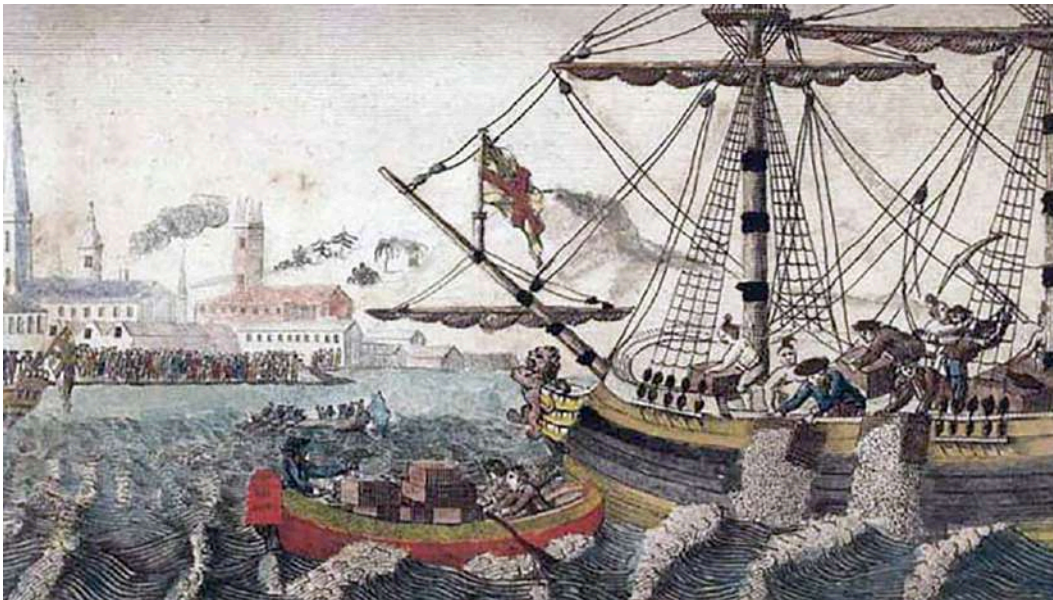


FIGURE 17.11 What symbols of the Boston Tea Party are represented in this painting? How might a symbolic interactionist explain the way the modern-day Tea Party has reclaimed and repurposed these symbolic meanings? (Credit: Wikimedia Commons)

Symbolic Interactionism

Other sociologists study government and power by relying on the framework of symbolic interactionism, which is grounded in the works of Max Weber and George H. Mead.

Symbolic interactionism, as it pertains to government, focuses its attention on figures, emblems, or individuals that represent power and authority. Many diverse entities in larger society can be considered symbolic: trees, doves, wedding rings. Images that represent the power and authority of the United States include the White House, the eagle, and the American flag. The Seal of the President of the United States, along with the office in general, incites respect and reverence in many Americans.

Symbolic interactionists are not interested in large structures such as the government. As micro-sociologists, they are more interested in the face-to-face aspects of politics. In reality, much of politics consists of face-to-face backroom meetings and lobbyist efforts. What the public often sees is the front porch of politics that is sanitized by the media through gatekeeping.

Symbolic interactionists are most interested in the interaction between these small groups who make decisions, or in the case of some recent congressional committees, demonstrate the inability to make any decisions at all. The heart of politics is the result of interaction between individuals and small groups over

periods of time. These meetings produce new meanings and perspectives that individuals use to make sure there are future interactions.

Key Terms

- absolute monarchies** governments wherein a monarch has absolute or unmitigated power
- anarchy** the absence of any organized government
- authority** power that people accept because it comes from a source that is perceived as legitimate
- charismatic authority** power legitimized on the basis of a leader's exceptional personal qualities
- constitutional monarchies** national governments that recognize monarchs but require these figures to abide by the laws of a greater constitution
- democracy** a form of government that provides all citizens with an equal voice or vote in determining state policy
- dictatorship** a form of government in which a single person (or a very small group) wields complete and absolute authority over a government or populace after the dictator rises to power, usually through economic or military might
- monarchy** a form of government in which a single person (a monarch) rules until that individual dies or abdicates the throne
- oligarchy** a form of government in which power is held by a small, elite group
- one person, one vote** a concept holding that each person's vote should be counted equally
- patrimonialism** a type of authority wherein military and administrative factions enforce the power of the master
- politics** a means of studying a nation's or group's underlying social norms as values as evidenced through its political structure and practices
- power** the ability to exercise one's will over others
- power elite** a small group of powerful people who control much of a society
- rational-legal authority** power that is legitimized by rules, regulations, and laws
- representative democracy** a government wherein citizens elect officials to represent their interests
- totalitarian dictatorship** an extremely oppressive form of dictatorship in which most aspects of citizens' lives are controlled by the leader
- traditional authority** power legitimized on the basis of long-standing customs

Section Summary

17.1 Power and Authority

Sociologists examine government and politics in terms of their impact on individuals and larger social systems. Power is an entity or individual's ability to control or direct others, while authority is influence that is predicated on perceived legitimacy. Max Weber studied power and authority, differentiating between the two concepts and formulating a system for classifying types of authority.

17.2 Forms of Government

Nations are governed by different political systems, including monarchies, oligarchies, dictatorships, and democracies. Generally speaking, citizens of nations wherein power is concentrated in one leader or a small group are more likely to suffer violations of civil liberties and experience economic inequality. Many nations that are today organized around democratic ideals started out as monarchies or dictatorships but have evolved into more egalitarian systems. Democratic ideals, although hard to implement and achieve, promote basic human rights and justice for all citizens.

17.3 Politics in the United States

The success and validity of U.S. democracy hinges on free, fair elections that are characterized by the support and participation of diverse citizens. In spite of their importance, elections have low participation. In the past, the voice of minority groups was nearly imperceptible in elections, but recent trends have shown increased voter turnout across many minority races and ethnicities. In the past, the creation and sustenance of a fair

voting process has necessitated government intervention, particularly on the legislative level. The *Reynolds v. Sims* case, with its landmark “one person, one vote” ruling, is an excellent example of such action.

17.4 Theoretical Perspectives on Government and Power

Sociologists use frameworks to gain perspective on data and observations related to the study of power and government. Functionalism suggests that societal power and structure is predicated on cooperation, interdependence, and shared goals or values. Conflict theory, rooted in Marxism, asserts that societal structures are the result of social groups competing for wealth and influence. Symbolic interactionism examines a smaller realm of sociological interest: the individual's perception of symbols of power and their subsequent reaction to the face-to-face interactions of the political realm.

Section Quiz

17.1 Power and Authority

- Which statement best expresses the difference between power and authority?
 - Authority involves intimidation.
 - Authority is more subtle than power.
 - Authority is based on the perceived legitimacy of the individual in power.
 - Authority is inherited, but power is seized by military force.
- Which of the following types of authority does *not* reside primarily in a leader?
 - Dictatorial
 - Traditional
 - Charismatic
 - Legal-rational
- In the U.S. Senate, it is customary to assign each senator a seniority ranking based on years of government service and the population of the state he or she represents. A top ranking gives the senator priority for assignments to office space, committee chair positions, and seating on the senate floor. What type of authority does this example best illustrate?
 - Dictatorial
 - Traditional
 - Charismatic
 - Legal-rational
- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. used his public speaking abilities and magnetism to inspire African Americans to stand up against injustice in an extremely hostile environment. He is an example of a(n) _____ leader.
 - traditional
 - charismatic
 - legal-rational
 - illegitimate
- Which current world figure has the least amount of political power?
 - President Barack Obama
 - Queen Elizabeth II
 - British Prime Minister David Cameron
 - North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un

6. Which statement best expresses why there have been so few charismatic female leaders throughout history?
- Women have different leadership styles than men.
 - Women are not interested in leading at all.
 - Few women have had the opportunity to hold leadership roles over the course of history.
 - Male historians have refused to acknowledge the contributions of female leaders in their records.

17.2 Forms of Government

7. Many constitutional monarchies started out as:
- oligarchies
 - absolute monarchies
 - dictatorships
 - democracies
8. Which nation is an absolute monarchy?
- Oman
 - Great Britain
 - Denmark
 - Australia
9. Which of the following present and former government leaders is generally considered a dictator?
- David Cameron
 - Barack Obama
 - Qaboos bin Said Al Said
 - Kim Jong-Un
10. A(n) _____ is an extremely oppressive government that seeks to control all aspects of its citizens' lives.
- oligarchy
 - totalitarian dictatorship
 - anarchy
 - absolute monarchy
11. Which is *not* a characteristic of a democracy?
- People vote to elect officials.
 - A king or queen holds the majority of governmental control.
 - One goal of this type of government is to protect citizens' basic rights.
 - A constitution typically outlines the foundational ideas of how this government should operate.
12. Which statement best expresses why the United States is not a true democracy?
- Many politicians are corrupt.
 - Special-interest groups fund political campaigns.
 - Citizens elect representatives who vote on their behalf to make policy.
 - Ancient Greece was the only true democracy.

17.3 Politics in the United States

13. In the past, Southern states discouraged African Americans from voting by requiring them to take a _____ test.
- blood
 - literacy
 - lie detector
 - citizenship
14. Which president signed the Voting Rights Act?
- Lyndon Johnson
 - John F. Kennedy Jr.
 - Barack Obama
 - Franklin D. Roosevelt
15. Which factor does not influence voting practices?
- Race
 - Social class
 - Ethnicity
 - Voting booths
16. The U.S. Supreme Court case _____ led to the revision of voting districts to account for differences in population density.
- Roe v. Wade*
 - Reynolds v. Sims*
 - Brown v. Board of Education*
 - Marbury v. Madison*
17. Which statement best explains the meaning of “one person, one vote”?
- One person should not be allowed to vote twice.
 - A voter deserves one chance to vote.
 - A voter should vote only once a year.
 - All people's votes should count equally.

17.4 Theoretical Perspectives on Government and Power

18. Which concept corresponds best to functionalism?
- Happiness
 - Interdependence
 - Revolution
 - Symbolism
19. Which sociologist is not associated with conflict theory?
- C. Wright Mills
 - G. William Domhoff
 - Karl Marx
 - George H. Mead

20. Karl Marx believed social structures evolve through:
 - a. supply and demand
 - b. enlightenment
 - c. conflict
 - d. cooperation
21. The Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street protests, and the Tea Party movement have the following in common:
 - a. They sought to destroy central government.
 - b. They are examples of conflict theory in action.
 - c. They can only occur in a representative democracy.
 - d. They used violence as the means of achieving their goals.
22. Which is not one of functionalism's four main purposes of government?
 - a. Maintaining law and order
 - b. Meeting social needs
 - c. Equally distributing resources
 - d. Planning and directing society
23. Sociologist G. William Domhoff's *Who Rules America?* asserts that wealth is often necessary to exert the most influence over social and political systems. This is a ____ perspective.
 - a. conflict theory
 - b. symbolic interactionist
 - c. functionalist
 - d. feminist
24. Which of the following paradigms would consider movements such as Occupy Wall Street undesirable and unnecessarily forcing social change?
 - a. Symbolic interactionism
 - b. Functionalism
 - c. Feminism
 - d. Conflict theory

Short Answer

17.1 Power and Authority

1. Explain why leaders as divergent as Hitler and Jesus Christ are both categorized as charismatic authorities.
2. Why do people accept traditional authority figures even though these types of leaders have limited means of enforcing their power?
3. Charismatic leaders are among the most fascinating figures in history. Select a charismatic leader about whom you wish to learn more and conduct online research to find out about this individual. Then write a paragraph describing the personal qualities that led to this person's influence, considering the society in which he or she emerged.

17.2 Forms of Government

4. Do you feel the United States has become an oligarchy? Why, or why not?
5. Explain how an absolute monarchy differs from a dictatorship.
6. In which form of government do average citizens have the least political power? What options might they have for exerting political power under this type of regime?

17.3 Politics in the United States

7. If the percentage of Asian Americans in Congress is far below the percentage of Asian Americans in the United States, does that mean Asian Americans lack political power? Why or why not?
8. Explain how a voter's social class can affect his or her voting practices.
9. Besides voting, how can U.S. citizens influence political processes and outcomes? Which of these strategies have you personally used?

17.4 Theoretical Perspectives on Government and Power

10. What is one criticism of functionalism?
11. Explain what is meant by the term *power elite*. Consider its original intention as coined by C. Wright Mills as well as your understanding of it.

Further Research

17.1 Power and Authority

Want to learn more about sociologists at work in the real world? Read [this overview of sociological perspectives on disenfranchisement of people convicted of felonies \(https://openstax.org/l/3efelondisen\)](https://openstax.org/l/3efelondisen).

17.2 Forms of Government

The Tea Party is among the highest-profile grassroots organizations active in U.S. politics today. What is its official platform? Examine the [Tea Party website \(http://openstax.org/l/2eTeaPartygov\)](http://openstax.org/l/2eTeaPartygov) to find out more information.

17.3 Politics in the United States

The 1965 Voting Rights Act was preceded by Lyndon Johnson's signing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Both articles were instrumental in establishing equal rights for African Americans. Check out [Cornell University's website on this civil rights \(http://openstax.org/l/2EDemoNow\)](http://openstax.org/l/2EDemoNow) to learn more about this civil rights legislation.

17.4 Theoretical Perspectives on Government and Power

Functionalism is a complex philosophical theory that pertains to a variety of disciplines beyond sociology. Visit [the entry devoted to functionalism on Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy \(http://openstax.org/l/Stanford_functionalism\)](http://openstax.org/l/Stanford_functionalism) for a more comprehensive overview.

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FIGURE 18.1 Today, employees are working harder than ever in offices and other places of employment. (Credit: Juhan Sonin/flickr)

CHAPTER OUTLINE

18.1 Economic Systems

18.2 Globalization and the Economy

18.3 Work in the United States

INTRODUCTION TO WORK AND THE ECONOMY What if the U.S. economy thrived solely on basic bartering instead of its bustling agricultural and technological goods? Would you still see a busy building like the one shown in [Figure 18.1](#)?

In sociology, **economy** refers to the social institution through which a society's resources are exchanged and managed. The earliest economies were based on trade, which is often a simple exchange in which people traded one item for another. While today's economic activities are more complex than those early trades, the underlying goals remain the same: exchanging goods and services allows individuals to meet their needs and wants. In 1893, Émile Durkheim described what he called "mechanical" and "organic" solidarity that correlates to a society's economy. **Mechanical solidarity** exists in simpler societies where social cohesion comes from sharing similar work, education, and religion. **Organic solidarity** arises out of the mutual interdependence created by the specialization of work. The complex U.S. economy, and the economies of other industrialized nations, meet the definition of organic solidarity. Most individuals perform a specialized task to earn money they use to trade for goods and services provided by others who perform different specialized tasks. In a simplified example, an elementary school teacher relies on farmers for food, doctors for healthcare, carpenters to build shelter, and so on. The farmers, doctors, and carpenters all rely on the teacher to educate their children. They are all dependent on each other and their work.

Economy is one of human society's earliest social structures. Our earliest forms of writing (such as Sumerian clay tablets) were developed to record transactions, payments, and debts between merchants. As societies grow and change, so do their economies. The economy of a small farming community is very different from the

economy of a large nation with advanced technology. In this chapter, we will examine different types of economic systems and how they have functioned in various societies.

Detroit, once the roaring headquarters of the country's large and profitable automotive industry, had already been in a population decline for several decades as auto manufacturing jobs were being outsourced to other countries and foreign car brands began to take increasing portions of U.S. market share. According to State of Michigan population data (State of Michigan, n.d.), Detroit was home to approximately 1.85 million residents in 1950, which dwindled to slightly more than 700,000 in 2010 following the economic crash. The drastic reduction took its toll on the city. It is estimated that a third of the buildings in Detroit have been abandoned. The current average home price hovers around \$7,000, while homes nationwide sell on average for around \$200,000. The city has filed for bankruptcy, and its unemployment rate hovers around 30 percent.

The Wage Gap in the United States

The Equal Pay Act, passed by the U.S. Congress in 1963, was designed to reduce the wage gap between men and women. The act in essence required employers to pay equal wages to men and women who were performing substantially similar jobs. However, more than fifty years later, women continue to make less money than their male counterparts. According to a report released by the White House in 2013, full-time working women made just 77 cents for every dollar a man made (National Equal Pay Taskforce 2013). Seven years later, the gap had only closed by four cents, with women making 81 cents for every dollar a man makes (Payscale 2020).

A part of the White House report read, “This significant gap is more than a statistic—it has real-life consequences. When women, who make up nearly half the workforce, bring home less money each day, it means they have less for the everyday needs of their families, and over a lifetime of work, far less savings for retirement.”

As shocking as it is, the gap actually widens when we add race and ethnicity to the picture. For example, African American women make on average 64 cents for every dollar a White male makes. Latina women make 56 cents, or 44 percent less, for every dollar a White man makes. African American and Latino men also make notably less than White men. Asian Americans tend to be the only minority that earns as much as or more than White men.

Certain professions have their own differences in wage gaps, even those whose participants have higher levels of education and supposedly a more merit-based method of promotion and credit. For example, U.S. and Canadian scientists have a significant wage gap that begins as soon as people enter the workforce. For example, of the PhD recipients that have jobs lined up after earning their degree, men reported an initial salary average of \$92,000 per year, while women's was only \$72,500. Men with permanent jobs in the life sciences reported an expected median salary of \$87,000, compared with \$80,000 for women. In mathematics and computer sciences, men reported an expected median salary of \$125,000; for women, that figure was \$101,500 (Woolston 2021).

Recent Economic Conditions

In 2015, the United States continued its recovery from the “Great Recession,” arguably the worst economic downturn since the stock market collapse in 1929 and the Great Depression that ensued.

The 2008 recession was brought on by aggressive lending, extremely risky behavior by investment firms, and lax oversight by the government. During this time, banks provided mortgages to people with poor credit histories, sometimes with deceptively low introductory interest rates. When the rates rose, borrowers' mortgage payments increased to the point where they couldn't make payments. At the same time, investment firms had purchased these risky mortgages in the form of large bundled investments worth billions of dollars each (mortgage-backed securities or MBS). Rating agencies were supposed to rate mortgage securities according to their level of risk, but they typically rated all MBS as high-quality no matter what types of mortgages they contained. When the mortgages defaulted, the investment firms' holdings went down. The

massive rate of loan defaults put a strain on the financial institutions that had made the loans as well as those that had purchased the MBS, and this stress rippled throughout the entire economy and around the globe.

With the entire financial system on the verge of permanent damage, the U.S. government bailed out many of these firms and provided support to other industries, such as airlines and automobile companies. But the Recession couldn't be stopped. The United States fell into a period of high and prolonged unemployment, extreme reductions in wealth (except at the very top), stagnant wages, and loss of value in personal property (houses and land).

Starting in 2009, however, employment began to tick back up as companies found their footing. By 2012, most of the country's employment rates were similar to the levels prior to the Great Recession. However, for most segments of the population, median income had not increased, and in fact it has receded in many cases. The size, income, and wealth of the middle class have been declining since the 1970s— effects that were perhaps hastened by the recession. Today, wealth is distributed inequitably at the top. Corporate profits have increased more than 141 percent, and CEO pay has risen by more than 298 percent.

Although wages had not increased, and certain parts of the economy, such as brick-and-mortar retail (department stores and similar chains) were doing poorly, the economy as a whole grew from the time after the Great Recession through 2020. Unemployment reached a historic low in late 2019. COVID-19 changed all that. As you may have experienced yourself, entire industries suffered incredible losses as they were forced to shut down or severely reduce operations. Some people were laid off from their jobs, while others had their hours or wages reduced. Unemployment skyrocketed again, reaching a new high of nearly 15 percent, only about six months after it had been at its record low. Industries as diverse as hospitality and mining reported massive decreases in employment, and part-time workers in particular were hard hit. By early 2021, the overall unemployment rate had returned to generally normal levels. The impact on those who had gone without work for so long, however, was significant (Congressional Research Service 2021).

18.1 Economic Systems

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Differentiate types of economic systems and their historical development
- Describe capitalism and socialism both in theory and in practice
- Discuss the ways functionalists, conflict theorists, and symbolic interactionists view the economy and work

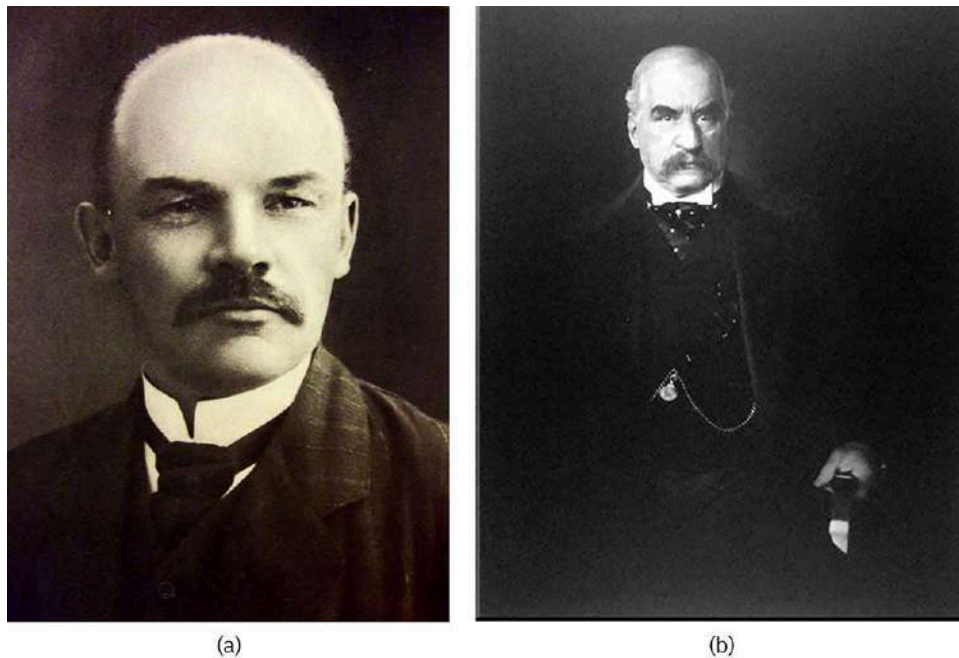


FIGURE 18.2 Vladimir Ilyich Lenin was one of the founders of Russian communism. J.P. Morgan was one of the most influential capitalists in history. They have very different views on how economies should be run. (Credit: Photos (a) and (b) Wikimedia Commons)

The dominant economic systems of the modern era are capitalism and socialism, and there have been many variations of each system across the globe. Countries have switched systems as their rulers and economic fortunes have changed. For example, Russia has been transitioning to a market-based economy since the fall of communism in that region of the world. Vietnam, where the economy was devastated by the Vietnam War, restructured to a state-run economy in response, and more recently has been moving toward a socialist-style market economy. In the past, other economic systems reflected the societies that formed them. Many of these earlier systems lasted centuries. These changes in economies raise many questions for sociologists. What are these older economic systems? How did they develop? Why did they fade away? What are the similarities and differences between older economic systems and modern ones?

Economics of Agricultural, Industrial, and Postindustrial Societies



FIGURE 18.3 Agricultural economies depend on discoveries and technologies to shift from subsistence to prosperity. The Banaue Rice Terraces were carved into the landscape by hand by the ancestors of the Ifugao people. Rice needs flat, completely submerged fields in which to grow, so mountainous areas would not be naturally suited for rice. By transforming the mountainsides and maintaining a massive irrigation system, these farmer-engineers produced far more rice than the landscape would have normally yielded. Interestingly, the economy of this location is shifting again, as tourism to the terraces grows faster than farming them.

Our earliest ancestors lived as hunter-gatherers. Small groups of extended families roamed from place to place looking for subsistence. They would settle in an area for a brief time when there were abundant resources. They hunted animals for their meat and gathered wild fruits, vegetables, and cereals. They ate what they caught or gathered their goods as soon as possible, because they had no way of preserving or transporting it. Once the resources of an area ran low, the group had to move on, and everything they owned had to travel with them. Food reserves only consisted of what they could carry. Many sociologists contend that hunter-gatherers did not have a true economy, because groups did not typically trade with other groups due to the scarcity of goods.

The Agricultural Revolution

The first true economies arrived when people started raising crops and domesticating animals. Although there is still a great deal of disagreement among archeologists as to the exact timeline, research indicates that agriculture began independently and at different times in several places around the world. The earliest agriculture was in the Fertile Crescent in the Middle East around 11,000–10,000 years ago. Next were the valleys of the Indus, Yangtze, and Yellow rivers in India and China, between 10,000 and 9,000 years ago. The people living in the highlands of New Guinea developed agriculture between 9,000 and 6,000 years ago, while people were farming in Sub-Saharan Africa between 5,000 and 4,000 years ago. Agriculture developed later in the western hemisphere, arising in what would become the eastern United States, central Mexico, and northern South America between 5,000 and 3,000 years ago (Diamond 2003).

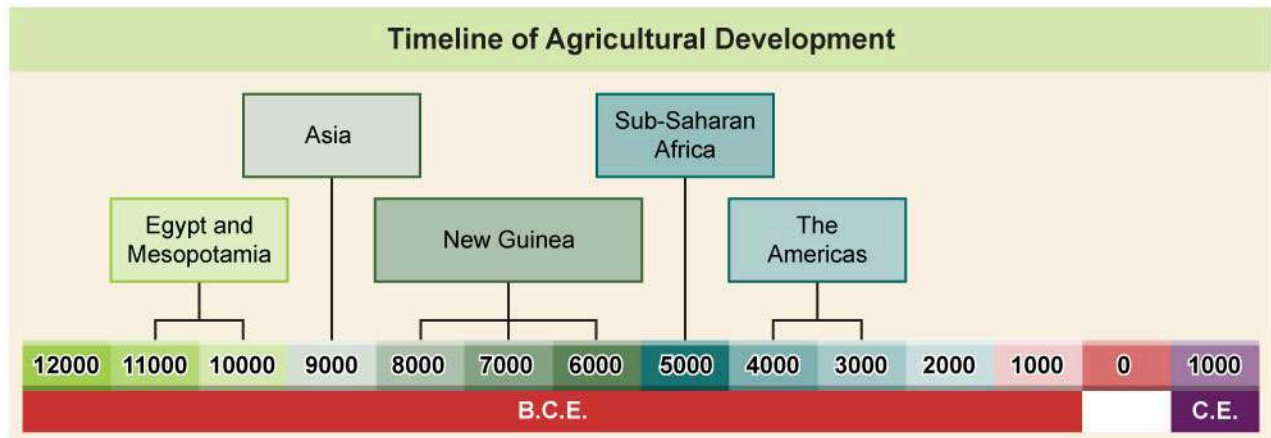


FIGURE 18.4 Agricultural practices have emerged in different societies at different times. (Information: Wikimedia Commons)

Agriculture began with the simplest of technologies—for example, a pointed stick to break up the soil—but really took off when people harnessed animals to pull an even more efficient tool for the same task: a plow. With this new technology, one family could grow enough crops not only to feed themselves but also to feed others. Knowing there would be abundant food each year as long as crops were tended led people to abandon the nomadic life of hunter-gatherers and settle down to farm.

The improved efficiency in food production meant that not everyone had to toil all day in the fields. As agriculture grew, new jobs emerged, along with new technologies. Excess crops needed to be stored, processed, protected, and transported. Farming equipment and irrigation systems needed to be built and maintained. Wild animals needed to be domesticated and herds shepherded. Economies began to develop because people now had goods and services to trade. At the same time, farmers eventually came to labor for the ruling class.

As more people specialized in nonfarming jobs, villages grew into towns and then into cities. Urban areas created the need for administrators and public servants. Disputes over ownership, payments, debts, compensation for damages, and the like led to the need for laws and courts—and the judges, clerks, lawyers, and police who administered and enforced those laws.

At first, most goods and services were traded as gifts or through bartering between small social groups (Mauss 1922). Exchanging one form of goods or services for another was known as **bartering**. This system only works when one person happens to have something the other person needs at the same time. To solve this problem, people developed the idea of a means of exchange that could be used at any time: that is, money. **Money** refers to an object that a society agrees to assign a value to so it can be exchanged for payment. In early economies, money was often objects like cowry shells, rice, barley, or even rum. Precious metals quickly became the preferred means of exchange in many cultures because of their durability and portability. The first coins were minted in Lydia in what is now Turkey around 650–600 B.C.E. (Goldsborough 2010). Early legal codes established the value of money and the rates of exchange for various commodities. They also established the rules for inheritance, fines as penalties for crimes, and how property was to be divided and taxed (Horne 1915). A symbolic interactionist would note that bartering and money are systems of symbolic exchange. Monetary objects took on a symbolic meaning, one that carries into our modern-day use of cash, checks, and debit cards.



SOCIOLOGY IN THE REAL WORLD

The Woman Who Lives without Money

Imagine having no money. If you wanted some french fries, needed a new pair of shoes, or were due to get an oil change for your car, how would you get those goods and services?

This isn't just a theoretical question. Think about it. What do those on the outskirts of society do in these situations? Think of someone escaping domestic abuse who gave up everything and has no resources. Or an immigrant who wants to build a new life but who had to leave another life behind to find that opportunity. Or a homeless person who simply wants a meal to eat.

This last example, homelessness, is what caused Heidemarie Schwermer to give up money. She was a divorced high school teacher in Germany, and her life took a turn when she relocated her children to a rural town with a significant homeless population. She began to question what serves as currency in a society and decided to try something new.

Schwermer founded a business called *Gib und Nimm*—in English, “give and take.” It operated on a moneyless basis and strived to facilitate people swapping goods and services for other goods and services—no cash allowed (Schwermer 2007). What began as a short experiment has become a new way of life. Schwermer says the change has helped her focus on people's inner value instead of their outward wealth. She wrote two books that tell her story (she's donated all proceeds to charity) and, most importantly, a richness in her life she was unable to attain with money.

How might our three sociological perspectives view her actions? What would most interest them about her unconventional ways? Would a functionalist consider her aberration of norms a social dysfunction that upsets the normal balance? How would a conflict theorist place her in the social hierarchy? What might a symbolic interactionist make of her choice not to use money—such an important symbol in the modern world?

What do *you* make of *Gib und Nimm*?

As city-states grew into countries and countries grew into empires, their economies grew as well. When large empires broke up, their economies broke up too. The governments of newly formed nations sought to protect and increase their markets. They financed voyages of discovery to find new markets and resources all over the world, which ushered in a rapid progression of economic development.

Colonies were established to secure these markets, and wars were financed to take over territory. These ventures were funded in part by raising capital from investors who were paid back from the goods obtained. Governments and private citizens also set up large trading companies that financed their enterprises around the world by selling stocks and bonds.

Governments tried to protect their share of the markets by developing a system called mercantilism.

Mercantilism is an economic policy based on accumulating silver and gold by controlling colonial and foreign markets through taxes and other charges. The resulting restrictive practices and exacting demands included monopolies, bans on certain goods, high tariffs, and exclusivity requirements. Mercantilist governments also promoted manufacturing and, with the ability to fund technological improvements, they helped create the equipment that led to the Industrial Revolution.

The Industrial Revolution

Until the end of the eighteenth century, most manufacturing was done by manual labor. This changed as inventors devised machines to manufacture goods. A small number of innovations led to a large number of changes in the British economy. In the textile industries, the spinning of cotton, worsted yarn, and flax could be done more quickly and less expensively using new machines with names like the Spinning Jenny and the Spinning Mule (Bond 2003). Another important innovation was made in the production of iron: Coke from coal

could now be used in all stages of smelting rather than charcoal from wood, which dramatically lowered the cost of iron production while increasing availability (Bond 2003). James Watt ushered in what many scholars recognize as the greatest change, revolutionizing transportation and thereby the entire production of goods with his improved steam engine.

As people moved to cities to fill factory jobs, factory production also changed. Workers did their jobs in assembly lines and were trained to complete only one or two steps in the manufacturing process. These advances meant that more finished goods could be manufactured with more efficiency and speed than ever before.

The Industrial Revolution also changed agricultural practices. Until that time, many people practiced **subsistence farming** in which they produced only enough to feed themselves and pay their taxes. New technology introduced gasoline-powered farm tools such as tractors, seed drills, threshers, and combine harvesters. Farmers were encouraged to plant large fields of a single crop to maximize profits. With improved transportation and the invention of refrigeration, produce could be shipped safely all over the world.

The Industrial Revolution modernized the world. With growing resources came growing societies and economies. Between 1800 and 2000, the world's population grew sixfold, while per capita income saw a tenfold jump (Maddison 2003).

While many people's lives were improving, the Industrial Revolution also birthed many societal problems. There were inequalities in the system. Owners amassed vast fortunes while laborers, including young children, toiled for long hours in unsafe conditions. Workers' rights, wage protection, and safe work environments are issues that arose during this period and remain concerns today.

Postindustrial Societies and the Information Age

Postindustrial societies, also known as information societies, have evolved in modernized nations. One of the most valuable goods of the modern era is information. Those who have the means to produce, store, and disseminate information are leaders in this type of society.

One way scholars understand the development of different types of societies (like agricultural, industrial, and postindustrial) is by examining their economies in terms of four sectors: primary, secondary, tertiary, and quaternary. Each has a different focus. The primary sector extracts and produces raw materials (like metals and crops). The secondary sector turns those raw materials into finished goods. The tertiary sector provides services: child care, healthcare, and money management. Finally, the quaternary sector produces ideas; these include the research that leads to new technologies, the management of information, and a society's highest levels of education and the arts (Kenessey 1987).

In underdeveloped countries, the majority of the people work in the primary sector. As economies develop, more and more people are employed in the secondary sector. In well-developed economies, such as those in the United States, Japan, and Western Europe, the majority of the workforce is employed in service industries. In the United States, for example, almost 80 percent of the workforce is employed in the tertiary sector (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2011).

The rapid increase in computer use in all aspects of daily life is a main reason for the transition to an information economy. Fewer people are needed to work in factories because computerized robots now handle many of the tasks. Other manufacturing jobs have been outsourced to less-developed countries as a result of the developing global economy. The growth of the Internet has created industries that exist almost entirely online. Within industries, technology continues to change how goods are produced. For instance, the music and film industries used to produce physical products like CDs and DVDs for distribution. Now those goods are increasingly produced digitally and streamed or downloaded at a much lower physical manufacturing cost. Information and the means to use it creatively have become commodities in a postindustrial economy.

Capitalism



FIGURE 18.5 Capitalism enables incredible innovation, but it also empowers employers and owners to make many of their own decisions. This bread company has automated the process of packaging its products and preparing them for shipping. As you can see, the factory floor seems largely devoid of people. (Credit: KUKA Roboter GmbH, Bachmann)

Scholars don't always agree on a single definition of capitalism. For our purposes, we will define **capitalism** as an economic system in which there is private ownership (as opposed to state ownership) and where there is an impetus to produce profit, and thereby wealth. This is the type of economy in place in the United States today. Under capitalism, people invest capital (money or property invested in a business venture) in a business to produce a product or service that can be sold in a market to consumers. The investors in the company are generally entitled to a share of any profit made on sales after the costs of production and distribution are taken out. These investors often reinvest their profits to improve and expand the business or acquire new ones. To illustrate how this works, consider this example. Sarah, Antonio, and Chris each invest \$250,000 into a start-up company that offers an innovative baby product. When the company nets \$1 million in profits its first year, a portion of that profit goes back to Sarah, Antonio, and Chris as a return on their investment. Sarah reinvests with the same company to fund the development of a second product line, Antonio uses his return to help another start-up in the technology sector, and Chris buys a small yacht for vacations.

To provide their product or service, owners hire workers to whom they pay wages. The cost of raw materials, the retail price they charge consumers, and the amount they pay in wages are determined through the law of supply and demand and by competition. When demand exceeds supply, prices tend to rise. When supply exceeds demand, prices tend to fall. When multiple businesses market similar products and services to the same buyers, there is competition. Competition can be good for consumers because it can lead to lower prices and higher quality as businesses try to get consumers to buy from them rather than from their competitors.

Wages tend to be set in a similar way. People who have talents, skills, education, or training that is in short supply and is needed by businesses tend to earn more than people without comparable skills. Competition in

the workforce helps determine how much people will be paid. In times when many people are unemployed and jobs are scarce, people are often willing to accept less than they would when their services are in high demand. In this scenario, businesses are able to maintain or increase profits by not increasing workers' wages.

Capitalism in Practice

As capitalists began to dominate the economies of many countries during the Industrial Revolution, the rapid growth of businesses and their tremendous profitability gave some owners the capital they needed to create enormous corporations that could monopolize an entire industry. Many companies controlled all aspects of the production cycle for their industry, from the raw materials, to the production, to the stores in which they were sold. These companies were able to use their wealth to buy out or stifle any competition.

In the United States, the predatory tactics used by these large monopolies caused the government to take action. Starting in the late 1800s, the government passed a series of laws that broke up monopolies and regulated how key industries—such as transportation, steel production, and oil and gas exploration and refining—could conduct business.

The United States is considered a capitalist country. However, the U.S. government has a great deal of influence on private companies through the laws it passes and the regulations enforced by government agencies. Through taxes, regulations on wages, guidelines to protect worker safety and the environment, plus financial rules for banks and investment firms, the government exerts a certain amount of control over how all companies do business. State and federal governments also own, operate, or control large parts of certain industries, such as the post office, schools, hospitals, highways and railroads, and many water, sewer, and power utilities. Debate over the extent to which the government should be involved in the economy remains an issue of contention today. Some criticize such involvements as socialism (a type of state-run economy), while others believe intervention is necessary to protect the rights of workers and the well-being of the general population.

Socialism



FIGURE 18.6 The economies of China and Russia after World War II are examples of one form of socialism. (Credit: Wikimedia Commons)

Socialism is an economic system in which there is government ownership (often referred to as “state run”) of goods and their production, with an impetus to share work and wealth equally among the members of a society. Under socialism, everything that people produce, including services, is considered a social product. Everyone who contributes to the production of a good or to providing a service is entitled to a share in any benefits that come from its sale or use. To make sure all members of society get their fair share, governments must be able to control property, production, and distribution.

The focus in socialism is on benefitting society, whereas capitalism seeks to benefit the individual. Socialists claim that a capitalistic economy leads to inequality, with unfair distribution of wealth and individuals who use their power at the expense of society. Socialism strives, ideally, to control the economy to avoid the problems inherent in capitalism.

Within socialism, there are diverging views on the extent to which the economy should be controlled. One extreme believes all but the most personal items are public property. Other socialists believe only essential services such as healthcare, education, and utilities (electrical power, telecommunications, and sewage) need direct control. Under this form of socialism, farms, small shops, and businesses can be privately owned but are subject to government regulation.

The other area on which socialists disagree is on what level society should exert its control. In communist

countries like the former Soviet Union, China, Vietnam, and North Korea, the national government exerts control over the economy centrally. They had the power to tell all businesses what to produce, how much to produce, and what to charge for it. Other socialists believe control should be decentralized so it can be exerted by those most affected by the industries being controlled. An example of this would be a town collectively owning and managing the businesses on which its residents depend.

Because of challenges in their economies, several of these communist countries have moved from central planning to letting market forces help determine many production and pricing decisions. **Market socialism** describes a subtype of socialism that adopts certain traits of capitalism, like allowing limited private ownership or consulting market demands. This could involve situations like profits generated by a company going directly to the employees of the company or being used as public funds (Gregory and Stuart 2003). Many Eastern European and some South American countries have mixed economies. Key industries are nationalized and directly controlled by the government; however, most businesses are privately owned and regulated by the government.

Organized socialism never became powerful in the United States. The success of labor unions and the government in securing workers' rights, joined with the high standard of living enjoyed by most of the workforce, made socialism less appealing than the controlled capitalism practiced here.

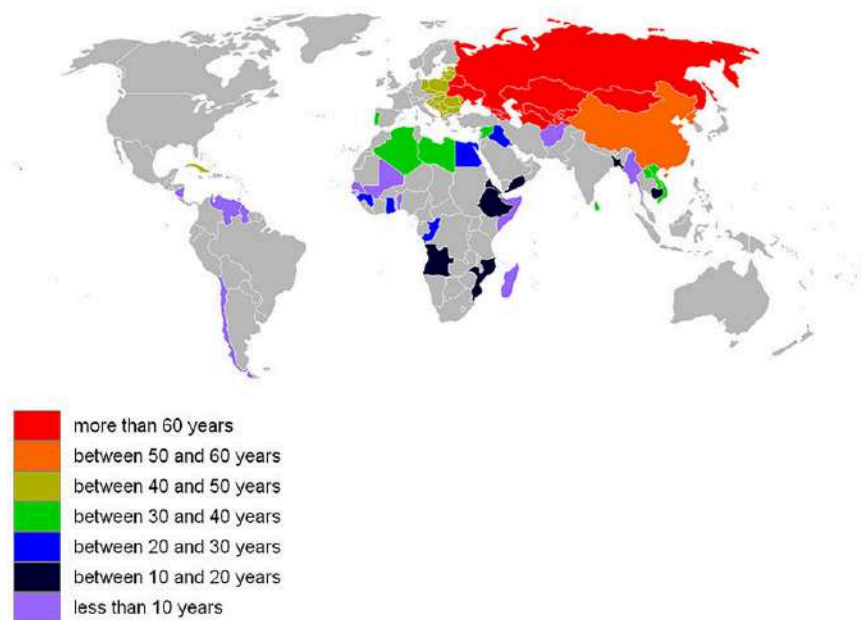


FIGURE 18.7 This map shows countries that have adopted a socialist economy at some point. The colors indicate the duration that socialism prevailed. (Credit: Wikimedia Commons)

Socialism in Practice

As with capitalism, the basic ideas behind socialism go far back in history. Plato, in ancient Greece, suggested a republic in which people shared their material goods. Early Christian communities believed in common ownership, as did the systems of monasteries set up by various religious orders. Many of the leaders of the French Revolution called for the abolition of all private property, not just the estates of the aristocracy they had overthrown. Thomas More's *Utopia*, published in 1516, imagined a society with little private property and mandatory labor on a communal farm. A *utopia* has since come to mean an imagined place or situation in which everything is perfect. Most experimental utopian communities had the abolition of private property as a founding principle.

Modern socialism really began as a reaction to the excesses of uncontrolled industrial capitalism in the 1800s and 1900s. The enormous wealth and lavish lifestyles enjoyed by owners contrasted sharply with the

miserable conditions of the workers.

Some of the first great sociological thinkers studied the rise of socialism. Max Weber admired some aspects of socialism, especially its rationalism and how it could help social reform, but he worried that letting the government have complete control could result in an "iron cage of future bondage" from which there is no escape (Greisman and Ritzer 1981).

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809–1865) was another early socialist who thought socialism could be used to create utopian communities. In his 1840 book, *What Is Property?*, he famously stated that “property is theft” (Proudhon 1840). By this he meant that if an owner did not work to produce or earn the property, then the owner was stealing it from those who did. Proudhon believed economies could work using a principle called **mutualism**, under which individuals and cooperative groups would exchange products with one another on the basis of mutually satisfactory contracts (Proudhon 1840).

By far the most important influential thinker on socialism is Karl Marx. Through his own writings and those with his collaborator, industrialist Friedrich Engels, Marx used a scientific analytical process to show that throughout history, the resolution of class struggles caused changes in economies. He saw the relationships evolving from slave and owner, to serf and lord, to journeyman and master, to worker and owner. Neither Marx nor Engels thought socialism could be used to set up small utopian communities. Rather, they believed a socialist society would be created after workers rebelled against capitalistic owners and seized the means of production. They felt industrial capitalism was a necessary step that raised the level of production in society to a point it could progress to a socialist and then communist state (Marx and Engels 1848). These ideas form the basis of the sociological perspective of social conflict theory.



SOCIOLOGY IN THE REAL WORLD

Politicians, Socialism, and Changing Perspectives

In most Presidential elections, as well as some state and local contests, one or more of the candidates is likely to be insulted with a term meant to evoke fear and indicate their lack of patriotism: They are called a socialist.

With a few exceptions throughout U.S. history, mainstream politicians would have taken efforts to shed this label. It may have brought to mind failed or totalitarian countries, where people had fewer freedoms and generally less prosperity than in America.

More recently, however, some political figures seem more comfortable with the term. Most notably, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders has accepted the term "democratic socialist," as has New York Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. They ascribe to government involvement models similar to those of some European countries. They advocate for policies like student loan forgiveness, free public college, universal healthcare, elimination of for-profit prisons, and so on. In some cases, they advocate for breakups or government involvement in some corporate-dominated industries, such as power utilities. They also note that many semi-socialist societies, such as Germany and the U.K, are among the world's largest economies, with plenty of economic opportunity and – if the ability to become rich is one measure – plenty of millionaires and billionaires.

Beyond the political damage that may be associated with socialism, many people in America do not like the idea of government involvement in private industry. Choice and unlimited opportunity are parts of the fabric of the American story, and large corporations have had positive impacts on our lifestyle. But some of those notions are changing. Many people from different political backgrounds are decrying income inequality, which, as has been described elsewhere in this text, is higher than ever in the U.S.

Another aspect of the U.S. economy is whether it already has socialistic tendencies. One example might be the practice of subsidies, where politicians (of both parties) grant payments or tax breaks to certain businesses or industries. Subsidies were at some points necessary to help people like small farmers remain viable during crises; in many years, farm subsidies of tens of billions of dollars account for over 25 percent of total farm income; in 2003 it

was 41 percent, and in 2020 it was 39 percent (Abbott 2020). Subsidies are also common in industries as profitable as oil, and the U.S. government is deeply involved in many companies' work in energy production. The government also has a significant role in the lending practices of private banks, often through action by the Federal Reserve. Add in corporate bail-outs, high levels of military spending, and the fact that the government is by far the largest employer of U.S. citizens, and it's clear that the United States isn't a purely capitalist society. Most economists refer to it as a mixed economy.

Is that such a bad thing? Neither system is perfect. Billionaire hedge fund manager Roy Dalio, who certainly benefited from capitalism before turning his attention to social equality and philanthropy, expresses it this way: "Most capitalists don't know how to divide the economic pie well and most socialists don't know how to grow it well (Dalio 2019).

Convergence Theory

We have seen how the economies of some capitalist countries such as the United States have features that are very similar to socialism. Some industries, particularly utilities, are either owned by the government or controlled through regulations. Public programs such as welfare, Medicare, and Social Security exist to provide public funds for private needs. We have also seen how several large communist (or formerly communist) countries such as Russia, China, and Vietnam have moved from state-controlled socialism with central planning to market socialism, which allows market forces to dictate prices and wages and for some business to be privately owned. In many formerly communist countries, these changes have led to economic growth compared to the stagnation they experienced under communism (Fidrmuc 2002).

In studying the economies of developing countries to see if they go through the same stages as previously developed nations did, sociologists have observed a pattern they call convergence. This describes the theory that societies move toward similarity over time as their economies develop.

Convergence theory explains that as a country's economy grows, its societal organization changes to become more like that of an industrialized society. Rather than staying in one job for a lifetime, people begin to move from job to job as conditions improve and opportunities arise. This means the workforce needs continual training and retraining. Workers move from rural areas to cities as they become centers of economic activity, and the government takes a larger role in providing expanded public services (Kerr et al. 1960).

Supporters of the theory point to Germany, France, and Japan—countries that rapidly rebuilt their economies after World War II. They point out how, in the 1960s and 1970s, East Asian countries like Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan converged with countries with developed economies. They are now considered developed countries themselves.



FIGURE 18.8 Sociologists look for signs of convergence and divergence in the societies of countries that have joined and departed the European Union (EU). The United Kingdom voted to leave the EU, and after years of policy shifts, several new Prime Ministers, and negotiations, it formally departed in 2020 and ended most trade agreements in 2021. Note that the U.K.'s departure means that Britain, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and the 6.7 square kilometer territory of Gibraltar also departed. (Credit: Hogweard/Wikimedia Commons)

To experience this rapid growth, the economies of developing countries must be able to attract inexpensive capital to invest in new businesses and to improve traditionally low productivity. They need access to new, international markets for buying the goods. If these characteristics are not in place, then their economies cannot catch up. This is why the economies of some countries are diverging rather than converging (Abramovitz 1986).

Another key characteristic of economic growth regards the implementation of technology. A developing country can bypass some steps of implementing technology that other nations faced earlier. Television and telephone systems are a good example. While developed countries spent significant time and money establishing elaborate system infrastructures based on metal wires or fiber-optic cables, developing countries today can go directly to cell phone and satellite transmission with much less investment.

Another factor affects convergence concerning social structure. Early in their development, countries such as Brazil and Cuba had economies based on cash crops (coffee or sugarcane, for instance) grown on large plantations by unskilled workers. The elite ran the plantations and the government, with little interest in training and educating the populace for other endeavors. This restricted economic growth until the power of the wealthy plantation owners was challenged (Sokoloff and Engerman 2000). Improved economies generally lead to wider social improvement. Society benefits from improved educational systems, and people have more time to devote to learning and leisure.

Theoretical Perspectives on the Economy

Now that we've developed an understanding of the history and basic components of economies, let's turn to theory. How might social scientists study these topics? What questions do they ask? What theories do they develop to add to the body of sociological knowledge?

Functionalist Perspective

Someone taking a functionalist perspective will most likely view work and the economy as a well-oiled machine that is designed for maximum efficiency. The Davis-Moore thesis, for example, suggests that some social stratification is a social necessity. The need for certain highly skilled positions combined with the relative difficulty of the occupation and the length of time it takes to qualify will result in a higher reward for that job and will provide a financial motivation to engage in more education and a more difficult profession (Davis and Moore 1945). This theory can be used to explain the prestige and salaries that go with careers only available to those with doctorates or medical degrees.

The functionalist perspective would assume that the continued health of the economy is vital to the health of the nation, as it ensures the distribution of goods and services. For example, we need food to travel from farms (high-functioning and efficient agricultural systems) via roads (safe and effective trucking and rail routes) to urban centers (high-density areas where workers can gather). However, sometimes a dysfunction—a function with the potential to disrupt social institutions or organization (Merton 1968)—in the economy occurs, usually because some institutions fail to adapt quickly enough to changing social conditions. This lesson has been driven home recently with the bursting of the housing bubble. Due to risky lending practices and an underregulated financial market, we are recovering from the after-effects of the Great Recession, which Merton would likely describe as a major dysfunction.

Some of this is cyclical. Markets produce goods as they are supposed to, but eventually the market is saturated and the supply of goods exceeds the demands. Typically the market goes through phases of surplus, or excess, inflation, where the money in your pocket today buys less than it did yesterday, and **recession**, which occurs when there are two or more consecutive quarters of economic decline. The functionalist would say to let market forces fluctuate in a cycle through these stages. In reality, to control the risk of an economic **depression** (a sustained recession across several economic sectors), the U.S. government will often adjust interest rates to encourage more lending—and consequently more spending. In short, letting the natural cycle fluctuate is not a gamble most governments are willing to take.

Conflict Perspective

For a conflict perspective theorist, the economy is not a source of stability for society. Instead, the economy reflects and reproduces economic inequality, particularly in a capitalist marketplace. The conflict perspective is classically Marxist, with the bourgeoisie (ruling class) accumulating wealth and power by exploiting and perhaps oppressing the proletariat (workers), and regulating those who cannot work (the aged, the infirm) into the great mass of unemployed (Marx and Engels 1848). From the symbolic (though probably made up) statement of Marie Antoinette, who purportedly said, “Let them eat cake” when told that the peasants were starving, to the Occupy Wall Street movement that began during the Great Recession, the sense of inequity is almost unchanged. Conflict theorists believe wealth is concentrated in the hands of those who do not deserve it. As of 2010, 20 percent of Americans owned 90 percent of U.S. wealth (Domhoff 2014). While the inequality might not be as extreme as in pre-revolutionary France, it is enough to make many believe that the United States is not the meritocracy it seems to be.

Symbolic Interactionist Perspective

Those working in the symbolic interaction perspective take a microanalytical view of society. They focus on the way reality is socially constructed through day-to-day interaction and how society is composed of people communicating based on a shared understanding of symbols.

One important symbolic interactionist concept related to work and the economy is **career inheritance**. This concept means simply that children tend to enter the same or similar occupation as their parents, which is a correlation that has been demonstrated in research studies (Antony 1998). For example, the children of police officers learn the norms and values that will help them succeed in law enforcement, and since they have a model career path to follow, they may find law enforcement even more attractive. Related to career inheritance is career socialization—learning the norms and values of a particular job.

Finally, a symbolic interactionist might study what contributes to job satisfaction. Melvin Kohn and his fellow researchers (1990) determined that workers were most likely to be happy when they believed they controlled some part of their work, when they felt they were part of the decision-making processes associated with their work, when they have freedom from surveillance, and when they felt integral to the outcome of their work. Sunyal, Sunyal, and Yasin (2011) found that a greater sense of vulnerability to stress, the more stress experienced by a worker, and a greater amount of perceived risk consistently predicted a lower worker job satisfaction.

18.2 Globalization and the Economy

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Define globalization and describe its manifestation in modern society
- Discuss the pros and cons of globalization from an economic standpoint



FIGURE 18.9 Instant communications have allowed many international corporations to move parts of their businesses to countries such as India, where their costs are lowest. (Credit: Wikimedia Commons)

What Is Globalization?

Globalization refers to the process of integrating governments, cultures, and financial markets through international trade into a single world market. Often, the process begins with a single motive, such as market expansion (on the part of a corporation) or increased access to healthcare (on the part of a nonprofit organization). But usually there is a snowball effect, and globalization becomes a mixed bag of economic, philanthropic, entrepreneurial, and cultural efforts. Sometimes the efforts have obvious benefits, even for those who worry about cultural colonialism, such as campaigns to bring clean-water technology to rural areas that do not have access to safe drinking water.

Other globalization efforts, however, are more complex. Let us look, for example, at the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The agreement was among the countries of North America, including Canada, the United States, and Mexico, and allowed much freer trade opportunities without the kind of tariffs (taxes) and import laws that restrict international trade. Often, trade opportunities are misrepresented by politicians and economists, who sometimes offer them up as a panacea to economic woes. For example, trade can lead to both increases and decreases in job opportunities. This is because while easier, more lax export laws mean there is the potential for job growth in the United States, imports can mean the exact opposite. As the United States imports more goods from outside the country, jobs typically decrease, as more and more products are made overseas.

Many prominent economists believed that when NAFTA was created in 1994 it would lead to major gains in jobs. But by 2010, the evidence showed an opposite impact; the data showed 682,900 U.S. jobs lost across all states (Parks 2011). While NAFTA did increase the flow of goods and capital across the northern and southern U.S. borders, it also increased unemployment in Mexico, which spurred greater amounts of illegal immigration motivated by a search for work. NAFTA was renegotiated in 2018, and was formally replaced by the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement in 2020.

There are several forces driving globalization, including the global economy and multinational corporations that control assets, sales, production, and employment (United Nations 1973). Characteristics of multinational corporations include the following: A large share of their capital is collected from a variety of different nations, their business is conducted without regard to national borders, they concentrate wealth in the hands of core nations and already wealthy individuals, and they play a key role in the global economy.

We see the emergence of **global assembly lines**, where products are assembled over the course of several international transactions. For instance, Apple designs its next-generation Mac prototype in the United States, components are made in various peripheral nations, they are then shipped to another peripheral nation such as Malaysia for assembly, and tech support is outsourced to India.

Globalization has also led to the development of **global commodity chains**, where internationally integrated economic links connect workers and corporations for the purpose of manufacture and marketing (Plahe 2005). For example, in *maquiladoras*, mostly found in northern Mexico, workers may sew imported precut pieces of fabric into garments.

Globalization also brings an international division of labor, in which comparatively wealthy workers from core nations compete with the low-wage labor pool of peripheral and semi-peripheral nations. This can lead to a sense of **xenophobia**, which is an illogical fear and even hatred of foreigners and foreign goods. Corporations trying to maximize their profits in the United States are conscious of this risk and attempt to “Americanize” their products, selling shirts printed with U.S. flags that were nevertheless made in Mexico.

Aspects of Globalization

Globalized trade is nothing new. Societies in ancient Greece and Rome traded with other societies in Africa, the Middle East, India, and China. Trade expanded further during the Islamic Golden Age and after the rise of the Mongol Empire. The establishment of colonial empires after the voyages of discovery by European countries meant that trade was going on all over the world. In the nineteenth century, the Industrial Revolution led to even more trade of ever-increasing amounts of goods. However, the advance of technology, especially communications, after World War II and the Cold War triggered the explosive acceleration in the process occurring today.

One way to look at the similarities and differences that exist among the economies of different nations is to compare their standards of living. The statistic most commonly used to do this is the domestic process per capita. This is the gross domestic product, or GDP, of a country divided by its population. The table below compares the top 11 countries with the bottom 11 out of the 228 countries listed in the *CIA World Factbook*.

Country	GDP Per Capita in U.S. Dollars
Monaco	185,829.00
Liechtenstein	181,402.80
Bermuda	117,089.30
Luxembourg	114,704.60
Isle of Man	89,108.40
Cayman Islands	85,975.00
Macao SAR, China	84,096.40
Switzerland	81,993.70
Ireland	78,661.00
Norway	75,419.60
Burundi	261.2
Malawi	411.6
Sudan	441.5
Central African Republic	467.9
Mozambique	503.6
Afghanistan	507.1
Madagascar	523.4
Sierra Leone	527.5
Niger	553.9
Congo, Dem. Rep.	580.7

TABLE 18.1 Gross Domestic Product Per Capita Not every country is benefiting from globalization. The GDP per capita of the poorest country is 255 times less than that of the wealthiest country. (Credit: World Bank)

There are benefits and drawbacks to globalization. Some of the benefits include the exponentially accelerated progress of development, the creation of international awareness and empowerment, and the potential for increased wealth (Abadian 2002). However, experience has shown that countries can also be weakened by globalization. Some critics of globalization worry about the growing influence of enormous international financial and industrial corporations that benefit the most from free trade and unrestricted markets. They fear these corporations can use their vast wealth and resources to control governments to act in their interest rather than that of the local population (Bakan 2004). Indeed, when looking at the countries at the bottom of the list above, we are looking at places where the primary benefactors of mineral exploitation are major corporations and a few key political figures.

Other critics oppose globalization for what they see as negative impacts on the environment and local economies. Rapid industrialization, often a key component of globalization, can lead to widespread economic damage due to the lack of regulatory environment (Speth 2003). Further, as there are often no social institutions in place to protect workers in countries where jobs are scarce, some critics state that globalization leads to weak labor movements (Boswell and Stevis 1997). Finally, critics are concerned that wealthy countries can force economically weaker nations to open their markets while protecting their own local products from competition (Wallerstein 1974). This can be particularly true of agricultural products, which are often one of the main exports of poor and developing countries (Koroma 2007). In a 2007 article for the United Nations, Koroma discusses the difficulties faced by “least developed countries” (LDCs) that seek to participate in globalization efforts. These countries typically lack the infrastructure to be flexible and nimble in their production and trade, and therefore are vulnerable to everything from unfavorable weather conditions to international price volatility. In short, rather than offering them more opportunities, the increased competition and fast pace of a globalized market can make it more challenging than ever for LDCs to move forward (Koroma 2007).

The increasing use of outsourcing of manufacturing and service-industry jobs to developing countries has caused increased unemployment in some developed countries. Countries that do not develop new jobs to replace those that move, and train their labor force to do them, will find support for globalization weakening.

18.3 Work in the United States

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Describe the current U.S. workforce and the trend of polarization
- Explain how women and immigrants have changed the modern U.S. workforce
- Analyze the basic elements of poverty in the United States today



FIGURE 18.10 Many college students and others attend job fairs looking for their first job or for a better one. (Credit: COD Newsroom/flickr)

The American Dream has always been based on opportunity. There is a great deal of mythologizing about the energetic upstart who can climb to success based on hard work alone. Common wisdom states that if you study hard, develop good work habits, and graduate high school or, even better, college, then you'll have the opportunity to land a good job. That has long been seen as the key to a successful life. And although the reality has always been more complex than suggested by the myth, the worldwide recession that began in 2008 took its toll on the American Dream. During the recession, more than 8 million U.S. workers lost their jobs, and unemployment rates surpassed 10 percent on a national level. Today, while the recovery is still incomplete, many sectors of the economy are hiring, and unemployment rates have receded.



SOCIOLOGY IN THE REAL WORLD

Real Money, Virtual Worlds



FIGURE 18.11 In a virtual world, living the good life still costs real money. (Credit: Juan Pablo Amo/flickr)

If you are not one of the tens of millions gamers who enjoy World of Warcraft, Final Fantasy, Fortnite, Apex, or other online games, you might not know that for some people, these aren't just games: They're employment. The virtual world has been yielding very real profits for entrepreneurs who are able to buy, sell, and manage online real estate, currency, and more for cash (Holland and Ewalt 2006). If it seems strange that people would pay real money for imaginary goods, consider that for serious gamers the online world is of equal importance to the real one.

These entrepreneurs can sell items because the gaming sites have introduced scarcity into the virtual worlds. Scarcity of any resource, be it food, oil, gems, or virtual goods, drives supply and demand. When the supply is low, and demand is high, people are often willing to pay to get what they want. Even though the games offer enjoyment, scarcity builds tension and leads to a greater sense of satisfaction.

So how does it work? One of the ways to make such a living is by farming, gathering, or crafting certain resources, such as mining a particular ore or building a product to sell. The buyers are those looking for a competitive edge or who simply don't want to spend their time on those tasks. Other methods include power leveling, in which one person may pay another to play the game for them to acquire wealth and power in the game environment. As you may have read in the chapter on Media and Technology, an online presence can also pay dividends from advertisers or even directly from fans. Highly popular players stream their gameplay on Twitch and other services; others offer coaching, game guides, or reviews.

Then there is prize money or other compensation. Gaming tournaments may offer monetary awards to the winner. Finally, the growth of college and professional esports indicates that monetization and virtual/real-world crossovers are going to be continually lucrative in the form of sponsorship, prizes, and scholarships.

Polarization in the Workforce

The mix of jobs available in the United States began changing many years before the recession struck, and, as mentioned above, the American Dream has not always been easy to achieve. Geography, race, gender, and

other factors have always played a role in the reality of success. More recently, the increased **outsourcing**—or contracting a job or set of jobs to an outside source—of manufacturing jobs to developing nations has greatly diminished the number of high-paying, often unionized, blue-collar positions available. A similar problem has arisen in the white-collar sector, with many low-level clerical and support positions also being outsourced, as evidenced by the international technical-support call centers in Mumbai, India, and Newfoundland, Canada. The number of supervisory and managerial positions has been reduced as companies streamline their command structures and industries continue to consolidate through mergers. Even highly educated skilled workers such as computer programmers have seen their jobs vanish overseas.

The **automation** of the workplace, which replaces workers with technology, is another cause of the changes in the job market. Computers can be programmed to do many routine tasks faster and less expensively than people who used to do such tasks. Jobs like bookkeeping, clerical work, and repetitive tasks on production assembly lines all lend themselves to automation. Envision your local supermarket's self-scan checkout aisles. The automated cashiers affixed to the units take the place of paid employees. Now one cashier can oversee transactions at six or more self-scan aisles, which was a job that used to require one cashier per aisle.

Despite the ongoing economic recovery, the job market is actually growing in some areas, but in a very polarized fashion. **Polarization** means that a gap has developed in the job market, with most employment opportunities at the lowest and highest levels and few jobs for those with mid-level skills and education. At one end, there has been strong demand for low-skilled, low-paying jobs in industries like food service and retail. On the other end, some research shows that in certain fields there has been a steadily increasing demand for highly skilled and educated professionals, technologists, and managers. These high-skilled positions also tend to be highly paid (Autor 2010).

The fact that some positions are highly paid while others are not is an example of the class system, an economic hierarchy in which movement (both upward and downward) between various rungs of the socioeconomic ladder is possible. Theoretically, at least, the class system as it is organized in the United States is an example of a meritocracy, an economic system that rewards merit—typically in the form of skill and hard work—with upward mobility. A theorist working in the functionalist perspective might point out that this system is designed to reward hard work, which encourages people to strive for excellence in pursuit of reward. A theorist working in the conflict perspective might counter with the thought that hard work does not guarantee success even in a meritocracy, because social capital—the accumulation of a network of social relationships and knowledge that will provide a platform from which to achieve financial success—in the form of connections or higher education are often required to access the high-paying jobs. Increasingly, we are realizing intelligence and hard work aren't enough. If you lack knowledge of how to leverage the right names, connections, and players, you are unlikely to experience upward mobility.

With so many jobs being outsourced or eliminated by automation, what kind of jobs are there a demand for in the United States? While fishing and forestry jobs are in decline, in several markets jobs are increasing. These include community and social service, personal care and service, finance, computer and information services, and healthcare. The chart below, from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, illustrates areas of projected growth.

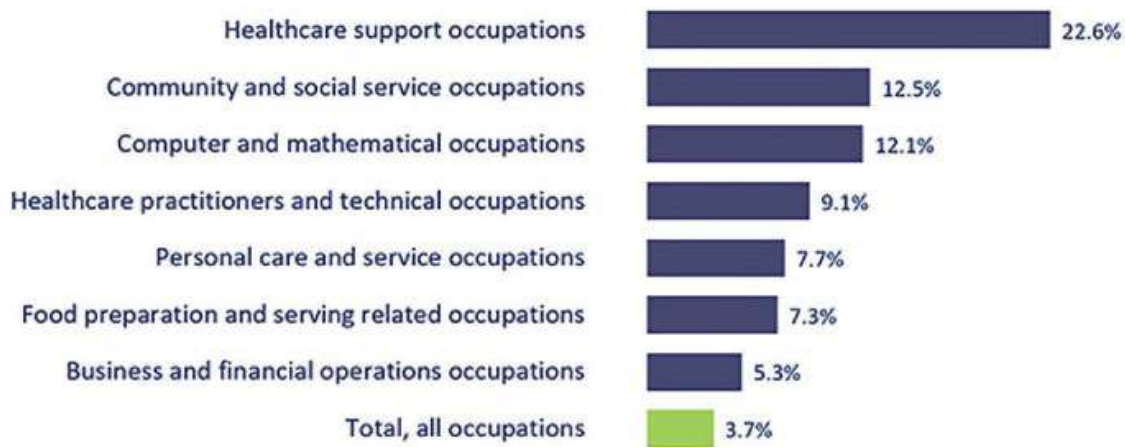


FIGURE 18.12 Projected Percent Change, by Selected Occupational Groups, 2019-29 — This chart shows the projected growth of several occupational groups. (Credit: Bureau of Labor Statistics)

Professions that typically require significant education and training and tend to be lucrative career choices. In particular, jobs that require some type of license or formal certification – be it healthcare, technology, or a trade – usually have a higher salary than those that do not. Service jobs, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, can include everything from jobs with the fire department to jobs scooping ice cream (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2019). There is a wide variety of training needed, and therefore an equally large wage potential discrepancy. One of the largest areas of growth by industry, rather than by occupational group (as seen above), is in the health field. This growth is across occupations, from associate-level nurse’s aides to management-level assisted-living staff. As baby boomers age, they are living longer than any generation before, and the growth of this population segment requires an increase in capacity throughout our country’s elder care system, from home healthcare nursing to geriatric nutrition.

Notably, jobs in farming are in decline. This is an area where those with less education traditionally could be assured of finding steady, if low-wage, work. With these jobs disappearing, more and more workers will find themselves untrained for the types of employment that are available.

Another projected trend in employment relates to the level of education and training required to gain and keep a job. As the chart below shows us, growth rates are higher for those with more education. Those with a professional degree or a master’s degree may expect job growth of 20 and 22 percent respectively, and jobs that require a bachelor’s degree are projected to grow 17 percent. At the other end of the spectrum, jobs that require a high school diploma or equivalent are projected to grow at only 12 percent, while jobs that require less than a high school diploma will grow 14 percent. Quite simply, without a degree, it will be more difficult to find a job. It is worth noting that these projections are based on overall growth across all occupation categories, so obviously there will be variations within different occupational areas. However, once again, those who are the least educated will be the ones least able to fulfill the American Dream.

Typical entry-level education	Employment change, 2019–29 (percent)	Median annual wage, 2019(1)
Total, all occupations	3.7	\$39,810
Doctoral or professional degree	5.9	\$107,660
Master's degree	15.0	\$76,180
Bachelor's degree	6.4	\$75,440
Associate's degree	6.2	\$54,940
Postsecondary nondegree award	5.6	\$39,940
Some college, no degree	-0.1	\$36,790
High school diploma or equivalent	1.5	\$37,930
No formal educational credential	3.3	\$25,700

TABLE 18.2 More education means more jobs (generally) and a higher amount of compensation.
(Credit: Bureau of Labor Statistics)

In the past, rising education levels in the United States had been able to keep pace with the rise in the number of education-dependent jobs. However, since the late 1970s, men have been enrolling in college at a lower rate than women, and graduating at a rate of almost 10 percent less. The lack of male candidates reaching the education levels needed for skilled positions has opened opportunities for women, minorities, and immigrants (Wang 2011).

Women in the Workforce

As discussed in the chapter introduction, women have been entering the workforce in ever-increasing numbers for several decades. They have also been finishing college and going on to earn higher degrees at higher rate than men do. This has resulted in many women being better positioned to obtain high-paying, high-skill jobs (Autor 2010).

While women are getting more and better jobs and their wages are rising more quickly than men's wages are, U.S. Census statistics show that they are still earning only 81 percent of what men are for the same positions (U.S. Census Bureau 2020).

Immigration and the Workforce

Simply put, people will move from where there are few or no jobs to places where there are jobs, unless something prevents them from doing so. The process of moving to a country is called immigration. Due to its reputation as the land of opportunity, the United States has long been the destination of all skill levels of workers. While the rate decreased somewhat during the economic slowdown of 2008, immigrants, both documented and undocumented, continue to be a major part of the U.S. workforce.

In 2005, before the recession arrived, immigrants made up a historic high of 14.7 percent of the workforce (Lowell et al. 2006). During the 1970s through 2000s, the United States experienced both an increase in college-educated immigrants and in immigrants who lacked a high school diploma. With this range across the

spectrum, immigrants are well positioned for both the higher-paid jobs and the low-wage low-skill jobs that are predicted to grow in the next decade (Lowell et al. 2006). In the early 2000s, it certainly seemed that the United States was continuing to live up to its reputation of opportunity. But what about during the recession of 2008, when so many jobs were lost and unemployment hovered close to 10 percent? How did immigrant workers fare then?

The answer is that as of June 2009, when the National Bureau of Economic Research (NEBR) declared the recession officially over, “foreign-born workers gained 656,000 jobs while native-born workers lost 1.2 million jobs” (Kochhar 2010). As these numbers suggest, the unemployment rate that year decreased for immigrant workers and increased for native workers. The reasons for this trend are not entirely clear. Some Pew research suggests immigrants tend to have greater flexibility to move from job to job and that the immigrant population may have been early victims of the recession, and thus were quicker to rebound (Kochhar 2010). Regardless of the reasons, the 2009 job gains are far from enough to keep them inured from the country’s economic woes. Immigrant earnings are in decline, even as the number of jobs increases, and some theorize that increase in employment may come from a willingness to accept significantly lower wages and benefits.

While the political debate is often fueled by conversations about low-wage-earning immigrants, there are actually as many highly skilled—and high-earning—immigrant workers as well. Many immigrants are sponsored by their employers who claim they possess talents, education, and training that are in short supply in the U.S. These sponsored immigrants account for 15 percent of all legal immigrants (Batalova and Terrazas 2010). Interestingly, the U.S. population generally supports these high-level workers, believing they will help lead to economic growth and not be a drain on government services (Hainmueller and Hiscox 2010). On the other hand, undocumented immigrants tend to be trapped in extremely low-paying jobs in agriculture, service, and construction with few ways to improve their situation without risking exposure and deportation.

Poverty in the United States

When people lose their jobs during a recession or in a changing job market, it takes longer to find a new one, if they can find one at all. If they do, it is often at a much lower wage or not full time. This can force people into poverty. In the United States, we tend to have what is called relative poverty, defined as being unable to live the lifestyle of the average person in your country. This must be contrasted with the absolute poverty that is frequently found in underdeveloped countries and defined as the inability, or near-inability, to afford basic necessities such as food (Byrns 2011).

We cannot even rely on unemployment statistics to provide a clear picture of total unemployment in the United States. First, unemployment statistics do not take into account **underemployment**, a state in which a person accepts a lower paying, lower status job than their education and experience qualifies them to perform. Second, unemployment statistics only count those:

1. who are actively looking for work
2. who have not earned income from a job in the past four weeks
3. who are ready, willing, and able to work

The unemployment statistics provided by the U.S. government are rarely accurate, because many of the unemployed become discouraged and stop looking for work. Not only that, but these statistics undercount the youngest and oldest workers, the chronically unemployed (e.g., homeless), and seasonal and migrant workers.

A certain amount of unemployment is a direct result of the relative inflexibility of the labor market, considered **structural unemployment**, which describes when there is a societal level of disjuncture between people seeking jobs and the available jobs. This mismatch can be geographic (they are hiring in one area, but most unemployed live somewhere else), technological (workers are replaced by machines, as in the auto industry), educational (a lack of specific knowledge or skills among the workforce) or can result from any sudden change in the types of jobs people are seeking versus the types of companies that are hiring.

Because of the high standard of living in the United States, many people are working at full-time jobs but are still poor by the standards of relative poverty. They are the working poor. The United States has a higher percentage of working poor than many other developed countries (Brady, Fullerton and Cross 2010). In terms of employment, the Bureau of Labor Statistics defines the working poor as those who have spent at least 27 weeks working or looking for work, and yet remain below the poverty line. Many of the facts about the working poor are as expected: Those who work only part time are more likely to be classified as working poor than those with full-time employment; higher levels of education lead to less likelihood of being among the working poor; and those with children under 18 are four times more likely than those without children to fall into this category. In 2009, the working poor included 10.4 million Americans, up almost 17 percent from 2008 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2011).

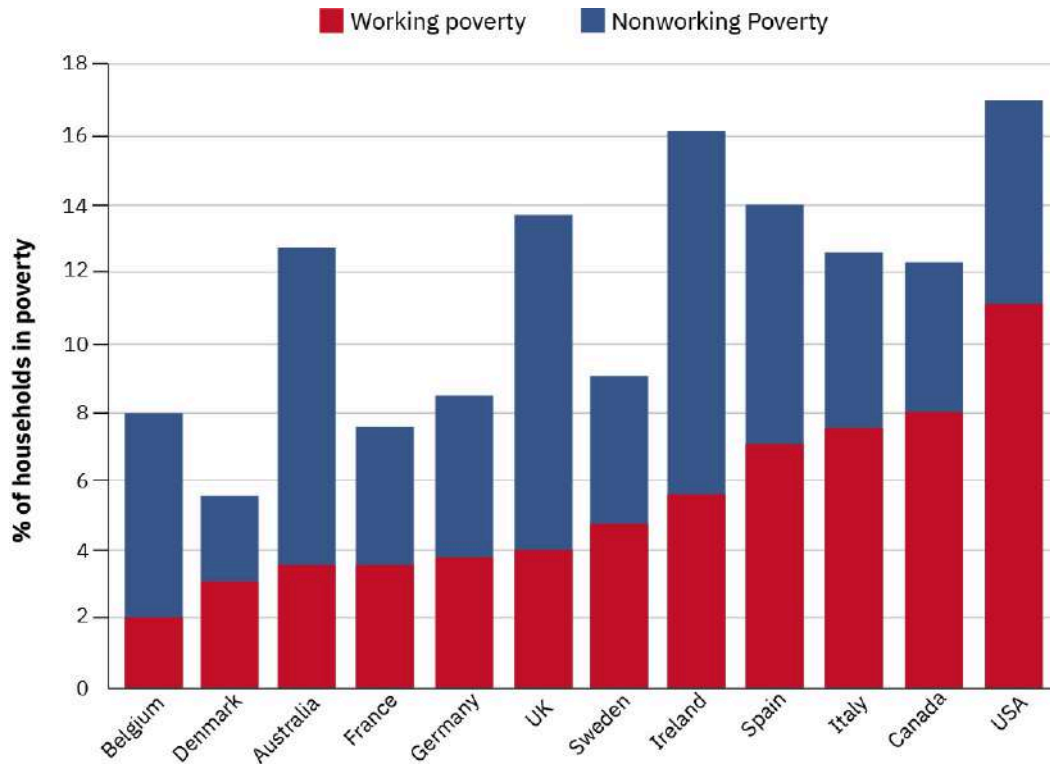


FIGURE 18.13 Working Poverty vs. Nonworking Poverty Rates, Circa 2000 — A higher percentage of the people living in poverty in the United States have jobs compared to other developed nations.

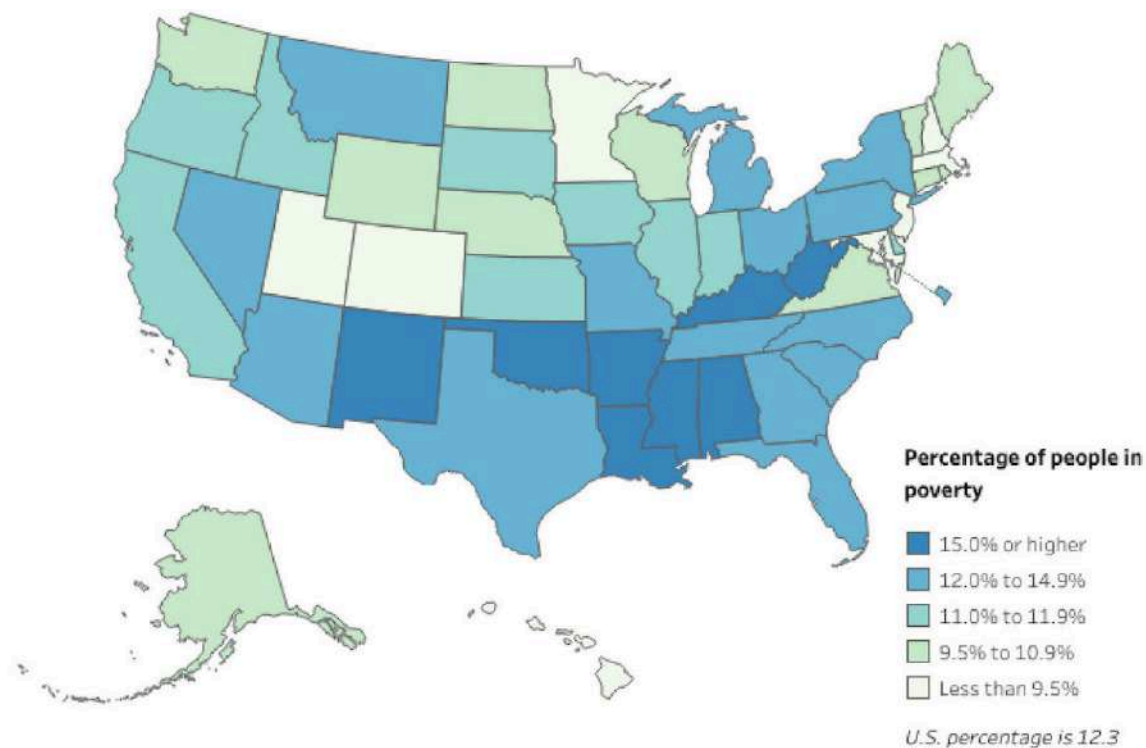


FIGURE 18.14 Poverty rates vary by states and region. As you can see, areas with the highest level of poverty are relatively tightly clustered, but the second-highest rates of poverty occur in states across the nation, from Nevada and Arizona in the Southwest to New York in the Northeast. (Credit: U.S. Census Bureau)

Most developed countries protect their citizens from absolute poverty by providing different levels of social services such as unemployment insurance, welfare, food assistance, and so on. They may also provide job training and retraining so that people can reenter the job market. In the past, the elderly were particularly vulnerable to falling into poverty after they stopped working; however, pensions, retirement plans, and Social Security were designed to help prevent this. A major concern in the United States is the rising number of young people growing up in poverty. Growing up poor can cut off access to the education and services people need to move out of poverty and into stable employment. As we saw, more education was often a key to stability, and those raised in poverty are the ones least able to find well-paying work, perpetuating a cycle.

Another notion important to sociologists and citizens is the expense of being poor. In a practical sense, people with more money on hand, better credit, a more stable income, and reliable insurance can purchase items or services in different ways than people who lack those things. For example, someone with a higher income can pay bills more reliably, as well as have more credit extended to them through credit cards or loans. When it comes time for those people to purchase a car, for example, they can likely negotiate a lower monthly payment or less money down. In an even more simplistic situation, people with more spending money can buy groceries in bulk, spending far less per unit than those who must purchase smaller portions. The single greatest expense for most adults is housing; beyond its significant portion of a family's expenses, housing drives many other costs, such as transportation (how close does someone live to the places they need to go), childcare, and other areas. And people in poverty pay significantly more for their housing than others – sometimes 70-80 percent of their total income. Those with fewer resources are also more likely to rent rather than own, so they do not build credit in the same way, nor do they have the opportunity to sell the property later and utilize their equity (Nobles 2019).

The ways that governments, organizations, individuals, and society as a whole help the poor are matters of significant debate, informed by extensive study. Sociologists and other professionals contribute to these conversations and provide evidence of the impacts of these circumstances and interventions to change them.

The decisions made on these issues have a profound effect on working in the United States.

Key Terms

automation workers being replaced by technology

bartering a process where people exchange one form of goods or services for another

capitalism an economic system in which there is private ownership (as opposed to state ownership) and where there is an impetus to produce profit, and thereby wealth

career inheritance a practice where children tend to enter the same or similar occupation as their parents

convergence theory a sociological theory to explain how and why societies move toward similarity over time as their economies develop

depression a sustained recession across several economic sectors

economy the social institution through which a society's resources (goods and services) are managed

global assembly lines a practice where products are assembled over the course of several international transactions

global commodity chains internationally integrated economic links that connect workers and corporations for the purpose of manufacture and marketing

market socialism a subtype of socialism that adopts certain traits of capitalism, like allowing limited private ownership or consulting market demand

mechanical solidarity a form of social cohesion that comes from sharing similar work, education, and religion, as might be found in simpler societies

mercantilism an economic policy based on national policies of accumulating silver and gold by controlling markets with colonies and other countries through taxes and customs charges

money an object that a society agrees to assign a value to so it can be exchanged as payment

mutualism a form of socialism under which individuals and cooperative groups exchange products with one another on the basis of mutually satisfactory contracts

organic solidarity a form of social cohesion that arises out of the mutual interdependence created by the specialization of work

outsourcing a practice where jobs are contracted to an outside source, often in another country

polarization a practice where the differences between low-end and high-end jobs become greater and the number of people in the middle levels decreases

recession two or more consecutive quarters of economic decline

socialism an economic system in which there is government ownership (often referred to as “state run”) of goods and their production, with an impetus to share work and wealth equally among the members of a society

structural unemployment a societal level of disjuncture between people seeking jobs and the jobs that are available

subsistence farming farming where farmers grow only enough to feed themselves and their families

underemployment a state in which a person accepts a lower paying, lower status job than his or her education and experience qualifies him or her to perform

xenophobia an illogical fear and even hatred of foreigners and foreign goods

Section Summary

18.1 Economic Systems

Economy refers to the social institution through which a society's resources (goods and services) are managed. The Agricultural Revolution led to development of the first economies that were based on trading goods. Mechanization of the manufacturing process led to the Industrial Revolution and gave rise to two major competing economic systems. Under capitalism, private owners invest their capital and that of others to produce goods and services they can sell in an open market. Prices and wages are set by supply and demand and competition. Under socialism, the means of production is commonly owned, and the economy is controlled centrally by government. Several countries' economies exhibit a mix of both systems. Convergence

theory seeks to explain the correlation between a country's level of development and changes in its economic structure.

18.2 Globalization and the Economy

Globalization refers to the process of integrating governments, cultures, and financial markets through international trade into a single world market. There are benefits and drawbacks to globalization. Often the countries that fare the worst are those that depend on natural resource extraction for their wealth. Many critics fear globalization gives too much power to multinational corporations and that political decisions are influenced by these major financial players.

18.3 Work in the United States

The job market in the United States is meant to be a meritocracy that creates social stratifications based on individual achievement. Economic forces, such as outsourcing and automation, are polarizing the workforce, with most job opportunities being either low-level, low-paying manual jobs or high-level, high-paying jobs based on abstract skills. Women's role in the workforce has increased, although women have not yet achieved full equality. Immigrants play an important role in the U.S. labor market. The changing economy has forced more people into poverty even if they are working. Welfare, Social Security, and other social programs exist to protect people from the worst effects of poverty.

Section Quiz

18.1 Economic Systems

1. Which of these is an example of a commodity?
 - a. A restaurant meal
 - b. Corn
 - c. A college lecture
 - d. A book, blog entry, or magazine article
2. When did the first economies begin to develop?
 - a. When all the hunter-gatherers died
 - b. When money was invented
 - c. When people began to grow crops and domesticate animals
 - d. When the first cities were built
3. What is the most important commodity in a postindustrial society?
 - a. Electricity
 - b. Money
 - c. Information
 - d. Computers
4. In which sector of an economy would someone working as a software developer be?
 - a. Primary
 - b. Secondary
 - c. Tertiary
 - d. Quaternary

5. Which is an economic policy based on national policies of accumulating silver and gold by controlling markets with colonies and other countries through taxes and customs charges?
 - a. Capitalism
 - b. Communism
 - c. Mercantilism
 - d. Mutualism
6. Who was the leading theorist on the development of socialism?
 - a. Karl Marx
 - b. Heidimarie Schwermer
 - c. Émile Durkheim
 - d. Adam Smith
7. The type of socialism now carried on by Russia is a form of _____ socialism.
 - a. centrally planned
 - b. market
 - c. utopian
 - d. zero-sum
8. Among the reasons socialism never developed into a political movement in the United States was that trade unions _____.
 - a. secured workers' rights
 - b. guaranteed health care
 - c. broke up monopolies
 - d. diversified the workforce
9. Which country serves as an example of convergence?
 - a. Singapore
 - b. North Korea
 - c. England
 - d. Canada

18.2 Globalization and the Economy

10. Ben lost his job when General Motors closed U.S. factories and opened factories in Mexico. Now, Ben is very anti-immigration and campaigns for large-scale deportation of Mexican nationals, even though, logically, their presence does not harm him and their absence will not restore his job. Ben might be experiencing _____.
 - a. xenophobia
 - b. global commodity chains
 - c. xenophilia
 - d. global assembly line
11. Which of the following is *not* an aspect of globalization?
 - a. Integrating governments through international trade
 - b. Integrating cultures through international trade
 - c. Integrating finance through international trade
 - d. Integrating child care through international trade

12. One reason critics oppose globalization is that it:
 - a. has positive impacts on world trade
 - b. has negative impacts on the environment
 - c. concentrates wealth in the poorest countries
 - d. has negative impacts on political stability
13. All of the following are characteristics of global cities, *except*:
 - a. headquarter multinational corporations
 - b. exercise significant international political influence
 - c. host headquarters of international NGOs
 - d. host influential philosophers
14. Which of the following is *not* a characteristic of multinational corporations?
 - a. A large share of their capital is collected from a variety of nationalities.
 - b. Their business is conducted without regard to national borders.
 - c. They concentrate wealth in the hands of core nations.
 - d. They are headquartered primarily in the United States.

18.3 Work in the United States

15. Which is evidence that the United States workforce is largely a meritocracy?
 - a. Job opportunities are increasing for highly skilled jobs.
 - b. Job opportunities are decreasing for midlevel jobs.
 - c. Highly skilled jobs pay better than low-skill jobs.
 - d. Women tend to make less than men do for the same job.
16. If someone does not earn enough money to pay for the essentials of life he or she is said to be _____ poor.
 - a. absolutely
 - b. essentially
 - c. really
 - d. working
17. What is the practice where the differences between low-end and high-end jobs become greater and the number of people in the middle levels decreases?
 - a. polarization
 - b. meritocracy
 - c. outsourcing
 - d. structural unemployment

Short Answer

18.1 Economic Systems

1. Explain the difference between state socialism with central planning and market socialism.
2. In what ways can capitalistic and socialistic economies converge?
3. Describe the impact a rapidly growing economy can have on families.
4. How do you think the United States economy will change as we move closer to a technology-driven service economy?

18.2 Globalization and the Economy

5. What impact has globalization had on the music you listen to, the books you read, or the movies or television you watch?
6. What effect can immigration have on the economy of a developing country?
7. Is globalization a danger to local cultures? Why, or why not?

18.3 Work in the United States

8. As polarization occurs in the U.S. job market, this will affect other social institutions. For example, if midlevel education won't lead to employment, we could see polarization in educational levels as well. Use the sociological imagination to consider what social institutions may be impacted, and how.
9. Do you believe we have a true meritocracy in the United States? Why, or why not?

Further Research

18.1 Economic Systems

Green jobs have the potential to improve not only your prospects of getting a good job, but the environment as well. [Visit this web site to learn more about the green revolution in jobs \(http://openstax.org/l/greenjobs\)](http://openstax.org/l/greenjobs)

One alternative to traditional capitalism is to have the workers own the company for which they work. [To learn more about company-owned businesses check out this website \(http://openstax.org/r/employee-owned\).](http://openstax.org/r/employee-owned)

18.2 Globalization and the Economy

The World Social Forum (WSF) was created in response to the creation of the World Economic Forum (WEF). The WSF is a coalition of organizations dedicated to the idea of a worldwide civil society and presents itself as an alternative to WEF, which it says is too focused on capitalism. [Learn more about the WSF here rights \(http://openstax.org/l/WSF\).](http://openstax.org/l/WSF)

18.3 Work in the United States

The role of women in the workplace is constantly changing. To learn more, check out this [page on the U.S. Department of Labor's web site \(http://openstax.org/l/women_workplace\).](http://openstax.org/l/women_workplace)

To see some jobs and employment trends for the next decade, check out [the Employment Projections Program of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics \(http://openstax.org/l/BLS\).](http://openstax.org/l/BLS)

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FIGURE 19.1 Medical personnel are at the front lines of extremely dangerous work. Personal protective clothing is essential for any health worker entering an infection zone. (Credit: Navy Medicine/flickr)

CHAPTER OUTLINE

- 19.1** The Social Construction of Health
- 19.2** Global Health
- 19.3** Health in the United States
- 19.4** Comparative Health and Medicine
- 19.5** Theoretical Perspectives on Health and Medicine

INTRODUCTION On March 19, 2014 a "mystery" hemorrhagic fever outbreak occurred in Liberia and Sierra Leone. This outbreak was later confirmed to be Ebola, a disease first discovered in what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo. The 2014-2016 outbreak sickened more than 28,000 people and left more than 11,000 dead (CDC 2020).

For the people in West Africa, the outbreak was personally tragic and terrifying. In much of the rest of the world, the outbreak increased tensions, but did not change anyone's behavior. Infection of U.S. medical staff (both in West Africa and at home) led to fear and distrust, and restrictions on flights from West Africa was one proposed way to stop the spread of the disease. Ebola first entered the United States via U.S. missionary medical staff who were infected in West Africa and then transported home for treatment. Several other Ebola outbreaks occurred in West Africa in subsequent years, killing thousands of people.

Six years after the massive 2014 epidemic, the people of West Africa faced another disease, but this time they were not alone. The Coronavirus pandemic swept across the globe in a matter of months. While some

countries managed the disease far better than others, it affected everyone. Highly industrialized countries, such as China, Italy, and the United States, were early centers of the outbreak. Brazil and India had later increases, as did the U.K. and Russia. Most countries took measures that were considered extreme—closing their borders, forcing schools and businesses to close, transforming their people's lives. Other nations went further, completely shutting down at the discovery of just a few cases. And some countries had mixed responses, typically resulting in high rates of infection and overwhelming losses of life. In Brazil and the United States, for example, political leaders and large swaths of the populations rejected measures to contain the virus. By the time vaccines became widely available, those two countries had the highest numbers of coronavirus death worldwide.

Did the world learn from the Ebola virus epidemics? Or did only parts of it learn? Prior to the United States facing the worst COVID-19 outbreak in the world, the government shut down travel, as did many countries in Europe. This was certainly an important step, but other measures fell short; conflicting messages about mask wearing and social distancing became political weapons amid the country's Presidential election, and localized outbreaks and spikes of deaths were continually traced to gatherings that occurred against scientific guidance. Brazil's president actively disputed medical opinions, rejected any travel or business restrictions, and was in conflict with many people in his own government (even his political allies); with Brazil's slower pace of vaccination compared to the U.S., it saw a steep increase in cases and deaths just as the United States' numbers started to decline.

Both those opposed to heavy restrictions and those who used them to fight the disease acknowledge that the impacts went far beyond physical health. Families shattered by the loss of a loved one had to go through the pain without relatives to support them at funerals or other gatherings. Many who recovered from the virus had serious health issues to contend with, while other people who delayed important treatments had larger problems than they normally would have. Fear, isolation, and strained familial relationships led to emotional problems. Many families lost income. Learning was certainly impacted as education practices went through sudden shifts. The true outcomes will likely not be fully understood for years after the pandemic is under control.

So now, after the height of the coronavirus pandemic, what does “health” mean to you? Does your opinion of it differ from your pre-COVID attitudes? Many people who became severely ill or died from COVID had other health issues (known as comorbidities) such as hypertension and obesity. Do you know people whose attitudes about their general health changed? Do you know people who are more or less suspicious of the government, more or less likely to listen to doctors or scientists? What do you think will be the best way to prevent illness and death should another pandemic strike?

Medical sociology is the systematic study of how humans manage issues of health and illness, disease and disorders, and healthcare for both the sick and the healthy. Medical sociologists study the physical, mental, and social components of health and illness. Major topics for medical sociologists include the doctor/patient relationship, the structure and socioeconomics of healthcare, and how culture impacts attitudes toward disease and wellness.

19.1 The Social Construction of Health

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Define the term medical sociology
- Differentiate between the cultural meaning of illness, the social construction of illness, and the social construction of medical knowledge

The social construction of health is a major research topic within medical sociology. At first glance, the concept of a social construction of health does not seem to make sense. After all, if disease is a measurable, physiological problem, then there can be no question of socially constructing disease, right? Well, it's not that

simple. The idea of the social construction of health emphasizes the socio-cultural aspects of the discipline's approach to physical, objectively definable phenomena.

Sociologists Conrad and Barker (2010) offer a comprehensive framework for understanding the major findings of the last fifty years of development in this concept. Their summary categorizes the findings in the field under three subheadings: the cultural meaning of illness, the social construction of the illness experience, and the social construction of medical knowledge.

The Cultural Meaning of Illness

Many medical sociologists contend that illnesses have both a biological and an experiential component and that these components exist independently of each other. Our culture, not our biology, dictates which illnesses are stigmatized and which are not, which are considered disabilities and which are not, and which are deemed contestable (meaning some medical professionals may find the existence of this ailment questionable) as opposed to definitive (illnesses that are unquestionably recognized in the medical profession) (Conrad and Barker 2010).

For instance, sociologist Erving Goffman (1963) described how social stigmas hinder individuals from fully integrating into society. In essence, Goffman (1963) suggests we might view illness as a stigma that can push others to view the ill in an undesirable manner. The **stigmatization of illness** often has the greatest effect on the patient and the kind of care they receive. Many contend that our society and even our healthcare institutions discriminate against certain diseases—like mental disorders, AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases, and skin disorders (Sartorius 2007). Facilities for these diseases may be sub-par; they may be segregated from other healthcare areas or relegated to a poorer environment. The stigma may keep people from seeking help for their illness, making it worse than it needs to be.

Contested illnesses are those that are questioned or questionable by some medical professionals. Disorders like fibromyalgia or chronic fatigue syndrome may be either true illnesses or only in the patients' heads, depending on the opinion of the medical professional. This dynamic can affect how a patient seeks treatment and what kind of treatment they receive.

The Social Construction of the Illness Experience

The idea of the social construction of the illness experience is based on the concept of reality as a social construction. In other words, there is no objective reality; there are only our own perceptions of it. The social construction of the illness experience deals with such issues as the way some patients control the manner in which they reveal their diseases and the lifestyle adaptations patients develop to cope with their illnesses.

In terms of constructing the illness experience, culture and individual personality both play a significant role. For some people, a long-term illness can have the effect of making their world smaller, more defined by the illness than anything else. For others, illness can be a chance for discovery, for re-imaging a new self (Conrad and Barker 2007). Culture plays a huge role in how an individual experiences illness. Widespread diseases like AIDS or breast cancer have specific cultural markers that have changed over the years and that govern how individuals—and society—view them.

Today, many institutions of wellness acknowledge the degree to which individual perceptions shape the nature of health and illness. Regarding physical activity, for instance, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommends that individuals use a standard level of exertion to assess their physical activity. This Rating of Perceived Exertion (RPE) gives a more complete view of an individual's actual exertion level, since heart rate or pulse measurements may be affected by medication or other issues (Centers for Disease Control 2011a). Similarly, many medical professionals use a comparable scale for perceived pain to help determine pain management strategies.

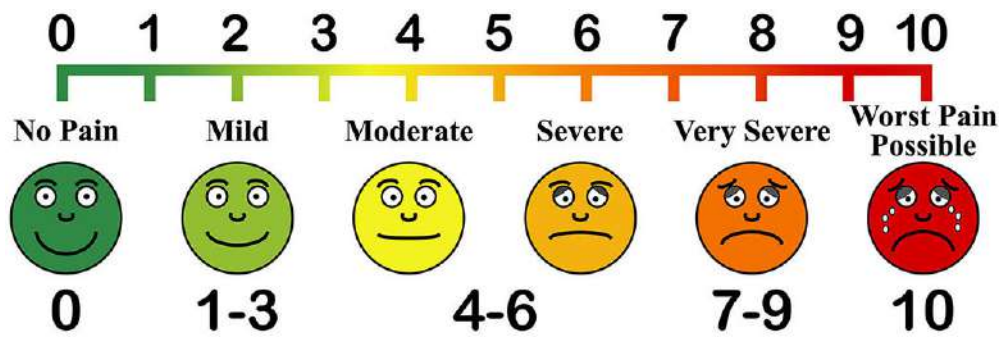


FIGURE 19.2 PAIN ASSESSMENT TOOL. The Mosby pain rating scale helps health care providers assess an individual's level of pain. What might a symbolic interactionist observe about this method? (Credit: Arvin61r58/openclipart)

The Social Construction of Medical Knowledge

Conrad and Barker show how medical knowledge is socially constructed; that is, it can both reflect and reproduce inequalities in gender, class, race, and ethnicity. Conrad and Barker (2011) use the example of the social construction of women's health and how medical knowledge has changed significantly in the course of a few generations. For instance, in the early nineteenth century, pregnant women were discouraged from driving or dancing for fear of harming the unborn child, much as they are discouraged, with more valid reason, from smoking or drinking alcohol today.



SOCIAL POLICY AND DEBATE

Has Breast Cancer Awareness Gone Too Far?



FIGURE 19.3 Pink ribbons are a ubiquitous reminder of breast cancer. But do pink ribbon chocolates do anything to eradicate the disease? (Credit: wishuponacupcake/Wikimedia Commons)

Every October, the world turns pink. Football and baseball players wear pink accessories. Skyscrapers and large public buildings are lit with pink lights at night. Shoppers can choose from a huge array of pink products. In 2014, people wanting to support the fight against breast cancer could purchase any of the following pink products: KitchenAid mixers, Master Lock padlocks and bike chains, Wilson tennis rackets, Fiat cars, and Smith & Wesson handguns. You read that correctly. The goal of all these pink products is to raise awareness and money for breast cancer. However, the relentless creep of pink has many people wondering if the pink marketing juggernaut has gone

too far.

Pink has been associated with breast cancer since 1991, when the Susan G. Komen Foundation handed out pink ribbons at its 1991 Race for the Cure event. Since then, the pink ribbon has appeared on countless products, and then by extension, the color pink has come to represent support for a cure of the disease. No one can argue about the Susan G. Komen Foundation's mission—to find a cure for breast cancer—or the fact that the group has raised millions of dollars for research and care. However, some people question if, or how much, all these products really help in the fight against breast cancer (Begos 2011).

The advocacy group Breast Cancer Action (BCA) position themselves as watchdogs of other agencies fighting breast cancer. They accept no funding from entities, like those in the pharmaceutical industry, with potential profit connections to this health industry. They've developed a trademarked “Think Before You Pink” campaign to provoke consumer questioning of the end contributions made to breast cancer by companies hawking pink wares. They do not advise against “pink” purchases; they just want consumers to be informed about how much money is involved, where it comes from, and where it will go. For instance, what percentage of each purchase goes to breast cancer causes? BCA does not judge how much is enough, but it informs customers and then encourages them to consider whether they feel the amount is enough (Think Before You Pink 2012).

BCA also suggests that consumers make sure that the product they are buying does not actually *contribute* to breast cancer, a phenomenon they call “pinkwashing.” This issue made national headlines in 2010, when the Susan G. Komen Foundation partnered with Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) on a promotion called “Buckets for the Cure.” For every bucket of grilled or regular fried chicken, KFC would donate fifty cents to the Komen Foundation, with the goal of reaching 8 million dollars: the largest single donation received by the foundation. However, some critics saw the partnership as an unholy alliance. Higher body fat and eating fatty foods has been linked to increased cancer risks, and detractors, including BCA, called the Komen Foundation out on this apparent contradiction of goals. Komen's response was that the program did a great deal to raise awareness in low-income communities, where Komen previously had little outreach (Hutchison 2010).

What do you think? Are fundraising and awareness important enough to trump issues of health? What other examples of “pinkwashing” can you think of?

19.2 Global Health

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Define social epidemiology
- Apply theories of social epidemiology to an understanding of global health issues
- Differentiate high-income and low-income nations

Social epidemiology is the study of the causes and distribution of diseases. Social epidemiology can reveal how social problems are connected to the health of different populations. These epidemiological studies show that the health problems of high-income nations differ from those of low-income nations, but also that diseases and their diagnosis are changing. Cardiovascular disease, for example, is now the both most prevalent disease and the disease most likely to be fatal in lower-income countries. And globally, 70 percent of cardiovascular disease cases and deaths are due to modifiable risks (Dagenais 2019).

Some theorists differentiate among three types of countries: core nations, semi-peripheral nations, and peripheral nations. Core nations are those that we think of as highly developed or industrialized, semi-peripheral nations are those that are often called developing or newly industrialized, and peripheral nations are those that are relatively undeveloped. While the most pervasive issue in the U.S. healthcare system is affordable access to healthcare, other core countries have different issues, and semi-peripheral and peripheral nations are faced with a host of additional concerns. Reviewing the status of global health offers insight into the various ways that politics and wealth shape access to healthcare, and it shows which populations are most

affected by health disparities.

Health in High-Income Nations

Obesity, which is on the rise in high-income nations, has been linked to many diseases, including cardiovascular problems, musculoskeletal problems, diabetes, and respiratory issues. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2011), obesity rates are rising in all countries, with the greatest gains being made in the highest-income countries. The United States has the highest obesity rate at 42 percent; some of these people are considered severely obese, which occurs in 9 percent of U.S. adults (Hales 2020).

Wallace Huffman and his fellow researchers (2006) contend that several factors are contributing to the rise in obesity in developed countries:

- Improvements in technology and reduced family size have led to a reduction of work to be done in household production.
- Unhealthy market goods, including processed foods, sweetened drinks, and sweet and salty snacks are replacing home-produced goods.
- Leisure activities are growing more sedentary, for example, computer games, web surfing, and television viewing.
- More workers are shifting from active work (agriculture and manufacturing) to service industries.
- Increased access to passive transportation has led to more driving and less walking.

Obesity and weight issues have significant societal costs, including lower life expectancies and higher shared healthcare costs.

While ischemic heart disease is the single most prevalent cause of death in higher-income countries, cancers of all types combine to be a higher overall cause of death. Cancer accounts for twice as many deaths as cardiovascular disease in higher-income countries (Mahase 2019).

Health in Low-Income Nations

In peripheral nations with low per capita income, it is not the cost of healthcare that is the most pressing concern. Rather, low-income countries must manage such problems as infectious disease, high infant mortality rates, scarce medical personnel, and inadequate water and sewer systems. Due to such health concerns, low-income nations have higher rates of infant mortality and lower average life spans.

One of the biggest contributors to medical issues in low-income countries is the lack of access to clean water and basic sanitation resources. According to a 2014 UNICEF report, almost half of the developing world's population lacks improved sanitation facilities. The World Health Organization (WHO) tracks health-related data for 193 countries, and organizes them by region. In their 2011 World Health Statistics report, they document the following statistics:

- Globally in 2019, the rate of mortality for children under five was 38 per 1,000 live births, which is a dramatic change from previous decades. (In 1990, the rate was 93 deaths per 1,000 births (World Health Organization 2020.)) In low-income countries, however, that rate is much higher. The child mortality rate in low-income nations was 11 times higher than that of high-income countries—76 deaths per 1,000 births compared to 7 deaths per 1,000 births (Keck 2020). To consider it regionally, the highest under-five mortality rate remains in the WHO African Region (74 per 1000 live births), around 9 times higher than that in the WHO European Region (8 per 1000 live births) (World Health Organization 2021).
- The most frequent causes of death in children under five years old are pneumonia, diarrhea, congenital anomalies, preterm birth complications, birth asphyxia/trauma, and malaria, all of which can be prevented or treated with affordable interventions including immunization, adequate nutrition, safe water and food and quality care by a trained health provider when needed.

The availability of doctors and nurses in low-income countries is one-tenth that of nations with a high income.

Challenges in access to medical education and access to patients exacerbate this issue for would-be medical professionals in low-income countries (World Health Organization 2011).

19.3 Health in the United States

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Apply social epidemiology to health in the United States
- Explain disparities of health based on gender, socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity
- Summarize mental health and disability issues in the United States
- Explain the terms stigma and medicalization

Health in the United States is a complex and often contradictory issue. On the one hand, as one of the wealthiest nations, the United States fares well in health comparisons with the rest of the world. However, the United States also lags behind almost every industrialized country in terms of providing care to *all* its citizens. The following sections look at different aspects of health in the United States.

Health by Race and Ethnicity

When looking at the social epidemiology of the United States, it is hard to miss the disparities among races. The discrepancy between Black and White Americans shows the gap clearly; in 2018, the average life expectancy for White males was approximately five years longer than for Black males: 78.8 compared to 74.7 (Wamsley 2021). (Note that in 2020 life expectancies of all races declined further, though the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic was a significant cause.) Other indicators show a similar disparity. The 2018 infant mortality rates for different races and ethnicities are as follows:

- Non-Hispanic Black people: 10.8
- Native Hawaiian people or other Pacific Islanders: 9.4
- Native American/Alaska Native people: 8.2
- Hispanic people: 4.9
- Non-Hispanic White people: 4.6
- Asian and Asian American people: 3.6 (Centers for Disease Control 2021)

According to a report from the Henry J. Kaiser Foundation (2007), African Americans also have higher incidence of several diseases and causes of mortality, from cancer to heart disease to diabetes. In a similar vein, it is important to note that ethnic minorities, including Mexican Americans and Native Americans, also have higher rates of these diseases and causes of mortality than White people.

Lisa Berkman (2009) notes that this gap started to narrow during the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s, but it began widening again in the early 1980s. What accounts for these perpetual disparities in health among different ethnic groups? Much of the answer lies in the level of healthcare that these groups receive. The National Healthcare Disparities Report shows that even after adjusting for insurance differences, racial and ethnic minority groups receive poorer quality of care and less access to care than dominant groups. The Report identified these racial inequalities in care:

- Black people, Native Americans, and Alaska Native people received worse care than Whites for about 40 percent of quality measures.
- Hispanic people, Native Hawaiian people, and Pacific Islanders received worse care than White people for more than 30 percent of quality measures.
- Asian people received worse care than White people for nearly 30 percent of quality measures but better care for nearly 30 percent of quality measures (Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality 2020).

Health by Socioeconomic Status

Discussions of health by race and ethnicity often overlap with discussions of health by socioeconomic status, since the two concepts are intertwined in the United States. As the Agency for Health Research and Quality

(2010) notes, “racial and ethnic minorities are more likely than non-Hispanic whites to be poor or near poor,” so much of the data pertaining to subordinate groups is also likely to be pertinent to low socioeconomic groups. Marilyn Winkleby and her research associates (1992) state that “one of the strongest and most consistent predictors of a person's morbidity and mortality experience is that person's socioeconomic status (SES). This finding persists across all diseases with few exceptions, continues throughout the entire lifespan, and extends across numerous risk factors for disease.” **Morbidity** is the incidence of disease.

It is important to remember that economics are only part of the SES picture; research suggests that education also plays an important role. Phelan and Link (2003) note that many behavior-influenced diseases like lung cancer (from smoking), coronary artery disease (from poor eating and exercise habits), and AIDS initially were widespread across SES groups. However, once information linking habits to disease was disseminated, these diseases decreased in high SES groups and increased in low SES groups. This illustrates the important role of education initiatives regarding a given disease, as well as possible inequalities in how those initiatives effectively reach different SES groups.

Health by Gender

Women are affected adversely both by unequal access to and institutionalized sexism in the healthcare industry. According to a recent report from the Kaiser Family Foundation, women experienced a decline in their ability to see needed specialists between 2001 and 2008. In 2008, one quarter of women questioned the quality of their healthcare (Ranji and Salganico 2011). Quality is partially indicated by access and cost. In 2018, roughly one in four (26%) women—compared to one in five (19%) men—reported delaying healthcare or letting conditions go untreated due to cost. Because of costs, approximately one in five women postponed preventive care, skipped a recommended test or treatment, or reduced their use of medication due to cost (Kaiser Family Foundation 2018).

We can see an example of institutionalized sexism in the way that women are more likely than men to be diagnosed with certain kinds of mental disorders. Psychologist Dana Becker notes that 75 percent of all diagnoses of Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) are for women according to the *Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. This diagnosis is characterized by instability of identity, of mood, and of behavior, and Becker argues that it has been used as a catch-all diagnosis for too many women. She further decries the pejorative connotation of the diagnosis, saying that it predisposes many people, both within and outside of the profession of psychotherapy, against women who have been so diagnosed (Becker).

Many critics also point to the medicalization of women's issues as an example of institutionalized sexism. **Medicalization** refers to the process by which previously normal aspects of life are redefined as deviant and needing medical attention to remedy. Historically and contemporaneously, many aspects of women's lives have been medicalized, including menstruation, premenstrual syndrome, pregnancy, childbirth, and menopause. The medicalization of pregnancy and childbirth has been particularly contentious in recent decades, with many women opting against the medical process and choosing a more natural childbirth. Fox and Worts (1999) find that all women experience pain and anxiety during the birth process, but that social support relieves both as effectively as medical support. In other words, medical interventions are no more effective than social ones at helping with the difficulties of pain and childbirth. Fox and Worts further found that women with supportive partners ended up with less medical intervention and fewer cases of postpartum depression. Of course, access to quality birth care outside the standard medical models may not be readily available to women of all social classes.



SOCIOLOGY IN THE REAL WORLD

Medicalization of Sleeplessness



FIGURE 19.4 Many people fail to get enough sleep. But is insomnia a disease that should be cured with medication? (Credit: Wikimedia Commons)

How is your “sleep hygiene?” Sleep hygiene refers to the lifestyle and sleep habits that contribute to sleeplessness. Bad habits that can lead to sleeplessness include inconsistent bedtimes, lack of exercise, late-night employment, napping during the day, and sleep environments that include noise, lights, or screen time (National Institutes of Health 2011a).

According to the National Institute of Health, examining sleep hygiene is the first step in trying to solve a problem with sleeplessness.

For many people in the United States, however, making changes in sleep hygiene does not seem to be enough. According to a 2006 report from the Institute of Medicine, sleeplessness is an underrecognized public health problem affecting up to 70 million people. It is interesting to note that in the months (or years) after this report was released, advertising by the pharmaceutical companies behind Ambien, Lunesta, and Sepracor (three sleep aids) averaged \$188 million weekly promoting these drugs (Gellene 2009).

According to a study in the *American Journal of Public Health* (2011), prescriptions for sleep medications increased dramatically from 1993 to 2007. While complaints of sleeplessness during doctor’s office visits more than doubled during this time, insomnia diagnoses increased more than sevenfold, from about 840,000 to 6.1 million. The authors of the study conclude that sleeplessness has been medicalized as insomnia, and that “insomnia may be a public health concern, but potential overtreatment with marginally effective, expensive medications with nontrivial side effects raises definite population health concerns” (Moloney, Konrad, and Zimmer 2011). Indeed, a study published in 2004 in the *Archives of Internal Medicine* shows that cognitive behavioral therapy, not medication, was the most effective sleep intervention (Jacobs, Pace-Schott, Stickgold, and Otto 2004).

A century ago, people who couldn’t sleep were told to count sheep. Now they pop a pill, and all those pills add up to a very lucrative market for the pharmaceutical industry. Is this industry behind the medicalization of sleeplessness,

or is it just responding to a need?

Mental Health and Disability

The treatment received by those defined as mentally ill or disabled varies greatly from country to country. In the post-millennial United States, those of us who have never experienced such a disadvantage take for granted the rights our society guarantees for each citizen. We do not think about the relatively recent nature of the protections, unless, of course, we know someone constantly inconvenienced by the lack of accommodations or misfortune of suddenly experiencing a temporary disability.

Mental Health

People with mental disorders (a condition that makes it more difficult to cope with everyday life) and people with mental illness (a severe, lasting mental disorder that requires long-term treatment) experience a wide range of effects. According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), the United States has over 50 million adults with mental illness or mental disorder, or 20 percent of the total adult population. Of these, 13 million have what is considered serious mental illness or mental disorder (5 percent of the adult population); serious mental illness is that which causes impairment or disability (National Institute of Mental Health 2021). Finally, 16.5 percent of children aged 6-17 experienced mental illness or disorder (National Alliance on Mental Illness 2021).

The most common mental disorders in the United States are **anxiety disorders**. Almost 18 percent of U.S. adults are likely to be affected in a single year, and 28 percent are likely to be affected over the course of a lifetime (Anxiety and Depression Institute of America 2021). It is important to distinguish between occasional feelings of anxiety and a true anxiety disorder. Anxiety is a normal reaction to stress that we all feel at some point, but anxiety disorders are feelings of worry and fearfulness that last for months at a time. Anxiety disorders include obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), panic disorders, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and both social and specific phobias.

The second most common mental disorders in the United States are **mood disorders**; roughly 10 percent of U.S. adults are likely to be affected yearly, while 21 percent are likely to be affected over the course of a lifetime (National Institute of Mental Health 2005). Mood disorders are the most common causes of illness-related hospitalization in the U.S. (Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality 2021). Major mood disorders are depression and dysthymic disorder. Like anxiety, depression might seem like something that everyone experiences at some point, and it is true that most people feel sad or “blue” at times in their lives. A true depressive episode, however, is more than just feeling sad for a short period. It is a long-term, debilitating illness that usually needs treatment to cure. Bipolar disorder is characterized by dramatic shifts in energy and mood, often affecting the individual’s ability to carry out day-to-day tasks. Bipolar disorder used to be called manic depression because of the way people would swing between manic and depressive episodes.

Depending on what definition is used, there is some overlap between mood disorders and **personality disorders**, which affect 9 percent of people in the United States yearly. A personality disorder is an enduring and inflexible pattern of long duration leading to significant distress or impairment, that is not due to use of substances or another medical condition. In other words, personality disorders cause people to behave in ways that are seen as abnormal to society but seem normal to them.

The diagnosis and classification regarding personality disorders has been evolving and is somewhat controversial. To guide diagnosis and potential treatments of mental disorders, the American Psychological Association publishes the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual on Mental Disorders* (DSM). Experts working on the latest version initially proposed changing the categories of personality disorders. However, the final publication retains the original ten categories, but contains an alternate/emerging approach for classifying them. This evolution demonstrates the challenges and the wide array of treating conditions, and also represents areas of difference between theorists, practitioners, governing bodies, and other stakeholders. As

discussed in the Sociological Research chapter, study and investigation is a diligent and multi-dimensional process. As the diagnostic application evolves, we will see how their definitions help scholars across disciplines understand the intersection of health issues and how they are defined by social institutions and cultural norms.



FIGURE 19.5 Medication is a common option for children with ADHD. (Credit: Deviation56/Wikimedia Commons)

Another commonly diagnosed mental disorder is Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), which affects 9 percent of U.S. children and 4 percent of adults on a lifetime basis (Danielson 2018). Since ADHD is one of the most common childhood disorders, it is often incorrectly considered only a disease found in children. But ADHD can be a serious issue for adults who either had been diagnosed as children or who are diagnosed as adults. ADHD is marked by difficulty paying attention, difficulty controlling behavior, and hyperactivity. As a result, it can lead to educational and behavioral issues in children, success issues in college, and challenges in workplace and family life. However, there is some social debate over whether such drugs are being overprescribed (American Psychological Association). A significant difficulty in diagnosis, treatment, and societal understanding of ADHD is that it changes in expression based on a wide range of factors, including age (CHADD 2020).

Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) encompass a group of developmental brain disorders that are characterized by "deficits in social interaction, verbal and nonverbal communication, and engagement in repetitive behaviors or interests" (National Institute of Mental Health). As of 2021, the CDC estimates that 1 in 54 children has an autism spectrum disorder. Beyond the very high incidence, the rate of diagnosis has been increasing steadily as awareness became more widespread. In 2005, the rate was 1 in 166 children; in 2012 it was 1 in 88 children. The rate of increase and awareness has assisted diagnosis and treatment, but autism is a cause of significant fear among parents and families. Because of its impact on relationships and especially verbal communication, children with autism (and their parents) can be shunned, grossly misunderstood, and mistreated. For example, people with an autism spectrum disorder who cannot verbalize are often assumed to be unintelligent, or are sometimes left out of conversations or activities because others feel they cannot participate. Parents may be reluctant to let their children play with or associate with children with ASD. Adults with ASD go through many of the same misconceptions and mistreatments, such as being denied opportunities or being made to feel unwelcome (Applied Behavior Analysis).

Disability



FIGURE 19.6 The handicapped accessible sign indicates that people with disabilities can access the facility. The Americans with Disabilities Act requires that access be provided to everyone. (Credit: Ltjljlj/Wikimedia Commons)

Disability refers to a reduction in one's ability to perform everyday tasks. The World Health Organization makes a distinction between the various terms used to describe handicaps that's important to the sociological perspective. They use the term **impairment** to describe the physical limitations, while reserving the term disability to refer to the social limitation.

Before the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990, people in the United States with disabilities were often excluded from opportunities and social institutions many of us take for granted. This occurred not only through employment and other kinds of discrimination but also through casual acceptance by most people in the United States of a world designed for the convenience of the able-bodied. Imagine being in a wheelchair and trying to use a sidewalk without the benefit of wheelchair-accessible curbs. Imagine as a blind person trying to access information without the widespread availability of Braille. Imagine having limited motor control and being faced with a difficult-to-grasp round door handle. Issues like these are what the ADA tries to address. Ramps on sidewalks, Braille instructions, and more accessible door levers are all accommodations to help people with disabilities.

People with disabilities can be stigmatized by their illnesses. **Stigmatization** means their identity is spoiled; they are labeled as different, discriminated against, and sometimes even shunned. They are labeled (as an interactionist might point out) and ascribed a master status (as a functionalist might note), becoming “the blind girl” or “the boy in the wheelchair” instead of someone afforded a full identity by society. This can be especially true for people who are disabled due to mental illness or disorders.

As discussed in the section on mental health, many mental health disorders can be debilitating and can affect a person's ability to cope with everyday life. This can affect social status, housing, and especially employment. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2011), people with a disability had a higher rate of unemployment than people without a disability in 2010: 14.8 percent to 9.4 percent. This unemployment rate refers only to people actively looking for a job. In fact, eight out of ten people with a disability are considered “out of the labor force;” that is, they do not have jobs and are not looking for them. The combination of this population and the high unemployment rate leads to an employment-population ratio of 18.6 percent among those with disabilities. The employment-population ratio for people without disabilities was much higher, at 63.5 percent (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2011).



SOCIOLOGY IN THE REAL WORLD

Obesity: The Last Acceptable Prejudice?

Many people who see a person with obesity may make negative assumptions about them based on their size. According to a study from the Yale Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity, large people are the object of “widespread negative stereotypes that overweight and obese persons are lazy, unmotivated, lacking in self-discipline, less competent, noncompliant, and sloppy” (Puhl and Heuer 2009).

Historically, both in the United States and elsewhere, it was considered acceptable to discriminate against people based on prejudiced opinions. Even after slavery was abolished through the 13th Amendment in 1865, institutionalized racism and prejudice against Black people persisted. In an example of **stereotype interchangeability**, the same insults that are flung today at the overweight and obese population (lazy, for instance) have been flung at various racial and ethnic groups in earlier history.

Why is it considered acceptable to feel prejudice toward—even to hate—people with obesity? Puhl and Heuer suggest that these feelings stem from the perception that obesity is preventable through self-control, better diet, and more exercise. Highlighting this contention is the fact that studies have shown that people’s perceptions of obesity are more positive when they think the obesity was caused by non-controllable factors like biology (a thyroid condition, for instance) or genetics.

Health experts emphasize that obesity is a disease, and that it is not the result of simple overeating. There are often a number of contributing factors that make it more difficult to avoid. Even with some understanding of non-controllable factors that might affect obesity, people with obesity are still subject to stigmatization. Puhl and Heuer’s study is one of many that document discrimination at work, in the media, and even in the medical profession. Large people are less likely to get into college than thinner people, and they are less likely to succeed at work.

Stigmatization of people with obesity comes in many forms, from the seemingly benign to the potentially illegal. In movies and television shows, overweight people are often portrayed negatively, or as stock characters who are the butt of jokes. One study found that in children’s movies “obesity was equated with negative traits (evil, unattractive, unfriendly, cruel) in 64 percent of the most popular children’s videos. In 72 percent of the videos, characters with thin bodies had desirable traits, such as kindness or happiness” (Hines and Thompson 2007). In movies and television for adults, the negative portrayal is often meant to be funny. Think about the way you have seen obese people portrayed in movies and on television; now think of any other subordinate group being openly denigrated in such a way. It is difficult to find a parallel example.

19.4 Comparative Health and Medicine

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Explain the different types of health care available in the United States
- Compare the health care system of the United States with that of other countries

There are broad, structural differences among the healthcare systems of different countries. In core nations, those differences might arise in the administration of healthcare, while the care itself is similar. In peripheral and semi-peripheral countries, a lack of basic healthcare administration can be the defining feature of the system. Most countries rely on some combination of modern and traditional medicine. In core countries with large investments in technology, research, and equipment, the focus is usually on modern medicine, with traditional (also called alternative or complementary) medicine playing a secondary role. In the United States, for instance, the American Medical Association (AMA) resolved to support the incorporation of complementary and alternative medicine in medical education. In developing countries, even quickly modernizing ones like China, traditional medicine (often understood as “complementary” by the western world) may still play a

larger role.

U.S. Healthcare

U.S. healthcare coverage can broadly be divided into two main categories: **public healthcare** (government-funded) and **private healthcare** (privately funded).

The two main publicly funded healthcare programs are Medicare, which provides health services to people over sixty-five years old as well as people who meet other standards for disability, and Medicaid, which provides services to people with very low incomes who meet other eligibility requirements. Other government-funded programs include service agencies focused on Native Americans (the Indian Health Service), Veterans (the Veterans Health Administration), and children (the Children's Health Insurance Program).

Private insurance is typically categorized as either employment-based insurance or direct-purchase insurance. Employment-based insurance is health plan coverage that is provided in whole or in part by an employer or union; it can cover just the employee, or the employee and their family. Direct purchase insurance is coverage that an individual buys directly from a private company.

Even with all these options, a sizable portion of the U.S. population remains uninsured. In 2019, about 26 million people, or 8 percent of U.S. residents, had no health insurance. 2020 saw that number go up to 31 million (Keith 2020). Several more million had health insurance for part of the year (Keisler-Starkey 2020). Uninsured people are at risk of both severe illness and also chronic illnesses that develop over time. Fewer uninsured people engage in regular check-ups or preventative medicine, and rely on urgent care for a range of acute health issues.

The number of uninsured people is far lower than in previous decades. In 2013 and in many of the years preceding it, the number of uninsured people was in the 40 million range, or roughly 18 percent of the population. The Affordable Care Act, which came into full force in 2014, allowed more people to get affordable insurance. The uninsured number reached its lowest point in 2016, before beginning to climb again (Garfield 2019).

People having some insurance may mask the fact that they could be underinsured; that is, people who pay at least 10 percent of their income on healthcare costs not covered by insurance or, for low-income adults, those whose medical expenses or deductibles are at least 5 percent of their income (Schoen, Doty, Robertson, and Collins 2011).

Why are so many people uninsured or underinsured? Skyrocketing healthcare costs are part of the issue. While most people get their insurance through their employer, not all employers offer it, especially retail companies or small businesses in which many of the workers may be part time. Finally, for many years insurers could deny coverage to people with pre-existing conditions--previous illnesses or chronic diseases.

The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (often abbreviated ACA or nicknamed Obamacare) was a landmark change in U.S. healthcare. Passed in 2010 and fully implemented in 2014, it increased eligibility to programs like Medicaid, helped guarantee insurance coverage for people with pre-existing conditions, and established regulations to make sure that the premium funds collected by insurers and care providers go directly to medical care. It also included an **individual mandate**, which requires everyone to have insurance coverage by 2014 or pay a penalty. A series of provisions, including significant subsidies, are intended to address the discrepancies in income that are currently contributing to high rates of uninsurance and underinsurance. In 2012 the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the ACA's individual mandate. 29 million people in the United States have gained health insurance under ACA (Economic Policy Institute 2021).



FIGURE 19.7 The Affordable Care Act has been a savior for some and a target for others. As Congress and various state governments sought to have it overturned with laws or to have it diminished by the courts, supporters took to the streets to express its importance to them. (Credit: Molly Adams)

The ACA remains contentious. The Supreme Court ruled in the case of *National Federation of Independent Businesses v. Sebelius* in 2012, that states cannot be forced to participate in the PPACA's Medicaid expansion. This ruling opened the door to further challenges to the ACA in Congress and the Federal courts, some state governments, conservative groups and independent businesses. The ACA has been a driving factor in elections and public opinion. In 2010 and 2014, many Republican gains in Congressional seats were related to fierce concern about Obamacare. However, once millions of people were covered by the law and the economy continued to improve, public sentiment and elections swung the other way. Healthcare was the top issue for voters, and desire to preserve the law was credited for many of the Democratic gains in the election, which carried over to 2020.

Healthcare Elsewhere

Clearly, healthcare in the United States has some areas for improvement. But how does it compare to healthcare in other countries? Many people in the United States are fond of saying that this country has the best healthcare in the world, and while it is true that the United States has a higher quality of care available than many peripheral or semi-peripheral nations, it is not necessarily the “best in the world.” In a report on how U.S. healthcare compares to that of other countries, researchers found that the United States does “relatively well in some areas—such as cancer care—and less well in others—such as mortality from conditions amenable to prevention and treatment” (Docteur and Berenson 2009).

One critique of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act is that it will create a system of socialized medicine, a term that for many people in the United States has negative connotations lingering from the Cold War era and earlier. Under a **socialized medicine** system, the government owns and runs the system. It employs the doctors, nurses, and other staff, and it owns and runs the hospitals (Klein 2009). The best example of socialized medicine is in Great Britain, where the National Health System (NHS) gives free healthcare to all its residents. And despite some U.S. citizens’ knee-jerk reaction to any healthcare changes that hint of

socialism, the United States has one socialized system with the Veterans Health Administration.

It is important to distinguish between socialized medicine, in which the government owns the healthcare system, and **universal healthcare**, which is simply a system that guarantees healthcare coverage for everyone. Germany, Singapore, and Canada all have universal healthcare. People often look to Canada's universal healthcare system, Medicare, as a model for the system. In Canada, healthcare is publicly funded and is administered by the separate provincial and territorial governments. However, the care itself comes from private providers. This is the main difference between universal healthcare and socialized medicine. The Canada Health Act of 1970 required that all health insurance plans must be “available to all eligible Canadian residents, comprehensive in coverage, accessible, portable among provinces, and publicly administered” (International Health Systems Canada 2010).

Heated discussions about socialization of medicine and managed-care options seem frivolous when compared with the issues of healthcare systems in developing or underdeveloped countries. In many countries, per capita income is so low, and governments are so fractured, that healthcare as we know it is virtually non-existent. Care that people in developed countries take for granted—like hospitals, healthcare workers, immunizations, antibiotics and other medications, and even sanitary water for drinking and washing—are unavailable to much of the population. Organizations like Doctors Without Borders, UNICEF, and the World Health Organization have played an important role in helping these countries get their most basic health needs met.

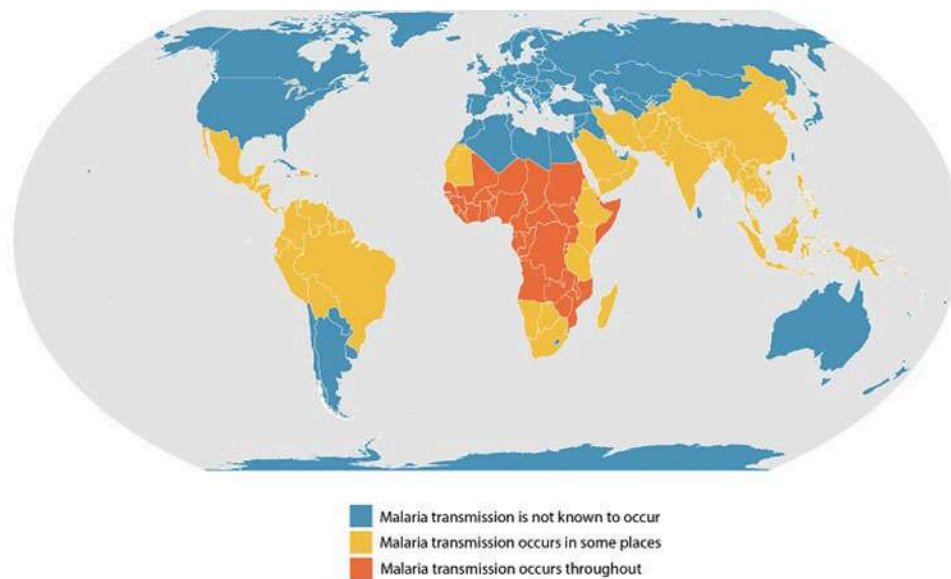


FIGURE 19.8 This map shows the countries where malaria is known to occur. In low-income countries, malaria is still a common cause of death. (Credit: CDC/Wikimedia Commons)

WHO, which is the health arm of the United Nations, set eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000 with the aim of reaching these goals by 2015. Some of the goals deal more broadly with the socioeconomic factors that influence health, but MDGs 4, 5, and 6 all relate specifically to large-scale health concerns, the likes of which most people in the United States will never contemplate. MDG 4 is to reduce child mortality, MDG 5 aims to improve maternal health, and MDG 6 strives to combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases. The goals may not seem particularly dramatic, but the numbers behind them show how serious they are.

For MDG 4, the WHO reports that 2009 infant mortality rates in “children under 5 years old in the WHO African Region (127 per 1000 live births) and in low-income countries (117 per 1000 live births) [had dropped], but they were still higher than the 1990 global level of 89 per 1000 live births” (World Health Organization 2011). The fact that these deaths could have been avoided through appropriate medicine and clean drinking water shows the importance of healthcare.

Much progress has been made on MDG 5, with maternal deaths decreasing by 34 percent. However, almost all maternal deaths occurred in developing countries, with the African region still experiencing high numbers (World Health Organization 2011).

On MDG 6, the WHO is seeing some decreases in per capita incidence rates of malaria, tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS, and other diseases. However, the decreases are often offset by population increases (World Health Organization 2011). Again, the lowest-income countries, especially in the African region, experience the worst problems with disease. An important component of disease prevention and control is **epidemiology**, or the study of the incidence, distribution, and possible control of diseases. Fear of Ebola contamination, primarily in Western Africa but also to a smaller degree in the United States, became national news in the summer and fall of 2014.

19.5 Theoretical Perspectives on Health and Medicine

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Apply functionalist, conflict theorist, and interactionist perspectives to health issues

Each of the three major theoretical perspectives approaches the topics of health, illness, and medicine differently. You may prefer just one of the theories that follow, or you may find that combining theories and perspectives provides a fuller picture of how we experience health and wellness.

Functionalism

According to the functionalist perspective, health is vital to the stability of the society, and therefore sickness is a sanctioned form of deviance. Talcott Parsons (1951) was the first to discuss this in terms of the **sick role**: patterns of expectations that define appropriate behavior for the sick and for those who take care of them.

According to Parsons, the sick person has a specific role with both rights and responsibilities. To start with, the sick person has not chosen to be sick and should not be treated as responsible for her condition. The sick person also has the right of being exempt from normal social roles; they are not required to fulfill the obligation of a well person and can avoid her normal responsibilities without censure. However, this exemption is temporary and relative to the severity of the illness. The exemption also requires **legitimation** by a physician; that is, a physician must certify that the illness is genuine.

The responsibility of the sick person is twofold: to try to get well and to seek technically competent help from a physician. If the sick person stays ill longer than is appropriate (malingers), they may be stigmatized.

Parsons argues that since the sick are unable to fulfill their normal societal roles, their sickness weakens the society. Therefore, it is sometimes necessary for various forms of social control to bring the behavior of a sick person back in line with normal expectations. In this model of health, doctors serve as gatekeepers, deciding who is healthy and who is sick—a relationship in which the doctor has all the power. But is it appropriate to allow doctors so much power over deciding who is sick? And what about people who are sick, but are unwilling to leave their positions for any number of reasons (personal/social obligations, financial need, or lack of insurance, for instance).

Conflict Perspective

Theorists using the conflict perspective suggest that issues with the healthcare system, as with most other social problems, are rooted in capitalist society. According to conflict theorists, capitalism and the pursuit of profit lead to the **commodification** of health: the changing of something not generally thought of as a commodity into something that can be bought and sold in a marketplace. In this view, people with money and power—the dominant group—are the ones who make decisions about how the healthcare system will be run. They therefore ensure that they will have healthcare coverage, while simultaneously ensuring that subordinate groups stay subordinate through lack of access. This creates significant healthcare—and health—disparities between the dominant and subordinate groups.

Alongside the health disparities created by class inequalities, there are a number of health disparities created by racism, sexism, ageism, and heterosexism. When health is a commodity, the poor are more likely to experience illness caused by poor diet, to live and work in unhealthy environments, and are less likely to challenge the system. In the United States, a disproportionate number of racial minorities also have less economic power, so they bear a great deal of the burden of poor health. It is not only the poor who suffer from the conflict between dominant and subordinate groups. For many years now, same-sex couples have been denied spousal benefits, either in the form of health insurance or in terms of medical responsibility. Further adding to the issue, doctors hold a disproportionate amount of power in the doctor/patient relationship, which provides them with extensive social and economic benefits.

While conflict theorists are accurate in pointing out certain inequalities in the healthcare system, they do not give enough credit to medical advances that would not have been made without an economic structure to support and reward researchers: a structure dependent on profitability. Additionally, in their criticism of the power differential between doctor and patient, they are perhaps dismissive of the hard-won medical expertise possessed by doctors and not patients, which renders a truly egalitarian relationship more elusive.

Symbolic Interactionism

According to theorists working in this perspective, health and illness are both socially constructed. As we discussed in the beginning of the chapter, interactionists focus on the specific meanings and causes people attribute to illness. The term **medicalization of deviance** refers to the process that changes “bad” behavior into “sick” behavior. A related process is **demedicalization**, in which “sick” behavior is normalized again. Medicalization and demedicalization affect who responds to the patient, how people respond to the patient, and how people view the personal responsibility of the patient (Conrad and Schneider 1992).



FIGURE 19.9 In this engraving from the nineteenth century, “King Alcohol” is shown with a skeleton on a barrel of alcohol. The words “poverty,” “misery,” “crime,” and “death” hang in the air behind him. (Credit: Library of Congress/ Wikimedia Commons)

An example of medicalization is illustrated by the history of how our society views alcohol and alcoholism. During the nineteenth century, people who drank too much were considered bad, lazy people. They were called drunks, and it was not uncommon for them to be arrested or run out of a town. Drunks were not treated

in a sympathetic way because, at that time, it was thought that it was their own fault that they could not stop drinking. During the latter half of the twentieth century, however, people who drank too much were increasingly defined as alcoholics: people with a disease or a genetic predisposition to addiction who were not responsible for their drinking. With alcoholism defined as a disease and not a personal choice, alcoholics came to be viewed with more compassion and understanding. Thus, “badness” was transformed into “sickness.”

There are numerous examples of demedicalization in history as well. During the Civil War era, enslaved people who escaped from their enslavers were diagnosed with a mental disorder called drapetomania. This has since been reinterpreted as a completely appropriate response to being enslaved. A more recent example is homosexuality, which was labeled a mental disorder or a sexual orientation disturbance by the American Psychological Association until 1973.

While interactionism does acknowledge the subjective nature of diagnosis, it is important to remember who most benefits when a behavior becomes defined as illness. Pharmaceutical companies make billions treating illnesses such as fatigue, insomnia, and hyperactivity that may not actually be illnesses in need of treatment, but opportunities for companies to make more money.

Key Terms

- anxiety disorders** feelings of worry and fearfulness that last for months at a time
- commodification** the changing of something not generally thought of as a commodity into something that can be bought and sold in a marketplace
- contested illnesses** illnesses that are questioned or considered questionable by some medical professionals
- demedicalization** the social process that normalizes “sick” behavior
- disability** a reduction in one’s ability to perform everyday tasks; the World Health Organization notes that this is a social limitation
- epidemiology** the study of the incidence, distribution, and possible control of diseases
- impairment** the physical limitations a less-able person faces
- individual mandate** a government rule that requires everyone to have insurance coverage or they will have to pay a penalty
- legitimation** the act of a physician certifying that an illness is genuine
- medical sociology** the systematic study of how humans manage issues of health and illness, disease and disorders, and healthcare for both the sick and the healthy
- medicalization** the process by which aspects of life that were considered bad or deviant are redefined as sickness and needing medical attention to remedy
- medicalization of deviance** the process that changes “bad” behavior into “sick” behavior
- mood disorders** long-term, debilitating illnesses like depression and bipolar disorder
- morbidity** the incidence of disease
- mortality** the number of deaths in a given time or place
- personality disorders** disorders that cause people to behave in ways that are seen as abnormal to society but seem normal to them
- private healthcare** health insurance that a person buys from a private company; private healthcare can either be employer-sponsored or direct-purchase
- public healthcare** health insurance that is funded or provided by the government
- sick role** the pattern of expectations that define appropriate behavior for the sick and for those who take care of them
- social epidemiology** the study of the causes and distribution of diseases
- socialized medicine** when the government owns and runs the entire healthcare system
- stereotype interchangeability** stereotypes that don’t change and that get recycled for application to a new subordinate group
- stigmatization** the act of spoiling someone's identity; they are labeled as different, discriminated against, and sometimes even shunned due to an illness or disability
- stigmatization of illness** illnesses that are discriminated against and whose sufferers are looked down upon or even shunned by society
- underinsured** people who spend at least 10 percent of their income on healthcare costs that are not covered by insurance
- universal healthcare** a system that guarantees healthcare coverage for everyone

Section Summary

19.1 The Social Construction of Health

Medical sociology is the systematic study of how humans manage issues of health and illness, disease and disorders, and healthcare for both the sick and the healthy. The social construction of health explains how society shapes and is shaped by medical ideas.

19.2 Global Health

Social epidemiology is the study of the causes and distribution of diseases. From a global perspective, the health issues of high-income nations tend toward diseases like cancer as well as those that are linked to obesity, like heart disease, diabetes, and musculoskeletal disorders. Low-income nations are more likely to contend with cardiovascular disease, infectious disease, high infant mortality rates, scarce medical personnel, and inadequate water and sanitation systems.

19.3 Health in the United States

Although people in the United States are generally in good health compared to less developed countries, the United States is still facing challenging issues such as a prevalence of obesity and diabetes. Moreover, people in the United States of historically disadvantaged racial groups, ethnicities, socioeconomic status, and gender experience lower levels of healthcare. Mental health and disability are health issues that are significantly impacted by social norms.

19.4 Comparative Health and Medicine

There are broad, structural differences among the healthcare systems of different countries. In core nations, those differences include publicly funded healthcare, privately funded healthcare, and combinations of both. In peripheral and semi-peripheral countries, a lack of basic healthcare administration can be the defining feature of the system.

19.5 Theoretical Perspectives on Health and Medicine

While the functionalist perspective looks at how health and illness fit into a fully functioning society, the conflict perspective is concerned with how health and illness fit into the oppositional forces in society. The interactionist perspective is concerned with how social interactions construct ideas of health and illness.

Section Quiz

19.1 The Social Construction of Health

1. Who determines which illnesses are stigmatized?
 - a. Therapists
 - b. The patients themselves
 - c. Society
 - d. All of the above

2. Chronic fatigue syndrome is an example of _____.
 - a. a stigmatized disease
 - b. a contested illness
 - c. a disability
 - d. demedicalization

3. The Rating of Perceived Exertion (RPE) is an example of _____.
 - a. the social construction of health
 - b. medicalization
 - c. disability accommodations
 - d. a contested illness

19.2 Global Health

4. What is social epidemiology?
 - a. The study of why some diseases are stigmatized and others are not
 - b. The study of why diseases spread
 - c. The study of the mental health of a society
 - d. The study of the causes and distribution of diseases
5. Core nations are also known as _____.
 - a. high-income nations
 - b. newly industrialized nations
 - c. low-income nations
 - d. developing nations
6. Many deaths in high-income nations are linked to _____.
 - a. cancer
 - b. obesity
 - c. mental illness
 - d. lack of clean water
7. According to the World Health Organization, what was the most frequent cause of death for children under five in low-income countries?
 - a. Starvation
 - b. Thirst
 - c. Pneumonia and diarrheal diseases
 - d. All of the above

19.3 Health in the United States

8. Which of the following statements is *not* true?
 - a. The life expectancy of Black males in the United States is approximately five years shorter than for White males.
 - b. The infant mortality rate for Black people in the United States is almost double than it is for White people
 - c. Black people have lower cancer rates than White people.
 - d. Hispanic people have worse access to care than non-Hispanic White people.
9. The process by which aspects of life that were considered bad or deviant are redefined as sickness and needing medical attention to remedy is called:
 - a. deviance
 - b. medicalization
 - c. demedicalization
 - d. intersection theory
10. What are the most commonly diagnosed mental disorders in the United States?
 - a. ADHD
 - b. Mood disorders
 - c. Autism spectrum disorders
 - d. Anxiety disorders

11. Sidewalk ramps and Braille signs are examples of _____.
 - a. disabilities
 - b. accommodations required by the Americans with Disabilities Act
 - c. forms of accessibility for people with disabilities
 - d. both b and c
12. The high unemployment rate among people with disabilities may be a result of _____.
 - a. medicalization
 - b. obesity
 - c. stigmatization
 - d. all of the above

19.4 Comparative Health and Medicine

13. Which public healthcare system offers insurance primarily to people over sixty-five years old?
 - a. Medicaid
 - b. Medicare
 - c. Veterans Health Administration
 - d. All of the above
14. Which program is an example of socialized medicine?
 - a. Canada's system
 - b. The United States' Veterans Health Administration
 - c. The United States' new system under the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act
 - d. Medicaid
15. What does the individual mandate provision of the 2010 U.S. healthcare reform do?
 - a. Requires everyone to buy insurance from the government
 - b. Requires everyone to sign up for Medicaid
 - c. Requires everyone to have insurance or pay a penalty
 - d. None of the above
16. Great Britain's healthcare system is an example of _____.
 - a. socialized medicine
 - b. private healthcare
 - c. single-payer private healthcare
 - d. universal private healthcare
17. What group created the Millennium Development Goals?
 - a. UNICEF
 - b. The Kaiser Family Foundation
 - c. Doctors Without Borders
 - d. The World Health Organization

19.5 Theoretical Perspectives on Health and Medicine

18. Which of the following is *not* part of the rights and responsibilities of a sick person under the functionalist perspective?
 - a. The sick person is not responsible for his condition.
 - b. The sick person must try to get better.
 - c. The sick person can take as long as she wants to get better.
 - d. The sick person is exempt from the normal duties of society.
19. The class, race, and gender inequalities in our healthcare system support the _____ perspective.
 - a. conflict
 - b. interactionist
 - c. functionalist
 - d. all of the above
20. The removal of homosexuality from the *DSM* is an example of _____.
 - a. medicalization
 - b. deviance
 - c. interactionist theory
 - d. demedicalization

Short Answer

19.1 The Social Construction of Health

1. Pick a common illness and describe which parts of it are medically constructed, and which parts are socially constructed.
2. What diseases are the most stigmatized? Which are the least? Is this different in different cultures or social classes?

19.2 Global Health

3. If social epidemiologists studied the United States in the colonial period, what differences would they find between now and then?
4. What do you think are some of the contributing factors to obesity-related diseases in the United States?

19.3 Health in the United States

5. What factors contribute to the disparities in health among racial, ethnic, and gender groups in the United States?
6. Do you know anyone with a mental disorder? How does it affect his or her life?

19.4 Comparative Health and Medicine

7. What do you think are the best and worst parts of the PPACA? Why?
8. Compare and contrast the healthcare system of the United States with the WHO's Millennium Development Goals.

19.5 Theoretical Perspectives on Health and Medicine

9. What do you think are the best and worst parts of the PPACA? Why?
10. Compare and contrast the healthcare system of the United States with the WHO's Millennium Development Goals.

Further Research

19.1 The Social Construction of Health

Read this [article, which discusses the measures nations and people may take to prevent or manage future pandemics \(https://openstax.org/l/pandemics1\)](https://openstax.org/l/pandemics1). It contains many links to international efforts and studies. What do you think about our commitment to these steps?

19.2 Global Health

Study this [map on global life expectancies \(http://openstax.org/l/global_life_expectancies\)](http://openstax.org/l/global_life_expectancies). What trends do you notice?

19.3 Health in the United States

People with disabilities, disorders, and neurodiversity are often mistreated even by others who do not know the best way to act around them. Children with autism experience this continually. Evaluate this [guide from parents of children with autism \(https://openstax.org/l/behavior1\)](https://openstax.org/l/behavior1) to learn more about how to treat and think about people with autism.

19.4 Comparative Health and Medicine

[Project Mosquito Net \(http://openstax.org/l/project_mosquito_net\)](http://openstax.org/l/project_mosquito_net) says that mosquito nets sprayed with insecticide can reduce childhood malaria deaths by half.

19.5 Theoretical Perspectives on Health and Medicine

A massive surge in substance use disorders and overdoses occurred in the United States based on usage of prescription drugs. The causes were widespread and were rooted in pharmaceutical company approaches, medical policies, and social causes. Read more in [article about the causes of the U.S. opioid crisis \(https://openstax.org/l/substance_disorders\)](https://openstax.org/l/substance_disorders).

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Population, Urbanization, and the Environment

20



FIGURE 20.1 A view from space makes it easy to see differences in population. Lighted areas are urban centers, containing larger and larger portions of the world's population. Darker areas are sparsely populated. Beyond the global scale, the differences within regions is notable. Africa is mostly empty of lights with the exception of a few densely populated areas to the south, west, and north. India is almost clearly outlined by its lights, showing a stark contrast with the nations to its north and west, with a line of light indicating the cities along the Indus River in Pakistan. The United States almost seems to be split in half at the line formed by Dallas, Oklahoma City, and Wichita. (Credit NASA Goddard Space Flight Center)

CHAPTER OUTLINE

20.1 Demography and Population

20.2 Urbanization

20.3 The Environment and Society

INTRODUCTION **Fracking**, another word for hydraulic fracturing, is a method used to recover gas and oil from shale by drilling down into the earth and directing a high-pressure mixture of water, sand, and proprietary chemicals into the rock. While energy companies view fracking as a profitable revolution in the industry, there are a number of concerns associated with the practice.

First, fracking requires huge amounts of water. Water transportation comes at a high environmental cost. Once mixed with fracking chemicals, water is unsuitable for human and animal consumption, though it is estimated that between 10 percent and 90 percent of the contaminated water is returned to the water cycle. Second, the chemicals used in a fracking mix are potentially carcinogenic. These chemicals may pollute groundwater near the extraction site (Colborn, Kwiatkowski, Schultz, and Bachran 2011; United States 2011). Industry leaders suggest that such contamination is unlikely, and that when it does occur, it is incidental and related to unavoidable human error rather than an expected risk of the practice, but the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's study of fracking is ongoing (Environmental Protection Agency 2014). The third concern is that fracking causes minor earthquakes by undermining the seismic stability of an area, though far more induced

earthquakes are caused by traditional oil and gas production (USGS n.d.) Finally, gas is not a renewable source of energy; this is a negative in the eyes of those who oppose continued reliance on fossil fuels.

Fracking is not without its advantages. Its supporters offer statistics that suggest it reduces unemployment and contributes to economic growth (IHS Global Insights 2012). Since it allows energy companies access to previously nonviable and completely untapped oil and gas reserves, fracking boosts domestic oil production and lowers energy costs (IHS Global Insights 2012). Finally, since natural gas is a lower-emission fuel than coal, fracking reduces the airborne environmental impacts of industrial energy.

One complexity of lower-priced natural gas production is that demand for coal has plummeted. Coal is both more expensive to produce and more environmentally damaging than natural gas, and the coal industry is concentrated in a few areas, such as Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Kentucky. Automation had already depleted the employment opportunities in the industry; decades before fracking became widespread, coal companies began widespread replacement of people with machines (Vavra 2017). Although the U.S. was producing more coal than it had in previous decades, it was doing so with fewer workers than it ever had. At its peak, the coal industry employed nearly a million people, and its thriving towns drove other businesses. By 2015, the industry employs about 50,000 people (Money Illusion 2016). Inexpensive natural gas is just another factor that is contributing to the industry's continued issues. Coal companies continually shutter, and entire regions are full of newly laid off workers who cannot find employment.

As you read this chapter, consider how an increasing global population can balance environmental concerns with opportunities for industrial and economic growth. Think about how much water pollution can be justified by the need to lower U.S. dependence of foreign energy supplies. Is the economic growth associated with fracking worth some environmental degradation? As we see a related industry – coal – further diminished due to fracking, do we owe its workers some compensation or additional support?

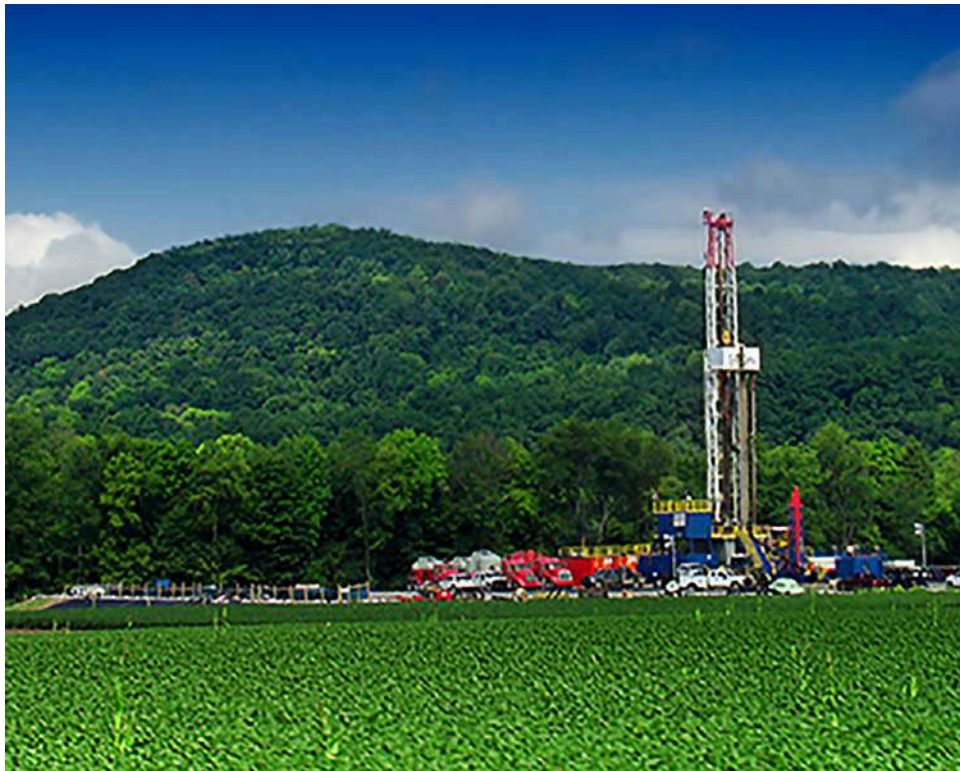


FIGURE 20.2 This is a Marcellus shale gas-drilling site in Lycoming County, Pennsylvania. (Credit: Nicholas A. Tonelli/flickr)

As the discussion of fracking illustrates, there are important societal issues connected to the environment and how and where people live. Sociologists begin to examine these issues through demography, or the study of

population and how it relates to urbanization, the study of the social, political, and economic relationships in cities. Environmental sociologists look at the study of how humans interact with their environments. Today, as has been the case many times in history, we are at a point of conflict in a number of these areas. The world's population reached seven billion between 2011 and 2012. When will it reach eight billion? Can our planet sustain such a population? We generate more trash than ever, from Starbucks cups to obsolete cell phones containing toxic chemicals to food waste that could be composted. You may be unaware of where your trash ends up. And while this problem exists worldwide, trash issues are often more acute in urban areas. Cities and city living create new challenges for both society and the environment that make interactions between people and places of critical importance.

How do sociologists study population and urbanization issues? Functionalist sociologists might focus on the way all aspects of population, urbanization, and the environment serve as vital and cohesive elements, ensuring the continuing stability of society. They might study how the growth of the global population encourages emigration and immigration, and how emigration and immigration serve to strengthen ties between nations. Or they might research the way migration affects environmental issues; for example, how have forced migrations, and the resulting changes in a region's ability to support a new group, affected both the displaced people and the area of relocation? Another topic a functionalist might research is the way various urban neighborhoods specialize to serve cultural and financial needs.

A conflict theorist, interested in the creation and reproduction of inequality, might ask how peripheral nations' lack of family planning affects their overall population in comparison to core nations that tend to have lower fertility rates. Or, how do inner cities become ghettos, nearly devoid of jobs, education, and other opportunities? A conflict theorist might also study environmental racism and other forms of environmental inequality. For example, which parts of New Orleans society were the most responsive to the evacuation order during Hurricane Katrina? Which area was most affected by the flooding? And where (and in what conditions) were people from those areas housed, both during and before the evacuation?

A symbolic interactionist interested in the day-to-day interaction of groups and individuals might research topics like the way family-planning information is presented to and understood by different population groups, the way people experience and understand urban life, and the language people use to convince others of the presence (or absence) of global climate change. For example, some politicians wish to present the study of global warming as junk science, and other politicians insist it is a proven fact.

20.1 Demography and Population

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Explain demographic measurements like fertility and mortality rates
- Describe a variety of demographic theories, such as Malthusian, cornucopian, zero population growth, and demographic transition theories
- Evaluate current population trends and patterns
- Differentiate between an internally displaced person, an asylum-seeker, and a refugee



FIGURE 20.3 At nearly 8 billion, Earth's population is always on the move, but the methods vary. As you see here, bicycles, motorcycles, and scooters are more common in Vietnam than they are in many U.S. cities. And in some countries, masks were common well before COVID-19. (Credit: Esin Üstün/flickr)

Between 2011 and 2012, we reached a population milestone of 7 billion humans on the earth's surface. The rapidity with which this happened demonstrated an exponential increase from the time it took to grow from 5 billion to 6 billion people. In short, the planet is filling up. We'll have 8 billion people in this decade. While the population is increasing overall, there are certain countries and regions where growth is slowing. Relocation and migration also change the makeup and quantity of people in an area. In order to properly understand these dynamics and make decisions regarding them, we turn to **demography**, or the study of populations. Three critical aspects of demography are fertility, mortality, and migration.

The **fertility rate** of a society is a measure noting the number of children born. The fertility number is generally lower than the fecundity number, which measures the potential number of children that could be born to women of childbearing age. Sociologists measure fertility using the crude birthrate (the number of live births per 1,000 people per year). Just as fertility measures childbearing, the **mortality rate** is a measure of the number of people who die. The crude death rate is a number derived from the number of deaths per 1,000 people per year. When analyzed together, fertility and mortality rates help researchers understand the overall growth occurring in a population.

Another key element in studying populations is the movement of people into and out of an area. Migration may take the form of immigration, which describes movement into an area to take up permanent residence, or emigration, which refers to movement out of an area to another place of permanent residence. Migration might be voluntary (as when college students study abroad), involuntary (as when Syrians evacuated war-torn areas), or forced (as when many Native American tribes were removed from the lands they'd lived in for generations).

BIG PICTURE

Mass Migration Crises



FIGURE 20.4 This March 2021 image of dozens of children in plastic-lined holding areas was one of a group of photos that sparked public outcry in the early days of the Biden administration, years after similar scenes and situations in the 2014 and 2018 border crises. (Credit: Defense Visual Information Distribution Service)

At least once during each of the last three Presidential administrations, the United States has faced a crisis at its southern border. While images of children in crowded holding areas, covered in piles of shiny plastic emergency blankets, were often associated with the Trump Presidency, Presidents Obama and Biden saw children in the same conditions. The holding facilities, described as cages by some and often referred to as “perreras” (dog kennels) or “hieleras” (ice boxes) by the migrating people, are meant to be temporary stopovers while people await hearings or related refugee processes. But during a number of occasions, the number of people crossing the border was so large – including, at times, tens of thousands of children – that the system became overwhelmed. The conditions are deplorable. The outcomes are uncertain. But the people cross the border anyway.

How did we get here? Bipartisan legislation passed in 2008 guarantees unaccompanied minors a hearing with an immigration judge where they may request asylum based on a “credible” fear of persecution or torture (U.S. Congress 2008). In some cases, these children are looking for relatives and can be placed with family while awaiting a hearing on their immigration status; in other cases, they become involved with the foster system or are placed in one of the 170 housing facilities run by nonprofit or for-profit groups. Finally, for people who turn 18 while still in the process, they may be transferred to detention centers, sometimes on their birthday (Montoya-Galvez 2021). Many people in America were either accepting or unaware of these policies and situations until crises occurred in 2014 and 2018–19. At those points of incredible influxes of migrant children, border control, refugee services, and advocacy organizations were overwhelmed by the surge. Both the Obama and Trump administrations pushed for changes in laws or guidelines for enforcement (Gomez 2014 and Kanno-Youngs 2020).

The Obama administration sought to make the decision process faster. In 2014, over 50,000 unaccompanied minors were taken into custody, creating the backlog discussed above. The Trump administration sought to discourage immigration through policies such as separating parents and children who arrived together. The policy was decried by members of Trump's own party, as well as many other organizations, and was eventually dealt a series of legal blows before the President reversed it. Later investigations determined that hundreds, if

not thousands, of children remained separated from their parents for extended periods of time (Spagat 2019).

While the situations at the border are extremely threatening to children's health and safety, people and policymakers in the United States are divided on how to address the situation. In many cases, these children are fleeing various kinds of violence and extreme poverty. The U.S. government has repeatedly indicated that the best way to avoid these crises is to address those conditions in the migrants' home countries. But even with financial aid for those nations and pressure on their governments to crack down on illegal activity, it is unlikely that the situation will change quickly or consistently. The Biden administration may not be the last to face a surge of immigrant children at its border.

A functional perspective theorist might focus on the dysfunctions caused by the sudden influx of underage asylum seekers, while a conflict perspective theorist might look at the way social stratification influences how the members of a developed country are treating the lower-status migrants from less-developed countries in Latin America. An interactionist theorist might see significance in the attitude of those protesting the presence of migrant children. Which theoretical perspective makes the most sense to you?

Population Growth

Changing fertility, mortality, and migration rates make up the total **population composition**, a snapshot of the demographic profile of a population. This number can be measured for societies, nations, world regions, or other groups. The population composition includes the **sex ratio**, the number of men for every hundred women, as well as the **population pyramid**, a picture of population distribution by sex and age ([Figure 20.5](#)).

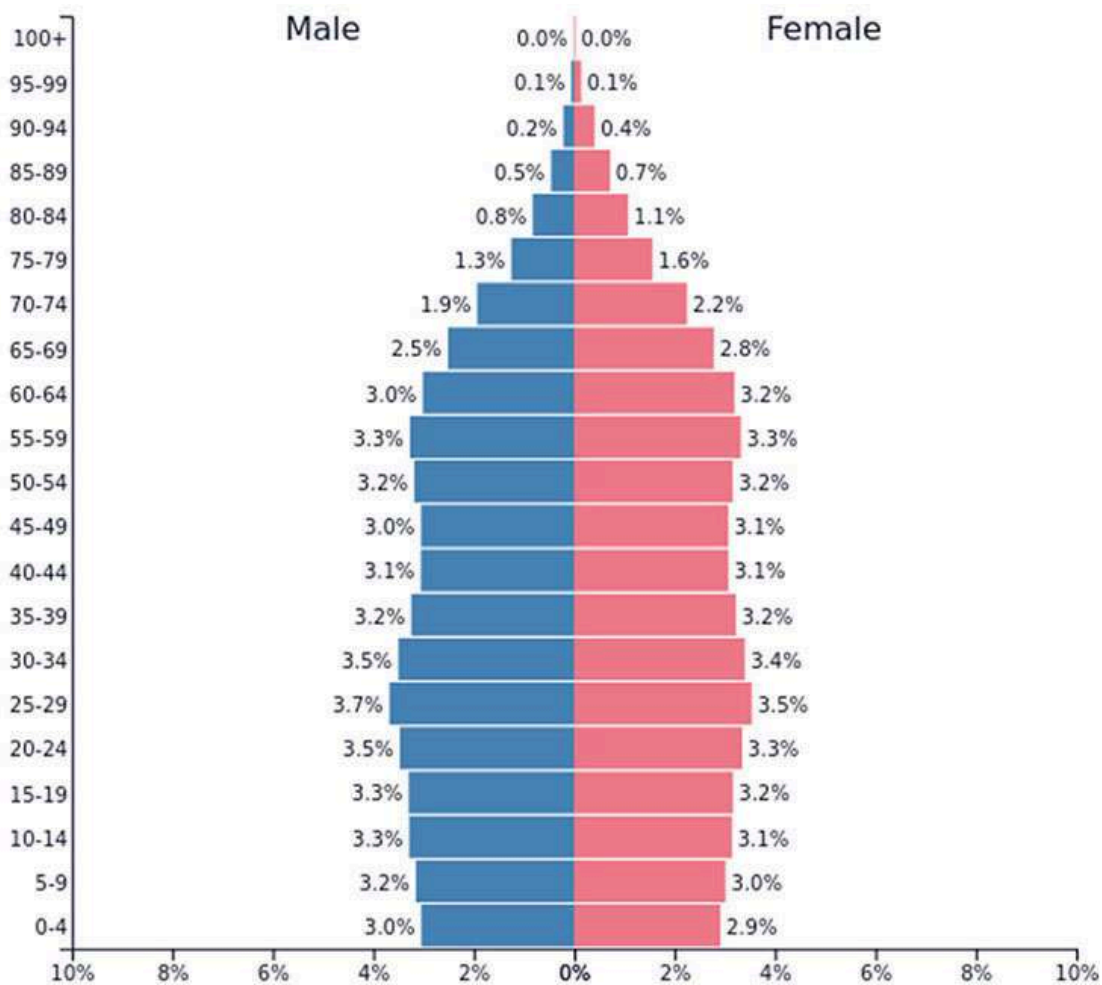


FIGURE 20.5 This population pyramid shows the breakdown of the 2019 U.S. population according to age and sex. (Credit: Populationpyramid.net)

Country	Population (in millions)	Fertility Rate (number of children per adult women)	Mortality Rate (per 1,000 births)	Sex Ratio Male to Female
Afghanistan	38.4	4.4	48	1.05
Finland	5.52	1.4	2.0	1.04
United States of America	32.8	1.7	5.7	0.97

TABLE 20.1 Varying Fertility and Mortality Rated by Country As the table illustrates, countries vary greatly in fertility rates and mortality rates—the components that make up a population composition. This data is from 2018, and changes occur continually. For example, in 2014, the number of children per adult woman in Afghanistan was 5.4 – generally an average of one more child per family. And the U.S. was slightly higher at 2.0 (World Bank 2019)

Comparing the three countries in [Table 20.1](#) reveals that there are more men than women in Afghanistan and Finland, whereas the reverse is true in the United States. Afghanistan also has significantly higher fertility and mortality rates than either of the other two countries. In all three cases, the fertility rates have dropped in recent years, but Afghanistan's drop (from 5.4 children per woman to 4.4) will likely be the most impactful

(World Bank 2019). Do these statistics surprise you? How do you think the population makeup affects the political climate and economics of the different countries?

Demographic Theories

Sociologists have long looked at population issues as central to understanding human interactions. Below we will look at four theories about population that inform sociological thought: Malthusian, zero population growth, cornucopian, and demographic transition theories.

Malthusian Theory

Thomas Malthus (1766–1834) was an English clergyman who made dire predictions about earth's ability to sustain its growing population. According to **Malthusian theory**, three factors would control human population that exceeded the earth's **carrying capacity**, or how many people can live in a given area considering the amount of available resources. Malthus identified these factors as war, famine, and disease (Malthus 1798). He termed them “positive checks” because they increase mortality rates, thus keeping the population in check. They are countered by “preventive checks,” which also control the population but by reducing fertility rates; preventive checks include birth control and celibacy. Thinking practically, Malthus saw that people could produce only so much food in a given year, yet the population was increasing at an exponential rate. Eventually, he thought people would run out of food and begin to starve. They would go to war over increasingly scarce resources and reduce the population to a manageable level, and then the cycle would begin anew.

Of course, this has not exactly happened. The human population has continued to grow long past Malthus's predictions. So what happened? Why didn't we die off? There are three reasons sociologists believe we are continuing to expand the population of our planet. First, technological increases in food production have increased both the amount and quality of calories we can produce per person. Second, human ingenuity has developed new medicine to curtail death from disease. Finally, the development and widespread use of contraception and other forms of family planning have decreased the speed at which our population increases. But what about the future? Some still believe Malthus was correct and that ample resources to support the earth's population will soon run out.

Zero Population Growth

A neo-Malthusian researcher named Paul Ehrlich brought Malthus's predictions into the twentieth century. However, according to Ehrlich, it is the environment, not specifically the food supply, that will play a crucial role in the continued health of the planet's population (Ehrlich 1968). Ehrlich's ideas suggest that the human population is moving rapidly toward complete environmental collapse, as privileged people use up or pollute a number of environmental resources such as water and air. He advocated for a goal of **zero population growth** (ZPG), in which the number of people entering a population through birth or immigration is equal to the number of people leaving it via death or emigration. While support for this concept is mixed, it is still considered a possible solution to global overpopulation.

Cornucopian Theory

Of course, some theories are less focused on the pessimistic hypothesis that the world's population will meet a detrimental challenge to sustaining itself. **Cornucopian theory** scoffs at the idea of humans wiping themselves out; it asserts that human ingenuity can resolve any environmental or social issues that develop. As an example, it points to the issue of food supply. If we need more food, the theory contends, agricultural scientists will figure out how to grow it, as they have already been doing for centuries. After all, in this perspective, human ingenuity has been up to the task for thousands of years and there is no reason for that pattern not to continue (Simon 1981).

Demographic Transition Theory

Whether you believe that we are headed for environmental disaster and the end of human existence as we

know it, or you think people will always adapt to changing circumstances, we can see clear patterns in population growth. Societies develop along a predictable continuum as they evolve from unindustrialized to postindustrial. **Demographic transition theory** (Caldwell and Caldwell 2006) suggests that future population growth will develop along a predictable four-stage model.

In Stage 1, birth, death, and infant mortality rates are all high, while life expectancy is short. An example of this stage is the 1800s in the United States. As countries begin to industrialize, they enter Stage 2, where birth rates are higher while infant mortality and the death rates drop. Life expectancy also increases. Afghanistan is currently in this stage. Stage 3 occurs once a society is thoroughly industrialized; birth rates decline, while life expectancy continues to increase. Death rates continue to decrease. Mexico's population is at this stage. In the final phase, Stage 4, we see the postindustrial era of a society. Birth and death rates are low, people are healthier and live longer, and society enters a phase of population stability. Overall population may even decline. For example, Sweden is considered to be in Stage 4.

The United Nations Population Fund (2008) categorizes nations as high fertility, intermediate fertility, or low fertility. The United Nations (UN) anticipates the population growth will triple between 2011 and 2100 in high-fertility countries, which are currently concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa. For countries with intermediate fertility rates (the United States, India, and Mexico all fall into this category), growth is expected to be about 26 percent. And low-fertility countries like China, Australia, and most of Europe will actually see population declines of approximately 20 percent. The graphs below illustrate this trend.

Changes in U.S. Immigration Patterns and Attitudes

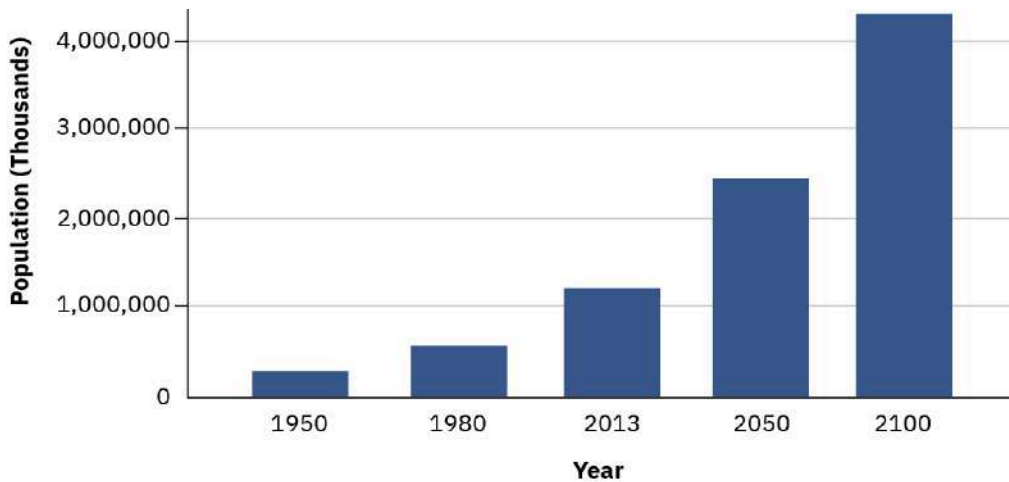


FIGURE 20.6 Projected Population in Africa This graph shows the population growth of countries located on the African continent, many of which have high fertility rates. (Credit: USAID)

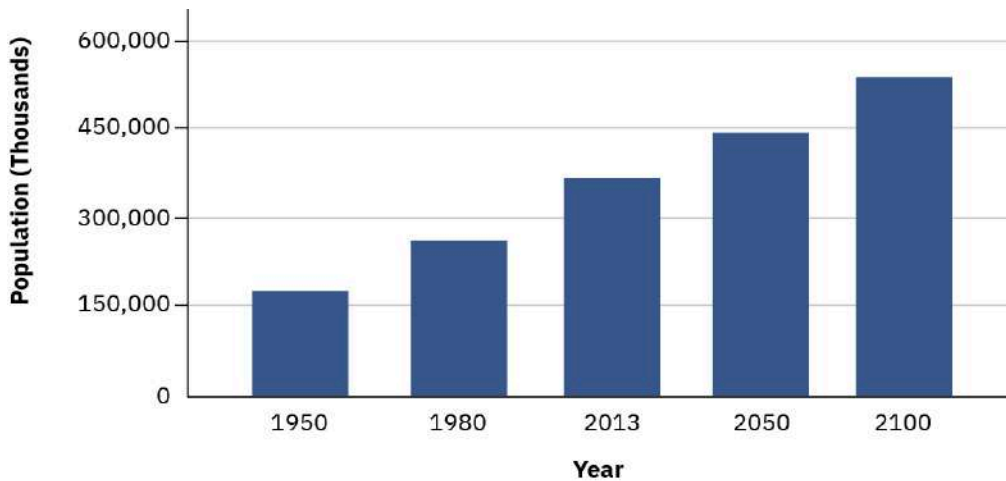


FIGURE 20.7 Projected Population in the United States The United States has an intermediate fertility rate, and therefore, a comparatively moderate projected population growth. (Credit: USAID)

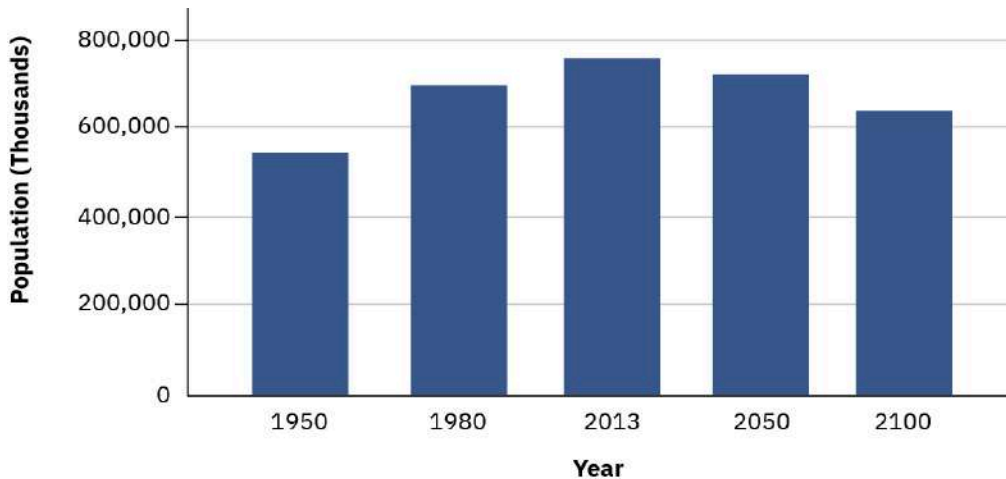


FIGURE 20.8 Projected Population in Europe This chart shows the projected population growth of Europe for the remainder of this century. (Credit: USAID)

Worldwide patterns of migration have changed, though the United States remains the most popular destination. From 1990 to 2013, the number of migrants living in the United States increased from one in six to one in five (The Pew Research Center 2013). Overall, the United States is home to about 45 million foreign-born people, while only about 3 million U.S. citizens lived abroad. Of foreign-born citizens emigrating to the United States, 55 percent originated in Latin America and the Caribbean. However, over the past few years, more people from Asian countries have entered than from Latin American ones (Budiman 2020).

While there are more foreign-born people residing in the United States legally, as of 2017 about 10.5 million resided here without legal status (Budiman 2020). Most immigrants in the U.S. live in either Texas, Florida, or California.

Even before policy changes and COVID-19 affected refugee admittance, a relatively small number of people formally entered the country as refugees. In 2016, about 85,000 refugees were admitted to the U.S. (of over one million total immigrants), with the largest portion arriving from the Democratic Republic of Congo; in 2020, the number of refugees was reduced to 18,000.

Most citizens agree that our national immigration policies are need adjustment. More than two-thirds (69 percent) of those in a recent national survey believed illegal immigrants should have a path to citizenship provided they meet other requirements, such as paying taxes and passing a background check. Even more

people (72 percent) supported passing a DREAM Act, which would allow people who immigrated as children to earn citizenship. In both parts of the survey, majorities of both Republicans and Democrats as well as independents supported the pathway to citizenship (Vox and Data for Progress 2021).

20.2 Urbanization

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Describe the process of urbanization in the United States and the growth of urban populations worldwide
- Analyze the function of suburbs, exurbs, and concentric zones
- Discuss urbanization from various sociological perspectives



FIGURE 20.9 The lights of New York City are an iconic image of city life. (Credit: Jauher Ali Nasir/flickr)

Urbanization is the study of the social, political, and economic relationships in cities, and someone specializing in **urban sociology** studies those relationships. In some ways, cities can be microcosms of universal human behavior, while in others they provide a unique environment that yields its own brand of human behavior. There is no strict dividing line between rural and urban; rather, there is a continuum where one bleeds into the other. However, once a geographically concentrated population has reached approximately 100,000 people, it typically behaves like a city regardless of what its designation might be.

The Growth of Cities

According to sociologist Gideon Sjoberg (1965), there are three prerequisites for the development of a city: First, good environment with fresh water and a favorable climate; second, advanced technology, which will produce a food surplus to support nonfarmers; and third, strong social organization to ensure social stability and a stable economy. Most scholars agree that the first cities were developed somewhere in ancient Mesopotamia, though there are disagreements about exactly where. Most early cities were small by today's standards, and the largest was most likely Rome, with about 650,000 inhabitants (Chandler and Fox 1974). The factors limiting the size of ancient cities included lack of adequate sewage control, limited food supply, and immigration restrictions. For example, serfs were tied to the land, and transportation was limited and

inefficient. Today, the primary influence on cities' growth is economic forces. Since the recent economic recession reduced housing prices, researchers have been waiting to see what happens to urban migration patterns in response.

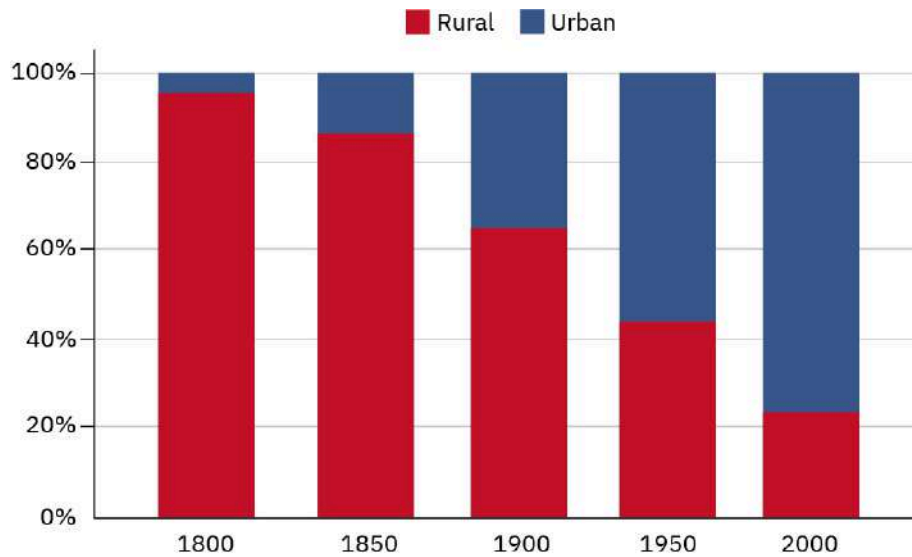


FIGURE 20.10 Percent of U.S. Population. As this chart illustrates, the shift from rural to urban living in the United States has been dramatic and continuous. (Credit: the U.S. Census Bureau)

Urbanization in the United States

Urbanization in the United States proceeded rapidly during the Industrial Era. As more and more opportunities for work appeared in factories, workers left farms (and the rural communities that housed them) to move to the cities. From mill towns in Massachusetts to tenements in New York, the industrial era saw an influx of poor workers into U.S. cities. At various times throughout the country's history, certain demographic groups, from post-Civil War southern Black people to more recent immigrants, have made their way to urban centers to seek a better life in the city.



SOCIOLOGY IN THE REAL WORLD

Managing Refugees and Asylum-Seekers in the Modern World

In 2013, the number of refugees, asylum-seekers, and internally displaced people worldwide exceeded 50 million people for the first time since the end of World War II. Half these people were children. A **refugee** is defined as an individual who has been forced to leave his or her country in order to escape war, persecution, or natural disaster, while **asylum-seekers** are those whose claim to refugee status has not been validated. An **internally displaced person**, on the other hand, is neither a refugee nor an asylum-seeker. Displaced persons have fled their homes while remaining inside their country's borders.

The war in Syria caused most of the 2013 increase, forcing 2.5 million people to seek refugee status while internally displacing an additional 6.5 million. Violence in Central African Republic and South Sudan also contributed a large number of people to the total (The United Nations Refugee Agency 2014).

The refugees need help in the form of food, water, shelter, and medical care, which has worldwide implications for nations contributing foreign aid, the nations hosting the refugees, and the non-government organizations (NGOs) working with individuals and groups on site (The United Nations Refugee Agency 2014). Where will this large moving population, including sick, elderly, children, and people with very few possessions and no long-term plan, go?

Suburbs and Exurbs

As cities grew more crowded, and often more impoverished and costly, more and more people began to migrate back out of them. But instead of returning to rural small towns (like they'd resided in before moving to the city), these people needed close access to the cities for their jobs. In the 1850s, as the urban population greatly expanded and transportation options improved, suburbs developed. **Suburbs** are the communities surrounding cities, typically close enough for a daily commute in, but far enough away to allow for more space than city living affords. The bucolic suburban landscape of the early twentieth century has largely disappeared due to sprawl. Suburban sprawl contributes to traffic congestion, which in turn contributes to commuting time. And commuting times and distances have continued to increase as new suburbs developed farther and farther from city centers. Simultaneously, this dynamic contributed to an exponential increase in natural resource use, like petroleum, which sequentially increased pollution in the form of carbon emissions.

As the suburbs became more crowded and lost their charm, those who could afford it turned to the **exurbs**, communities that exist outside the ring of suburbs and are typically populated by even wealthier families who want more space and have the resources to lengthen their commute. Together, the suburbs, exurbs, and metropolitan areas all combine to form a **metropolis**. New York was the first U.S. **megalopolis**, a huge urban corridor encompassing multiple cities and their surrounding suburbs. These metropolises use vast quantities of natural resources and are a growing part of the U.S. landscape.



FIGURE 20.11 The sprawl in Los Angeles means long commutes and traffic congestion. (Credit: Doc Searles/flickr)



SOCIAL POLICY AND DEBATE

Suburbs Are Not All White Picket Fences: The Banlieues of Paris

What makes a suburb a suburb? Simply, a suburb is a community surrounding a city. But when you picture a suburb in your mind, your image may vary widely depending on which nation you call home. In the United States, most consider the suburbs home to upper- and middle-class people with private homes. In other countries, like France, the suburbs—or “banlieues”—are synonymous with housing projects and impoverished communities. In fact, the banlieues of Paris are notorious for their ethnic violence and crime, with higher unemployment and more residents living in poverty than in the city center. Further, the banlieues have a much higher immigrant population, which in Paris is mostly Arabic and African immigrants. This contradicts the clichéd U.S. image of a typical white-picket-fence suburb.

In 2005, serious riots broke out in the banlieue of Clichy-sous-Bois after two boys were electrocuted while hiding from the police. They were hiding, it is believed, because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time, near the scene of a break-in, and they were afraid the police would not believe in their innocence. Only a few days earlier, interior minister Nicolas Sarkozy (who later became president), had given a speech touting new measures against

urban violence and referring to the people of the banlieue as “rabble” (BBC 2005). After the deaths and subsequent riots, Sarkozy reiterated his zero-tolerance policy toward violence and sent in more police. Ultimately, the violence spread across more than thirty towns and cities in France. Thousands of cars were burned, many hundreds of people were arrested, and both police and protesters suffered serious injuries.

Then-President Jacques Chirac responded by pledging more money for housing programs, jobs programs, and education programs to help the banlieues solve the underlying problems that led to such disastrous unrest. But none of the newly launched programs were effective. Sarkozy ran for president on a platform of tough regulations toward young offenders, and in 2007 the country elected him. More riots ensued as a response to his election. In 2010, Sarkozy promised “war without mercy” against the crime in the banlieues (France24 2010). Six years after the Clichy-sous-Bois riot, circumstances are no better for those in the banlieues.

As the Social Policy & Debate feature illustrates, the suburbs also have their share of socio-economic problems. In the United States, **White flight** refers to the migration of economically secure White people from racially mixed urban areas and toward the suburbs. This occurred throughout the twentieth century, due to causes as diverse as the legal end of racial segregation established by *Brown v. Board of Education* to the Mariel boatlift of people fleeing Cuba for Miami. Current trends include middle-class African-American families following White flight patterns out of cities, while affluent White people return to cities that have historically had a majority of Black people. The result is that the issues of race, socio-economics, neighborhoods, and communities remain complicated and challenging.

Urbanization around the World

During the Industrial Era, there was a growth spurt worldwide. The development of factories brought people from rural to urban areas, and new technology increased the efficiency of transportation, food production, and food preservation. For example, from the mid-1670s to the early 1900s, London's population increased from 550,000 to 7 million (Old Bailey Proceedings Online 2011). Global favorites like New York, London, and Tokyo are all examples of postindustrial cities. As cities evolve from manufacturing-based industrial to service- and information-based postindustrial societies, gentrification becomes more common. **Gentrification** occurs when members of the middle and upper classes enter and renovate city areas that have been historically less affluent while the poor urban underclass are forced by resulting price pressures to leave those neighborhoods for increasingly decaying portions of the city.

Globally, 55 percent of the world's people currently reside in urban areas, with the most urbanized region being North America (82 percent), followed by Latin America/the Caribbean (81 percent), with Europe coming in third (74 percent). In comparison, Africa is only 40 percent urbanized, though one of its nations, Nigeria, is projected to significantly urbanize in the coming years. With 37 million people, Tokyo is the world's largest city by population, and New Delhi is the second largest with 29 million. The world's most densely populated cities are now largely concentrated in the global south, a marked change from several decades ago when the biggest cities were found in the global north. In the next forty years, the biggest global challenge for urbanized populations, particularly in less developed countries, will be to achieve development that occurs without depleting or damaging the natural environment, also called **sustainable development** (United Nations 2018).

Theoretical Perspectives on Urbanization

The issues of urbanization play significant roles in the study of sociology. Race, economics, and human behavior intersect in cities. Let's look at urbanization through the sociological perspectives of functionalism and conflict theory. Functional perspectives on urbanization generally focus on the ecology of the city, while conflict perspective tends to focus on political economy.

Human ecology is a functionalist field of study that looks at the relationship between people and their built and natural physical environments (Park 1915). Generally speaking, urban land use and urban population distribution occur in a predictable pattern once we understand how people relate to their living environment.

For example, in the United States, we have a transportation system geared to accommodate individuals and families in the form of interstate highways built for cars. In contrast, most parts of Europe emphasize public transportation such as high-speed rail and commuter lines, as well as walking and bicycling. The challenge for a human ecologist working in U.S. urban planning is to design landscapes and waterscapes with natural beauty, while also figuring out how to provide for free-flowing transport of innumerable vehicles, not to mention parking!

The **concentric zone model** (Burgess 1925) is perhaps the most famous example of human ecology. This model views a city as a series of concentric circular areas, expanding outward from the center of the city, with various “zones” invading adjacent zones (as new categories of people and businesses overrun the edges of nearby zones) and succeeding (then after invasion, the new inhabitants repurpose the areas they have invaded and push out the previous inhabitants). In this model, Zone A, in the heart of the city, is the center of the business and cultural district. Zone B, the concentric circle surrounding the city center, is composed of formerly wealthy homes split into cheap apartments for new immigrant populations; this zone also houses small manufacturers, pawn shops, and other marginal businesses. Zone C consists of the homes of the working class and established ethnic enclaves. Zone D holds wealthy homes, white-collar workers, and shopping centers. Zone E contains the estates of the upper class (in the exurbs) and the suburbs.

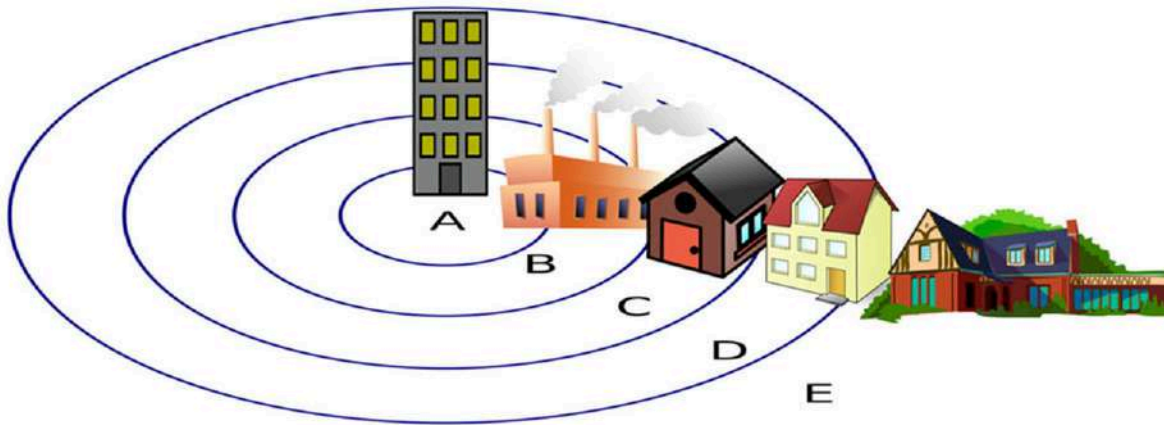


FIGURE 20.12 This illustration depicts the zones that make up a city in the concentric zone model. (Credit: Zeimusu/Wikimedia Commons)

In contrast to the functionalist approach, theoretical models in the conflict perspective focus on the way urban areas change according to specific decisions made by political and economic leaders. These decisions generally benefit the middle and upper classes while exploiting the working and lower classes.

For example, sociologists Feagin and Parker (1990) suggested three factors by which political and economic leaders control urban growth. First, these leaders work alongside each other to influence urban growth and decline, determining where money flows and how land use is regulated. Second, exchange value and use value of land are balanced to favor the middle and upper classes so that, for example, public land in poor neighborhoods may be rezoned for use as industrial land. Finally, urban development is dependent on both structure (groups such as local government) and agency (individuals including businessmen and activists), and these groups engage in a push-pull dynamic that determines where and how land is actually used. For example, Not In My Back Yard (NIMBY) movements are more likely to emerge in middle and upper-class neighborhoods as engaged citizens protest poor environmental practices they fear will affect them, so these groups have more control over the use of local land.

20.3 The Environment and Society

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Describe climate change and its importance
- Apply the concept of carrying capacity to environmental concerns
- Explain the challenges presented by pollution, garbage, e-waste, and toxic hazards
- Discuss real-world instances of environmental racism

The subfield of **environmental sociology** studies the way humans interact with their environments. This field is closely related to human ecology, which focuses on the relationship between people and their built and natural environment. This is an area that is garnering more attention as extreme weather patterns and policy battles over climate change dominate the news. A key factor of environmental sociology is the concept of carrying capacity, which describes the maximum amount of life that can be sustained within a given area. While this concept can refer to grazing lands or to rivers, we can also apply it to the earth as a whole.



FIGURE 20.13 Too little land for grazing means starving cattle. (Credit: newbeatphoto/flickr)

BIG PICTURE

The Tragedy of the Commons

You might have heard the expression “the tragedy of the commons.” In 1968, an article of the same title written by Garrett Hardin described how a common pasture was ruined by overgrazing. But Hardin was not the first to notice the phenomenon. Back in the 1800s, Oxford economist William Forster Lloyd looked at the devastated public grazing commons and the unhealthy cattle subject to such limited resources, and saw, in essence, that the carrying capacity of the commons had been exceeded. However, since no one was held responsible for the land (as it was open to all), no one was willing to make sacrifices to improve it. Cattle grazers benefitted from adding more cattle to their herds, but they did not have to take on the responsibility of the lands that were being damaged by overgrazing. So there was an incentive for them to add more head of cattle, and no incentive for restraint.

Satellite photos of Africa taken in the 1970s showed this practice to dramatic effect. The images depicted a dark irregular area of more than 300 square miles. There was a large fenced area, where plenty of grass was growing. Outside the fence, the ground was bare and devastated. The reason was simple: the fenced land was privately owned by informed farmers who carefully rotated their grazing animals and allowed the fields to lie fallow periodically. Outside the fence was land used by nomads. Like the herdsmen in 1800s Oxford, the nomads

increased their heads of cattle without planning for its impact on the greater good. The soil eroded, the plants died, then the cattle died, and, ultimately, some of the people died.

How does this lesson affect those of us who don't need to graze our cattle? Well, like the cows, we all need food, water, and clean air to survive. With the increasing world population and the ever-larger megalopolises with tens of millions of people, the limit of the earth's carrying capacity is called into question. When too many take while giving too little thought to the rest of the population, whether cattle or humans, the result is usually tragedy.

Climate Change

While you might be more familiar with the phrase “global warming,” **climate change** is the term now used to refer to long-term shifts in temperatures due to human activity and, in particular, the release of greenhouse gases into the environment. The planet as a whole is warming, but the term climate change acknowledges that the short-term variations in this process can include both higher and lower temperatures, despite the overarching trend toward warmth.

Climate change is a deeply controversial subject, despite decades of scientific research and a high degree of scientific consensus that supports its existence. For example, according to NASA scientists, 2020 essentially tied with 2016 as the warmest year on record, continuing the overall trend of increasing worldwide temperatures (NASA 2021). One effect of climate change is more extreme weather. There are increasingly more record-breaking weather phenomena, from the number of Category 4 hurricanes to the amount of snowfall in a given winter. These extremes, while they make for dramatic television coverage, can cause immeasurable damage to crops, property, and lives.

So why is there a controversy? Until relatively recently, the United States was very divided on the existence of climate change as an immediate threat, as well as whether or not human activity causes or contributes to it. But now it appears that the U.S. has joined the ranks of many countries where citizens are concerned about climate change; the nation is divided on what to do about it.

Research conducted in 2020 and 2021 indicated that at least 60 percent of Americans believe climate change is a real and immediate threat (UNDP 2021 and Global Strategy Group 2021). Citizens are also more supportive of clean energy and taking part in international efforts, such as the Paris Climate Accord, which is intended to engage countries in actions to limit the activity that leads to climate change. What's changed these opinions? It may be that younger people are more represented in these polls, and they tend to support climate change initiatives more consistently. It may be that the continued severity of weather and the costly and widespread impact is more difficult to ignore than it was previously. And part of the changing opinions might be driven by the prevalence of green energy sources, from wind power to solar power to electric cars, which are more evident to people across the country. However, deep divides remain. The addition of clean energy producers, such as offshore wind farms, typically meet stiff local opposition (similar to the “not in my backyard” discussion earlier in the chapter). And any punitive or price-raising methods of controlling emissions are unlikely to be welcome by U.S. citizens. Finally, global agreements like the Paris Accord will have limited impact because they are not strictly enforceable.

World systems analysis suggests that while, historically, core nations (like the United States and Western Europe) were the greatest source of greenhouse gases, they have now evolved into postindustrial societies. Industrialized semi-peripheral and peripheral nations are releasing increasing quantities of greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide. The core nations, now post-industrial and less dependent on greenhouse-gas-causing industries, wish to enact strict protocols regarding the causes of global warming, but the semi-peripheral and peripheral nations rightly point out that they only want the same economic chance to evolve their economies. Since they were unduly affected by the progress of core nations, if the core nations now insist on “green” policies, they should pay offsets or subsidies of some kind. There are no easy answers to this conflict. It may well not be “fair” that the core nations benefited from ignorance during their industrial boom.

Pollution

Pollution describes what happens when contaminants are introduced into an environment (water, air, land) at levels that are damaging. Environments can often sustain a limited amount of contaminants without marked change, and water, air, and soil can “heal” themselves to a certain degree. However, once contaminant levels reach a certain point, the results can be catastrophic.

Water

Typhoid, cholera, and diarrhea from unsafe water kill hundreds of thousands of children each year, and over 160 million children suffer from malnutrition and growth issues due to water issues. An estimated 3 billion people do not have access to clean water at home for hand-washing (CDC 2016). Consider the impact of that, knowing that many of those without water for hand-washing live in agricultural societies in which they work with animals or live in cities with many other people.

The water crisis is exacerbated by many of the other issues we've discussed. Global pandemics, pollution, and climate change all have more severe impacts when coupled with lack of access to clean water. Finally, the cost of obtaining that clean water can interfere with other important aspects of survival and social mobility. Children serve as water haulers, traveling long distances on foot to collect potable water for their family. Those same children (as well as those who similarly collect firewood) are less able to focus on their education, either missing school or not completing the associated work (Water.org 2021). Regular water hauling—which for some people involves carrying 20 kilograms (40 pounds) for 30 minutes or more—also has negative effects on people's bodies, especially pregnant women who often undertake the task. The situation is only getting more dire as the global population increases. Water is a key resource battleground in the twenty-first century.

As every child learns in school, 70 percent of earth is made of water. Despite that figure, there is a finite amount of water usable by humans and it is constantly used and reused in a sustainable water cycle. The way we use this abundant natural resource, however, renders much of it unsuitable for consumption and unable to sustain life. Oil and natural gas production, discussed at the beginning of the chapter, require so much water that there's no safe place to put the wastewater other than deep underground. But more common activities use far more water than many people understand. The immense amount of water to produce almonds (8 percent of California's water supply, equating to roughly one gallon per individual almond) has made headlines, as have the 37 gallons that it takes to produce a cup of coffee. But all crops and livestock have a “water footprint.” Dairy milk is actually known to take more water to produce than does almond milk, for example. And steak may take up to 900 gallons of water to produce (WaterCalculator.org 2020).

Those water costs are important to consider, particularly if the crops are produced in a part of the world where access to safe water is also an issue. But reducing irrigation water usage for U.S. crops would have very limited effects in sub-Saharan Africa. Most experts focus on improving water quality and sanitation in general, as well as reducing the distance people need to travel in order to obtain safe water.

Water pollution has always been a byproduct of industrialization, increased population, and urbanization. Cleveland's Cuyahoga River caught fire several times due to pollution, and was part of what inspired the United States' turn to cleaner water. Other countries are currently undergoing the same crises. As a consequence of population concentrations, water close to human settlements is frequently polluted with untreated or partially treated human waste (sewage), chemicals, radioactivity, and levels of heat sufficient to create large “dead zones” incapable of supporting aquatic life. The methods of food production used by many core nations rely on liberal doses of nitrogen and pesticides, which end up back in the water supply. In some cases, water pollution affects the quality of the aquatic life consumed by water and land animals. As we move along the food chain, the pollutants travel from prey to predator. Since humans consume at all levels of the food chain, we ultimately consume the carcinogens, such as mercury, accumulated through several branches of the food web.

Soil

You might have read *The Grapes of Wrath* in English class at some point in time. Steinbeck's tale of the Joads, driven out of their home by the Dust Bowl, is still playing out today. In China, as in Depression-era Oklahoma, over-tilling soil in an attempt to expand agriculture has resulted in the disappearance of large patches of topsoil.

Soil erosion and desertification are just two of the many forms of soil pollution. In addition, all the chemicals and pollutants that harm our water supplies can also leach into soil with similar effects. Brown zones where nothing can grow are common results of soil pollution. One demand the population boom makes on the planet is a requirement for more food to be produced. The so-called "Green Revolution" in the 1960s saw chemists and world aid organizations working together to bring modern farming methods, complete with pesticides, to developing countries. The immediate result was positive: food yields went up and burgeoning populations were fed. But as time has gone on, these areas have fallen into even more difficult straits as the damage done by modern methods leave traditional farmers with less than they had to start.

Dredging certain beaches in an attempt to save valuable beachfront property from coastal erosion has resulted in greater storm impact on shorelines, and damage to beach ecosystems (Turneffe Atoll Trust 2008). These dredging projects have damaged reefs, sea grass beds, and shorelines and can kill off large swaths of marine life. Ultimately, this damage threatens local fisheries, tourism, and other parts of the local economy.

Garbage



FIGURE 20.14 Where should garbage go when you've run out of room? This is a question that is increasingly pressing the planet. (Credit: Department of Environmental Protection Recycling/flickr)

Where is your last cell phone? What about the one before that? Or the huge old television set your family had before flat screens became popular? For most of us, the answer is a sheepish shrug. We don't pay attention to the demise of old items, and since electronics drop in price and increase in innovation at an incredible clip, we have been trained by their manufacturers to upgrade frequently.

Garbage creation and control are major issues for most core and industrializing nations, and it is quickly becoming one of the most critical environmental issues faced in the United States. People in the United States buy products, use them, and then throw them away. Did you dispose of your old electronics according to government safety guidelines? Chances are good you didn't even know there are guidelines. Multiply your electronics times a few million, take into account the numerous toxic chemicals they contain, and then imagine either burying those chemicals in the ground or lighting them on fire.

Those are the two primary means of waste disposal in the United States: landfill and incineration. When it comes to getting rid of dangerous toxins, neither is a good choice. Styrofoam and plastics that many of us use every day do not dissolve in a natural way. Burn them, and they release carcinogens into the air. Their improper incineration (intentional or not) adds to air pollution and increases smog. Dump them in landfills, and they do not decompose. As landfill sites fill up, we risk an increase in groundwater contamination.

BIG PICTURE**What Should Apple (and Friends) Do about E-Waste?**

FIGURE 20.15 A parking lot filled with electronic waste, known as e-waste. (Credit: U.S. Army Environmental Command/flickr)

The mountains of broken plastic and rusty metal that plague the environment are not the most problematic types of garbage. **E-waste** or obsolete, broken, and worn-out electronics is the fastest growing segment of garbage production in the world. It is made up of household appliances, batteries, control devices, computers, phones, and similar products. Ironically, one of the largest potential e-waste problems will come from expended solar panels, which, although only a fraction of total waste, will require a complex recycling process (Stone 2020). All of these products have toxic chemicals and dangerous metals in them, as well as a significant amount of plastic that does not biodegrade.

So where do they go? Many companies ship their e-waste to developing nations in Africa and Asia to be “recycled.” While they are, in some senses, recycled, the result is not exactly clean. In fact, it is one of the dirtiest jobs around. Overseas, without the benefit of environmental regulation, e-waste dumps become a kind of boomtown for entrepreneurs willing to sort through endless stacks of broken-down electronics for tiny bits of valuable copper, silver, and other precious metals. Unfortunately, in their hunt, these workers are exposed to deadly toxins.

Governments are beginning to take notice of the impending disaster, and the European Union, as well as the state of California, put stricter regulations in place. These regulations both limit the amount of toxins allowed in electronics and address the issue of end-of-life recycling. But not surprisingly, corporations, while insisting they

are greening their process, often fight stricter regulations. Meanwhile, many environmental groups, including the activist group Greenpeace, have taken up the cause. Greenpeace states that it is working to get companies to:

1. measure and reduce emissions with energy efficiency, renewable energy, and energy policy advocacy
2. make greener, efficient, longer lasting products that are free of hazardous substances
3. reduce environmental impacts throughout company operations, from choosing production materials and energy sources right through to establishing global take-back programs for old products (Greenpeace 2011). Companies like Amazon, Samsung, Canon, Sprint, and Dell are noted for effective and forward-thinking programs (Sadoff 2019).

Air

China's fast-growing economy and burgeoning industry have translated into notoriously poor air quality. Smog hangs heavily over the major cities, sometimes grounding aircraft that cannot navigate through it. Pedestrians and cyclists wear air-filter masks to protect themselves. In Beijing, citizens are skeptical that the government-issued daily pollution ratings are trustworthy. Increasingly, they are taking their own pollution measurements in the hopes that accurate information will galvanize others to action. Given that some days they can barely see down the street, they hope action comes soon (Papenfuss 2011).

Humanity, with its growing numbers, use of fossil fuels, and increasingly urbanized society, is putting too much stress on the earth's atmosphere. The amount of air pollution varies from locale to locale, and you may be more personally affected than you realize. How often do you check air quality reports before leaving your house? Depending on where you live, this question can sound utterly strange or like an everyday matter. Along with oxygen, most of the time we are also breathing in soot, hydrocarbons, carbon, nitrogen, and sulfur oxides.

Much of the pollution in the air comes from human activity. How many college students move their cars across campus at least once a day? Who checks the environmental report card on how many pollutants each company throws into the air before purchasing a cell phone? Many of us are guilty of taking our environment for granted without concern for how everyday decisions add up to a long-term global problem. How many minor adjustments can you think of, like walking instead of driving, that would reduce your overall carbon footprint?

Remember the “tragedy of the commons.” Each of us is affected by air pollution. But like the herder who adds one more head of cattle to realize the benefits of owning more cows but who does not have to pay the price of the overgrazed land, we take the benefit of driving or buying the latest cell phones without worrying about the end result. Air pollution accumulates in the body, much like the effects of smoking cigarettes accumulate over time, leading to more chronic illnesses. And in addition to directly affecting human health, air pollution affects crop quality as well as heating and cooling costs. In other words, we all pay a lot more than the price at the pump when we fill up our tank with gas.

Toxic and Radioactive Waste

Radioactivity is a form of air pollution. While nuclear energy promises a safe and abundant power source, increasingly it is looked upon as a danger to the environment and to those who inhabit it. We accumulate nuclear waste, which we must then keep track of long term and ultimately figure out how to store the toxic waste material without damaging the environment or putting future generations at risk.

The 2011 earthquake in Japan illustrates the dangers of even safe, government-monitored nuclear energy. When disaster occurs, how can we safely evacuate the large numbers of affected people? Indeed, how can we even be sure how far the evacuation radius should extend? Radiation can also enter the food chain, causing damage from the bottom (phytoplankton and microscopic soil organisms) all the way to the top. Once again, the price paid for cheap power is much greater than what we see on the electric bill.



FIGURE 20.16 An aerial view of the Gulf Coast, taken in May 2010, illustrates the damage done by the BP *Deep Water Horizon* spill. (Credit: Jeff Warren/flickr)

The enormous oil disaster that hit the Louisiana Gulf Coast in 2010 is just one of a high number of environmental crises that have led to toxic residue. They include the pollution of the Love Canal neighborhood of the 1970s to the Exxon *Valdez* oil tanker crash of 1989, the Chernobyl disaster of 1986, and Japan's Fukushima nuclear plant incident following the earthquake in 2011. Often, the stories are not newsmakers, but simply an unpleasant part of life for the people who live near toxic sites such as Centralia, Pennsylvania and Hinkley, California. In many cases, people in these neighborhoods can be part of a **cancer cluster** without realizing the cause.



FIGURE 20.17 Oil on the gulf shore beaches caused great destruction, killing marine and land animals and devastating local business. (Credit: AV8ter/flickr)



SOCIOLOGY IN THE REAL WORLD

The Fire Burns On: Centralia, Pennsylvania

There used to be a place called Centralia, Pennsylvania. The town incorporated in the 1860s and once had several thousand residents, largely coal workers. But the story of its demise begins a century later in 1962. That year, a trash-burning fire was lit in the pit of the old abandoned coal mine outside of town. The fire moved down the mineshaft and ignited a vein of coal. It is still burning.

For more than twenty years, people tried to extinguish the underground fire, but no matter what they did, it returned. There was little government action, and people had to abandon their homes as toxic gases engulfed the area and sinkholes developed. The situation drew national attention when the ground collapsed under twelve-year-old Todd Domboski in 1981. Todd was in his yard when a sinkhole four feet wide and 150 feet deep opened beneath him. He clung to exposed tree roots and saved his life; if he had fallen a few feet farther, the heat or carbon monoxide would have killed him.

In 1983, engineers studying the fire concluded that it could burn for another century or more and could spread over nearly 4,000 acres. At this point, the government offered to buy out the town's residents and wanted them to relocate to nearby towns. A few determined Centralians refused to leave, even though the government bought their homes, and they are the only ones who remain. In one field, signs warn people to enter at their own risk, because the ground is hot and unstable. And the fire burns on (DeKok 1986).

Environmental Racism

Environmental racism refers to the way in which minority group neighborhoods (populated primarily by people of color and members of low socioeconomic groups) are burdened with a disproportionate number of

hazards, including toxic waste facilities, garbage dumps, and other sources of environmental pollution and foul odors that lower the quality of life. All around the globe, members of minority groups bear a greater burden of the health problems that result from higher exposure to waste and pollution. This can occur due to unsafe or unhealthy work conditions where no regulations exist (or are enforced) for poor workers, or in neighborhoods that are uncomfortably close to toxic materials.

The statistics on environmental racism are shocking. Research shows that it pervades all aspects of African Americans' lives: environmentally unsound housing, schools with asbestos problems, facilities and playgrounds with lead paint. A twenty-year comparative study led by sociologist Robert Bullard determined “race to be more important than socioeconomic status in predicting the location of the nation’s commercial hazardous waste facilities” (Bullard et al. 2007). His research found, for example, that Black children are five times more likely to have lead poisoning (the leading environmental health threat for children) than their White counterparts, and that a disproportionate number of people of color reside in areas with hazardous waste facilities (Bullard et al. 2007). Sociologists with the project are examining how environmental racism is addressed in the long-term cleanup of the environmental disasters caused by Hurricane Katrina.



SOCIOLOGY IN THE REAL WORLD

Native American Tribes and Environmental Racism

Native Americans are unquestionably victims of environmental racism. The Commission for Racial Justice found that about 50 percent of all Native Americans live in communities with uncontrolled hazardous waste sites (Asian Pacific Environmental Network 2002). There’s no question that, worldwide, indigenous populations are suffering from similar fates.

For Native American tribes, the issues can be complicated—and their solutions hard to attain—because of the complicated governmental issues arising from a history of institutionalized disenfranchisement. Unlike other racial minorities in the United States, Native American tribes are sovereign nations. However, much of their land is held in “trust,” meaning that “the federal government holds title to the land in trust on behalf of the tribe” (Bureau of Indian Affairs 2012). Some instances of environmental damage arise from this crossover, where the U.S. government’s title has meant it acts without approval of the tribal government. Other significant contributors to environmental racism as experienced by tribes are forcible removal and burdensome red tape to receive the same reparation benefits afforded to non-Indians.

To better understand how this happens, let’s consider a few example cases. The home of the Skull Valley Band of Goshute Indians was targeted as the site for a high-level nuclear waste dumping ground, amid allegations of a payoff of as high as \$200 million (Kamps 2001). Keith Lewis, an indigenous advocate for Native American rights, commented on this buyout, after his people endured decades of uranium contamination, saying that “there is nothing moral about tempting a starving man with money” (Kamps 2001). In another example, the Western Shoshone’s Yucca Mountain area has been pursued by mining companies for its rich uranium stores, a threat that adds to the existing radiation exposure this area suffers from U.S. and British nuclear bomb testing (Environmental Justice Case Studies 2004). In the “four corners” area where Colorado, Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico meet, a group of Hopi and Navajo families have been forcibly removed from their homes so the land could be mined by the Peabody Mining Company for coal valued at \$10 billion (American Indian Cultural Support 2006). Years of uranium mining on the lands of the Navajo of New Mexico have led to serious health consequences, and reparations have been difficult to secure; in addition to the loss of life, people’s homes and other facilities have been contaminated (Frosch 2009). In yet another case, members of the Chippewa near White Pine, Michigan, were unable to stop the transport of hazardous sulfuric acid across reservation lands, but their activism helped bring an end to the mining project that used the acid (Environmental Justice Case Studies 2004).

These examples are only a few of the hundreds of incidents that Native American tribes have faced and continue to battle against. Sadly, the mistreatment of the land’s original inhabitants continues via this institution of

environmental racism. How might the work of sociologists help draw attention to—and eventually mitigate—this social problem?

Why does environmental racism exist? The reason is simple. Those with resources can raise awareness, money, and public attention to ensure that their communities are unsullied. This has led to an inequitable distribution of environmental burdens. Another method of keeping this inequity alive is NIMBY protests. Chemical plants, airports, landfills, and other municipal or corporate projects are often the subject of NIMBY demonstrations. And equally often, the NIMBYists win, and the objectionable project is moved closer to those who have fewer resources to fight it.

Key Terms

sustainable development development that occurs without depleting or damaging the natural environment

asylum-seekers those whose claim to refugee status have not been validated

cancer cluster a geographic area with high levels of cancer within its population

carrying capacity the amount of people that can live in a given area considering the amount of available resources

climate change long-term shifts in temperature and climate due to human activity

concentric zone model a model of human ecology that views cities as a series of circular rings or zones

cornucopian theory a theory that asserts human ingenuity will rise to the challenge of providing adequate resources for a growing population

demographic transition theory a theory that describes four stages of population growth, following patterns that connect birth and death rates with stages of industrial development

demography the study of population

e-waste the disposal of broken, obsolete, and worn-out electronics

environmental racism the burdening of economically and socially disadvantaged communities with a disproportionate share of environmental hazards

environmental sociology the sociological subfield that addresses the relationship between humans and the environment

exurbs communities that arise farther out than the suburbs and are typically populated by residents of high socioeconomic status

fertility rate a measure noting the actual number of children born

fracking hydraulic fracturing, a method used to recover gas and oil from shale by drilling down into the earth and directing a high-pressure mixture of water, sand, and proprietary chemicals into the rock

gentrification the entry of upper- and middle-class residents to city areas or communities that have been historically less affluent

human ecology a functional perspective that looks at the relationship between people and their built and natural environment

internally displaced person someone who fled his or her home while remaining inside the country's borders

Malthusian theory a theory asserting that population is controlled through positive checks (war, famine, disease) and preventive checks (measures to reduce fertility)

megalopolis a large urban corridor that encompasses several cities and their surrounding suburbs and exurbs

metropolis the area that includes a city and its suburbs and exurbs

mortality rate a measure of the number of people in a population who die

NIMBY “Not In My Back Yard,” the tendency of people to protest poor environmental practices when those practices will affect them directly

pollution the introduction of contaminants into an environment at levels that are damaging

population composition a snapshot of the demographic profile of a population based on fertility, mortality, and migration rates

population pyramid a graphic representation that depicts population distribution according to age and sex

refugee an individual who has been forced to leave their country in order to escape war, persecution, or natural disaster

sex ratio the ratio of men to women in a given population

suburbs the communities surrounding cities, typically close enough for a daily commute

urban sociology the subfield of sociology that focuses on the study of urbanization

urbanization the study of the social, political, and economic relationships of cities

white flight the migration of economically secure white people from racially mixed urban areas toward the suburbs

zero population growth a theoretical goal in which the number of people entering a population through birth or immigration is equal to the number of people leaving it via death or emigration

Section Summary

20.1 Demography and Population

Scholars understand demography through various analyses. Malthusian, zero population growth, cornucopian theory, and demographic transition theories all help sociologists study demography. The earth's human population is growing quickly, especially in peripheral countries. Factors that impact population include birthrates, mortality rates, and migration, including immigration and emigration. There are numerous potential outcomes of the growing population, and sociological perspectives vary on the potential effect of these increased numbers. The growth will pressure the already taxed planet and its natural resources.

20.2 Urbanization

Cities provide numerous opportunities for their residents and offer significant benefits including access to goods to numerous job opportunities. At the same time, high population areas can lead to tensions between demographic groups, as well as environmental strain. While the population of urban dwellers is continuing to rise, sources of social strain are rising along with it. The ultimate challenge for today's urbanites is finding an equitable way to share the city's resources while reducing the pollution and energy use that negatively impacts the environment.

20.3 The Environment and Society

The area of environmental sociology is growing as extreme weather patterns and concerns over climate change increase. Human activity leads to pollution of soil, water, and air, compromising the health of the entire food chain. While everyone is at risk, poor and disadvantaged neighborhoods and nations bear a greater burden of the planet's pollution, a dynamic known as environmental racism.

Section Quiz

20.1 Demography and Population

1. The population of the planet doubled in fifty years to reach _____ in 1999?
 - a. 6 billion
 - b. 7 billion
 - c. 5 billion
 - d. 10 billion
2. A functionalist would address which issue?
 - a. The way inner-city areas become ghettoized and limit availability to jobs
 - b. The way immigration and emigration trends strengthen global relationships
 - c. The way racism and sexism impact the population composition of rural communities
 - d. The way humans interact with environmental resources on a daily basis
3. What does carrying capacity refer to?
 - a. The ability of a community to welcome new immigrants
 - b. The capacity for globalism within a given ethnic group
 - c. The amount of life that can be supported sustainably in a particular environment
 - d. The amount of weight that urban centers can bear if vertical growth is mandated

4. What three factors did Malthus believe would limit human population?
 - a. Self-preservation, old age, and illness
 - b. Natural cycles, illness, and immigration
 - c. Violence, new diseases, and old age
 - d. War, famine, and disease
5. What does cornucopian theory believe?
 - a. That human ingenuity will solve any issues that overpopulation creates
 - b. That new diseases will always keep populations stable
 - c. That the earth will naturally provide enough for whatever number of humans exist
 - d. That the greatest risk is population reduction, not population growth

20.2 Urbanization

6. In the concentric zone model, Zone B is likely to house what?
 - a. The city's industrial center
 - b. Wealthy commuter homes
 - c. Formerly wealthy homes split into cheap apartments
 - d. Rural outposts
7. What are the prerequisites for the existence of a city?
 - a. Good environment with water and a favorable climate
 - b. Advanced agricultural technology
 - c. Strong social organization
 - d. All of the above
8. In 2014, what was the largest city in the world?
 - a. Delhi
 - b. New York
 - c. Shanghai
 - d. Tokyo
9. What led to the creation of the exurbs?
 - a. Urban sprawl and crowds moving into the city
 - b. The high cost of suburban living
 - c. The housing boom of the 1980s
 - d. Gentrification
10. How are the suburbs of Paris different from those of most U.S. cities?
 - a. They are connected by public transportation.
 - b. There are more industrial and business opportunities there.
 - c. They are synonymous with housing projects and urban poor.
 - d. They are less populated.
11. How does gentrification affect cities?
 - a. They become more crowded.
 - b. Less affluent residents are pushed into less desirable areas.
 - c. Traffic issues, including pollution, become worse.
 - d. All of the above

12. What does human ecology theory address?
- a. The relationship between humans and their environments
 - b. The way humans affect technology
 - c. The way the human population reduces the variety of nonhuman species
 - d. The relationship between humans and other species
13. Urbanization includes the sociological study of what?
- a. Urban economics
 - b. Urban politics
 - c. Urban environments
 - d. All of the above

20.3 The Environment and Society

14. The “tragedy of the commons” is a reference to what?
- a. Global warming
 - b. African landowners
 - c. The common grazing lands in Oxford
 - d. The misuse of private space
15. What are ways that human activity impacts the water supply?
- a. Creating sewage
 - b. Spreading chemicals
 - c. Increasing radioactivity
 - d. All of the above
16. Which is an example of environmental racism?
- a. The fact that a disproportionate percentage of people of color live in environmentally hazardous areas
 - b. Greenpeace protests
 - c. The prevalence of asbestos in formerly “whites only” schools
 - d. Prejudice similar to racism against people with different environmental views than one’s own
17. What is *not* a negative outcome of shoreline dredging?
- a. Damaged coral reefs
 - b. Death of marine life
 - c. Ruined sea grass beds
 - d. Reduction of human population
18. What are the two primary methods of waste disposal?
- a. Landfill and incineration
 - b. Incineration and compost
 - c. Decomposition and incineration
 - d. Marine dumping and landfills
19. Where does a large percentage of e-waste wind up?
- a. Incinerators
 - b. Recycled in peripheral nations
 - c. Repurposed into new electronics
 - d. Dumped into ocean repositories

20. What types of municipal projects often result in environmental racism?
- Toxic dumps or other objectionable projects
 - The location of schools, libraries, and other cultural institutions
 - Hospitals and other health and safety sites
 - Public transportation options

Short Answer

20.1 Demography and Population

- Given what we know about population growth, what do you think of China's policy that limits the number of children a family can have? Do you agree with it? Why, or why not? What other ways might a country of over 1.3 billion people manage its population?
- Describe the effect of immigration or emigration on your life or in a community you have seen. What are the positive effects? What are the negative effects?
- What responsibility does the United States have toward underage asylum-seekers?

20.2 Urbanization

- What are the differences between the suburbs and the exurbs, and who is most likely to live in each?
- How will the growth in urban populations affect the world over the next ten years?
- Considering the concentric zone model, what type of zone were you raised in? Is this the same or different as that of earlier generations in your family? What type of zone do you reside in now? Do you find that people from one zone stereotype those from another? If so, how?

20.3 The Environment and Society

- After reading this section, will you change the way you treat your household waste? Explain.
- How do you think the issue of e-waste should be dealt with? Should the responsibility fall to the companies that make the products or the consumer who buys them? Would your buying habits be different if you had to pay to recycle old electronics?
- Can you think of a modern example of the tragedy of the commons, where public use without accountability has created a negative outcome?
- NIMBY protests occur when concerned citizens band together to speak up against something that will impact them negatively. Is this a positive or negative trend? Give an example of a NIMBY protest and whether you support it or not.

Further Research

20.1 Demography and Population

To learn more about population concerns, from the new-era ZPG advocates to the United Nations reports, check out the [Population Connection web site \(http://openstax.org/l/population_connection\)](http://openstax.org/l/population_connection).

Explore an interactive version of the [population pyramid \(http://openstax.org/l/2EDemoNow\)](http://openstax.org/l/2EDemoNow) for each country, and to see updates and changes over time: [at this website \(https://openstax.org/l/populationpyramid\)](https://openstax.org/l/populationpyramid).

20.2 Urbanization

Interested in learning more about the latest research in the field of human ecology? Visit the [Society for Human Ecology web site \(http://openstax.org/l/human_ecology\)](http://openstax.org/l/human_ecology) to discover what's emerging in this field.

Getting from place to place in urban areas might be more complicated than you think. Read the latest on

pedestrian-traffic concerns at the [Streetsblog web site \(http://openstax.org/l/pedestrian_traffic\)](http://openstax.org/l/pedestrian_traffic).

20.3 The Environment and Society

Visit the [Cleanups in My Community web site \(http://openstax.org/l/community_cleanup\)](http://openstax.org/l/community_cleanup) to see where environmental hazards have been identified in your backyard, and what is being done about them.

What is your carbon footprint? Find out using the [carbon footprint calculator \(http://openstax.org/l/carbon_footprint_calculator\)](http://openstax.org/l/carbon_footprint_calculator).

Find out using the [water footprint calculator \(https://openstax.org/l/watercalculator\)](https://openstax.org/l/watercalculator).

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FIGURE 21.1 Activism can take the form of enormous marches, violent clashes, fundraising, social media activity, or silent displays. In this 2016 photo, people wear hoods and prison jumpsuits to protest the conditions at Guantanamo Bay Prison, where suspected terrorists had been held for over a decade without trial and without the rights of most people being held for suspicion of crimes. (Credit: Debra Sweet/flickr)

CHAPTER OUTLINE

21.1 Collective Behavior

21.2 Social Movements

21.3 Social Change

INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND SOCIAL CHANGE When considering social movements, the images that come to mind are often the most dramatic and dynamic: the Boston Tea Party, Martin Luther King's speech at the 1963 March on Washington, anti-war protesters putting flowers in soldiers' rifles, and Gloria Richardson brushing away a bayonet in Cambridge, Maryland. Or perhaps more violent visuals: burning buildings in Watts, protestors fighting with police, or a lone citizen facing a line of tanks in Tiananmen Square.

But social movement occurs every day, often without any pictures or fanfare, by people of all backgrounds and ages. Organizing an awareness event, volunteering at a shelter, donating to a cause, speaking at a school board meeting, running for office, or writing an article are all ways that people participate in or promote social movements. Some people drive social change by educating themselves through books or trainings. Others find one person to help at a time.

Occupy Wall Street (OWS) was a unique movement that defied some of the theoretical and practical expectations regarding social movements. OWS is set apart by its lack of a single message, its leaderless organization, and its target—financial institutions instead of the government. OWS baffled much of the public, and certainly the media, leading many to ask, "Who are they, and what do they want?"

On July 13, 2011, the organization Adbusters posted on its blog, "Are you ready for a Tahrir moment? On September 17th, flood into lower Manhattan, set up tents, kitchens, peaceful barricades and occupy Wall Street" (Castells 2012).

The "Tahrir moment" was a reference to the 2010 political uprising that began in Tunisia and spread throughout the Middle East and North Africa, including Egypt's Tahrir Square in Cairo. Although OWS was a reaction to the continuing financial chaos that resulted from the 2008 market meltdown and not a political movement, the Arab Spring was its catalyst.

Manuel Castells (2012) notes that the years leading up to the Occupy movement had witnessed a dizzying increase in the disparity of wealth in the United States, stemming back to the 1980s. The top 1 percent in the nation had secured 58 percent of the economic growth in the period for themselves, while real hourly wages for the average worker had increased by only 2 percent. The wealth of the top 5 percent had increased by 42 percent. The average pay of a CEO was at that time 350 times that of the average worker, compared to less than 50 times in 1983 (AFL-CIO 2014). The country's leading financial institutions, to many clearly to blame for the crisis and dubbed "too big to fail," were in trouble after many poorly qualified borrowers defaulted on their mortgage loans when the loans' interest rates rose. The banks were eventually "bailed" out by the government with \$700 billion of taxpayer money. According to many reports, that same year top executives and traders received large bonuses.

On September 17, 2011, an anniversary of the signing of the U.S. Constitution, the occupation began. About one thousand protestors descended upon Wall Street, and up to 20,000 people moved into Zuccotti Park, only two blocks away, where they began building a village of tents and organizing a system of communication. The protest soon began spreading throughout the nation, and its members started calling themselves "the 99 percent." More than a thousand cities and towns had Occupy demonstrations.

What did they want? Castells has dubbed OWS "A non-demand movement: The process is the message." Using Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and live-stream video, the protesters conveyed a multifold message with a long list of reforms and social change, including the need to address the rising disparity of wealth, the influence of money on election outcomes, the notion of "corporate personhood," a corporatized political system (to be replaced by "direct democracy"), political favoring of the rich, and rising student debt.

What did they accomplish? Despite headlines at the time softly mocking OWS for lack of cohesion and lack of clear messaging, the movement is credited with bringing attention to income inequality and the seemingly preferential treatment of financial institutions accused of wrongdoing. Recall from the chapter on Crime and Deviance that many financial crimes are not prosecuted, and their perpetrators rarely face jail time. It is likely that the general population is more sensitive to those issues than they were before the Occupy and related movements made them more visible.

What is the long-term impact? Has the United States changed the way it manages inequality? Certainly not. As discussed in several chapters, income inequality has generally increased. But is a major shift in our future?

The late James C. Davies suggested in his 1962 paper, "Toward a Theory of Revolution" that major change depends upon the mood of the people, and that it is extremely unlikely those in absolute poverty will be able to overturn a government, simply because the government has infinitely more power.

Instead, a shift is more possible when those with more power become involved. When formerly prosperous people begin to have unmet needs and unmet expectations, they become more disturbed: their mood changes. Eventually an intolerable point is reached, and revolution occurs. Thus, change comes not from the very bottom of the social hierarchy, but from somewhere in the middle (Davies 1962). For example, the Arab Spring was driven by mostly young, educated people whose promise and expectations were thwarted by corrupt autocratic governments. OWS too came not from the bottom but from people in the middle, who exploited the power of social media to enhance communication.

21.1 Collective Behavior

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Describe different forms of collective behavior
- Differentiate between types of crowds
- Discuss emergent norm, value-added, and assembling perspective analyses of collective behavior



SOCIOLOGY IN THE REAL WORLD

Flash Mobs and Challenges



FIGURE 21.2 Is this a good time had by all? Some flash mobs may function as political protests, while others are for fun. (Credit Richard Wood/flickr)

In March 2014, a group of musicians got together in a fish market in Odessa for a spontaneous performance of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" from his Ninth Symphony. While tensions were building over Ukraine's efforts to join the European Union, and even as Russian troops had taken control of the Ukrainian airbase in Belbek, the Odessa Philharmonic Orchestra and Opera Chorus tried to lighten the troubled times for shoppers with music and song. Spontaneous gatherings like this are called **flash mobs**. They are often recorded or live streamed, and are sometimes planned to celebrate an event or person.

While flash mobs are often intensely designed and rehearsed in order to give the impression of spontaneity, challenges don't always go according to plan: Cinnamon is too intense, buckets may fall on people's heads, or a bottle breaks on the floor. But successes and failures on social media can tie people together. Challenges can lead to chats, recollections, and repeats.

Humans seek connections and shared experiences. Perhaps experiencing a flash mob event enhances this bond. It certainly interrupts our otherwise mundane routine with a reminder that we are social animals.

Forms of Collective Behavior

Flash mobs are examples of **collective behavior**, noninstitutionalized activity in which several or many people voluntarily engage. Other examples are a group of commuters traveling home from work and a population of teens adopting a favorite singer's hairstyle. In short, collective behavior is any group behavior that is not

mandated or regulated by an institution. There are three primary forms of collective behavior: the crowd, the mass, and the public.

It takes a fairly large number of people in close proximity to form a **crowd** (Lofland 1993). Examples include a group of people attending an Ani DiFranco concert, tailgating at a Patriots game, or attending a worship service. Turner and Killian (1993) identified four types of crowds. **Casual crowds** consist of people who are in the same place at the same time but who aren't really interacting, such as people standing in line at the post office. **Conventional crowds** are those who come together for a scheduled event that occurs regularly, like a religious service. **Expressive crowds** are people who join together to express emotion, often at funerals, weddings, or the like. The final type, **acting crowds**, focuses on a specific goal or action, such as a protest movement or riot.

In addition to the different types of crowds, collective groups can also be identified in two other ways. A **mass** is a relatively large number of people with a common interest, though they may not be in close proximity (Lofland 1993), such as players of the popular Facebook game Farmville. A **public**, on the other hand, is an unorganized, relatively diffused group of people who share ideas, such as the Libertarian political party. While these two types of crowds are similar, they are not the same. To distinguish between them, remember that members of a mass share interests, whereas members of a public share ideas.

Theoretical Perspectives on Collective Behavior

Early collective behavior theories (LeBon 1895; Blumer 1969) focused on the irrationality of crowds. Eventually, those theorists who viewed crowds as uncontrolled groups of irrational people were supplanted by theorists who viewed the behavior some crowds engaged in as the rational behavior of logical beings.

Emergent-Norm Perspective



FIGURE 21.3 According to the emergent-norm perspective, Hurricane Katrina victims sought needed supplies for survival, but to some outsiders their behavior was normally seen as looting. (Credit: Infrogmation/Wikimedia Commons)

Sociologists Ralph Turner and Lewis Killian (1993) built on earlier sociological ideas and developed what is known as emergent norm theory. They believe that the norms experienced by people in a crowd may be disparate and fluctuating. They emphasize the importance of these norms in shaping crowd behavior, especially those norms that shift quickly in response to changing external factors. **Emergent norm theory** asserts that, in this circumstance, people perceive and respond to the crowd situation with their particular (individual) set of norms, which may change as the crowd experience evolves. This focus on the individual component of interaction reflects a symbolic interactionist perspective.

For Turner and Killian, the process begins when individuals suddenly find themselves in a new situation, or when an existing situation suddenly becomes strange or unfamiliar. For example, think about human behavior during Hurricane Katrina. New Orleans was decimated and people were trapped without supplies or a way to evacuate. In these extraordinary circumstances, what outsiders saw as “looting” was defined by those involved

as seeking needed supplies for survival. Normally, individuals would not wade into a corner gas station and take canned goods without paying, but given that they were suddenly in a greatly changed situation, they established a norm that they felt was reasonable.

Once individuals find themselves in a situation ungoverned by previously established norms, they interact in small groups to develop new guidelines on how to behave. According to the emergent-norm perspective, crowds are not viewed as irrational, impulsive, uncontrolled groups. Instead, norms develop and are accepted as they fit the situation. While this theory offers insight into why norms develop, it leaves undefined the nature of norms, how they come to be accepted by the crowd, and how they spread through the crowd.

Value-Added Theory

Neil Smelser's (1962) meticulous categorization of crowd behavior, called **value-added theory**, is a perspective within the functionalist tradition based on the idea that several conditions must be in place for collective behavior to occur. Each condition adds to the likelihood that collective behavior will occur. The first condition is *structural conduciveness*, which occurs when people are aware of the problem and have the opportunity to gather, ideally in an open area. *Structural strain*, the second condition, refers to people's expectations about the situation at hand being unmet, causing tension and strain. The next condition is the *growth and spread of a generalized belief*, wherein a problem is clearly identified and attributed to a person or group.

Fourth, *precipitating factors* spur collective behavior; this is the emergence of a dramatic event. The fifth condition is *mobilization for action*, when leaders emerge to direct a crowd to action. The final condition relates to action by the agents. Called *social control*, it is the only way to end the collective behavior episode (Smelser 1962).

A real-life example of these conditions occurred after the fatal police shooting of teenager Michael Brown, an unarmed eighteen-year-old African American, in Ferguson, MO on August 9, 2014. The shooting drew national attention almost immediately. A large group of mostly Black, local residents assembled in protest—a classic example of structural conduciveness. When the community perceived that the police were not acting in the people's interest and were withholding the name of the officer, structural strain became evident. A growing generalized belief evolved as the crowd of protesters were met with heavily armed police in military-style protective uniforms accompanied by an armored vehicle. The precipitating factor of the arrival of the police spurred greater collective behavior as the residents mobilized by assembling a parade down the street. Ultimately they were met with tear gas, pepper spray, and rubber bullets used by the police acting as agents of social control. The element of social control escalated over the following days until August 18, when the governor called in the National Guard.



FIGURE 21.4 Agents of social control bring collective behavior to an end. (Credit: hozinja/flickr)

Assembling Perspective

Interactionist sociologist Clark McPhail (1991) developed **assembling perspective**, another system for understanding collective behavior that credited individuals in crowds as rational beings. Unlike previous theories, this theory refocuses attention from collective behavior to collective action. Remember that collective behavior is a noninstitutionalized gathering, whereas collective action is based on a shared interest. McPhail's theory focused primarily on the processes associated with crowd behavior, plus the lifecycle of gatherings. He identified several instances of convergent or collective behavior, as shown on the chart below.

Type of crowd	Description	Example
Convergence clusters	Family and friends who travel together	Carpooling parents take several children to the movies
Convergent orientation	Group all facing the same direction	A semi-circle around a stage
Collective vocalization	Sounds or noises made collectively	Screams on a roller coaster
Collective verbalization	Collective and simultaneous participation in a speech or song	Pledge of Allegiance in the school classroom
Collective gesticulation	Body parts forming symbols	The YMCA dance
Collective manipulation	Objects collectively moved around	Holding signs at a protest rally

TABLE 21.1 Clark McPhail identified various circumstances of convergent and collective behavior (McPhail 1991).

Type of crowd	Description	Example
Collective locomotion	The direction and rate of movement to the event	Children running to an ice cream truck

TABLE 21.1 Clark McPhail identified various circumstances of convergent and collective behavior (McPhail 1991).

As useful as this is for understanding the components of how crowds come together, many sociologists criticize its lack of attention on the large cultural context of the described behaviors, instead focusing on individual actions.

21.2 Social Movements

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Demonstrate awareness of social movements on a state, national, and global level
- Distinguish between different types of social movements
- Identify stages of social movements
- Discuss theoretical perspectives on social movements, like resource mobilization, framing, and new social movement theory

Social movements are purposeful, organized groups that strive to work toward a common social goal. While most of us learned about social movements in history classes, we tend to take for granted the fundamental changes they caused—and we may be completely unfamiliar with the trend toward global social movements. But from the antitobacco movement that has worked to outlaw smoking in public buildings and raise the cost of cigarettes, to political uprisings throughout the Arab world, movements are creating social change on a global scale.

Levels of Social Movements

Movements happen in our towns, in our nation, and around the world. Let's take a look at examples of social movements, from local to global. No doubt you can think of others on all of these levels, especially since modern technology has allowed us a near-constant stream of information about the quest for social change around the world.



FIGURE 21.5 Staff at University of Wisconsin protest a proposed law that would significantly reduce their ability to bargain for better pay and benefits. (Credit: marctasman/flickr)

Local

Local social movements typically refer to those in cities or towns, but they can also affect smaller constituencies, such as college campuses. Sometimes colleges are smaller hubs of a national movement, as seen during the Vietnam War protests or the Black Lives Matter protests. Other times, colleges are managing a more local issue. In 2012, The Cooper Union in New York City announced that, due to financial mismanagement and unforeseen downturns from the Great Recession, the college had a massive shortfall; it would be forced to charge tuition for the first time. To students at most other colleges, tuition would not seem out of line, but Cooper Union was founded (and initially funded) under the principle that it would not charge tuition. When the school formally announced the plan to charge tuition, students occupied a building and, later, the college president's office. Student action eventually contributed to the president's resignation and a financial recovery plan in partnership with the state attorney general.

Another example occurred in Wisconsin. After announcing a significant budget shortfall, Governor Scott Walker put forth a financial repair bill that would reduce the collective bargaining abilities of unions and other organizations in the state. (Collective bargaining was used to attain workplace protections, benefits, healthcare, and fair pay.) Faculty at the state's college system were not in unions, but teaching assistants, researchers, and other staff had regularly collectively bargained. Faced with the prospect of reduced job protections, pay, and benefits, the staff members began one of the earliest protests against Walker's action, by protesting on campus and sending an ironic message of love to the governor on Valentine's Day. Over time, these efforts would spread to other organizations in the state.

State



FIGURE 21.6 Texas Secede! is an organization which would like Texas to secede from the United States. (Credit: Tim Pearce/flickr)

The most impactful state-level protest would be to cease being a state, and organizations in several states are working toward that goal. Texas secession has been a relatively consistent movement since about 1990. The past decade has seen an increase in rhetoric and campaigns to drive interest and support for a public referendum (a direct vote on the matter by the people). The Texas Nationalist Movement, Texas Secede!, and other groups have provided formal proposals and programs designed to make the idea seem more feasible. Textit has become a widely used nickname and hashtag for the movement. And in February 2021, a bill was introduced to hold a referendum that would begin formal discussions on creating an independent

nation—though the bill's sponsor indicated that it was mainly intended to begin conversation and evaluations rather than directly lead to secession (De Alba 2021).

States also get involved before and after national decisions. The legalization of same-sex marriage throughout the United States led some people to feel their religious beliefs were under attack. Following swiftly upon the heels of the Supreme Court Obergefell ruling, the Indiana legislature passed a Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA, pronounced "rifra"). Originally crafted decades ago with the purpose of preserving the rights of minority religious people, more recent RFRA laws allow individuals, businesses, and other organizations to decide whom they will serve based on religious beliefs. For example, Arkansas's 2021 law allowed doctors to refuse to treat patients based on the doctor's religious beliefs (Associated Press 2021). In this way, state-level organizations and social movements are responding to a national decision.



FIGURE 21.7 At the time of this writing, more than thirty states and the District of Columbia allow marriage for same-sex couples. State constitutional bans are more difficult to overturn than mere state bans because of the higher threshold of votes required to change a constitution. Now that the Supreme Court has stricken a key part of the Defense of Marriage Act, same-sex couples married in states that allow it are now entitled to federal benefits afforded to heterosexual couples (CNN 2014). (Credit: Jose Antonio Navas/flickr).

Global

Social organizations worldwide take stands on such general areas of concern as poverty, sex trafficking, and the use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in food. **Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)** are sometimes formed to support such movements, such as the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movement (FOAM). Global efforts to reduce poverty are represented by the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief (OXFAM), among others. The Fair Trade movement exists to protect and support food producers in developing countries. Occupy Wall Street, although initially a local movement, also went global throughout Europe and, as the chapter's introductory photo shows, the Middle East.

Types of Social Movements

We know that social movements can occur on the local, national, or even global stage. Are there other patterns or classifications that can help us understand them? Sociologist David Aberle (1966) addresses this question by developing categories that distinguish among social movements based on what they want to change and how much change they want. **Reform movements** seek to change something specific about the social structure. Examples include antinuclear groups, Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), the Dreamers movement for immigration reform, and the Human Rights Campaign's advocacy for Marriage Equality. **Revolutionary movements** seek to completely change every aspect of society. These include the 1960s counterculture movement, including the revolutionary group The Weather Underground, as well as anarchist collectives. Texas Secede! is a revolutionary movement. **Religious/Redemptive movements** are "meaning seeking," and their goal is to provoke inner change or spiritual growth in individuals. Organizations pushing these movements include Heaven's Gate or the Branch Davidians. The latter is still in existence despite

government involvement that led to the deaths of numerous Branch Davidian members in 1993. **Alternative movements** are focused on self-improvement and limited, specific changes to individual beliefs and behavior. These include trends like transcendental meditation or a macrobiotic diet. **Resistance movements** seek to prevent or undo change to the social structure. The Ku Klux Klan, the Minutemen, and pro-life movements fall into this category.

Stages of Social Movements

Later sociologists studied the lifecycle of social movements—how they emerge, grow, and in some cases, die out. Blumer (1969) and Tilly (1978) outline a four-stage process. In the *preliminary stage*, people become aware of an issue, and leaders emerge. This is followed by the *coalescence stage* when people join together and organize in order to publicize the issue and raise awareness. In the *institutionalization stage*, the movement no longer requires grassroots volunteerism: it is an established organization, typically with a paid staff. When people fall away and adopt a new movement, the movement successfully brings about the change it sought, or when people no longer take the issue seriously, the movement falls into the *decline stage*. Each social movement discussed earlier belongs in one of these four stages. Where would you put them on the list?

Social Media and Social Movements



FIGURE 21.8 Are these activists most likely to have a larger impact through people who see their sign from the shore, or through people who will see pictures of their event on social media? (Credit: Backbone Campaign/flickr)

As we have mentioned throughout this text, and likely as you have experienced in your life, social media is a widely used mechanism in social movements. In the Groups and Organizations chapter, we discussed Tarana Burke first using "Me Too" in 2006 on a major social media venue of the time (MySpace). The phrase later grew into a massive movement when people began using it on Twitter to drive empathy and support regarding experiences of sexual harassment or sexual assault. In a similar way, Black Lives Matter began as a social media message after George Zimmerman was acquitted in the shooting death of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, and the phrase burgeoned into a formalized (though decentralized) movement in subsequent years.

Social media has the potential to dramatically transform how people get involved in movements ranging from

local school district decisions to presidential campaigns. As discussed above, movements go through several stages, and social media adds a dynamic to each of them. In the *preliminary stage*, people become aware of an issue, and leaders emerge. Compared to movements of 20 or 30 years ago, social media can accelerate this stage substantially. Issue awareness can spread at the speed of a click, with thousands of people across the globe becoming informed at the same time. In a similar vein, those who are savvy and engaged with social media may emerge as leaders, even if, for example, they are not great public speakers.

At the next stage, the *coalescence stage*, social media is also transformative. Coalescence is the point when people join together to publicize the issue and get organized. President Obama's 2008 campaign was a case study in organizing through social media. Using Twitter and other online tools, the campaign engaged volunteers who had typically not bothered with politics. Combined with comprehensive data tracking and the ability to micro-target, the campaign became a blueprint for others to build on. The 2020 elections featured a level of data analysis and rapid response capabilities that, while echoing the Obama campaign's early work, made the 2008 campaign look quaint. The campaigns and political analysts could measure the level of social media interaction following any campaign stop, debate, statement by the candidate, news mention, or any other event, and measure whether the tone or "sentiment" was positive or negative. Political polls are still important, but social media provides instant feedback and opportunities for campaigns to act, react, or—on a daily basis—ask for donations based on something that had occurred just hours earlier (Knowledge at Wharton 2020).

Interestingly, social media can have interesting outcomes once a movement reaches the *institutionalization* stage. In some cases, a formal organization might exist alongside the hashtag or general sentiment, as is the case with Black Lives Matter. At any one time, BLM is essentially three things: a structured organization, an idea with deep and personal meaning for people, and a widely used phrase or hashtag. It's possible that users of the hashtag are not referring to the formal organization. It's even possible that people who hold a strong belief that Black lives matter do not agree with all of the organization's principles or its leadership. And in other cases, people may be very aligned with all three contexts of the phrase. Social media is still crucial to the social movement, but its interplay is both complex and evolving.

In a similar way, MeToo activists, including Tarana Burke herself, have sought to clarify the interweaving of different aspects of the movement. She told the Harvard Gazette in 2020:

I think we have to be careful about what we're calling the movement. And I think one of the things I've learned in the last two years is that folks don't really understand what a movement is or how it's defined. The people using the hashtag on the internet were the impetus for Me Too being put into the public sphere. The media coverage of the viralness of Me Too and the people being accused are media coverage of a popular story that derived from the hashtag. The movement is the work that our organization and others like us are doing to both support survivors and move people to action (Walsh 2020).

Sociologists have identified high-risk activism, such as the civil rights movement, as a "strong-tie" phenomenon, meaning that people are far more likely to stay engaged and not run home to safety if they have close friends who are also engaged. The people who dropped out of the movement—who went home after the danger became too great—did not display any less ideological commitment. But they lacked the strong-tie connection to other people who were staying. Social media had been considered "weak-tie" (McAdam 1993 and Brown 2011). People follow or friend people they have never met. Weak ties are important for our social structure, but they seemed to limit the level of risk we'll take on their behalf. For some people, social media remains that way, but for others it can relate to or build stronger ties. For example, if people, who had for years known each other only through an online group, meet in person at an event, they may feel far more connected at that event and afterward than people who had never interacted before. And as we discussed in the Groups chapter, social media itself, even if people never meet, can bring people into primary group status, forming stronger ties.

Another way to consider the impact of social media on activism is through something that may or may not be emotional, has little implications regarding tie strength, and may be fleeting rather than permanent, but still be one of the largest considerations of any formal social movement: money. Returning to politics, think of the massive amounts of campaign money raised in each election cycle through social media. In the 2020 Presidential election and its aftermath, hundreds of millions of dollars were raised through social media. Likewise, 55 percent of people who engage with nonprofits through social media take some sort of action; and for 60 percent of them (or 33 percent of the total) that action is to give money to support the cause (Nonprofit Source 2020).

Theoretical Perspectives on Social Movements

Most theories of social movements are called collective action theories, indicating the purposeful nature of this form of collective behavior. The following three theories are but a few of the many classic and modern theories developed by social scientists.

Resource Mobilization

McCarthy and Zald (1977) conceptualize **resource mobilization theory** as a way to explain movement success in terms of the ability to acquire resources and mobilize individuals. Resources are primarily time and money, and the more of both, the greater the power of organized movements. Numbers of social movement organizations (SMOs), which are single social movement groups, with the same goals constitute a social movement industry (SMI). Together they create what McCarthy and Zald (1977) refer to as "the sum of all social movements in a society."

Resource Mobilization and the Civil Rights Movement

An example of resource mobilization theory is activity of the civil rights movement in the decade between the mid 1950s and the mid 1960s. Social movements had existed before, notably the Women's Suffrage Movement and a long line of labor movements, thus constituting an **existing social movement sector**, which is the multiple social movement industries in a society, even if they have widely varying constituents and goals. The civil rights movement had also existed well before Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat to a white man. Less known is that Parks was a member of the NAACP and trained in leadership (A&E Television Networks, LLC. 2014). But her action that day was spontaneous and unplanned (Schmitz 2014). Her arrest triggered a public outcry that led to the famous Montgomery bus boycott, turning the movement into what we now think of as the "civil rights movement" (Schmitz 2014).

Mobilization had to begin immediately. Boycotting the bus made other means of transportation necessary, which was provided through car pools. Churches and their ministers joined the struggle, and the protest organization In Friendship was formed as well as The Friendly Club and the Club From Nowhere. A **social movement industry**, which is the collection of the social movement organizations that are striving toward similar goals, was growing.

Martin Luther King Jr. emerged during these events to become the charismatic leader of the movement, gained respect from elites in the federal government, and aided by even more emerging SMOs such as the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), among others. Several still exist today. Although the movement in that period was an overall success, and laws were changed (even if not attitudes), the "movement" continues. So do struggles to keep the gains that were made, even as the U.S. Supreme Court has recently weakened the Voter Rights Act of 1965, once again making it more difficult for Black Americans and other minorities to vote.

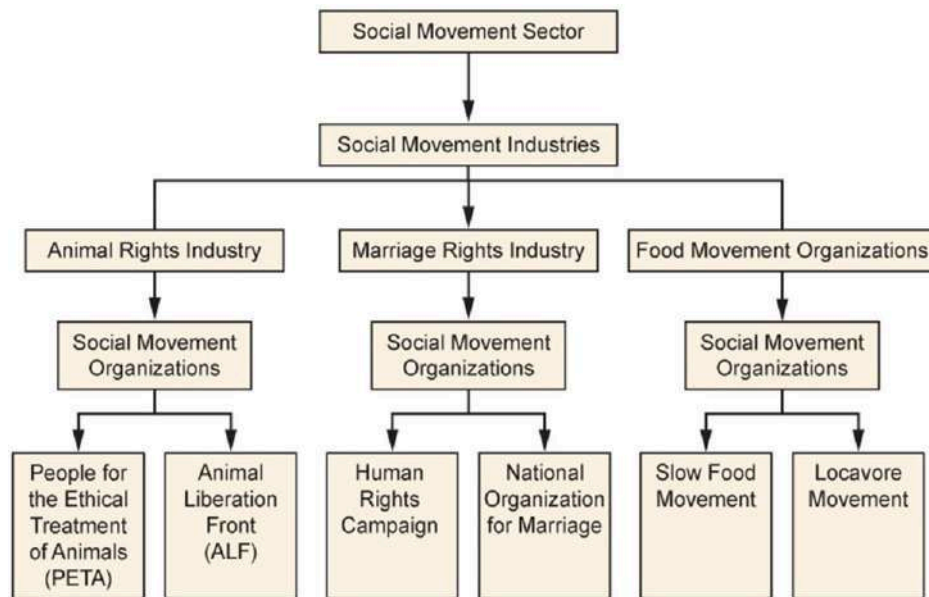


FIGURE 21.9 Multiple social movement organizations concerned about the same issue form a social movement industry. A society's many social movement industries comprise its social movement sector. With so many options, to whom will you give your time and money?

Framing/Frame Analysis

Over the past several decades, sociologists have developed the concept of frames to explain how individuals identify and understand social events and which norms they should follow in any given situation (Goffman 1974; Snow et al. 1986; Benford and Snow 2000). Imagine entering a restaurant. Your “frame” immediately provides you with a behavior template. It probably does not occur to you to wear pajamas to a fine-dining establishment, throw food at other patrons, or spit your drink onto the table. However, eating food at a sleepover pizza party provides you with an entirely different behavior template. It might be perfectly acceptable to eat in your pajamas and maybe even throw popcorn at others or guzzle drinks from cans.

Successful social movements use three kinds of frames (Snow and Benford 1988) to further their goals. The first type, **diagnostic framing**, states the problem in a clear, easily understood way. When applying diagnostic frames, there are no shades of gray: instead, there is the belief that what “they” do is wrong and this is how “we” will fix it. The anti-gay marriage movement is an example of diagnostic framing with its uncompromising insistence that marriage is only between a man and a woman. **Prognostic framing**, the second type, offers a solution and states how it will be implemented. Some examples of this frame, when looking at the issue of marriage equality as framed by the anti-gay marriage movement, include the plan to restrict marriage to “one man/one woman” or to allow only “civil unions” instead of marriages. As you can see, there may be many competing prognostic frames even within social movements adhering to similar diagnostic frames. Finally, **motivational framing** is the call to action: what should you do once you agree with the diagnostic frame and believe in the prognostic frame? These frames are action-oriented. In the gay marriage movement, a call to action might encourage you to vote “no” on Proposition 8 in California (a move to limit marriage to male-female couples), or conversely, to contact your local congressperson to express your viewpoint that marriage should be restricted to male-female couples.

With so many similar diagnostic frames, some groups find it best to join together to maximize their impact. When social movements link their goals to the goals of other social movements and merge into a single group, a **frame alignment process** (Snow et al. 1986) occurs—an ongoing and intentional means of recruiting participants to the movement.

This frame alignment process has four aspects: bridging, amplification, extension, and transformation.

Bridging describes a “bridge” that connects uninvolved individuals and unorganized or ineffective groups with social movements that, though structurally unconnected, nonetheless share similar interests or goals. These organizations join together to create a new, stronger social movement organization. Can you think of examples of different organizations with a similar goal that have banded together?

In the *amplification* model, organizations seek to expand their core ideas to gain a wider, more universal appeal. By expanding their ideas to include a broader range, they can mobilize more people for their cause. For example, the Slow Food movement extends its arguments in support of local food to encompass reduced energy consumption, pollution, obesity from eating more healthfully, and more.

In *extension*, social movements agree to mutually promote each other, even when the two social movement organization’s goals don’t necessarily relate to each other’s immediate goals. This often occurs when organizations are sympathetic to each others’ causes, even if they are not directly aligned, such as women’s equal rights and the civil rights movement.

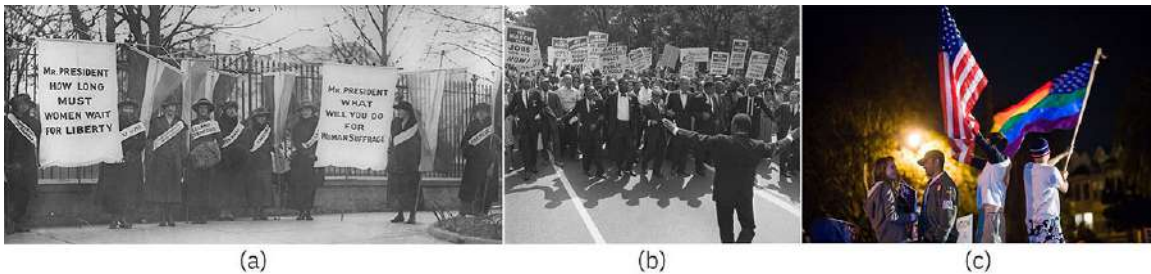


FIGURE 21.10 Extension occurs when social movements have sympathetic causes. Women’s rights, racial equality, and LGBT advocacy are all human rights issues. (Credit: Photos (a) and (b) Wikimedia Commons; Photo (c) Charlie Nguyen/flickr)

Transformation means a complete revision of goals. Once a movement has succeeded, it risks losing relevance. If it wants to remain active, the movement has to change with the transformation or risk becoming obsolete. For instance, when the women’s suffrage movement gained women the right to vote, members turned their attention to advocating equal rights and campaigning to elect women to office. In short, transformation is an evolution in the existing diagnostic or prognostic frames that generally achieves a total conversion of the movement.

New Social Movement Theory

New social movement theory, a development of European social scientists in the 1950s and 1960s, attempts to explain the proliferation of postindustrial and postmodern movements that are difficult to analyze using traditional social movement theories. Rather than being one specific theory, it is more of a perspective that revolves around understanding movements as they relate to politics, identity, culture, and social change. Some of these more complex interrelated movements include ecofeminism, which focuses on the patriarchal society as the source of environmental problems, and the transgender rights movement. Sociologist Steven Buechler (2000) suggests that we should be looking at the bigger picture in which these movements arise—shifting to a macro-level, global analysis of social movements.

21.3 Social Change

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Explain how technology, social institutions, population, and the environment can bring about social change
- Discuss the importance of modernization in relation to social change

Collective behavior and social movements are just two of the forces driving **social change**, which is the change in society created through social movements as well as external factors. Essentially, any disruptive shift in the status quo, be it intentional or random, human-caused or natural, can lead to social change.

Causes of Social Change

Throughout this text, we have discussed various causes and effects of social change. Below is a recap of some major drivers, including technology, social institutions, population, and the environment. Alone or in combination, these agents can disturb, improve, disrupt, or otherwise influence society.

Technology

Some would say that improving technology has made our lives easier. Imagine what your day would be like without the Internet, the automobile, or electricity. In *The World Is Flat*, Thomas Friedman (2005) argues that technology is a driving force behind globalization, while the other forces of social change (social institutions, population, environment) play comparatively minor roles. He suggests that we can view globalization as occurring in three distinct periods. First, globalization was driven by military expansion, powered by horsepower and wind power. The countries best able to take advantage of these power sources expanded the most, and exert control over the politics of the globe from the late fifteenth century to around the year 1800. The second shorter period from approximately 1800 C.E. to 2000 C.E. consisted of a globalizing economy. Steam and rail power were the guiding forces of social change and globalization in this period. Finally, Friedman brings us to the post-millennial era. In this period of globalization, change is driven by technology, particularly the Internet (Friedman 2005).

Technology can change other societal forces. For example, advances in medical technology allow people to live longer, have more children, and survive some natural disasters or problems. Advances in agricultural technology have allowed us to alter food products, which impacts our health as well as the environment. A given technology can create beneficiaries, but that same technology—especially if it is disruptive—can lead others to lose their jobs, suffer from pollution, or be monitored or victimized.

The digital divide—the increasing gap between the technological haves and have-nots—exists both locally and globally. Added security issues include theft of personal information, cyber aggression, and loss of privacy. The constant change in technology leads to an almost inevitable lack of preparation for new risks on both personal and societal scales.



SOCIOLOGY IN THE REAL WORLD

Crowdsourcing: Using the Web to Get Things Done

Millions of people today walk around with their heads tilted toward a small device held in their hands. Perhaps you are reading this textbook on a phone or tablet. People in developed societies now take communication technology for granted. How has this technology affected social change in our society and others? One very positive way is crowdsourcing.

Thanks to the web, digital **crowdsourcing** is the process of obtaining needed services, ideas, or content by soliciting contributions from a large group of people, and especially from an online community rather than from traditional employees or suppliers. Web-based companies such as Kickstarter have been created precisely for the purposes of raising large amounts of money in a short period of time, notably by sidestepping the traditional financing process. This book, or virtual book, is the product of a kind of crowdsourcing effort. It has been written and reviewed by several authors in a variety of fields to give you free access to a large amount of data produced at a low cost. The most common example of crowdsourced data is Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia, which is the result of thousands of volunteers adding and correcting material.

Perhaps the most striking use of crowdsourcing is disaster relief. By tracking tweets and e-mails and organizing the data in order of urgency and quantity, relief agencies can address the most urgent calls for help, such as for medical aid, food, shelter, or rescue. On January 12, 2010 a devastating earthquake hit the nation of Haiti. By January 25, a crisis map had been created from more than 2,500 incident reports, and more reports were added every day. The same technology was used to assist victims of the Japanese earthquake and tsunami in 2011.

The Darker Side of Technology: Electronic Aggression in the Information Age

The U.S. Center for Disease Control (CDC) uses the term "electronic aggression" to describe "any type of harassment or bullying that occurs through e-mail, a chat room, instant messaging, a website (including blogs), or text messaging" (CDC, n.d.) We generally think of this as cyberbullying. A 2011 study by the U.S. Department of Education found that 27.8 percent of students aged twelve through eighteen reported experiencing bullying. From the same sample 9 percent specifically reported having been a victim of cyberbullying (Robers et al. 2013).

Cyberbullying represents a powerful change in modern society. William F. Ogburn (1922) might have been describing it nearly a century ago when he defined "cultural lag," which occurs when material culture precedes nonmaterial culture. That is, society may not fully comprehend all the consequences of a new technology and so may initially reject it (such as stem cell research) or embrace it, sometimes with unintended negative consequences (such as pollution).

Cyberbullying is a special feature of the Internet. Unique to electronic aggression is that it can happen twenty-four hours a day, every day; it can reach a child (or an adult) even though she or he might otherwise feel safe in a locked house. The messages and images may be posted anonymously and to a very wide audience, and they might even be impossible to trace. Finally, once posted, the texts and images are very hard to delete. Its effects range from the use of alcohol and drugs to lower self-esteem, health problems, and even suicide (CDC, n.d.).

Social Institutions

Each change in a single social institution leads to changes in all social institutions. For example, the industrialization of society meant that there was no longer a need for large families to produce enough manual labor to run a farm. Further, new job opportunities were in close proximity to urban centers where living space was at a premium. The result is that the average family size shrunk significantly.

This same shift toward industrial corporate entities also changed the way we view government involvement in the private sector, created the global economy, provided new political platforms, and even spurred new religions and new forms of religious worship like Scientology. It has also informed the way we educate our children: originally schools were set up to accommodate an agricultural calendar so children could be home to work the fields in the summer, and even today, teaching models are largely based on preparing students for industrial jobs, despite that being an outdated need. A shift in one area, such as industrialization, means an interconnected impact across social institutions.

Population

Population composition is changing at every level of society. Births increase in one nation and decrease in another. Some families delay childbirth while others start bringing children into their folds early. Population changes can be due to random external forces, like an epidemic, or shifts in other social institutions, as described above. But regardless of why and how it happens, population trends have a tremendous interrelated impact on all other aspects of society.

In the United States, we are experiencing an increase in our senior population as Baby Boomers retire, which will in turn change the way many of our social institutions are organized. For example, there is an increased demand for housing in warmer climates, a massive shift in the need for elder care and assisted living facilities, and growing incidence of elder abuse. Retiring Boomers may also lead to labor or expertise shortages, and (as discussed extensively in the chapter on Aging and the Elderly) healthcare costs will increase to become a larger and larger portion of our economy.

Globally, often the countries with the highest fertility rates are least able to absorb and attend to the needs of a growing population. Family planning is a large step in ensuring that families are not burdened with more children than they can care for. On a macro level, the increased population, particularly in the poorest parts of the globe, also leads to increased stress on the planet's resources.

The Environment

As discussed extensively in the chapter on Population, Urbanization, and the Environment, changes in the environment and our interaction with it can have promising or devastating effects. Access to safe water is a primary determinant of health and prosperity. And as human populations expand in more vulnerable areas while natural disasters occur with more frequency, we see an increase in the number of people affected by those disasters.

Overall health and wellbeing are deeply affected by the environment even in urbanized areas. Many types of cancers, which are collectively the leading cause of death in higher-income countries, have environmental influences (Mahase 2019).



SOCIOLOGY IN THE REAL WORLD

Hurricane Katrina: When It All Comes Together

The four key elements that affect social change that are described in this chapter are the environment, technology, social institutions, and population. In 2005, New Orleans was struck by a devastating hurricane. But it was not just the hurricane that was disastrous. It was the converging of all four of these elements, and the text below will connect the elements by putting the words in parentheses.

Before Hurricane Katrina (environment) hit, poorly coordinated evacuation efforts had left about 25 percent of the population, almost entirely African Americans who lacked private transportation, to suffer the consequences of the coming storm (demographics). Then "after the storm, when the levees broke, thousands more [refugees] came. And the city buses, meant to take them to proper shelters, were underwater" (Sullivan 2005). No public transportation was provided, drinking water and communications were delayed, and FEMA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (institutions), was headed by an appointee with no real experience in emergency management. Those who were eventually evacuated did not know where they were being sent or how to contact family members. African Americans were sent the farthest from their homes. When the displaced began to return, public housing had not been reestablished, yet the Superdome stadium, which had served as a temporary disaster shelter, had been rebuilt. Homeowners received financial support, but renters did not.

As it turns out, it was not entirely the hurricane that cost the lives of 1,500 people, but the fact that the city's storm levees (technology), which had been built too low and which failed to meet numerous other safety specifications, gave way, flooding the lower portions of the city, occupied almost entirely by African Americans.

Journalist Naomi Klein, in her book *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, presents a theory of a "triple shock," consisting of an initial disaster, an economic shock that replaces public services with private (for-profit) ones, and a third shock consisting of the intense policing of the remaining public. Klein supports her claim by quoting then-Congressman Richard Baker as saying, "We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn't do it, but God did." She quotes developer Joseph Canizaro as stating, "I think we have a clean sheet to start again. And with that clean sheet we have some very big opportunities."

One clean sheet was that New Orleans began to replace public schools with charters, breaking the teachers' union and firing all public school teachers (Mullins 2014). Public housing was seriously reduced and the poor were forced out altogether or into the suburbs far from medical and other facilities (The Advocate 2013). Finally, by relocating African Americans and changing the ratio of African Americans to whites, New Orleans changed its entire demographic makeup.

Modernization

Modernization describes the processes that increase the amount of specialization and differentiation of structure in societies resulting in the move from an undeveloped society to a developed, technologically driven society (Irwin 1975). By this definition, the level of modernity within a society is judged by the sophistication of

its technology, particularly as it relates to infrastructure, industry, and the like. However, it is important to note the inherent ethnocentric bias of such assessment. Why do we assume that those living in semi-peripheral and peripheral nations would find it so wonderful to become more like the core nations? Is modernization always positive?

One contradiction of all kinds of technology is that they often promise time-saving benefits, but somehow fail to deliver. How many times have you ground your teeth in frustration at an Internet site that refused to load or at a dropped call on your cell phone? Despite time-saving devices such as dishwashers, washing machines, and, now, remote control vacuum cleaners, the average amount of time spent on housework is the same today as it was fifty years ago. And the dubious benefits of 24/7 e-mail and immediate information have simply increased the amount of time employees are expected to be responsive and available. While once businesses had to travel at the speed of the U.S. postal system, sending something off and waiting until it was received before the next stage, today the immediacy of information transfer means there are no such breaks.

Further, the Internet bought us information, but at a cost. The morass of information means that there is as much poor information available as trustworthy sources. There is a delicate line to walk when core nations seek to bring the assumed benefits of modernization to more traditional cultures. For one, there are obvious procapitalist biases that go into such attempts, and it is short-sighted for western governments and social scientists to assume all other countries aspire to follow in their footsteps. Additionally, there can be a kind of neo-liberal defense of rural cultures, ignoring the often crushing poverty and diseases that exist in peripheral nations and focusing only on a nostalgic mythology of the happy peasant. It takes a very careful hand to understand both the need for cultural identity and preservation as well as the hopes for future growth.

Key Terms

- acting crowds** crowds of people who are focused on a specific action or goal
- alternative movements** social movements that limit themselves to self-improvement changes in individuals
- assembling perspective** a theory that credits individuals in crowds as behaving as rational thinkers and views crowds as engaging in purposeful behavior and collective action
- casual crowds** people who share close proximity without really interacting
- collective behavior** a noninstitutionalized activity in which several people voluntarily engage
- conventional crowds** people who come together for a regularly scheduled event
- crowd** a fairly large number of people who share close proximity
- crowdsourcing** the process of obtaining needed services, ideas, or content by soliciting contributions from a large group of people
- diagnostic framing** a the social problem that is stated in a clear, easily understood manner
- emergent norm theory** a perspective that emphasizes the importance of social norms in crowd behavior
- expressive crowds** crowds who share opportunities to express emotions
- flash mob** a large group of people who gather together in a spontaneous activity that lasts a limited amount of time
- frame alignment process** using bridging, amplification, extension, and transformation as an ongoing and intentional means of recruiting participants to a movement
- mass** a relatively large group with a common interest, even if they may not be in close proximity
- modernization** the process that increases the amount of specialization and differentiation of structure in societies
- motivational framing** a call to action
- new social movement theory** a theory that attempts to explain the proliferation of postindustrial and postmodern movements that are difficult to understand using traditional social movement theories
- NGO** nongovernmental organizations working globally for numerous humanitarian and environmental causes
- prognostic framing** social movements that state a clear solution and a means of implementation
- public** an unorganized, relatively diffuse group of people who share ideas
- reform movements** movements that seek to change something specific about the social structure
- religious/redemptive movements** movements that work to promote inner change or spiritual growth in individuals
- resistance movements** those who seek to prevent or undo change to the social structure
- resource mobilization theory** a theory that explains social movements' success in terms of their ability to acquire resources and mobilize individuals
- revolutionary movements** movements that seek to completely change every aspect of society
- social change** the change in a society created through social movements as well as through external factors like environmental shifts or technological innovations
- social movement** a purposeful organized group hoping to work toward a common social goal
- social movement industry** the collection of the social movement organizations that are striving toward similar goals
- social movement organization** a single social movement group
- social movement sector** the multiple social movement industries in a society, even if they have widely varying constituents and goals
- value-added theory** a functionalist perspective theory that posits that several preconditions must be in place for collective behavior to occur

Section Summary

21.1 Collective Behavior

Collective behavior is noninstitutionalized activity in which several people voluntarily engage. There are three different forms of collective behavior: crowd, mass, and public. There are three main theories on collective behavior. The first, the emergent-norm perspective, emphasizes the importance of social norms in crowd behavior. The next, the value-added theory, is a functionalist perspective that states that several preconditions must be in place for collective behavior to occur. Finally the assembling perspective focuses on collective action rather than collective behavior, addressing the processes associated with crowd behavior and the lifecycle and various categories of gatherings.

21.2 Social Movements

Social movements are purposeful, organized groups, either with the goal of pushing toward change, giving political voice to those without it, or gathering for some other common purpose. Social movements intersect with environmental changes, technological innovations, and other external factors to create social change. There are a myriad of catalysts that create social movements, and the reasons that people join are as varied as the participants themselves. Sociologists look at both the macro- and microanalytical reasons that social movements occur, take root, and ultimately succeed or fail.

21.3 Social Change

There are numerous and varied causes of social change. Four common causes, as recognized by social scientists, are technology, social institutions, population, and the environment. All four of these areas can impact when and how society changes. And they are all interrelated: a change in one area can lead to changes throughout. Modernization is a typical result of social change. Modernization refers to the process of increased differentiation and specialization within a society, particularly around its industry and infrastructure. While this assumes that more modern societies are better, there has been significant pushback on this western-centric view that all peripheral and semi-peripheral countries should aspire to be like North America and Western Europe.

Section Quiz

21.1 Collective Behavior

- Which of the following organizations is *not* an example of a social movement?
 - National Football League
 - Tea Party
 - Greenpeace
 - NAACP
- Sociologists using conflict perspective might study what?
 - How social movements develop
 - What social purposes a movement serves
 - What motivates inequitably treated people to join a movement
 - What individuals hope to gain from taking part in a social movement
- Which of the following is an example of collective behavior?
 - A soldier questioning orders
 - A group of people interested in hearing an author speak
 - A class going on a field trip
 - Going shopping with a friend

4. The protesters at the Egypt uprising rally were:
 - a. a casual crowd
 - b. a conventional crowd
 - c. a mass
 - d. an acting crowd
5. According to emergent-norm theory, crowds are:
 - a. irrational and impulsive
 - b. often misinterpreted and misdirected
 - c. able to develop their own definition of the situation
 - d. prone to criminal behavior
6. A boy throwing rocks during a demonstration might be an example of _____.
 - a. structural conduciveness
 - b. structural strain
 - c. precipitating factors
 - d. mobilization for action

21.2 Social Movements

7. If we divide social movements according to their positions among all social movements in a society, we are using the _____ theory to understand social movements.
 - a. framing
 - b. new social movement
 - c. resource mobilization
 - d. value-added
8. While PETA is a social movement organization, taken together, the animal rights social movement organizations PETA, ALF, and Greenpeace are a _____.
 - a. social movement industry
 - b. social movement sector
 - c. social movement party
 - d. social industry
9. Social movements are:
 - a. disruptive and chaotic challenges to the government
 - b. ineffective mass movements
 - c. the collective action of individuals working together in an attempt to establish new norms beliefs, or values
 - d. the singular activities of a collection of groups working to challenge the status quo
10. When the League of Women Voters successfully achieved its goal of women being allowed to vote, they had to undergo frame _____, a means of completely changing their goals to ensure continuing relevance.
 - a. extension
 - b. amplification
 - c. bridging
 - d. transformation

11. If a movement claims that the best way to reverse climate change is to reduce carbon emissions by outlawing privately owned cars, “outlawing cars” is the _____.
 a. prognostic framing
 b. diagnostic framing
 c. motivational framing
 d. frame transformation

21.3 Social Change

12. Children in peripheral nations have little to no daily access to computers and the Internet, while children in core nations are constantly exposed to this technology. This is an example of:
 a. the digital divide
 b. human ecology
 c. modernization theory
 d. dependency theory
13. When sociologists think about technology as an agent of social change, which of the following is *not* an example?
 a. Population growth
 b. Medical advances
 c. The Internet
 d. Genetically engineered food
14. China is undergoing a shift in industry, increasing labor specialization and the amount of differentiation present in the social structure. This exemplifies:
 a. human ecology
 b. dependency theory
 c. modernization
 d. conflict perspective
15. Core nations that work to propel peripheral nations toward modernization need to be aware of:
 a. preserving peripheral nation cultural identity
 b. preparing for pitfalls that come with modernization
 c. avoiding hegemonistic assumptions about modernization
 d. all of the above
16. In addition to social movements, social change is also caused by technology, social institutions, population and _____.
 a. the environment
 b. modernization
 c. social structure
 d. new social movements

Short Answer

21.1 Collective Behavior

1. Discuss the differences between a mass and a crowd. What is an example of each? What sets them apart? What do they share in common?
2. Can you think of a time when your behavior in a crowd was dictated by the circumstances? Give an example of emergent-norm perspective, using your own experience.

3. Discuss the differences between an acting crowd and a collective crowd. Give examples of each.
4. Imagine you are at a rally protesting nuclear energy use. Walk us through the hypothetical rally using the value-added theory, imagining it meets all the stages.

21.2 Social Movements

5. Think about a social movement industry dealing with a cause that is important to you. How do the different social movement organizations of this industry seek to engage you? Which techniques do you respond to? Why?
6. Do you think social media is an important tool in creating social change? Why, or why not? Defend your opinion.
7. Describe a social movement in the decline stage. What is its issue? Why has it reached this stage?

21.3 Social Change

8. Consider one of the major social movements of the twentieth century, from civil rights in the United States to Gandhi's nonviolent protests in India. How would technology have changed it? Would change have come more quickly or more slowly? Defend your opinion.
9. Discuss the digital divide in the context of modernization. Is there a real concern that poorer communities are lacking in technology? Why, or why not?
10. Which theory do you think better explains the global economy: dependency theory (global inequity is due to the exploitation of peripheral and semi-peripheral nations by core nations) or modernization theory? Remember to justify your answer and provide specific examples.
11. Do you think that modernization is good or bad? Explain, using examples.

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ANSWER KEY

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