Introduction to Diversity Studies

NORTHEAST WISCONSIN TECHNICAL COLLEGE

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Contents

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About the Authors

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Sociology: Understanding and Changing the Social World is adapted from a work produced by a publisher who has requested that they and the original author not receive attribution.

Unnamed Author is a professor of sociology at the University of Maine. He is the author of several other textbooks: (1) *Discovering Sociology: An Introduction Using MicroCase ExplorIt*, second edition (Wadsworth); (2) *Criminology: A Sociological Understanding*, fifth edition (Prentice Hall); (3) *Law and Society: An Introduction* (Prentice Hall); (4) *Collective Violence*, second edition (with Lynne Snowden; Sloan Publishing); and (5) *Fundamentals of Criminal Justice*, second edition (with George Bryjak; Jones and Bartlett). He has also authored more than 30 journal articles and book chapters in sources such as the *American Sociological Review*; *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*; *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*; *Justice Quarterly*; *Mobilization*; *Review of Religious Research*; *Social Forces*; *Social Problems*; *Social Science Quarterly*; and *Sociological Forum*.

Professor Unnamed Author is past president of the Society for the Study of Social Problems and is currently in his 17th year (fortunately, not all consecutive) as chair of his department. He has received an Outstanding Faculty Award from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at UMaine. A native of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Professor Unnamed Author has lived in Maine for the past 32 years. He received his PhD in sociology from the State University of New York at Stony Brook and his BA in sociology from Trinity College (Hartford, Connecticut), where he began to learn how to think like a sociologist and also to appreciate the value of a sociological

perspective for understanding and changing society. He sincerely hopes that instructors and students enjoy reading this book in the format of their choice.

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Unnamed Author is a former president of the Society for the Study of Social Problems and professor of sociology at the University of Maine. He is the author of another *Sociology*: *Understanding and Changing the Social World*, which won a Textbook Excellence Award from the Text and Academic Authors Association. He is also the author of several other textbooks: (1) *Criminology*: *A Sociological Understanding*, fifth edition (Prentice Hall); (2) *Fundamentals of Criminal Justice*, second edition (with George Bryjak; Jones and Bartlett); (3) *Collective Violence*, second edition (with Lynne Snowden; Sloan Publishing); (4) *Discovering Sociology*: *An Introduction Using MicroCase ExplorIt*, third edition (Wadsworth); and (5) *Law and Society*: *An Introduction* (Prentice Hall). He has also authored more than thirty journal articles and book chapters in venues such as the *American Sociological Review*; *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*; *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*; *Justice Quarterly*; *Mobilization*; *Review of Religious Research*; *Social Forces*; *Social Problems*; *Social Science Quarterly*; and *Sociological Forum.*

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CHAPTER 1: CULTURE

Social Issues in the News

"Cows With Gas," the headline said. In India, cows are considered sacred by that nation's major religion, Hinduism. They are also an important source of milk and fertilizer. It is no surprise that India has almost 300 million cows, the highest number in the world, and that they roam freely in Indian cities and towns. But one problem of this abundance of cows is the methane gas they excrete as they burp and belch. They emit so much methane that scientists think Indian cows, along with some 180 million sheep and goats, are a significant cause of global warming. One reason Indian livestock emit so much methane, aside from their sheer numbers, is that they are underfed and undernourished; better diets would reduce their methane emission. However, India is such a poor country that the prospect of a better diet for livestock remains years away, and the problem of cows with gas will continue for some time to come. (Singh, 2009)

The idea of cows with too much gas, or any gas at all, roaming city streets is probably not very appealing, but cow worship is certainly

a part of India's culture. This news story provides just one of many examples of the importance of cultural differences for beliefs and behaviors.

Although kissing certainly seems like a very normal and natural act, anthropological evidence indicates that culture affects whether people kiss and whether they like kissing.

Here is a more pleasing example. When you are in love, what can be more natural and enjoyable than kissing? This simple act is the highlight of countless movies and television shows where two people meet each other, often not liking each other at first, but then slowly but surely fall madly in love and have their first magical kiss. What we see on the screen reflects our own interest in kissing. When we reach puberty, many of us yearn for our first kiss. That kiss is as much a part of growing up as almost anything else we can think of, and many of us can remember when, where, and with whom our first kiss occurred.

Kissing certainly seems a natural, enjoyable act to most of us, but evidence from some societies indicates kissing might not be so natural after all. In traditional societies such as the Balinese and Tinguian of Oceania, the Chewa and Thonga of Africa, and the Siriono of South America, kissing is unknown, as the people there think it is unhealthy and disgusting. When the Thonga first

saw Europeans kissing, they retorted, "Look at them—they eat each other's saliva and dirt" (Ford & Beach, 1972, p. 49). Even in industrial societies, kissing is not always considered desirable. Until fairly recently, the Japanese abhorred kissing and did not even have a word for it until they created *kissu* from the English kiss, and even today older Japanese frown on kissing in public. Reflecting the traditional Japanese view, when Rodin's famous statue *The Kiss* arrived in Japan in the 1920s as part of a European art show, the Japanese hid it behind a curtain. In other societies, people do kiss, but their type of kissing differs greatly from what we are used to. In one of these, people kiss the mouth and the nose simultaneously, while people in a few other societies kiss only by sucking the lips of their partners (Tanikawa, 1995; Tiefer, 1995).

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1.1 Culture and the Sociological Perspective

Learning Objectives

1. Describe examples of how culture influences behavior.
2. Explain why sociologists might favor cultural explanations of behavior over biological explanations.

As this evidence on kissing suggests, what seems to us a very natural, even instinctual act turns out not to be so natural and biological after all. Instead, kissing seems best understood as something we learn to enjoy from our **culture**, or the symbols, language, beliefs, values, and artifacts (material objects) that are part of a society. Because society refers to a group of people who live in a defined territory and who share a culture, it is obvious that culture is a critical component of any society.

If the culture we learn influences our beliefs and behaviors, then culture is a key concept to the sociological perspective. Someone who grows up in the United States differs in many ways, some of them obvious and some of them not so obvious, from someone growing up in China, Sweden, South Korea, Peru, or Nigeria. Culture influences not only language but the gestures we use when we interact, how far apart we stand from each other when we talk, and the values we consider most important for our children to learn, to name just a few. Without culture, we could not have a society.

The profound impact of culture becomes most evident when we examine behaviors or conditions that, like kissing, are normally considered biological in nature. Consider morning sickness and labor pains, both very familiar to pregnant women before and during childbirth, respectively. These two types of discomfort have known biological causes, and we are not surprised that so many pregnant women experience them. But we *would* be surprised if the husbands of pregnant women woke up sick in the morning or experienced severe abdominal pain while their wives gave birth. These men are neither carrying nor delivering a baby, and there is no logical—that is, biological—reason for them to suffer either type of discomfort.

And yet scholars have discovered several traditional societies in which men about to become fathers experience precisely these symptoms. They are nauseous during their wives' pregnancies, and they experience labor pains while their wives give birth. The term *couvade* refers to these symptoms, which do not have any known biological origin. Yet the men feel them nonetheless, because they have learned from their culture that they *should* feel these types of discomfort (Doja, 2005). And because they should feel these symptoms, they actually do so. Perhaps their minds are playing tricks on them, but that is often the point of culture. As sociologists William I. and Dorothy Swaine Thomas (1928) once pointed out, if things are perceived as real, then they are real in their consequences. These men learn how they should feel as budding fathers, and thus they feel this way. Unfortunately for them, the perceptions they learn from their culture are real in their consequences.

The example of drunkenness further illustrates how cultural expectations influence a behavior that is commonly thought to have biological causes. In the United States, when people drink too much alcohol, they become intoxicated and their behavior changes. Most typically, their inhibitions lower and they become loud, boisterous, and even rowdy. We attribute these changes to alcohol's biological effect as a drug on our central nervous system, and scientists have

documented how alcohol breaks down in our body to achieve this effect.

Culture affects how people respond when they drink alcohol. Americans often become louder and lose their sexual inhibitions when they drink, but people in some societies studied by anthropologists often respond very differently, with many never getting loud or not even enjoying themselves.

Melissa Wang – bp tourney – CC BY-SA 2.0.

This explanation of alcohol's effect is OK as far as it goes, but it turns out that *how* alcohol affects our behavior depends on our culture. In some small, traditional societies, people drink alcohol until they pass out, but they never get loud or boisterous; they might not even

appear to be enjoying themselves. In other societies, they drink lots of alcohol and get loud but not rowdy. In some societies, including our own, people lose sexual inhibitions as they drink, but in other societies they do not become more aroused. The cross-cultural evidence is very clear: alcohol as a drug does affect human behavior, but culture influences the types of effects that occur. We learn from our culture how to behave when drunk just as we learn how to behave when sober (McCaghy, Capron, Jamieson, & Carey, 2008).

Culture and Biology

These examples suggest that human behavior is more the result of culture than it is of biology. This is not to say that biology is entirely unimportant. As just one example, humans have a biological need to eat, and so they do. But humans are much less under the control of biology than any other animal species, including other primates such as monkeys and chimpanzees. These and other animals are governed largely by biological instincts that control them totally. A dog chases any squirrel it sees because of instinct, and a cat chases a mouse for the same reason. Different breeds of dogs do have different personalities, but even these stem from the biological differences among breeds passed down from one generation to another. Instinct prompts many dogs to turn around before they lie down, and it prompts most dogs to defend their territory. When the doorbell rings and a dog begins barking, it is responding to ancient biological instinct.

Because humans have such a large, complex central nervous system, we are less controlled by biology. The critical question then

becomes, how much does biology influence our behavior? Predictably, scholars in different disciplines answer this question in different ways. Most sociologists and anthropologists would probably say that culture affects behavior much more than biology does. In contrast, many biologists and psychologists would give much more weight to biology. Advocating a view called **sociobiology**, some scholars say that several important human behaviors and emotions, such as competition, aggression, and altruism, stem from our biological makeup. Sociobiology has been roundly criticized and just as staunchly defended, and respected scholars continue to debate its premises (Freese, 2008).

Why do sociologists generally favor culture over biology? Two reasons stand out. First, and as we have seen, many behaviors differ dramatically among societies in ways that show the strong impact of culture. Second, biology cannot easily account for why groups and locations differ in their rates of committing certain behaviors. For example, what biological reason could explain why suicide rates west of the Mississippi River are higher than those east of it, or why the U.S. homicide rate is so much higher than Canada's? Various aspects of culture and social structure seem much better able than biology to explain these differences.

Many sociologists also warn of certain implications of biological explanations. First, they say, these explanations implicitly support the status quo. Because it is difficult to change biology, any problem with biological causes cannot be easily fixed. A second warning harkens back to a century ago, when perceived biological differences were used to justify forced sterilization and mass violence, including genocide, against certain groups. As just one example, in the early 1900s, some 70,000 people, most of them poor and many of them immigrants or African Americans, were involuntarily sterilized in the United States as part of the **eugenics** movement, which said that certain kinds of people were biologically inferior and must not be allowed to reproduce (Lombardo, 2008). The Nazi Holocaust a few decades later used a similar eugenics argument to justify its genocide against Jews, Catholics, gypsies,

and gays (Kuhl, 1994). With this history in mind, some scholars fear that biological explanations of human behavior might still be used to support views of biological inferiority (York & Clark, 2007).

Key Takeaways

- Culture refers to the symbols, language, beliefs, values, and artifacts that are part of any society.
- Because culture influences people's beliefs and behaviors, culture is a key concept to the sociological perspective.
- Many sociologists are wary of biological explanations of behavior, in part because these explanations implicitly support the status quo and may be used to justify claims of biological inferiority.

For Your Review

1. Have you ever traveled outside the United States? If so, describe one cultural difference you remember in the nation you visited.
2. Have you ever traveled within the United States to a very different region (e.g., urban versus rural, or another part of the country) from the one in which you grew up? If so, describe one cultural difference you remember in the region you visited.
3. Do you share the concern of many sociologists over

biological explanations of behavior? Why or why not?

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1.2 The Elements of Culture

Culture was defined earlier as the symbols, language, beliefs, values, and artifacts that are part of any society. As this definition suggests, there are two basic components of culture: ideas and symbols on the one hand and artifacts (material objects) on the other. The first type, called **nonmaterial culture**, includes the values, beliefs, symbols, and language that define a society. The second type, called **material culture**, includes all the society's physical objects, such as its tools and technology, clothing, eating utensils, and means of transportation. These elements of culture are discussed next.

Symbols

Every culture is filled with **symbols**, or things that stand for something else and that often evoke various reactions and emotions. Some symbols are actually types of nonverbal communication, while other symbols are in fact material objects. Shared symbols make social interaction possible.

Let's look at nonverbal symbols first. A common one is shaking hands, which is done in some societies but not in others. It commonly conveys friendship and is used as a sign of both greeting and departure. Probably all societies have nonverbal symbols we call **gestures**, movements of the hands, arms, or other parts of the body that are meant to convey certain ideas or emotions. However, the same gesture can mean one thing in one society and something quite different in another society (Axtell, 1998). In the United States, for example, if we nod our head up and down, we mean yes, and if we shake it back and forth, we mean no. In Bulgaria, however, nodding means no, while shaking our head back and forth means yes! In the United States, if we make an "O" by putting our thumb and forefinger together, we mean "OK," but the same gesture in certain parts of Europe signifies an obscenity. "Thumbs up" in the United States means "great" or "wonderful," but in Australia it means the same thing as extending the middle finger in the United States. Certain parts of the Middle East and Asia would be offended if they saw you using your left hand to eat, because they use their left hand for bathroom hygiene.

The meaning of a gesture may differ from one society to another. This familiar gesture means "OK" in the United States, but in certain parts of Europe it signifies an obscenity. An American using this gesture might very well be greeted with an angry look.

Some of our most important symbols are objects. Here the U.S. flag is a prime example. For most Americans, the flag is not just a piece of cloth with red and white stripes and white stars against a field of blue. Instead, it is a symbol of freedom, democracy, and other American values and, accordingly, inspires pride and patriotism. During the Vietnam War, however, the flag became to many Americans a symbol of war and imperialism. Some burned the flag in protest, prompting angry attacks by bystanders and negative coverage by the news media.

Other objects have symbolic value for religious reasons. Three of the most familiar religious symbols in many nations are the cross, the Star of David, and the crescent moon, which are widely understood to represent Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, respectively. Whereas many cultures attach no religious

significance to these shapes, for many people across the world they evoke very strong feelings of religious faith. Recognizing this, hate groups have often desecrated these symbols.

As these examples indicate, shared symbols, both nonverbal communication and tangible objects, are an important part of any culture but also can lead to misunderstandings and even hostility. These problems underscore the significance of symbols for social interaction and meaning.

Language

Perhaps our most important set of symbols is language. In English, the word *chair* means something we sit on. In Spanish, the word *silla* means the same thing. As long as we agree how to interpret these words, a shared language and thus society are possible. By the same token, differences in languages can make it quite difficult to communicate. For example, imagine you are in a foreign country where you do not know the language and the country's citizens do not know yours. Worse yet, you forgot to bring your dictionary that translates their language into yours, and vice versa, and your iPhone battery has died. You become lost. How will you get help? What will you do? Is there any way to communicate your plight?

As this scenario suggests, language is crucial to communication and thus to any society's culture. Children learn language from their culture just as they learn about shaking hands, about gestures, and about the significance of the flag and other symbols. Humans have a capacity for language that no other animal species possesses.

Our capacity for language in turn helps make our complex culture possible.

Language is a key symbol of any culture. Humans have a capacity for language that no other animal species has, and children learn the language of their society just as they learn other aspects of their culture.

In the United States, some people consider a common language so important that they advocate making English the official language of certain cities or states or even the whole country and banning bilingual education in the public schools (Ray, 2007). Critics acknowledge the importance of English but allege that this movement smacks of anti-immigrant prejudice and would help destroy ethnic subcultures. In 2009, voters in Nashville, Tennessee, rejected a proposal that would have made English the city's official language and required all city workers to speak in English rather than their native language (R. Brown, 2009).

Language, of course, can be spoken or written. One of the most important developments in the evolution of society was the creation of written language. Some of the preindustrial societies that anthropologists have studied have written language, while others do not, and in the remaining societies the "written" language consists

mainly of pictures, not words. [Figure 3.1 "The Presence of Written Language (Percentage of Societies)"](#) illustrates this variation with data from 186 preindustrial societies called the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample (SCCS), a famous data set compiled several decades ago by anthropologist George Murdock and colleagues from information that had been gathered on hundreds of preindustrial societies around the world (Murdock & White, 1969). In [Figure 3.1 "The Presence of Written Language (Percentage of Societies)"](#), we see that only about one-fourth of the SCCS societies have a written language, while about equal proportions have no language at all or only pictures.

Figure 3.1 The Presence of Written Language (Percentage of Societies)

No Writing

Pictures Only

Writing

23.7%

39.2%

37.1%
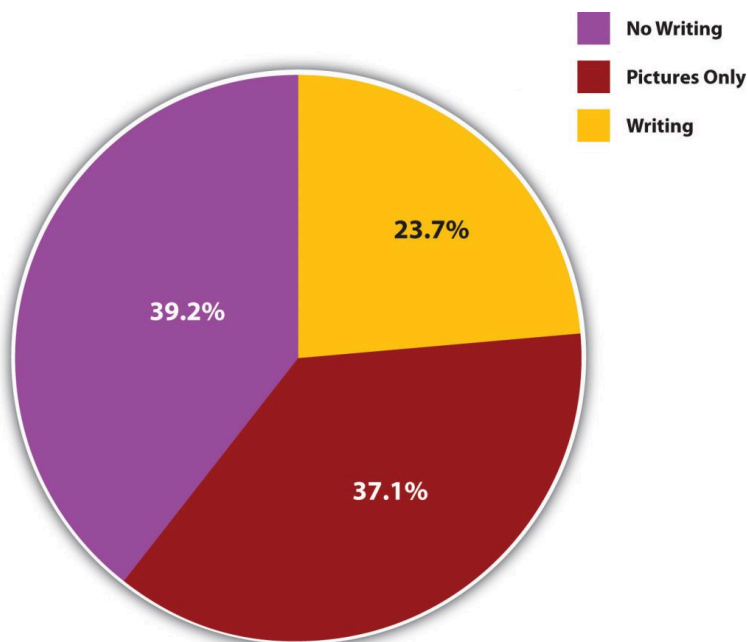
Source: Data from Standard Cross-Cultural Sample.

To what extent does language influence how we think and how we perceive the social and physical worlds? The famous but controversial **Sapir-Whorf hypothesis**, named after two linguistic anthropologists, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf, argues that people cannot easily understand concepts and objects unless their language contains words for these items (Whorf, 1956). Language thus influences how we understand the world around us. For example, people in a country such as the United States that has many terms for different types of kisses (e.g. buss, peck, smack, smooch, and soul) are better able to appreciate these different types than people in a country such as Japan, which, as we saw earlier, only fairly recently developed the word *kissu* for kiss.

Another illustration of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is seen in sexist language, in which the use of male nouns and pronouns shapes how we think about the world (Miles, 2008). In older children's books, words like fire*man* and mail*man* are common,

along with pictures of men in these jobs, and critics say they send a message to children that these are male jobs, not female jobs. If a teacher tells a second-grade class, "Every student should put his books under his desk," the teacher obviously means students of both sexes but may be sending a subtle message that boys matter more than girls. For these reasons, several guidebooks promote the use of nonsexist language (Maggio, 1998). Table 3.1 "Examples of Sexist Terms and Nonsexist Alternatives" provides examples of sexist language and nonsexist alternatives.

Table 3.1 Examples of Sexist Terms and Nonsexist Alternatives

Term	Alternative
Businessman	Businessperson, executive
Fireman	Fire fighter
Chairman	Chair, chairperson
Policeman	Police officer
Mailman	Letter carrier, postal worker
Mankind	Humankind, people
Man-made	Artificial, synthetic
Waitress	Server
He (as generic pronoun)	He or she; he/she; s/he
"A professor should be devoted to his students"	"Professors should be devoted to their students"

The use of racist language also illustrates the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. An old saying goes, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me." That may be true in theory but not in reality. Names can hurt, especially names that are racial slurs, which African Americans growing up before the era of the civil rights movement routinely heard. According to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, the use of these words would have affected how whites perceived African Americans. More generally, the use of racist terms may reinforce racial prejudice and racial stereotypes.

Sociology Making a Difference

Overcoming Cultural and Ethnic Differences

People from many different racial and ethnic backgrounds live in large countries such as the United States. Because of cultural differences and various prejudices, it can be difficult for individuals from one background to interact with individuals from another background. Fortunately, a line of research, grounded in *contact theory* and conducted by sociologists and social psychologists, suggests that interaction among individuals from different backgrounds can indeed help overcome

tensions arising from their different cultures and any prejudices they may hold. This happens because such contact helps disconfirm stereotypes that people may hold of those from different backgrounds (Dixon, 2006; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2005).

Recent studies of college students provide additional evidence that social contact can help overcome cultural differences and prejudices. Because many students are randomly assigned to their roommates when they enter college, interracial roommates provide a "natural" experiment for studying the effects of social interaction on racial prejudice. Studies of such roommates find that whites with black roommates report lowered racial prejudice and greater numbers of interracial friendships with other students (Laar, Levin, Sinclair, & Sidanius, 2005; Shook & Fazio, 2008).

It is not easy to overcome cultural differences and prejudices, and studies also find that interracial college roommates often have to face many difficulties in overcoming the cultural differences and prejudices that existed before they started living together (Shook & Fazio, 2008). Yet the body of work supporting contact theory suggests that efforts that increase social interaction among people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds in the long run will reduce racial and ethnic tensions.

Norms

Cultures differ widely in their **norms**, or standards and expectations for behaving. We already saw that the nature of drunken behavior depends on society's expectations of how people should behave when drunk. Norms of drunken behavior influence how we behave when we drink too much.

Norms are often divided into two types, **formal norms** and **informal norms**. Formal norms, also called *mores* (MOOR-ayz) and *laws*, refer to the standards of behavior considered the most important in any society. Examples in the United States include traffic laws, criminal codes, and, in a college context, student behavior codes addressing such things as cheating and hate speech. Informal norms, also called *folkways* and *customs*, refer to standards of behavior that are considered less important but still influence how we behave. Table manners are a common example of informal norms, as are such everyday behaviors as how we interact with a cashier and how we ride in an elevator.

Many norms differ dramatically from one culture to the next. Some of the best evidence for cultural variation in norms comes from the study of sexual behavior (Edgerton, 1976). Among the Pokot of East Africa, for example, women are expected to enjoy sex, while among the Gusii a few hundred miles away, women who enjoy sex are considered deviant. In Inis Beag, a small island off the coast of Ireland, sex is considered embarrassing and even disgusting; men feel that intercourse drains their strength, while women consider it a burden. Even nudity is considered terrible, and people on Inis Beag keep their clothes on while they bathe. The situation is quite different in Mangaia, a small island in the South Pacific. Here sex is considered very enjoyable, and it is the major subject of songs and stories.

While many societies frown on homosexuality, others accept it. Among the Azande of East Africa, for example, young warriors live

with each other and are not allowed to marry. During this time, they often have sex with younger boys, and this homosexuality is approved by their culture. Among the Sambia of New Guinea, young males live separately from females and engage in homosexual behavior for at least a decade. It is felt that the boys would be less masculine if they continued to live with their mothers and that the semen of older males helps young boys become strong and fierce (Edgerton, 1976).

Although many societies disapprove of homosexuality, other societies accept it. This difference illustrates the importance of culture for people's attitudes.

philippe leroyer – Lesbian & Gay Pride – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Other evidence for cultural variation in norms comes from the study of how men and women are expected to behave in various societies. For example, many traditional societies are simple hunting-and-gathering societies. In most of these, men tend to hunt and women tend to gather. Many observers attribute this gender difference to at least two biological differences between the sexes. First, men tend to be bigger and stronger than women and are thus better suited for hunting. Second, women become pregnant and bear children and are less able to hunt. Yet a different pattern emerges in some

hunting-and-gathering societies. Among a group of Australian aborigines called the Tiwi and a tribal society in the Philippines called the Agta, both sexes hunt. After becoming pregnant, Agta women continue to hunt for most of their pregnancy and resume hunting after their child is born (Brettell & Sargent, 2009).

Some of the most interesting norms that differ by culture govern how people stand apart when they talk with each other (Hall & Hall, 2007). In the United States, people who are not intimates usually stand about three to four feet apart when they talk. If someone stands more closely to us, especially if we are of northern European heritage, we feel uncomfortable. Yet people in other countries—especially Italy, France, Spain, and many of the nations of Latin America and the Middle East—would feel uncomfortable if they were standing three to four feet apart. To them, this distance is too great and indicates that the people talking dislike each other. If a U.S. native of British or Scandinavian heritage were talking with a member of one of these societies, they might well have trouble interacting, because at least one of them will be uncomfortable with the physical distance separating them.

Rituals

Different cultures also have different **rituals**, or established procedures and ceremonies that often mark transitions in the life course. As such, rituals both reflect and transmit a culture's norms and other elements from one generation to the next. Graduation ceremonies in colleges and universities are familiar examples of time-honored rituals. In many societies, rituals help signify one's

gender identity. For example, girls around the world undergo various types of initiation ceremonies to mark their transition to adulthood. Among the Bemba of Zambia, girls undergo a month-long initiation ceremony called the *chisungu*, in which girls learn songs, dances, and secret terms that only women know (Maybury-Lewis, 1998). In some cultures, special ceremonies also mark a girl's first menstrual period. Such ceremonies are largely absent in the United States, where a girl's first period is a private matter. But in other cultures the first period is a cause for celebration involving gifts, music, and food (Hathaway, 1997).

Boys have their own initiation ceremonies, some of them involving circumcision. That said, the ways in which circumcisions are done and the ceremonies accompanying them differ widely. In the United States, boys who are circumcised usually undergo a quick procedure in the hospital. If their parents are observant Jews, circumcision will be part of a religious ceremony, and a religious figure called a *moyel* will perform the circumcision. In contrast, circumcision among the Maasai of East Africa is used as a test of manhood. If a boy being circumcised shows signs of fear, he might well be ridiculed (Maybury-Lewis, 1998).

Are rituals more common in traditional societies than in industrial ones such as the United States? Consider the Nacirema, studied by anthropologist Horace Miner more than 50 years ago (Miner, 1956). In this society, many rituals have been developed to deal with the culture's fundamental belief that the human body is ugly and in danger of suffering many diseases. Reflecting this belief, every household has at least one shrine in which various rituals are performed to cleanse the body. Often these shrines contain magic potions acquired from medicine men. The Nacirema are especially concerned about diseases of the mouth. Miner writes, "Were it not for the rituals of the mouth, they believe that their teeth would fall out, their gums bleed, their jaws shrink, their friends desert them, and their lovers reject them" (p. 505). Many Nacirema engage in "mouth-rites" and see a "holy-mouth-man" once or twice yearly.

Spell Nacirema backward and you will see that Miner was

describing American culture. As his satire suggests, rituals are not limited to preindustrial societies. Instead, they function in many kinds of societies to mark transitions in the life course and to transmit the norms of the culture from one generation to the next.

Changing Norms and Beliefs

Our examples show that different cultures have different norms, even if they share other types of practices and beliefs. It is also true that norms change over time within a given culture. Two obvious examples here are hairstyles and clothing styles. When the Beatles first became popular in the early 1960s, their hair barely covered their ears, but parents of teenagers back then were aghast at how they looked. If anything, clothing styles change even more often than hairstyles. Hemlines go up, hemlines go down. Lapels become wider, lapels become narrower. This color is in, that color is out. Hold on to your out-of-style clothes long enough, and eventually they may well end up back in style.

Some norms may change over time within a given culture. In the early 1960s, the hair of the four members of the Beatles barely covered their ears, but many parents of U.S. teenagers were very critical of the length of their hair.

U.S. Library of Congress – public domain.

A more important topic on which norms have changed is abortion and birth control (Bullough & Bullough, 1977). Despite the controversy surrounding abortion today, it was very common in the ancient world. Much later, medieval theologians generally felt that abortion was not murder if it occurred within the first several weeks after conception. This distinction was eliminated in 1869, when Pope Pius IX declared abortion at any time to be murder. In the United States, abortion was not illegal until 1828, when New York state banned it to protect women from unskilled abortionists, and most other states followed suit by the end of the century. However, the sheer number of unsafe, illegal abortions over the next several decades helped fuel a demand for repeal of abortion laws that in turn helped lead to the *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court

decision in 1973 that generally legalized abortion during the first two trimesters.

Contraception was also practiced in ancient times, only to be opposed by early Christianity. Over the centuries, scientific discoveries of the nature of the reproductive process led to more effective means of contraception and to greater calls for its use, despite legal bans on the distribution of information about contraception. In the early 1900s, Margaret Sanger, an American nurse, spearheaded the growing birth-control movement and helped open a birth-control clinic in Brooklyn in 1916. She and two other women were arrested within 10 days, and Sanger and one other defendant were sentenced to 30 days in jail. Efforts by Sanger and other activists helped to change views on contraception over time, and finally, in 1965, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Griswold v. Connecticut* that contraception information could not be banned. As this brief summary illustrates, norms about contraception changed dramatically during the last century.

Other types of cultural beliefs also change over time ([Figure 3.2 "Percentage of People Who Say They Would Vote for a Qualified African American for President"](#) and [Figure 3.3 "Percentage of People Who Agree Women Should Take Care of Running Their Homes"](#)). Since the 1960s, the U.S. public has changed its views about some important racial and gender issues. [Figure 3.2 "Percentage of People Who Say They Would Vote for a Qualified African American for President"](#), taken from several years of the General Social Survey (GSS), shows that the percentage of Americans who would vote for a qualified black person as president rose almost 20 points from the early 1970s to the middle of 1996, when the GSS stopped asking the question. If beliefs about voting for an African American had not changed, Barack Obama would almost certainly not have been elected in 2008. [Figure 3.3 "Percentage of People Who Agree Women Should Take Care of Running Their Homes"](#), also taken from several years of the GSS, shows that the percentage saying that women should take care of running their homes and leave running the country to men declined

from almost 36% in the early 1970s to only about 15% in 1998, again, when the GSS stopped asking the question. These two figures depict declining racial and gender prejudice in the United States during the past quarter-century.

Figure 3.2 Percentage of People Who Say They Would Vote for a Qualified African American for President
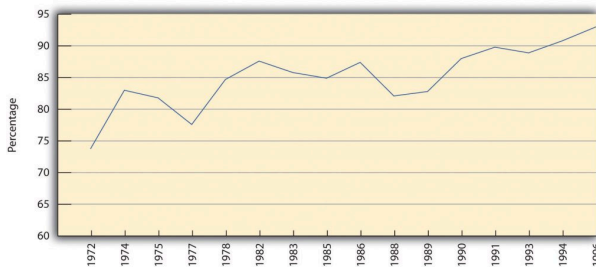
Source: Data from General Social Surveys, 1972–1996.

Figure 3.3 Percentage of People Who Agree Women Should Take Care of Running Their Homes
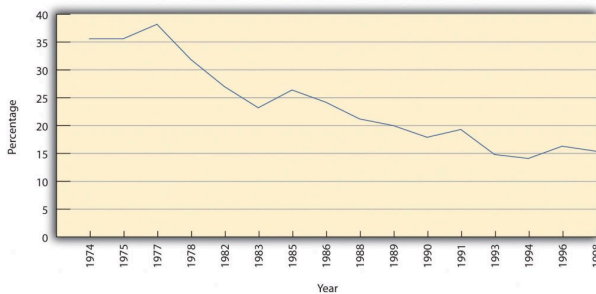
Source: Data from General Social Surveys, 1974–1998.

Values

Values are another important element of culture and involve judgments of what is good or bad and desirable or undesirable. A culture's values shape its norms. In Japan, for example, a central value is group harmony. The Japanese place great emphasis on harmonious social relationships and dislike interpersonal conflict. Individuals are fairly unassertive by American standards, lest they be perceived as trying to force their will on others (Schneider & Silverman, 2010). When interpersonal disputes do arise, Japanese do their best to minimize conflict by trying to resolve the disputes amicably. Lawsuits are thus uncommon; in one case involving disease and death from a mercury-polluted river, some Japanese who dared to sue the company responsible for the mercury poisoning were considered bad citizens (Upham, 1976).

Individualism in the United States

American culture promotes competition and an emphasis on winning in the sports and business worlds and in other spheres of life. Accordingly, lawsuits over frivolous reasons are common and even expected.

Clyde Robinson – [Courtroom](#) – CC BY 2.0.

In the United States, of course, the situation is quite different. The American culture extols the rights of the individual and promotes competition in the business and sports worlds and in other areas of life. Lawsuits over the most frivolous of issues are quite common and even expected. Phrases like "Look out for number one!" abound. If the Japanese value harmony and group feeling, Americans value competition and individualism. Because the Japanese value harmony, their norms frown on self-assertion in interpersonal relationships and on lawsuits to correct perceived wrongs. Because Americans value and even thrive on competition, our norms promote assertion in relationships and certainly promote the use of the law to address all kinds of problems.

[Figure 3.4 "Percentage of People Who Think Competition Is Very Beneficial"](#) illustrates this difference between the two nations' cultures with data from the 2002 World Values Survey (WVS), which was administered to random samples of the adult populations of

more than 80 nations around the world. One question asked in these nations was, "On a scale of one ('competition is good; it stimulates people to work hard and develop new ideas') to ten ('competition is harmful; it brings out the worst in people'), please indicate your views on competition." Figure 3.4 "Percentage of People Who Think Competition Is Very Beneficial" shows the percentages of Americans and Japanese who responded with a "one" or "two" to this question, indicating they think competition is very beneficial. Americans are about three times as likely as Japanese to favor competition.

Figure 3.4 Percentage of People Who Think Competition Is Very Beneficial
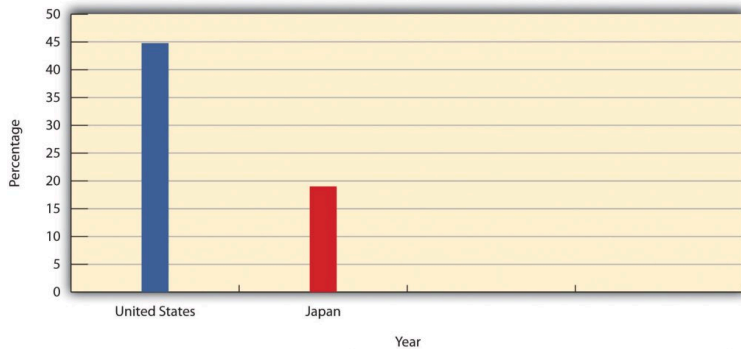
Source: Data from World Values Survey, 2002.

The Japanese value system is a bit of an anomaly, because Japan is an industrial nation with very traditional influences. Its emphasis on group harmony and community is more usually thought of as a value found in traditional societies, while the U.S. emphasis on

individuality is more usually thought of as a value found in industrial cultures. Anthropologist David Maybury-Lewis (1998, p. 8) describes this difference as follows: "The heart of the difference between the modern world and the traditional one is that in traditional societies people are a valuable resource and the interrelations between them are carefully tended; in modern society things are the valuables and people are all too often treated as disposable." In industrial societies, continues Maybury-Lewis, individualism and the rights of the individual are celebrated and any one person's obligations to the larger community are weakened. Individual achievement becomes more important than values such as kindness, compassion, and generosity.

Other scholars take a less bleak view of industrial society, where they say the spirit of community still lives even as individualism is extolled (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985). In American society, these two simultaneous values sometimes create tension. In Appalachia, for example, people view themselves as rugged individuals who want to control their own fate. At the same time, they have strong ties to families, relatives, and their neighbors. Thus their sense of independence conflicts with their need for dependence on others (Erikson, 1976).

The Work Ethic

Another important value in the American culture is the work ethic. By the 19th century, Americans had come to view hard work not just as something that had to be done but as something that was morally good to do (Gini, 2000). The commitment to the work ethic remains

strong today: in the 2008 General Social Survey, 72% of respondents said they would continue to work even if they got enough money to live as comfortably as they would like for the rest of their lives.

Cross-cultural evidence supports the importance of the work ethic in the United States. Using earlier World Values Survey data, Figure 3.5 "Percentage of People Who Take a Great Deal of Pride in Their Work" presents the percentage of people in United States and three other nations from different parts of the world—Mexico, Poland, and Japan—who take "a great deal of pride" in their work. More than 85% of Americans feel this way, compared to much lower proportions of people in the other three nations.

Figure 3.5 Percentage of People Who Take a Great Deal of Pride in Their Work
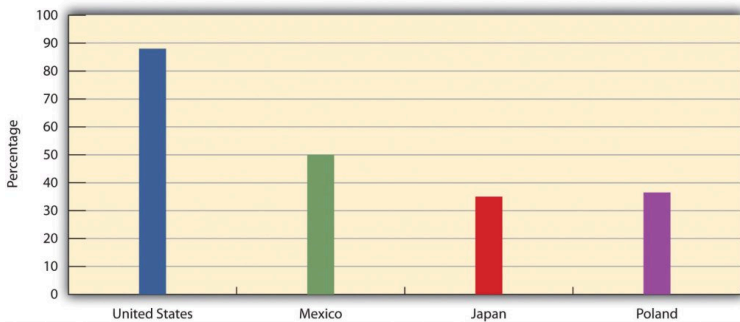
Source: Data from World Values Survey, 1993.

Closely related to the work ethic is the belief that if people work hard enough, they will be successful. Here again the American

culture is especially thought to promote the idea that people can pull themselves up by their "bootstraps" if they work hard enough. The WVS asked whether success results from hard work or from luck and connections. Figure 3.6 "Percentage of People Who Think Hard Work Brings Success" presents the proportions of people in the four nations just examined who most strongly thought that hard work brings success. Once again we see evidence of an important aspect of the American culture, as U.S. residents were especially likely to think that hard work brings success.

Figure 3.6 Percentage of People Who Think Hard Work Brings Success
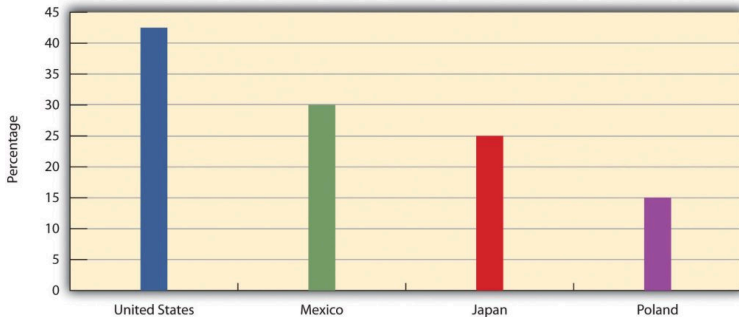
Source: Data from World Values Survey, 1997.

If Americans believe hard work brings success, then they should be more likely than people in most other nations to believe that poverty stems from not working hard enough. True or false, this belief is an example of the blaming-the-victim ideology. Figure 3.7 "Percentage of People Who Attribute Poverty to Laziness and Lack of Willpower" presents WVS percentages of respondents who said

the most important reason people are poor is "laziness and lack of willpower." As expected, Americans are much more likely to attribute poverty to not working hard enough.

Figure 3.7 Percentage of People Who Attribute Poverty to Laziness and Lack of Willpower
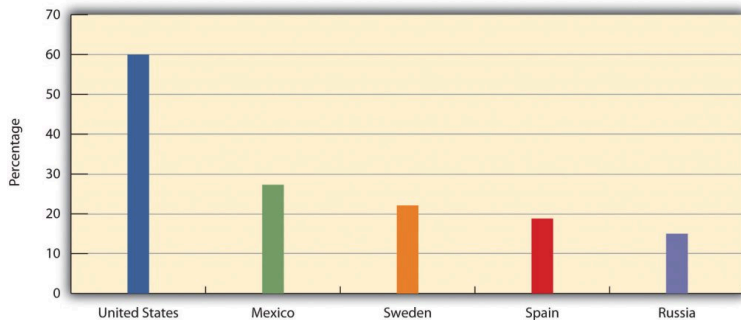
Source: Data from World Values Survey, 1997.

We could discuss many other values, but an important one concerns how much a society values women's employment outside the home. The WVS asked respondents whether they agree that "when jobs are scarce men should have more right to a job than women." Figure 3.8 "Percentage of People Who Disagree That Men Have More Right to a Job Than Women When Jobs Are Scarce" shows that U.S. residents are more likely than those in nations with more traditional views of women to *disagree* with this statement.

Figure 3.8 Percentage of People Who Disagree That Men Have More Right to a Job Than Women When Jobs Are Scarce
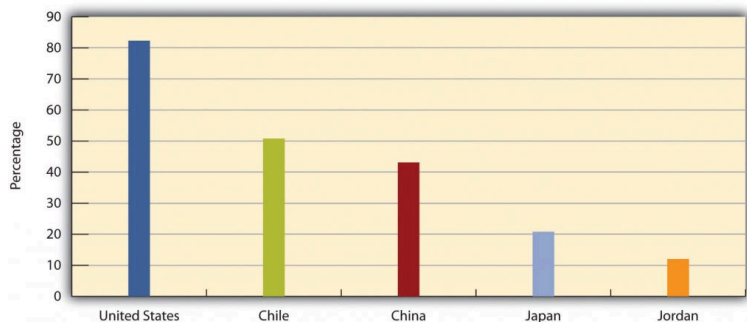
Source: Data from World Values Survey, 2002.

Artifacts

The last element of culture is the **artifacts**, or material objects, that constitute a society's material culture. In the most simple societies, artifacts are largely limited to a few tools, the huts people live in, and the clothing they wear. One of the most important inventions in the evolution of society was the wheel. Figure 3.9 "Primary Means of Moving Heavy Loads" shows that very few of the societies in the

SCCS use wheels to move heavy loads over land, while the majority use human power and about one-third use pack animals.

Figure 3.9 Primary Means of Moving Heavy Loads
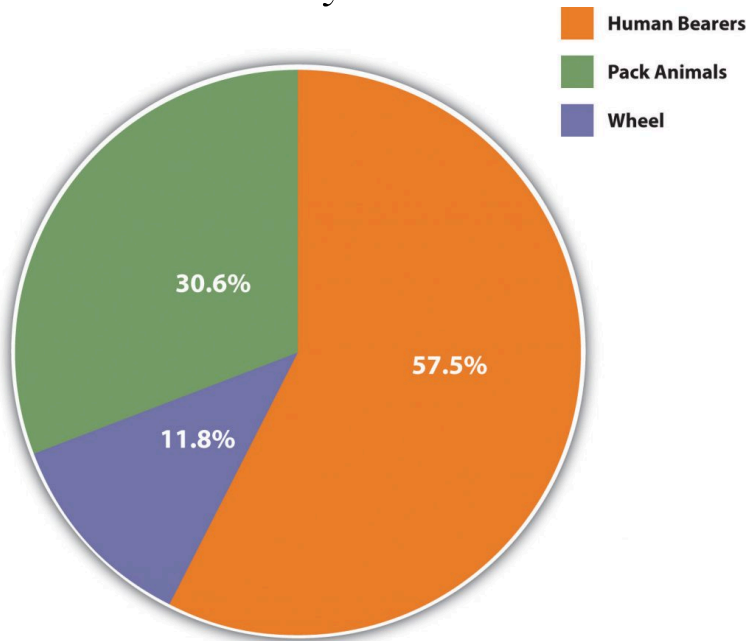
Source: Data from Standard Cross-Cultural Sample.

Although the wheel was a great invention, artifacts are much more numerous and complex in industrial societies. Because of technological advances during the past two decades, many such societies today may be said to have a *wireless* culture, as

smartphones, netbooks and laptops, and GPS devices now dominate so much of modern life. The artifacts associated with this culture were unknown a generation ago. Technological development created these artifacts and new language to describe them and the functions they perform. Today's wireless artifacts in turn help reinforce our own commitment to wireless technology as a way of life, if only because children are now growing up with them, often even before they can read and write.

The iPhone is just one of the many notable cultural artifacts in today's wireless world. Technological development created these artifacts and new language to describe them and their functions—for example, "There's an app for that!"

Philip Brooks – iPhone – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Sometimes people in one society may find it difficult to understand the artifacts that are an important part of another society's culture. If a member of a tribal society who had never seen a cell phone, or who had never even used batteries or electricity, were somehow to visit the United States, she or he would obviously have no idea of what a cell phone was or of its importance in almost everything we do these days. Conversely, if we were to visit that person's society, we might not appreciate the importance of some of its artifacts.

In this regard, consider once again India's cows, discussed in the news article that began this chapter. As the article mentioned, people from India consider cows holy, and they let cows roam the streets of many cities. In a nation where hunger is so rampant,

such cow worship is difficult to understand, at least to Americans, because a ready source of meat is being ignored.

Anthropologist Marvin Harris (1974) advanced a practical explanation for India's cow worship. Millions of Indians are peasants who rely on their farms for their food and thus their existence. Oxen and water buffalo, not tractors, are the way they plow their fields. If their ox falls sick or dies, farmers may lose their farms. Because, as Harris observes, oxen are made by cows, it thus becomes essential to preserve cows at all costs. In India, cows also act as an essential source of fertilizer, to the tune of 700 million tons of manure annually, about half of which is used for fertilizer and the other half of which is used as fuel for cooking. Cow manure is also mixed with water and used as flooring material over dirt floors in Indian households. For all of these reasons, cow worship is not so puzzling after all, because it helps preserve animals that are very important for India's economy and other aspects of its way of life.

According to anthropologist Marvin Harris, cows are worshipped in India because they are such an important part of India's agricultural economy.

Francisco Martins – Cow in Mumbai – CC BY-NC 2.0.

If Indians exalt cows, many Jews and Muslims feel the opposite

about pigs: they refuse to eat any product made from pigs and so obey an injunction from the Old Testament of the Bible and from the Koran. Harris thinks this injunction existed because pig farming in ancient times would have threatened the ecology of the Middle East. Sheep and cattle eat primarily grass, while pigs eat foods that people eat, such as nuts, fruits, and especially grains. In another problem, pigs do not provide milk and are much more difficult to herd than sheep or cattle. Next, pigs do not thrive well in the hot, dry climate in which the people of the Old Testament and Koran lived. Finally, sheep and cattle were a source of food back then because beyond their own meat they provided milk, cheese, and manure, and cattle were also used for plowing. In contrast, pigs would have provided only their own meat. Because sheep and cattle were more "versatile" in all of these ways, and because of the other problems pigs would have posed, it made sense for the eating of pork to be prohibited.

   In contrast to Jews and Muslims, at least one society, the Maring of the mountains of New Guinea, is characterized by "pig love." Here pigs are held in the highest regard. The Maring sleep next to pigs, give them names and talk to them, feed them table scraps, and once or twice every generation have a mass pig sacrifice that is intended to ensure the future health and welfare of Maring society. Harris explains their love of pigs by noting that their climate is ideally suited to raising pigs, which are an important source of meat for the Maring. Because too many pigs would overrun the Maring, their periodic pig sacrifices help keep the pig population to manageable levels. Pig love thus makes as much sense for the Maring as pig hatred did for people in the time of the Old Testament and the Koran.

For Your Review

1. How and why does the development of language illustrate the importance of culture and provide evidence for the sociological perspective?
2. Some people say the United States is too individualistic and competitive, while other people say these values are part of what makes America great. What do you think? Why?

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1.3 Cultural Diversity

These cow and pig examples remind us that material and nonmaterial cultures often make sense only in the context of a given society. If that is true, then it is important for outsiders to become familiar with other societies and to appreciate their cultural differences. These differences are often referred to as **cultural diversity**. Cultural diversity also occurs within a single society, where subcultures and countercultures can both exist.

Learning From Other Societies

Saving Dogs and Cats in South Korea

Sometimes citizens can make a difference. Dog ownership has recently been increasing in South Korea, a nation in which dogs have traditionally been preferred more as a source of food than as pets. Two individuals who can claim credit for the more humane treatment of dogs there are Kyenan Kum and Haesun Park, two women who founded the Korea Animal Protection and Education Society (KAPES; http://www.koreananimals.org/index.htm) in 2007.

The mission of KAPES is to educate South Koreans about the humane treatment of dogs and cats and to promote compassionate treatment of these pets. Kyenan Kum had previously founded the International Aid for Korean Animals (IAKA) organization in 1997, to achieve the same goals. During the next 10 years, IAKA advocated for the more humane treatment of pets and publicized their plight to other nations to help bring international pressure to bear on South Korea. In 2007, IAKA's efforts proved

successful when the Korean government strengthened its Animal Protection Law. With stronger legal protections for pets in place, Kum and Park decided it was now time to focus on convincing the public that pets should be treated humanely, and they founded KAPES to achieve this goal. In December 2008, Park received an award from the Ministry of Agriculture for her efforts, which have included the holding of animal protection festivals and advocating for government funding for animal shelters.

It is not easy to confront a deeply embedded cultural practice as Kyenan Kum and Haesun Park have done. Their example offers inspiration to Americans and other citizens who also dedicate their lives to various kinds of social reforms.

The Amish in the United States are a subculture that shuns electricity and many other modern conveniences.

Shinya Suzuki – Amish – CC BY-ND 2.0.

A **subculture** refers to a group that shares the central values and

beliefs of the larger culture but still retains certain values, beliefs, and norms that make it distinct from the larger culture. A good example of a U.S. subculture is the Amish, who live primarily in central Pennsylvania and parts of Ohio and shun electricity and other modern conveniences, including cars, tractors, and telephones. Their way of life is increasingly threatened by the expansion of non-Amish businesses and residences into Amish territory (Rifkin, 2009). Since the 1970s, development has cost Lancaster County, Pennsylvania—where many Amish live—thousands of acres of farming land. Some Amish families have moved to other states or left farming to start small businesses, where some do use cell phones and computers. Despite these concessions to modern development, for the most part the Amish live the way they always have. Most still do not drive cars or even ride bikes. The case of the Amish dramatically illustrates the persistence of an old-fashioned subculture and its uneasy fit with the larger, dominant culture.

A **counterculture** is a group whose values and beliefs directly oppose those of the larger culture and even reject it. Perhaps the most discussed example of a counterculture is the so-called youth counterculture of the 1960s, often referred to as the hippies but also comprising many other young people who did not fit the "tuned-out" image of the hippies and instead were politically engaged against U.S. government policy in Vietnam and elsewhere (Roszak, 1969). A contemporary example of a U.S. counterculture is the survivalists, whose extreme antigovernment views and hoarding of weapons fit them into the counterculture category (Mitchell, 2002).

Cultural Relativism and

Ethnocentrism

The fact of cultural diversity raises some important but difficult questions of cultural relativism and ethnocentrism. **Cultural relativism** refers to the belief that we should not judge any culture as superior or inferior to another culture. In this view, all cultures have their benefits and disadvantages, and we should not automatically assume that our own culture is better and "their" culture is worse. **Ethnocentrism**, the opposite view, refers to the tendency to judge another culture by the standards of our own and to the belief that our own culture is indeed superior to another culture. When we think of cow worship in India, it is easy to be amused by it and even to make fun of it. That is why anthropologist Marvin Harris's analysis was so important, because it suggests that cow worship is in fact very important for the Indian way of life.

Some scholars think cultural relativism is an absolute, that we should never judge another culture's beliefs and practices as inferior to our own. Other scholars think cultural relativism makes sense up to a point, but that there are some practices that should be condemned, even if they are an important part of another culture, because they violate the most basic standards of humanity. For example, a common practice in areas of India and Pakistan is *dowry deaths*, where a husband and his relatives murder the husband's wife because her family has not provided the dowry they promised when the couple got married (Kethineni & Srinivasan, 2009). Often they burn the wife in her kitchen with cooking oil or gasoline and make it look like an accident. The number of such dowry deaths is estimated to be at least several hundred every year and perhaps as many as several thousand. Should we practice cultural relativism and not disapprove of dowry deaths? Or is it fair to condemn this practice, even if it is one that many people in those nations accept?

Dowry deaths are relatively common in certain parts of India and Pakistan. Should we practice cultural relativism and not disapprove of dowry deaths? Or is it fair to condemn this practice, even if it is one that many people in these nations accept?

Owen Young – Bishnoi grandmother – CC BY 2.0.

Because dowry death is so horrible, you might be sure we should not practice cultural relativism for this example. However, other cultural practices such as cow worship might sound odd to you but are not harmful, and you would probably agree we should accept these practices on their own terms. Other practices lie between these two extremes. Consider the eating of dog meat, which was mentioned in the "Learning From Other Societies" box. In China, South Korea, and other parts of Asia, dog meat is considered a delicacy, and people sometimes kill dogs to eat them (Dunlop, 2008). As one observer provocatively asked about eating dog meat, "For a Westerner, eating it can feel a little strange, but is it morally different from eating, say, pork? The dogs brought to table in China are not people's pets, but are raised as food, like pigs. And pigs, of course, are also intelligent and friendly" (Dunlop, 2008). Should

we accept the practice of eating dog meat on its own terms? Is it any worse than eating pork or slaughtering cattle in order to eat beef? If an Asian immigrant killed and ate a dog in the United States, should that person be arrested for engaging in a practice the person grew up with? Cultural relativism and ethnocentrism certainly raise difficult issues in today's increasingly globalized world.

Key Takeaways

- Subcultures and countercultures are two types of alternative cultures that may exist amid the dominant culture.
- Cultural relativism and ethnocentrism are often in tension, and it is sometimes difficult to determine whether it is appropriate to condemn behaviors that one's own culture finds repugnant but that another culture considers appropriate.

For Your Review

1. This section discussed the eating of dog meat in some other cultures. Many Americans and Europeans condemn this practice. Do you think it is appropriate to condemn eating dog meat, or do you think such criticism violates cultural relativism and is thus inappropriate? Explain your answer.

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Summary

1.   Culture involves the symbols, language, norms, values, and artifacts that characterize any society and that shape the thoughts, behaviors, and attitudes of the members of the society.

2.   Scholars continue to debate the relative importance of biology and culture for human behavior. Sociologists favor culture over biology for several reasons, including the cultural variations existing around the world, the inability of biological explanations to account for many differences in groups' rates of behavior, and the support of biological explanations of behavior for the status quo.

3.   Symbols are an important part of culture and help members of a society interact. They include both objects and nonverbal means of communication. Failure to understand the meanings of symbols can make it difficult to interact.

4.   Language is another important element of culture and fundamental to communication. If the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is correct, language shapes the

thoughts and perceptions of society's members.

5.   A culture's norms and values influence how people behave. When we look around the world, we see several dramatic illustrations of cross-cultural variation in norms and values. In Japan, for example, harmony is a central value, while in the United States individualism and competition prevail.

6.   Artifacts are the final element of culture and may prove puzzling to people outside a given culture. However, artifacts often make much sense from the perspective of the people living amid a given culture.

7.   Cultural relativism and ethnocentrism are two sides of the same coin in the issue of cultural diversity. Many societies have cultural practices that may surprise and even dismay us, and it's often difficult to decide whether we should accept or instead condemn these practices.

Using Sociology

Suppose you meet a young woman from Pakistan in one of your classes, and you gradually become friends with her. One day she tells you that after she receives her degree in sociology, she is supposed to go back to her native country to marry a man in a marriage arranged by her parents and the man's parents. She has only met this man once and is not in love with him, she tells you, but arranged marriages are part of her country's culture. Having lived in the United

States for more than a year, she is beginning to dread the prospect of marrying a man she does not know and does not love. You sympathize with her plight but also remember from your introduction to sociology course that Americans should not be ethnocentric by condemning out of hand cultural practices in other nations. What, if anything, do you say to your new friend? Explain your answer.

CHAPTER 2: SOCIALIZATION

Social Issues in the News

"Lessons from Charlie Howard's Death," the headline of the op-ed column said. On July 7, 2009, Bangor, Maine, marked the 25th anniversary of the death of Charlie Howard, an openly gay, 23-year-old man who was beaten and thrown off a bridge into a river by three teenagers on July 7, 1984. Howard could not swim and drowned. His three assailants eventually pleaded guilty to manslaughter and were sentenced to a juvenile correction center. One of the lessons of his death, wrote the columnist, a theology professor, is the need to challenge the hateful mindset that underlies homophobia. "The three youth who killed Charlie Howard were not social rebels acting out against societal norms and values," he wrote, but instead "were social conformists who thought they would be rewarded for acting in conformity to this community's norms. In fact, when the three boys returned to Bangor High School, they were cheered as heroes by their peers and some adults." (Ellison, 2009)

Why did three teenagers in a small town beat a gay man and hurl

him to his death a quarter-century ago? We may never know, but it seems obvious that they had learned to hate gays from community norms back then and perhaps also from some of the many people with whom they interacted every day. This was not the first hate crime against a gay man or other individual, nor was it the last, but it nonetheless illustrates one of the ugly aspects of the many things we learn from our culture and from the people around us. We learn many good things, all necessary to have a society, but we can also learn to accept some very harmful beliefs and to practice very harmful behaviors.

The stories of Sarah Patton Boyle and Lillian Smith illustrate this all too well. Sarah Patton Boyle was born in 1906 to one of the leading families of Virginia. A great-grandfather had been a prominent attorney and acting governor of the state; both her grandfathers led illustrious military careers; her father was a respected Episcopalian minister. She was raised on the plantation on which her ancestors had once owned slaves, and her family employed several African American servants.

It was in this setting that little Sarah learned to be racially prejudiced. She was forbidden to visit the servants' rooms, which, she was told, were filthy and ridden with disease. The servants themselves were not allowed to use the family's bathroom or china, lest they spread disease from the germs they were assumed to harbor. Sarah's mother loved her servants the same way she loved the family's pets, "without the slightest feeling that they were much like herself," and taught Sarah that African Americans "belonged to a lower order of man than we" (Boyle, 1962, p. 14). When Sarah turned 12, she was told to stop playing with the servants' children because she was now too old to be "familiar" with black youngsters, and she then endured a "dreadful training period" in which she was scolded if she forgot her new, standoffish role. She was socialized during the next few years to treat whites better than blacks. When Sarah's adolescence ended, she was "as close to a typical Southern lady as anyone ever is to a typical anything" (Boyle, 1962, pp. 14, 29). Her racial views stayed with her for many years.

Whites like Sarah Patton Boyle and Lillian Smith, who grew up in the South before the 1960s civil rights movement, learned to be racially prejudiced toward African Americans.

U.S. Library of Congress – public domain.

Lillian Smith learned similar beliefs after her birth, a few years before Sarah's, to a wealthy family in Florida. She learned about

taboos and manners in race relations just as she learned her games, prayers, and other childhood practices. A central lesson was that "I was better than a Negro, that all black folks have their place and must be kept in it...that a terrifying disaster would befall the South if ever I treated a Negro as my social equal" (Smith, 1949, p. 17). Her parents played a prime role in this learning process: "The mother who taught me what I know of tenderness and love and compassion taught me also the bleak rituals of keeping Negroes in their place. The father who...reminding me that 'all men are brothers,' trained me in the steel-rigid decorums I must demand of every colored male. They...taught me also to split my conscience from my acts and Christianity from Southern tradition" (Smith, 1949, pp. 17–18). These racial views also stayed with her for many years.

Thanks to the civil rights movement, the South is much different, of course, from when Sarah Patton Boyle and Lillian Smith were growing up, but their poignant descriptions and Charlie Howard's death remind us that children and adolescents learn all sorts of things, good or bad, without formal instruction. They learn these things from their parents, their friends, and other parts of their social environment. The things they learn constitute their culture: norms, values, and symbols. **Socialization** is the term sociologists use to describe the process by which people learn their culture. Socialization occurs in societies big and small, simple and complex, preindustrial and industrial. It happens in the United States, in Brazil, in Saudi Arabia, and in Indonesia. Without socialization we would not learn our culture, and, as Chapter 1 "Culture" indicated, without culture we could not have a society. Socialization, then, is an essential process for any society to be possible.

This chapter examines several aspects of socialization. In so doing, it continues developing the sociological perspective addressed by the previous chapters, as we will again see the ways in which our social environment shapes our thoughts, actions, and life chances.

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2.1 The Importance of Socialization

Learning Objective

1. Describe why socialization is important for being fully human.

We have just noted that socialization is how culture is learned, but socialization is also important for another important reason. To illustrate this importance, let's pretend we find a 6-year-old child who has had almost no human contact since birth. After the child was born, her mother changed her diapers and fed her a minimal diet but otherwise did not interact with her. The child was left alone all day and night for years and never went outside. We now find her at the age of 6. How will her behavior and actions differ from those of the average 6-year-old? Take a moment and write down all the differences you would find.

In no particular order, here is the list you probably wrote. First, the child would not be able to speak; at most, she could utter a few grunts and other sounds. Second, the child would be afraid of us and probably cower in a corner. Third, the child would not know how to play games and interact with us. If we gave her some food and utensils, she would eat with her hands and not know how to use the utensils. Fourth, the child would be unable to express a full range of emotions. For example, she might be able to cry but would not know how to laugh. Fifth, the child would be unfamiliar with, and probably

afraid of, our culture's material objects, including cell phones and televisions. In these and many other respects, this child would differ dramatically from the average 6-year-old youngster in the United States. She would *look* human, but she would not *act* human. In fact, in many ways she would act more like a frightened animal than like a young human being, and she would be less able than a typical dog to follow orders and obey commands.

As this example indicates, socialization makes it possible for us to fully function as human beings. Without socialization, we could not have our society and culture. And without social interaction, we could not have socialization. Our example of a socially isolated child was hypothetical, but real-life examples of such children, often called **feral** children, have unfortunately occurred and provide poignant proof of the importance of social interaction for socialization and of socialization for our ability to function as humans.

One of the most famous feral children was Victor of Aveyron, who was found wandering in the woods in southern France in 1797. He then escaped custody but emerged from the woods in 1800. Victor was thought to be about age 12 and to have been abandoned some years earlier by his parents; he was unable to speak and acted much more like a wild animal than a human child. Victor first lived in an institution and then in a private home. He never learned to speak, and his cognitive and social development eventually was no better than a toddler's when he finally died at about age 40 (Lane, 1976).

In rare cases, children have grown up in extreme isolation and end up lacking several qualities that make them fully human. This is a photo of Victor of Aveyron, who emerged from the woods in southern France in 1800 after apparently being abandoned by his parents some years earlier. He could not speak, and his cognitive and social skills never advanced beyond those of a small child before he died at the age of 40.

Der Wilde von Aveyron.

Another such child, found more than about a half-century ago, was called Anna, who "had been deprived of normal contact and had received a minimum of human care for almost the whole of her first six years of life" (Davis, 1940, p. 554). After being shuttled from one residence to another for her first 5 months, Anna ended up living with her mother in her grandfather's house and was kept in a small, airless room on the second floor because the grandfather was so dismayed by her birth out of wedlock that he hated seeing her. Because her mother worked all day and would go out at night, Anna was alone almost all the time and lived in filth, often barely alive. Her only food in all those years was milk.

When Anna was found at the age of 6, she could not talk or walk or "do anything that showed intelligence" (Davis, 1940, p. 554). She was also extremely undernourished and emaciated. Two years later, she had learned to walk, understand simple commands, feed herself, and remember faces, but she could not talk and in these respects resembled a 1-year-old infant more than the 7-year-old child she really was. By the time she died of jaundice at about age 9, she had acquired the speech of a 2-year-old.

Shortly after Anna was discovered, another girl, called Isabelle, was found in similar circumstances at age 6. She was also born out of wedlock and lived alone with her mother in a dark room isolated from the rest of the mother's family. Because her mother was mute, Isabelle did not learn to speak, although she did communicate with her mother via some simple gestures. When she was finally found, she acted like a wild animal around strangers, and in other respects she behaved more like a child of 6 months than one of more than 6 years. When first shown a ball, she stared at it, held it in her hand, and then rubbed an adult's face with it. Intense training afterward helped Isabelle recover, and 2 years later she had reached a normal speaking level for a child her age (Davis, 1940).

These cases of feral children show that extreme isolation—or, to put it another way, lack of socialization—deprives children of the obvious and not-so-obvious qualities that make them human and in other respects retards their social, cognitive, and emotional development. A series of famous experiments by psychologists Harry and Margaret Harlow (1962) reinforced the latter point by showing it to be true of monkeys as well. The Harlows studied rhesus monkeys that had been removed from their mothers at birth; some were raised in complete isolation, while others were given fake mothers made of cloth and wire with which to cuddle. Neither group developed normally, although the monkeys cuddling with the fake mothers fared somewhat better than those that were totally isolated. In general, the monkeys were not able to interact later with other monkeys, and female infants abused their young when they became mothers. The longer their isolation, the more the monkeys'

development suffered. By showing the dire effects of social isolation, the Harlows' experiment reinforced the significance of social interaction for normal development. Combined with the tragic examples of feral children, their experiments remind us of the critical importance of socialization and social interaction for human society.

Key Takeaways

- Socialization is the process through which individuals learn their culture and become fully human.
- Unfortunate examples of extreme human isolation illustrate the importance of socialization for children's social and cognitive development.

For Your Review

1. Do you agree that effective socialization is necessary for an individual to be fully human? Could this assumption imply that children with severe developmental disabilities, who cannot undergo effective socialization, are not fully human?
2. Do you know anyone with negative views in regard to race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, or religious preference? If so, how do you think this person acquired these views?

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2.2 Explaining Socialization

Learning Objective

1. Describe the theories of Cooley, Mead, Freud, Piaget, Kohlberg, Gilligan, and Erikson.

Because socialization is so important, scholars in various fields have tried to understand how and why it occurs, with different scholars looking at different aspects of the process. Their efforts mostly focus on infancy, childhood, and adolescence, which are the critical years for socialization, but some have also looked at how socialization continues through the life course. Let's examine some of the major theories of socialization, which are summarized in Table 4.1 "Theory Snapshot".

Table 4.1 Theory Snapshot

Theory	Major figure(s)	Major assumptions
Looking-glass self	Charles Horton Cooley	Children gain an impression of how people perceive them as the children interact with them. In effect, children "see" themselves when they interact with other people, as if they are looking in a mirror. Individuals use the perceptions that others have of them to develop judgments and feelings about themselves.
Taking the role of the other	George Herbert Mead	Children pretend to be other people in their play and in so doing learn what these other people expect of them. Younger children take the role of significant others, or the people, most typically parents and siblings, who have the most contact with them; older children when they play sports and other games take on the roles of other people and internalize the expectations of the generalized other, or society itself.
Psychoanalytic	Sigmund Freud	The personality consists of the id, ego, and superego. If a child does not develop normally and the superego does not become strong enough to overcome the id, antisocial behavior may result.
Cognitive development	Jean Piaget	Cognitive development occurs through four stages. The final stage is the formal operational stage, which begins at age 12 as children begin to use general principles to resolve various problems.
Moral development	Lawrence Kohlberg, Carol Gilligan	Children develop their ability to think and act morally through several stages. If they fail to reach the conventional stage, in which adolescents realize that their parents and society have rules that should be followed because they are morally right to follow, they might well engage in harmful behavior. Whereas boys tend to use formal rules to decide what is right or wrong, girls tend to take personal relationships into account.
Identity development	Erik Erikson	Identity development encompasses eight stages across the life course. The fifth stage occurs in adolescence and is especially critical because teenagers often experience an identity crisis as they move from childhood to adulthood.

Sociological Explanations: The Development of the Self

One set of explanations, and the most sociological of those we discuss, looks at how the **self**, or one's identity, self-concept, and self-image, develops. These explanations stress that we learn how to interact by first interacting with others and that we do so by using this interaction to gain an idea of who we are and what they expect of us.

Charles Horton Cooley

Among the first to advance this view was Charles Horton Cooley (1864–1929), who said that by interacting with other people we gain an impression of how they perceive us. In effect, we "see" ourselves when we interact with other people, as if we are looking in a mirror when we are with them. Cooley (1902) developed his famous concept of the **looking-glass self** to summarize this process. Cooley said we first imagine how we appear to others and then imagine how they think of us and, more specifically, whether they are evaluating us positively or negatively. We then use these perceptions to develop judgments and feelings about ourselves, such as pride or embarrassment.

Sometimes errors occur in this complex process, as we may

misperceive how others regard us and develop misguided judgments of our behavior and feelings. For example, you may have been in a situation where someone laughed at what you said, and you thought they were mocking you, when in fact they just thought you were being funny. Although you should have interpreted their laughter positively, you interpreted it negatively and probably felt stupid or embarrassed.

Charles Horton Cooley wrote that we gain an impression of ourselves by interacting with other people. By doing so, we "see" ourselves as if we are looking in a mirror when we are with them. Cooley developed his famous concept of the looking-glass self to summarize this process.

Whether errors occur or not, the process Cooley described is especially critical during childhood and adolescence, when our self is still in a state of flux. Imagine how much better children on a sports team feel after being cheered for making a great play or how

children in the school band feel after a standing ovation at the end of the band's performance. If they feel better about themselves, they may do that much better next time. For better or worse, the reverse is also true. If children do poorly on the sports field or in a school performance and the applause they hoped for does not occur, they may feel dejected and worse about themselves and from frustration or anxiety perform worse the next time around.

Yet it is also true that the looking-glass-self process affects us throughout our lives. By the time we get out of late adolescence and into our early adult years, we have very much developed our conception of our self, yet this development is never complete. As young, middle-aged, or older adults, we continue to react to our perceptions of how others view us, and these perceptions influence our conception of our self, even if this influence is often less than was true in our younger years. Whether our social interaction is with friends, relatives, coworkers, supervisors, or even strangers, our self continues to change.

George Herbert Mead

Another scholar who discussed the development of the self was George Herbert Mead (1863–1931), a founder of the field of symbolic interactionism. Mead's (1934) main emphasis was on children's playing, which he saw as central to their understanding of how people should interact. When they play, Mead said, children **take the role of the other**. This means they pretend to be other people in their play and in so doing learn what these other people expect of them. For example, when children play house and pretend to

be their parents, they treat their dolls the way they think their parents treat them. In so doing, they get a better idea of how they are expected to behave. Another way of saying this is that they internalize the expectations other people have of them.

Younger children, said Mead, take the role of **significant others**, or the people, most typically parents and siblings, who have the most contact with them. Older children take on the roles of other people and learn society's expectations as a whole. In so doing, they internalize the expectations of what Mead called the **generalized other**, or society itself.

This whole process, Mead wrote, involves several stages. In the *imitation* stage, infants can only imitate behavior without really understanding its purposes. If their parents rub their own bellies and laugh, 1-year-olds may do likewise. After they reach the age of 3, they are in the *play* stage. Here most of their play is by themselves or with only one or two other children, and much of it involves pretending to be other people: their parents, teachers, superheroes, television characters, and so forth. In this stage they begin taking the role of the other. Once they reach age 6 or 7, or roughly the time school begins, the *games* stage begins, and children start playing in team sports and games. The many players in these games perform many kinds of roles, and they must all learn to anticipate the actions of other members of their team. In so doing, they learn what is expected of the roles all team members are supposed to play and by extension begin to understand the roles society wants us to play, or to use Mead's term, the expectations of the generalized other.

Mead felt that the self has two parts, the *I* and the *me*. The *I* is the creative, spontaneous part of the self, while the *me* is the more passive part of the self stemming from the internalized expectations of the larger society. These two parts are not at odds, he thought, but instead complement each other and thus enhance the individual's contributions to society. Society needs creativity, but it also needs at least some minimum of conformity. The development of both these parts of the self is important not only for the individual but also for the society to which the individual belongs.

Social-Psychological Explanations: Personality and Cognitive and Moral Development

A second set of explanations is more psychological, as it focuses on the development of personality, cognitive ability, and morality.

Sigmund Freud and the Unconscious Personality

Whereas Cooley and Mead focused on interaction with others in explaining the development of the self, the great psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) focused on unconscious, biological forces that he felt shape individual personality. Freud (1933) thought that the personality consists of three parts: the **id**, **ego**, and **superego.** The id is the selfish part of the personality and consists of biological instincts that all babies have, including the need for food and, more generally, the demand for immediate gratification. As babies get older, they learn that not all their needs can be immediately satisfied and thus develop the ego, or the rational part

of the personality. As children get older still, they internalize society's norms and values and thus begin to develop their superego, which represents society's conscience. If a child does not develop normally and the superego does not become strong enough, the individual is more at risk for being driven by the id to commit antisocial behavior.
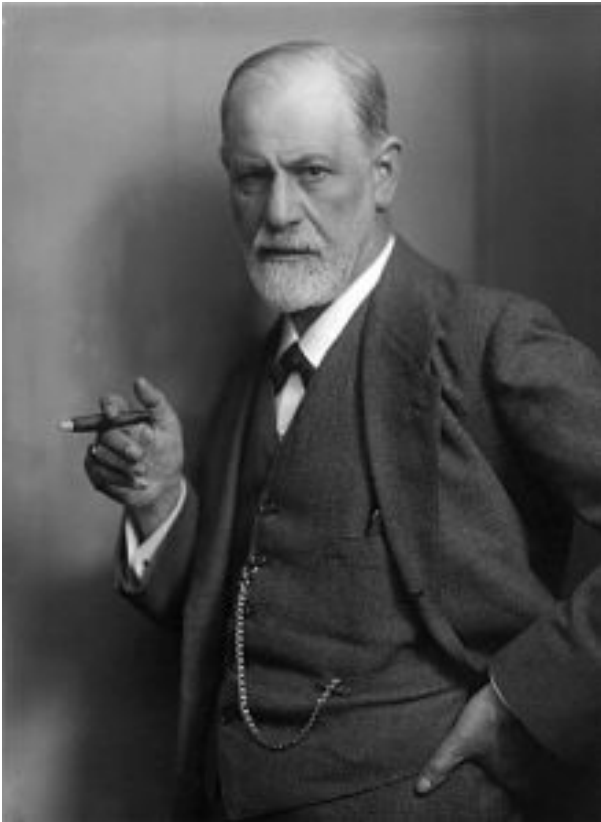
Sigmund Freud believed that the personality consists of three parts: the id, ego, and superego. The development of these biological forces helps shape an individual's personality.

Wikimedia Commons – public domain.

Freud's basic view that an individual's personality and behavior develop largely from within differs from sociology's emphasis on the

social environment. That is not to say his view is wrong, but it is to say that it neglects the many very important influences highlighted by sociologists.

Piaget and Cognitive Development

Children acquire a self and a personality but they also learn how to think and reason. How they acquire such *cognitive development* was the focus of research by Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget (1896–1980). Piaget (1954) thought that cognitive development occurs through four stages and that proper maturation of the brain and socialization were necessary for adequate development.

The first stage is the *sensorimotor* stage, in which infants cannot really think or reason and instead use their hearing, vision, and other senses to discover the world around them. The second stage is the *preoperational* stage, lasting from about age 2 to age 7, in which children begin to use symbols, especially words, to understand objects and simple ideas. The third stage is the *concrete operational* stage, lasting from about age 7 to age 11 or 12, in which children begin to think in terms of cause and effect but still do not understand underlying principles of fairness, justice, and related concepts. The fourth and final stage is the *formal operational* stage, which begins about the age of 12. Here children begin to think abstractly and use general principles to resolve various problems.

Recent research supports Piaget's emphasis on the importance

of the early years for children's cognitive development. Scientists have found that brain activity develops rapidly in the earliest years of life. Stimulation from a child's social environment enhances this development, while a lack of stimulation impairs it. Children whose parents or other caregivers routinely play with them and talk, sing, and read to them have much better neurological and cognitive development than other children (Riley, San Juan, Klinkner, & Ramminger, 2009). By providing a biological basis for the importance of human stimulation for children, this research underscores both the significance of interaction and the dangers of social isolation. For both biological and social reasons, socialization is not fully possible without extensive social interaction.

Kohlberg, Gilligan, and Moral Development

An important part of children's reasoning is their ability to distinguish right from wrong and to decide on what is morally correct to do. Psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg (1927–1987) said that children develop their ability to think and act morally through several stages. In the *preconventional* stage, young children equate what is morally right simply to what keeps them from getting punished. In the *conventional* stage, adolescents realize that their parents and society have rules that should be followed because they are morally right to follow, not just because disobeying them leads to punishment. At the *postconventional* stage, which occurs in

late adolescence and early adulthood, individuals realize that higher moral standards may supersede those of their own society and even decide to disobey the law in the name of these higher standards. If people fail to reach at least the conventional stage, Kohlberg (1969) said, they do not develop a conscience and instead might well engage in harmful behavior if they think they will not be punished. Incomplete moral development, Kohlberg concluded, was a prime cause of antisocial behavior.

Carol Gilligan believes that girls take personal relationships into account during their moral development.

One limitation of Kohlberg's research was that he studied only boys. Do girls go through similar stages of moral development? Carol Gilligan (1982) concluded that they do not. Whereas boys tend to use formal rules to decide what is right or wrong, she wrote, girls tend to take personal relationships into account. If people break a rule because of some important personal need or because they are trying to help someone, then their behavior may not be wrong. Put another way, males tend to use impersonal, *universalistic* criteria for moral decision making, whereas females tend to use more individual, *particularistic* criteria.

An example from children's play illustrates the difference between these two forms of moral reasoning. If boys are playing a sport, say basketball, and a player says he was fouled, they may disagree—sometimes heatedly—over how much contact occurred and whether it indeed was enough to be a foul. In contrast, girls in a similar situation may decide in the interest of having everyone get along to call the play a "do-over."

Erikson and Identity Development

We noted earlier that the development of the self is not limited to childhood but instead continues throughout the life span. More generally, although socialization is most important during childhood and adolescence, it, too, continues throughout the life span. Psychologist Erik Erikson (1902–1990) explicitly recognized this central fact in his theory of *identity development* (Erikson, 1980). This sort of development, he said, encompasses eight stages of life across the life course. In the first four stages, occurring in succession from birth to age 12, children ideally learn trust, self-control, and independence and also learn how to do tasks whose complexity increases with their age. If all this development goes well, they develop a positive identity, or self-image.

The fifth stage occurs in adolescence and is especially critical, said Erikson, because teenagers often experience an *identity crisis*. This crisis occurs because adolescence is a transition between

childhood and adulthood: adolescents are leaving childhood but have not yet achieved adulthood. As they try to work through all the complexities of adolescence, teenagers may become rebellious at times, but most eventually enter young adulthood with their identities mostly settled. Stages 6, 7, and 8 involve young adulthood, middle adulthood, and late adulthood, respectively. In each of these stages, people's identity development is directly related to their family and work roles. In late adulthood, people reflect on their lives while trying to remain contributing members of society. Stage 8 can be a particularly troubling stage for many people, as they realize their lives are almost over.

Erikson's research helped stimulate the further study of socialization past adolescence, and today the study of socialization during the years of adulthood is burgeoning. We return to adulthood in <u>Section 2.4 "Socialization Through the Life Course"</u> and address it again in the discussion of age and aging in <u>Chapter 9 "Aging and Ageism"</u>.

Key Takeaways

- Cooley and Mead explained how one's self-concept and self-image develop.
- Freud focused on the need to develop a proper balance among the id, ego, and superego.
- Piaget wrote that cognitive development among children and adolescents occurs from four stages of social interaction.
- Kohlberg wrote about stages of moral development and emphasized the importance of formal rules, while Gilligan emphasized that girls' moral development takes into account personal relationships.

- Erikson's theory of identity development encompasses eight stages, from infancy through old age.

For Your Review

1. Select one of the theories of socialization in this section, and write about how it helps you to understand your own socialization.
2. Gilligan emphasized that girls take social relationships into account in their moral development, while boys tend to stress the importance of formal rules. Do you agree with her argument? Why or why not?

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2.3 Agents of Socialization

Several institutional and other sources of socialization exist and are called *agents of socialization*. The first of these, the family, is certainly the most important agent of socialization for infants and young children.

The Family

The family is perhaps the most important agent of socialization for children. Parents' values and behavior patterns profoundly influence those of their daughters and sons.

Randen Pederson – [Family](#) – CC BY 2.0.

Should parents get the credit when their children turn out to be good kids and even go on to accomplish great things in life? Should they get the blame if their children turn out to be bad? No parent deserves all the credit or blame for their children's successes and failures in life, but the evidence indicates that our parents do affect us profoundly. In many ways, we even end up resembling our parents in more than just appearance.

Sociology Making a Difference

Understanding Racial Socialization

In a society that is still racially prejudiced, African American parents continue to find it necessary to teach their children about African American culture and to prepare them for the bias and discrimination they can expect to encounter. Scholars in sociology and other disciplines have studied this process of *racial socialization.* One of their most interesting findings is that African American parents differ in the degree of racial socialization they practice: some parents emphasize African American identity and racial prejudice to a considerable degree, while other parents mention these topics to their children only minimally. The reasons for these differences have remained unclear.

Sociologist Jason E. Shelton (2008) analyzed data from a national random sample of African Americans to determine these reasons, in what he called "one of the most comprehensive analyses to date of racial socialization strategies among African Americans" (p. 237). Among other

questions, respondents were asked whether "in raising your children, have you done or told them things to help them know what it means to be Black." They were also asked whether "there are any other things you've done or told your children to help them know how to get along with White people."

In his major results, Shelton found that respondents were more likely to practice racial socialization if they were older, female, and living outside the South; if they perceived that racial discrimination was a growing problem and were members of civil rights or other organization aimed at helping African Americans; and if they had higher incomes.

These results led Shelton to conclude that "African Americans are not a culturally monolithic group," as they differ in "the parental lessons they impart to their children about race relations" (2008, p. 253). Further, the parents who do practice racial socialization "do so in order to demystify and empower their offspring to seize opportunities in the larger society" (p. 253).

Shelton's study helps us to understand the factors accounting for differences in racial socialization by African American parents, and it also helps us understand that the parents who do attempt to make their children aware of U.S. race relations are merely trying, as most parents do, to help their children get ahead in life. By increasing our understanding of these matters, Shelton's research has helped make a difference.

The reason we turn out much like our parents, for better or worse, is that our families are such an important part of our socialization process. When we are born, our primary caregivers are almost always one or both of our parents. For several years we have more

contact with them than with any other adults. Because this contact occurs in our most formative years, our parents' interaction with us and the messages they teach us can have a profound impact throughout our lives, as indicated by the stories of Sarah Patton Boyle and Lillian Smith presented earlier.

The ways in which our parents socialize us depend on many factors, two of the most important of which are our parents' social class and our own biological sex. Melvin Kohn (1965, 1977) found that working-class and middle-class parents tend to socialize their children very differently. Kohn reasoned that working-class parents tend to hold factory and other jobs in which they have little autonomy and instead are told what to do and how to do it. In such jobs, obedience is an important value, lest the workers be punished for not doing their jobs correctly. Working-class parents, Kohn thought, should thus emphasize obedience and respect for authority as they raise their children, and they should favor spanking as a primary way of disciplining their kids when they disobey. In contrast, middle-class parents tend to hold white-collar jobs where autonomy and independent judgment are valued and workers get ahead by being creative. These parents should emphasize independence as they raise their children and should be less likely than working-class parents to spank their kids when they disobey.

If parents' social class influences how they raise their children, it is also true that the sex of their children affects how they are socialized by their parents. Many studies find that parents raise their daughters and sons quite differently as they interact with them from birth. We will explore this further in Chapter 7 "Gender Inequality", but suffice it to say here that parents help their girls learn how to act and think "like girls," and they help their boys learn how to act and think "like boys." That is, they help their daughters and sons learn their gender (Wood, 2009). For example, they are gentler with their daughters and rougher with their sons. They give their girls dolls to play with, and their boys guns. Girls may be made of "sugar and spice and everything nice" and boys something quite

different, but their parents help them greatly, for better or worse, turn out that way. To the extent this is true, our gender stems much more from socialization than from biological differences between the sexes, or so most sociologists probably assume. To return to a question posed earlier, if Gilligan is right that boys and girls reach moral judgments differently, socialization matters more than biology for how they reach these judgments.

As the "Learning From Other Societies" box illustrates, various cultures socialize their children differently. We can also examine cross-cultural variation in socialization with data from the World Values Survey, which was administered to almost six dozen nations. [Figure 4.1 "Percentage Believing That Obedience Is Especially Important for a Child to Learn"](#) shows the percentage of people in several countries who think it is "especially important for children to learn obedience at home." Here we see some striking differences in the value placed on obedience, with the United States falling somewhat in between the nations in the figure.

Learning From Other Societies

Children and Socialization in Japan

This chapter ends with the observation that American

children need to be socialized with certain values in order for our society to be able to address many of the social issues, including hate crimes and violence against women, facing it. As we consider the socialization of American children, the experience of Japan offers a valuable lesson.

Japan's culture emphasizes harmony, cooperation, and respect for authority. Socialization in Japan is highly oriented toward the teaching of the values just listed, with much of it stressing the importance of belonging to a group and dependence, instead of individual autonomy and independence. This is especially true in Japanese schools, which, as two sociologists write, "stress the similarity of all children, and the importance of the group" (Schneider & Silverman, 2010, p. 24). Let's see how this happens (Hendry, 1987; Schwalb & Schwalb, 1996).

From the time they begin school, Japanese children learn to value their membership in their homeroom, or *kumi*, and they spend several years in the same *kumi*. Each *kumi* treats its classroom as a "home away from home," as the children arrange the classroom furniture, bring in plants and other things from their own homes, and clean the classroom every day. At recess one *kumi* will play against another. In an interesting difference from standard practice in the United States, a *kumi* in junior high school will stay in its classroom while the teachers for, say, math and social science move from one classroom to another. In the United States, of course, the opposite is true: teachers stay in their classrooms, and students move from one room to another.

Other practices in Japanese schools further the learning of Japanese values. Young schoolchildren wear the same uniforms. Japanese teachers use constant drills to teach them how to bow, and they have the children repeatedly

stand up and sit down as a group. These practices help students learn respect for authority and help enhance the sense of group belonging that the *kumi* represents. Whereas teachers in the United States routinely call on individual students to answer a question, Japanese teachers rarely do this. Rather than competing with each other for a good grade, Japanese schoolchildren are evaluated according to the performance of the *kumi* as a whole. Because decision making within the *kumi* is done by consensus, the children learn the need to compromise and to respect each other's feelings.

Because the members of a *kumi* spend so much time together for so many years, they develop extremely close friendships and think of themselves more as members of the *kumi* than as individuals. They become very loyal to the *kumi* and put its interests above their own individual interests. In these and other ways, socialization in Japanese schools helps the children and adolescents there learn the Japanese values of harmony, group loyalty, and respect for authority. If American children learned these values to a greater degree, it would be easier to address violence and other issues facing the United States.

Figure 4.1 Percentage Believing That

Obedience Is Especially Important for a Child to Learn
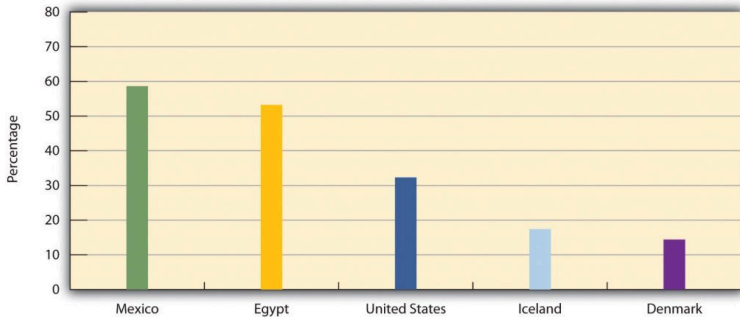
Source: Data from World Values Survey, 2002.

Schools

Schools socialize children by teaching them their formal curricula but also a hidden curriculum that imparts the cultural values of the society in which the schools are found. One of these values is the need to respect authority, as evidenced by these children standing in line.

Schools socialize children in several ways. First, students learn a formal curriculum, informally called the "three Rs": reading, writing, and arithmetic. This phase of their socialization is necessary for them to become productive members of their society. Second, because students interact every day at school with their peers, they ideally strengthen their social interaction skills. Third, they interact with authority figures, their teachers, who are not their parents. For children who have not had any preschooling, their teachers are often the first authority figures they have had other than their parents. The learning they gain in relating to these authority figures is yet another important component of their socialization.

Functional theorists cite all these aspects of school socialization, but conflict theorists instead emphasize that schools in the United States also impart a **hidden curriculum** by socializing children to accept the cultural values of the society in which the schools are found. To be more specific, children learn primarily positive things about the country's past and present; they learn the importance of being neat, patient, and obedient; and they learn to compete for good grades and other rewards. In this manner, they learn to love America and not to recognize its faults, and they learn traits that prepare them for jobs and careers that will bolster the capitalist economy. Children are also socialized to believe that failure, such as earning poor grades, stems from not studying hard enough and, more generally, from not trying hard enough (Booher-Jennings, 2008; Bowles & Gintis, 1976). This process reinforces the blaming-the-victim ideology. Schools are also a significant source of gender socialization, as even in this modern day, teachers and curricula send out various messages that reinforce the qualities traditionally ascribed to females and males, and students engage in recess and other extracurricular activities that do the same thing (Booher-Jennings, 2008; Thorne, 1993).

Peers

When you were a 16-year-old, how many times did you complain to your parent(s), "All of my friends are [doing so and so]. Why can't I? It isn't fair!" As this all-too-common example indicates, our friends play a very important role in our lives. This is especially true during adolescence, when peers influence our tastes in music, clothes, and so many other aspects of our lives, as the now-common image of the teenager always on a cell phone reminds us. But friends are important during other parts of the life course as well. We rely on them for fun, for emotional comfort and support, and for companionship. That is the upside of friendships.

Our peers also help socialize us and may even induce us to violate social norms.

Tony – Peer Pressure – CC BY-SA 2.0.

The downside of friendships is called *peer pressure*, with which you are undoubtedly familiar. Suppose it is Friday night, and you are studying for a big exam on Monday. Your friends come by and ask you to go with them to get a pizza and a drink. You would probably

agree to go with them, partly because you really dislike studying on a Friday night, but also because there is at least some subtle pressure on you to do so. As this example indicates, our friends can influence us in many ways. During adolescence, their interests can affect our own interests in film, music, and other aspects of popular culture. More ominously, adolescent peer influences have been implicated in underage drinking, drug use, delinquency, and hate crimes, such as the killing of Charlie Howard, recounted at the beginning of this chapter (Agnew, 2007) (see Chapter 3 "Social Structure and Social Interaction").

After we reach our 20s and 30s, our peers become less important in our lives, especially if we get married. Yet even then our peers do not lose all their importance, as married couples with young children still manage to get out with friends now and then. Scholars have also begun to emphasize the importance of friendships with coworkers for emotional and practical support and for our continuing socialization (Elsesser & Peplau, 2006; Marks, 1994).

The Mass Media

The mass media are another agent of socialization. Television shows, movies, popular music, magazines, Web sites, and other aspects of the mass media influence our political views; our tastes in popular culture; our views of women, people of color, and gays; and many other beliefs and practices.

In an ongoing controversy, the mass media are often blamed for youth violence and many other of our society's ills. The average child sees thousands of acts of violence on television and in the

movies before reaching young adulthood. Rap lyrics often seemingly extol very ugly violence, including violence against women. Commercials can greatly influence our choice of soda, shoes, and countless other products. The mass media also reinforce racial and gender stereotypes, including the belief that women are sex objects and suitable targets of male violence. In the General Social Survey (GSS), about 28% of respondents said that they watch four or more hours of television every day, while another 46% watch two to three hours daily (see [Figure 4.2 "Average Number of Hours of Television Watched Daily"](#)). The mass media certainly are an important source of socialization unimaginable a half-century ago.

Figure 4.2 Average Number of Hours of Television Watched Daily
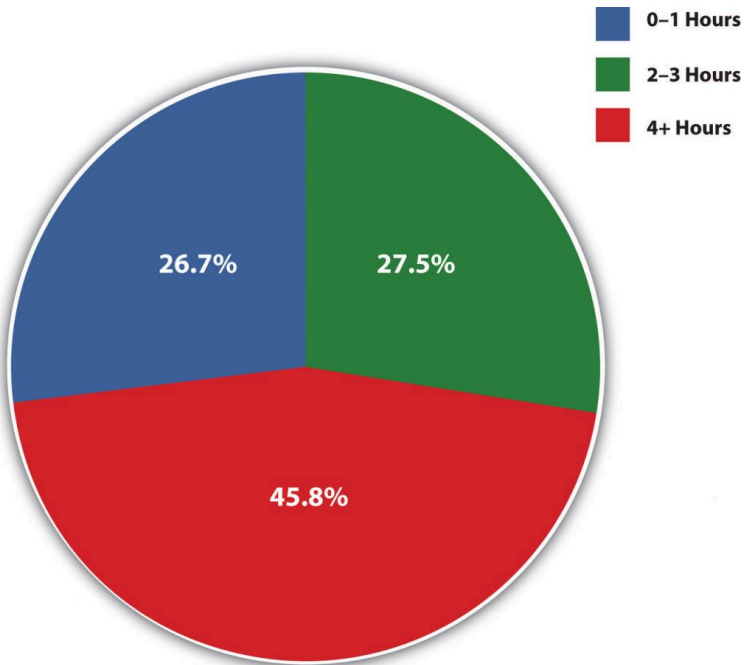
Source: Data from General Social Survey, 2008.

As the mass media socialize children, adolescents, and even adults, a key question is the extent to which media violence causes violence in our society (Surette, 2011). Studies consistently uncover a strong correlation between watching violent television shows and movies and committing violence. However, this does not necessarily mean that watching the violence actually causes violent behavior: perhaps people watch violence because they are already interested in it and perhaps even committing it. Scholars continue to debate the effect of media violence on youth violence. In a free society, this question is especially important, as the belief in this effect has prompted calls for monitoring the media and the banning of certain acts of violence. Civil libertarians argue that such calls smack of censorship that violates the First Amendment to the Constitution, whole others argue that they fall within the First Amendment and would make for

a safer society. Certainly the concern and debate over mass media violence will continue for years to come.

Religion

One final agent of socialization is religion, discussed further in [Chapter 10 "Religion"](). Although religion is arguably less important in people's lives now than it was a few generations ago, it still continues to exert considerable influence on our beliefs, values, and behaviors.

Here we should distinguish between *religious preference* (e.g., Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish) and *religiosity* (e.g., how often people pray or attend religious services). Both these aspects of religion can affect your values and beliefs on religious and nonreligious issues alike, but their particular effects vary from issue to issue. To illustrate this, consider the emotionally charged issue of abortion. People hold very strong views on abortion, and many of their views stem from their religious beliefs. Yet which aspect of religion matters the most, religious preference or religiosity? General Social Survey data help us answer this question ([Figure 4.3 "Religious Preference, Religiosity, and Belief That Abortion Should Be Legal for Any Reason"]()). It turns out that religious preference, if we limit it for the sake of this discussion to Catholics versus Protestants, does not matter at all: Catholics and Protestants in the GSS exhibit roughly equal beliefs on the abortion issue, as about one-third of each group thinks abortion should be allowed for any reason. (The slight difference shown in the table is not statistically significant.) However, religiosity matters a lot: GSS respondents

who pray daily are only about half as likely as those who rarely or never pray to think abortion should be allowed.

Figure 4.3 Religious Preference, Religiosity, and Belief That Abortion Should Be Legal for Any Reason

Source: Data from General Social Survey, 2008.

For Your Review

1. Describe one important value or attitude you have that is the result of socialization by your parent(s).
2. Do you agree that there is a hidden curriculum in secondary schools? Explain your answer.
3. Briefly describe one example of how peers influenced you or someone you know in a way that you now regard as negative.

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2.4 Socialization Through the Life Course

Learning Objectives

1. List the major changes of the life course.
2. Provide an example of how events during childhood may have a lifelong impact.

As you probably realize by now, most theories and discussions of socialization concern childhood. However, socialization continues throughout the several stages of the life course, most commonly categorized as childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age. Within each of these categories, scholars further recognize subcategories, such as early adolescence and late adolescence, early adulthood and middle adulthood, and so forth. This section sketches some important aspects of the major life course stages.

Childhood

Despite increasing recognition of the entire life course, childhood (including infancy) certainly remains the most important stage of most people's lives for socialization and for the cognitive, emotional, and physiological development that is so crucial during the early years of anyone's life. We have already discussed what can happen if an infant does not receive "normal" socialization from at least one adult, and feral children are a sad reminder that socialization is necessary to produce an entity that not only looks human but really is human in the larger sense of the word.

Beyond this basic importance of childhood, however, lies an ugly truth. In regard to education, health, and other outcomes, many children do not fare well during childhood. Moreover, how well they do fare often depends on their social location—their social class, their race and ethnicity, and their gender. The Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics regularly publishes a report called *America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being* (including a shorter version in some years). This report provides an annual update of how children are faring on more than three dozen measures. The Forum's latest report, published in July 2010, provided some disturbing facts about children's well-being, and it also showed the difference that social location makes for their well-being (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2010).

In one important finding, only about 55% of children aged 3–5 and not in kindergarten had a family member read to them daily. This figure varied by income level. Only 40% of children in families below the poverty level profited in this way, compared to 64% of children whose families' incomes were at least twice as high as the poverty level.

About 55% of children aged 3–5 who are not in kindergarten have a family member read to them every day. Social class affects the likelihood of reading to children: only 40% of children in families below the poverty level are read to daily, compared to 64% of children in families with incomes twice the poverty level or higher.

Neeta Lind – IMG_3646 – CC BY 2.0.

In other important findings, about one-fifth of U.S. children lived in poverty in 2008, a figure that rose to more than 30% of African American and Latino children. As well, slightly more than one-fifth of children were in families that sometimes were "food insecure," meaning they had trouble providing food for at least one family member. More than 40% of households with children in 2007 were characterized by crowded or physically inadequate conditions.

What happens during childhood can have lifelong consequences. Traumatic experiences during childhood—being neglected or abused, witnessing violence, being seriously injured, and so

forth—put youngsters at much greater risk for many negative outcomes. They are more likely to commit serious delinquency during adolescence, and, throughout the life course, they are more likely to experience various psychiatric problems, learning disorders, and substance abuse. They are also less likely to graduate high school or attend college, to get married or avoid divorce if they do marry, and to gain and keep a job (Adams, 2010). The separate stages of the life course are really not that separate after all.

Adolescence

As many readers may remember, adolescence can be a very challenging time. Teenagers are no longer mere children, but they are not yet full adults. They want their independence, but parents and teachers keep telling them what to do. Peer pressure during adolescence can be enormous, and tobacco, alcohol, and other drug use become a serious problem for many teens.

These are all social aspects of adolescence, but adolescence also is a time of great biological change—namely, puberty. Puberty obviously has noticeable physiological consequences and, for many adolescents, at least one very important behavioral consequence—sexual activity. But *early* puberty also seems to have two additional effects: among both boys and girls, it increases the likelihood of delinquency and also the likelihood of becoming a victim of violence (Schreck, Burek, Stewart, & Miller, 2007). These twin consequences are thought to happen for at least two reasons. First, early puberty leads to stress, and stress leads to antisocial behavior (which can also result in violence against the teen

committing the behavior). Second, teens experiencing early puberty (*early maturers*) are more likely to hang out with older teens, who tend to be more delinquent because they are older. Because their influence "rubs off," early maturers get into trouble more often and are again more likely to also become victims of violence.

Romantic relationships, including the desire to be in such a relationship, also matter greatly during adolescence. Wishful thinking, unrequited love, and broken hearts are common. Dating multiple partners is thought to contribute to delinquency and substance abuse, in part because dating occurs at parties and in other unsupervised settings where delinquency and drug use can occur, and in part because the emotional problems sometimes accompanying dating may result in delinquency, drug use, or both (Seffrin, Giordano, Manning, & Longmore, 2009).

As the discussion on childhood suggested, social class, race and ethnicity, and gender continue to affect the experiences of individuals during adolescence. Adolescence can certainly be an interesting stage of the life course, but how we fare during adolescence is often heavily influenced by these three fundamental aspects of our social location.

Adulthood

Adulthood is usually defined as the 18–64 age span. Obviously, 18-year-olds are very different from 64-year-olds, which is why scholars often distinguish young adults from middle-age adults. In a way, many young adults, including most readers of this book, delay entrance into "full" adulthood by going to college after high

school and, for some, then continuing to be a student in graduate or professional school. By the time the latter obtain their advanced degree, many are well into their 30s, and they finally enter the labor force full time perhaps a dozen years after people who graduate high school but do not go on to college. These latter individuals may well marry, have children, or both by the time they are 18 or 19, while those who go to college and especially those who get an advanced degree may wait until their late 20s or early to mid-30s to take these significant steps.

Marriage and parenthood are "turning points" in many young adults' lives that help them to become more settled and to behave better than they might have behaved during adolescence.

One thing is clear from studies of young adulthood: people begin to "settle down" as they leave their teenage years, and their behavior generally improves. At least two reasons account for this improvement. First, as scientists are increasingly recognizing, the teenaged brain is not yet fully mature physiologically. For example, the frontal lobe, the region of the brain that governs reasoning and the ability to consider the consequences of one's actions, is not yet fully formed, leaving teenagers more impulsive. As the brain matures into the mid- and late 20s, impulsiveness declines and behavior improves (Ruder, 2008).

Second, as sociologists recognize, young adulthood is a time when people's "stakes" in society and conformity become stronger. Many get married, some have children, and most obtain their first full-time job. These "turning points," as they are called, instill a sense of responsibility and also increase the costs of misbehavior. If you are married, your spouse might not be very happy to have you go barhopping every weekend night or even more often; if you are employed full time, your employer might not be very happy to have you show up hung over. Marriage and employment as turning points thus help account for the general improvement in behavior that occurs after people reach adulthood (Laub, Sampson, & Sweeten, 2006).

Social class, race and ethnicity, and gender continue to affect how people fare during adulthood. [Chapter 4 "Social Stratification"](#) through [Chapter 7 "Gender Inequality"](#) and sections in some subsequent chapters discuss this important but discouraging fact of our social world.

Old Age

This stage of the life course unofficially begins at age 65. Once again, scholars make finer distinctions—such as "young-old" and "old-old"—because of the many differences between people who are 65 or 66 and those who are 85, 86, or even older. Chapter 9 "Aging and Ageism" is devoted entirely to this period of the life course. Here we will just indicate that old age can be a fulfilling time of life for some people but one filled with anxiety and problems for other people, with social location (social class, race and ethnicity, and gender) once again often making a considerable difference. These problems are compounded by the negative views and even prejudice that many Americans have toward old age and toward people who are old. Because we all want to be old someday, the discussion of aging and the elderly in Chapter 9 "Aging and Ageism" should be of special interest.

Key Takeaways

- The four stages of the life course are childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age. Socialization continues throughout all these stages.
- What happens during childhood may have lifelong consequences. Traumatic experiences and other negative events during childhood may impair psychological well-being in adolescence and beyond and lead to various behavioral problems.
- Social location in society—social class, race and ethnicity, and gender—affects how well people fare

during the stages of the life course.

For Your Review

1.   Think of a time some sort of socialization occurred for you since you started college. Write a brief essay in which you discuss the socialization you experienced.
2.   Compared to when you were in high school, has your behavior generally improved, worsened, or stayed about the same? How do you think your behavior might change 10 years from now?

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2.5 Resocialization and Total Institutions

Some people live in settings where their lives are so controlled that their values and beliefs change drastically. This change is so drastic, in fact, that these people are in effect resocialized. Such resocialization occurs in what Erving Goffman (1961) called total institutions. As their name implies, these institutions have total control over the lives of the people who live in them.

A boot camp is an example of a total institution.

Several types of total institutions exist: mental asylums, Nazi concentration camps, military boot camps, convents, and monasteries. Some scholars would also say that criminal prisons are total institutions, as they exhibit some of the same processes found in the other types. As this list implies, total institutions can be used for good or bad purposes, and so can resocialization.

Whether we are talking about total institutions that are good or bad, they all share certain processes and procedures that make them total institutions. The most important characteristic is that they have total control over the lives of their inmates, patients, or whatever the people who live in them are called. These residents, to use a generic term, have no freedom or autonomy. They are told what to do and when to do it, and punishment for rule infraction can be quite severe. In Nazi concentration camps, punishment was torture or death; in religious cloisters, it may be banishment; in boot camp, it may be a court-martial; in mental asylums, it may be solitary confinement in a straitjacket.

Second, total institutions take away the identity of their residents in an effort to weaken their self-identity and ensure conformity to the institutions' rules. Their residents typically wear uniforms and often have their heads shaved and, depending on the institution, may be known by a number or a new name. These procedures make everyone look more similar to each other than they otherwise would and help weaken the residents' self-identity. Whether these outcomes are good or bad depends again on which total institution we have in mind.

Third, total institutions subject their residents to harsh treatment and, quite often, abuse, although the nature of this abuse, and whether it occurs at all, obviously depends on which total institution we have in mind. Nazis starved concentration camp inmates, tortured them, stripped them naked, conducted hideous experiments on them, and, of course, exterminated millions (Gigliotti & Lang, 2005). Literature on mental asylums is filled with

examples of abuses of the patients living there (Goffman, 1961). Drill sergeants have also been known for harshly treating new recruits: some observers defend this practice as necessary for military discipline and readiness, while others consider it to be unjustified abuse.

Resocialization is often accompanied via a **degradation ceremony**, an encounter in which a total institution's resident is humiliated, often in front of the institution's other residents or officials (Goffman, 1961). A drill sergeant may call a physically unconditioned male recruit a "girl" or "lady" and question his manhood in front of other recruits. In a mental asylum or prison, an inmate may be stripped naked and checked in their private areas for lice and other vermin. Shaving the heads of new military recruits or prison inmates is another example of a degradation ceremony.

Resocialization also occurs in groups that are not in institutional settings. Alcoholics Anonymous is one such group, as it tries to change the alcoholics' value system by having them internalize several principles about how to live one's life. The goal here, of course, is to have the alcoholic stop drinking and to continue to refrain from drinking (Davis & Jansen, 1998). Some religious cults also resocialize their members and continue to spark much controversy in today's society (Cowan & Bromley, 2008).

Key Takeaways

- Resocialization involves far-reaching changes in an individual's values, beliefs, and behavior.
- Total institutions exert total control over the lives of their residents. They typically try to eliminate the individual identity of their residents and often subject them to harsh treatment.

For Your Review

1. Do you know anyone who has spent time in a total institution of any kind? If so, describe how this person's experience there changed the person to the best of your knowledge.

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2.6 Socialization Practices and Improving Society

Learning Objective

1. Explain why new patterns of socialization might help address certain social issues in American society.

This chapter began with a news story about the beating and killing of a gay man and proceeded with the stories of two women who grew up in the South when it was racially segregated. These stories illustrate the power of socialization, which can have both good and bad consequences. Socialization into one's culture is necessary for any society to exist, and socialization is also necessary for any one individual to be "human" in the social sense of the term, as our discussion of feral children indicated. Yet socialization can also result in attitudes and behaviors that most of us would rightly condemn. Socialization created the homophobic mentality that led three teenagers to beat Charlie Howard and throw him into a river, and it also created the racist mentality that Sarah Patton Boyle and Lillian Smith described in their accounts of growing up in the South. Most of us are socialized to become good, cooperative members of society, but some of us are socialized to hold very negative views of certain groups in society.

For many of the social issues confronting the United States today—hate crimes, other crimes, violence against women, sexism, racism, and so forth—it might not be an exaggeration to say that new patterns of socialization are ultimately necessary if our society

wants to be able to address these issues effectively. Parents of young children and adolescents bear a major responsibility for making sure our children do not learn to hate and commit harm to others, but so do our schools, mass media, and religious bodies. No nation is perfect, but nations like Japan have long been more successful than the United States in raising their children to be generous and cooperative. Their examples hold many good lessons for the United States.

Key Takeaway

- New socialization practices might be necessary to address many of the social ills facing the United States and other societies.

For Your Review

1. If you were in charge of our society, what socialization practice would you most try to change to help improve our society? Explain your answer.

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Summary

1. Socialization is important for at least two reasons. First, it is the process by which people learn the culture of their society. Second, it is the process by which they become fully human in terms of behavior, emotions, and cognitive ability. The unfortunate examples of feral children reinforce the importance of socialization in these respects.

2. Charles Horton Cooley and George Herbert Mead both theorized about how the self develops through socialization. Cooley's concept of the looking-glass self recognized that we see ourselves when we interact with other people and through this process develop our self-image. Mead's concept of "taking the role of the other" stressed that children play at various roles and so learn what others expect of them.

3. Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory of personality development stressed the role of unconscious forces. Every individual is born with a selfish id and will achieve a normal personality if the

individual's ego and superego develop properly. If the id, ego, and superego are in the wrong balance, the individual may engage in antisocial or other mentally disordered behavior.

4.   Jean Piaget theorized that people go through several stages of cognitive development, while Lawrence Kohlberg said the same for moral development. Carol Gilligan argued that boys and girls engage in different types of moral reasoning, with the boys' type resting on formal rules and the girls' resting more on social relationships.

5.   Erik Erikson discussed identity development throughout the life span while calling attention to adolescence as a stage in which many individuals experience an identity crisis.

6.   Several agents of socialization exist. The most important one is arguably the family, as parents socialize their children in any number of ways; children end up resembling their parents not only biologically but also sociologically. Schools, peers, the mass media, and, to some extent, religion all also play important roles in socializing not only children but also older individuals.

7.   Socialization continues throughout the several stages of the life course. What happens during childhood can often have lifelong effects. Social class, race and ethnicity, and gender all affect how people fare during the various stages of the life course.

8.   Resocialization involves a dramatic change in an individual's values, beliefs, and behavior. It is often the goal of total institutions, such as military boot camp, convents and monasteries, mental institutions, and

prisons, as it was with the Nazi death camps. Total institutions often exercise arbitrary power and in many ways try to achieve total control over the individual and remove their sense of individual identity.

Using Sociology

Imagine that you are sitting with two friends in a dining hall or cafeteria on your campus. An openly gay student you know walks by on his way out the door and you wave to him. As he exits the room, you hear someone at a table behind you utter an antigay remark. Angered by this slur, you feel that you need to say something, but you also are not ordinarily the type of person to raise a ruckus. Do you decide to do or say something, or do you remain silent? Explain your answer.

CHAPTER 3: SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND SOCIAL INTERACTION

Social Issues in the News

"He's Not a Patient, but Plays One for Class," the headline said. For 12 days in July 2010, a 24-year-old medical student named Matt entered a nursing home in Chelsea, Massachusetts, to play the role of an 85-year-old man bound to a wheelchair and suffering from several serious health problems. He and five other medical students were staying in the facility to get a better idea of how to care for the elderly.

Matt kept a daily journal and wrote regularly of the problems of using his wheelchair, among other topics. One day he wrote, "I never really noticed how hard it is to live like this. I just always thought of old people as grumpy people who are easily upset." He had trouble reaching a TV remote control or reading a notice that was posted too high. When he first showered in his wheelchair, he was unable to turn it to be able to wash the right side of his body. He was so embarrassed to ask for help in going to the bathroom that

he tried to spread out his bathroom trips so that the same nurse would not have to help him twice in a row.

The experience taught Matt a lot about how to care not only for older patients but also for patients in general. The emotional bonds he developed with other patients during his time in the nursing home particularly made him realize how he should interact with patients. As Matt wrote in his journal, "There is a face and story behind every patient. The patient should not be viewed by the conditions that ail them, but by the person beneath the disease." (Wu, 2010)

The status of an 85-year-old man bound to a wheelchair is very different from that of a medical student. So are our views of people in each status and our expectations of their behavior. Matt quickly learned what life in a wheelchair is like and realized that his stereotypical views of older people could easily complicate his medical interactions with them. The setting in which he played the role of a very old man was an institutional setting, but this setting was also one tiny component of the vast social institution that sociologists call medicine.

In all these ways, Matt's brief experience in the nursing home illuminates important aspects of social structure and social interaction in today's society. The statuses we occupy and the roles we play in these statuses shape our lives in fundamental ways and affect our daily interactions with other people. The many social institutions that are so important in modern society affect our lives profoundly from the moment we are born. This chapter examines major aspects of social structure and social interaction. As with Chapter 1 "Culture" and Chapter 2 "Socialization", this chapter should help you further understand yourself as a social being and not just as an individual. This in turn means it should further help you understand how and why you came to be the person you are.

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3.1 Social Structure: The Building Blocks of Social Life

Social life is composed of many levels of building blocks, from the very micro to the very macro. These building blocks combine to form the *social structure*. **Social structure** refers to the social patterns through which a society is organized and can be horizontal or vertical. To recall, *horizontal social structure* refers to the social relationships and the social and physical characteristics of communities to which individuals belong, while *vertical social structure*, more commonly called **social inequality**, refers to ways in which a society or group ranks people in a hierarchy. This chapter's discussion of social structure focuses primarily on horizontal social structure, while [Chapter 4 "Social Stratification"](#) through [Chapter 9 "Aging and Ageism"](#), as well as much material in other chapters, examine dimensions of social inequality. The (horizontal) social structure comprises several components, to which we now turn, starting with the most micro and ending with the most macro. Our

discussion of social interaction in the second half of this chapter incorporates several of these components.

Statuses

Status has many meanings in the dictionary and also within sociology, but for now we will define it as the position that someone occupies in society. This position is often a job title, but many other types of positions exist: student, parent, sibling, relative, friend, and so forth. It should be clear that *status* as used in this way conveys nothing about the prestige of the position, to use a common synonym for status. A physician's job is a status with much prestige, but a shoeshiner's job is a status with no prestige.

Any one individual often occupies several different statuses at the same time, and someone can simultaneously be a banker, Girl Scout troop leader, mother, school board member, volunteer at a homeless shelter, and spouse. This someone would be very busy! We call all the positions an individual occupies that person's **status set** (see [Figure 5.1 "Example of a Status Set"](#)).

Figure 5.1 Example of a Status Set

Sociologists usually speak of three types of statuses. The first type is **ascribed status**, which is the status that someone is born with and has no control over. There are relatively few ascribed statuses; the most common ones are our biological sex, race, parents' social class and religious affiliation, and biological relationships (child, grandchild, sibling, and so forth).

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Status refers to the position an individual occupies. Used in this way, a person's status is not related to the prestige of that status. The jobs of physician and shoeshiner are both statuses, even though one of these jobs is much more prestigious than the other job.

The second kind of status is called **achieved status**, which, as the name implies, is a status you achieve, at some point after birth, sometimes through your own efforts and sometimes because good or bad luck befalls you. The status of student is an achieved status, as is the status of restaurant server or romantic partner, to cite just two of the many achieved statuses that exist.

Two things about achieved statuses should be kept in mind. First, our ascribed statuses, and in particular our sex, race and ethnicity, and social class, often affect our ability to acquire and maintain many achieved statuses (such as college graduate). Second, achieved statuses can be viewed positively or negatively. Our society usually views achieved statuses such as physician, professor, or college

student positively, but it certainly views achieved statuses such as burglar, prostitute, and pimp negatively.

The third type of status is called a **master status**. This is a status that is so important that it overrides other statuses you may hold. In terms of people's reactions, master statuses can be either positive or negative for an individual depending on the particular master status they hold. Barack Obama now holds the positive master status of president of the United States: his status as president overrides all the other statuses he holds (husband, father, and so forth), and millions of Americans respect him, whether or not they voted for him or now favor his policies, because of this status. Many other positive master statuses exist in the political and entertainment worlds and in other spheres of life.

Some master statuses have negative consequences. To recall the medical student and nursing home news story that began this chapter, a physical disability often becomes such a master status. If you are bound to a wheelchair, for example, this fact becomes more important than the other statuses you have and may prompt people to perceive and interact with you negatively. In particular, they perceive you more in terms of your master status (someone bound to a wheelchair) than as the "person beneath" the master status, to cite Matt's words. For similar reasons, gender, race, and sexual orientation may also be considered master statuses, as these statuses often subject women, people of color, and gays and lesbians, respectively, to discrimination and other problems, no matter what other statuses they may have.

Whatever status we occupy, certain objects signify any particular status. These objects are called **status symbols.** In popular terms, *status symbol* usually means something like a Rolls-Royce or BMW that shows off someone's wealth or success, and many status symbols of this type exist. But sociologists use the term more generally than that. For example, the wheelchair that Matt the medical student rode for 12 days was a status symbol that signified his master status of someone with a (feigned) disability. If someone

is pushing a stroller, the stroller is a status symbol that signifies that the person pushing it is a parent or caretaker of a young child.

Roles

Whatever its type, every status is accompanied by a **role**, which is the behavior expected of someone—and in fact *everyone*—with a certain status. You and most other people reading this book are students. Despite all the other differences among you, you have at least this one status in common. As such, there is a role expected of you as a student (at least by your professors); this role includes coming to class regularly, doing all the reading assigned from this textbook, and studying the best you can for exams. Roles for given statuses existed long before we were born, and they will continue long after we are no longer alive. A major dimension of socialization is learning the roles our society has and then behaving in the way a particular role demands.

Roles help us interact because we are familiar with the behavior associated with roles. Because shoppers and cashiers know what to expect of each other, their social interaction is possible.

David Tan – Cashier – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Because roles are the behavior expected of people in various statuses, they help us interact because we are familiar with the roles in the first place, a point to which the second half of this chapter returns. Suppose you are shopping in a department store. Your status is a shopper, and the role expected of you as a shopper—and of all shoppers—involves looking quietly at various items in the store, taking the ones you want to purchase to a checkout line, and paying for them. The person who takes your money is occupying another status in the store that we often call a cashier. The role expected of that cashier—and of all cashiers not only in that store but in every other store—is to accept your payment in a businesslike way and put your items in a bag. Because shoppers and cashiers all have these mutual expectations, their social interaction is possible.

Social Networks

Modern life seems increasingly characterized by social networks. A **social network** is the totality of relationships that link us to other people and groups and through them to still other people and groups. As Facebook and other social media show so clearly, social networks can be incredibly extensive. Social networks can be so large, of course, that an individual in a network may know little or nothing of another individual in the network (e.g., a friend of a friend of a friend of a friend). But these "friends of friends" can sometimes be an important source of practical advice and other kinds of help. They can "open doors" in the job market, they can introduce you to a potential romantic partner, they can pass through some tickets to the next big basketball game.

Groups and Organizations

Groups and organizations are the next component of social structure.

A **social group** (hereafter just *group*) consists of two or more people who regularly interact on the basis of mutual expectations and who share a common identity. To paraphrase John Donne, the 17th-century English poet, no one is an island; almost all people are members of many groups, including families, groups of friends, and groups of coworkers in a workplace. Sociology is sometimes called

the study of group life, and it is difficult to imagine a modern society without many types of groups and a small, traditional society without at least some groups.

In terms of size, emotional bonding, and other characteristics, many types of groups exist. But one of the most important types is the **formal organization** (also just *organization*), which is a large group that follows explicit rules and procedures to achieve specific goals and tasks. For better and for worse, organizations are an essential feature of modern societies. Our banks, our hospitals, our schools, and so many other examples are all organizations, even if they differ from one another in many respects. In terms of their goals and other characteristics, several types of organizations exist.

Social Institutions

Yet another component of social structure is the **social institution**, or patterns of beliefs and behavior that help a society meet its basic needs. Modern society is filled with many social institutions that all help society meet its needs and achieve other goals and thus have a profound impact not only on the society as a whole but also on virtually every individual in a society. Examples of social institutions include the family, the economy, the polity (government), education, religion, and medicine.

As those chapters will show, these social institutions all help the United States meet its basic needs, but they also have failings that prevent the United States from meeting all its needs. A particular problem is social inequality, to recall the vertical dimension of social structure, as our social institutions often fail many people because

of their social class, race, ethnicity, gender, or all four. These chapters will also indicate that American society could better fulfill its needs if it followed certain practices and policies of other democracies that often help their societies "work" better than our own.

Societies

The largest component of social structure is, of course, **society** itself. Society is a group of people who live within a defined territory and who share a culture. Societies certainly differ in many ways; some are larger in population and some are smaller, some are modern and some are less modern. Since the origins of sociology during the 19th century, sociologists have tried to understand how and why modern, industrial society developed. Part of this understanding involves determining the differences between industrial societies and traditional ones.

One of the key differences between traditional and industrial societies is the emphasis placed on the community versus the emphasis placed on the individual. In traditional societies, community feeling and group commitment are usually the cornerstones of social life. In contrast, industrial society is more individualistic and impersonal. Whereas the people in traditional societies have close daily ties, those in industrial societies have many relationships in which one person barely knows the other person. Commitment to the group and community become less important in industrial societies, and individualism becomes more important.

Sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (1887/1963) long ago characterized these key characteristics of traditional and industrial societies with the German words *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. **Gemeinschaft** means human community, and Tönnies said that a sense of community characterizes traditional societies, where family, kin, and community ties are quite strong. As societies grew and industrialized and as people moved to cities, Tönnies said, social ties weakened and became more impersonal. Tönnies called this situation **Gesellschaft** and found it dismaying.

Key Takeaways

- The major components of social structure are statuses, roles, social networks, groups and organizations, social institutions, and society.
- Specific types of statuses include the ascribed status, achieved status, and master status. Depending on the type of master status, an individual may be viewed positively or negatively because of a master status.

For Your Review

1. Take a moment and list every status that you now occupy. Next to each status, indicate whether it is an ascribed status, achieved status, or master status.
2. Take a moment and list every group to which you

belong. Write a brief essay in which you comment on which of the groups are more meaningful to you and which are less meaningful to you.

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3.2 The Development of Modern Society

Learning Objectives

1.   List the major types of societies that have been distinguished according to their economy and technology.
2.   Explain why social development produced greater gender and wealth inequality.

To help understand how modern society developed, sociologists find it useful to distinguish societies according to their type of economy and technology. One of the most useful schemes distinguishes the following types of societies: *hunting-and-gathering*, *horticultural*, *pastoral*, *agricultural*, and *industrial* (Nolan & Lenski, 2009). Some scholars add a final type, *postindustrial*, to the end of this list. We now outline the major features of each type in turn. summarizes these features.

Table 5.1 Summary of Societal Development

Type of society	Key characteristics
Hunting-and-gathering	These are small, simple societies in which people hunt and gather food. Because all people in these societies have few possessions, the societies are fairly egalitarian, and the degree of inequality is very low.
Horticultural and pastoral	Horticultural and pastoral societies are larger than hunting-and-gathering societies. Horticultural societies grow crops with simple tools, while pastoral societies raise livestock. Both types of societies are wealthier than hunting-and-gathering societies, and they also have more inequality and greater conflict than hunting-and-gathering societies.
Agricultural	These societies grow great numbers of crops, thanks to the use of plows, oxen, and other devices. Compared to horticultural and pastoral societies, they are wealthier and have a higher degree of conflict and of inequality.
Industrial	Industrial societies feature factories and machines. They are wealthier than agricultural societies and have a greater sense of individualism and a somewhat lower degree of inequality that still remains substantial.
Postindustrial	These societies feature information technology and service jobs. Higher education is especially important in these societies for economic success.

Hunting-and-Gathering

Societies

Beginning about 250,000 years ago, **hunting-and-gathering societies** are the oldest ones we know of; few of them remain today, partly because modern societies have encroached on their existence. As the name *hunting-and-gathering* implies, people in these societies both hunt for food and gather plants and other vegetation. They have few possessions other than some simple hunting-and-gathering equipment. To ensure their mutual survival, everyone is expected to help find food and also to share the food they find. To seek their food, hunting-and-gathering peoples often move from place to place. Because they are nomadic, their societies tend to be quite small, often consisting of only a few dozen people.

Beyond this simple summary of the type of life these societies lead, anthropologists have also charted the nature of social relationships in them. One of their most important findings is that hunting-and-gathering societies are fairly egalitarian. Although men do most of the hunting and women most of the gathering, perhaps reflecting the biological differences between the sexes discussed earlier, women and men in these societies are roughly equal. Because hunting-and-gathering societies have few possessions, their members are also fairly equal in terms of wealth and power, as virtually no wealth exists.

Horticultural and Pastoral

Societies

Horticultural and pastoral societies both developed about 10,000–12,000 years ago. In **horticultural societies**, people use hoes and other simple hand tools to raise crops. In **pastoral societies**, people raise and herd sheep, goats, camels, and other domesticated animals and use them as their major source of food and also, depending on the animal, as a means of transportation. Some societies are either primarily horticultural or pastoral, while other societies combine both forms. Pastoral societies tend to be at least somewhat nomadic, as they often have to move to find better grazing land for their animals. Horticultural societies, on the other hand, tend to be less nomadic, as they are able to keep growing their crops in the same location for some time. Both types of societies often manage to produce a surplus of food from vegetable or animal sources, respectively, and this surplus allows them to trade their extra food with other societies. It also allows them to have a larger population size than hunting-and-gathering societies that often reaches several hundred members.

Horticultural societies often produce an excess of food that allows them to trade with other societies and also to have more members than hunting-and-gathering societies.

Accompanying the greater complexity and wealth of horticultural and pastoral societies is greater inequality in terms of gender and wealth than is found in hunting-and-gathering societies. In pastoral societies, wealth stems from the number of animals a family owns, and families with more animals are wealthier and more powerful than families with fewer animals. In horticultural societies, wealth stems from the amount of land a family owns, and families with more land are wealthier and more powerful.

One other side effect of the greater wealth of horticultural and pastoral societies is greater conflict. As just mentioned, sharing of food is a key norm in hunting-and-gathering societies. In horticultural and pastoral societies, however, wealth (and more specifically, the differences in wealth) leads to disputes and even fighting over land and animals. Whereas hunting-and-gathering peoples tend to be very peaceful, horticultural and pastoral peoples tend to be more aggressive.

Agricultural Societies

Agricultural societies developed some 5,000 years ago in the Middle East, thanks to the invention of the plow. When pulled by oxen and other large animals, the plow allowed for much more cultivation of crops than the simple tools of horticultural societies permitted. The wheel was also invented about the same time, and written language and numbers began to be used. The development of agricultural societies thus marked a watershed in the

development of human society. Ancient Egypt, China, Greece, and Rome were all agricultural societies, and India and many other large nations today remain primarily agricultural.

We have already seen that the greater food production of horticultural and pastoral societies led them to become larger than hunting-and-gathering societies and to have more trade and greater inequality and conflict. Agricultural societies continue all these trends. First, because they produce so much more food than horticultural and pastoral societies, they often become quite large, with their numbers sometimes reaching into the millions. Second, their huge food surpluses lead to extensive trade, both within the society itself and with other societies. Third, the surpluses and trade both lead to degrees of wealth unknown in the earlier types of societies and thus to unprecedented inequality, exemplified in the appearance for the first time of peasants, people who work on the land of rich landowners. Finally, agricultural societies' greater size and inequality also produce more conflict. Some of this conflict is internal, as rich landowners struggle with each other for even greater wealth and power, and peasants sometimes engage in revolts. Other conflict is external, as the governments of these societies seek other markets for trade and greater wealth.

If gender inequality becomes somewhat greater in horticultural and pastoral societies than in hunting-and-gathering ones, it becomes very pronounced in agricultural societies. An important reason for this is the hard, physically taxing work in the fields, much of it using large plow animals, that characterizes these societies. Then, too, women are often pregnant in these societies, because large families provide more bodies to work in the fields and thus more income. Because men do more of the physical labor in agricultural societies—labor on which these societies depend—they have acquired greater power over women (Brettell & Sargent, 2009). In the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample, agricultural societies are much more likely than hunting-and-gathering ones to believe men should dominate women (see Figure 5.2 "Type of Society and Presence of Cultural Belief That Men Should Dominate Women").

Figure 5.2 Type of Society and Presence of Cultural Belief That Men Should Dominate Women
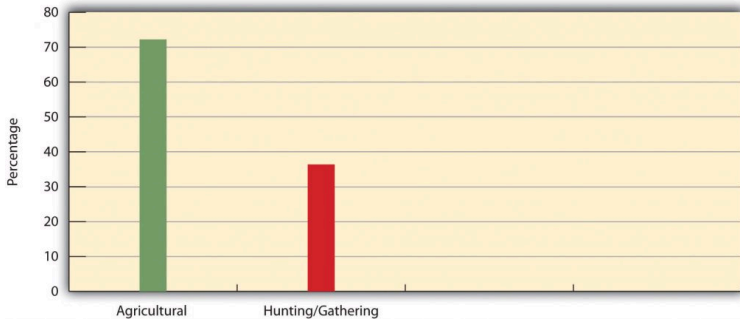
Source: Data from Standard Cross-Cultural Sample.

Industrial Societies

Industrial societies emerged in the 1700s as the development of machines and then factories replaced the plow and other agricultural equipment as the primary mode of production. The first machines were steam- and water-powered, but eventually, of course, electricity became the main source of power. The growth of industrial societies marked such a great transformation in many of the world's societies that we now call the period from about 1750 to the late 1800s the Industrial Revolution. This revolution has had

enormous consequences in almost every aspect of society, some for the better and some for the worse.

On the positive side, industrialization brought about technological advances that improved people's health and expanded their life spans. As noted earlier, there is also a greater emphasis in industrial societies on individualism, and people in these societies typically enjoy greater political freedom than those in older societies. Compared to agricultural societies, industrial societies also have lowered economic and gender inequality. In industrial societies, people do have a greater chance to pull themselves up by their bootstraps than was true in earlier societies, and rags-to-riches stories continue to illustrate the opportunity available under industrialization. That said, we will see in later chapters that economic and gender inequality remains substantial in many industrial societies.

On the negative side, industrialization meant the rise and growth of large cities and concentrated poverty and degrading conditions in these cities, as the novels of Charles Dickens poignantly remind us. This urbanization changed the character of social life by creating a more impersonal and less traditional *Gesellschaft* society. It also led to riots and other urban violence that, among other things, helped fuel the rise of the modern police force and forced factory owners to improve workplace conditions. Today industrial societies consume most of the world's resources, pollute its environment to an unprecedented degree, and have compiled nuclear arsenals that could undo thousands of years of human society in an instant.

Postindustrial Societies

We are increasingly living in what has been called the *information technology age* (or just *information age*), as wireless technology vies with machines and factories as the basis for our economy. Compared to industrial economies, we now have many more service jobs, ranging from housecleaning to secretarial work to repairing computers. Societies in which this transition is happening are moving from an industrial to a postindustrial phase of development. In **postindustrial societies**, then, information technology and service jobs have replaced machines and manufacturing jobs as the primary dimension of the economy (Bell, 1999). If the car was the sign of the economic and social times back in the 1920s, then the smartphone or netbook/laptop is the sign of the economic and social future in the early years of the 21st century. If the factory was the dominant workplace at the beginning of the 20th century, with workers standing at their positions by conveyor belts, then cell phone, computer, and software companies are dominant industries at the beginning of the 21st century, with workers, almost all of them much better educated than their earlier factory counterparts, huddled over their wireless technology at home, at work, or on the road. In short, the Industrial Revolution has been replaced by the Information Revolution, and we now have what has been called an *information society* (Hassan, 2008).

As part of postindustrialization in the United States, many manufacturing companies have moved their operations from U.S. cities to overseas sites. Since the 1980s, this process has raised unemployment in cities, many of whose residents lack the college education and other training needed in the information sector. Partly for this reason, some scholars fear that the information age will aggravate the disparities we already have between the "haves" and "have-nots" of society, as people lacking a college education will have even more trouble finding gainful employment than they do

now (W. J. Wilson, 2009). In the international arena, postindustrial societies may also have a leg up over industrial or, especially, agricultural societies as the world moves ever more into the information age.

Key Takeaways

- The major types of societies historically have been hunting-and-gathering, horticultural, pastoral, agricultural, industrial, and postindustrial.
- As societies developed and grew larger, they became more unequal in terms of gender and wealth and also more competitive and even warlike with other societies.
- Postindustrial society emphasizes information technology but also increasingly makes it difficult for individuals without college educations to find gainful employment.

For Your Review

1. Explain why societies became more unequal in terms of gender and wealth as they developed and became larger.
2. Explain why societies became more individualistic as they developed and became larger.
3. Describe the benefits and disadvantages of

industrial societies as compared to earlier societies.

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3.3 Social Interaction in Everyday Life

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Learning Objectives

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1. Describe what is meant by dramaturgy and by impression management.
2. Provide one example of role conflict or role strain.
3. List one or two gender differences in nonverbal communication.

A fundamental feature of social life is **social interaction**, or the ways in which people act with other people and react to how other people are acting. To recall our earlier paraphrase of John Donne, no one is an island. This means that all individuals, except those who choose to live truly alone, interact with other individuals virtually every day and often many times in any one day. For social order, a prerequisite for any society, to be possible, effective social interaction must be possible. Partly for this reason, sociologists interested in microsociology have long tried to understand social life by analyzing how and why people interact they way they do. This section draws on their work to examine various social influences on individual behavior. As you read this section, you will probably be reading many things relevant to your own social interaction.

Social interaction is a fundamental feature of social life. For social order to be possible, effective social interaction must also be possible.

Martina – Friends – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Chapter 2 "Socialization" emphasized that socialization results from our social interaction. The reverse is also true: we learn how to interact from our socialization. We have seen many examples of this process in earlier chapters. Among other things, we learn from our socialization how far apart to stand when talking to someone else, we learn to enjoy kissing, we learn how to stand and behave in an elevator, and we learn how to behave when we are drunk. Perhaps most important for the present discussion, we especially learn our society's roles, outlined earlier as a component of social structure. The importance of roles for social interaction merits further discussion here.

Roles and Social Interaction

Our earlier discussion of roles defined them as the behaviors expected of people in a certain status. Regardless of our individual differences, if we are in a certain status, we are all expected to behave in a way appropriate to that status. Roles thus help make social interaction possible.

As our example of shoppers and cashiers was meant to suggest, social interaction based on roles is usually very automatic, and we often perform our roles without thinking about them. This, in fact, is why social interaction is indeed possible: if we always had to think about our roles before we performed them, social interaction would be slow, tedious, and fraught with error. (Analogously, if actors in a play always had to read the script before performing their lines, as an understudy sometimes does, the play would be slow and stilted.) It is when people violate their roles that the importance of roles is thrown into sharp relief. Suppose you were shopping in a department store, and while you were in the checkout line the cashier asked you how your sex life has been! Now, you might expect such an intimate question from a very close friend, because discussions of intimate matters are part of the roles close friends play, but you would definitely *not* expect it from a cashier you do not know.

As this example suggests, effective social interaction rests on shared **background assumptions**, or our understanding of the roles expected of people in a given encounter, that are easily violated if one has the nerve to do so. If they are violated, social order might well break down, as you would quickly find if you dared to ask your cashier how her or his sex life has been, or if two students sitting in class violated their student role by kissing each other passionately. Sociologist Harold Garfinkel (1967) argued that unexpected events like these underscore how fragile social order is and remind us that people are constantly constructing the social reality of the

situations in which they find themselves. To illustrate his point, he had his students perform a series of experiments, including acting like a stranger in their parents' home. Not surprisingly, their parents quickly became flustered and wondered what college was doing to their daughters and sons!

These examples indicate that social reality is to a large extent socially constructed. It is what we make of it, and individuals who interact help construct the reality of the situation in which they interact. Sociologists refer to this process as the social construction of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1963). Although we usually come into a situation with shared understandings of what is about to happen, as the interaction proceeds the actors continue to define the situation and thus to construct its reality. This view lies at the heart of the symbolic interactionist perspective and helps us understand how and why roles (or to be more precise, our understanding of what behavior is expected of someone in a certain status) make social interaction possible.

Roles and Personalities

Roles help us interact and help make social order possible, but they may even shape our personalities. The idea here is that if we assume a new role, the expectations of that role can change how we interact with others and even the way we think about ourselves. In short, roles can *change* our personalities.

Roles can shape personalities. When individuals become police officers, the nature of their job can prompt them to act and think in a more authoritarian manner.

A telling example of this effect comes from the story of a criminal justice professor from Florida named George Kirkham. In his classes, Kirkham would be critical of the harshness with which police treated suspects and other citizens. One day, some police officers in one of his classes said Kirkham could not begin to understand what it was like being a police officer, and they challenged him to become one. He took up the challenge by gaining admission to a police academy and going through the regular training program for all recruits. Kirkham (1984) later recounted what happened on his first few days on the job. In one episode, he and his veteran partner went into a bar where an intoxicated patron had been causing trouble. Kirkham politely asked the patron to go with him outside. Evidently surprised by this new police officer's politeness, the man instead swung at Kirkham and landed a blow. Kirkham could not believe this happened and was forced to subdue his assailant. In another episode, Kirkham and his partner were checking out the driver of a double-parked car. An ugly crowd soon gathered and began making threats. Alarmed, Kirkham opened up his car's trunk and pulled out a shotgun to keep the crowd away. In recounting this

episode, Kirkham wrote that as a professor he quickly would have condemned the police officer he had now become. In a few short days, he had turned from a polite, kind professor into a gruff, angry police officer. His role had changed and, along with it, his personality.

Role Problems

Roles help our interactions run smoothly and automatically and, for better or worse, shape our personalities. But roles can also cause various kinds of problems. One such problem is **role conflict**, which occurs when the roles of our many statuses conflict with each other. For example, say you are a student and also a parent. Your 3-year-old child gets sick. You now have a conflict between your role as a parent and your role as a student. To perform your role as a parent, you should stay home with your sick child. To perform your role as a student, you should go to your classes and take the big exam that had been scheduled weeks ago. What do you do?

Figure 5.3 Example of a Role Conflict
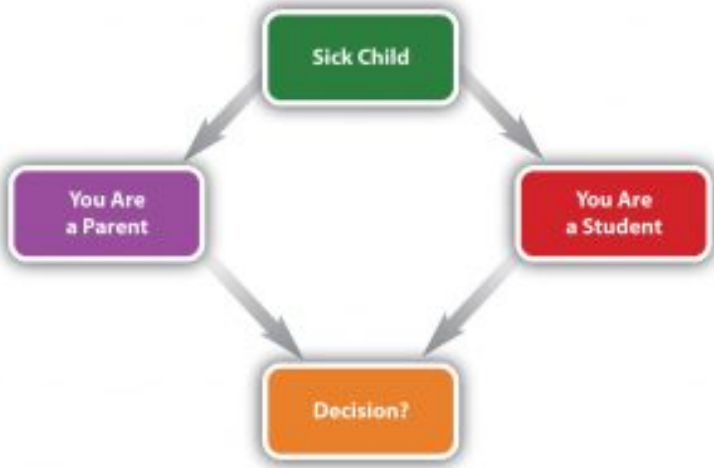
Parents can often experience role conflict stemming from the fact that they have both parental responsibilities and work responsibilities.

One thing is clear: you cannot perform both roles at the same time. To resolve role conflict, we ordinarily have to choose between one role and the other, which is often a difficult choice to make. In this example, if you take care of your child, you miss your classes and exam; if you go to your classes, you have to leave your child at home alone, an unacceptable and illegal option. Another way to

resolve role conflict is to find some alternative that would meet the needs of your conflicting roles. In our sick child example, you might be able to find someone to watch your child until you can get back from classes. It is certainly desirable to find such alternatives, but, unfortunately, they are not always forthcoming. If role conflict becomes too frequent and severe, a final option is to leave one of your statuses altogether. In our example, if you find it too difficult to juggle your roles as parent and student, you could stop being a parent—hardly likely!—or, more likely, take time off from school until your child is older. Most of us in these circumstances would try our best to avoid having to do this.

Another role-related problem is called **role strain**. Here you have one status, and a role associated with it, that is causing problems because of all the demands coming to you from people in other statuses with which your own status is involved. Suppose you were a high school principal. In your one role as a principal, you come into contact with people in several different statuses: teachers, students, custodial and support staff, the superintendent, school board members, the community as a whole, and the news media. These statuses may make competing demands on you in your one role as a principal. If your high school has a dress code, for example, the students may want you to abolish it, the teachers and superintendent may want you to keep it, and maybe the school board would agree with the students. As you try to please all these competing factions, you certainly might experience some role strain!

A third type of role problem occurs when we occupy a status whose role demands a certain type of personality that differs from the one we actually have. Can you imagine a police officer who was afraid of guns? An athlete who was not competitive? A flight attendant who did not like helping people or was afraid of flying? Although most people avoid this type of role problem by not taking on a role to which their personality is ill suited, such problems occur nonetheless. For example, some people who dislike children and do not have the patience to be good parents end up being

parents anyway. In another example, your author once knew a new professor who was woefully nervous lecturing in front of students. You might wonder why he became a professor in the first place, but he probably just loved the subject matter so much that he thought he would overcome his nervousness. He did not.

Dramaturgy and Impression Management

From a sociological standpoint, much of our social interaction can be understood by likening it to a performance in a play. As with so many things, Shakespeare said it best when he wrote,

> All the world's a stage,
> And all the men and women merely players.
> They have their exits and their entrances;
> And one man in his time plays many parts. (As You Like It, Act II, Scene 7)

From this perspective, each individual has many parts or roles to play in society, and many of these roles specify how we should interact in any given situation. These roles exist before we are born, and they continue long after we die. The culture of society is thus similar to the script of a play. Just as actors in a play learn what lines to say, where to stand on the stage, how to position their bodies, and so many other things, so do we learn as members of society the roles that specify how we should interact.

This fundamental metaphor was developed and popularized by sociologist Erving Goffman (1959) in what he called a **dramaturgical approach**. By this he meant that we can understand social interaction as if it were a theatrical performance. People who interact are actors on a stage, the things they say and do are equivalent to the parts actors play, and any people who observe their interaction are equivalent to the audience at a play. As sociologists Jonathan H. Turner and Jan E. Stets (2006, p. 26) summarize this approach, "Individuals are, in essence, dramatic actors on a stage playing parts dictated by culture, and, like all theater, they are given some dramatic license in how they play roles, as long as they do not deviate too far from the emotional script provided by culture."

Erving Goffman's dramaturgical approach likened social interaction to acting in a theatrical performance.

Manolis Skantzakis – "with regar to Mr Alexandros" – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Beyond these aspects of his theatrical analogy, Goffman also stressed that the *presentation of self* guides social interaction just as it guides behavior in a play. Actors in a play, he wrote, aim to act properly, which at a minimum means they need to say their lines correctly and in other ways carry out their parts as they were written. They try to convey the impression of their character the

playwright had in mind when the play was written and the director has in mind when the play is presented.

Such **impression management**, Goffman wrote, also guides social interaction in everyday life. When people interact, they routinely try to convey a positive impression of themselves to the people with whom they interact. Our behavior in a job interview differs dramatically (pun intended) from our behavior at a party. The key dimension of social interaction, then, involves trying to manage the impressions we convey to the people with whom we interact. We usually do our best, consciously or unconsciously, to manage the impressions we convey to others and so to evoke from them reactions that will please us.

Goffman wrote about other aspects of social interaction that affect our efforts to manage these impressions. Again using his dramaturgical metaphor, he said that some interaction occurs in the "frontstage," or front region, while other interaction occurs in the "backstage," or back region (Goffman, 1959, p. 128). In a play, of course, the frontstage is what the audience sees and is obviously the location in which the actors are performing their lines. Backstage, they can do whatever they want, and the audience will have no idea of what they are doing (as long as they are quiet). Much of our everyday interaction is on the frontstage, where an audience can see everything we do and hear everything we say. But we also spend a lot of time on the backstage, by ourselves, when we can do and say things in private (such as singing in the shower) that we would not dare do or say in public.

Social interaction involves impression management. How a student behaves with a professor is probably very different from how the same student behaves when out on the town with friends.

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How we dress is also a form of impression management. You are the same person regardless of what clothes you wear, but if you dress for a job interview as you would dress for a party (to use our earlier example), the person interviewing you would get an impression you might not want to convey. If you showed up for a medical visit and your physician were wearing a bathing suit, wouldn't you feel just a bit uneasy?

Sociology Making a Difference

Impression Management and Job Interviewing

Erving Goffman's (1959) concept of impression management, discussed in the text, is one of the key sociological insights for the understanding of social interaction. One reason the concept has been so useful, and one reason that it interests many college students, is that impression management has so much practical relevance. Anyone who has gone out on a first date or had a job interview can immediately recognize that impression management is something we all do and can immediately realize the importance of *effective* impression management.

Impression management is important in many settings and situations but perhaps especially important in the job interview. Many scholarly publications and job-hunting manuals emphasize the importance of proper impression management during a job interview, especially an interview for a full-time, well-paying job, as opposed to a fast-food job or something similar (Van Iddekinge, McFarland, & Raymark, 2007). The strategies they discuss include

impression management involving dress, body language, and other dimensions of social interaction. Interviewing tips they recommend include (a) dressing professionally, (b) showing up early for the interview, (c) shaking hands firmly while smiling and looking the interviewer in the eye, (d) sitting with a comfortable but erect posture without crossing one's arms, (e) maintaining eye contact with the interviewer throughout the interview, and (f) shaking hands at the end of the interview and saying thank you.

These strategies and tips are probably more familiar to college students from wealthy backgrounds than to working-class people who have not gone to college. Sociologists emphasize the importance of *cultural capital*, or attitudes, skills, and knowledge that enable people to achieve a higher social status (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). People who grow up in poverty or near-poverty, including disproportionate numbers of people of color, are less likely than those who grow up in much wealthier circumstances to possess cultural capital. The attitudes, skills, and knowledge that many college students have and take for granted, including how to conduct oneself during a job interview, are much less familiar to individuals who grow up without cultural capital. To use some sociological language, they know much less about how to manage their impressions during a job interview should they get one and thus are less likely to be hired after an interview.

For this reason, many public and private agencies in poor and working-class communities around the country regularly hold workshops on job interviewing skills. These workshops emphasize strategies similar to those outlined earlier. One of the many organizations that offer these workshops and provides related services is the Los Angeles

Urban League (http://www.laul.org/milken-family-literacy-and-youth-training-center) through its Milken Family Literacy and Youth Training Center. According to its Web site, this center "provides a comprehensive system of services of programs and services to assist youth and adults in developing the skills to compete for and obtain meaningful employment." Much of what the youth and adults who attend its workshops and other programs are learning is impression-management skills that help them find employment. Goffman's concept is helping make a difference.

Individuals engage in impression management, but so do groups and organizations. Consider the medical visit just mentioned. A physician's office usually "looks" a certain way. It is clean, it has carpeting, it has attractive furniture, and it has magazines such as *People*, *Time*, and *Sports Illustrated*. Such an office assures patients by conveying the impression that the physician and staff are competent professionals. Imagine that you entered a physician's office and saw torn carpeting, some broken furniture, and magazines such as *Maxim* and *Playboy*. What would be your instant reaction? How soon would you turn around and leave the office? As this fanciful example illustrates, impression management is critically important for groups and organizations as well as for individuals.

Impression management occurs with physical settings. These two eating establishments convey very different impressions of the quality of food and service that diners can expect.

Life is filled with impression management. Compare the decor of your favorite fast-food restaurant with that of a very expensive restaurant with which you might be familiar. Compare the appearance, dress, and demeanor of the servers and other personnel in the two establishments. The expensive restaurant is trying to convey an image that the food will be wonderful and that the time you spend there will be memorable and well worth the money. The fast-food restaurant is trying to convey just the opposite impression. In fact, if it looked too fancy, you would probably think it was too expensive.

Some people go to great efforts to manage the impressions they convey. You have probably done so in a job interview or on a date. In New York City, the capital of book publishing, editors of large publishing companies and "superagents" for authors are very conscious of the impressions they convey, because much of the publishing industry depends on gossip, impressions, and the development of rapport. Editors and agents often dine together in one of a few very expensive "power" restaurants, where their

presence is certain to be noted. Publishers or senior editors who dine at these restaurants will eat only with celebrity authors, other senior editors or publishers, or important agents. Such agents rarely dine with junior editors, who are only "allowed" to eat with junior agents. To eat with someone "beneath" your standing would convey the wrong impression (Arnold, 1998).

Emotions and Social Interaction

When we interact with others, certain **emotions**—feelings that begin with a stimulus and that often involve psychological changes and a desire to engage in specific actions—often come into play. To understand social interaction, it is helpful to understand how these emotions emerge and how they affect and are affected by social interaction.

Not surprisingly, evolutionary biologists and sociologists differ in their views on the origins of emotions. Many evolutionary biologists think that human emotions exist today because they conferred an evolutionary advantage when human civilization began eons ago (Plutchik, 2001). In this way of thinking, an emotion such as fear would help prehistoric humans (as well as other primates and organisms) survive by enabling them to recognize and avoid dangerous situations. Humans who could feel and act on fear were thus more likely to survive than those who could not. In this way, fear became a biological instinct and part of our genetic heritage.

The fact that emotions such as anger, fear, hate, joy, love, and sadness are found across the world and in every culture suggests that emotions are indeed part of our biological makeup as humans.

In contrast to the evolutionary approach, a sociological approach emphasizes that emotions are *socially constructed* (Turner & Stets, 2006). To recall our earlier discussion of the social construction of reality, this means that people learn from their culture and from their social interactions which emotions are appropriate to display in which situations. In particular, statuses and the roles associated with them involve expectations of specific emotions that are appropriate or inappropriate for a given status in a given social setting. Someone attending a wedding is expected to look and be happy for the couple about to be married. Someone attending a funeral is expected to look and be mournful. Emotions are socially constructed because they arise out of the roles we play and the situations in which we find ourselves.

Sociologists emphasize that emotions are socially constructed, as they arise out of expectations for specific roles in specific settings. Because we expect people to have very different emotions at weddings and funerals, they usually end up having these emotions.

The origins of emotions aside, emotions still play an essential role in social interaction, and social interaction gives rise to emotions. Accordingly, sociologists have discussed many aspects of emotions and social interaction (Turner & Stets, 2006), a few of which we outline here. One important aspect is that *insincere* displays of emotion can be used to manipulate a situation. For example, a child or adult may cry to win some sympathy, a display popularly called "crocodile tears." A staple of many novels and films is to pretend to be sorry that a rich, elderly relative is very ill in order to win a place in the relative's will. By the same token, though, people who display inappropriate emotions risk social disapproval. If you are attending a funeral of someone you did not really know that well and, out of boredom, think of a recent episode of *The Simpsons* that makes you chuckle, the glares you get will make it very clear that your emotional display is quite inappropriate.

As this example suggests, a second aspect of emotions is that we often find ourselves in situations that "demand" certain emotions we simply do not feel. This discrepancy forces most of us to *manage* our emotions to avoid social disapproval, a process called *emotion work* (Hochschild, 1983). Having to engage in emotion work in turn often leads us to feel other emotions such as anger or frustration.

A third aspect is that gender influences the emotions we feel and display. In sociology, work on gender and emotions often falls under the larger topic of femininity and masculinity as expressions of gender roles, which [Chapter 7 "Gender Inequality"](#) examines at greater length. Suffice it to say here, though at the risk of sounding stereotypical, that certain gender differences in emotions and the display of emotions do exist. For example, women cry more often and more intensely than men, and men outwardly express anger much more often than women. A key question is whether gender differences in emotions (as well as other gender differences) stem more from biology or more from culture, socialization, and other

social origins. [Chapter 7 "Gender Inequality"](#) again has more to stay about this basic debate in the study of gender.

According to sociologist Jonathan Turner, positive emotions are found more often among the wealthy, while negative emotions are found more often among the poor.

A final aspect is that emotions differ across the social classes. Jonathan Turner (2010) notes that some emotions, such as happiness and trust, are positive emotions, while other emotions, such as anger, fear, and sadness, are negative emotions. Positive emotions, he says, lead to more successful social interaction and help gain needed resources (e.g., a cheerful demeanor and self-confidence can help win a high-paying job or attract a romantic partner), while negative emotions have the opposite effect. He adds that positive emotions are more often found among the upper social classes, while negative emotions are more often found among the poorer social classes. Emotion is thus "a valued resource that is distributed unequally" (Turner, 2010, pp. 189–190). The upper classes benefit from their positive emotions, while the lower classes suffer various problems because of their negative emotions. In this manner, the social class difference in positive versus negative emotions helps reinforce social inequality.

Nonverbal Social Interaction

Social interaction is both verbal and nonverbal. As [Chapter 1 "Culture"](#) discussed, culture greatly influences **nonverbal communication**, or ways of communicating that do not involve talking. Nonverbal communication includes the gestures we use and how far apart we stand when we talk with someone. When we do talk with someone, much more nonverbal interaction happens beyond gestures and standing apart. We might smile, laugh, frown, grimace, or engage in any number of other facial expressions (with or without realizing we are doing so) that let the people with whom we interact know how we feel about what we are saying or they are saying. Often how we act nonverbally is at least as important, and sometimes more important, than what our mouths are saying.

Body posture is another form of nonverbal communication, and one that often combines with facial expressions to convey how a person feels. People who are angry may cross their arms or stand with their hands on their hips and glare at someone. Someone sitting slouched in a chair looks either very comfortable or very bored, and neither posture is one you would want to use at an interview for a job you really wanted to get. Men and women may engage in certain postures while they are flirting with someone. Consciously or not, they sit or stand in certain ways that convey they are romantically interested in a particular person and hopeful that the person will return this interest.

Learning From Other Societies

Personal Space and Standing Apart: Why People From Other Countries Think Americans Are Cold and Distant

As the text discusses, one aspect of nonverbal interaction involves how far we stand apart from someone with whom we are talking. To amplify on a point first mentioned in Chapter 2 "Eye on Society: Doing Sociological Research", Americans and the citizens of Great Britain and the northern European nations customarily stand about three to four feet apart from someone who is a stranger or acquaintance. If we are closer to this person without having to be closer—that is, we're not in a crowded elevator, bar, or other setting in which it is impossible to be farther apart—we feel uncomfortable.

In contrast, people in many parts of the world—South and Central America, Africa, the Middle East, and Western European nations such as France, Spain, and Italy—stand much closer to someone with whom they are talking. In these nations, people stand only about 9 to 15 inches apart when they talk. If someone for some reason wanted to

stand another two feet away, a member of one of these nations would view this person as unfriendly and might well feel insulted (Ting-Toomey, 1999; Samovar, Porter, & McDaniel, 2010).

Your author once found himself in this situation in Maine. I was talking to a professor from a Middle Eastern nation who was standing very close to me. To feel more comfortable, I moved back a step or two, without really realizing it. The professor moved forward, evidently to feel more comfortable himself, and then I moved back. He again moved forward, and I again moved back. Within a few minutes, we had moved about 20 to 30 feet!

When Americans travel abroad, anecdotal evidence indicates that they often think that people in other nations are pushy and demanding and that these citizens view Americans as cold and aloof (Ellsworth, 2005). Although there are many cultural differences between Americans and people in other lands, personal space is one of the most important differences. This fact yields an important lesson for any American who travels abroad, and it also illustrates the significance of culture for behavior and thus the value of the sociological perspective.

As with emotions, gender appears to influence how people communicate nonverbally (Hall, 2006). For example, a number of studies find that women are more likely than men to smile, to nod, and to have more expressive faces. Once again, biologists and social scientists disagree over the origins of these and other gender differences in nonverbal communication, with social scientists attributing the differences to gender roles, culture, and socialization.

Research finds that women tend to smile more often than men. Biologists and social scientists disagree over the origins of this gender difference in nonverbal communication.

mhobl – [colourful and smiling](#) – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Gender differences also exist in two other forms of nonverbal interaction: eye contact and touching. Women tend more than men to look directly into the eyes of people with whom they interact, a process called *gazing*. Such gazing is meant to convey interest in the interaction and to be nonthreatening. On the other hand, men are more likely than women to *stare* at someone in a way that is indeed threatening. A man might stare at a man because he resents something the other man said or did; a man might stare at a woman because he eyes her as a sexual object. In touching, men are more likely than women to touch someone, especially when that someone is a woman; as he guides her through a doorway, for example, he might put his arm behind her arm or back. On the other hand, women are more likely than men to touch themselves when they are talking with someone, a process called *self-touching*. Thus if a woman is saying "I think that…," she might briefly touch the area just below her neck to refer to herself. Men are less likely to refer to themselves in this manner.

Enhancing Social Interaction: What Sociology Suggests

If a goal of this book is to help you understand more about yourself and the social world around you, then a sociological understanding of social interaction should help your own social interaction and also that of other people.

We see evidence of the practical value of a sociological understanding in the "Sociology Making a Difference" and "Learning From Other Societies" boxes in this chapter. The "Sociology Making a Difference" box discussed the impact that Goffman's concept of impression management has made in job hunting in general and particularly in efforts to improve the employment chances of the poor and people of color. The "Learning From Other Societies" box discussed why Americans sometimes have trouble interacting with people abroad. Differences in personal space can lead to hurt feelings between Americans and people in other nations.

If we are aware, then, of the importance of impression

management, we can be more conscious of the impressions we are making in our daily interactions, whether they involve talking with a professor, interviewing for a job, going out on a first date, or speaking to a police officer who has pulled you over. By the same token, if we are aware of the importance of personal space, we can improve our interactions with people with different cultural backgrounds. Thus, if we are Americans of northern European ancestry and are interacting with people from other nations, we can be aware that physical distance matters and perhaps stand closer to someone than we might ordinarily feel comfortable doing to help the other person feel more comfortable and like us more. Conversely, readers who are not Americans of northern European ancestry might move back a step or two to accomplish the same goals.

To illustrate the importance of enhancing social interaction among people from different cultural backgrounds, the federal government has prepared a document called "Developing Cultural Competence in Disaster Mental Health Programs: Guiding Principles and Recommendations" (http://mentalhealth. samhsa.gov/ publications/allpubs/sma03-3828/sectiontwo.asp). The document is designed to help mental-health professionals who are assisting victims of natural disasters in other countries or within the United States. It warns professionals that cultural differences may impede their efforts to help victims: "Both verbal and nonverbal communication can be barriers to providing effective disaster crisis counseling when survivors and workers are from different cultures. Culture influences how people express their feelings as well as what feelings are

appropriate to express in a given situation. The inability to communicate can make both parties feel alienated and helpless." It also advises professionals to be aware of the personal space needs of the people they are trying to help: "A person from one subculture might touch or move closer to another as a friendly gesture, whereas someone from a different culture might consider such behavior invasive. Disaster-crisis counselors must look for clues to a survivor's need for space. Such clues may include, for example, moving the chair back or stepping closer." As this document makes clear, if we can draw on a sociological understanding to enhance our social interaction skills, we can help not only ourselves but also people who come from other cultures.

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Summary

1. The major components of social structure are statuses, roles, groups and organizations, and social institutions.
2. As societies moved beyond the hunting-and-gathering stage, they became larger and more impersonal and individualistic and were characterized by increasing inequality and conflict.
3. Industrial societies developed about 250 years ago after several inventions allowed work to become more mechanized. The Industrial Revolution has had important consequences, some good and some bad, in virtually every area of society. Postindustrial societies have begun in the last few decades with the advent of the computer and an increasing number of service jobs. While it's too soon to know the consequences of the advent of postindustrialization, there are signs it will have important implications for the nature of work and employment in modern society
4. Erving Goffman used a theatrical metaphor called

dramaturgy to understand social interaction, which he likened to behavior on a stage in a play. More generally, many sociologists stress the concept of roles in social interaction. Although we usually play our roles automatically, social order occasionally breaks down when people don't play their roles. This breakdown illustrates the fragility of social order.

5.   Although roles help us interact, they can also lead to problems such as role conflict and role strain. In another problem, some individuals may be expected to carry out a role that demands a personality they do not have.

6.   Emotions play an important role in social interaction. They influence how social interaction proceeds, and they are also influenced by social interaction. Sociologists emphasize that emotions are socially constructed, as they arise from the roles we play and the situations in which we find ourselves.

7.   Nonverbal communication is an essential part of social interaction. The sexes differ in several forms of nonverbal communication. Biologists and sociologists differ on the origins of these differences.

Using Sociology

Suppose you are working in a financial services firm and are married with a 2-year-old daughter. Your spouse is out of town at a conference, and you have an important

meeting to attend shortly after lunch where you are scheduled to make a key presentation. As you are reviewing your PowerPoint slides while you eat lunch at your desk, you get a call from your daughter's day care center. Your daughter is not feeling well and has a slight temperature, and the day care center asks you to come pick her up. What do you do?

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CHAPTER 4: SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

Social Issues in the News

"More Wichita Kids Go Hungry," the headline said. As the United States was in a deep recession, poverty-stricken parents in Wichita, Kansas, increasingly worried about how they would be able to feed their children. As a state official explained, "We see a lot of children who regularly wonder where their next meal is coming from. Churches that used to do food drives once every two to three months are now doing them once a month." The number of children eating at one of Wichita's major food pantries had climbed by one-third from a year earlier, and the number of children classified as homeless had increased by 90% from 1,000 to 1,900. A sixth-grade girl gave life to these numbers when she wrote of her own family's situation. "My mom works very hard to support our family," she said, "[but] some days we would eat only once a day. Then Mom got her paycheck and we were really happy but then the bills started coming and we couldn't buy food because a house was more important. We would rather have a house to live in and we needed a car." (Wenzl, 2009)

This story of hunger in America's heartland reminds us that poverty is far from unknown in the richest nation in the world, especially since the severe economic recession began in 2008. The United States has long been considered a land of opportunity, but research by sociologists and other social scientists shows again and again that people differ dramatically in their opportunity to realize the American dream.

To illustrate this, imagine that you and four other people are about to begin playing the popular board game Monopoly. Following the rules, each player begins with $1,500. You start the game, go around the board, buy properties or land on someone else's properties, and sometimes end up in Jail or Free Parking. Like life itself, whether you eventually win or lose the game is a matter of both luck and skill.

But if Monopoly were *more* like real life, each player would *not* begin with $1,500. Instead, they would begin with very different amounts, because in real life some people are richer than others, and some are much poorer. In fact, reflecting the unequal distribution of wealth in the United States, one player, the richest, would begin with $6,352 of the $7,500 distributed to the five players combined. The next richest player would have $848. The third player would start with $285, while the next would have $52. The fifth and poorest player would actually begin $38 in debt! <u>Figure 8.1 "Distribution of Starting Cash If Monopoly Were More Like Real Life"</u> depicts this huge disparity in money at the beginning of the game.

Figure 8.1 Distribution of Starting

Cash If Monopoly Were More Like Real Life
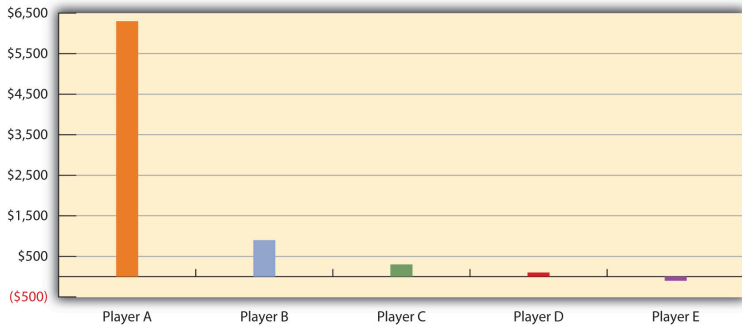
Source: Based on distribution of wealth data from Mishel, L., Bernstein, J., & Shierholz, H. (2009). *The state of working America 2008/2009*. Ithaca, NY: ILR Press [An imprint of Cornell University Press].

Now suppose you are the player starting $38 in debt. How would you feel? You can hardly afford to buy Park Place or Boardwalk. Even landing on a couple of "pay" spaces like a utility the first time you go around the board would virtually force you out of the game. If you landed in Jail, you could not afford to get out. What are your chances of winning the game? Yes, you have a chance to win, but how likely is this? The second, third, and fourth players have a better chance of winning than you do, but in the long run they certainly will not win nearly as often as the richest player, who, after all, starts out with about 85% of all the money distributed at the beginning.

Unlike most games, real life is filled with differences in wealth and other resources a society values. Sociologists refer to rankings based on these differences as **social stratification**. Except for the simplest preindustrial societies, every society is stratified to some extent, and some societies are more stratified than others. Another way of saying this is that some societies have more *economic inequality*, or a greater difference between the best-off and the worst-off, than others. In modern society, stratification is usually

determined by income and other forms of wealth, such as stocks and bonds, but resources such as power and prestige matter, too. No matter what determines it, a society's stratification has significant consequences for its members' attitudes, behavior, and, perhaps most important of all, **life chances**—how well people do in such areas as education, income, and health. We will see examples of these consequences in the pages ahead and end with a discussion of some promising policies and programs for reducing inequality and poverty.

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4.1 Systems of Stratification

Learning Objectives

1. Explain the difference between open and closed societies.
2. Define the several systems of stratification.
3. Understand how Max Weber and Karl Marx differed in their view of class societies.

When we look around the world and through history, we see different types of stratification systems. These systems vary on their degree of **vertical mobility**, or the chances of rising up or falling down the stratification ladder. In some so-called *closed* societies, an individual has virtually no chance of moving up or down. *Open* societies have more vertical mobility, as some people, and perhaps many people, can move up or even down. That said, a key question is how much vertical mobility really exists in these societies. Let's look at several systems of stratification, moving from the most closed to the most open.

Slavery

The most closed system is **slavery**, or the ownership of people, which has been quite common in human history (Ennals, 2007). Slavery is thought to have begun 10,000 years ago, after agricultural societies developed, as people in these societies made prisoners of war work on their farms. Many of the ancient lands of the Middle East, including Babylonia, Egypt, and Persia, also owned slaves, as did ancient China and India. Slavery especially flourished in ancient Greece and Rome, which used thousands of slaves for their trade economies. Most slaves in ancient times were prisoners of war or debtors. As trade died down during the Middle Ages, so did slavery.

Slavery is the most closed system of stratification. Although U.S. slavery, depicted here, ended with the Civil War, slavery still exists today in parts of Africa, Asia, and South America.

But once Europeans began exploring the Western Hemisphere in the 1500s, slavery regained its popularity. Portuguese and Spanish colonists who settled in Brazil and Caribbean islands made slaves of thousands of Indians already living there. After most of them died from disease and abuse, the Portuguese and Spaniards began bringing slaves from Africa. In the next century, the English, the French, and other Europeans also began bringing African slaves into the Western Hemisphere, and by the 1800s they had captured and shipped to the New World some 10–12 million Africans, almost 2 million of whom died along the way (Thornton, 1998).

The United States, of course, is all too familiar with slavery, which remains perhaps the most deplorable experience in American history and continues to have repercussions for African Americans and the rest of American society. It increasingly divided the new nation after it won its independence from Britain and helped lead to the Civil War eight decades later. The cruel treatment of slaves was captured in Harriet Beecher Stowe's classic but controversial book *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which ignited passions on both sides of the slavery debate.

Slavery still exists in parts of Africa, Asia, and South America, with some estimates putting the number of slaves in the tens of millions. Today's slaves include (a) men first taken as prisoners of war in ethnic conflicts; (b) girls and women captured in wartime or kidnapped from their neighborhoods and used as prostitutes or sex slaves; (c) children sold by their parents to become child laborers; and (d) workers paying off debts who are abused and even tortured and too terrified to leave (Bales, 2007; Batstone, 2007).

Estate Systems

Estate systems are characterized by control of land and were common in Europe and Asia during the Middle Ages and into the 1800s. In these systems, two major estates existed: the landed gentry or nobility and the peasantry or serfs. The landed gentry owned huge expanses of land on which serfs toiled. The serfs had more freedom than slaves had but typically lived in poverty and were subject to arbitrary control by the nobility (Kerbo, 2009).

Estate systems thrived in Europe until the French Revolution in 1789 violently overturned the existing order and inspired people in other nations with its cries for freedom and equality. As time went on, European estate systems slowly gave way to class systems of stratification (discussed a little later). After the American colonies won their independence from Britain, the South had at least one characteristic of an estate system, the control of large plots of land by a relatively few wealthy individuals and their families, but it used slaves rather than serfs to work the land.

Much of Asia, especially China and Japan, also had estate systems. For centuries, China's large population lived as peasants in abject conditions and frequently engaged in peasant uprisings. These escalated starting in the 1850s after the Chinese government raised taxes and charged peasants higher rents for the land on which they worked. After many more decades of political and economic strife, Communists took control of China in 1949 (DeFronzo, 2007).

Caste Systems

In a **caste system**, people are born into unequal groups based on their parents' status and remain in these groups for the rest of their lives. For many years, the best-known caste system was in India, where, supported by Hindu beliefs emphasizing the acceptance of one's fate in life, several major castes dictated one's life chances from the moment of birth, especially in rural areas (Kerbo, 2009). People born in the lower castes lived in abject poverty throughout their lives. Another caste, the *harijan*, or *untouchables*, was considered so low that technically it was not thought to be a caste at all. People in this caste were called the untouchables because they were considered unclean and were prohibited from coming near to people in the higher castes. Traditionally, caste membership in India almost totally determined an individual's life, including what job you had and whom you married; for example, it was almost impossible to marry someone in another caste. After India won its independence from Britain in 1949, its new constitution granted equal rights to the untouchables. Modern communication and migration into cities further weakened the caste system, as members of different castes now had more contact with each other. Still, caste prejudice remains a problem in India and illustrates the continuing influence of its traditional system of social stratification.

A country that used to have a caste system is South Africa. In the days of apartheid, from 1950 to 1990, a small group of white Afrikaners ruled the country. Black people constituted more than three-quarters of the nation's population and thus greatly outnumbered Afrikaners, but they had the worst jobs, could not vote, and lived in poor, segregated neighborhoods. Afrikaners bolstered their rule with the aid of the South African police, which used terror tactics to intimidate blacks (I. Berger, 2009).

Many observers believe a caste system existed in the U.S. South until the civil rights movement ended legal racial segregation.

Many observers believe a caste system also existed in the South in the United States after Reconstruction and until the civil rights movement of the 1960s ended legal segregation. A segregated system called Jim Crow dominated the South, and even though African Americans had several rights, including the right to vote, granted to them by the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitution, these rights were denied in practice. Lynchings were common for many decades, and the Southern police system bolstered white rule in the South just as the South African police system bolstered white rule in that country (Litwack, 2009).

Class Systems

Many societies, including all industrial ones, have **class systems**. In this system of stratification, a person is born into a social ranking but can move up or down from it much more easily than in caste systems or slave societies. This movement in either direction is primarily the result of a person's own effort, knowledge, and skills or lack of them. Although these qualities do not aid upward movement in caste or slave societies, they often do enable upward movement in class societies. Of the three systems of stratification discussed so far, class systems are by far the most open, meaning they have the most vertical mobility. We will look later at social class in the United States and discuss the extent of vertical mobility in American society.

Sociologist Max Weber also had much to say about class systems of stratification. Such systems, he wrote, are based on three dimensions of stratification: class (which we will call *wealth*), power, and prestige. **Wealth** is the total value of an individual or family, including income, stocks, bonds, real estate, and other assets; **power** is the ability to influence others to do your bidding, even if they do not want to; and **prestige** refers to the status and esteem people hold in the eyes of others.

In discussing these three dimensions, Weber disagreed somewhat with Karl Marx, who said our ranking in society depends on whether we own the means of production. Marx thus felt that the primary dimension of stratification in class systems was economic. Weber readily acknowledged the importance of this economic dimension but thought power and prestige also matter. He further said that although wealth, power, and prestige usually go hand-in-hand, they do not always overlap. For example, although the head of a major corporation has a good deal of wealth, power, and prestige, we can think of many other people who are high on one dimension but not on the other two. A professional athlete who makes millions

of dollars a year has little power in the political sense that Weber meant it. An organized crime leader might also be very wealthy but have little prestige outside the criminal underworld. Conversely, a scientist or professor may enjoy much prestige but not be very wealthy.

Classless Societies

Although, as noted earlier, all societies except perhaps for the simplest ones are stratified, some large nations have done their best to eliminate stratification by developing **classless societies**. Marx, of course, predicted that one day the proletariat would rise up and overthrow the bourgeoisie and create a communist society, by which he meant a classless one in which everyone had roughly the same amount of wealth, power, and prestige. In Russia, China, and Cuba, revolutions inspired by Marx's vision occurred in the 20th century. These revolutions resulted in societies not only with less economic inequality than in the United States and other class systems but also with little or no political freedom. Moreover, governing elites in these societies enjoyed much more wealth, power, and prestige than the average citizen. Overall, the communist experiments in Russia, China, and Cuba failed to achieve Marx's vision of an egalitarian society.

Some Western European nations, such as Sweden and Denmark, have developed *social democracies* based on fairly socialist economies. Although a few have nominal monarchies, these nations have much political freedom and less economic inequality than the United States and other class societies. They also typically rank

much higher than the United States on various social and economic indicators. Although these nations are not truly classless, they indicate it is possible, if not easy, to have a society that begins to fulfill Marx's egalitarian vision but where political freedom still prevails (Sandbrook, Edelman, Heller, & Teichman, 2007).

Key Takeaways

- Systems of stratification vary in their degree of vertical social mobility. Some societies are more open in this regard, while some are more closed.
- The major systems of stratification are slavery, estate systems, caste systems, and class systems.
- Some Western European nations are not classless but still have much less economic inequality than class societies such as the United States.

For Your Review

1. What, if anything, should the United States and the United Nations try to do about the slavery that still exists in today's world?
2. Why do you think some class societies have more vertical social mobility than other class societies?

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4.2 Explaining Stratification

Learning Objectives

1. Outline the assumptions of the functionalist explanation of stratification.
2. Outline the assumptions of the conflict theory explanation of stratification.
3. Understand how symbolic interactionism views stratification.

Why is stratification so common? Is it possible to have a society without stratification? Sociologists trying to answer these questions have developed two very different macro explanations of stratification, while symbolic interactionists have examined the differences that stratification produces for everyday interaction. Table 8.1 "Theory Snapshot" summarizes these three approaches.

Table 8.1 Theory Snapshot

Theoretical perspective	Major assumptions
Functionalism	Stratification is necessary to induce people with special intelligence, knowledge, and skills to enter the most important occupations. For this reason, stratification is necessary and inevitable.
Conflict	Stratification results from lack of opportunity and from discrimination and prejudice against the poor, women, and people of color. It is neither necessary nor inevitable.
Symbolic interactionism	Stratification affects people's beliefs, lifestyles, daily interaction, and conceptions of themselves.

The Functionalist View

Functionalist theory assumes that the various structures and processes in society exist because they serve important functions for society's stability and continuity. In line with this view, functionalist theorists in sociology assume that stratification exists because it also serves important functions for society. This explanation was developed more than 60 years ago by Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore (Davis & Moore, 1945) in the form of several logical assumptions that imply stratification is both necessary and inevitable. When applied to American society, their assumptions would be as follows:

1. **Some jobs are more important than other jobs.** For example, the job of a brain surgeon is more important than the job of shoe-shining.
2. **Some jobs require more skills and knowledge than other jobs.**

To stay with our example, it takes more skills and knowledge to do brain surgery than to shine shoes.

3. **Relatively few people have the ability to acquire the skills and knowledge that are needed to do these important, highly skilled jobs.** Most of us would be able to do a decent job of shining shoes, but very few of us would be able to become brain surgeons.

4. **To induce the people with the skills and knowledge to do the important, highly skilled jobs, society must promise them higher incomes or other rewards.** If this is true, some people automatically end up higher in society's ranking system than others, and stratification is thus necessary and inevitable. To illustrate this, say we have a society where shining shoes and doing brain surgery both give us incomes of $150,000 per year. (This example is *very* hypothetical, but please keep reading.) If you decide to shine shoes, you can begin making this money at age 16, but if you decide to become a brain surgeon, you will not start making this same amount until about age 35, as you first must go to college and medical school and then acquire several more years of medical training. While you have spent 19 additional years beyond age 16 getting this education and training and taking out tens of thousands of dollars in student loans, you could have spent these 19 years shining shoes and making $150,000 a year, or $2.85 million overall. Which job would you choose?

Functional theory argues that the promise of very high incomes is necessary to induce talented people to pursue important careers such as surgery. If physicians and shoe shiners made the same high income, would enough people decide to become physicians?

Public Domain Images – CC0 public domain.

As this example suggests, many people might not choose to become brain surgeons unless considerable financial and other rewards awaited them. By extension, we might not have enough people filling society's important jobs unless they know they will be similarly rewarded. If this is true, we must have stratification. This all sounds very logical, but a few years after Davis and Moore published their functionalist theory of stratification, other sociologists pointed out some serious problems in their argument (Tumin, 1953; Wrong, 1959).

First, it is difficult to compare the importance of many types of jobs. For example, which is more important, doing brain surgery or mining coal? Although you might be tempted to answer "brain surgery," if no coal were mined, much of our society could not function. In another example, which job is more important, attorney or professor? (Be careful how you answer this one!)

Second, the functionalist explanation implies that the most important jobs have the highest incomes and the least important jobs the lowest incomes, but many examples, including the ones just mentioned, counter this view. Coal miners make much less money than physicians, and professors, for better or worse, earn much less

on the average than lawyers. A professional athlete making millions of dollars a year earns many times the income of the president of the United States, but who is more important to the nation? Elementary school teachers do a very important job in our society, but their salaries are much lower than those of sports agents, advertising executives, and many other people whose jobs are far less essential.

Third, the functionalist view also implies that people move up the economic ladder based on their abilities, skills, knowledge, and, more generally, their merit. If this is true, another implication is that if they do not move up the ladder, they lack the necessary merit. This view ignores the fact that much of our stratification stems from lack of equal opportunity, as our Monopoly example at the beginning of the chapter made clear. Because of their race, ethnicity, gender, and class standing at birth, some people have less opportunity than others to acquire the skills and training they need to fill the types of jobs addressed by the functionalist approach.

Finally, the functionalist explanation might make sense up to a point, but it does not justify the extremes of wealth and poverty found in the United States and other nations. Even if we do have to promise higher incomes to get enough people to become physicians, does that mean we also need the amount of poverty we have? Do CEOs of corporations really need to make millions of dollars per year to get enough qualified people to become CEOs? Don't people take on a CEO job or other high-paying job at least partly because of the challenge, working conditions, and other positive aspects they offer? The functionalist view does not answer these questions adequately.

The Conflict View

Conflict theory's explanation of stratification draws on Karl Marx's view of class societies and incorporates the critique of the functionalist view just discussed. Many different explanations grounded in conflict theory exist, but they all assume that stratification stems from a fundamental conflict between the needs and interests of the powerful, or "haves," in society and those of the weak, or "have-nots" (Kerbo, 2009). The former take advantage of their position at the top of society to stay at the top, even if it means oppressing those at the bottom. At a minimum, they can heavily influence the law, the media, and other institutions in a way that maintains society's class structure.

Ideology and Stratification

In explaining stratification, conflict theory emphasizes **ideology**, or a set of ideas that justifies the status quo. This emphasis goes back to the work of Marx, who said the ruling class shapes and even controls the ruling ideas of a society. It tries to shape these ideas so that they justify the existing order and decrease the chances that the poor will challenge it. The key goal of the ruling class here is to prevent the poor from achieving **class consciousness**, or an awareness of their oppression and the true reasons for it (Marx & Engels, 1947). If the poor instead do not recognize their interests as

a class that does not control the means of production, they suffer from **false consciousness.**

As an example, Marx called religion the "opiate of the masses." By this he meant that religious beliefs influence the poor to feel that their fate in life is God's will or a test of their belief in God. If they hold such beliefs, they will neither blame their poverty on the rich nor rebel against them. Religious beliefs help create false consciousness.

Ideological beliefs bolster every system of stratification and domination. In slave societies, the dominant ideology, and one that at least some slaves accepted, was that slaves are inferior to their masters and deserve no better fate in life. When U.S. slavery existed in the South, it was commonly thought that blacks were biologically inferior and suited only to be slaves. Caste societies, as we noted earlier, have similar beliefs that justify the existence and impact of the caste system. Hitler's "final solution" likewise rested on the belief that Jews and other groups he targeted were biologically inferior and deserving of extermination.

Because he was born in a log cabin and later became president, Abraham Lincoln's life epitomizes the American Dream, the belief that people born into poverty can become successful through hard work. The popularity of this belief leads many Americans to blame poor people for their poverty.

U.S. Library of Congress – public domain.

Ideological beliefs in class societies are more subtle and complex but nonetheless influential. One of the most important beliefs in the United States is the American Dream, epitomized by the story of Abraham Lincoln. According to this belief, people born into poverty can lift themselves up by the bootstraps and become successful if they work hard enough. By implication, if people remain poor, they are not trying hard enough or have other personal deficiencies keeping them in poverty. This ideology prompts many Americans to take a blaming-the-victim approach by blaming poverty on laziness

and other problems in the poor rather than on discrimination and the lack of opportunity in society. To the extent that people accept such ideological beliefs, they are less likely to criticize the existing system of stratification. Marx did not foresee the extent to which these beliefs would impede the development of class consciousness in the United States.

International data underline this American ideology. We saw in [Chapter 1 "Culture"](#) that about 60% of Americans attribute poverty to laziness and lack of willpower, compared to less than half that in Mexico, Russia, Spain, and Sweden. Belief in the American Dream evidently helps lead to a blaming-the-victim ideology that blames the poor for their own fate.

Conflict theory assumes that class position influences our perceptions of social and political life, even if not to the degree envisioned by Marx. Some national survey data support this assumption. A General Social Survey question asks whether it is the government's responsibility to "reduce income differences between the rich and poor." As [Figure 8.2 "Annual Family Income and Belief That Government "Should Reduce Income Differences Between the Rich and Poor""](#) shows, low-income people are much more likely than high-income people to think the government has this responsibility.

Figure 8.2 Annual Family Income and Belief That Government "Should Reduce Income Differences Between the Rich and Poor"
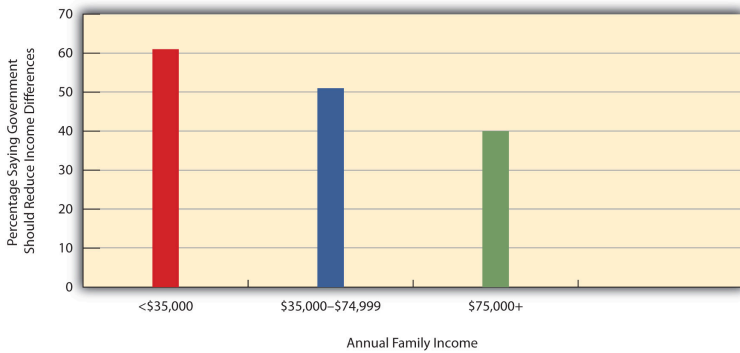
Source: Data from General Social Survey, 2006.

Symbolic Interactionism

Consistent with its micro orientation, symbolic interactionism tries to understand stratification by looking at people's interaction and understandings in their daily lives. Unlike the functionalist and conflict views, it does not try to explain why we have stratification in the first place. Rather, it examines the differences that stratification makes for people's lifestyles and their interaction with other people.

One of the most insightful analyses of stratification that fits into a symbolic interactionist framework was Thorstein Veblin's (1899/ 1953) famous discussion of *conspicuous consumption*, or the acquisition and display by the wealthy of lavish products that show off their wealth. The very rich do not need mansions or other very opulent homes, and neither do they need a motor vehicle costing upward of $100,000 or more or jewelry costing thousands and

thousands of dollars. Yet they purchase these products to show off their wealth and to feel better about themselves. The lifestyles of the rich are featured in classic novels by writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and in classic films such as *The Philadelphia Story*, starring the formidable trio of Katharine Hepburn, Cary Grant, and James Stewart. Although one message of many of these cultural works is that money does not always bring happiness, it remains true, as Fitzgerald once wrote, "Let me tell you about the very rich. They are different from you and me."

Examples of the symbolic interactionist framework are also seen in the many literary works and films that portray the difficulties that the rich and poor have in interacting on the relatively few occasions when they do interact. For example, in the film *Pretty Woman*, Richard Gere plays a rich businessman who hires a prostitute, played by Julia Roberts, to accompany him to swank parties and other affairs. Roberts has to buy a new wardrobe and learn how to dine and behave in rich social settings, and much of the film's humor and poignancy come from her awkwardness in learning the lifestyle of the rich.

If there are many dramatic and humorous accounts of the "lifestyles of the rich and famous," there are also many sociological and other accounts of lives of the poor. Poverty is discussed later in this chapter, but for now it is sufficient to say that the poor often lead lives of quiet desperation and must find many ways of coping with the fact of being poor. Studies of the poor, too, reflect the symbolic interactionist perspective.

Key Takeaways

- According to the functionalist view, stratification is a necessary and inevitable consequence of the need

to use the promise of financial reward to induce talented people to pursue important jobs and careers.
- According to conflict theory, stratification results from lack of opportunity and discrimination against the poor and people of color.
- According to symbolic interactionism, social class affects how people interact in everyday life and how they view certain aspects of the social world.

For Your Review

1. In explaining stratification in the United States, which view, functionalist or conflict, makes more sense to you? Why?
2. Suppose you could wave a magic wand and invent a society where everyone had about the same income no matter which job he or she performed. Do you think it would be difficult to persuade enough people to become physicians or to pursue other important careers? Explain your answer.

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4.3 Social Class in the United States

There is a surprising amount of disagreement among sociologists on the number of social classes in the United States and even on how to measure social class membership. We first look at the measurement issue and then discuss the number and types of classes sociologists have delineated.

Measuring Social Class

We can measure social class either *objectively* or *subjectively*. If we choose the objective method, we classify people according to one or more criteria, such as their occupation, education, and/or income. The researcher is the one who decides which social class people are in based on where they stand in regard to these variables. If we choose the subjective method, we ask people what class *they think* they are in. For example, the General Social Survey asks, "If you were asked to use one of four names for your social class, which would you say you belong in: the lower class, the working class, the middle class, or the upper class?" [Figure 8.3 "Subjective Social Class Membership"](#) depicts responses to this question. The trouble with such a subjective measure is that some people say they are in a social class that differs from what objective criteria might indicate they are in. This problem leads most sociologists to favor objective measures of social class when they study stratification in American society.

Figure 8.3 Subjective Social Class Membership
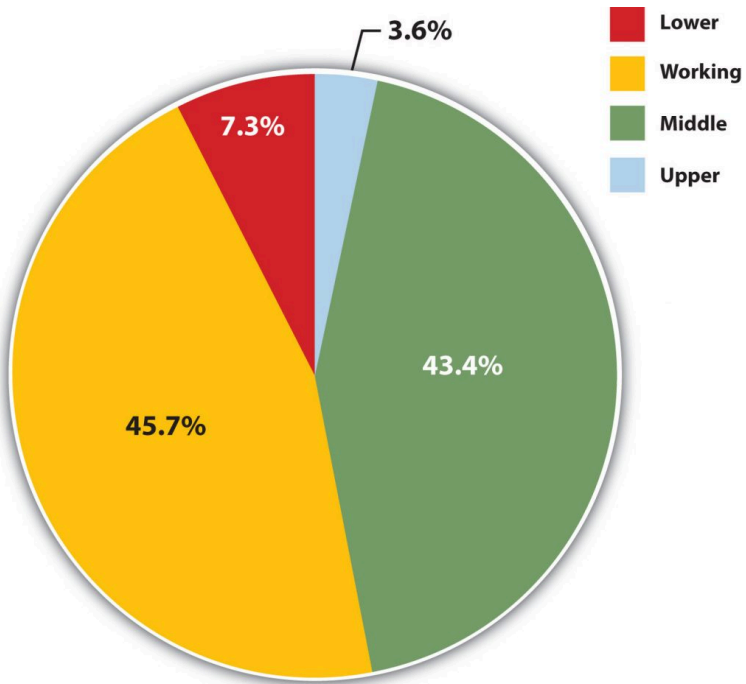
Source: Data from General Social Survey, 2008.

Yet even here there is disagreement between functionalist theorists and conflict theorists on which objective measures to use. Functionalist sociologists rely on measures of **socioeconomic status (SES)**, such as education, income, and occupation, to determine someone's social class. Sometimes one of these three variables is used by itself to measure social class, and sometimes two or all three of the variables are combined (in ways that need not concern us) to measure social class. When occupation is used, sociologists often rely on standard measures of occupational prestige. Since the late 1940s, national surveys have asked Americans to rate the prestige of dozens of occupations, and their ratings are averaged together to yield prestige scores for the occupations (Hodge, Siegel, & Rossi, 1964). Over the years these scores have been relatively stable. Here are some average prestige scores for various

occupations: physician, 86; college professor, 74; elementary school teacher, 64; letter carrier, 47; garbage collector, 28; and janitor, 22.

Despite SES's usefulness, conflict sociologists prefer different, though still objective, measures of social class that take into account ownership of the means of production and other dynamics of the workplace. These measures are closer to what Marx meant by the concept of class throughout his work, and they take into account the many types of occupations and workplace structures that he could not have envisioned when he was writing during the 19th century.

For example, corporations have many upper-level managers who do not own the means of production but still determine the activities of workers under them. They thus do not fit neatly into either of Marx's two major classes, the bourgeoisie or the proletariat. Recognizing these problems, conflict sociologists delineate social class on the basis of several factors, including the ownership of the means of production, the degree of autonomy workers enjoy in their jobs, and whether they supervise other workers or are supervised themselves (Wright, 2000).

The American Class Structure

As should be evident, it is not easy to determine how many social classes exist in the United States. Over the decades, sociologists have outlined as many as six or seven social classes based on such

things as, once again, education, occupation, and income, but also on lifestyle, the schools people's children attend, a family's reputation in the community, how "old" or "new" people's wealth is, and so forth (Coleman & Rainwater, 1978; Warner & Lunt, 1941). For the sake of clarity, we will limit ourselves to the four social classes included in Figure 8.3 "Subjective Social Class Membership": the upper class, the middle class, the working class, and the lower class. Although subcategories exist within some of these broad categories, they still capture the most important differences in the American class structure (Gilbert, 2011). The annual income categories listed for each class are admittedly somewhat arbitrary but are based on the percentage of households above or below a specific income level.

The Upper Class

Depending on how it is defined, the upper class consists of about 4% of the U.S. population and includes households with annual incomes (2009 data) of more than $200,000 (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2010). Some scholars would raise the ante further by limiting the upper class to households with incomes of at least $500,000 or so, which in turn reduces this class to about 1% of the population, with an average wealth (income, stocks and bonds, and real estate) of several million dollars. However it is defined, the upper class has much wealth, power, and influence (Kerbo, 2009).

The upper class in the United States consists of about 4% of all households and possesses much wealth, power, and influence.

Steven Martin – Highland Park Mansion – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Members of the *upper-upper* class have "old" money that has been in their families for generations; some boast of their ancestors coming over on the *Mayflower*. They belong to exclusive clubs and live in exclusive neighborhoods; have their names in the *Social Register*; send their children to expensive private schools; serve on the boards of museums, corporations, and major charities; and exert much influence on the political process and other areas of life from behind the scenes. Members of the *lower-upper* class have "new" money acquired through hard work, lucky investments, and/or athletic prowess. In many ways their lives are similar to those of their old-money counterparts, but they do not enjoy the prestige that old money brings. Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft and the richest person in the United States in 2009, would be considered a member of the lower-upper class because his money is too "new." Because he does not have a long-standing pedigree, upper-upper class members might even be tempted to disparage his immense wealth, at least in private.

The Middle Class

Many of us like to think of ourselves in the middle class, as [Figure 8.3 "Subjective Social Class Membership"](#) showed, and many of us are. The middle class includes the 46% of all households whose annual incomes range from $50,000 to $199,999. As this very broad range suggests, the middle class includes people with many different levels of education and income and many different types of jobs. It is thus helpful to distinguish the *upper-middle* class from the *lower-middle* class on the upper and lower ends of this income bracket, respectively. The upper-middle class has household incomes from about $150,000 to $199,000, amounting to about 4.4% of all households. People in the upper-middle class typically have college and, very often, graduate or professional degrees; live in the suburbs or in fairly expensive urban areas; and are bankers, lawyers, engineers, corporate managers, and financial advisers, among other occupations.

The upper-middle class in the United States consists of about 4.4% of all households, with incomes ranging from $150,000 to $199,000.

Alyson Hurt – [Back Porch](#) – CC BY-NC 2.0.

The lower-middle class has household incomes from about $50,000 to $74,999, amounting to about 18% of all families. People in this income bracket typically work in white-collar jobs as nurses, teachers, and the like. Many have college degrees, usually from the less prestigious colleges, but many also have 2-year degrees or only a high school degree. They live somewhat comfortable lives but can hardly afford to go on expensive vacations or buy expensive cars and can send their children to expensive colleges only if they receive significant financial aid.

The Working Class

The working class in the United States consists of about 25% of all households, whose members work in blue-collar jobs and less skilled clerical positions.

Working-class households have annual incomes between about $25,000 and $49,999 and constitute about 25% of all U.S. households. They generally work in blue-collar jobs such as factory work, construction, restaurant serving, and less skilled clerical positions. People in the working class typically do not have 4-year college degrees, and some do not have high school degrees. Although most are not living in official poverty, their financial situation is very uncomfortable. A single large medical bill or expensive car repair would be almost impossible to pay without going into considerable debt. Working-class families are far less likely than their wealthier counterparts to own their own homes or to send their children to college. Many of them live at risk for unemployment as their companies downsize by laying off workers even in good times, and hundreds of thousands began to be laid off when the U.S. recession began in 2008.

The Lower Class

The lower class or poor in the United States constitute about 25% of all households. Many poor individuals lack high school degrees and are unemployed or employed only part time.

Chris Hunkeler – Trailer Homes – CC BY-SA 2.0.

Although lower class is a common term, many observers prefer a less negative-sounding term like the poor, which is the term used here. The poor have household incomes under $25,000 and constitute about 25% of all U.S. households. Many of the poor lack high school degrees, and many are unemployed or employed only part time in semiskilled or unskilled jobs. When they do work, they work as janitors, house cleaners, migrant laborers, and shoe shiners. They tend to rent apartments rather than own their own homes, lack medical insurance, and have inadequate diets. We will discuss the poor further when we focus later in this chapter on inequality and poverty in the United States.

Social Mobility

Regardless of how we measure and define social class, what are our chances of moving up or down within the American class structure? As we saw earlier, the degree of vertical social mobility is a key distinguishing feature of systems of stratification. Class systems such as in the United States are thought to be open, meaning that social mobility is relatively high. It is important, then, to determine how much social mobility exists in the United States.

Here we need to distinguish between two types of vertical social mobility. **Intergenerational mobility** refers to mobility from one generation to the next within the same family. If children from poor parents end up in high-paying jobs, the children have experienced upward intergenerational mobility. Conversely, if children of college professors end up hauling trash for a living, these children have experienced downward intergenerational mobility. **Intragenerational mobility** refers to mobility within a person's own lifetime. If you start out as an administrative assistant in a large corporation and end up as an upper-level manager, you have experienced upward intragenerational mobility. But if you start out from business school as an upper-level manager and get laid off 10 years later because of corporate downsizing, you have experienced downward intragenerational mobility.

Sociologists have conducted a good deal of research on vertical mobility, much of it involving the movement of males up or down the occupational prestige ladder compared to their fathers, with the earliest studies beginning in the 1960s (Blau & Duncan, 1967; Featherman & Hauser, 1978). For better or worse, the focus on males occurred because the initial research occurred when many women were still homemakers and also because women back then were excluded from many studies in the social and biological sciences. The early research on males found that about half of sons end up in higher-prestige jobs than their fathers had but that the difference

between the sons' jobs and their fathers' was relatively small. For example, a child of a janitor may end up running a hardware store but is very unlikely to end up as a corporate executive. To reach that lofty position, it helps greatly to have parents in jobs much more prestigious than a janitor's. Contemporary research also finds much less mobility among African Americans and Latinos than among non-Latino whites with the same education and family backgrounds, suggesting an important negative impact of racial and ethnic discrimination.

A college education is a key step toward achieving upward social mobility. However, the payoff of education is often higher for men than for women and for whites than for people of color.

Nazareth College – Commencement 2013 – CC BY 2.0.

A key vehicle for upward mobility is formal education. Regardless of the socioeconomic status of our parents, we are much more likely to end up in a high-paying job if we attain a college degree or, increasingly, a graduate or professional degree. Figure 8.4 "Education and Median Earnings of Year-Round, Full-Time Workers, 2007" vividly shows the difference that education makes for Americans' median annual incomes. Notice, however, that for a given level of education, men's incomes are greater than women's. Figure 8.4 "Education and Median Earnings of Year-Round, Full-

Time Workers, 2007" thus suggests that the payoff of education is higher for men than for women, and many studies support this conclusion (Green & Ferber, 2008). The reasons for this gender difference are complex and will be discussed further in Chapter 7 "Gender Inequality". To the extent vertical social mobility exists in the United States, then, it is higher for men than for women and higher for whites than for people of color.

Figure 8.4 Education and Median Earnings of Year-Round, Full-Time Workers, 2007
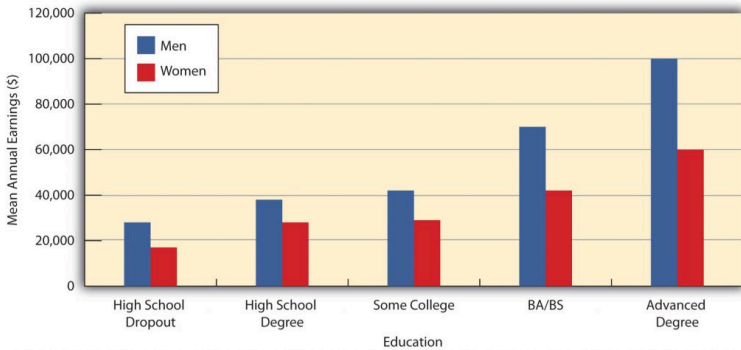
Source: Data from U.S. Census Bureau. (2010). *Statistical abstract of the United States*: 2010. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. Retrieved from http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab.

Certainly the United States has upward social mobility, even when we take into account gender and racial discrimination. Whether we conclude the United States has *a lot of* vertical mobility or *just a little* is the key question, and the answer to this question depends

on how the data are interpreted. People can and do move up the socioeconomic ladder, but their movement is fairly limited. Hardly anyone starts at the bottom of the ladder and ends up at the top. As we see later in this chapter, recent trends in the U.S. economy have made it more difficult to move up the ladder and have even worsened the status of some people.

One way of understanding the issue of U.S. mobility is to see how much parents' education affects the education their children attain. Figure 8.5 "Parents' Education and Percentage of Respondents Who Have a College Degree" compares how General Social Survey respondents with parents of different educational backgrounds fare in attaining a college (bachelor's) degree. For the sake of clarity, the figure includes only those respondents whose parents had the same level of education as each other: they either both dropped out of high school, both were high school graduates, or both were college graduates.

Figure 8.5 Parents' Education and Percentage of Respondents Who Have a College Degree
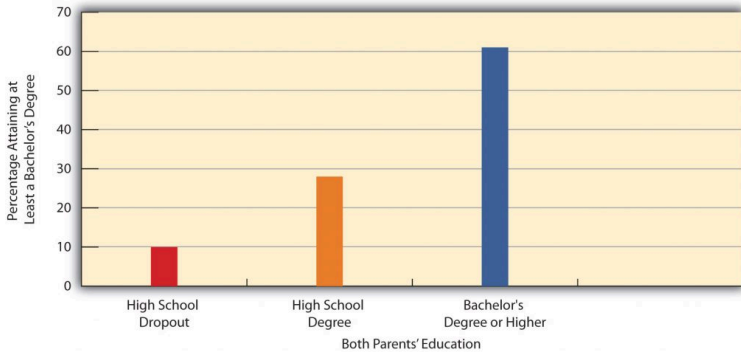
Source: Data from General Social Survey, 2008.

As Figure 8.5 "Parents' Education and Percentage of Respondents Who Have a College Degree" indicates, we are much more likely to get a college degree if our parents had college degrees themselves. The two bars for respondents whose parents were high school graduates or dropouts, respectively, do represent upward mobility, because the respondents are graduating from college even though their parents did not. But the three bars taken together also show that our chances of going to college depend heavily on our parents' education (and presumably their income and other aspects of our family backgrounds). The American Dream does exist, but it is much more likely to remain *only* a dream unless we come from advantaged backgrounds. In fact, there is less vertical mobility in the United States than in other Western democracies. As a recent analysis summarized the evidence, "There is considerably more mobility in most of the other developed economies of Europe and Scandinavia than in the United States" (Mishel, Bernstein, & Shierholz, 2009, p. 108).

- Several ways of measuring social class exist. Functionalist and conflict sociologists disagree on which objective criteria to use in measuring social class. Subjective measures of social class, which rely on people rating their own social class, may lack some validity.
- Sociologists disagree on the number of social classes in the United States, but a common view is that the United States has four classes: upper, middle, working, and lower. Further variations exist within the upper and middle classes.
- The United States has some vertical social mobility, but not as much as several nations in Western Europe.

For Your Review

1. Which way of measuring social class do you prefer, objective or subjective? Explain your answer.
2. Which objective measurement of social class do you prefer, functionalist or conflict? Explain your answer.

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4.4 Economic Inequality and Poverty in the United States

Learning Objectives

1. Understand trends in U.S. inequality.
2. Explain the social distribution of U.S. poverty.
3. Distinguish the structural and individual explanations of poverty.
4. List the major effects of poverty.

In his classic book *The Other America*, Michael Harrington (1962) brought the reality of poverty home to many Americans. In chapter after chapter, he discussed the troubled lives of the poor in rural Appalachia, in our urban centers, and in other areas of the country, and he indicted the country for not helping the poor. His book helped kindle interest in the White House and Congress in aiding the poor and deeply affected its thousands of readers. Almost five decades later, we know much more about poverty than we used to. Despite initial gains in fighting poverty in the 1960s (Schwartz, 1984), poverty is still with us and has worsened since the early 2000s, especially since the onset of the serious economic recession that began in 2008. What do we know about the extent of poverty, the reasons for it, and its consequences?

Economic Inequality

Let's start by discussing **economic inequality**, which refers to the extent of the economic difference between the rich and the poor. Because most societies are stratified, there will always be some people who are richer or poorer than others, but the key question is *how much* richer or poorer they are. When the gap between them is large, we say that much economic inequality exists; when the gap between them is small, we say that relatively little economic inequality exists.

Considered in this light, the United States has a very large degree of economic inequality. A common way to examine inequality is to rank the nation's families by income from lowest to highest and then to divide this distribution into *fifths*. Thus, we have the poorest fifth of the nation's families (or the 20% of families with the lowest family incomes), a second fifth with somewhat higher incomes, and so on until we reach the richest fifth of families, or the 20% with the highest incomes. We then can see what percentage each fifth has of the nation's *entire* income. [Figure 8.6 "Share of National Income Going to Income Fifths, 2009"](#) shows such a calculation for the United States. The poorest fifth enjoys only 3.4% of the nation's income, while the richest fifth enjoys 50.3%. Another way of saying this is that the richest 20% of the population have as much income as the remaining 80% of the population.

Figure 8.6 Share of National Income Going to Income Fifths, 2009
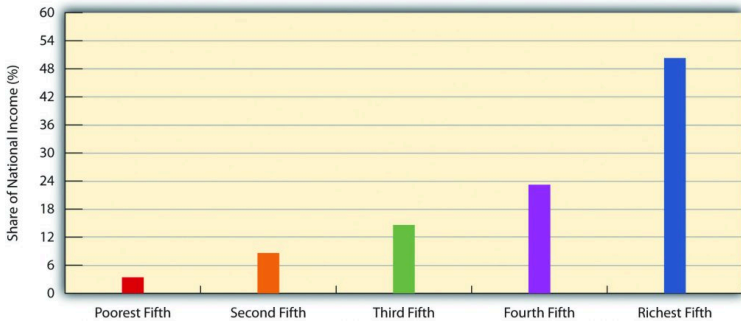
Source: Data from DeNavas-Walt, C., Proctor, B. D., & Smith, J. C. (2010). *Income, poverty, and health insurance coverage in the United States*: 2009 (Current Population Report P60-238). Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau.

This degree of inequality is the largest in the industrialized world. Figure 8.7 "Income Inequality Around the World" compares the inequality among several industrialized nations by dividing the median income of households in the 90th percentile (meaning they have more income than 90% of all households) by the median income of households in the 10th percentile (meaning they have more income than only 10% of all households); the higher the resulting ratio, the greater a nation's inequality. The ratio for the United States, 4.86, far exceeds that for any other nation.

Figure 8.7 Income Inequality Around the World
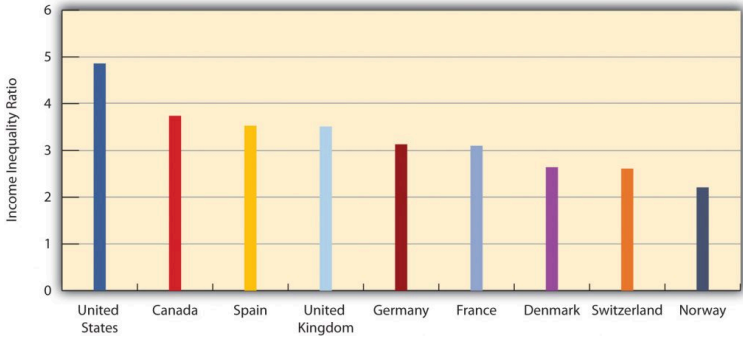
Ratio of median income of richest 10% in each nation to that of poorest 10%.

Source: Data from Mishel, L., Bernstein, J., & Shierholz, H. (2009). *The state of working America 2008/2009*. Ithaca, NY: ILR Press [An imprint of Cornell University Press].

Economic inequality in the United States has increased during the last two decades. The loss of manufacturing jobs and changes in taxation and income distribution policies since the early 1980s have favored the rich and hurt the economic standing of the middle class and the poor (Barlett & Steele, 2002; Wilson, 2009). After adjusting for inflation, the post-tax income of the nation's wealthiest families grew by a much greater amount than that for the poorest families from 1979 to 2005. It grew by only 6% for the poorest fifth but by 80% for the wealthiest fifth, and it also grew by a whopping 228% for families in the top 1% of the nation's families (Mishel, Bernstein, & Shierholz, 2009). As the saying goes, the rich get richer. To recall our earlier discussion, to be upwardly mobile, it helps to be well-off to begin with.

Poverty

Measuring Poverty

When U.S. officials became concerned about poverty during the 1960s, they quickly realized they needed to find out how much poverty we had. To do so, a measure of official poverty, or a poverty line, was needed. This line was first calculated in 1963 by multiplying the cost of a very minimal diet by three, as a 1955 government study had determined that the typical American family spent one-third of its income on food. Thus a family whose income is lower than three times the cost of a very minimal diet is considered officially poor.

The measure of official poverty began in 1963 and stipulates that a family whose income is lower than three times the cost of a minimal diet is considered officially poor. This measure has not changed since 1963 even though family expenses have risen greatly in many areas.

Bill Herndon – Katrina Leftovers 1 – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

This way of calculating the poverty line has not changed since 1963, even though many other things, such as energy, child care, and health care, now occupy a greater percentage of the typical family's budget than was true in 1963. As a national measure, the poverty line also fails to take into account regional differences in the cost of living. For all of these reasons, many experts think the official measurement of poverty is highly suspect. As a recent report observed, "Most poverty analysts strongly believe that the official poverty statistics are inadequate to the task of determining who is poor in America" (Mishel, Bernstein, & Shierholz, 2009, p. 298).

The poverty line is adjusted annually for inflation and takes into account the number of people in a family: the larger the family size, the higher the poverty line. In 2009, the poverty line for a

nonfarming family of four (two adults, two children) was $21,756. A four-person family earning even one more dollar than $21,756 in 2009 was not officially poor, even though its "extra" income hardly lifted it out of dire economic straits. Policy experts have calculated a no-frills budget that enables a family to meet its basic needs in food, clothing, shelter, and so forth; this budget is about twice the poverty line. Families with incomes between the poverty line and twice the poverty line are barely making ends meet, but they are not considered officially poor. When we talk here about the poverty level, keep in mind that we are talking only about *official* poverty and that there are many families and individuals living in near-poverty who have trouble meeting their basic needs, especially when they face unusually high medical or motor vehicle expenses or the like. For this reason, some analyses use "twice-poverty" data (i.e., family incomes below twice the poverty line) to provide a more accurate understanding of how many Americans face serious financial difficulties.

The Extent and Social Distribution of Poverty

With this caveat in mind, how many Americans are poor, and who are they? The U.S. Census Bureau gives us some answers. In 2009, 14.3% of the U.S. population, or almost 44 million Americans, lived in (official) poverty (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2010). This percentage represented a decline from the early 1990s but was

higher than the rate in the late 1960s (see [Figure 8.8 "U.S. Poverty, 1959–2009"](#)). If we were winning the war on poverty in the 1960s, since then poverty has fought us to a standstill.

Figure 8.8 U.S. Poverty, 1959–2009
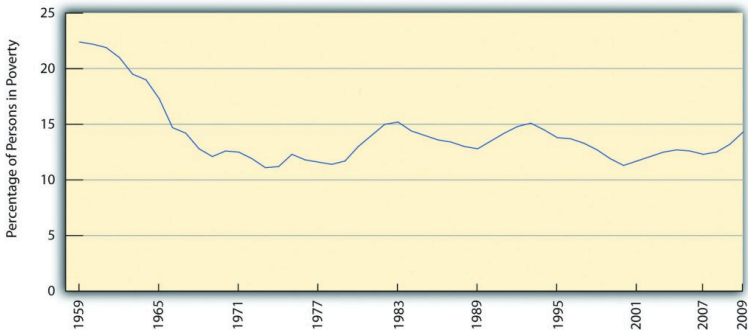
Source: Data from U.S. Census Bureau. (2010). Historical poverty tables: People. Retrieved from http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/data/historical/people.html.

Another way of understanding the extent of poverty is to consider **episodic poverty**, defined by the Census Bureau as being poor for at least 2 consecutive months in some time period. From 2004 to 2007, the last years for which data are available, almost one-third of the U.S. public, equal to about 95 million people, were poor for at least 2 consecutive months, although only 2.2% were poor for all 3 years (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2010). As these figures indicate, people go into and out of poverty, but even those who go out of it do not usually move very far from it.

Learning From Other Societies

Poverty and Poverty Policy in Other Western Democracies

To compare international poverty rates, scholars commonly use a measure of the percentage of households in a nation that receive less than half of the nation's median household income after taxes and cash transfers from the government. In 2000, the latest date for which data are available, 17% of U.S. households lived in poverty as defined by this measure (Mishel, Bernstein, & Shierholz, 2009). By comparison, selected other Western democracies had the following rates (Mishel, Bernstein, & Shierholz, 2009, p. 384):

Canada	11.4%
Denmark	9.2%
France	8.0%
Germany	8.3%
Norway	6.4%
Spain	14.3%
Sweden	6.5%
United Kingdom	12.4%

The average poverty rate of Western democracies excluding the United States is 9.8%. The U.S. rate is thus 1.73 times greater than this average.

Why is there so much more poverty in the United States than in its Western counterparts? Several differences between the United States and the other nations stand out. First, other Western nations have higher minimum wages and stronger unions than the United States has, and these lead to incomes that help push people above poverty. Second, the other nations spend a much greater proportion of their gross domestic product on social expenditures (income support and social services such as child care subsidies and housing allowances) than does the United States. As a recent analysis concluded,

> Other peer countries are much more likely than the United States to step in where markets have failed to live their most disadvantaged citizens out of poverty. This suggests that the relatively low expenditures on social welfare are at least partially

implicated in the high poverty rates in the United States. (Mishel, Bernstein, & Shierholz, 2009, p. 387)

In short, the United States has so much more poverty than other democracies in part because it spends so much less than they do on helping the poor. The United States certainly has the wealth to follow their example, but it has chosen not to do so, and a high poverty rate is the unfortunate result.

Who are the poor? Contrary to popular images, the most typical poor person in the United States is *white*: approximately 44% of poor people are white (non-Latino), 29% are Latino, 23% are black, and 4% are Asian (see [Figure 8.9 "Racial and Ethnic Composition of the Poor, 2009 (Percentage of Poor Persons in Each Group)"](#)). At the same time, race and ethnicity affect the chances of being poor: while only 9.4% of non-Latino whites are poor, 25.8% of African Americans, 12.5% of Asians, and 25.3% of Latinos (who may be of any race) are poor (see [Figure 8.10 "Race, Ethnicity, and Poverty, 2009 (Percentage of Each Group That Is Poor)"](#)). Thus African Americans and Latinos are almost three times as likely as non-Latino whites to be poor. (Because there are so many non-Latino whites in the United States, the plurality of poor people are non-Latino white, even if the percentage of whites who are poor is relatively low.) [Chapter 6 "Race and Ethnic Inequality"](#) further discusses the link between poverty and race and ethnicity.

Figure 8.9 Racial and Ethnic Composition of the Poor, 2009 (Percentage of Poor Persons in Each Group)
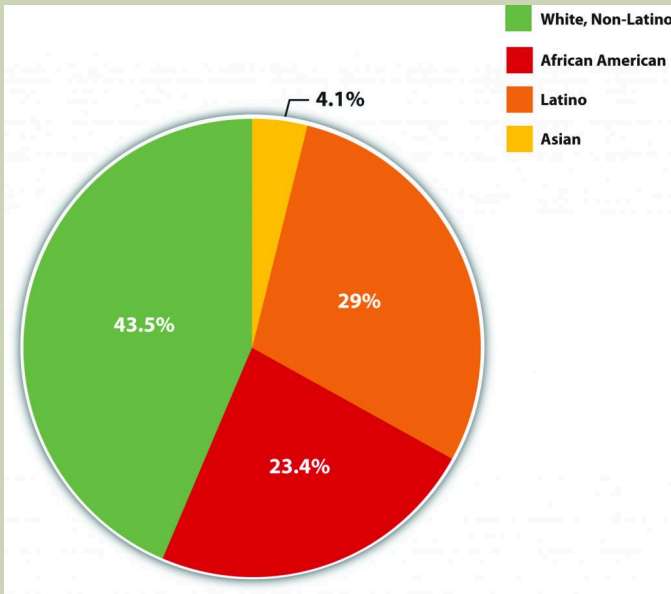
Source: Data from DeNavas-Walt, C., Proctor, B. D., & Smith, J. C. (2010). *Income, poverty, and health insurance coverage in the United States: 2009* (Current Population Report P60-238). Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau.

Figure 8.10 Race, Ethnicity, and Poverty, 2009 (Percentage of Each Group That Is Poor)
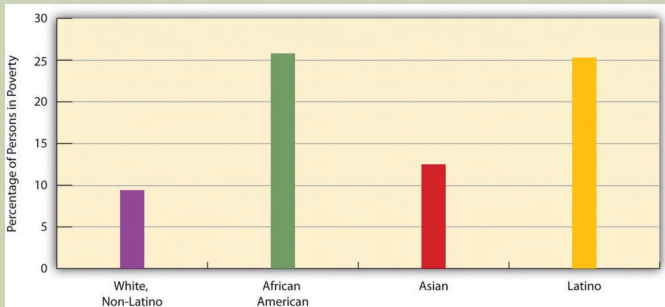
Source: Data from U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Survey. (2008). POV01: Age and sex of all people, family members and unrelated individuals iterated by income-to-poverty ratio and race. Retrieved from http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/macro/032008/pov/new01_100.htm.

Turning to age, almost 21% of children under age 18 are poor (amounting to more than 15 million children), including 35.7% of African American children and 33.1% of Latino children (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2010). The poverty rate for U.S. children is the highest in the Western world and 1.5 to 9 times greater than the corresponding rates in Canada and Western Europe (Mishel, Bernstein, & Shierholz, 2009). At the other end of the age distribution,

8.9% of people aged 65 or older are poor (amounting to about 3.4 million seniors). Turning around these U.S. figures, about 36% of all poor people in the United States are children, and about 8% of the poor are 65 or older. Thus some 44% of Americans living in poverty are children or the elderly.

The poverty rate for U.S. children is the highest in the Western world.

The type of family structure also makes a difference: whereas only 8.5% of children living with married parents live in poverty, 43% of those living with only their mother live in poverty (2007 data). This latter figure is about 32% for Asian children and for non-Latino white children and rises to slightly more than 50% for African American children and Latino children (Moore, Redd, Burkhauser, Mbawa, & Collins, 2009). As these latter numbers indicate, families headed by a single woman are much more likely to be poor. Poverty thus has a female face.

Explaining Poverty

Explanations of poverty focus on problems either within the poor themselves or in the society in which they live (Iceland, 2006). The first type of explanation follows logically from the functional theory of stratification and may be considered an "individual" explanation. The second type of explanation follows from conflict theory and is a structural explanation that focuses on problems in American society that produce poverty. As the "Sociology Making a Difference" box discusses, the explanation of poverty people favor affects how sympathetic they are to the poor.

According to the individual explanation, the poor have personal problems and deficiencies that are responsible for their poverty. In the past, the poor were thought to be biologically inferior, a view

that has not entirely faded, but today the much more common belief is that they lack the ambition and motivation to work hard and to achieve. According to the World Values Survey, 60% of Americans believe that people are poor "because they are lazy and lack will power." This percentage reflects the tendency of Americans to favor individual explanations of poverty (Davidson, 2009).

A more sophisticated version of this type of explanation is called the *culture of poverty* theory (Banfield, 1974; O. Lewis, 1966). According to this theory, the poor generally have beliefs and values that differ from those of the nonpoor and that doom them to continued poverty. For example, they are said to be impulsive and to live for the present rather than the future. Critics say this view exaggerates the degree to which the poor and nonpoor do in fact hold different values and ignores discrimination and other problems in American society (Iceland, 2006).

According to the second, structural explanation, U.S. poverty stems from problems in American society that lead to lack of equal opportunity. These problems include (a) racial, ethnic, gender, and age discrimination; (b) lack of good schooling and adequate health care; and (c) structural changes in the American economic system, such as the departure of manufacturing companies from American cities in the 1980s and 1990s (Iceland, 2003). These problems help create a vicious cycle of poverty in which children of the poor are often fated to end up in poverty or near-poverty themselves as adults.

Sociology Making a Difference

Attributions for Poverty and Public Education Campaigns

The text discusses two general explanations for poverty. The first attributes poverty to lack of willpower and other problems among the poor themselves, while the second attributes poverty to structural obstacles and lack of opportunity in the larger society. As the text notes, Americans tend to favor the first explanation more than the second explanation. They also tend to disagree that the government should do more to help the poor. Could these two sets of views be linked? If so, what would such a link imply for poverty policy?

Sociological research finds that the explanation we favor for poverty—the attribution for poverty we hold—affects whether we want the government to take an active role in helping the poor (Bradley & Cole, 2002). People who attribute poverty to problems in the larger society are much more likely than those who attribute it to deficiencies among the poor to believe that the government should take such a role. The attribution for poverty we hold

presumably affects the amount of sympathy we have for the poor, and our sympathy, or lack of sympathy, in turn affects our views about the government's role in helping the poor. As sociologist Theresa C. Davidson (2009) observes, "Beliefs about the causes of poverty shape attitudes toward the poor."

This body of research strongly suggests that public support for government aid for the poor is weak because so much of the public attributes poverty to failings among the poor themselves. If so, the public might very well begin to endorse greater government aid if its attribution for poverty became more structural instead of individual. Public education campaigns that call attention to the lack of opportunity and other structural problems that account for poverty thus might further poverty policy by beginning to change public perceptions of the poor.

Most sociologists favor the structural explanation. As our earlier Monopoly example illustrates, poverty greatly blocks opportunities for success. Later chapters document racial and ethnic discrimination, lack of adequate schooling and health care, and other problems that make it difficult to rise out of poverty. On the other hand, some ethnographic research supports the individual explanation by showing that the poor do have certain values and follow certain practices that augment their plight (Small, Harding, & Lamont, 2010). For example, the poor have higher rates of cigarette smoking (34% of people with annual incomes between $6,000 and $11,999 smoke, compared to only 13% of those with incomes $90,000 or greater (Goszkowski, 2008), which helps lead them to have more serious health problems. Adopting an integrated perspective, some researchers say these values and practices are in many ways the result of poverty itself (Small, Harding, & Lamont,

2010). These scholars concede a culture of poverty does exist, but they also say it exists because it helps the poor cope daily with the structural effects of being poor. If these effects lead to a culture of poverty, they add, then poverty becomes self-perpetuating. If poverty is both cultural and structural in origin, these scholars say, a comprehensive national effort must be launched to improve the lives of the people in the "other America."

The Effects of Poverty

However poverty is explained, it has important and enduring effects, which later chapters will continue to discuss. For now, we can list some of the major consequences of poverty (and near-poverty) in the United States. As we do so, recall the sociological perspective's emphasis on how our social backgrounds influence our attitudes, behaviors, and life chances. This influence on life chances is quite evident when we look at some of the effects of poverty (Moore, Redd, Burkhauser, Mbawa, & Collins, 2009; Iceland, 2006; D. Lindsey, 2009):

Poor children are more likely to have inadequate nutrition and to experience health, behavioral, and cognitive problems.

- The poor are at greater risk for family problems, including divorce and domestic violence. The stress of being poor is thought to be a major reason for these problems.
- The poor are also at greater risk for health problems, including infant mortality, earlier mortality during adulthood, mental illness, and inadequate medical care. Many poor people lack health insurance. Poor children are more likely to have inadequate nutrition and to suffer health, behavioral, and cognitive problems. These problems in turn impair their ability to do well in school and land stable employment as adults,

helping to ensure that poverty will persist across generations.

- Poor children typically go to rundown schools with inadequate facilities where they receive inadequate schooling. They are much less likely than nonpoor children to graduate from high school or to go to college. Their lack of education in turn restricts them and their own children to poverty, once again helping to ensure a vicious cycle of continuing poverty across generations.

- The poor are, not surprisingly, more likely to be homeless than the nonpoor but also more likely to live in dilapidated housing and unable to buy their own homes. Many poor families spend more than half their income on rent. The lack of adequate housing for the poor remains a major national problem.

Key Takeaways

- Inequality refers to the gap between the rich and the poor. The United States has a high degree of inequality.

- Although the official poverty line measure has been criticized for several reasons, in 2007 about 12.5% of the U.S. population, or more than 37 million people, were living in official poverty.

- About 18% of U.S. children live in official poverty; this rate is the highest in the Western world.

- Explanations of poverty focus on problems either within the poor themselves or in the society in which they live. These two types of explanations reflect the functionalist and conflict views, respectively.

- Poverty has several important and enduring consequences, including many kinds of health

problems.

For Your Review

1. Do you agree with the criticism of the official measure of poverty in the United States, or do you think it is probably accurate enough because it has been used since the 1960s? Explain your answer.
2. Which explanation of poverty makes the most sense to you? Why?

Reducing U.S. Poverty: What Sociology Suggests

It is easy to understand why the families in Wichita,

Kansas, discussed in the news story that began this chapter might be poor in the middle of a deep economic recession. Yet a sociological understanding of poverty emphasizes its structural basis in bad times and good times alike. Poverty is rooted in social and economic problems of the larger society rather than in the lack of willpower, laziness, or other moral failings of poor individuals themselves. Individuals born into poverty suffer from a lack of opportunity from their first months up through adulthood, and poverty becomes a self-perpetuating, vicious cycle. To the extent a culture of poverty might exist, it is best seen as a logical and perhaps even inevitable outcome of, and adaptation to, the problem of being poor and not the primary force driving poverty itself.

This sort of understanding suggests that efforts to reduce poverty must address first and foremost the structural basis for poverty while not ignoring certain beliefs and practices of the poor that also make a difference. An extensive literature on poverty policy outlines many types of policies and strategies that follow this dual approach (Moore, Redd, Burkhauser, Mbawa, & Collins, 2009; Iceland, 2006; D. Lindsey, 2009; Cancian & Danziger, 2009; Turner & Rawlings, 2005). If these were fully adopted, funded, and implemented, they would offer great promise for reducing poverty. As two poverty experts recently wrote, "We are optimistic that poverty can be reduced significantly in the long term if the public and policymakers can muster the political will to pursue a range of promising antipoverty policies" (Cancian & Danziger, 2009, p. 32). Although a full discussion of these policies is beyond the scope of this chapter, the following measures

are commonly cited as holding strong potential for reducing poverty:

1. Adopt a national "full employment" policy for the poor, involving federally funded job training and public works programs.
2. Increase federal aid for the working poor, including earned income credits and child care subsidies for those with children.
3. Establish well-funded early childhood intervention programs, including home visitations by trained professionals, for poor families.
4. Improve the schools that poor children attend and the schooling they receive and expand early childhood education programs for poor children.
5. Provide better nutrition and health services for poor families with young children.
6. Strengthen efforts to reduce teenage pregnancies.

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Summary

1.   Almost all societies are stratified according to wealth, power, prestige, and other resources the societies value. Societies are often categorized into systems of stratification according to the degrees of inequality and vertical social mobility that characterize them.

2.   Systems of stratification include slave societies, caste societies, and class societies, with class societies the most open in terms of vertical social mobility. Classless societies exist in theory, according to Karl Marx and other thinkers, but have never been achieved in reality. Certain social democracies in Western Europe have succeeded in limiting their degree of inequality while preserving political freedom.

3.   The two major explanations of stratification are the functionalist and conflict views. Functionalist theory says that stratification is necessary and inevitable because of the need to induce people with the needed knowledge and skills to decide to pursue the

careers that are most important to society. Conflict theory says stratification exists because of discrimination against, and blocked opportunities for, the have-nots of society. A set of ideological beliefs supports the existence and perpetuation of systems of stratification and domination. In the United States, these beliefs include the ideas surrounding the American Dream ethos that even poor people can succeed by working hard and pulling themselves up by their bootstraps.

4.   Social class in the United States is usually measured in terms of socioeconomic status, but some conflict theory scholars prefer measures more related to Marx's concept of the ownership of the means of production. Many typologies of the American class structure exist, but four commonly delineated classes include the upper class, middle class, working class, and lower class or the poor. Within the upper class and middle class are subclasses distinguished by their incomes and lifestyles.

5.   Many studies examine the degree of vertical social mobility in the United States. Some vertical mobility does exist, but overall it's fairly small. Your family's socioeconomic status (SES) greatly affects your own chances for success in life; people on the bottom of society usually can move up only a little bit, if at all.

6.   The United States has the highest degree of economic inequality in the industrial world, and its degree of inequality has increased in the last two decades. Although our poverty rate declined in the late 1990s, it was as high as in the middle 1960s,

before the war on poverty began reducing the poverty rate.

7. Poverty rates are strongly related to factors such as race and ethnicity, age, and gender. Although most poor people are white, people of color have higher poverty rates than whites. About 40% of all poor people are children under the age of 18. Single-parent households headed by women have especially high poverty rates.

8. In explaining poverty, observers attribute it either to personal deficiencies of the poor themselves or instead to structural problems in American society such as racial discrimination and rundown schools that block the ability and opportunity of the poor to improve their lot. Poverty has dire effects for the poor in many areas of life, including illness and health care, schooling, and housing.

Using Sociology

It is Thanksgiving dinner, and your family and other relatives are gathered around a very large table. Having taken a few sociology courses, you subscribe to the structural explanation for poverty presented in this chapter. One of your cousins asks if you have any career plans after college, and you reply that you're thinking of becoming a community activist in your home state to help the poor deal with the many problems they have. Your

cousin is surprised to hear this and says that poor people are just lazy and don't like to work. A silence sets over the table, and everyone is staring at you, wondering what you will say in response to your cousin. What do you say?

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CHAPTER 5: POVERTY

Social Problems in the News

"Survey: More US Kids Go to School Hungry," the headline said. As the US economy continued to struggle, a nationwide survey of 638 public school teachers in grades K–8 conducted for Share Our Strength, a nonprofit organization working to end childhood hunger, found alarming evidence of children coming to school with empty stomachs. More than two-thirds of the teachers said they had students who "regularly come to school too hungry to learn—some having had no dinner the night before," according to the news article. More than 60 percent of the teachers said the problem had worsened during the past year, and more than 40 percent called it a "serious" problem. Many of the teachers said they spent their own money to buy food for their students. As an elementary school teacher explained, "I've had lots of students come to

> school—not just one or two—who put their heads down and cry because they haven't eaten since lunch yesterday" (United Press International, 2011).

The United States is one of the richest nations in the world. Many Americans live in luxury or at least are comfortably well-off. Yet, as this poignant news story of childhood hunger reminds us, many Americans also live in poverty or near poverty. This chapter explains why poverty exists and why the US poverty rate is so high, and it discusses the devastating consequences of poverty for the millions of Americans who live in or near poverty. It also examines poverty in the poorest nations of the world and outlines efforts for reducing poverty in the United States and these nations.

Although this chapter will paint a disturbing picture of poverty, there is still cause for hope. As we shall see, the "war on poverty" that began in the United States during the 1960s dramatically reduced poverty. Inspired by books with titles like *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (Harrington, 1962) and *In the Midst of Plenty: The Poor in America* (Bagdikian, 1964) that described the plight of the poor in heartbreaking detail, the federal government established various funding programs and other policies that greatly lowered the poverty rate in less than a decade (Schwartz, 1984). Since the 1960s and 1970s, however, the United States has cut back on these programs, and the poor are no longer on the national agenda. Other wealthy democracies provide much more funding and many more services for their poor than does the United States, and their poverty rates are much lower than ours.

Still, the history of the war on poverty and the experience of these other nations both demonstrate that US poverty can be reduced with appropriate policies and programs. If the United States were to go back to the future by remembering its earlier war on poverty and by learning from other Western democracies, it could again lower

poverty and help millions of Americans lead better, healthier, and more productive lives.

But why should we care about poverty in the first place? As this chapter discusses, many politicians and much of the public blame the poor for being poor, and they oppose increasing federal spending to help the poor and even want to reduce such spending. As poverty expert Mark R. Rank (Rank, 2011) summarizes this way of thinking, "All too often we view poverty as someone else's problem." Rank says this unsympathetic view is shortsighted because, as he puts it, "poverty affects us all" (Rank, 2011). This is true, he explains, for at least two reasons.

First, the United States spends much more money than it needs to because of the consequences of poverty. Poor people experience worse health, family problems, higher crime rates, and many other problems, all of which our nation spends billions of dollars annually to address. In fact, childhood poverty has been estimated to cost the US economy an estimated $500 billion annually because of the problems it leads to, including unemployment, low-paid employment, higher crime rates, and physical and mental health problems (Eckholm, 2007). If the US poverty rate were no higher than that of other democracies, billions of tax dollars and other resources would be saved.

Second, the majority of Americans can actually expect to be poor or near poor at some point in their lives, with about 75 percent of Americans in the 20–75 age range living in poverty or near poverty for at least one year in their lives. As Rank (Rank, 2011) observes, most Americans "will find ourselves below the poverty line and using a social safety net program at some point." Because poverty costs the United States so much money and because so many people experience poverty, says Rank, everyone should want the United States to do everything possible to reduce poverty.

Sociologist John Iceland (Iceland, 2006) adds two additional reasons for why everyone should care about poverty and want it reduced. First, a high rate of poverty impairs our nation's economic progress: When a large number of people cannot afford to purchase

goods and services, economic growth is more difficult to achieve. Second, poverty produces crime and other social problems that affect people across the socioeconomic ladder. Reductions in poverty would help not only the poor but also people who are not poor.

We begin our examination of poverty by discussing how poverty is measured and how much poverty exists.

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5.1 The Measurement and Extent of Poverty

Learning Objectives

1. Understand how official poverty in the United States is measured.
2. Describe problems in the measurement of official poverty.
3. Describe the extent of official poverty.

When US officials became concerned about poverty during the 1960s, they quickly realized they needed to find out how much poverty we had. To do so, a measure of official poverty, or a **poverty line**, was needed. A government economist, Mollie Orshanky, first calculated this line in 1963 by multiplying the cost of a very minimal diet by three, as a 1955 government study had determined that the typical American family spent one-third of its income on food. Thus a family whose cash income is lower than three times the cost of a very minimal diet is considered officially poor.

This way of calculating the official poverty line has not changed since 1963. It is thus out of date for many reasons. For example, many expenses, such as heat and electricity, child care, transportation, and health care, now occupy a greater percentage of the typical family's budget than was true in 1963. In addition, this official measure ignores a family's noncash income from benefits such as food stamps and tax credits. As a national measure, the

poverty line also fails to take into account regional differences in the cost of living. All these problems make the official measurement of poverty highly suspect. As one poverty expert observes, "The official measure no longer corresponds to reality. It doesn't get either side of the equation right—how much the poor have or how much they need. No one really trusts the data" (DeParle, et. al., 2011). We'll return to this issue shortly.

The measure of official poverty began in 1963 and stipulates that a family whose income is lower than three times the cost of a minimal diet is considered officially poor. This measure has not changed since 1963 even though family expenses have risen greatly in many areas.

Wikimedia Commons – public domain.

The poverty line is adjusted annually for inflation and takes into account the number of people in a family: The larger the family size, the higher the poverty line. In 2010, the poverty line for a nonfarm family of four (two adults, two children) was $22,213. A four-person family earning even one more dollar than $22,213 in 2010 was *not* officially poor, even though its "extra" income hardly

lifted it out of dire economic straits. Poverty experts have calculated a no-frills budget that enables a family to meet its basic needs in food, clothing, shelter, and so forth; this budget is about twice the poverty line. Families with incomes between the poverty line and twice the poverty line (or *twice poverty*) are barely making ends meet, but they are not considered officially poor. When we talk here about the poverty level, then, keep in mind that we are talking only about *official* poverty and that there are many families and individuals living in near poverty who have trouble meeting their basic needs, especially when they face unusually high medical expenses, motor vehicle expenses, or the like. For this reason, many analysts think families need incomes twice as high as the federal poverty level just to get by (Wright, et. al., 2011). They thus use *twice-poverty* data (i.e., family incomes below twice the poverty line) to provide a more accurate understanding of how many Americans face serious financial difficulties, even if they are not living in official poverty.

The Extent of Poverty

With this caveat in mind, how many Americans are poor? The US Census Bureau gives us some answers that use the traditional, official measure of poverty developed in 1963. In 2010, 15.1 percent of the US population, or 46.2 million Americans, lived in official poverty (DeNavas-Walt, et. al., 2011). This percentage represented a decline from the early 1990s but was higher than 2000 and even higher than the rate in the late 1960s (see [Figure 2.1 "US Poverty, 1959–2010"](#)). If we were winning the war on poverty in the 1960s (notice the sharp

drop in the 1960s in [Figure 2.1 "US Poverty, 1959–2010"](#)), since then poverty has fought us to a standstill.

Figure 2.1 US Poverty, 1959–2010
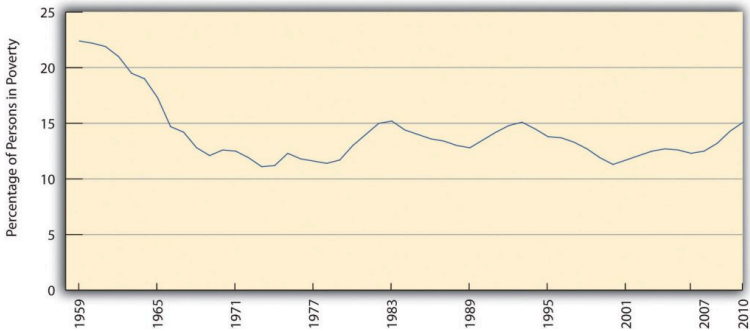
Another way of understanding the extent of poverty is to consider **episodic poverty**, defined by the Census Bureau as being poor for at least two consecutive months in some time period. From 2004 to 2007, the last years for which data are available, almost one-third of the US public, equal to about 95 million people, were poor for at least two consecutive months, although only 2.2 percent were poor for all three years (DeNavas-Walt, et al., 2010). As these figures indicate, people go into and out of poverty, but even those who go out of it do not usually move very far from it. And as we have seen, the majority of Americans can expect to experience poverty or near poverty at some point in their lives.

The problems in the official poverty measure that were noted earlier have led the Census Bureau to develop a *Supplemental*

Poverty Measure. This measure takes into account the many family expenses in addition to food; it also takes into account geographic differences in the cost of living, taxes paid and tax credits received, and the provision of food stamps, Medicaid, and certain other kinds of government aid. This new measure yields an estimate of poverty that is higher than the rather simplistic official poverty measure that, as noted earlier, is based solely on the size of a family and the cost of food and the amount of a family's cash income. According to this new measure, the 2010 poverty rate was 16.0 percent, equal to 49.1 million Americans (Short, 2011). Because the official poverty measure identified 46.2 million people as poor, the new, more accurate measure increased the number of poor people in the United States by almost 3 million. Without the help of Social Security, food stamps, and other federal programs, at least 25 million additional people would be classified as poor (Sherman, 2011). These programs thus are essential in keeping many people above the poverty level, even if they still have trouble making ends meet and even though the poverty rate remains unacceptably high.

A final figure is worth noting. Recall that many poverty experts think that twice-poverty data—the percentage and number of people living in families with incomes below twice the official poverty level—are a better gauge than the official poverty level of the actual extent of poverty, broadly defined, in the United States. Using the twice-poverty threshold, about one-third of the US population, or more than 100 million Americans, live in poverty or near poverty (Pereyra, 2011). Those in near poverty are just one crisis—losing a job or sustaining a serious illness or injury—away from poverty. Twice-poverty data paint a very discouraging picture.

- The official poverty rate is based on the size of a family and a minimal food budget; this measure underestimates the true extent of poverty.
- The official poverty rate in 2010 was 15.1 percent, equal to more than 46 million Americans.
- About one-third of the US population, or more than 100 million Americans, have incomes no higher than twice the poverty line.

For Your Review

1. Write a short essay that summarizes the problems by which the official poverty rate is determined.
2. Sit down with some classmates and estimate what a family of four (two parents, two young children) in your area would have to pay annually for food, clothing, shelter, energy, and other necessities of life. What figure do you end up with? How does this sum of money compare with the official poverty line of $22,213 in 2010 for a family of four?

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5.2 Who the Poor Are: Social Patterns of Poverty

Who are the poor? Although the official poverty rate in 2010 was 15.1 percent, this rate differs by the important sociodemographic characteristics of race/ethnicity, gender, and age, and it also differs by region of the nation and by family structure. The poverty rate differences based on these variables are critical to understanding the nature and social patterning of poverty in the United States. We look at each of these variables in turn with 2010 census data (DeNavas-Walt, et, al., 2011).

Race/Ethnicity

Here is a quick quiz; please circle the correct answer.

- Most poor people in the United States are

  1. Black/African American
  2. Latino
  3. Native American
  4. Asian
  5. White

What did you circle? If you are like the majority of people who answer a similar question in public opinion surveys, you would have circled *a. Black/African American.* When Americans think about poor people, they tend to picture African Americans (White, 2007). This popular image is thought to reduce the public's sympathy for poor people and to lead them to oppose increased government aid for the poor. The public's views on these matters are, in turn, thought to play a key role in government poverty policy. It is thus essential for the public to have an accurate understanding of the racial/ethnic patterning of poverty.

The most typical poor people in the United States are non-Latino whites. These individuals comprise 42.4 percent of all poor Americans.

Franco Folini – [Homeless guys with dogs](#) – CC BY-SA 2.0.

Unfortunately, the public's racial image of poor people is mistaken, as census data reveal that *the most typical poor person is white (non-Latino)*. To be more precise, 42.4 percent of poor people are white (non-Latino), 28.7 percent are Latino, 23.1 percent are black, and 3.7 percent are Asian (see [Figure 2.2 "Racial and Ethnic Composition of the Poor, 2010 (Percentage of Poor Persons Who Belong to Each Group)"](#)). As these figures show, non-Latino whites certainly comprise the greatest number of the American poor. Turning these percentages into numbers, they account for 19.6 million of the 46.2 million poor Americans.

It is also true, though, that race and ethnicity affect the chances of being poor. While only 9.9 percent of non-Latino whites are poor, 27.4 percent of African Americans, 12.1 percent of Asians, and 26.6 percent of Latinos (who may be of any race) are poor (see [Figure 2.3 "Race, Ethnicity, and Poverty, 2010 (Percentage of Each Group That Is Poor)"](#)). Thus African Americans and Latinos are almost three times as likely as non-Latino whites to be poor. (Because there are so many non-Latino whites in the United States, the greatest

number of poor people are non-Latino white, even if the percentage of whites who are poor is relatively low.) The higher poverty rates of people of color are so striking and important that they have been termed the "colors of poverty" (Lin & Harris, 2008).

Figure 2.2 Racial and Ethnic Composition of the Poor, 2010 (Percentage of Poor Persons Who Belong to Each Group)
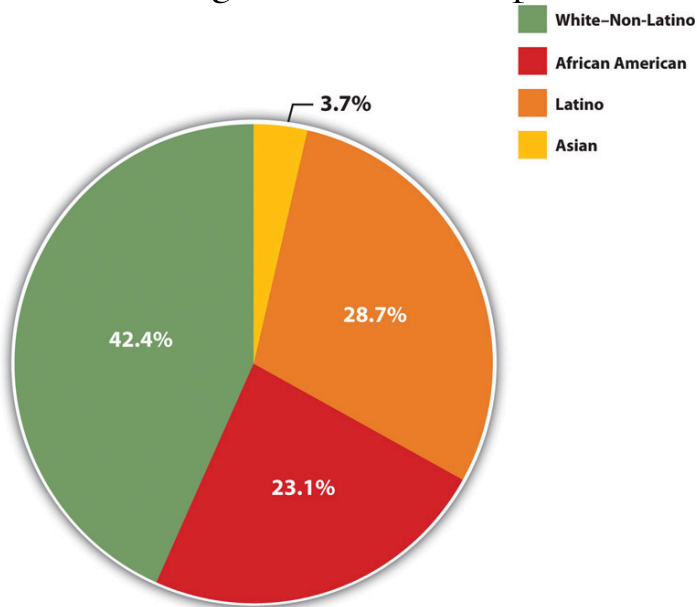
Source: Data from DeNavas-Walt, C., Proctor, B. D., & Smith, J. C. (2011). *Income, poverty,*

and health insurance coverage in the United States: 2010 (Current Population Report P60-239). Washington, DC: US Census Bureau.

Figure 2.3 Race, Ethnicity, and Poverty, 2010 (Percentage of Each Group That Is Poor)
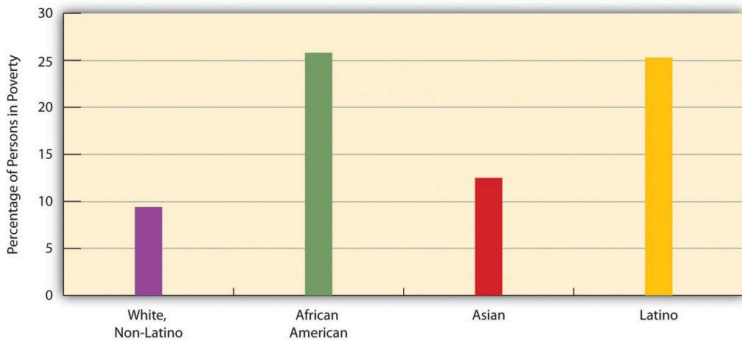
Source: Data from DeNavas-Walt, C., Proctor, B. D., & Smith, J. C. (2011). *Income, poverty, and health insurance coverage in the United States: 2010* (Current Population Report P60-239). Washington, DC: US Census Bureau.

Gender

One thing that many women know all too well is that women are more likely than men to be poor. According to the census, 16.2 percent of all females live in poverty, compared to only 14.0 percent of all males. These figures translate to a large gender gap in the actual number of poor people, as 25.2 million women and girls live in poverty, compared to only 21.0 million men and boys, for a difference of 4.2 million people. The high rate of female poverty is called the *feminization of poverty* (Iceland, 2006). We will see additional evidence of this pattern when we look at the section on family structure that follows.

Age

Turning to age, at any one time 22 percent of children under age 18 are poor (amounting to 16.4 million children), a figure that rises to about 39 percent of African American children and 35 percent of Latino children. About 37 percent of all children live in poverty for at least one year before turning 18 (Ratcliffe & McKernan, 2010). The poverty rate for US children is the highest of all wealthy democracies and in fact is 1.5 to 9 times greater than the corresponding rates in Canada and Western Europe (Mishel, et. al., 2009). As high as the US childhood poverty rate is, twice-poverty data again paint an even more discouraging picture. Children living

in families with incomes below twice the official poverty level are called *low-income children*, and their families are called *low-income families*. Almost 44 percent of American children, or some 32.5 million kids, live in such families (Addy & Wright, 2012). Almost two-thirds of African American children and Latino children live in low-income families.

The poverty rate for US children is the highest in the Western world.

At the other end of the age distribution, 9 percent of people aged 65 or older are poor (amounting to about 3.5 million seniors). Turning around these age figures, almost 36 percent of all poor people in the United States are children, and almost 8 percent of the poor are 65 or older. Thus more than 43.4 percent of Americans living in poverty are children or the elderly.

Region

Poverty rates differ around the country. Some states have higher poverty rates than other states, and some counties within a state are poorer than other counties within that state. A basic way of understanding geographical differences in poverty is to examine the poverty rates of the four major regions of the nation. When we do this, the South is the poorest region, with a poverty rate of 16.9 percent. The West is next (15.3 percent), followed by the Midwest (13.9 percent) and then the Northeast (12.8 percent). The South's high poverty rate is thought to be an important reason for the high rate of illnesses and other health problems it experiences compared to the other regions (Ramshaw, 2011).

Family Structure

There are many types of family structures, including a married couple living with their children; an unmarried couple living with one or more children; a household with children headed by only one parent, usually a woman; a household with two adults and no children; and a household with only one adult living alone. Across the nation, poverty rates differ from one type of family structure to another.

Not surprisingly, poverty rates are higher in families with one adult than in those with two adults (because they often are bringing in two incomes), and, in one-adult families, they are higher in families headed by a woman than in those headed by a man (because women generally have lower incomes than men). Of all families headed by just a woman, 31.6 percent live in poverty, compared to only 15.8 percent of families headed by just a man. In contrast, only 6.2 percent of families headed by a married couple live in poverty (see Figure 2.4 "Family Structure and Poverty Rate (Percentage of Each Type of Structure That Lives in Poverty)"). The figure for female-headed families provides additional evidence for the feminization of poverty concept introduced earlier.

Figure 2.4 Family Structure and Poverty Rate (Percentage of Each

Type of Structure That Lives in Poverty)
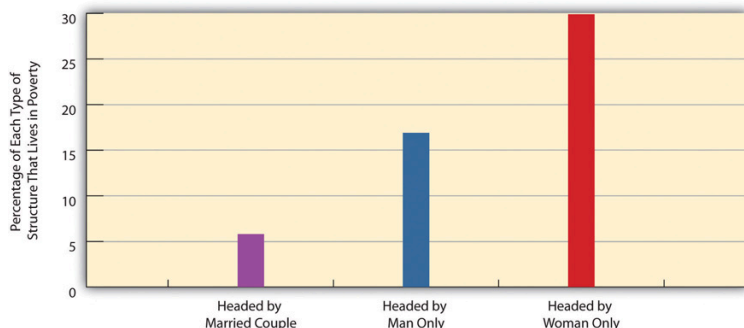
Source: Data from DeNavas-Walt, C., Proctor, B. D., & Smith, J. C. (2011). *Income, poverty, and health insurance coverage in the United States: 2010* (Current Population Report P60-239). Washington, DC: US Census Bureau.

We saw earlier that 22 percent of American children are poor. This figure varies according to the type of family structure in which the children live. Whereas only 11.6 percent of children residing with married parents live in poverty, 46.9 percent of those living with only their mother live in poverty. This latter figure rises to 53.3 percent for African American children and 57.0 percent for Latino children (US Census Bureau, 2012). Yet regardless of their race or ethnicity, children living just with their mothers are at particularly great risk of living in poverty.

Labor Force Status

As this chapter discusses later, many Americans think the poor are lazy and lack the motivation to work and, as is often said, "really could work if they wanted to." However, government data on the poor show that most poor people are, in fact, either working, unemployed but looking for work, or unable to work because of their age or health. Table 2.1 "Poverty and Labor Force Participation, 2010" shows the relevant data. We discuss these numbers in some detail because of their importance, so please follow along carefully.

Table 2.1 Poverty and Labor Force Participation, 2010

Total number of poor people	46,180,000
Number of poor people under age 18	16,401,000
Number of poor people ages 65 and older	3,521,000
Number of poor people ages 18–64	26,258,000
Number of poor people ages 18–64 who were:	
Working full- or part-time	9,053,000
Unemployed but looking for work	3,616,000
Disabled	4,247,000
In the armed forces	77,000
Able-bodied but not in the labor force	9,254,000

Source: Data from US Census Bureau. (2010). Current population survey (CPS) table creator. Retrieved from http://www.census.gov/cps/data/cpstablecreator.html.

Let's examine this table to see the story it tells. Of the roughly 46.2 million poor people, almost 20 million were either under age 18 or at least 65. Because of their ages, we would not expect them to

be working. Of the remaining 26.3 million poor adults ages 18–64, almost 17 million, or about two-thirds, fell into one of these categories: (a) they worked full-time or part-time, (b) they were unemployed but looking for work during a year of very high unemployment due to the nation's faltering economy, (c) they did not work because of a disability, or (d) they were in the armed forces. Subtracting all these adults leaves about 9.3 million able-bodied people ages 18–64.

Doing some arithmetic, we thus see that almost 37 million of the 46.2 million poor people we started with, or 80 percent, with were either working or unemployed but looking for work, too young or too old to work, disabled, or in the armed forces. It would thus be inaccurate to describe the vast majority of the poor as lazy and lacking the motivation to work.

What about the 9.3 million able-bodied poor people who are ages 18–64 but not in the labor force, who compose only 20 percent of the poor to begin with? Most of them were either taking care of small children or elderly parents or other relatives, retired for health reasons, or in school (US Census Bureau, 2012); some also left the labor force out of frustration and did not look for work (and thus were not counted officially as unemployed). Taking all these numbers and categories into account, it turns out that the percentage of poor people who "really could work if they wanted to" is rather miniscule, and the common belief that they "really could work if they wanted to" is nothing more than a myth.

People Making a Difference

Feeding "Motel Kids" Near Disneyland

Just blocks from Disneyland in Anaheim, California, more than 1,000 families live in cheap motels frequently used by drug dealers and prostitutes. Because they cannot afford the deposit for an apartment, the motels are their only alternative to homelessness. As Bruno Serato, a local Italian restaurant owner, observed, "Some people are stuck, they have no money. They need to live in that room. They've lost everything they have. They have no other choice. No choice."

Serato learned about these families back in 2005, when he saw a boy at the local Boys & Girls Club eating a bag of potato chips as his only food for dinner. He was told that the boy lived with his family in a motel and that the Boys & Girls Club had a "motel kids" program that drove children in vans after school to their motels. Although the children got free breakfast and lunch at school, they often went hungry at night. Serato soon began serving pasta dinners to some seventy children at the club every evening, a number that

had grown by spring 2011 to almost three hundred children nightly. Serato also pays to have the children transported to the club for their dinners, and he estimates that the food and transportation cost him about $2,000 monthly. His program had served more than 300,000 pasta dinners to motel kids by 2011.

Two of the children who eat Serato's pasta are Carlos and Anthony Gomez, 12, who live in a motel room with the other members of their family. Their father was grateful for the pasta: "I no longer worry as much, about them [coming home] and there being no food. I know that they eat over there at [the] Boys & Girls Club."

Bruno Serato is merely happy to be helping out. "They're customers," he explains. "My favorite customers" (Toner, 2011).

For more information about Bruno Serato's efforts, visit his charity site at www.thecaterinasclub.org.

Key Takeaways

- Although people of color have higher poverty rates than non-Latino whites, the most typical poor person in the United States is non-Latino white.
- The US childhood poverty rate is the highest of all Western democracies.
- Labor force participation data indicate that the belief that poor people lack motivation to work is in

fact a myth.

For Your Review

1.   Why do you think the majority of Americans assume poor people lack the motivation to work?
2.   Explain to a friend how labor force participation data indicate that it is inaccurate to think that poor people lack the motivation to work.

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5.3 Explaining Poverty

Learning Objectives

1. Describe the assumptions of the functionalist and conflict views of stratification and of poverty.
2. Explain the focus of symbolic interactionist work on poverty.
3. Understand the difference between the individualist and structural explanations of poverty.

Why does poverty exist, and why and how do poor people end up being poor? Sociological perspectives provide some possible answers to these questions through their attempt to explain why American society is *stratified*—that is, why it has a range of wealth ranging from the extremely wealthy to the extremely poor. We review what these perspectives say generally about **social stratification** (rankings of people based on wealth and other resources a society values) before turning to explanations focusing specifically on poverty.

In general, the functionalist perspective and conflict perspective both try to explain why social stratification exists and endures, while the symbolic interactionist perspective discusses the differences that stratification produces for everyday interaction. [Table 2.2 "Theory Snapshot"](#) summarizes these three approaches.

Table 2.2 Theory Snapshot

Theoretical perspective	Major assumptions
Functionalism	Stratification is necessary to induce people with special intelligence, knowledge, and skills to enter the most important occupations. For this reason, stratification is necessary and inevitable.
Conflict theory	Stratification results from lack of opportunity and from discrimination and prejudice against the poor, women, and people of color. It is neither necessary nor inevitable.
Symbolic interactionism	Stratification affects people's beliefs, lifestyles, daily interaction, and conceptions of themselves.

The Functionalist View

Functionalist theory assumes that society's structures and processes exist because they serve important functions for society's stability and continuity. In line with this view, functionalist theorists in sociology assume that stratification exists because it also serves important functions for society. This explanation was developed more than sixty years ago by Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore (Davis & Moore, 1945) in the form of several logical assumptions that imply stratification is both necessary and inevitable. When applied to American society, their assumptions would be as follows:

1. **Some jobs are more important than other jobs.** For example, the job of a brain surgeon is more important than the job of

shoe shining.

2. **Some jobs require more skills and knowledge than other jobs.** To stay with our example, it takes more skills and knowledge to perform brain surgery than to shine shoes.

3. **Relatively few people have the ability to acquire the skills and knowledge that are needed to do these important, highly skilled jobs.** Most of us would be able to do a decent job of shining shoes, but very few of us would be able to become brain surgeons.

4. **To encourage the people with the skills and knowledge to do the important, highly skilled jobs, society must promise them higher incomes or other rewards.** If this is true, some people automatically end up higher in society's ranking system than others, and stratification is thus necessary and inevitable.

To illustrate their assumptions, say we have a society where shining shoes and doing brain surgery both give us incomes of $150,000 per year. (This example is *very* hypothetical, but please keep reading.) If you decide to shine shoes, you can begin making this money at age 16, but if you decide to become a brain surgeon, you will not start making this same amount until about age 35, as you must first go to college and medical school and then acquire several more years of medical training. While you have spent nineteen additional years beyond age 16 getting this education and training and taking out tens of thousands of dollars in student loans, you could have spent those years shining shoes and making $150,000 a year, or $2.85 million overall. Which job would you choose?

Functional theory argues that the promise of very high incomes is necessary to encourage talented people to pursue important careers such as surgery. If physicians and shoe shiners made the same high income, would enough people decide to become physicians?

Public Domain Images – CC0 public domain.

As this example suggests, many people might not choose to become brain surgeons unless considerable financial and other rewards awaited them. By extension, we might not have enough people filling society's important jobs unless they know they will be similarly rewarded. If this is true, we must have stratification. And if we must have stratification, then that means some people will have much less money than other people. If stratification is inevitable, then, poverty is also inevitable. The functionalist view further implies that if people are poor, it is because they do not have the ability to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary for the important, high-paying jobs.

The functionalist view sounds very logical, but a few years after Davis and Moore published their theory, other sociologists pointed

out some serious problems in their argument (Tumin, 1953; Wrong, 1959).

First, it is difficult to compare the importance of many types of jobs. For example, which is more important, doing brain surgery or mining coal? Although you might be tempted to answer with brain surgery, if no coal were mined then much of our society could not function. In another example, which job is more important, attorney or professor? (Be careful how you answer this one!)

Second, the functionalist explanation implies that the most important jobs have the highest incomes and the least important jobs the lowest incomes, but many examples, including the ones just mentioned, counter this view. Coal miners make much less money than physicians, and professors, for better or worse, earn much less on the average than lawyers. A professional athlete making millions of dollars a year earns many times the income of the president of the United States, but who is more important to the nation? Elementary school teachers do a very important job in our society, but their salaries are much lower than those of sports agents, advertising executives, and many other people whose jobs are far less essential.

Third, the functionalist view assumes that people move up the economic ladder based on their abilities, skills, knowledge, and, more generally, their merit. This implies that if they do not move up the ladder, they lack the necessary merit. However, this view ignores the fact that much of our stratification stems from lack of equal opportunity. As later chapters in this book discuss, because of their race, ethnicity, gender, and class standing at birth, some people have less opportunity than others to acquire the skills and training they need to fill the types of jobs addressed by the functionalist approach.

Finally, the functionalist explanation might make sense up to a point, but it does not justify the extremes of wealth and poverty found in the United States and other nations. Even if we do have to promise higher incomes to get enough people to become physicians, does that mean we also need the amount of poverty we have? Do CEOs of corporations really need to make millions of

dollars per year to get enough qualified people to become CEOs? Do people take on a position as CEO or other high-paying job at least partly because of the challenge, working conditions, and other positive aspects they offer? The functionalist view does not answer these questions adequately.

One other line of functionalist thinking focuses more directly on poverty than generally on stratification. This particular functionalist view provocatively argues that poverty exists because it serves certain positive functions for our society. These functions include the following: (1) poor people do the work that other people do not want to do; (2) the programs that help poor people provide a lot of jobs for the people employed by the programs; (3) the poor purchase goods, such as day-old bread and used clothing, that other people do not wish to purchase, and thus extend the economic value of these goods; and (4) the poor provide jobs for doctors, lawyers, teachers, and other professionals who may not be competent enough to be employed in positions catering to wealthier patients, clients, students, and so forth (Gans, 1972). Because poverty serves all these functions and more, according to this argument, the middle and upper classes have a vested interested in neglecting poverty to help ensure its continued existence.

The Conflict View
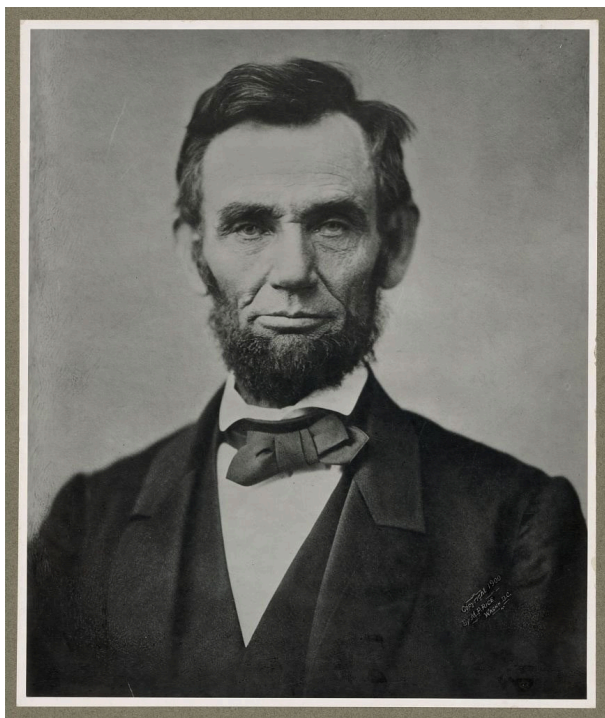
Because he was born in a log cabin and later became president, Abraham Lincoln's life epitomizes the American Dream, which is the belief that people born into poverty can become successful through hard work. The popularity of this belief leads many Americans to blame poor people for their poverty.

Conflict theory's explanation of stratification draws on Karl Marx's view of class societies and incorporates the critique of the functionalist view just discussed. Many different explanations grounded in conflict theory exist, but they all assume that stratification stems from a fundamental conflict between the needs and interests of the powerful, or "haves," in society and those of the weak, or "have-nots" (Kerbo, 2012). The former take advantage of

their position at the top of society to stay at the top, even if it means oppressing those at the bottom. At a minimum, they can heavily influence the law, the media, and other institutions in a way that maintains society's class structure.

In general, conflict theory attributes stratification and thus poverty to lack of opportunity from discrimination and prejudice against the poor, women, and people of color. In this regard, it reflects one of the early critiques of the functionalist view that the previous section outlined. To reiterate an earlier point, several of the remaining chapters of this book discuss the various obstacles that make it difficult for the poor, women, and people of color in the United States to move up the socioeconomic ladder and to otherwise enjoy healthy and productive lives.

Symbolic Interactionism

Consistent with its micro orientation, symbolic interactionism tries to understand stratification and thus poverty by looking at people's interaction and understandings in their daily lives. Unlike the functionalist and conflict views, it does not try to explain why we have stratification in the first place. Rather, it examines the differences that stratification makes for people's lifestyles and their interaction with other people.

Many detailed, insightful sociological books on the lives of the urban and rural poor reflect the symbolic interactionist perspective (Anderson, 1999; C. M. Duncan, 2000; Liebow, 1993; Rank, 1994). These books focus on different people in different places, but they all make very clear that the poor often lead lives of quiet desperation

and must find ways of coping with the fact of being poor. In these books, the consequences of poverty discussed later in this chapter acquire a human face, and readers learn in great detail what it is like to live in poverty on a daily basis.

Some classic journalistic accounts by authors not trained in the social sciences also present eloquent descriptions of poor people's lives (Bagdikian, 1964; Harrington, 1962). Writing in this tradition, a newspaper columnist who grew up in poverty recently recalled, "I know the feel of thick calluses on the bottom of shoeless feet. I know the bite of the cold breeze that slithers through a drafty house. I know the weight of constant worry over not having enough to fill a belly or fight an illness…Poverty is brutal, consuming and unforgiving. It strikes at the soul" (Blow, 2011).

Sociological accounts of the poor provide a vivid portrait of what it is like to live in poverty on a daily basis.

On a more lighthearted note, examples of the symbolic interactionist framework are also seen in the many literary works and films that portray the difficulties that the rich and poor have in interacting on the relatively few occasions when they do interact. For example, in the film *Pretty Woman*, Richard Gere plays a rich businessman who hires a prostitute, played by Julia Roberts, to

accompany him to swank parties and other affairs. Roberts has to buy a new wardrobe and learn how to dine and behave in these social settings, and much of the film's humor and poignancy come from her awkwardness in learning the lifestyle of the rich.

Specific Explanations of Poverty

The functionalist and conflict views focus broadly on social stratification but only indirectly on poverty. When poverty finally attracted national attention during the 1960s, scholars began to try specifically to understand why poor people become poor and remain poor. Two competing explanations developed, with the basic debate turning on whether poverty arises from problems either within the poor themselves or in the society in which they live (Rank, 2011). The first type of explanation follows logically from the functional theory of stratification and may be considered an individualistic explanation. The second type of explanation follows from conflict theory and is a structural explanation that focuses on problems in American society that produce poverty. Table 2.3 "Explanations of Poverty" summarizes these explanations.

Table 2.3 Explanations of Poverty

Explanation	Major assumptions
Individualistic	Poverty results from the fact that poor people lack the motivation to work and have certain beliefs and values that contribute to their poverty.
Structural	Poverty results from problems in society that lead to a lack of opportunity and a lack of jobs.

It is critical to determine which explanation makes more sense because, as sociologist Theresa C. Davidson (Davidson, 2009) observes, "beliefs about the causes of poverty shape attitudes toward the poor." To be more precise, the particular explanation that people favor affects their view of government efforts to help the poor. Those who attribute poverty to problems in the larger society are much more likely than those who attribute it to deficiencies among the poor to believe that the government should do more to help the poor (Bradley & Cole, 2002). The explanation for poverty we favor presumably affects the amount of sympathy we have for the poor, and our sympathy, or lack of sympathy, in turn affects our views about the government's role in helping the poor. With this backdrop in mind, what do the individualistic and structural explanations of poverty say?

Individualistic Explanation

According to the **individualistic explanation**, the poor have personal problems and deficiencies that are responsible for their poverty. In the past, the poor were thought to be biologically inferior, a view that has not entirely faded, but today the much more common belief is that they lack the ambition and motivation to work hard and to achieve success. According to survey evidence, the majority of Americans share this belief (Davidson, 2009). A more sophisticated version of this type of explanation is called the *culture of poverty* theory (Banfield, 1974; Lewis, 1966; Murray, 2012). According to this theory, the poor generally have beliefs and values that differ from those of the nonpoor and that doom them to continued poverty. For example, they are said to be impulsive and to live for the present rather than the future.

Regardless of which version one might hold, the individualistic explanation is a blaming-the-victim approach. Critics say this explanation ignores discrimination and other problems in American society and exaggerates the degree to which the poor and nonpoor do in fact hold different values (Ehrenreich, 2012; Holland, 2011; Schmidt, 2012). Regarding the latter point, they note that poor employed adults work more hours per week than wealthier adults and that poor parents interviewed in surveys value education for their children at least as much as wealthier parents. These and other similarities in values and beliefs lead critics of the individualistic explanation to conclude that poor people's poverty cannot reasonably be said to result from a culture of poverty.

Structural Explanation

According to the second, **structural explanation**, which is a blaming-the-system approach, US poverty stems from problems in American society that lead to a lack of equal opportunity and a lack of jobs. These problems include (a) racial, ethnic, gender, and age discrimination; (b) lack of good schooling and adequate health care; and (c) structural changes in the American economic system, such as the departure of manufacturing companies from American cities in the 1980s and 1990s that led to the loss of thousands of jobs. These problems help create a vicious cycle of poverty in which children of the poor are often fated to end up in poverty or near poverty themselves as adults.

As Rank (Rank, 2011) summarizes this view, "American poverty is largely the result of failings at the economic and political levels, rather than at the individual level...In contrast to [the individualistic] perspective, the basic problem lies in a shortage of viable opportunities for all Americans." Rank points out that the US economy during the past few decades has created more low-paying and part-time jobs and jobs without benefits, meaning that Americans increasingly find themselves in jobs that barely lift them out of poverty, if at all. Sociologist Fred Block and colleagues share this critique of the individualistic perspective: "Most of our policies incorrectly assume that people can avoid or overcome poverty through hard work alone. Yet this assumption ignores the realities of our failing urban schools, increasing employment insecurities, and the lack of affordable housing, health care, and child care. It ignores the fact that the American Dream is rapidly becoming unattainable for an increasing number of Americans, whether employed or not" (Block, et. al., 2006).

Most sociologists favor the structural explanation. As later chapters in this book document, racial and ethnic discrimination, lack of adequate schooling and health care, and other problems

make it difficult to rise out of poverty. On the other hand, some ethnographic research supports the individualistic explanation by showing that the poor do have certain values and follow certain practices that augment their plight (Small, et. al., 2010). For example, the poor have higher rates of cigarette smoking (34 percent of people with annual incomes between $6,000 and $11,999 smoke, compared to only 13 percent of those with incomes $90,000 or greater [Goszkowski, 2008]), which helps cause them to have more serious health problems.

Adopting an integrated perspective, some researchers say these values and practices are ultimately the result of poverty itself (Small et, al., 2010). These scholars concede a culture of poverty does exist, but they also say it exists because it helps the poor cope daily with the structural effects of being poor. If these effects lead to a culture of poverty, they add, poverty then becomes self-perpetuating. If poverty is both cultural and structural in origin, these scholars say, efforts to improve the lives of people in the "other America" must involve increased structural opportunities for the poor and changes in some of their values and practices.

Key Takeaways

- According to the functionalist view, stratification is a necessary and inevitable consequence of the need to use the promise of financial reward to encourage talented people to pursue important jobs and careers.
- According to conflict theory, stratification results from lack of opportunity and discrimination against the poor and people of color.
- According to symbolic interactionism, social class affects how people interact in everyday life and how

they view certain aspects of the social world.

- The individualistic view attributes poverty to individual failings of poor people themselves, while the structural view attributes poverty to problems in the larger society.

For Your Review

1. In explaining poverty in the United States, which view, individualist or structural, makes more sense to you? Why?
2. Suppose you could wave a magic wand and invent a society where everyone had about the same income no matter which job he or she performed. Do you think it would be difficult to persuade enough people to become physicians or to pursue other important careers? Explain your answer.

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5.4 The Consequences of Poverty

Regardless of its causes, poverty has devastating consequences for the people who live in it. Much research conducted and/or analyzed by scholars, government agencies, and nonprofit organizations has documented the effects of poverty (and near poverty) on the lives of the poor (Lindsey, 2009; Moore, et. al., 2009; Ratcliffe & McKernan, 2010; Sanders, 2011). Many of these studies focus on childhood poverty, and these studies make it very clear that childhood poverty has lifelong consequences. In general, poor children are more likely to be poor as adults, more likely to drop out of high school, more likely to become a teenaged parent, and more likely to have employment problems. Although only 1 percent of children who are never poor end up being poor as young adults, 32 percent of poor children become poor as young adults (Ratcliffe & McKernan, 2010).

Poor children are more likely to have inadequate nutrition and to experience health, behavioral, and cognitive problems.

Kelly Short – Poverty: "Damaged Child," Oklahoma City, OK, USA, 1936. (Colorized). – CC BY-SA 2.0.

A recent study used government data to follow children born between 1968 and 1975 until they were ages 30 to 37 (Duncan & Magnuson, 2011). The researchers compared individuals who lived in poverty in early childhood to those whose families had incomes at least twice the poverty line in early childhood. Compared to the latter group, adults who were poor in early childhood

- had completed two fewer years of schooling on the average;
- had incomes that were less than half of those earned by adults who had wealthier childhoods;
- received $826 more annually in food stamps on the average;
- were almost three times more likely to report being in poor health;

- were twice as likely to have been arrested (males only); and
- were five times as likely to have borne a child (females only).

We discuss some of the major specific consequences of poverty here and will return to them in later chapters.

Family Problems

The poor are at greater risk for family problems, including divorce and domestic violence. A major reason for many of the problems families experience is stress. Even in families that are not poor, running a household can cause stress, children can cause stress, and paying the bills can cause stress. Families that are poor have more stress because of their poverty, and the ordinary stresses of family life become even more intense in poor families. The various kinds of family problems thus happen more commonly in poor families than in wealthier families. Compounding this situation, when these problems occur, poor families have fewer resources than wealthier families to deal with these problems.

Children and Our Future

Getting under Children's Skin: The Biological Effects of Childhood Poverty

As the text discusses, childhood poverty often has lifelong consequences. Poor children are more likely to be poor when they become adults, and they are at greater risk for antisocial behavior when young, and for unemployment, criminal behavior, and other problems when they reach adolescence and young adulthood.

According to growing evidence, one reason poverty has these consequences is that it has certain neural effects on poor children that impair their cognitive abilities and thus their behavior and learning potential. As Greg J. Duncan and Katherine Magnuson (Duncan & Magnuson, 2011, p. 23) observe, "Emerging research in neuroscience and developmental psychology suggests that poverty early in a child's life may be particularly harmful because the astonishingly rapid development of young children's brains leaves them sensitive (and vulnerable) to environmental conditions."

In short, poverty can change the way the brain develops in young children. The major reason for this effect is stress.

Children growing up in poverty experience multiple stressful events: neighborhood crime and drug use; divorce, parental conflict, and other family problems, including abuse and neglect by their parents; parental financial problems and unemployment; physical and mental health problems of one or more family members; and so forth. Their great levels of stress in turn affect their bodies in certain harmful ways. As two poverty scholars note, "It's not just that poverty-induced stress is mentally taxing. If it's experienced early enough in childhood, it can in fact get 'under the skin' and change the way in which the body copes with the environment and the way in which the brain develops. These deep, enduring, and sometimes irreversible physiological changes are the very human price of running a high-poverty society" (Grusky & Wimer, 2011, p. 2).

One way poverty gets "under children's skin" is as follows (Evans, et. al., 2011). Poor children's high levels of stress produce unusually high levels of stress hormones such as cortisol and higher levels of blood pressure. Because these high levels impair their neural development, their memory and language development skills suffer. This result in turn affects their behavior and learning potential. For other physiological reasons, high levels of stress also affect the immune system, so that poor children are more likely to develop various illnesses during childhood and to have high blood pressure and other health problems when they grow older, and cause other biological changes that make poor children more likely to end up being obese and to have drug and alcohol problems.

The policy implications of the scientific research on childhood poverty are clear. As public health scholar Jack P. Shonkoff (Shonkoff, 2011) explains, "Viewing this scientific

evidence within a biodevelopmental framework points to the particular importance of addressing the needs of our most disadvantaged children at the earliest ages." Duncan and Magnuson (Duncan & Magnuson, 2011) agree that "greater policy attention should be given to remediating situations involving deep and persistent poverty occurring early in childhood." To reduce poverty's harmful physiological effects on children, Skonkoff advocates efforts to promote strong, stable relationships among all members of poor families; to improve the quality of the home and neighborhood physical environments in which poor children grow; and to improve the nutrition of poor children. Duncan and Magnuson call for more generous income transfers to poor families with young children and note that many European democracies provide many kinds of support to such families. The recent scientific evidence on early childhood poverty underscores the importance of doing everything possible to reduce the harmful effects of poverty during the first few years of life.

Health, Illness, and Medical Care

The poor are also more likely to have many kinds of health problems,

including infant mortality, earlier adulthood mortality, and mental illness, and they are also more likely to receive inadequate medical care. Poor children are more likely to have inadequate nutrition and, partly for this reason, to suffer health, behavioral, and cognitive problems. These problems in turn impair their ability to do well in school and land stable employment as adults, helping to ensure that poverty will persist across generations. Many poor people are uninsured or underinsured, at least until the US health-care reform legislation of 2010 takes full effect a few years from now, and many have to visit health clinics that are overcrowded and understaffed.

It is unclear how much of poor people's worse health stems from their lack of money and lack of good health care versus their own behavior such as smoking and eating unhealthy diets. Regardless of the exact reasons, however, the fact remains that poor health is a major consequence of poverty. According to recent research, this fact means that poverty is responsible for almost 150,000 deaths annually, a figure about equal to the number of deaths from lung cancer (Bakalar, 2011).

Education

Poor children typically go to rundown schools with inadequate facilities where they receive inadequate schooling. They are much less likely than wealthier children to graduate from high school or to go to college. Their lack of education in turn restricts them and their own children to poverty, once again helping to ensure a vicious cycle of continuing poverty across generations. Scholars debate whether the poor school performance of poor children stems more

from the inadequacy of their schools and schooling versus their own poverty. Regardless of exactly why poor children are more likely to do poorly in school and to have low educational attainment, these educational problems are another major consequence of poverty.

Housing and Homelessness

The poor are, not surprisingly, more likely to be homeless than the nonpoor but also more likely to live in dilapidated housing and unable to buy their own homes. Many poor families spend more than half their income on rent, and they tend to live in poor neighborhoods that lack job opportunities, good schools, and other features of modern life that wealthier people take for granted. The lack of adequate housing for the poor remains a major national problem. Even worse is outright homelessness. An estimated 1.6 million people, including more than 300,000 children, are homeless at least part of the year (Lee, et. al., 2010).

Crime and Victimization

Poor (and near poor) people account for the bulk of our street crime (homicide, robbery, burglary, etc.), and they also account for the bulk of victims of street crime. That chapter will outline several reasons for this dual connection between poverty and street crime, but they include the deep frustration and stress of living in poverty and the fact that many poor people live in high-crime neighborhoods. In such neighborhoods, children are more likely to grow up under the influence of older peers who are already in gangs or otherwise committing crime, and people of any age are more likely to become crime victims. Moreover, because poor and near-poor people are more likely to commit street crime, they also comprise most of the people arrested for street crimes, convicted of street crime, and imprisoned for street crime. Most of the more than 2 million people now in the nation's prisons and jails come from poor or near-poor backgrounds. Criminal behavior and criminal victimization, then, are other major consequences of poverty.

Lessons from Other

Societies

Poverty and Poverty Policy in Other Western Democracies

To compare international poverty rates, scholars commonly use a measure of the percentage of households in a nation that receive less than half of the nation's median household income after taxes and cash transfers from the government. In data from the late 2000s, 17.3 percent of US households lived in poverty as defined by this measure. By comparison, other Western democracies had the rates depicted in the figure that follows. The average poverty rate of the nations in the figure excluding the United States is 9.5 percent. The US rate is thus almost twice as high as the average for all the other democracies.
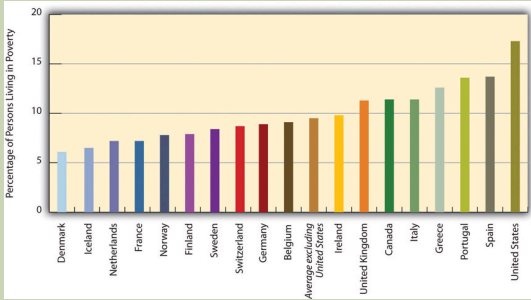
This graph illustrates the poverty rates in western democracies (i.e., the percentage of persons living with less than half of the median household income) as of the late 2000s

Source: Data from Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2011). Society at a glance 2011: OECD social indicators. Retrieved July 23, 2011, from http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/soc_glance-2011-en/06/02/ index.html;jsessionid=erdqhbpb203ea.epsilon?contentType=&itemId=/content/chapter/ soc_glance-2011-17-en&containerItemId=/content/se.

Why is there so much more poverty in the United States than in its Western counterparts? Several differences between the United States and the other nations stand out (Brady, 2009; Russell, 2011). First, other Western nations have higher minimum wages and stronger labor unions than the United States has, and these lead to incomes that help push people above poverty. Second, these other nations spend a much greater proportion of their gross domestic product on social expenditures (income support and social services such as child-care subsidies and housing allowances) than does the United States. As sociologist John Iceland (Iceland, 2006) notes, "Such countries often invest heavily in both universal benefits,

such as maternity leave, child care, and medical care, and in promoting work among [poor] families...The United States, in comparison with other advanced nations, lacks national health insurance, provides less publicly supported housing, and spends less on job training and job creation." Block and colleagues agree: "These other countries all take a more comprehensive government approach to combating poverty, and they assume that it is caused by economic and structural factors rather than bad behavior" (Block et, al., 2006).

The experience of the United Kingdom provides a striking contrast between the effectiveness of the expansive approach used in other wealthy democracies and the inadequacy of the American approach. In 1994, about 30 percent of British children lived in poverty; by 2009, that figure had fallen by more than half to 12 percent. Meanwhile, the US 2009 child poverty rate, was almost 21 percent.

Britain used three strategies to reduce its child poverty rate and to help poor children and their families in other ways. First, it induced more poor parents to work through a series of new measures, including a national minimum wage higher than its US counterpart and various tax savings for low-income workers. Because of these measures, the percentage of single parents who worked rose from 45 percent in 1997 to 57 percent in 2008. Second, Britain increased child welfare benefits regardless of whether a parent worked. Third, it increased paid maternity leave from four months to nine months, implemented two weeks of paid paternity leave, established universal preschool (which both helps children's cognitive abilities and makes it easier for parents to afford to work), increased child-care

aid, and made it possible for parents of young children to adjust their working hours to their parental responsibilities (Waldfogel, 2010). While the British child poverty rate fell dramatically because of these strategies, the US child poverty rate stagnated.

In short, the United States has so much more poverty than other democracies in part because it spends so much less than they do on helping the poor. The United States certainly has the wealth to follow their example, but it has chosen not to do so, and a high poverty rate is the unfortunate result. As the Nobel laureate economist Paul Krugman (2006, p. A25) summarizes this lesson, "Government truly can be a force for good. Decades of propaganda have conditioned many Americans to assume that government is always incompetent...But the [British experience has] shown that a government that seriously tries to reduce poverty can achieve a lot."

Key Takeaways

- Poor people are more likely to have several kinds of family problems, including divorce and family conflict.
- Poor people are more likely to have several kinds of health problems.
- Children growing up in poverty are less likely to graduate high school or go to college, and they are more likely to commit street crime.

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5.5 Global Poverty

As serious as poverty is in the United States, poverty in much of the rest of the world is beyond comprehension to the average American. Many of the world's poor live in such desperate circumstances that they would envy the lives of poor Americans. Without at all meaning to minimize the plight of the American poor, this section provides a brief look at the world's poor and at the dimensions of global poverty

Global Inequality

The world has a few very rich nations and many very poor nations,

and there is an enormous gulf between these two extremes. If the world were one nation, its median annual income (at which half of the world's population is below this income and half is above it) would be only $1,700 (Dikhanov, 2005). The richest fifth of the world's population would have three-fourths of the world's entire income, while the poorest fifth of the world's population would have only 1.5 percent of the world's income, and the poorest two-fifths would have only 5.0 percent of the world's income (Dikhanov, 2005). Reflecting this latter fact, these poorest two-fifths, or about 2 billion people, live on less than $2 per day (United Nations Development Programme, 2009). As [Figure 2.5 "Global Income Distribution (Percentage of World Income Held by Each Fifth of World Population)"](#) illustrates, this distribution of income resembles a champagne glass.

Figure 2.5 Global Income Distribution (Percentage of World Income Held by Each Fifth of World Population)

Richest Fifth	74.1%
Second Fifth	14.6%
Third Fifth	6.3%
Fourth Fifth	3.5%
Poorest Fifth	1.5%
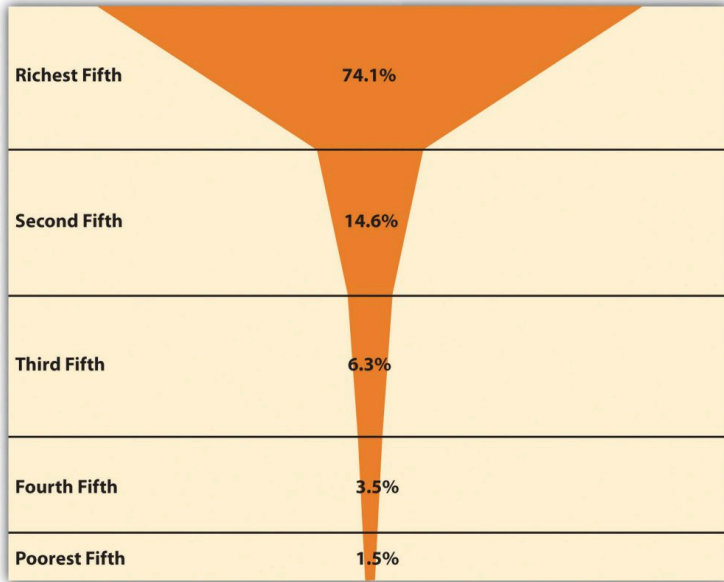
Source: Data from Dikhanov, Y. (2005). Trends in global income distribution, 1970–2000, and scenarios for 2015. New York, NY: United Nations Development Programme.

To understand global inequality, it is helpful to classify nations into a small number of categories based on their degree of wealth or poverty, their level of industrialization and economic development, and related factors. Over the decades, scholars and international organizations such as the United Nations and the World Bank have used various classification systems, or typologies. A popular typology today simply ranks nations into groups called *wealthy* (or high-income) nations, *middle-income* nations, and *poor* (or low-income) nations, based on measures such as gross domestic product (**GDP**) per capita (the total value of a nation's goods and services divided by its population). This typology has the advantage of emphasizing the most important variable in global stratification: how much wealth a nation has. At the risk of being somewhat simplistic, the other important differences among the world's nations all stem from their degree of wealth or poverty. Figure 2.6 "Global Stratification Map" depicts these three categories of nations

(with the middle category divided into upper-middle and lower-middle). As should be clear, whether a nation is wealthy, middle income, or poor is heavily related to the continent on which it is found.

Figure 2.6 Global Stratification Map
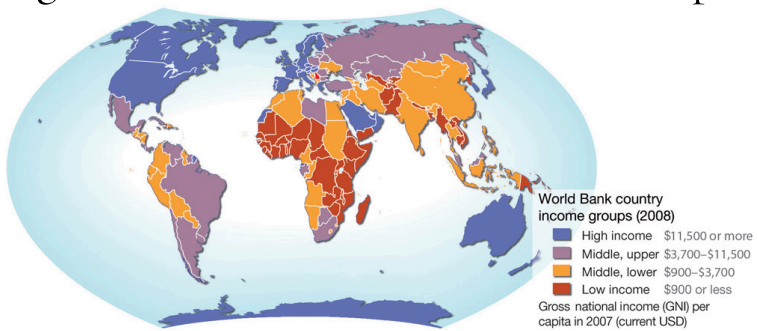
Source: Adapted from UNEP/GRID-Arendal Maps and Graphics Library. (2009).Country income groups (World Bank classification). Retrieved from http://maps.grida.no/go/graphic/country-income-groups-world-bank-classification.

Measuring Global Poverty

The World Bank has begun to emphasize vulnerability to poverty. Many people who are not officially poor have a good chance of becoming poor within a year. Strategies to prevent this from happening are a major focus of the World Bank.

How do we know which nations are poor? A very common measure of global poverty was developed by the World Bank, an international institution funded by wealthy nations that provides loans, grants, and other aid to help poor and middle-income nations. Each year the World Bank publishes its World Development Report, which provides statistics and other information on the economic and social well-being of the globe's almost two hundred nations. The World Bank puts the official global poverty line (which is considered a measure of extreme poverty) at income under $1.25 per person per day, which amounts to about $456 yearly per person or $1,825 for a family of four. According to this measure, 1.4 billion people,

making up more than one-fifth of the world's population and more than one-fourth of the population of developing (poor and middle-income) nations, are poor. This level of poverty rises to 40 percent of South Asia and 51 percent of sub-Saharan Africa (Haughton & Khandker, 2009).

In a new development, the World Bank has begun emphasizing the concept of **vulnerability to poverty**, which refers to a significant probability that people who are not officially poor will become poor within the next year. Determining vulnerability to poverty is important because it enables antipoverty strategies to be aimed at those most at risk for sliding into poverty, with the hope of preventing them from doing so.

Vulnerability to poverty appears widespread; in several developing nations, about one-fourth of the population is always poor, while almost one-third is vulnerable to poverty or is slipping into and out of poverty. In these nations, more than half the population is always or sometimes poor. (Haughton & Khandker, 2009) summarize this situation: "As typically defined, vulnerability to poverty is more widespread than poverty itself. A wide swathe of society risks poverty at some point of time; put another way, in most societies, only a relatively modest portion of society may be considered as economically secure."

Explaining Global Poverty

Explanations of global poverty parallel those of US poverty in their focus on individualistic versus structural problems. One type of explanation takes an individualistic approach by, in effect, blaming

the people in the poorest nations for their own poverty, while a second explanation takes a structural approach in blaming the plight of poor nations on their treatment by the richest ones. Table 2.4 "Theory Snapshot" summarizes the two sets of explanations.

Table 2.4 Theory Snapshot

Theory	Major assumptions
Modernization theory	Wealthy nations became wealthy because early on they were able to develop the necessary beliefs, values, and practices for trade, industrialization, and rapid economic growth to occur. Poor nations remained poor because they failed to develop these beliefs, values, and practices; instead, they continued to follow traditional beliefs and practices that stymied industrial development and modernization.
Dependency theory	The poverty of poor nations stems from their colonization by European nations, which exploited the poor nations' resources and either enslaved their populations or used them as cheap labor. The colonized nations were thus unable to develop a professional and business class that would have enabled them to enter the industrial age and to otherwise develop their economies.

Modernization Theory

The individualistic explanation is called **modernization theory** (Rostow, 1990). According to this theory, rich nations became wealthy because early on they were able to develop the "correct" beliefs, values, and practices—in short, the correct culture—for trade, industrialization, and rapid economic growth to occur. These cultural traits include a willingness to work hard, to abandon tradition in favor of new ways of thinking and doing things, and to adopt a future orientation rather than one focused on maintaining present conditions. Thus Western European nations began to emerge several centuries ago as economic powers because their populations adopted the kinds of values and practices just listed. In contrast, nations in other parts of the world never became wealthy and remain poor today because they never developed the appropriate values and practices. Instead, they continued to follow traditional beliefs and practices that stymied industrial development and modernization.

According to modernization theory, poor nations are poor because their people never developed values such as an emphasis on hard work.

Modernization theory has much in common with the culture of poverty theory discussed earlier. It attributes the poverty of poor nations to their failure to develop the "proper" beliefs, values, and practices necessary for economic success both at the beginning of industrialization during the nineteenth century and in the two centuries that have since transpired. Because modernization theory implies that people in poor nations do not have the talent and ability to improve their lot, it may be considered a functionalist explanation of global inequality.

Dependency Theory

The structural explanation for global stratification is called **dependency theory**, which may be considered a conflict explanation of global inequality. Not surprisingly, this theory's views sharply challenge modernization theory's assumptions (Packenham, 1992). Whereas modernization theory attributes global stratification to the "wrong" cultural values and practices in poor nations, dependency theory blames global stratification on the exploitation of these nations by wealthy nations. According to this view, poor nations never got the chance to pursue economic growth because early on they were conquered and colonized by European ones. The European nations stole the poor nations' resources and either enslaved their populations or used them as cheap labor. They installed their own governments and often prevented the local

populace from getting a good education. As a result, the colonized nations were unable to develop a professional and business class that would have enabled them to enter the industrial age and to otherwise develop their economies. Along the way, wealthy nations sold their own goods to colonized nations and forced them to run up enormous debt that continues to amount today.

In today's world, huge multinational corporations continue to exploit the labor and resources of the poorest nations, say dependency theorists. These corporations run sweatshops in many nations, in which workers toil in inhumane conditions at extremely low wages (Sluiter, 2009). Often the corporations work hand-in-hand with corrupt officials in the poor nations to strengthen their economic stake in the countries.

Comparing the Theories

Which makes more sense, modernization theory or dependency theory? As with many theories, both make sense to some degree, but both have their faults. Modernization theory places too much blame on poor nations for their own poverty and ignores the long history of exploitation of poor nations by rich nations and multinational corporations alike. For its part, dependency theory cannot explain why some of the poorest countries are poor even though they were never European colonies; neither can it explain why some former colonies such as Hong Kong have been able to attain enough economic growth to leave the rank of the poorest nations. Together, both theories help us understand the reasons for global stratification, but most sociologists would probably favor

dependency theory because of its emphasis on structural factors in the world's historic and current economy.

The Lives of the World's Poor

Poor nations are the least industrialized and most agricultural of all the world's countries. They consist primarily of nations in Africa and parts of Asia and constitute roughly half of the world's population. Many of these nations rely heavily on one or two crops, and if weather conditions render a crop unproductive in a particular season, the nations' hungry become even hungrier. By the same token, if economic conditions reduce the price of a crop or other natural resource, the income from exports of these commodities plummets, and these already poor nations become even poorer.

People in poor nations live in the most miserable conditions possible.

By any standard, the more than 1.4 billion people in poor nations live a desperate existence in the most miserable conditions possible. They suffer from AIDS and other deadly diseases, live on the edge of starvation, and lack indoor plumbing, electricity, and other modern conveniences that most Americans take for granted. Most of us have seen unforgettable photos or video footage of African children with stick-thin limbs and distended stomachs reflecting severe malnutrition.

It would be nice if these images were merely fiction, but unfortunately they are far too real. AIDS, malaria, starvation, and other deadly diseases are common. Many children die before reaching adolescence, and many adults die before reaching what in the richest nations would be considered middle age. Many people in the poorest nations are illiterate, and a college education remains as foreign to them as their way of life would be to us. The images of the world's poor that we see in television news reports or in film documentaries fade quickly from our minds. Meanwhile, millions of people on our planet die every year because they do not have enough to eat, because they lack access to clean water or adequate sanitation, or because they lack access to medicine that is found in every CVS, Rite Aid, and Walgreens in the United States. We now examine some specific dimensions and consequences of global poverty.

Life Expectancy

When we look around the world, we see that global poverty is literally a matter of life and death. The clearest evidence of this fact comes from data on life expectancy, or the average number of years that a nation's citizens can be expected to live. Life expectancy certainly differs within each nation, with some people dying younger and others dying older, but poverty and related conditions affect a nation's overall life expectancy to a startling degree.

Figure 2.7 Average Life Expectancy across the Globe (Years)
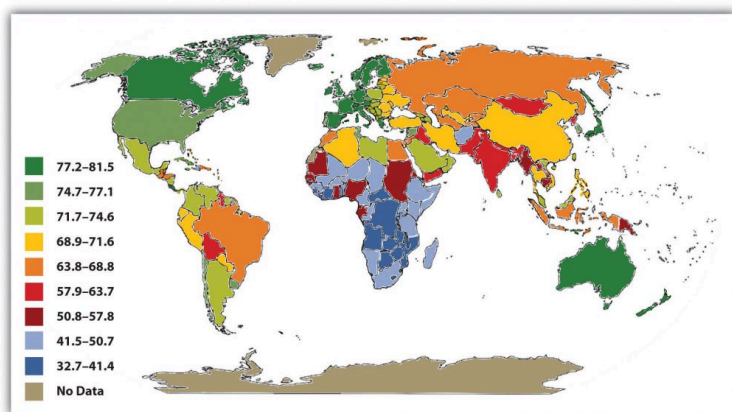
Source: Adapted from Global Education Project. (2004). Human conditions: World life

expectancy map. Retrieved from http://www.theglobaleducationproject.org/earth/human-conditions.php.

A map of global life expectancy appears in Figure 2.7 "Average Life Expectancy across the Globe (Years)". Life expectancy is highest in North America, Western Europe, and certain other regions of the world and lowest in Africa and South Asia, where *life expectancy in many nations is some 30 years shorter than in other regions.* Another way of visualizing the relationship between global poverty and life expectancy appears in Figure 2.8 "Global Poverty and Life Expectancy, 2006", which depicts average life expectancy for wealthy nations, upper-middle-income nations, lower-middle-income nations, and poor nations. Men in wealthy nations can expect to live 76 years on average, compared to only 56 in poor nations; women in wealthy nations can expect to live 82 years, compared to only 58 in poor nations. Life expectancy in poor nations is thus 20 and 24 years lower, respectively, for the two sexes.

Figure 2.8 Global Poverty and Life Expectancy, 2006
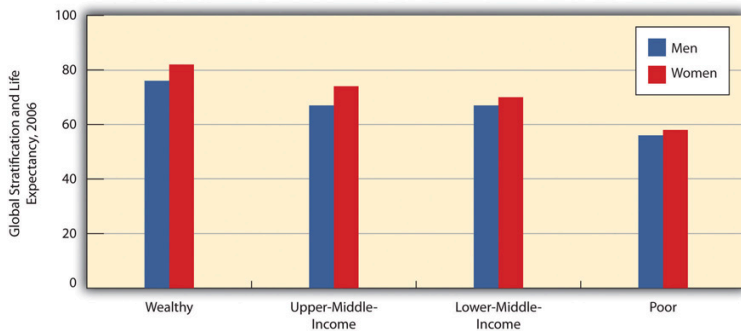
Child Mortality

A key contributor to life expectancy and also a significant consequence of global poverty in its own right is child mortality, the number of children who die before age 5 per 1,000 children. As Figure 2.9 "Global Poverty and Child Mortality, 2006" shows, the rate of child mortality in poor nations is 135 per 1,000 children, meaning that 13.5 percent of all children in these nations die before age 5. In a few African nations, child mortality exceeds 200 per 1,000. In contrast, the rate in wealthy nations is only 7 per 1,000. Children in poor nations are thus about 19 times (13.5 ÷ 0.7) more likely to die before age 5 than children in wealthy nations.

Figure 2.9 Global Poverty and Child Mortality, 2006
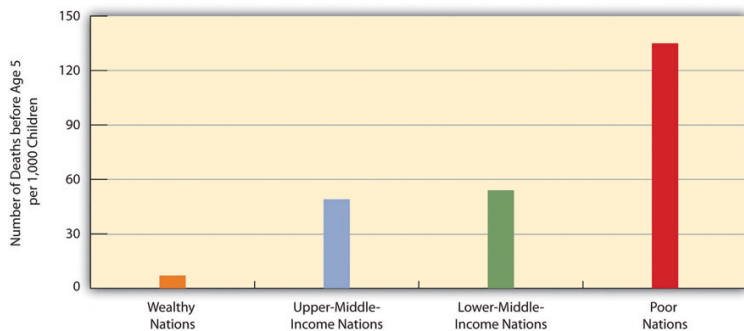
Source: Data from World Bank. (2009). World development report 2009. Washington, DC: Author.

Sanitation and Clean Water

Two other important indicators of a nation's health are access to adequate sanitation (disposal of human waste) and access to clean water. When people lack adequate sanitation and clean water, they are at much greater risk for life-threatening diarrhea, serious infectious diseases such as cholera and typhoid, and parasitic diseases such as schistosomiasis (World Health Organization, 2010). About 2.4 billion people around the world, almost all of them in poor and middle-income nations, do not have adequate sanitation, and more than 2 million, most of them children, die annually from diarrhea. More than 40 million people worldwide, almost all of them again in poor and middle-income nations, suffer from a parasitic infection caused by flatworms.

As [Figure 2.10 "Global Stratification and Access to Adequate](#)

and show, access to adequate sanitation and clean water is strongly related to national wealth. Poor nations are much less likely than wealthier nations to have adequate access to both sanitation and clean water. Adequate sanitation is virtually universal in wealthy nations but is available to only 38 percent of people in poor nations. Clean water is also nearly universal in wealthy nations but is available to only 67 percent of people in poor nations.

Figure 2.10 Global Stratification and Access to Adequate Sanitation, 2006
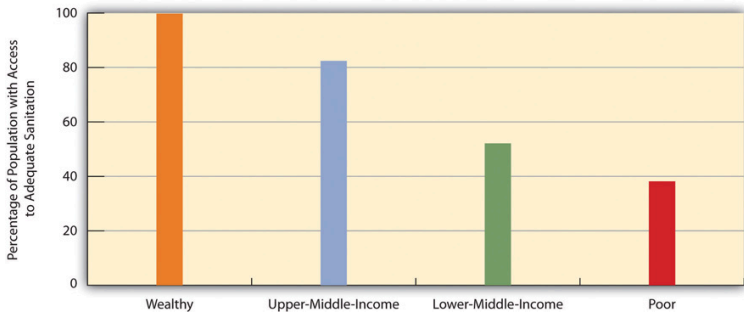
Source: Data from World Bank. (2010). Health nutrition and population statistics. Retrieved from http://databank.worldbank.org/ddp/home.do.

Figure 2.11 Global Stratification and Access to Clean Water, 2006
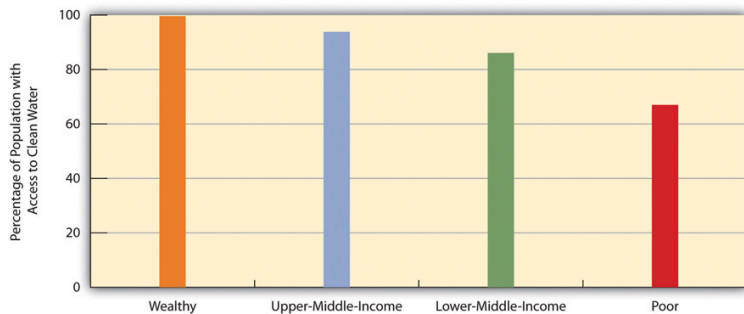
Source: Data from World Bank. (2010). Health nutrition and population statistics. Retrieved from http://databank.worldbank.org/ddp/home.do.

Malnutrition

About one-fifth of the population of poor nations, about 800 million individuals, are malnourished.

Dr. Lyle Conrad at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention- ID# 6874 – public domain.

Another health indicator is malnutrition. This problem is caused by a lack of good food combined with infections and diseases such as diarrhea that sap the body of essential nutrients. About one-fifth of the population of poor nations, or about 800 million individuals, are malnourished; looking just at children, in developing nations more than one-fourth of children under age 5, or about 150 million altogether, are underweight. Half of all these children live in only three nations: Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan; almost half the children in these and other South Asian nations are underweight. Children who are malnourished are at much greater risk for fat and muscle loss, brain damage, blindness, and death; perhaps you

have seen video footage of children in Africa or South Asia who are so starved that they look like skeletons. Not surprisingly, child malnutrition contributes heavily to the extremely high rates of child mortality that we just examined and is estimated to be responsible for more than 5 million deaths of children annually (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2006; World Health Organization, 2010).

Adult Literacy

Moving from the area of health, a final indicator of human development is adult literacy, the percentage of people 15 and older who can read and write a simple sentence. Once again we see that people in poor and middle-income nations are far worse off (see Figure 2.12 "Global Poverty and Adult Literacy, 2008"). In poor nations, only about 69 percent of adults 15 and older can read and write a simple sentence. The high rate of illiteracy in poor nations not only reflects their poverty but also contributes to it, as people who cannot read and write are obviously at a huge disadvantage in the labor market.

Figure 2.12 Global Poverty and Adult Literacy, 2008
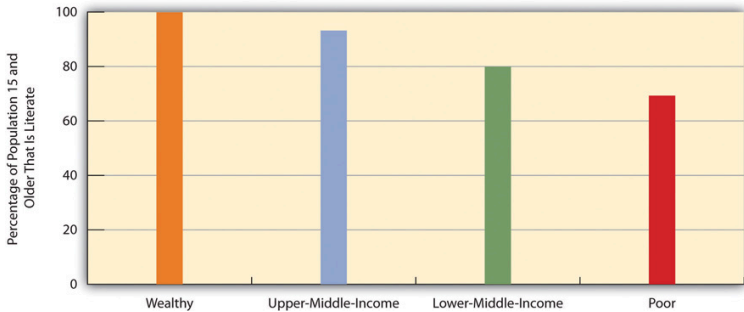
Source: Data from World Bank. (2010). Health nutrition and population statistics. Retrieved from http://databank.worldbank.org/ddp/home.do.

Applying Social Research

Unintended Consequences of Welfare Reform

Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) was a major government program to help the poor from the 1930s to the 1960s. Under this program, states allocated federal money to provide cash payments to poor families with children. Although the program was heavily criticized for allegedly providing an incentive to poor mothers both to

have more children and to not join the workforce, research studies found little or no basis for this criticism. Still, many politicians and much of the public accepted the criticism as true, and AFDC became so unpopular that it was replaced in 1997 by a new program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), which is still a major program today.

TANF is more restrictive in many respects than AFDC was. In particular, it limits the amount of time a poor family can receive federal funds to five years, and allows states to impose a shorter duration for funding, which many have done. In addition, it requires single parents in families receiving TANF funds to work at least thirty hours a week (or twenty hours a week if they have a child under the age of 6) and two parents to work at least thirty-five hours per week combined. In most states, going to school to obtain a degree does not count as the equivalent of working and thus does not make a parent eligible for TANF payments. Only short-term programs or workshops to develop job skills qualify.

Did welfare reform involving TANF work? Many adults formerly on AFDC found jobs, TANF payments nationwide have been much lower than AFDC payments, and many fewer families receive TANF payments than used to receive AFDC payments. All these facts lead many observers to hail TANF as a successful program. However, sociologists and other scholars who study TANF families say the numbers are misleading because poor families have in effect been excluded from TANF funding because of its strict requirements. The reduced payments and lower number of funded families indicate the failure of TANF, they say, not its success.

Several problems explain why TANF has had these

unintended consequences. First, many families are poor for many more than five years, and the five-year time limit under TANF means that they receive financial help for only some of the years they live in poverty. Second, because the federal and state governments provide relatively little financial aid for child care, many parents simply cannot afford to work, and if they don't work, they lose their TANF payments. Third, jobs are certainly difficult to find, especially if, as is typical, a poor parent has relatively little education and few job skills, and if parents cannot find a job, they again lose their TANF payments. Fourth, many parents cannot work because they have physical or mental health problems or because they are taking care of a family member or friend with a health problem; these parents, too, become ineligible for TANF payments.

Sociologist Lorna Rivera put a human face to these problems in a study of fifty poor women in Boston, Massachusetts. She lived among them, interviewed them individually, and conducted focus groups. She found that TANF worsened the situation of these women for the reasons just stated, and concluded that welfare reform left these and other poor women "uneducated, underemployed, underpaid, and unable to effectively move themselves and their families forward."

Ironically, some studies suggest that welfare reform impaired the health of black women for several reasons. Many ended up with jobs with long bus commutes and odd hours, leading to sleep deprivation and less time for medical visits. Many of these new workers also suddenly had to struggle to find affordable day care for their children. These problems are thought to have increased their stress levels and, in turn, harmed their health.

The research by social scientists on the effects of TANF reveals that the United States took a large step backward when it passed welfare reform in the 1990s. Far from reducing poverty, welfare reform only worsened it. This research underscores the need for the United States to develop better strategies for reducing poverty similar to those used by other Western democracies, as discussed in the Note 2.19 "Lessons from Other Societies" box in this chapter.

Sources: (Blitstein, 2009; Mink, 2008; Parrott & Sherman, 2008; Rivera, 2008)

Key Takeaways

- People in poor nations live in the worst conditions possible. Deadly diseases are common, and many children die before reaching adolescence.
- According to the modernization theory, rich nations became rich because their peoples possessed certain values, beliefs, and practices that helped them become wealthy. Conversely, poor nations remained poor because their peoples did not possess these values, beliefs, and practices.
- According to the dependency theory, poor nations have remained poor because they have been exploited by rich nations and by multinational corporations.

1. Considering all the ways in which poor nations fare much worse than wealthy nations, which one seems to you to be the most important problem that poor nations experience? Explain your answer.
2. Which theory of global poverty, modernization or dependency, makes more sense to you? Why?

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5.6 Reducing Poverty

Learning Objectives

1. Explain why the United States neglects its poor.
2. List any three potentially promising strategies to reduce US poverty.
3. Describe how to reduce global poverty from a sociological perspective.

As this chapter noted at the outset, the United States greatly reduced poverty during the 1960s through a series of programs and policies that composed the so-called war on poverty. You saw evidence of the success of the war on poverty in Figure 2.1 "US Poverty, 1959–2010", which showed that the poverty rate declined from 22.2 percent in 1960 to a low of 11.1 percent in 1973 before fluctuating from year to year and then rising since 2000. The Note 2.19 "Lessons from Other Societies" box showed that other democracies have much lower poverty rates than the United States because, as many scholars believe, they have better funded and more extensive programs to help their poor (Brady, 2009; Russell, 2011).

The lessons from the 1960s' war on poverty and the experience of other democracies are clear: It is very possible to reduce poverty if, and only if, a nation is willing to fund and implement appropriate programs and policies that address the causes of poverty and that help the poor deal with the immediate and ongoing difficulties they experience.

A major reason that the US poverty rate reached its low in 1973 and never went lower during the past four decades is that the United States retreated from its war on poverty by cutting back on the programs and services it had provided during that good war (Soss, et. al., 2007). Another major reason is that changes in the national economy during the past few decades have meant that well-paying manufacturing jobs have been replaced by low-paying service jobs with fewer benefits (Wilson, 2010). Yet this has also happened in other democracies, and their poverty rates remain lower than the US rate because, unlike the United States, they have continued to try to help their poor rather than neglect them.

Why does the United States neglect its poor? Many scholars attribute this neglect to the fact that many citizens and politicians think the poor are poor because of their own failings. As summarized by sociologist Mark R. Rank (Rank, 2011), these failings include "not working hard enough, failure to acquire sufficient skills, or just making bad decisions." By thus blaming the poor for their fate, citizens and politicians think the poor do not deserve to have the US government help them, and so the government does not help, or at least not nearly as much as other democracies do. We have seen that the facts do not support the myth that the poor lack motivation to work, but that does not lessen the blame given the poor for being poor.

To renew the US effort to help the poor, it is essential that the actual facts about poverty become better known so that a fundamental shift in thinking about poverty and the poor can occur. Rank (Rank, 2011) says that one aspect of this shift must include the recognition, as noted at the beginning of this chapter, that "poverty affects us all" because it costs so many tax dollars to help the poor and because a majority of the public can expect to be poor or near poor at some point in their lives. A second aspect of this shift in thinking, adds Rank, is the recognition (following a blaming-the-system approach) that poverty stems much more from the lack of opportunity, lack of jobs, declining government help for the poor, and other structural failings of American society than from

individual failings of the poor themselves. A third aspect of this shift in thinking, he concludes, is that poverty must become seen as a "moral problem" and as "an injustice of a substantial magnitude" (Rank, 2011). As he forcefully argues, "Something is seriously wrong when we find that, in a country with the most abundant resources in the world, there are children without enough to eat, families who cannot afford health care, and people sleeping on the streets for lack of shelter" (Rank, 2011). This situation, he says, must become seen as a "moral outrage" (Rank, 2011).

Sociologist Joe Soss (Soss, 2011) argues that a change in thinking is not enough for a renewed antipoverty effort to occur. What is needed, he says, is political protest and other political activity by the poor and on behalf of the poor. Soss notes that "political conflict and mass mobilization played key roles" in providing the impetus for social-welfare programs in the 1930s and 1960s in the United States, and he adds that the lower poverty rates of Western European democracies "are products of labor movements, unions, and parties that mobilized workers to demand more adequate social supports." These twin histories lead Soss to conclude that the United States will not increase its antipoverty efforts unless a new wave of political activity by and on behalf of the poor arises. As he argues, "History suggests that major antipoverty victories can be achieved. But they won't be achieved by good will and smart ideas alone. They'll be won politically, when people—in poor communities, in advocacy groups, in government, in the academy, and elsewhere—mobilize to advance antipoverty agendas in ways that make politics as usual untenable."

Antipoverty Programs and

Policies

To help reduce poverty, it is essential to help poor parents pay for child care.

Herald Post – Family Child Care – CC BY-NC 2.0.

If a renewed antipoverty effort does occur for whatever reason, what types of programs and policies show promise for effectively reducing poverty? Here a sociological vision is essential. It is easy to understand why the hungry schoolchildren described in the news story that began this chapter might be going without food during a very faltering national economy. Yet a sociological understanding of poverty emphasizes its structural basis in bad times and good times alike. Poverty is rooted in social and economic problems of the larger society rather than in the lack of willpower, laziness, or other moral failings of poor individuals themselves. Individuals born into poverty suffer from a lack of opportunity from their first months up through adulthood, and poverty becomes a self-perpetuating, vicious cycle. To the extent a culture of poverty might exist, it is best seen as a logical and perhaps even inevitable outcome of, and

adaptation to, the problem of being poor and not the primary force driving poverty itself.

This sort of understanding suggests that efforts to reduce poverty must address first and foremost the structural basis for poverty while not ignoring certain beliefs and practices of the poor that also make a difference. An extensive literature on poverty policy outlines many types of policies and programs that follow this dual approach (Cancian & Danziger, 2009; Greenberg, et. al., 2007; Iceland, 2006; Lindsey, 2009; Moore et al., 2009; Rank, 2004). If these were fully adopted, funded, and implemented, as they are in many other democracies, they would offer great promise for reducing poverty. As two poverty experts recently wrote, "We are optimistic that poverty can be reduced significantly in the long term if the public and policymakers can muster the political will to pursue a range of promising antipoverty policies" (M. Cancian & S. Danziger, 2009, p. 32).[1] Although a full discussion of these policies is beyond the scope of this chapter, the following measures are commonly cited as holding strong potential for reducing poverty, and they are found in varying degrees in other Western democracies:

1. Adopt a national "full employment" policy for the poor, involving federally funded job training and public works programs, and increase the minimum wage so that individuals working full-time will earn enough to lift their families out of poverty.
2. Increase federal aid for the working poor, including higher earned income credits and child-care subsidies for those with children.
3. Establish well-funded early childhood intervention programs,

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1. Cancian, M., & Danziger, S. H. (2009). *Changing poverty, changing policies*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

including home visitations by trained professionals, for poor families.

4. Provide poor families with enough income to enable them to pay for food and housing.
5. Increase the supply of affordable housing.
6. Improve the schools that poor children attend and the schooling they receive and expand early childhood education programs for poor children.
7. Provide better nutrition and health services for poor families with young children.
8. Establish universal health insurance.
9. Increase Pell Grants and other financial aid for higher education.

Global Poverty

Years of international aid to poor nations have helped them somewhat, but, as this chapter has shown, their situation remains dire. International aid experts acknowledge that efforts to achieve economic growth in poor nations have largely failed, but they disagree why this is so and what alternative strategies may prove more successful (Cohen & Easterly, 2009).[2] One very promising

2. Cohen, J., & Easterly, W. (Eds.). (2009). *What works in development? Thinking big and thinking small.* Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

trend has been a switch from macro efforts focusing on infrastructure problems and on social institutions, such as the schools, to micro efforts, such as providing cash payments or small loans directly to poor people in poor nations (a practice called *microfinancing*) and giving them bed nets to prevent mosquito bites (Banerjee & Duflo, 2011; Hanlon, Barrientos, & Hulme, 2010; Karlan & Appel, 2011).[3] However, the evidence on the success of these efforts is mixed (Bennett, 2009; The Economist, 2010).[4] Much more to help the world's poor certainly needs to be done.

In this regard, sociology's structural approach is in line with dependency theory and suggests that global stratification results from the history of colonialism and from continuing exploitation today of poor nations' resources by wealthy nations and multinational corporations. To the extent such exploitation exists, global poverty will lessen if and only if this exploitation lessens. A sociological approach also emphasizes the role that class, gender,

3. Banerjee, A. V., & Duflo, E. (2011). *Poor economics*: *A radical rethinking of the way to fight global poverty*. New York, NY: PublicAffairs; Hanlon, J., Barrientos, A., & Hulme, D. (2010). *Just give money to the poor*: *The development revolution from the global south*. Sterling, VA: Kumarian Press; Karlan, D., & Appel, J. (2011). *More than good intentions*: *How a new economics is helping to solve global poverty*. New York, NY: Dutton.

4. Bennett, D. (2009, September 20). Small change. *The Boston Globe*. Retrieved from http://www.boston.com/ bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2009/09/20/ small_change_does_microlending_actually_fight_poverty/; The Economist. (2010). A better mattress. *The Economist, 394*(8673), 75–76.

and ethnic inequality play in perpetuating global poverty. For global poverty to be reduced, gender and ethnic inequality must be reduced.

Writers Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn (2010)[5] emphasize the need to focus efforts to reduce global poverty of women. We have already seen one reason this emphasis makes sense: women are much worse off than men in poor nations in many ways, so helping them is crucial for both economic and humanitarian reasons. An additional reason is especially illuminating: When women in poor nations acquire extra money, they typically spend it on food, clothing, and medicine, essentials for their families. However, when men in poor nations acquire extra money, they often spend it on alcohol, tobacco, and gambling. This gender difference might sound like a stereotype, but it does indicate that aid to women will help in many ways, while aid to men might be less effective and often even wasted.

Key Takeaways

- According to some sociologists, a change in thinking about poverty and the poor and political action by and on behalf of the poor are necessary for a renewed effort to help poor Americans.
- Potentially successful antipoverty programs and policies to help the US poor include expanding their employment opportunities and providing them much

5. Kristoff, N. D., & WuDunn, S. (2010). *Half the sky: Turning oppression into opportunity for women worldwide*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.

greater amounts of financial and other aid.
- To help people in poor nations, gender and ethnic inequality must be addressed.

For Your Review

1. Write a brief essay summarizing the changes in thinking that some sociologists argue must occur before a renewed effort to reduce poverty can take place.
2. Write a brief essay summarizing any four policies or programs that could potentially lower US poverty.

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Summary

1. Poverty statistics are misleading in at least two ways. First, the way that poverty is measured is inadequate for several reasons, and more accurate measures of poverty that have recently been developed suggest that poverty is higher than the official poverty measure indicates. Second, even if people live slightly above the poverty line, they are still living in very difficult circumstances and are having trouble making ends meet.

2. Children, people of color, the South, and single-parent families headed by women have especially high poverty rates. Despite what many Americans think, the most typical poor person is white, and most poor people who are able to work outside the home in fact do work.

3. To explain social stratification and thus poverty, functionalist theory says that stratification is necessary and inevitable because of the need to encourage people with the needed knowledge and skills to decide to pursue the careers that are most important to society. Conflict theory says stratification exists because of discrimination against, and blocked opportunities for, the have-nots of society. Symbolic interactionist theory does not try to explain why stratification and poverty exist, but it does attempt to understand the experience of being

poor.

4.   The individualistic explanation attributes poverty to individual failings of poor people themselves, while the structuralist explanation attributes poverty to lack of jobs and lack of opportunity in the larger society.

5.   Poverty has serious consequences in many respects. Among other problems, poor children are more likely to grow up to be poor, to have health problems, to commit street crime, and to have lower levels of formal education.

6.   The nations of the world differ dramatically in wealth and other resources, with the poorest nations being found in Africa and parts of Asia.

7.   Global poverty has a devastating impact on the lives of hundreds of millions of people throughout the world. Poor nations have much higher rates of mortality and disease and lower rates of literacy.

8.   Modernization theory attributes global poverty to the failure of poor nations to develop the necessary beliefs, values, and practices to achieve economic growth, while dependency theory attributes global poverty to the colonization and exploitation by European nations of nations in other parts of the world.

9.   A sociological perspective suggests that poverty reduction in the United States and around the world can occur if the structural causes of poverty are successfully addressed.

Using What You Know

It is December 20, and you have just finished final exams. In two days, you will go home for winter break and are looking forward to a couple weeks of eating, sleeping, and seeing your high school friends. Your smartphone signals that someone has texted you. When you read the message, you see that a friend is asking you to join her in serving a holiday supper on December 23 at a food pantry just a few miles from your campus. If you do that, you will not be able to get home until two days after you had been planning to arrive, and you will miss a big high school "reunion" party set for the night of the twenty-third. What do you decide to do? Why?

What You Can Do

To help fight poverty and the effects of poverty, you may wish to do any of the following:

1. Contribute money to a local, state, or national organization that provides various kinds of aid to the poor.
2. Volunteer at a local food pantry or homeless shelter.
3. Start a canned food or used clothing drive on your campus.

4. Write letters or send e-mails to local, state, and federal officials that encourage them to expand antipoverty programs.

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CHAPTER 6: RACIAL AND ETHNIC INEQUALITY

Social Problems in the News

"Anger, Shock over Cross Burning in Calif. Community," the headline said. This cross burning took place next to a black woman's home in Arroyo Grande, California, a small, wealthy town about 170 miles northwest of Los Angeles. The eleven-foot cross had recently been stolen from a nearby church.

This hate crime shocked residents and led a group of local ministers to issue a public statement that said in part, "Burning crosses, swastikas on synagogue walls, hateful words on mosque doors are not pranks. They are hate crimes meant to frighten and intimidate." The head of the group added, "We live in a beautiful area, but it's only

beautiful if every single person feels safe conducting their lives and living here."

Four people were arrested four months later for allegedly burning the cross and charged with arson, hate crime, terrorism, and conspiracy. Arroyo Grande's mayor applauded the arrests and said in a statement, "Despite the fact that our city was shaken by this crime, it did provide an opportunity for us to become better educated on matters relating to diversity."

Sources: (Jablon, 2011; Lerner, 2011; Mann, 2011)

Cross burnings like this one recall the Ku Klux Klan era between the 1880s and 1960s, when white men dressed in white sheets and white hoods terrorized African Americans in the South and elsewhere and lynched more than 3,000 black men and women. Thankfully, that era is long gone, but as this news story reminds us, racial issues continue to trouble the United States.

In the wake of the 1960s urban riots, the so-called Kerner Commission (Kerner Commission, 1968)[1] appointed by President Lyndon Johnson to study the riots famously warned, "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal." The commission blamed white racism for the riots and urged the government to provide jobs and housing for African Americans and to take steps to end racial segregation.

More than four decades later, racial inequality in the United States continues to exist and in many ways has worsened. Despite

1. Kerner Commission. (1968). *Report of the National Advisory Commission on civil disorders*. New York, NY: Bantam Books.

major advances by African Americans, Latinos, and other people of color during the past few decades, they continue to lag behind non-Hispanic whites in education, income, health, and other social indicators. The faltering economy since 2008 has hit people of color especially hard, and the racial wealth gap is deeper now than it was just two decades ago.

Why does racial and ethnic inequality exist? What forms does it take? What can be done about it? This chapter addresses all these questions. We shall see that, although racial and ethnic inequality has stained the United States since its beginnings, there is hope for the future as long as our nation understands the structural sources of this inequality and makes a concerted effort to reduce it. Later chapters in this book will continue to highlight various dimensions of racial and ethnic inequality. Immigration is a very relevant issue today for Latinos and Asians and the source of much political controversy.

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6.1 Racial and Ethnic Inequality: A Historical Prelude

Learning Objectives

1. Describe the targets of nineteenth-century mob violence in US cities.
2. Discuss why the familiar saying "The more things change, the more they stay the same" applies to the history of race and ethnicity in the United States.

Race and ethnicity have torn at the fabric of American society ever since the time of Christopher Columbus, when an estimated 1 million Native Americans populated the eventual United States. By 1900, their numbers had dwindled to about 240,000, as tens of thousands were killed by white settlers and US troops and countless others died from disease contracted from people with European backgrounds. Scholars say this mass killing of Native Americans amounted to genocide (Brown, 2009).

African Americans also have a history of maltreatment that began during the colonial period, when Africans were forcibly transported from their homelands to be sold as slaves in the Americas. Slavery, of course, continued in the United States until the North's victory in the Civil War ended it. African Americans outside the South were not slaves but were still victims of racial prejudice. During the 1830s,

white mobs attacked free African Americans in cities throughout the nation, including Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Buffalo, and Pittsburgh. The mob violence stemmed from a "deep-seated racial prejudice…in which whites saw blacks as 'something less than human'" (Brown, 1975) and continued well into the twentieth century, when white mobs attacked African Americans in several cities, with at least seven antiblack riots occurring in 1919 that left dozens dead. Meanwhile, an era of Jim Crow racism in the South led to the lynching of thousands of African Americans, segregation in all facets of life, and other kinds of abuses (Litwack, 2009).

During the era of Jim Crow racism in the South, several thousand African Americans were lynched.

African Americans were not the only targets of native-born white mobs back then (Dinnerstein & Reimers, 2009). As immigrants from Ireland, Italy, Eastern Europe, Mexico, and Asia flooded into the United States during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they, too, were beaten, denied jobs, and otherwise mistreated. During the 1850s, mobs beat and sometimes killed Catholics in cities such as Baltimore and New Orleans. During the 1870s, whites rioted against Chinese immigrants in cities in California and other states. Hundreds of Mexicans were attacked and/or lynched in California and Texas during this period.

Nazi racism in the 1930s and 1940s helped awaken Americans to the evils of prejudice in their own country. Against this backdrop, a monumental two-volume work by Swedish social scientist Gunnar Myrdal (Myrdal, 1944) attracted much attention when it was published. The book, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, documented the various forms of discrimination facing blacks back then. The "dilemma" referred to by the book's title was the conflict between the American democratic ideals of egalitarianism and liberty and justice for all and the harsh reality of prejudice, discrimination, and lack of equal opportunity.

The Kerner Commission's 1968 report reminded the nation that little, if anything, had been done since Myrdal's book to address this conflict. Sociologists and other social scientists have warned since then that the status of people of color has actually been worsening in many ways since this report was issued (Massey, 2007; Wilson, 2009). Evidence of this status appears in the remainder of this chapter.

Key Takeaways

- US history is filled with violence and other

maltreatment against Native Americans, blacks, and immigrants.

- Social scientists warn that the status of people of color has been worsening.

For Your Review

1. Describe why Myrdal said US race relations were an "American dilemma."
2. How much did you learn in high school about the history of race and ethnicity in the United States? Do you think you should have learned more?

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6.2 The Meaning of Race and Ethnicity

Learning Objectives

1. Critique the biological concept of race.
2. Discuss why race is a social construction.
3. Explain why ethnic heritages have both good and bad consequences.

To begin our understanding of racial and ethnic inequality, we first need to understand what *race* and *ethnicity* mean. These terms may seem easy to define but are much more complex than their definitions suggest.

Race

Let's start first with **race**, which refers to a category of people who share certain inherited physical characteristics, such as skin color,

facial features, and stature. A key question about race is whether it is more of a biological category or a social category. Most people think of race in biological terms, and for more than three hundred years, or ever since white Europeans began colonizing nations filled with people of color, people have been identified as belonging to one race or another based on certain biological features.

It is certainly easy to see that people in the United States and around the world differ physically in some obvious ways. The most noticeable difference is skin tone: Some groups of people have very dark skin, while others have very light skin. Other differences also exist. Some people have very curly hair, while others have very straight hair. Some have thin lips, while others have thick lips. Some groups of people tend to be relatively tall, while others tend to be relatively short. Using such physical differences as their criteria, scientists at one point identified as many as nine races: African, American Indian or Native American, Asian, Australian Aborigine, European (more commonly called "white"), Indian, Melanesian, Micronesian, and Polynesian (Smedley, 2007).

Although people certainly do differ in these kinds of physical features, anthropologists, sociologists, and many biologists question the value of these categories and thus the value of the biological concept of race (Smedley, 2007). For one thing, we often see more physical differences *within* a race than *between* races. For example, some people we call "white" (or European), such as those with Scandinavian backgrounds, have very light skins, while others, such as those from some Eastern European backgrounds, have much darker skins. In fact, some "whites" have darker skin than some "blacks," or African Americans. Some whites have very straight hair, while others have very curly hair; some have blonde hair and blue eyes, while others have dark hair and brown eyes. Because of interracial reproduction going back to the days of slavery, African Americans also differ in the darkness of their skin and in other physical characteristics. In fact, it is estimated that at least 30 percent of African Americans have some white (i.e., European) ancestry and that at least 20 percent of whites have African or

Native American ancestry. If clear racial differences ever existed hundreds or thousands of years ago (and many scientists doubt such differences ever existed), in today's world these differences have become increasingly blurred.

President Barack Obama had an African father and a white mother. Although his ancestry is equally black and white, Obama considers himself an African American, as do most Americans. In several Latin American nations, however, Obama would be considered white because of his white ancestry.

Steve Jurvetson – [Barak Obama on the Primary](#) – CC BY 2.0.

Another reason to question the biological concept of race is that an individual or a group of individuals is often assigned to a race arbitrarily. A century ago, for example, Irish, Italians, and Eastern European Jews who left their homelands were not regarded as white once they reached the United States but rather as a different,

inferior (if unnamed) race (Painter, 2010). The belief in their inferiority helped justify the harsh treatment they suffered in their new country. Today, of course, we call people from all three backgrounds white or European.

In this context, consider someone in the United States who has a white parent and a black parent. What race is this person? American society usually calls this person black or African American, and the person may adopt this identity (as does President Barack Obama, who had a white mother and African father). But where is the logic for doing so? This person, as well as President Obama, is as much white as black in terms of parental ancestry.

Or consider someone with one white parent and another parent who is the child of one black parent and one white parent. This person thus has three white grandparents and one black grandparent. Even though this person's ancestry is thus 75 percent white and 25 percent black, she or he is likely to be considered black in the United States and may well adopt this racial identity. This practice reflects the traditional *one-drop rule* in the United States that defines someone as black if she or he has at least one drop of *black blood*, and that was used in the antebellum South to keep the slave population as large as possible (Staples, 2005). Yet in many Latin American nations, this person would be considered white (see). With such arbitrary designations, race is more of a social category than a biological one.

Lessons from Other Societies

The Concept of Race in Brazil

As the text discusses, race was long considered a fixed, biological category, but today it is now regarded as a social construction. The experience of Brazil provides very interesting comparative evidence for this more accurate way of thinking about race.

When slaves were first brought to the Americas almost four hundred years ago, many more were taken to Brazil, where slavery was not abolished until 1888, than to the land that eventually became the United States. Brazil was then a colony of Portugal, and the Portuguese used Africans as slave labor. Just as in the United States, a good deal of interracial reproduction has occurred since those early days, much of it initially the result of rape of women slaves by their owners, and Brazil over the centuries has had many more racial intermarriages than the United States. Also like the United States, then, much of Brazil's population has multiracial ancestry. But in a significant departure from the

United States, Brazil uses different criteria to consider the race to which a person belongs.

Brazil uses the term *preto*, or *black*, for people whose ancestry is solely African. It also uses the term *branco*, or *white*, to refer to people whose ancestry is both African and European. In contrast, as the text discusses, the United States commonly uses the term *black* or *African American* to refer to someone with even a small amount of African ancestry and *white* for someone who is thought to have solely European ancestry or at least "looks" white. If the United States were to follow Brazil's practice of reserving the term *black* for someone whose ancestry is solely African and the term *white* for someone whose ancestry is both African and European, many of the Americans commonly called "black" would no longer be considered black and instead would be considered white.

As sociologist Edward E. Telles (2006, p. 79) summarizes these differences, "[Blackness is differently understood in Brazil than in the United States. A person considered black in the United States is often not so in Brazil. Indeed, some U.S. blacks may be considered white in Brazil. Although the value given to blackness is similarly low [in both nations], who gets classified as black is not uniform." The fact that someone can count on being considered "black" in one society and not "black" in another society underscores the idea that race is best considered a social construction rather than a biological category.

Sources: Barrionuevo & Calmes, 2011; Klein & Luno, 2009; Telles, 2006

A third reason to question the biological concept of race comes from the field of biology itself and more specifically from the studies

of genetics and human evolution. Starting with genetics, people from different races are more than 99.9 percent the same in their DNA (Begley, 2008). To turn that around, less than 0.1 percent of all DNA in our bodies accounts for the physical differences among people that we associate with racial differences. In terms of DNA, then, people with different racial backgrounds are much, much more similar than dissimilar.

Even if we acknowledge that people differ in the physical characteristics we associate with race, modern evolutionary evidence reminds us that we are all, really, of one human race. According to evolutionary theory, the human race began thousands and thousands of years ago in sub-Saharan Africa. As people migrated around the world over the millennia, natural selection took over. It favored dark skin for people living in hot, sunny climates (i.e., near the equator), because the heavy amounts of melanin that produce dark skin protect against severe sunburn, cancer, and other problems. By the same token, natural selection favored light skin for people who migrated farther from the equator to cooler, less sunny climates, because dark skins there would have interfered with the production of vitamin D (Stone & Lurquin, 2007). Evolutionary evidence thus reinforces the common humanity of people who differ in the rather superficial ways associated with their appearances: We are one human species composed of people who happen to look different.

Race as a Social Construction

The reasons for doubting the biological basis for racial categories

suggest that race is more of a social category than a biological one. Another way to say this is that race is a **social construction**, a concept that has no objective reality but rather is what people decide it is (Berger & Luckmann, 1963). In this view, race has no real existence other than what and how people think of it.

This understanding of race is reflected in the problems, outlined earlier, in placing people with multiracial backgrounds into any one racial category. We have already mentioned the example of President Obama. As another example, golfer Tiger Woods was typically called an African American by the news media when he burst onto the golfing scene in the late 1990s, but in fact his ancestry is one-half Asian (divided evenly between Chinese and Thai), one-quarter white, one-eighth Native American, and only one-eighth African American (Leland & Beals, 1997).

Historical examples of attempts to place people in racial categories further underscore the social constructionism of race. In the South during the time of slavery, the skin tone of slaves lightened over the years as babies were born from the union, often in the form of rape, of slave owners and other whites with slaves. As it became difficult to tell who was "black" and who was not, many court battles over people's racial identity occurred. People who were accused of having black ancestry would go to court to prove they were white in order to avoid enslavement or other problems (Staples, 1998).

Although race is a social construction, it is also true that race has real consequences because people *do* perceive race as something real. Even though so little of DNA accounts for the physical differences we associate with racial differences, that low amount leads us not only to classify people into different races but also to treat them differently—and, more to the point, unequally—based on their classification. Yet modern evidence shows there is little, if any, scientific basis for the racial classification that is the source of so much inequality.

Ethnicity

Because of the problems in the meaning of *race*, many social scientists prefer the term *ethnicity* in speaking of people of color and others with distinctive cultural heritages. In this context, **ethnicity** refers to the shared social, cultural, and historical experiences, stemming from common national or regional backgrounds, that make subgroups of a population different from one another. Similarly, an **ethnic group** is a subgroup of a population with a set of shared social, cultural, and historical experiences; with relatively distinctive beliefs, values, and behaviors; and with some sense of identity of belonging to the subgroup. So conceived, the terms *ethnicity* and *ethnic group* avoid the biological connotations of the terms *race* and *racial group*.

At the same time, the importance we attach to ethnicity illustrates that it, too, is in many ways a social construction, and our ethnic membership thus has important consequences for how we are treated. In particular, history and current practice indicate that it is easy to become prejudiced against people with different ethnicities from our own. Much of the rest of this chapter looks at the prejudice and discrimination operating today in the United States against people whose ethnicity is not white and European. Around the world today, ethnic conflict continues to rear its ugly head. The 1990s and 2000s were filled with ethnic cleansing and pitched battles among ethnic groups in Eastern Europe, Africa, and elsewhere. Our ethnic heritages shape us in many ways and fill many of us with pride, but they also are the source of much conflict, prejudice, and even hatred, as the hate crime story that began this chapter so sadly reminds us.

Key Takeaways

- Sociologists think race is best considered a social construction rather than a biological category.
- "Ethnicity" and "ethnic" avoid the biological connotations of "race" and "racial."

For Your Review

1. List everyone you might know whose ancestry is biracial or multiracial. What do these individuals consider themselves to be?
2. List two or three examples that indicate race is a social construction rather than a biological category.

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6.3 Prejudice

Prejudice and *discrimination* (discussed in the next section) are often confused, but the basic difference between them is this: Prejudice is the attitude, while discrimination is the behavior. More specifically, racial and ethnic **prejudice** refers to a set of negative attitudes, beliefs, and judgments about whole categories of people, and about individual members of those categories, because of their perceived race and/or ethnicity. A closely related concept is **racism**, or the belief that certain racial or ethnic groups are inferior to one's own. Prejudice and racism are often based on racial and ethnic **stereotypes**, or simplified, mistaken generalizations about people because of their race and/or ethnicity. While cultural and other differences do exist among the various American racial and ethnic groups, many of the views we have of such groups are unfounded and hence are stereotypes. An example of the stereotypes that white people have of other groups appears in [Figure 3.1 "Perceptions by Non-Latino White Respondents of the Intelligence of White and Black Americans"](), in which white respondents in the General Social Survey (GSS), a recurring survey

of a random sample of the US population, are less likely to think blacks are intelligent than they are to think whites are intelligent.

Figure 3.1 Perceptions by Non-Latino White Respondents of the Intelligence of White and Black Americans

Source: Data from General Social Survey. (2010). Retrieved from http://sda.berkeley.edu/cgi-bin/hsda?harcsda+gss10.
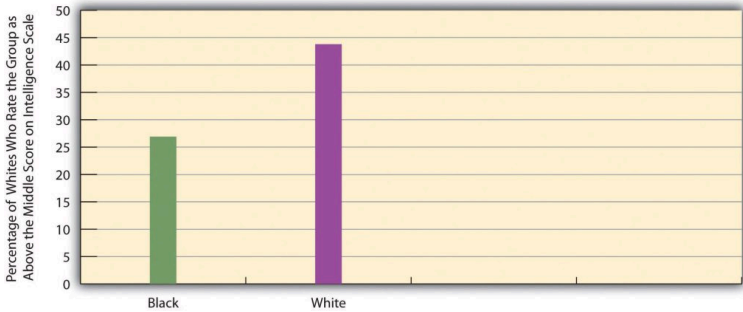
Explaining Prejudice

Where does racial and ethnic prejudice come from? Why are some people more prejudiced than others? Scholars have tried to answer these questions at least since the 1940s, when the horrors of Nazism were still fresh in people's minds. Theories of prejudice fall into two camps, social-psychological and sociological. We will look at social-psychological explanations first and then turn to sociological explanations. We will also discuss distorted mass media treatment of various racial and ethnic groups.

Social-Psychological Explanations

One of the first social-psychological explanations of prejudice centered on the authoritarian personality (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950). According to this view, authoritarian personalities develop in childhood in response to parents who practice harsh discipline. Individuals with authoritarian personalities emphasize such things as obedience to authority, a rigid adherence to rules, and low acceptance of people (out-groups) not like oneself. Many studies find strong racial and ethnic prejudice among such individuals (Sibley & Duckitt, 2008). But whether their prejudice stems from their authoritarian

personalities or instead from the fact that their parents were probably prejudiced themselves remains an important question.

Authoritarian personalities are said to develop in childhood from harsh parental discipline and to be linked to racial and ethnic prejudice. Although many people with authoritarian personalities are prejudiced, it remains unclear whether their prejudice stems from their personalities or from their parents' own prejudice.

Another early and still popular social-psychological explanation is called **frustration theory (or scapegoat theory)** (Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939). In this view individuals with various problems become frustrated and tend to blame their troubles on groups that are often disliked in the real world (e.g., racial, ethnic,

and religious minorities). These minorities are thus scapegoats for the real sources of people's misfortunes. Several psychology experiments find that when people are frustrated, they indeed become more prejudiced. In one early experiment, college students who were purposely not given enough time to solve a puzzle were more prejudiced after the experiment than before it (Cowen, Landes, & Schaet, 1959).

Sociological Explanations

One popular sociological explanation emphasizes *conformity* and *socialization* and is called *social learning theory.* In this view, people who are prejudiced are merely conforming to the culture in which they grow up, and prejudice is the result of socialization from parents, peers, the news media, and other various aspects of their culture. Supporting this view, studies have found that people tend to become more prejudiced when they move to areas where people are very prejudiced and less prejudiced when they move to locations where people are less prejudiced (Aronson, 2008). If people in the South today continue to be more prejudiced than those outside the South, as we discuss later, even though legal segregation ended more than four decades ago, the influence of their culture on their socialization may help explain these beliefs.

Children and Our Future

Growing Up as Farmworkers' Kids

In the large agricultural fields of California work thousands of farmworkers and their families. Adults and children alike live in poor, crowded conditions and do backbreaking work in the hot sun, day after day after day.

Because their parents are migrant workers, many children attend a specific school for only a few weeks or months at most before their parents move to another field in another town or even another state. At Sherwood Elementary School in Salinas, California, in the heart of the state's agricultural sector, 97 percent of students live in or near poverty. With their Latino backgrounds, more than three-fourths do not speak English well or at all, and many of their parents cannot read or write their own language, Spanish.

At the Sherwood school, according to a news report, many students "sleep beneath carports and live in such cramped quarters that their parents take them to the local truck stop to wash up before school." A local high school teacher said many of his students see little of their parents, who spend most of their waking hours working in the fields.

"They have little brothers and sisters to take care of, maybe cook for. Yet they're supposed to turn in a 10-page paper by tomorrow? I mean, it's unreal."

These conditions have grievous consequences for California's migrant farmworker children, almost half of whom fail to complete high school. The principal of the Sherwood Elementary School said the key strategy for her faculty and school was "understanding where the students come from but also having high expectations."

The plight of farmworkers' children is just one aspect of the difficulties facing Latino children around the country. Thanks to reproduction and immigration, the number of Latino children nationwide has grown significantly during the past few decades: in 2009, 23 percent of US kindergarten children were Latino, compared to only 10 percent in 1989. These growing numbers underscore the need to pay attention to the health and welfare of Latino children.

Against this backdrop, it is distressing to note that their health and welfare is not very good at all. About one-third of Latino children live in poverty. The average Latino child grows up in a poor neighborhood where almost half of the residents do not speak English fluently, where the schools are substandard, and where the high school dropout and teen unemployment rates are high. A number of factors, including their ethnicity, poverty, language barriers, and the immigrant status of many of their parents, limit Latino children's access to adequate health care and various kinds of social services.

Amid all these problems, however, the situation of California's farmworker children stands out as a national

embarrassment for a prosperous country like the United States. As the country struggles to end racial and ethnic inequality, it must not forget the children of Salinas who have to use a truck stop to wash up before school.

Sources: P. L. Brown, 2011; Landale, McHale, & Booth, 2011; Tavernise, 2011

The mass media play a key role in how many people learn to be prejudiced. This type of learning happens because the media often present people of color in a negative light. By doing so, the media unwittingly reinforce the prejudice that individuals already have or even increase their prejudice (Larson, 2005). Examples of distorted media coverage abound. Even though poor people are more likely to be white than any other race or ethnicity (see [Chapter 5 "Poverty"](#)), the news media use pictures of African Americans far more often than those of whites in stories about poverty. In one study, national news magazines, such as *Time* and *Newsweek*, and television news shows portrayed African Americans in almost two-thirds of their stories on poverty, even though only about one-fourth of poor people are African Americans. In the magazine stories, only 12 percent of the African Americans had a job, even though in the real world more than 40 percent of poor African Americans were working at the time the stories were written (Gilens, 1996). In a Chicago study, television news shows there depicted whites fourteen times more often in stories of good Samaritans, even though whites and African Americans live in Chicago in roughly equal numbers (Entman & Rojecki, 2001). Many other studies find that newspaper and television stories about crime and drugs feature higher proportions of African Americans as offenders than is true in arrest statistics (Surette, 2011). Studies like these show that the news media "convey the message that black people are violent, lazy, and less civic minded" (Jackson, 1997, p. A27).

A second sociological explanation emphasizes *economic and political competition* and is commonly called *group threat theory* (Quillian, 2006). In this view, prejudice arises from competition over jobs and other resources and from disagreement over various political issues. When groups vie with each other over these matters, they often become hostile toward each other. Amid such hostility, it is easy to become prejudiced toward the group that threatens your economic or political standing. A popular version of this basic explanation is Susan Olzak's (1992) *ethnic competition theory*, which holds that ethnic prejudice and conflict increase when two or more ethnic groups find themselves competing for jobs, housing, and other goals.

The competition explanation is the macro equivalent of the frustration/scapegoat theory already discussed. Much of the white mob violence discussed earlier stemmed from whites' concern that the groups they attacked threatened their jobs and other aspects of their lives. Thus lynchings of African Americans in the South increased when the Southern economy worsened and decreased when the economy improved (Tolnay & Beck, 1995). Similarly, white mob violence against Chinese immigrants in the 1870s began after the railroad construction that employed so many Chinese immigrants slowed and the Chinese began looking for work in other industries. Whites feared that the Chinese would take jobs away from white workers and that their large supply of labor would drive down wages. Their assaults on the Chinese killed several people and prompted the passage by Congress of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 that prohibited Chinese immigration (Dinnerstein & Reimers, 2009).
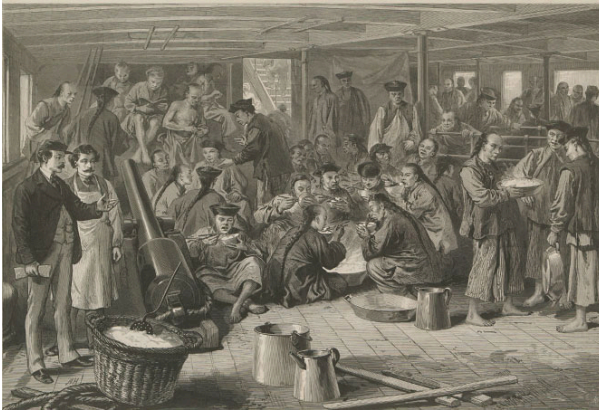
During the 1870s, whites feared that Chinese immigrants would take away their jobs. This fear led to white mob violence against the Chinese and to an act of Congress that prohibited Chinese immigration.

Correlates of Prejudice

Since the 1940s, social scientists have investigated the individual correlates of racial and ethnic prejudice (Stangor, 2009). These correlates help test the theories of prejudice just presented. For example, if authoritarian personalities do produce prejudice, then people with these personalities should be more prejudiced. If frustration also produces prejudice, then people who are frustrated with aspects of their lives should also be more prejudiced. Other

correlates that have been studied include age, education, gender, region of country, race, residence in integrated neighborhoods, and religiosity. We can take time here to focus on gender, education, and region of country and discuss the evidence for the racial attitudes of whites, as most studies do in view of the historic dominance of whites in the United States.

The findings on *gender* are rather surprising. Although women are usually thought to be more empathetic than men and thus to be less likely to be racially prejudiced, recent research indicates that the racial views of (white) women and men are in fact very similar and that the two genders are about equally prejudiced (Hughes & Tuch, 2003). This similarity supports group threat theory, outlined earlier, in that it indicates that white women and men are responding more as whites than as women or men, respectively, in formulating their racial views.

Findings on *education* and *region of country* are not surprising. Focusing again just on whites, less educated people are usually more racially prejudiced than better-educated people, and Southerners are usually more prejudiced than non-Southerners (Krysan, 2000). Evidence of these differences appears in [Figure 3.2 "Education, Region, and Opposition by Non-Latino Whites to a Close Relative Marrying an African American"](), which depicts educational and regional differences in a type of racial prejudice that social scientists call *social distance*, or feelings about interacting with members of other races and ethnicities. The General Social Survey asks respondents how they feel about a "close relative" marrying an African American. [Figure 3.2 "Education, Region, and Opposition by Non-Latino Whites to a Close Relative Marrying an African American"]() shows how responses by white (non-Latino) respondents to this question vary by education and by Southern residence. Whites without a high school degree are much more likely than those with more education to oppose these marriages, and whites in the South are also much more likely than their non-Southern counterparts to oppose them. To recall the sociological perspective, our social backgrounds certainly do seem to affect our attitudes.

Figure 3.2 Education, Region, and Opposition by Non-Latino Whites to a Close Relative Marrying an African American
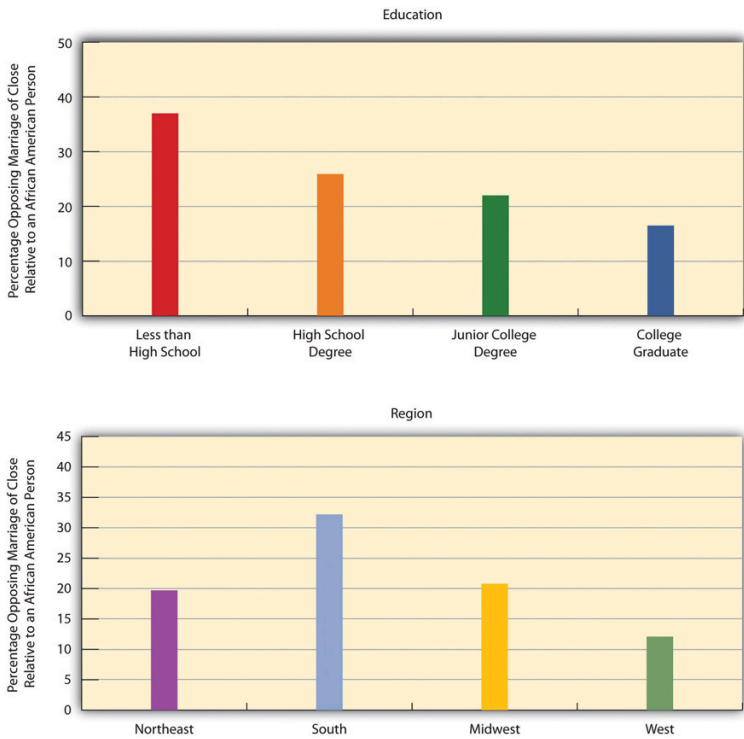
The Changing Nature of Prejudice

Although racial and ethnic prejudice still exists in the United States, its nature has changed during the past half-century. Studies of these changes focus on whites' perceptions of African Americans. Back in the 1940s and before, an era of overt *Jim Crow* racism (also called *traditional* or *old-fashioned* racism) prevailed, not just in the South but in the entire nation. This racism involved blatant bigotry, firm beliefs in the need for segregation, and the view that blacks were biologically inferior to whites. In the early 1940s, for example, more than half of all whites thought that blacks were less intelligent than whites, more than half favored segregation in public transportation, more than two-thirds favored segregated schools, and more than half thought whites should receive preference over blacks in employment hiring (Schuman, Steeh, Bobo, & Krysan, 1997).

The Nazi experience and then the civil rights movement led whites to reassess their views, and Jim Crow racism gradually waned. Few whites believe today that African Americans are biologically inferior, and few favor segregation. So few whites now support segregation and other Jim Crow views that national surveys no longer include many of the questions that were asked a half-century ago.

But that does not mean that prejudice has disappeared. Many scholars say that Jim Crow racism has been replaced by a more subtle form of racial prejudice, termed *laissez-faire*, *symbolic*, or *modern* racism, that amounts to a "kinder, gentler, antiblack ideology" that avoids notions of biological inferiority (Bobo, Kluegel, & Smith, 1997, p. 15; Quillian, 2006; Sears, 1988). Instead, it involves stereotypes about African Americans, a belief that their poverty is due to their cultural inferiority, and opposition to government

policies to help them. Similar views exist about Latinos. In effect, this new form of prejudice blames African Americans and Latinos themselves for their low socioeconomic standing and involves such beliefs that they simply do not want to work hard.

Evidence for this modern form of prejudice is seen in [Figure 3.3 "Attribution by Non-Latino Whites of Blacks' Low Socioeconomic Status to Blacks' Low Innate Intelligence and to Their Lack of Motivation to Improve"](#), which presents whites' responses to two General Social Survey (GSS) questions that asked, respectively, whether African Americans' low socioeconomic status is due to their lower "in-born ability to learn" or to their lack of "motivation and will power to pull themselves up out of poverty." While only 8.5 percent of whites attributed blacks' status to lower innate intelligence (reflecting the decline of Jim Crow racism), about 48 percent attributed it to their lack of motivation and willpower. Although this reason sounds "kinder" and "gentler" than a belief in blacks' biological inferiority, it is still one that blames African Americans for their low socioeconomic status.

Figure 3.3 Attribution by Non-Latino Whites of Blacks' Low Socioeconomic Status to Blacks' Low Innate Intelligence and to Their Lack of Motivation to Improve
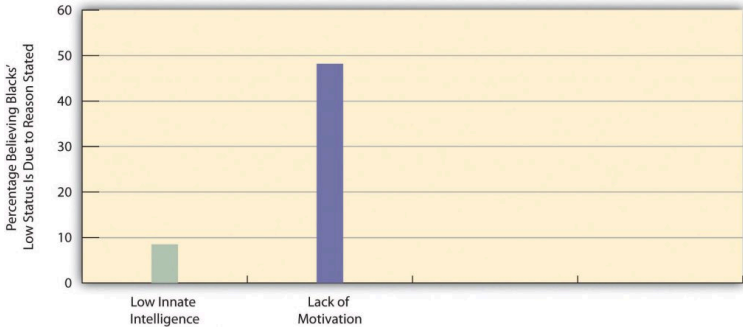
Prejudice and Public Policy Preferences

If whites do continue to believe in racial stereotypes, say the scholars who study modern prejudice, they are that much more likely to oppose government efforts to help people of color. For example, whites who hold racial stereotypes are more likely to oppose government programs for African Americans (Quillian, 2006). We can see an example of this type of effect in Figure 3.4 "Racial Stereotyping by Non-Latino Whites and Their Opposition to Government Spending to Help African Americans", which compares two groups: whites who attribute blacks' poverty to lack of motivation, and whites who attribute blacks' poverty to discrimination. Those who cite lack of motivation are more likely

than those who cite discrimination to believe the government is spending too much to help blacks.

Figure 3.4 Racial Stereotyping by Non-Latino Whites and Their Opposition to Government Spending to Help African Americans

Source: Data from General Social Survey. (2010). Retrieved from http://sda.berkeley.edu/cgi-bin/hsda?harcsda+gss10.
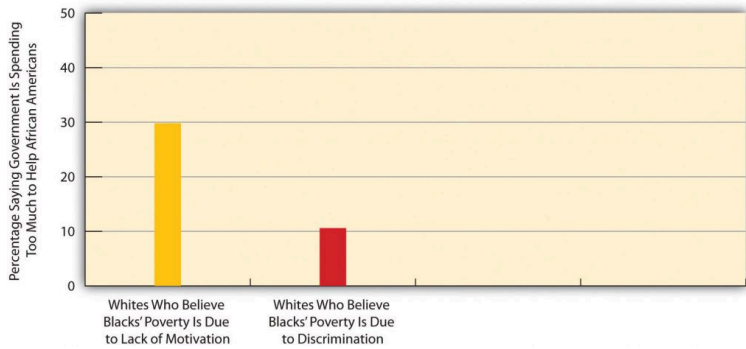
Whites who are racially prejudiced are more likely to favor harsher treatment of criminals and in particular are more likely to support the death penalty.

Racial prejudice influences other public policy preferences as well. In the area of criminal justice, whites who hold racial stereotypes or hostile feelings toward African Americans are more likely to be afraid of crime, to think that the courts are not harsh enough, to support the death penalty, to want more money spent to fight crime, and to favor excessive use of force by police (Barkan & Cohn, 2005; Unnever & Cullen, 2010).

If racial prejudice influences views on all these issues, then these results are troubling for a democratic society like the United States. In a democracy, it is appropriate for the public to disagree on all sorts of issues, including criminal justice. For example, citizens hold many reasons for either favoring or opposing the death penalty. But is it appropriate for racial prejudice to be one of these reasons? To the extent that elected officials respond to public opinion, as they

should in a democracy, and to the extent that racial prejudice affects public opinion, then racial prejudice may be influencing government policy on criminal justice and on other issues. In a democratic society, it is unacceptable for racial prejudice to have this effect.

Key Takeaways

- Social-psychological explanations of prejudice emphasize authoritarian personalities and frustration, while sociological explanations emphasize social learning and group threat.
- Education and region of residence are related to racial prejudice among whites; prejudice is higher among whites with lower levels of formal education and among whites living in the South.
- Jim Crow racism has been replaced by symbolic or modern racism that emphasizes the cultural inferiority of people of color.
- Racial prejudice among whites is linked to certain views they hold about public policy. Prejudice is associated with lower support among whites for governmental efforts to help people of color and with greater support for a more punitive criminal justice system.

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6.4 Discrimination

Learning Objectives

1.   Discuss Merton's views on whether prejudice and discrimination always coincide.
2.   Distinguish between individual discrimination and institutional discrimination.
3.   Provide two examples of institutional discrimination.

Often racial and ethnic prejudice lead to **discrimination** against the subordinate racial and ethnic groups in a given society. Discrimination in this context refers to the arbitrary denial of rights, privileges, and opportunities to members of these groups. The use of the word *arbitrary* emphasizes that these groups are being treated unequally not because of their lack of merit but because of their race and ethnicity.

Usually prejudice and discrimination go hand-in-hand, but Robert Merton (1949) stressed this is not always so. Sometimes we can be prejudiced and not discriminate, and sometimes we might not be prejudiced and still discriminate. Table 3.1 "The Relationship between Prejudice and Discrimination" illustrates his perspective. The top-left cell and bottom-right cell consist of people who behave in ways we would normally expect. The top-left one consists of "active bigots," in Merton's terminology, people who are both prejudiced and discriminatory. An example of such a person is the white owner of an apartment building who dislikes people of color

and refuses to rent to them. The bottom-right cell consists of "all-weather liberals," as Merton called them, people who are neither prejudiced nor discriminatory. An example would be someone who holds no stereotypes about the various racial and ethnic groups and treats everyone the same regardless of her or his background.

Table 3.1 The Relationship between Prejudice and Discrimination

	Prejudiced?	
	Yes	*No*
Discriminates?		
Yes	Active bigots	Fair-weather liberals
No	Timid bigots	All-weather liberals

Source: Adapted from Merton, R. K. (1949). Discrimination and the American creed. In R. M. MacIver (Ed.), *Discrimination and national welfare* (pp. 99–126). New York, NY: Institute for Religious Studies.

The remaining two cells of Table 3.1 "The Relationship between Prejudice and Discrimination" are the more unexpected ones. On the bottom left, we see people who are prejudiced but who nonetheless do not discriminate; Merton called them "timid bigots." An example would be white restaurant owners who do not like

people of color but still serve them anyway because they want their business or are afraid of being sued if they do not serve them. At the top right, we see "fair-weather liberals," or people who are not prejudiced but who still discriminate. An example would be white store owners in the South during the segregation era who thought it was wrong to treat blacks worse than whites but who still refused to sell to them because they were afraid of losing white customers.

Individual Discrimination

The discussion so far has centered on **individual discrimination**, or discrimination that individuals practice in their daily lives, usually because they are prejudiced but sometimes even if they are not prejudiced. Individual discrimination is common, as Joe Feagin (1991), a former president of the American Sociological Association, found when he interviewed middle-class African Americans about their experiences. Many of the people he interviewed said they had been refused service, or at least received poor service, in stores or restaurants. Others said they had been harassed by the police, and even put in fear of their lives, just for being black. Feagin concluded that these examples are not just isolated incidents but rather reflect the larger racism that characterizes US society.

In February 2012, neighborhood watch volunteer George Zimmerman fatally shot 17-year-old Trayvon Martin as Martin was walking back from a 7-Eleven carrying some Skittles and iced tea. Critics said Zimmerman was suspicious of Martin only because Martin was black.

Michael Fleshman – Trayvon_Martin_Occupy March 21 – CC BY-SA 2.0.

Sociologist Joe Feagin's study of middle-class African Americans found that many had been harassed by police and had otherwise experienced various kinds of racial slights.

USAG- Humphreys – [USAG-Humphreys teens participate in a focus group](#) – CC BY 2.0.

Sociologist Denise Segura found that more than 40 percent of the Mexican American women she interviewed at a public university had encountered workplace discrimination based on their ethnicity and/or gender.

Jodi Womack – [DSC05104](#) – CC BY 2.0.

To many observers, the fatal shooting of Trayvon Martin in February

2012 was a deadly example of individual discrimination. Martin, a 17-year-old African American, was walking in a gated community in Sanford, Florida, as he returned from a 7-Eleven with a bag of Skittles and some iced tea. An armed neighborhood watch volunteer, George Zimmerman, called 911 and said Martin looked suspicious. Although the 911 operator told Zimmerman not to approach Martin, Zimmerman did so anyway; within minutes Zimmerman shot and killed the unarmed Martin and later claimed self-defense. According to many critics of this incident, Martin's only "crime" was "walking while black." As an African American newspaper columnist observed, "For every black man in America, from the millionaire in the corner office to the mechanic in the local garage, the Trayvon Martin tragedy is personal. It could have been me or one of my sons. It could have been any of us" (Robinson, 2012).

Much individual discrimination occurs in the workplace, as sociologist Denise Segura (Segura, 1992) documented when she interviewed 152 Mexican American women working in white-collar jobs at a public university in California. More than 40 percent of the women said they had encountered workplace discrimination based on their ethnicity and/or gender, and they attributed their treatment to stereotypes held by their employers and coworkers. Along with discrimination, they were the targets of condescending comments like "I didn't know that there were any educated people in Mexico that have a graduate degree."

Institutional Discrimination

Individual discrimination is important to address, but at least as

consequential in today's world is **institutional discrimination**, or discrimination that pervades the practices of whole institutions, such as housing, medical care, law enforcement, employment, and education. This type of discrimination does not just affect a few isolated people of color. Instead, it affects large numbers of individuals simply because of their race or ethnicity. Sometimes institutional discrimination is also based on gender, disability, and other characteristics.

In the area of race and ethnicity, institutional discrimination often stems from prejudice, as was certainly true in the South during segregation. However, just as individuals can discriminate without being prejudiced, so can institutions when they engage in practices that seem to be racially neutral but in fact have a discriminatory effect. Individuals in institutions can also discriminate without realizing it. They make decisions that turn out, upon close inspection, to discriminate against people of color even if they did not mean to do so.

The bottom line is this: Institutions can discriminate even if they do not intend to do so. Consider height requirements for police. Before the 1970s, police forces around the United States commonly had height requirements, say five feet ten inches. As women began to want to join police forces in the 1970s, many found they were too short. The same was true for people from some racial/ethnic backgrounds, such as Latinos, whose stature is smaller on the average than that of non-Latino whites. Of course, even many white males were too short to become police officers, but the point is that even more women, and even more men of certain ethnicities, were too short.

This gender and ethnic difference is not, in and of itself, discriminatory as the law defines the term. The law allows for *bona fide* (good faith) physical qualifications for a job. As an example, we would all agree that someone has to be able to see to be a school bus driver; sight therefore is a *bona fide* requirement for this line of work. Thus even though people who are blind cannot become

school bus drivers, the law does not consider such a physical requirement to be discriminatory.

Institutional discrimination can occur even if this type of discrimination is not intended. Police forces used to have height requirements, but these were deemed by courts to discriminate against women, Latinos, and other individuals. In response, police forces lowered their height requirements.

Thomas Hawk – Oakland Police Memorial – CC BY-NC 2.0.

But were the height restrictions for police work in the early 1970s *bona fide* requirements? Women and members of certain ethnic groups challenged these restrictions in court and won their cases, as it was decided that there was no logical basis for the height restrictions then in effect. In short (pun intended), the courts concluded that a person did not have to be five feet ten inches to be an effective police officer. In response to these court challenges, police forces lowered their height requirements, opening the door for many more women, Latino men, and some other men to join

police forces (Appier, 1998). Whether police forces back then intended their height requirements to discriminate, or whether they honestly thought their height requirements made sense, remains in dispute. Regardless of the reason, their requirements did discriminate.

Institutional discrimination affects the life chances of people of color in many aspects of life today. To illustrate this, we turn briefly to some examples of institutional discrimination that have been the subject of government investigation and scholarly research.

Health Care

People of color have higher rates of disease and illness than whites. One question that arises is why their health is worse. One possible answer involves institutional discrimination based on race and ethnicity.

Several studies use hospital records to investigate whether people of color receive optimal medical care, including coronary bypass surgery, angioplasty, and catheterization. After taking the patients' medical symptoms and needs into account, these studies find that African Americans are much less likely than whites to receive the procedures just listed. This is true when poor blacks are compared to poor whites and also when middle-class blacks are compared to middle-class whites (Smedley, Stith, & Nelson, 2003). In a novel way of studying race and cardiac care, one study performed an experiment in which several hundred doctors viewed videos of African American and white patients, all of whom, unknown to the doctors, were actors. In the videos, each "patient" complained of

identical chest pain and other symptoms. The doctors were then asked to indicate whether they thought the patient needed cardiac catheterization. The African American patients were less likely than the white patients to be recommended for this procedure (Schulman et al., 1999).

Why does discrimination like this occur? It is possible, of course, that some doctors are racists and decide that the lives of African Americans just are not worth saving, but it is far more likely that they have *unconscious* racial biases that somehow affect their medical judgments. Regardless of the reason, the result is the same: African Americans are less likely to receive potentially life-saving cardiac procedures simply because they are black. Institutional discrimination in health care, then, is literally a matter of life and death.

Mortgages, Redlining, and Residential Segregation

When loan officers review mortgage applications, they consider many factors, including the person's income, employment, and credit history. The law forbids them to consider race and ethnicity. Yet African Americans and Latinos are more likely than whites to have their mortgage applications declined (Blank, Venkatachalam, McNeil, & Green, 2005). Because members of these groups tend to be poorer than whites and to have less desirable employment

and credit histories, the higher rate of mortgage rejections may be appropriate, albeit unfortunate.

To control for this possibility, researchers take these factors into account and in effect compare whites, African Americans, and Latinos with similar incomes, employment, and credit histories. Some studies are purely statistical, and some involve white, African American, and Latino individuals who independently visit the same mortgage-lending institutions. Both types of studies find that African Americans and Latinos are still more likely than whites with similar qualifications to have their mortgage applications rejected (Turner et al., 2002). We will probably never know whether loan officers are consciously basing their decisions on racial prejudice, but their practices still amount to racial and ethnic discrimination whether the loan officers are consciously prejudiced or not.

There is also evidence of banks rejecting mortgage applications for people who wish to live in certain urban, supposedly high-risk neighborhoods, and of insurance companies denying homeowner's insurance or else charging higher rates for homes in these same neighborhoods. Practices like these that discriminate against houses in certain neighborhoods are called *redlining*, and they also violate the law (Ezeala-Harrison, Glover, & Shaw-Jackson, 2008). Because the people affected by redlining tend to be people of color, redlining, too, is an example of institutional discrimination.

Banks have rejected mortgage applications from people who wish to live in certain urban, high-risk neighborhoods. This practice, called redlining, violates the law. Because many of the loan applicants who experience redlining are people of color, redlining is an example of institutional discrimination.

Taber Andrew Bain – US Bank – CC BY 2.0.

Mortgage rejections and redlining contribute to another major problem facing people of color: residential segregation. Housing segregation is illegal but is nonetheless widespread because of mortgage rejections and other processes that make it very difficult for people of color to move out of segregated neighborhoods and into unsegregated areas. African Americans in particular remain highly segregated by residence in many cities, much more so than is true for other people of color. The residential segregation of African Americans is so extensive that it has been termed *hypersegregation*

and more generally called American apartheid (Massey & Denton, 1993).

In addition to mortgage rejections, a pattern of subtle discrimination by realtors and homeowners makes it difficult for African Americans to find out about homes in white neighborhoods and to buy them (Pager, 2008). For example, realtors may tell African American clients that no homes are available in a particular white neighborhood, but then inform white clients of available homes. The now routine posting of housing listings on the Internet might be reducing this form of housing discrimination, but not all homes and apartments are posted, and some are simply sold by word of mouth to avoid certain people learning about them.

The hypersegregation experienced by African Americans cuts them off from the larger society, as many rarely leave their immediate neighborhoods, and results in *concentrated poverty*, where joblessness, crime, and other problems reign. For several reasons, then, residential segregation is thought to play a major role in the seriousness and persistence of African American poverty (Rothstein, 2012; Stoll, 2008).

Employment Discrimination

Title VII of the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964 banned racial discrimination in employment, including hiring, wages, and firing. However, African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans still have much lower earnings than whites. Several factors explain this disparity, including the various structural obstacles discussed in [Chapter 5 "Poverty"](#)'s examination of poverty. Despite Title VII,

however, an additional reason is that people of color continue to face discrimination in hiring and promotion (Hirsh & Cha, 2008). It is again difficult to determine whether such discrimination stems from conscious prejudice or from unconscious prejudice on the part of potential employers, but it is racial discrimination nonetheless.

A now-classic field experiment documented such discrimination. Sociologist Devah Pager (2003) had young white and African American men apply independently in person for entry-level jobs. They dressed the same and reported similar levels of education and other qualifications. Some applicants also admitted having a criminal record, while other applicants reported no such record. As might be expected, applicants with a criminal record were hired at lower rates than those without a record. However, in striking evidence of racial discrimination in hiring, African American applicants *without* a criminal record were hired at the same low rate as the white applicants *with* a criminal record.

Key Takeaways

- People who practice racial or ethnic discrimination are usually also prejudiced, but not always. Some people practice discrimination without being prejudiced, and some may not practice discrimination even though they are prejudiced.
- Individual discrimination is common and can involve various kinds of racial slights. Much individual discrimination occurs in the workplace.
- Institutional discrimination often stems from prejudice, but institutions can also practice racial and ethnic discrimination when they engage in practices that seem to be racially neutral but in fact have a

discriminatory effect.

For Your Review

1.   If you have ever experienced individual discrimination, either as the person committing it or as the person affected by it, briefly describe what happened. How do you now feel when you reflect on this incident?
2.   Do you think institutional discrimination occurs because people are purposely acting in a racially discriminatory manner? Why or why not?

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6.5 Dimensions of Racial and Ethnic Inequality

Learning Objectives

1.   Describe any two manifestations of racial and ethnic inequality in the United States.
2.   Explain how and why racial inequality takes a hidden toll on people of color.
3.   Provide two examples of white privilege.

Racial and ethnic inequality manifests itself in all walks of life. The individual and institutional discrimination just discussed is one manifestation of this inequality. We can also see stark evidence of racial and ethnic inequality in various government statistics. Sometimes statistics lie, and sometimes they provide all too true a picture; statistics on racial and ethnic inequality fall into the latter category. Table 3.2 "Selected Indicators of Racial and Ethnic Inequality in the United States" presents data on racial and ethnic differences in income, education, and health.

Table 3.2 Selected Indicators of Racial and Ethnic Inequality in the United States

	White	African American	Latino	Asian	Native American
Median family income, 2010 ($)	68,818	39,900	41,102	76,736	39,664
Persons who are college educated, 2010 (%)	30.3	19.8	13.9	52.4	14.9 (2008)
Persons in poverty, 2010 (%)	9.9 (non-Latino)	27.4	26.6	12.1	28.4
Infant mortality (number of infant deaths per 1,000 births), 2006	5.6	12.9	5.4	4.6	8.3

Sources: Data from US Census Bureau. (2012). *Statistical abstract of the United States: 2012.* Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office. Retrieved from http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab; US Census Bureau. (2012). American FactFinder. Retrieved from http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml; MacDorman, M., & Mathews, T. J. (2011). Infant Deaths—United States, 2000–2007. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, 60*(1), 49–51.

Asian Americans have higher family incomes than whites on the average. Although Asian Americans are often viewed as a "model minority," some Asians have been less able than others to achieve economic success, and stereotypes of Asians and discrimination against them remain serious problems.

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The picture presented by Table 3.2 "Selected Indicators of Racial and Ethnic Inequality in the United States" is clear: US racial and ethnic groups differ dramatically in their life chances. Compared to whites, for example, African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans have much lower family incomes and much higher rates of poverty; they are also much less likely to have college degrees. In addition, African Americans and Native Americans have much higher infant mortality rates than whites: Black infants, for example, are more than twice as likely as white infants to die. Later chapters

in this book will continue to highlight various dimensions of racial and ethnic inequality.

Although Table 3.2 "Selected Indicators of Racial and Ethnic Inequality in the United States" shows that African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans fare much worse than whites, it presents a more complex pattern for Asian Americans. Compared to whites, Asian Americans have higher family incomes and are more likely to hold college degrees, but they also have a higher poverty rate. Thus many Asian Americans do relatively well, while others fare relatively worse, as just noted. Although Asian Americans are often viewed as a "model minority," meaning that they have achieved economic success despite not being white, some Asians have been less able than others to climb the economic ladder. Moreover, stereotypes of Asian Americans and discrimination against them remain serious problems (Chou & Feagin, 2008). Even the overall success rate of Asian Americans obscures the fact that their occupations and incomes are often lower than would be expected from their educational attainment. They thus have to work harder for their success than whites do (Hurh & Kim, 1999).

The Increasing Racial/Ethnic Wealth Gap

At the beginning of this chapter, we noted that racial and ethnic inequality has existed since the beginning of the United States. We also noted that social scientists have warned that certain conditions

have actually worsened for people of color since the 1960s (Hacker, 2003; Massey & Sampson, 2009).

Recent evidence of this worsening appeared in a report by the Pew Research Center (2011). The report focused on racial disparities in wealth, which includes a family's total assets (income, savings and investments, home equity, etc.) and debts (mortgage, credit cards, etc.). The report found that the wealth gap between white households on the one hand and African American and Latino households on the other hand was much wider than just a few years earlier, thanks to the faltering US economy since 2008 that affected blacks more severely than whites.

According to the report, whites' median wealth was ten times greater than blacks' median wealth in 2007, a discouraging disparity for anyone who believes in racial equality. By 2009, however, whites' median wealth had jumped to twenty times greater than blacks' median wealth and eighteen times greater than Latinos' median wealth. White households had a median net worth of about $113,000, while black and Latino households had a median net worth of only $5,700 and $6,300, respectively (see Figure 3.5 "The Racial/ Ethnic Wealth Gap (Median Net Worth of Households in 2009)"). This racial and ethnic difference is the largest since the government began tracking wealth more than a quarter-century ago.

Figure 3.5 The Racial/Ethnic Wealth Gap (Median Net Worth of Households in 2009)
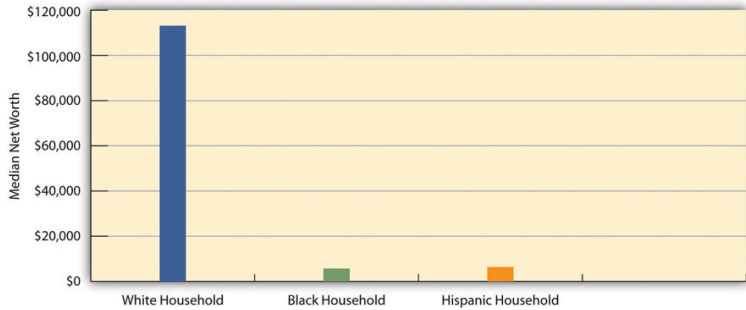
Source: Pew Research Center, 2011.

A large racial/ethnic gap also existed in the percentage of families with negative net worth—that is, those whose debts exceed their assets. One-third of black and Latino households had negative net worth, compared to only 15 percent of white households. Black and Latino households were thus more than twice as likely as white households to be in debt.

The Hidden Toll of Racial and Ethnic Inequality

An increasing amount of evidence suggests that being black in a society filled with racial prejudice, discrimination, and inequality takes what has been called a "hidden toll" on the lives of African Americans (Blitstein, 2009). As we shall see in later chapters, African Americans on the average have worse health than whites and die at younger ages. In fact, every year there are an additional 100,000

African American deaths than would be expected if they lived as long as whites do. Although many reasons probably explain all these disparities, scholars are increasingly concluding that the stress of being black is a major factor (Geronimus et al., 2010).

In this way of thinking, African Americans are much more likely than whites to be poor, to live in high-crime neighborhoods, and to live in crowded conditions, among many other problems. As this chapter discussed earlier, they are also more likely, whether or not they are poor, to experience racial slights, refusals to be interviewed for jobs, and other forms of discrimination in their everyday lives. All these problems mean that African Americans from their earliest ages grow up with a great deal of stress, far more than what most whites experience. This stress in turn has certain neural and physiological effects, including hypertension (high blood pressure), that impair African Americans' short-term and long-term health and that ultimately shorten their lives. These effects accumulate over time: black and white hypertension rates are equal for people in their twenties, but the black rate becomes much higher by the time people reach their forties and fifties. As a recent news article on evidence of this "hidden toll" summarized this process, "The long-term stress of living in a white-dominated society 'weathers' blacks, making them age faster than their white counterparts" (Blitstein, 2009, p. 48).

Although there is less research on other people of color, many Latinos and Native Americans also experience the various sources of stress that African Americans experience. To the extent this is true, racial and ethnic inequality also takes a hidden toll on members of these two groups. They, too, experience racial slights, live under disadvantaged conditions, and face other problems that result in high levels of stress and shorten their life spans.

White Privilege: The Benefits of Being White

American whites enjoy certain privileges merely because they are white. For example, they usually do not have to fear that a police officer will stop them simply because they are white, and they also generally do not have to worry about being mistaken for a bellhop, parking valet, or maid.

Loren Kerns – [Day 73](#) – CC BY 2.0.

Before we leave this section, it is important to discuss the advantages that US whites enjoy in their daily lives simply because they are white. Social scientists term these advantages **white privilege** and say that whites benefit from being white whether or not they are aware of their advantages (McIntosh, 2007).

This chapter's discussion of the problems facing people of color

points to some of these advantages. For example, whites can usually drive a car at night or walk down a street without having to fear that a police officer will stop them simply because they are white. Recalling the Trayvon Martin tragedy, they can also walk down a street without having to fear they will be confronted and possibly killed by a neighborhood watch volunteer. In addition, whites can count on being able to move into any neighborhood they desire to as long as they can afford the rent or mortgage. They generally do not have to fear being passed up for promotion simply because of their race. White students can live in college dorms without having to worry that racial slurs will be directed their way. White people in general do not have to worry about being the victims of hate crimes based on their race. They can be seated in a restaurant without having to worry that they will be served more slowly or not at all because of their skin color. If they are in a hotel, they do not have to think that someone will mistake them for a bellhop, parking valet, or maid. If they are trying to hail a taxi, they do not have to worry about the taxi driver ignoring them because the driver fears he or she will be robbed.

Social scientist Robert W. Terry (1981, p. 120) once summarized white privilege as follows: "*To be white in America is not to have to think about it.* Except for hard-core racial supremacists, the meaning of being white is having the choice of attending to or ignoring one's own whiteness" (emphasis in original). For people of color in the United States, it is not an exaggeration to say that race and ethnicity is a daily fact of their existence. Yet whites do not generally have to think about being white. As all of us go about our daily lives, this basic difference is one of the most important manifestations of racial and ethnic inequality in the United States.

Perhaps because whites do not have to think about being white, many studies find they tend to underestimate the degree of racial inequality in the United States by assuming that African Americans and Latinos are much better off than they really are. As one report summarized these studies' overall conclusion, "Whites tend to have a relatively rosy impression of what it means to be a black person in

America. Whites are more than twice as likely as blacks to believe that the position of African Americans has improved a great deal" (Vedantam, 2008, p. A3). Because whites think African Americans and Latinos fare much better than they really do, that perception probably reduces whites' sympathy for programs designed to reduce racial and ethnic inequality.

Key Takeaways

- Compared to non-Latino whites, people of color have lower incomes, lower educational attainment, higher poverty rates, and worse health.
- Racial and ethnic inequality takes a hidden toll on people of color, as the stress they experience impairs their health and ability to achieve.
- Whites benefit from being white, whether or not they realize it. This benefit is called white privilege.

For Your Review

1. Write a brief essay that describes important dimensions of racial and ethnic inequality in the United States.
2. If you are white, describe a time when you benefited from white privilege, whether or not you realized it at the time. If you are a person of color, describe an experience when you would have

benefited if you had been white.

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6.6 Explaining Racial and Ethnic Inequality

Learning Objectives

1.   Understand cultural explanations for racial and ethnic inequality.
2.   Describe structural explanations for racial and ethnic inequality.

Why do racial and ethnic inequality exist? Why do African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and some Asian Americans fare worse than whites? In answering these questions, many people have some very strong opinions.

Biological Inferiority

One long-standing explanation is that blacks and other people of color are *biologically inferior*: They are naturally less intelligent and

have other innate flaws that keep them from getting a good education and otherwise doing what needs to be done to achieve the American Dream. As discussed earlier, this racist view is no longer common today. However, whites historically used this belief to justify slavery, lynchings, the harsh treatment of Native Americans in the 1800s, and lesser forms of discrimination. In 1994, Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray revived this view in their controversial book, *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994), in which they argued that the low IQ scores of African Americans, and of poor people more generally, reflect their genetic inferiority in the area of intelligence. African Americans' low innate intelligence, they said, accounts for their poverty and other problems. Although the news media gave much attention to their book, few scholars agreed with its views, and many condemned the book's argument as a racist way of "blaming the victim" (Gould, 1994).

Cultural Deficiencies

Another explanation of racial and ethnic inequality focuses on supposed *cultural deficiencies* of African Americans and other people of color (Murray, 1984). These deficiencies include a failure to value hard work and, for African Americans, a lack of strong family ties, and are said to account for the poverty and other problems facing these minorities. This view echoes the culture-of-poverty argument presented in [Chapter 5 "Poverty"](#) and is certainly popular today. As we saw earlier, more than half of non-Latino whites think that blacks' poverty is due to their lack of motivation and willpower. Ironically some scholars find support for this cultural deficiency

view in the experience of many Asian Americans, whose success is often attributed to their culture's emphasis on hard work, educational attainment, and strong family ties (Min, 2005). If that is true, these scholars say, then the lack of success of other people of color stems from the failure of their own cultures to value these attributes.

How accurate is the cultural deficiency argument? Whether people of color have "deficient" cultures remains hotly debated (Bonilla-Silva, 2009). Many social scientists find little or no evidence of cultural problems in minority communities and say the belief in cultural deficiencies is an example of symbolic racism that blames the victim. Citing survey evidence, they say that poor people of color value work and education for themselves and their children at least as much as wealthier white people do (Holland, 2011; Muhammad, 2007). Yet other social scientists, including those sympathetic to the structural problems facing people of color, believe that certain cultural problems do exist, but they are careful to say that these cultural problems arise out of the structural problems. For example, Elijah Anderson (1999) wrote that a "street culture" or "oppositional culture" exists among African Americans in urban areas that contributes to high levels of violent behavior, but he emphasized that this type of culture stems from the segregation, extreme poverty, and other difficulties these citizens face in their daily lives and helps them deal with these difficulties. Thus even if cultural problems do exist, they should not obscure the fact that structural problems are responsible for the cultural ones.

Structural Problems

A third explanation for US racial and ethnic inequality is based in conflict theory and reflects the blaming-the-system approach. This view attributes racial and ethnic inequality to *structural problems*, including institutional and individual discrimination, a lack of opportunity in education and other spheres of life, and the absence of jobs that pay an adequate wage (Feagin, 2006). Segregated housing, for example, prevents African Americans from escaping the inner city and from moving to areas with greater employment opportunities. Employment discrimination keeps the salaries of people of color much lower than they would be otherwise. The schools that many children of color attend every day are typically overcrowded and underfunded. As these problems continue from one generation to the next, it becomes very difficult for people already at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder to climb up it because of their race and ethnicity (see Note 3.33 "Applying Social Research").

Applying Social Research

The Poor Neighborhoods of Middle-Class African Americans

In a society that values equal opportunity for all, scholars have discovered a troubling trend: African American children from middle-class families are much more likely than white children from middle-class families to move down the socioeconomic ladder by the time they become adults. In fact, almost half of all African American children born during the 1950s and 1960s to middle-class parents ended up with lower incomes than their parents by adulthood. Because these children had parents who had evidently succeeded despite all the obstacles facing them in a society filled with racial inequality, we have to assume they were raised with the values, skills, and aspirations necessary to stay in the middle class and even to rise beyond it. What, then, explains why some end up doing worse than their parents?

According to a recent study written by sociologist Patrick Sharkey for the Pew Charitable Trusts, one important answer lies in the neighborhoods in which these children are raised. Because of continuing racial segregation, many

middle-class African American families find themselves having to live in poor urban neighborhoods. About half of African American children born between 1955 and 1970 to middle-class parents grew up in poor neighborhoods, but hardly any middle-class white children grew up in such neighborhoods. In Sharkey's statistical analysis, neighborhood poverty was a much more important factor than variables such as parents' education and marital status in explaining the huge racial difference in the eventual socioeconomic status of middle-class children. An additional finding of the study underscored the importance of neighborhood poverty for adult socioeconomic status: African American children raised in poor neighborhoods in which the poverty rate declined significantly ended up with higher incomes as adults than those raised in neighborhoods where the poverty rate did not change.

Why do poor neighborhoods have this effect? It is difficult to pinpoint the exact causes, but several probable reasons come to mind. In these neighborhoods, middle-class African American children often receive inadequate schooling at run-down schools, and they come under the influence of youths who care much less about schooling and who get into various kinds of trouble. The various problems associated with living in poor neighborhoods also likely cause a good deal of stress, which, as discussed elsewhere in this chapter, can cause health problems and impair learning ability.

Even if the exact reasons remain unclear, this study showed that poor neighborhoods make a huge difference. As a Pew official summarized the study, "We've known that neighborhood matters...but this does it in a new and powerful way. Neighborhoods become a significant drag

not just on the poor, but on those who would otherwise be stable." Sociologist Sharkey added, "What surprises me is how dramatic the racial differences are in terms of the environments in which children are raised. There's this perception that after the civil rights period, families have been more able to seek out any neighborhood they choose, and that...the racial gap in neighborhoods would whittle away over time, and that hasn't happened."

Data from the 2010 Census confirm that the racial gap in neighborhoods persists. A study by sociologist John R. Logan for the Russell Sage Foundation found that African American and Latino families with incomes above $75,000 are more likely to live in poor neighborhoods than non-Latino white families with incomes below $40,000. More generally, Logan concluded, "The average affluent black or Hispanic household lives in a poorer neighborhood than the average lower-income white household."

One implication of this neighborhood research is clear: to help reduce African American poverty, it is important to do everything possible to improve the quality and economy of the poor neighborhoods in which many African American children, middle-class or poor, grow up.

Sources: Logan, 2011; MacGillis, 2009; Sharkey, 2009

As we assess the importance of structure versus culture in explaining why people of color have higher poverty rates, it is interesting to consider the economic experience of African Americans and Latinos since the 1990s. During that decade, the US economy thrived. Along with this thriving economy, unemployment rates for African Americans and Latinos declined and their poverty rates also declined. Since the early 2000s and especially since 2008, the US economy has faltered. Along with this faltering economy,

unemployment and poverty rates for African Americans and Latinos increased.

To explain these trends, does it make sense to assume that African Americans and Latinos somehow had fewer cultural deficiencies during the 1990s and more cultural deficiencies since the early 2000s? Or does it make sense to assume that their economic success or lack of it depended on the opportunities afforded them by the US economy? Economic writer Joshua Holland (2011) provides the logical answer by attacking the idea of cultural deficiencies: "That's obviously nonsense. It was exogenous economic factors and changes in public policies, not manifestations of 'black culture' [or 'Latino culture'], that resulted in those widely varied outcomes…While economic swings this significant can be explained by economic changes and different public policies, it's simply impossible to fit them into a cultural narrative."

Key Takeaways

- Although a belief in biological inferiority used to be an explanation for racial and ethnic inequality, this belief is now considered racist.
- Cultural explanations attribute racial and ethnic inequality to certain cultural deficiencies among people of color.
- Structural explanations attribute racial and ethnic inequality to problems in the larger society, including discriminatory practices and lack of opportunity.

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6.7 Reducing Racial and Ethnic Inequality

Learning Objectives

1.   Summarize the debate over affirmative action.
2.   Describe any three policies or practices that could reduce racial and ethnic inequality in the United States.

Now that we have examined race and ethnicity in the United States, what have we found? Where do we stand in the second decade of the twenty-first century? Did the historic election of Barack Obama as president in 2008 signify a new era of equality between the races, as many observers wrote, or did his election occur despite the continued existence of pervasive racial and ethnic inequality?

On the one hand, there is cause for hope. Legal segregation is gone. The vicious, "old-fashioned" racism that was so rampant in this country into the 1960s has declined dramatically since that tumultuous time. People of color have made important gains in several spheres of life, and African Americans and other people of color occupy some important elected positions in and outside the South, a feat that would have been unimaginable a generation ago. Perhaps most notably, Barack Obama has African ancestry and identifies as an African American, and on his 2008 election night people across the country wept with joy at the symbolism of his

victory. Certainly progress has been made in US racial and ethnic relations.

On the other hand, there is also cause for despair. Old-fashioned racism has been replaced by a modern, symbolic racism that still blames people of color for their problems and reduces public support for government policies to deal with their problems. Institutional discrimination remains pervasive, and hate crimes, such as the cross burning that began this chapter, remain all too common. So does suspicion of people based solely on the color of their skin, as the Trayvon Martin tragedy again reminds us.

If adequately funded and implemented, several types of programs and policies show strong promise of reducing racial and ethnic inequality. We turn to these in a moment, but first let's discuss affirmative action, an issue that has aroused controversy since its inception.

People Making a Difference

College Students and the Southern Civil Rights Movement

The first chapter of this book included this famous quotation by anthropologist Margaret Mead: "Never doubt

that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." The beginnings of the Southern civil rights movement provide an inspirational example of Mead's wisdom and remind us that young people can make a difference.

Although there had been several efforts during the 1950s by African Americans to end legal segregation in the South, the start of the civil rights movement is commonly thought to have begun on February 1, 1960. On that historic day, four brave African American students from the Agricultural and Technical College of North Carolina, dressed in coats and ties, sat down quietly at a segregated lunch counter in a Woolworth's store in the city of Greensboro and asked to be served. When they were refused service, they stayed until the store closed at the end of the day, and then went home. They returned the next day and were joined by some two dozen other students. They were again refused service and sat quietly the rest of the day. The next day some sixty students and other people joined them, followed by some three hundred on the fourth day. Within a week, sit-ins were occurring at lunch counters in several other towns and cities inside and outside of North Carolina. In late July, 1960, the Greensboro Woolworth's finally served African Americans, and the entire Woolworth's chain desegregated its lunch counters a day later. Although no one realized it at the time, the civil rights movement had "officially" begun thanks to the efforts of a small group of college students.

During the remaining years of the heyday of the civil rights movement, college students from the South and North joined thousands of other people in sit-ins, marches, and other activities to end legal segregation. Thousands were arrested, and at least forty-one were murdered. By

risking their freedom and even their lives, they made a difference for millions of African Americans. And it all began when a small group of college students sat down at a lunch counter in Greensboro and politely refused to leave until they were served.

Sources: Branch, 1988; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2011

Affirmative Action

Affirmative action refers to special consideration for minorities and women in employment and education to compensate for the discrimination and lack of opportunities they experience in the larger society. Affirmative action programs were begun in the 1960s to provide African Americans and, later, other people of color and women access to jobs and education to make up for past discrimination. President John F. Kennedy was the first known official to use the term, when he signed an executive order in 1961 ordering federal contractors to "take affirmative action" in ensuring that applicants are hired and treated without regard to their race and national origin. Six years later, President Lyndon B. Johnson added sex to race and national origin as demographic categories for which affirmative action should be used.

Although many affirmative action programs remain in effect today, court rulings, state legislation, and other efforts have limited their number and scope. Despite this curtailment, affirmative action

continues to spark much controversy, with scholars, members of the public, and elected officials all holding strong views on the issue.

One of the major court rulings just mentioned was the US Supreme Court's decision in *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, 438 US 265 (1978). Allan Bakke was a 35-year-old white man who had twice been rejected for admission into the medical school at the University of California, Davis. At the time he applied, UC–Davis had a policy of reserving sixteen seats in its entering class of one hundred for qualified people of color to make up for their underrepresentation in the medical profession. Bakke's college grades and scores on the Medical College Admission Test were higher than those of the people of color admitted to UC–Davis either time Bakke applied. He sued for admission on the grounds that his rejection amounted to reverse racial discrimination on the basis of his being white (Stefoff, 2005).

The case eventually reached the Supreme Court, which ruled 5–4 that Bakke must be admitted into the UC–Davis medical school because he had been unfairly denied admission on the basis of his race. As part of its historic but complex decision, the Court thus rejected the use of strict racial quotas in admission, as it declared that no applicant could be excluded based solely on the applicant's race. At the same time, however, the Court also declared that race may be used as one of the several criteria that admissions committees consider when making their decisions. For example, if an institution desires racial diversity among its students, it may use race as an admissions criterion along with other factors such as grades and test scores.

Two more recent Supreme Court cases both involved the University of Michigan: *Gratz v. Bollinger*, 539 US 244 (2003), which involved the university's undergraduate admissions, and *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 539 US 306 (2003), which involved the university's law school admissions. In *Grutter* the Court reaffirmed the right of institutions of higher education to take race into account in the admissions process. In *Gratz*, however, the Court invalidated the university's policy of awarding additional points to high school

students of color as part of its use of a point system to evaluate applicants; the Court said that consideration of applicants needed to be more individualized than a point system allowed.

Drawing on these Supreme Court rulings, then, affirmative action in higher education admissions on the basis of race/ethnicity is permissible as long as it does not involve a rigid quota system and as long as it does involve an individualized way of evaluating candidates. Race may be used as one of several criteria in such an individualized evaluation process, but it must not be used as the only criterion.

The Debate over Affirmative Action

Opponents of affirmative action cite several reasons for opposing it (Connors, 2009). Affirmative action, they say, is reverse discrimination and, as such, is both illegal and immoral. The people benefiting from affirmative action are less qualified than many of the whites with whom they compete for employment and college admissions. In addition, opponents say, affirmative action implies that the people benefiting from it need extra help and thus are indeed less qualified. This implication stigmatizes the groups benefiting from affirmative action.

In response, proponents of affirmative action give several reasons for favoring it (Connors, 2009). Many say it is needed to make up not just for past discrimination and a lack of opportunities for people of

color but also for ongoing discrimination and a lack of opportunity. For example, because of their social networks, whites are much better able than people of color to find out about and to get jobs (Reskin, 1998). If this is true, people of color are automatically at a disadvantage in the job market, and some form of affirmative action is needed to give them an equal chance at employment. Proponents also say that affirmative action helps add diversity to the workplace and to the campus. Many colleges, they note, give some preference to high school students who live in a distant state in order to add needed diversity to the student body; to "legacy" students—those with a parent who went to the same institution—to reinforce alumni loyalty and to motivate alumni to donate to the institution; and to athletes, musicians, and other applicants with certain specialized talents and skills. If all these forms of preferential admission make sense, proponents say, it also makes sense to take students' racial and ethnic backgrounds into account as admissions officers strive to have a diverse student body.

Proponents add that affirmative action has indeed succeeded in expanding employment and educational opportunities for people of color, and that individuals benefiting from affirmative action have generally fared well in the workplace or on the campus. In this regard research finds that African American students graduating from selective US colleges and universities after being admitted under affirmative action guidelines are slightly *more* likely than their white counterparts to obtain professional degrees and to become involved in civic affairs (Bowen & Bok, 1998).

As this brief discussion indicates, several reasons exist for and against affirmative action. A cautious view is that affirmative action may not be perfect but that some form of it is needed to make up for past and ongoing discrimination and lack of opportunity in the workplace and on the campus. Without the extra help that affirmative action programs give disadvantaged people of color, the discrimination and other difficulties they face are certain to continue.

Other Programs and Policies

As indicated near the beginning of this chapter, one message from DNA evidence and studies of evolution is that we are all part of one human race. If we fail to recognize this lesson, we are doomed to repeat the experiences of the past, when racial and ethnic hostility overtook good reason and subjected people who happened to look different from the white majority to legal, social, and violent oppression. In the democracy that is America, we must try to do better so that there will truly be "liberty and justice for all."

As the United States attempts, however haltingly, to reduce racial and ethnic inequality, sociology has much insight to offer in its emphasis on the structural basis for this inequality. This emphasis strongly indicates that racial and ethnic inequality has much less to do with any personal faults of people of color than with the structural obstacles they face, including ongoing discrimination and lack of opportunity. Efforts aimed at such obstacles, then, are in the long run essential to reducing racial and ethnic inequality (Danziger, Reed, & Brown, 2004; Syme, 2008; Walsh, 2011). Some of these efforts resemble those for reducing poverty discussed in Chapter 5 "Poverty", given the greater poverty of many people of color, and include the following:

1. Adopt a national "full employment" policy involving federally funded job training and public works programs.
2. Increase federal aid for the working poor, including earned income credits and child-care subsidies for those with children.
3. Establish and expand well-funded early childhood intervention programs, including home visitation by trained professionals, for poor families, as well as adolescent intervention programs, such as Upward Bound, for low-income teenagers.
4. Improve the schools that poor children attend and the

schooling they receive, and expand early childhood education programs for poor children.

5. Provide better nutrition and health services for poor families with young children.
6. Strengthen efforts to reduce teenage pregnancies.
7. Strengthen affirmative action programs within the limits imposed by court rulings.
8. Strengthen legal enforcement of existing laws forbidding racial and ethnic discrimination in hiring and promotion.
9. Strengthen efforts to reduce residential segregation.

Key Takeaways

- There is reason to be both hopeful and less hopeful in regard to the future of racial and ethnic relations and inequality in the United States.
- Affirmative action continues to be a very controversial issue. Proponents think it is necessary to compensate for past and continuing racial and ethnic discrimination and lack of opportunity, while opponents think it discriminates against qualified whites.
- A variety of policies and practices hold strong potential for reducing racial and ethnic inequality, providing they are adequately funded and successfully implemented.

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Summary

1.   Racial and ethnic prejudice and discrimination have been an "American dilemma" in the United States ever since the colonial period. Slavery was only the ugliest manifestation of this dilemma. The urban riots of the 1960s led to warnings about the racial hostility and discrimination confronting African Americans and other groups, and these warnings continue down to the present.

2.   Social scientists today tend to consider race more of a social category than a biological one for several reasons. Race is thus best considered a social construction and not a fixed biological category.

3.   Ethnicity refers to a shared cultural heritage and is a term increasingly favored by social scientists over race. Membership in ethnic groups gives many people an important sense of identity and pride but can also lead to hostility toward people in other ethnic groups.

4.   Prejudice, racism, and stereotypes all refer to negative attitudes about people based on their membership in racial or ethnic categories. Social-psychological explanations of prejudice focus on scapegoating and authoritarian personalities, while sociological explanations focus on conformity and socialization or on economic and political competition. Jim Crow racism has given way to modern or symbolic racism that considers people of color to be culturally inferior.

5.   Discrimination and prejudice often go hand in hand, but not always. People can discriminate without being prejudiced, and they can be prejudiced without discriminating. Individual and institutional discrimination both continue to exist in the United States.

6.   Racial and ethnic inequality in the United States is reflected in income, employment, education, and health statistics. In their daily lives, whites enjoy many privileges denied to their counterparts in other racial and ethnic groups.

7.   On many issues Americans remain sharply divided along racial and ethnic lines. One of the most divisive issues is affirmative action. Its opponents view it among other things as reverse discrimination, while its proponents cite many reasons for its importance, including the need to correct past and present discrimination against racial and ethnic minorities.

Using What You Know

After graduating college, you obtain a job in a medium-sized city in the Midwest and rent an apartment in a house in a nearby town. A family with an African American father and white mother has recently moved into a house down the street. You think nothing of it, but you begin to hear some of the neighbors expressing concern that the neighborhood "has begun to change." Then one night a

brick is thrown through the window of the new family's home, and around the brick is wrapped the message, "Go back to where you came from!" Since you're new to the neighborhood yourself, you don't want to make waves, but you are also shocked by this act of racial hatred. You can speak up somehow or you can stay quiet. What do you decide to do? Why?

What You Can Do

To help reduce racial and ethnic inequality, you may wish to do any of the following:

1.   Contribute money to a local, state, or national organization that tries to help youths of color at their schools, homes, or other venues.
2.   Volunteer for an organization that focuses on policy issues related to race and ethnicity.
3.   Volunteer for any programs at your campus that aim at enhancing the educational success of new students of color; if no such programs exist, start one.

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CHAPTER 7: GENDER INEQUALITY

Social Problems in the News

"$3.2M Awarded in Harassment Suit against Ex-Judge," the headline said. A federal jury in Houston, Texas, awarded $3.2 million to three women, all county employees, who had accused a former judge of sexual harassment. Their suit said the judge had "hugged, groped, kissed and fondled them and had emailed them sexually explicit photographs," according to a news report, and that county officials had ignored the judge's behavior despite their knowledge of it. The judge had resigned his position three years earlier after pleading no contest to several charges of misdemeanor assault related to his physical contact with several women. His only criminal penalty was to pay a fine of less than $3,000.

After the verdict was announced, the plaintiffs' attorney said, "I am very proud of this verdict, and hope it sends a message to all public officials that they are not above the law and should think twice before abusing power." One of the plaintiffs recalled what it was like to have been harassed by the judge: "I felt alone, I felt small, I felt like he was the most powerful man in Brazoria County. I felt like there was nothing I could do. I felt scared." At the same time, she was encouraged by the jury's verdict and the fact that other women had come forward to speak out about the judge's behavior: "You don't have to go through it alone. You can stand up for yourself."

Sources: Cisneros, 2011; Tolson, 2011

Thanks to the contemporary women's rights movement that began in the late 1960s, much has changed for women and men in American society during the past half-century. Still, as this news story about sexual harassment reminds us, much more still needs to be done. Despite tremendous advancements for women since the 1960s, gender inequality persists and manifests itself in many ways. This chapter examines the major forms of gender inequality and the reasons for its existence, and it outlines various steps our society should take to help ensure equality between the sexes. Our discussion begins with a critical look at the concepts of sex and gender.

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7.1 Understanding Sex and Gender

Although the terms *sex* and *gender* are sometimes used interchangeably and do complement each other, they nonetheless refer to different aspects of what it means to be a woman or man in any society.

Sex refers to the anatomical and other biological differences between females and males that are determined at the moment of conception and develop in the womb and throughout childhood and adolescence. Females, of course, have two X chromosomes, while males have one X chromosome and one Y chromosome. From this basic genetic difference spring other biological differences. The first to appear are the genitals that boys and girls develop in the womb and that the doctor (or midwife) and parents look for when a baby is born (assuming the baby's sex is not already known from ultrasound or other techniques) so that the momentous announcement, "It's a boy!" or "It's a girl!" can be made. The genitalia are called **primary sex characteristics**, while the other differences that develop during puberty are called **secondary sex**

characteristics and stem from hormonal differences between the two sexes. Boys generally acquire deeper voices, more body hair, and more muscles from their flowing testosterone. Girls develop breasts and wider hips and begin menstruating as nature prepares them for possible pregnancy and childbirth. For better or worse, these basic biological differences between the sexes affect many people's perceptions of what it means to be female or male, as we next discuss.

Babies are born with anatomical and other biological differences that are determined at the moment of conception. These biological differences define the baby's sex.

Gender as a Social Construction

If sex is a biological concept, then **gender** is a social concept. It refers to the social and cultural differences a society assigns to people based on their (biological) sex. A related concept, **gender roles**, refers to a society's expectations of people's behavior and attitudes based on whether they are females or males. Understood in this way, gender, like race as discussed in [Chapter 6 "Racial and Ethnic Inequality"](), is a *social construction.* How we think and behave as females and males is not etched in stone by our biology but rather is a result of how society expects us to think and behave based on what sex we are. As we grow up, we learn these expectations as we develop our **gender identity**, or our beliefs about ourselves as females or males.

These expectations are called *femininity* and *masculinity.* **Femininity** refers to the cultural expectations we have of girls and women, while **masculinity** refers to the expectations we have of boys and men. A familiar nursery rhyme nicely summarizes these two sets of traits:

What are little boys made of?

Snips and snails,

And puppy dog tails,

That's what little boys are made of.

What are little girls made of?

Sugar and spice,

And everything nice,

That's what little girls are made of.

As this rhyme suggests, our traditional notions of femininity and masculinity indicate that we think females and males are fundamentally different from each other. In effect, we think of them as two sides of the same coin of being human. What we traditionally mean by femininity is captured in the adjectives, both positive and negative, we traditionally ascribe to women: gentle, sensitive, nurturing, delicate, graceful, cooperative, decorative, dependent, emotional, passive, and weak. Thus when we say that a girl or woman is very feminine, we have some combination of these traits in mind: she is soft, dainty, pretty, and even a bit flighty. What we traditionally mean by masculinity is captured in the adjectives, again both positive and negative, our society traditionally ascribes to men: strong, assertive, brave, active, independent, intelligent, competitive, insensitive, unemotional, and aggressive. When we say that a boy or man is very masculine, we have some combination of these traits in mind: he is tough, strong, and assertive.

These traits might sound like stereotypes of females and males in today's society, and to some extent they are, but differences between women and men in attitudes and behavior do in fact exist (Aulette & Wittner, 2011). For example, women cry more often than men do. Men are more physically violent than women. Women take care of children more than men do. Women smile more often than men. Men curse and spit more often than women. When women talk with each other, they are more likely to talk about their personal lives than men are when they talk with each other. The two sexes even differ when they hold a cigarette (not that anyone should smoke!). When a woman holds a cigarette, she usually has the palm of her cigarette-holding hand facing upward; when a man holds a cigarette, he usually has his palm facing downward.

The Development of Gender Differences

What accounts for differences in female and male behavior and attitudes? Do the biological differences between the sexes account for these other differences? Or do these latter differences stem, as most sociologists think, from cultural expectations and from differences in the ways in which the sexes are socialized? These are critical questions, for they ask whether the differences between boys and girls and women and men stem more from biology or from society. If we think behavioral and other differences between the sexes are due primarily to their respective biological makeups, we imply that these differences are inevitable or nearly so and that any attempt to change them goes against biology and will likely fail.

For example, consider the obvious biological fact that women bear and nurse children and men do not. Couple this with the common view that women are also more gentle and nurturing than men, and we end up with a "biological recipe" for women to be the primary caretakers of children. Many people think this means women are therefore much better suited than men to take care of children once they are born, and that the family might be harmed if mothers work outside the home or if fathers are the primary caretakers. Figure 4.1 "Belief That Women Should Stay at Home" shows that more than one-third of the public agrees that "it is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and family." To the extent this belief exists, women may not want to work outside the home or, if they choose to do so, they then face difficulties from employers, family, and friends. Conversely, men may not even think about wanting to stay at home and may themselves face difficulties from employees, family, and friends if they want to do so. A belief in a strong biological basis for differences between women and men

implies, then, that there is little we can or should do to change these differences. It implies that "anatomy is destiny," and destiny is, of course, by definition inevitable.

Figure 4.1 Belief That Women Should Stay at Home
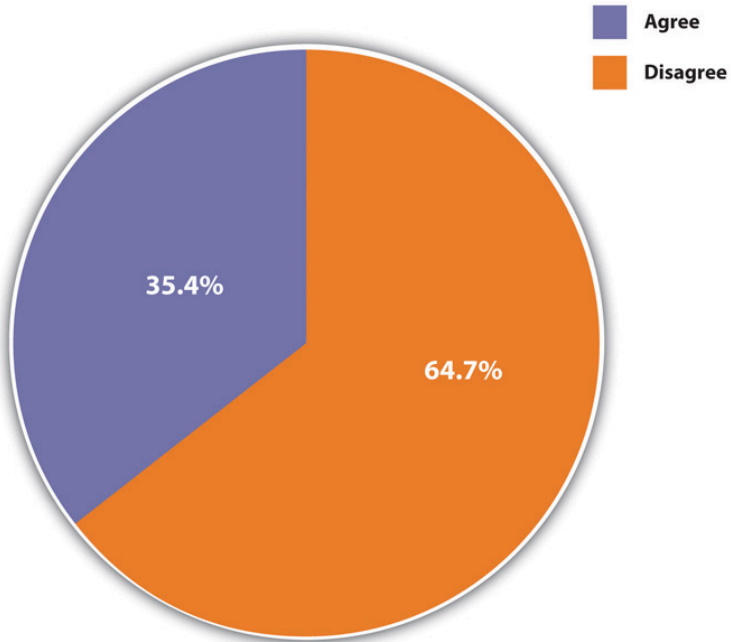
Agreement or disagreement with the statement that "it is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and family."

This implication makes it essential to understand the extent to which gender differences do, in fact, stem from biological differences between the sexes or, instead, stem from cultural and social influences. If biology is paramount, then gender differences are perhaps inevitable and the status quo will remain. If culture and social influences matter much more than biology, then gender differences can change and the status quo may give way. With this backdrop in mind, let's turn to the biological evidence for behavioral and other differences between the sexes and then examine the evidence for their social and cultural roots.

Biology and Gender

Several biological explanations for gender roles exist, and we discuss two of the most important ones here. One explanation is from the field of evolutionary psychology (Buss, 2012) and argues an evolutionary basis for traditional gender roles.

Scholars advocating this view reason as follows (Thornhill & Gangestad, 2008). In prehistoric societies, two major social roles existed (1) hunting or gathering food to relieve hunger, and (2) bearing and nursing children. Because only women could perform the latter role, they were also the primary caretakers for children for several years after birth. And because women were frequently pregnant, their roles as mothers confined them to the home. Meanwhile, men were better suited than women for hunting

because they were stronger and quicker than women. In prehistoric societies, then, biology was indeed destiny: For biological reasons, men in effect worked outside the home (hunted), while women stayed at home with their children.

Evolutionary reasons also explain why men are more violent than women. In prehistoric times, men who were more willing to commit violence against and even kill other men would "win out" in the competition for female mates. They thus were more likely than less violent men to produce offspring, who would then carry these males' genetic violent tendencies.

If the human race evolved along these lines, evolutionary psychologists continue, natural selection favored those societies where men were stronger, braver, and more aggressive and where women were more fertile and nurturing. Such traits over the millennia became fairly instinctual, meaning that men's and women's biological natures evolved differently. Men became, by nature, more assertive, daring, and violent than women, and women became, by nature, more gentle, nurturing, and maternal than men. To the extent this is true, these scholars add, traditional gender roles for women and men make sense from an evolutionary standpoint, and attempts to change them go against the sexes' biological natures. This in turn implies that existing gender inequality must continue because it is rooted in biology. The title of a book presenting the evolutionary psychology argument summarizes this implication: "Biology at Work: Rethinking Sexual Equality" (Browne, 2002).

According to some evolutionary psychologists, today's gender differences in strength and physical aggression are ultimately rooted in certain evolutionary processes that spanned millennia.

Vladimir Pustovit – Couple – CC BY 2.0.

Critics challenge the evolutionary explanation on several grounds (Begley, 2009; Fine, 2011). First, much greater gender variation in behavior and attitudes existed in prehistoric times than the evolutionary explanation assumes. Second, even if biological differences did influence gender roles in prehistoric times, these differences are largely irrelevant in modern societies, in which, for example, physical strength is not necessary for survival. Third, human environments throughout the millennia have simply been too diverse to permit the simple, straightforward biological development that the evolutionary explanation assumes. Fourth, evolutionary arguments implicitly justify existing gender inequality by implying the need to confine women and men to their traditional roles.

Recent anthropological evidence also challenges the evolutionary argument that men's tendency to commit violence was biologically transmitted. This evidence instead finds that violent men have trouble finding female mates who would want them and that the

female mates they find and the children they produce are often killed by rivals to the men (Begley, 2009).

A second biological explanation for traditional gender roles attributes males' higher levels of aggression to their higher levels of testosterone (Mazur, 2009). Several studies find that males with higher levels of testosterone tend to have higher levels of aggression. However, this correlation does not necessarily mean that their testosterone increased their violence; as has been found in various animal species, it is also possible that their violence increased their testosterone. Because studies of human males cannot for ethical and practical reasons manipulate their testosterone levels, the exact meaning of the results from these testosterone-aggression studies must remain unclear, according to a report by the National Academy of Sciences (Miczek, Mirsky, Carey, DeBold, & Raine, 1994).

Another line of research on the biological basis for sex differences in aggression involves children, including some as young as ages 1 or 2, in various situations (Card, Stucky, Sawalani, & Little, 2008). They might be playing with each other, interacting with adults, or writing down solutions to hypothetical scenarios given to them by a researcher. In most of these studies, boys are more physically aggressive in thought or deed than girls, even at a very young age. Other studies are more experimental in nature. In one type of study, a toddler will be playing with a toy, only to have it removed by an adult. Boys typically tend to look angry and try to grab the toy back, while girls tend to just sit there and whimper. Because these gender differences in aggression are found at very young ages, researchers often say they must have some biological basis. However, critics of this line of research counter that even young children have already been socialized along gender lines (Begley, 2009; Fine, 2011), a point to which we return later in the chapter. To the extent this is true, gender differences in children's aggression may reflect socialization rather than biology.

In sum, biological evidence for gender differences certainly exists, but its interpretation remains very controversial. It must be

weighed against the evidence, to which we next turn, of cultural variations in the experience of gender and of socialization differences by gender. One thing is clear: To the extent we accept biological explanations for gender, we imply that existing gender differences and gender inequality must continue to exist. As sociologist Linda L. Lindsey (2011, p. 52) notes, "Biological arguments are consistently drawn upon to justify gender inequality and the continued oppression of women." In contrast, cultural and social explanations of gender differences and gender inequality promise some hope for change. Let's examine the evidence for these explanations.

Culture and Gender

Some of the most compelling evidence against a strong biological determination of gender roles comes from anthropologists, whose work on preindustrial societies demonstrates some striking gender variation from one culture to another. This variation underscores the impact of culture on how females and males think and behave.

Extensive evidence of this impact comes from anthropologist George Murdock (1937), who created the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample of almost two hundred preindustrial societies studied by anthropologists. Murdock found that some tasks in these societies, such as hunting and trapping, are almost always done by men, while other tasks, such as cooking and fetching water, are almost always done by women. These patterns provide evidence for the evolutionary argument presented earlier, as they probably stem from the biological differences between the sexes. Even so, there

were at least some societies in which women hunted and in which men cooked and fetched water.

Anthropological research finds a good deal of variation in gender roles for certain tasks, including planting crops, milking, and generating fires. Other tasks, such as hunting and trapping, are typically done by men while tasks such as cooking and fetching water are typically done by women.

World Bank Photo Collection – Somo Samo village well – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

More important, Murdock found much greater gender variation in several of the other tasks he studied, including planting crops, milking, and generating fires. Men primarily performed these tasks in some societies, women primarily performed them in other societies, and in still other societies both sexes performed them equally. Murdock's findings illustrate how gender roles differ from one culture to another and imply they are not biologically determined.

Anthropologists continue to investigate cultural differences in

gender. Some of their most interesting findings concern gender and sexuality (Brettell & Sargent, 2009). Although all societies distinguish "femaleness" and "maleness," additional gender categories exist in some societies. The Native Americans known as the Mohave, for example, recognize four genders: a woman, a woman who acts like a man, a man, and a man who acts like a woman. In some societies, a third, intermediary gender category is recognized. Anthropologists call this category the *berdache*, who is usually a man who takes on a woman's role. This intermediary category combines aspects of both femininity and masculinity of the society in which it is found and is thus considered an **androgynous** gender. Although some people in this category are born as *intersexed* individuals (formerly known as *hermaphrodites*), meaning they have genitalia of both sexes, many are born biologically as one sex or the other but adopt an androgynous identity.

Anthropologists have found another androgynous gender composed of women warriors in thirty-three Native American groups in North America. Walter L. Williams (1997) calls these women "amazons" and notes that they dress like men and sometimes even marry women. In some tribes girls exhibit such "masculine" characteristics from childhood, while in others they may be recruited into "amazonhood." In the Kaska Indians, for example, a married couple with too many daughters would select one to "be like a man." When she was about 5 years of age, her parents would begin to dress her like a boy and have her do male tasks. Eventually she would grow up to become a hunter.

The androgynous genders found by anthropologists remind us that gender is a social construction and not just a biological fact. If culture does affect gender roles, socialization is the process through which culture has this effect. What we experience as girls and boys strongly influences how we develop as women and men in terms of behavior and attitudes. To illustrate this important dimension of gender, let's turn to the evidence on socialization.

Socialization and Gender

Socialization is the process whereby individuals learn the culture of their society. Several agents of socialization exist, including the family, peers, schools, the mass media, and religion, and all these institutions help to socialize people into their gender roles and also help them develop their gender identity (Andersen & Hysock, 2011).

The Family

Socialization into gender roles begins in infancy, as almost from the moment of birth parents begin to socialize their children as boys or girls without even knowing it (Begley, 2009; Eliot, 2011). Parents commonly describe their infant daughters as pretty, soft, and delicate and their infant sons as strong, active, and alert, even though neutral observers find no such gender differences among infants when they do not know the infants' sex. From infancy on, parents play with and otherwise interact with their daughters and sons differently. They play more roughly with their sons—for example, by throwing them up in the air or by gently wrestling with them—and more quietly with their daughters. When their infant or toddler daughters cry, they warmly comfort them, but they tend to let their sons cry longer and to comfort them less. They give their girls dolls to play with and their boys action figures and toy guns. While these gender differences in socialization are probably smaller

now than a generation ago, they certainly continue to exist. Go into a large toy store and you will see pink aisles of dolls and cooking sets and blue aisles of action figures, toy guns, and related items.

Peers

Peer influences also encourage gender socialization. As they reach school age, children begin to play different games based on their gender. Boys tend to play sports and other competitive team games governed by inflexible rules and relatively large numbers of roles, while girls tend to play smaller, cooperative games such as hopscotch and jumping rope with fewer and more flexible rules. Although girls are much more involved in sports now than a generation ago, these gender differences in their play persist and continue to reinforce gender roles. For example, boys' games encourage them to be competitive, while girls' games encourage them to become cooperative and trusting. The patterns we see in adult males and females thus have roots in their play as young children (Lindsey, 2011) (see Note 4.13 "Children and Our Future").

Children and Our Future

Girls and Boys at Play

The text discusses how the types of games that girls and boys play influence their gender-role socialization. Let's take a closer look at two early sociological studies that provided important evidence for this process.

Janet Lever (1978) studied fifth-grade children in three different communities in Connecticut. She watched them play and otherwise interact in school and also had the children keep diaries of their play and games outside school. Lever found that boys' games were typically more complex than girls' games: The boys' games had a greater number of rules and more specialized roles, and they also involved more individuals playing. She attributed these differences to socialization by parents, teachers, and other adults and argued that the complexity of boys' play and games helped them to be better able than girls to learn important social skills such as dealing with rules and coordinating actions to achieve goals.

A second sociologist, Barrie Thorne (1993), studied fourth- and fifth-graders in California and Michigan. The boys tended to play team sports and other competitive

games, while the girls tended to play cooperative games such as jump rope. These differences led Thorne to conclude that gender-role socialization stems not only from practices by adults but also from the children's own activities without adult involvement. When boys and girls interacted, it was often "girls against the boys" in classroom spelling contests and in games such as tag. Thorne concluded that these "us against them" contests helped the children learn that boys and girls are two different and antagonistic sexes. Boys also tended to disrupt girls' games more than the reverse and in this manner both exerted and learned dominance over females. In all these ways, children were not just the passive recipients of gender-role socialization from adults (their teachers), but they also played an active role in ensuring that such socialization occurred.

These two studies were among the first to emphasize the importance of children's play for the gender-based traits and values that girls and boys learn, which in turn affect the choices they make for careers and other matters later in life. The rise in team sports opportunities for girls in the years since Lever and Thorne did their research is a welcome development, but young children continue to play in the ways that Lever and Thorne found. The body of research on gender differences in children's play points to the need for teachers, parents, and other adults to encourage girls and boys alike to have a mixture of both competitive and cooperative games so that both sexes may develop a better balance of values that are now commonly considered to be either feminine or masculine.

Schools

School is yet another agent of gender socialization. First of all, school playgrounds provide a location for the gender-linked play activities just described to occur. Second, and perhaps more important, teachers at all levels treat their female and male students differently in subtle ways of which they are probably not aware. They tend to call on boys more often to answer questions in class and to praise them more when they give the right answer. They also give boys more feedback about their assignments and other school work (Sadker & Sadker, 1994). At all grade levels, many textbooks and other books still portray people in gender-stereotyped ways. It is true that the newer books do less of this than older ones, but the newer books still contain some stereotypes, and the older books are still used in many schools, especially those that cannot afford to buy newer volumes.

Mass Media

Gender socialization also occurs through the mass media (Renzetti, Curran, & Maier, 2012). On children's television shows, the major characters are male. On Nickelodeon, for example, the very popular SpongeBob SquarePants is a male, as are his pet snail, Gary; his best friend, Patrick Star; their neighbor, Squidward Tentacles; and SpongeBob's employer, Eugene Crabs. Of the major characters in

Bikini Bottom, only Sandy Cheeks is a female. For all its virtues, *Sesame Street* features Bert, Ernie, Cookie Monster, and other male characters. Most of the Muppets are males, and the main female character, Miss Piggy, depicted as vain and jealous, is hardly an admirable female role model. As for adults' prime-time television, more men than women continue to fill more major roles in weekly shows, despite notable women's roles in shows such as *The Good Wife* and *Grey's Anatomy*. Women are also often portrayed as unintelligent or frivolous individuals who are there more for their looks than for anything else. Television commercials reinforce this image. Cosmetics ads abound, suggesting not only that a major task for women is to look good but also that their sense of self-worth stems from looking good. Other commercials show women becoming ecstatic over achieving a clean floor or sparkling laundry. Judging from the world of television commercials, then, women's chief goals in life are to look good and to have a clean house. At the same time, men's chief goals, judging from many commercials, are to drink beer and drive cars.

Women's magazines reinforce the view that women need to be slender and wear many cosmetics in order to be considered beautiful.

Photo Editing Services Tucia.com – [Glamour /Fashion Retouching by Tucia](#) – CC BY 2.0.

Women's and men's magazines reinforce these gender images

(Hesse-Biber, 2007; Milillo, 2008). Most of the magazines intended for teenaged girls and adult women are filled with pictures of thin, beautiful models; advice on dieting; cosmetics ads; and articles on how to win and please your man. Conversely, the magazines intended for teenaged boys and men are filled with ads and articles on cars and sports, advice on how to succeed in careers and other endeavors, and pictures of thin, beautiful (and sometimes nude) women. These magazine images again suggest that women's chief goals are to look good and to please men and that men's chief goals are to succeed, win over women, and live life in the fast lane.

Religion

Another agent of socialization, religion, also contributes to traditional gender stereotypes. Many traditional interpretations of the Bible yield the message that women are subservient to men (Tanenbaum, 2009). This message begins in Genesis, where the first human is Adam, and Eve was made from one of his ribs. The major figures in the rest of the Bible are men, and women are for the most part depicted as wives, mothers, temptresses, and prostitutes; they are praised for their roles as wives and mothers and condemned for their other roles. More generally, women are constantly depicted as the property of men. The Ten Commandments includes a neighbor's wife with his house, ox, and other objects as things not to be coveted (Exodus 20:17), and many biblical passages say explicitly that women belong to men, such as this one from the New Testament: "Wives be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the

Church. As the Church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands" (Ephesians 5:22–24).

Several passages in the Old Testament justify the rape and murder of women and girls. The Koran, the sacred book of Islam, also contains passages asserting the subordinate role of women (Mayer, 2009).

A Final Word on the Sources of Gender

Scholars in many fields continue to debate the relative importance of biology and of culture and socialization for how we behave and think as girls and boys and as women and men. The biological differences between females and males lead many scholars and no doubt much of the public to assume that masculinity and femininity are to a large degree biologically determined or at least influenced. In contrast, anthropologists, sociologists, and other social scientists tend to view gender as a social construction. Even if biology does matter for gender, they say, the significance of culture and socialization should not be underestimated. To the extent that gender is indeed shaped by society and culture, it is possible to change gender and to help bring about a society where both men and women have more opportunity to achieve their full potential.

- Sex is a biological concept, while gender is a social concept and refers to the social and cultural differences a society assigns to people based on their sex.
- Several biological explanations for gender roles exist, but sociologists think culture and socialization are more important sources of gender roles than biology.
- Families, schools, peers, the mass media, and religion are agents of socialization for the development of gender identity and gender roles.

For Your Review

1. Write a short essay about one or two events you recall from your childhood that reflected or reinforced your gender socialization.
2. Do you think gender roles are due more to biology or to culture and socialization? Explain your answer.

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7.2 Feminism and Sexism

In the national General Social Survey (GSS), slightly more than one-third of the public agrees with this statement: "It is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and family." Do you agree or disagree with this statement? If you are like the majority of college students, you disagree.

Today a lot of women, and some men, will say, "I'm not a feminist, but...," and then go on to add that they hold certain beliefs about women's equality and traditional gender roles that actually fall into a feminist framework. Their reluctance to self-identify as feminists underscores the negative image that feminists and feminism have but also suggests that the actual meaning of feminism may be unclear.

Feminism and sexism are generally two sides of the same coin. **Feminism** refers to the belief that women and men should have equal opportunities in economic, political, and social life, while **sexism** refers to a belief in traditional gender role stereotypes and in the inherent inequality between men and women. Sexism thus parallels the concept of racial and ethnic prejudice discussed in [Chapter 6 "Racial and Ethnic Inequality"](). Women and people of

color are both said, for biological and/or cultural reasons, to lack certain qualities for success in today's world.

Feminism as a social movement began in the United States during the abolitionist period before the Civil War. Elizabeth Cady Stanton (left) and Lucretia Mott (right) were outspoken abolitionists who made connections between slavery and the oppression of women.

The US Library of Congress – public domain; The US Library of Congress – public domain.

Two feminist movements in US history have greatly advanced the cause of women's equality and changed views about gender. The first began during the abolitionist period, when abolitionists such as Susan B. Anthony, Lucretia Mott, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton began to see similarities between slavery and the oppression of women. This new women's movement focused on many issues but especially the right to vote, which women won in 1920. The second major feminist movement began in the late 1960s, as women active in the Southern civil rights movement turned their attention to women's

rights, and it is still active today. This movement has profoundly changed public thinking and social and economic institutions, but, as we will soon see, much gender inequality remains.

Several varieties of feminism exist. Although they all share the basic idea that women and men should be equal in their opportunities in all spheres of life, they differ in other ways (Hannam, 2012). *Liberal feminism* believes that the equality of women can be achieved within our existing society by passing laws and reforming social, economic, and political institutions. In contrast, *socialist feminism* blames capitalism for women's inequality and says that true gender equality can result only if fundamental changes in social institutions, and even a socialist revolution, are achieved. *Radical feminism*, on the other hand, says that **patriarchy** (male domination) lies at the root of women's oppression and that women are oppressed even in noncapitalist societies. Patriarchy itself must be abolished, they say, if women are to become equal to men. Finally, *multicultural feminism* emphasizes that women of color are oppressed not only because of their gender but also because of their race and class. They thus face a triple burden that goes beyond their gender. By focusing their attention on women of color in the United States and other nations, multicultural feminists remind us that the lives of these women differ in many ways from those of the middle-class women who historically have led US feminist movements.

The Growth of Feminism and the Decline of Sexism

What evidence is there for the impact of the contemporary women's movement on public thinking? The GSS, the Gallup poll, and other national surveys show that the public has moved away from traditional views of gender toward more modern ones. Another way of saying this is that the public has moved from sexism toward feminism.

To illustrate this, let's return to the GSS statement that it is much better for the man to achieve outside the home and for the woman to take care of home and family. Figure 4.2 "Change in Acceptance of Traditional Gender Roles in the Family, 1977–2010" shows that agreement with this statement dropped sharply during the 1970s and 1980s before leveling off afterward to slightly more than one-third of the public.

Figure 4.2 Change in Acceptance of Traditional Gender Roles in the Family, 1977–2010
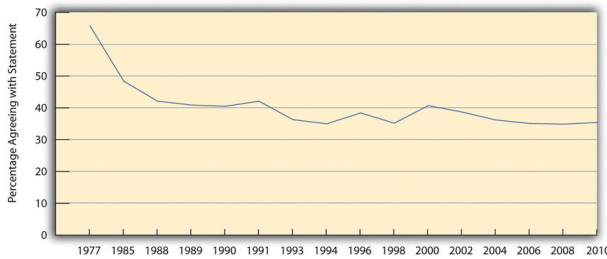
Percentage agreeing that "it is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and family."

Source: Data from General Social Surveys. (1977–2010). Retrieved from http://sda.berkeley.edu/cgi-bin/hsda?harcsda+gss10.

Another GSS question over the years has asked whether respondents would be willing to vote for a qualified woman for president of the United States. As Figure 4.3 "Change in Willingness to Vote for a Qualified Woman for President" illustrates, this percentage rose from 74 percent in the early 1970s to a high of 96.2 percent in 2010. Although we have not yet had a woman president, despite Hillary Rodham Clinton's historic presidential primary campaign in 2007 and 2008 and Sarah Palin's presence on the Republican ticket in 2008, the survey evidence indicates the public is willing to vote for one. As demonstrated by the responses to the survey questions on women's home roles and on a woman president, traditional gender views have indeed declined.

Figure 4.3 Change in Willingness to Vote for a Qualified Woman for President

Source: Data from General Social Survey. (2010). Retrieved from http://sda.berkeley.edu/cgi-bin/hsda?harcsda+gss10.

For Your Review

1. Do you consider yourself a feminist? Why or why not?
2. Think about one of your parents or of another adult

much older than you. Does this person hold more traditional views about gender than you do? Explain your answer.

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7.3 Dimensions of Gender Inequality

Learning Objectives

1. Summarize the status of women around the world today.
2. Understand the extent of and reasons for gender inequality in income and the workplace in the United States.
3. Understand the extent of and reasons for sexual harassment.

The primary focus of this chapter is gender inequality in the United States, but it is also important to discuss gender inequality worldwide. While American women are unequal to men in many respects, women's situation throughout much of the world is especially dire. Accordingly, we first examine the global inequality of women before turning our attention to the United States.

The Global Inequality of

Women

The problem of global poverty first discussed in [Chapter 5 "Poverty"](#) is especially severe for women. Although, as [Chapter 5 "Poverty"](#) noted, more than 1.4 billion people on earth are desperately poor, their ranks include more than their fair share of women, who are estimated to make up 70 percent of the world's poor. Because women tend to be poorer than men worldwide, they are more likely than men to experience all the problems that poverty causes, including malnutrition and disease. But they also suffer additional problems. Some of these problems derive from women's physiological role of childbearing, and some arise from how they are treated simply because they are women.

Let's first look at childbearing. One of the most depressing examples of how global poverty affects women is maternal mortality, or the number of women who die during childbirth for every 100,000 live births. More than 500,000 women die worldwide annually from complications during pregnancy or childbirth. Maternal mortality usually results from one or more of the following: inadequate prenatal nutrition, disease and illness, and inferior obstetrical care, all of which are much more common in poor nations than in wealthy nations. In wealthy nations, the rate of maternal mortality is 14 per 100,000 births, but in poor nations the rate is a distressingly high 590 per 100,000 births, equivalent to almost 6 deaths for every 1,000 births. Women in poor nations are thus forty-two times more likely than those in wealthy nations to die from complications during pregnancy or childbirth (World Bank, 2012).

In India and Pakistan, thousands of new wives every year are murdered in dowry deaths because they have not provided their husbands a suitable amount of money and goods.

In addition to these problems, women in poor nations fare worse than men in other ways because of how they are treated as women. One manifestation of this fact is the violence they experience (World Health Organization, 2010).World Health Organization/ London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. (2010). *Preventing intimate partner and sexual violence against women: Taking action and generating evidence.* Geneva, Switzerland: Author. About one-third of women worldwide have been raped or beaten, leading Amnesty International (2004) to call violence against women "the greatest human rights scandal of our times." Although violence against women certainly occurs in wealthy nations, it is more common and extreme in poor and middle-income nations, and in nations where women's inequality (as reflected by criteria such as their labor force participation and their educational attainment) is especially high (Kaya & Cook, 2010). More than half of women in Uganda, for example, have been physically or sexually abused (Amnesty International, 2010). Many young women in India who work outside the home have been raped by male high-school

dropouts who think these women lack virtue and should be punished with rape (Polgreen, 2011). In India and Pakistan, thousands of women are killed every year in dowry deaths, in which a new wife is murdered by her husband and/or his relatives if she does not pay the groom money or goods (Kethineni & Srinivasan, 2009). In many countries, young girls routinely have their genitals cut out, often with no anesthesia, in what has been termed *female genital mutilation*, a practice that is thought to affect more than 100 million girls and women across the earth and has been called an act of torture (Kristoff, 2011; Rogo, Subayi, & Toubia, 2007).

Sex trafficking is another major problem in countries like Cambodia, India, Nepal, and Thailand, where young girls are often stolen from their parents and forced to work as prostitutes in what amounts to *sexual slavery*. The number of girls (and sometimes boys) under age 18 who work as sex slaves is thought to reach into the millions and to be larger than the number of African slaves during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Kristoff & WuDunn, 2010).

Beyond violence, women in poor nations are less likely than their male counterparts to get a higher education, and girls are less likely than boys to attend primary school. Women are also less likely than men to work in jobs that pay a decent wage and to hold political office. In many poor nations, girls are less likely than boys to receive adequate medical care when they become ill and are more likely than boys to die before age 5. In all these ways, women and girls in poor nations especially suffer.

In stark contrast, women in wealthy democratic nations fare much better than their counterparts in poor nations. In many wealthy democracies, women's status vis-à-vis men is higher than in the United States. The Note 4.23 "Lessons from Other Societies" box discusses this situation further.

Lessons from Other Societies

Women in the Nordic Nations

The United Nations Development Programme ranks nations on a "gender empowerment measure" of women's involvement in their nation's economy and political life (United Nations Development Programme, 2009). Of the 109 nations included in the measure, Sweden ranks first, followed by Norway, Finland, and Denmark. The remaining Nordic nation, Iceland, ranks eighth. The other nations in the top ten are the Netherlands, Belgium, Australia, Germany, and New Zealand. Canada ranks twelfth, and the United States ranks only eighteenth. In trying to understand why the United States ranks this low and what it might be able to do to increase its empowerment of women, the experience of the Nordic nations provides some important lessons.

The Nordic nations rank at the top of the gender empowerment measure largely because they have made a concerted effort to boost women's involvement in the business and political worlds (Sumer, Smithson, Guerreiro,

& Granlund, 2008). They are all social democratic welfare states characterized by extensive government programs and other efforts to promote full economic and gender equality.

For example, Norway's government provides day care for children and adult care for older or disabled individuals, and it also provides forty-four weeks of paid parental leave after the birth of a child. Parents can also work fewer hours without losing income until their child is 2 years of age. All these provisions mean that women are much more likely than their American counterparts to have the freedom and economic means to work outside the home, and they have taken advantage of this opportunity. As a recent analysis concluded, "It has been extremely important for women that social rights have been extended to cover such things as the caring of young children and elderly, sick and disabled members of society. In the Nordic countries, women have been more successful than elsewhere in combining their dual role as mothers and workers, and social policy arrangements are an integral part of the gender equality policy" (Kangas & Palme, 2009, p. 565).

The lesson for the United States is clear: An important reason for the Nordic nations' high gender empowerment ranking is government policy that enables women to work outside the home if they want to do so. The experience of these nations indicates that greater gender equality might be achieved in the United States if it adopted policies similar to those found in these nations that make it easier for women to join and stay in the labor force.

Gender Inequality in the United States

We have said that the women's movement changed American life in many ways but that gender inequality persists in the United States. Let's look at examples of such inequality, much of it taking the form of institutional discrimination, which, as we saw in [Chapter 6 "Racial and Ethnic Inequality"](), can occur even if it is not intended to happen. We start with gender inequality in income and the workplace and then move on to a few other spheres of life.

The Gender Gap in Income

In the last few decades, women have entered the workplace in increasing numbers, partly, and for many women mostly, out of economic necessity, and partly out of desire for the sense of self-worth and other fulfillment that comes with work. In February 2012, 57.9 percent of US women aged 16 or older were in the labor force, compared to only 43.3 percent in 1970; comparable figures for men were 70.3 percent in 2012 and 79.7 percent in 1970 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). Thus while women's labor force participation continues to lag behind men's, this gender gap has narrowed. The figures just cited include women of retirement age. When we just look at younger women, labor force participation is even higher. For

example, 74.7 percent of women aged 35–44 were in the labor force in 2011, compared to only 46.8 percent in 1970.

Despite the workplace gains women have made, problems persist. Perhaps the major problem is a gender gap in income. Women have earned less money than men ever since records started being kept (Reskin & Padavic, 2002). In the United States in the early 1800s, full-time women workers in agriculture and manufacturing earned less than 38 percent of what men earned. By 1885, they were earning about 50 percent of what men earned in manufacturing jobs. As the 1980s began, full-time women workers' median weekly earnings were about 65 percent of men's. Women have narrowed the gender gap in earnings since then: Their weekly earnings now (2011) are 82.2 percent of men's among full-time workers ages 16 and older (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). Still, this means that for every $10,000 men earn, women earn only about $8,220. To turn that around, for every $10,000 women earn, men earn $12,156. This gap amounts to hundreds of thousands of dollars over a lifetime of working.

Women have earned less money than men ever since records started being kept. Women now earn about 81 percent of what men earn.

As Table 4.1 "Median Annual Earnings of Full-Time, Year-Round Workers Aged 25–64 by Educational Attainment, 2010*" shows, this gender gap exists for all levels of education and even increases with higher levels of education. On the average, women with a bachelor's

degree or higher and working full time earn almost $18,000 less per year than their male counterparts.

Table 4.1 Median Annual Earnings of Full-Time, Year-Round Workers Aged 25–64 by Educational Attainment, 2010*

	High school dropout	High school degree	Some college or associate's degree	Bachelor's degree or higher
Men	25,272	36,920	43,940	69,160
Women	20,176	28,236	33,176	51,272
Difference	5,096	8,684	10,764	17,888
Gender gap (%; women ÷ men)	79.8	76.5	75.5	74.1
* Median weekly earnings × 52 weeks				

Source: US Department of Labor. (2011). *Highlights of women's earnings in 2010.* Washington, DC: Author.

What accounts for the gender gap in earnings? A major reason is sex segregation in the workplace, which accounts for up to 45

percent of the gender gap (Kelley, 2011; Reskin & Padavic, 2002). Although women have increased their labor force participation, the workplace remains segregated by gender. Almost half of all women work in a few low-paying clerical and service (e.g., waitressing) jobs, while men work in a much greater variety of jobs, including high-paying ones. [Table 4.2 "Gender Segregation in the Workplace for Selected Occupations, 2010"](#) shows that many jobs are composed primarily of women or of men. Part of the reason for this segregation is that socialization affects what jobs young men and women choose to pursue, and part of the reason is that women and men do not want to encounter difficulties they may experience if they took a job traditionally assigned to the other sex. A third reason is that sex-segregated jobs discriminate against applicants who are not the "right" sex for that job. Employers may either consciously refuse to hire someone who is the "wrong" sex for the job or have job requirements (e.g., height requirements) and workplace rules (e.g., working at night) that unintentionally make it more difficult for women to qualify for certain jobs. Although such practices and requirements are now illegal, they still continue. The sex segregation they help create contributes to the continuing gender gap between female and male workers. Occupations dominated by women tend to have lower wages and salaries. Because women are concentrated in low-paying jobs, their earnings are much lower than men's (Reskin & Padavic, 2002).

This fact raises an important question: Why do women's jobs pay less than men's jobs? Is it because their jobs are not important and require few skills (recalling the functional theory of stratification discussed in [Chapter 5 "Poverty"](#))? The evidence indicates otherwise: Women's work is devalued precisely because it is women's work, and women's jobs thus pay less than men's jobs because they are women's jobs (Magnusson, 2009).

Table 4.2 Gender Segregation in the Workplace for Selected Occupations, 2010

Occupation	Female workers (%)	Male workers (%)
Preschool and kindergarten teachers	97.0	3.0
Speech-language pathologists	96.3	3.7
Secretaries and administrative assistants	96.1	3.9
Dental hygienists	95.1	4.9
Registered nurses	91.1	8.9
Food servers (waiters/waitresses)	71.1	29.9
Pharmacists	53.0	47.0
Physicians	32.3	67.7
Lawyers	31.5	68.5
Dentists	25.5	64.5
Computer software engineers	20.9	79.1
Electricians	1.5	98.5
Carpenters	1.4	98.5

Source: Data from US Census Bureau. (2012). *Statistical abstract of the United States: 2012*. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office. Retrieved from http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab.

Studies of comparable worth support this argument (Levanon, England, & Allison, 2009). Researchers rate various jobs in terms of their requirements and attributes that logically should affect the salaries they offer: the importance of the job, the degree of skill it requires, the level of responsibility it requires, the degree to which

the employee must exercise independent judgment, and so forth. They then use these dimensions to determine what salary a job should offer. Some jobs might be better on some dimensions and worse on others but still end up with the same predicted salary if everything evens out.

Some women's jobs pay less than men's jobs even though their comparable worth is equal to or even higher than the men's jobs. For example, a social worker, depicted here, may earn less money than a probation officer, even though calculations based on comparable worth would predict that a social worker should earn at least as much.

When researchers make their calculations, they find that certain women's jobs pay less than men's even though their comparable worth is equal to or even higher than the men's jobs. For example,

a social worker may earn less money than a probation officer, even though calculations based on comparable worth would predict that a social worker should earn at least as much. The comparable worth research demonstrates that women's jobs pay less than men's jobs of comparable worth and that the average working family would earn several thousand dollars more annually if pay scales were reevaluated based on comparable worth and women were paid more for their work.

Even when women and men work in the same jobs, women often earn less than men, and men are more likely than women to hold leadership positions in these occupations. Government data provide ready evidence of the lower incomes women receive even in the same occupations. For example, among full-time employees, female marketing and sales managers earn only 66 percent of what their male counterparts earn; female human resource managers earn only 80 percent of what their male counterparts earn; female claims adjusters earn only 77 percent; female accountants earn only 75 percent; female elementary and middle school teachers earn only 91 percent; and even female secretaries and clerical workers earn only 91 percent (US Department of Labor, 2011).

One reason for these differences, and for women's lower earnings in general, is their caregiving responsibilities (Chang, 2010). Women are more likely than men to have the major, and perhaps the sole, responsibility for taking care of children and aging parents or other adults who need care. This responsibility limits their work hours and often prompts them to drop out of the labor force. If women rejoin the labor force after their children start school, or join for the first time, they are already several years behind men who began working at an earlier age. Economics writer David Leonhardt (2010, p. B1) explains this dynamic: "Many more women take time off from work. Many more women work part time at some point in their careers. Many more women can't get to work early or stay late. And our economy exacts a terribly steep price for any time away from work—in both pay and promotions. People often cannot just pick up

where they have left off. Entire career paths are closed off. The hit to earnings is permanent."

We can see evidence of this "hit" when we examine the gender gap in earnings by age. This gap is relatively low for people in their early twenties, when women earn 93.8 percent of what men earn, but rises during the next two decades of age as more and more women bear and raise children (see Figure 4.4 "Gender, Age, and Median Weekly Earnings of Full-Time Employees, 2010").

Figure 4.4 Gender, Age, and Median Weekly Earnings of Full-Time Employees, 2010
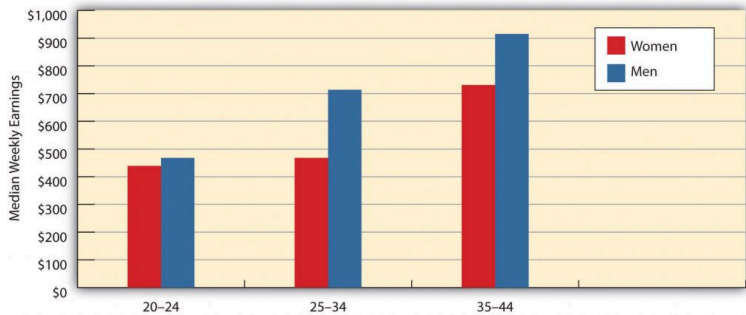
Source: U.S. Department of Labor. (2011). *Highlights of Women's Earnings in 2010*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor.

Still, when variables like number of years on the job, number of hours worked per week, and size of firm are taken into account, gender differences in earnings diminish but do not disappear altogether, and it is very likely that sex discrimination (conscious

or unconscious) by employers accounts for much of the remaining disparity.

Some of the sex discrimination in employment reflects the existence of two related phenomena, the **glass ceiling** and the **glass escalator**. Women may be promoted in a job only to find they reach an invisible "glass ceiling" beyond which they cannot get promoted, or they may not get promoted in the first place. In the largest US corporations, women constitute only about 16 percent of the top executives, and women executives are paid much less than their male counterparts (Jenner & Ferguson, 2009). Although these disparities stem partly from the fact that women joined the corporate ranks much more recently than men, they also reflect a glass ceiling in the corporate world that prevents qualified women from rising up above a certain level (Hymowitz, 2009). Men, on the other hand, can often ride a "glass escalator" to the top, even in female occupations. An example is seen in elementary school teaching, where principals typically rise from the ranks of teachers. Although men constitute only about 16 percent of all public elementary school teachers, they account for about 41 percent of all elementary school principals (Aud et al., 2011).

Women constitute only about 16 percent of the top executives in the largest US corporations, and women executives are paid much less than their male counterparts. These disparities reflect a "glass ceiling" that limits women's opportunities for promotion.

Baltic Development Forum – [Kristovskis meeting](#) – CC BY 2.0.

Whatever the reasons for the gender gap in income, the fact that women make so much less than men means that female-headed families are especially likely to be poor. In 2010, almost 32 percent of these families lived in poverty, compared to only 6 percent of married-couple families (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2011). As noted in [Chapter 5 "Poverty"](#), the term *feminization of poverty* refers to the fact that female-headed households are especially likely to be poor. The gendering of poverty in this manner is one of the most significant manifestations of gender inequality in the United States.

Sexual Harassment

Another workplace problem (including schools) is **sexual harassment**, which, as defined by federal guidelines and legal rulings and statutes, consists of unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, or physical conduct of a sexual nature that is used as a condition of employment or promotion or that interferes with an individual's job performance and creates an intimidating or hostile environment.

Although men can be, and are, sexually harassed, women are more often the targets of sexual harassment. This gender difference exists for at least two reasons, one cultural and one structural. The cultural reason centers on the depiction of women and the socialization of men. As our discussion of the mass media and gender socialization indicated, women are still depicted in our culture as sexual objects that exist for men's pleasure. At the same time, our culture socializes men to be sexually assertive. These two cultural beliefs combine to make men believe that they have the right to make verbal and physical advances to women in the workplace. When these advances fall into the guidelines listed here, they become sexual harassment.

Sexual harassment in the workplace is a common experience. In surveys of women employees, up to two-thirds of respondents report having been sexually harassed.

The second reason that most targets of sexual harassment are women is more structural. Reflecting the gendered nature of the workplace and of the educational system, typically the men doing the harassment are in a position of power over the women they harass. A male boss harasses a female employee, or a male professor harasses a female student or employee. These men realize that subordinate women may find it difficult to resist their advances for fear of reprisals: A female employee may be fired or not promoted, and a female student may receive a bad grade.

How common is sexual harassment? This is difficult to determine, as the men who do the sexual harassment are not about to shout it from the rooftops, and the women who suffer it often keep quiet because of the repercussions just listed. But anonymous surveys of women employees in corporate and other settings commonly find that 40–65 percent of the respondents report being sexually harassed (Rospenda, Richman, & Shannon, 2009). In a survey of 4,501 women physicians, 36.9 percent reported being sexually harassed either in medical school or in their practice as physicians (Frank, Brogan, & Schiffman, 1998). In studies of college students, almost one-third of women undergraduates and about 40 percent of women graduate students report being sexually harassed by a faculty member (Clodfelter, Turner, Hartman, & Kuhns, 2010).

Studies of people who have been sexually harassed find that they often experience various psychological problems. The [Note 4.29 "Applying Social Research"](#) box discusses this body of research further.

Applying Social Research

The Long-Term Mental Health Consequences of Sexual Harassment

Despite the fact that sexual harassment is illegal, most women (and men) who are sexually harassed do not bring court action. Two reasons explain their decision not to sue: they fear being fired and/or they worry they will not be believed. But another reason has to do with the mental and emotional consequences of being sexually harassed. These consequences include relationship problems, a loss of self-esteem, fatigue, depression, anxiety, sleeplessness, and a feeling of powerlessness. These effects are similar to those for posttraumatic stress disorder and are considered symptoms of what has been termed *sexual harassment trauma syndrome*. This syndrome, and perhaps especially the feeling of powerlessness, are thought to help explain why sexual harassment victims hardly ever bring court action and otherwise often keep quiet. According to law professor Theresa Beiner, the legal system should become more aware of these psychological consequences as it deals with the important question in sexual harassment cases of whether harassment actually occurred. If a woman keeps quiet about the harassment, it is too easy for judges and

juries to believe, as happens in rape cases, that the woman originally did not mind the behavior that she now says is harassment.

Should the legal system begin to make better use of social science research on sexual harassment trauma syndrome, a recent study by sociologist Jason N. Houle and colleagues provides important new evidence for legal officials to consider. The authors note two faults in prior sexual harassment research. First, most studies have focused on workers in a single occupation, such as lawyers, or in a single organization, such as a university campus, rather than in a diverse set of occupations and organizations. Second, because most studies have examined workers at only one point in time, they have been unable to study the long-term psychological consequences of sexual harassment.

To correct these deficiencies, Houle et al. analyzed data from a study of 1,010 ninth-graders in St. Paul, Minnesota, that followed them from 1988 to 2004, when they were 30 or 31 years old. The study included measures of the respondents' experience of sexual harassment at several periods over the study's sixteen-year time span (ages 14–18, 19–26, 29–30, and 30–31), their level of psychological depression, and their sociodemographic background. Focusing on depression at ages 30 or 31, the authors found that sexual harassment at ages 14–18 did not affect the chances of depression at ages 30–31, but that sexual harassment during any of the other three age periods *did* increase the chances of depression at ages 30–31. These results held true for both women and men who had been harassed. The authors concluded that the "effects of harassment are indeed lasting, as harassment experiences

early in the career were associated with heightened depressive symptoms nearly 10 years later."

In finding long-term effects of sexual harassment on women and men in a variety of occupations and organizational settings, Houle et al.'s study made an important contribution to our understanding of the psychological consequences of sexual harassment. Its findings underscore the need for workplaces and campuses to do everything possible to eliminate this illegal and harmful behavior and perhaps will prove useful in sexual harassment lawsuits.

Sources: Beiner, 2005; Houle, Staff, Mortimer, Uggen, & Blackstone, 2011; Willness, Steel, & Lee, 2007

Women of Color: A Triple Burden

Earlier we mentioned multicultural feminism, which stresses that women of color face difficulties for three reasons: their gender, their race, and, often, their social class, which is frequently near the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. They thus face a *triple burden* that manifests itself in many ways.

For example, women of color experience extra income inequality.

Earlier we discussed the gender gap in earnings, with women earning 82.2 percent of what men earn, but women of color face both a gender gap *and* a racial/ethnic gap. [Table 4.3 "The Race/Ethnicity and Gender Gap in Annual Earnings for Full-Time, Year-Round Workers, 2010*"](#) depicts this double gap for full-time workers. We see a racial/ethnic gap among both women and men, as African Americans and Latinos of either gender earn less than whites. We also see a gender gap between men and women, as women earn less than men within any race/ethnicity. These two gaps combine to produce an especially high gap between African American and Latina women and white men: African American women earn only about 70 percent of what white men earn, and Latina women earn only about 60 percent of what white men earn.

Table 4.3 The Race/Ethnicity and Gender Gap in Annual Earnings for Full-Time, Year-Round Workers, 2010*

	Annual earnings ($)	Percentage of white male earnings
Men		
White (non-Hispanic)	44,200	—
Black	32,916	74.5
Latino	26,416	59.8
Women		
White (non-Hispanic)	35,568	80.5
Black	30,784	69.7
Latina	26,416	59.8
* Median weekly earnings × 52 weeks		

Source: US Department of Labor. (2011). *Highlights of women's earnings in 2010*. Washington, DC: Author.

These differences in income mean that African American and Latina women are poorer than white women. We noted earlier that almost 32 percent of all female-headed families are poor. This figure masks race/ethnic differences among such families: 24.8 percent of families headed by non-Latina white women are poor, compared to 41.0 percent of families headed by African American women and also 44.5 percent of families headed by Latina women (DeNavas-Walt et al., 2011). While white women are poorer than white men, African American and Latina women are clearly poorer than white women.

Household Inequality

Gender inequality occurs within families and households. We will briefly discuss here one significant dimension of gender-based household inequality: housework. Someone has to do housework, and that someone is usually a woman. It takes many hours a week to clean the bathrooms, cook, shop in the grocery store, vacuum, and do everything else that needs to be done. The research evidence indicates that women married to or living with men spend two to three times as many hours per week on housework as men spend (Gupta & Ash, 2008). This disparity holds true even when women work outside the home, leading sociologist Arlie Hochschild (Hochschild, 1989) to observe in a widely cited book that women engage in a "second shift" of unpaid work when they come home from their paying job.

The good news is that gender differences in housework time are smaller than a generation ago. The bad news is that a large gender difference remains. As one study summarized the evidence on this issue, "Women invest significantly more hours in household labor than do men despite the narrowing of gender differences in recent years" (Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer, & Robinson, 2000, p. 196). In the realm of household work, then, gender inequality persists.

Key Takeaways

- Among full-time workers, women earn about 79.4 percent of men's earnings. This gender gap in earnings stems from several factors, including sex segregation in the workplace and the lower wages

and salaries found in occupations that involve mostly women.
- Sexual harassment results partly from women's subordinate status in the workplace and may involve up to two-thirds of women employees.
- Women of color may face a "triple burden" of difficulties based on their gender, their race/ethnicity, and their social class.

For Your Review

1. Do you think it is fair for occupations dominated by women to have lower wages and salaries than those dominated by men? Explain your answer.
2. If you know a woman who works in a male-dominated occupation, interview her about any difficulties she might be experiencing as a result of being in this sort of situation.

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7.4 Violence against Women: Rape and Sexual Assault

> ## *Learning Objectives*
>
> 1. Describe the extent of rape and sexual assault.
> 2. Explain why rape and sexual assault occur.

Susan Griffin (1971, p. 26) began a classic essay on rape in 1971 with this startling statement: "I have never been free of the fear of rape. From a very early age I, like most women, have thought of rape as a part of my natural environment—something to be feared and prayed against like fire or lightning. I never asked why men raped; I simply thought it one of the many mysteries of human nature."

When we consider interpersonal violence of all kinds—homicide, assault, robbery, and rape and sexual assault—men are more likely than women to be victims of violence. While true, this fact obscures another fact: Women are far more likely than men to be raped and sexually assaulted. They are also much more likely to be portrayed as victims of pornographic violence on the Internet and in videos, magazines, and other outlets. Finally, women are more likely than men to be victims of *domestic violence*, or violence between spouses and others with intimate relationships. The gendered nature of these acts against women distinguishes them from the violence men suffer. Violence is directed against men not because they are men per se, but because of anger, jealousy, and the sociological reasons related to justice and crime. But rape and sexual assault, domestic

violence, and pornographic violence are directed against women precisely because they are women. These acts are thus an extreme manifestation of the gender inequality women face in other areas of life.

The Extent and Context of Rape and Sexual Assault

Our knowledge about the extent and context of rape and reasons for it comes from three sources: the FBI Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) and the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) and surveys of and interviews with women and men conducted by academic researchers. From these sources we have a fairly good if not perfect idea of how much rape occurs, the context in which it occurs, and the reasons for it. What do we know?

Up to one-third of US women experience a rape or sexual assault, including attempts, at least once in their lives.

According to the UCR, which are compiled by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) from police reports, 88,767 reported rapes (including attempts, and defined as forced sexual intercourse) occurred in the United States in 2010 (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2011). Because women often do not tell police they were raped, the NCVS, which involves survey interviews of thousands of people nationwide, probably yields a better estimate of rape; the NCVS also measures sexual assaults in addition to rape, while the UCR measures only rape. According to the NCVS, 188,380 rapes and sexual assaults occurred in 2010 (Truman, 2011). Other

research indicates that up to one-third of US women will experience a rape or sexual assault, including attempts, at least once in their lives (Barkan, 2012). A study of a random sample of 420 Toronto women involving intensive interviews yielded an even higher figure: Two-thirds said they had experienced at least one rape or sexual assault, including attempts. The researchers, Melanie Randall and Lori Haskell (1995, p. 22), concluded that "it is more common than not for a woman to have an experience of sexual assault during their lifetime."

Studies of college students also find a high amount of rape and sexual assault. About 20–30 percent of women students in anonymous surveys report being raped or sexually assaulted (including attempts), usually by a male student they knew beforehand (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000; Gross, Winslett, Roberts, & Gohm, 2006). Thus at a campus of 10,000 students of whom 5,000 are women, about 1,000–1,500 women will be raped or sexually assaulted over a period of four years, or about 10 per week in a four-year academic calendar. The Note 4.33 "People Making a Difference" box describes what one group of college students did to help reduce rape and sexual assault at their campus.

People Making a Difference

College Students Protest against Sexual Violence

Dickinson College is a small liberal-arts campus in the small town of Carlisle, Pennsylvania. But in the fight against sexual violence, it loomed huge in March 2011, when up to 150 students conducted a nonviolent occupation of the college's administrative building for three days to protest rape and sexual assault on their campus. While they read, ate, and slept inside the building, more than 250 other students held rallies outside, with the total number of protesters easily exceeding one-tenth of Dickinson's student enrollment. The protesters held signs that said "Stop the silence, our safety is more important than your reputation" and "I value my body, you should value my rights." One student told a reporter, "This is a pervasive problem. Almost every student will tell you they know somebody who's experienced sexual violence or have experienced it themselves."

Feeling that college officials had not done enough to help protect Dickinson's women students, the students

occupying the administrative building called on the college to set up an improved emergency system for reporting sexual assaults, to revamp its judicial system's treatment of sexual assault cases, to create a sexual violence prevention program, and to develop a new sexual misconduct policy.

Rather than having police or security guards take the students from the administrative building and even arrest them, Dickinson officials negotiated with the students and finally agreed to their demands. Upon hearing this good news, the occupying students left the building on a Saturday morning, suffering from a lack of sleep and showers but cheered that they had won their demands. A college public relations official applauded the protesters, saying they "have indelibly left their mark on the college. We're all very proud of them." On this small campus in a small town in Pennsylvania, a few hundred college students had made a difference.

Sources: Jerving, 2011; Pitz, 2011

The public image of rape is of the proverbial stranger attacking a woman in an alleyway. While such rapes do occur, most rapes actually happen between people who know each other. A wide body of research finds that 60–80 percent of all rapes and sexual assaults are committed by someone the woman knows, including husbands, ex-husbands, boyfriends, and ex-boyfriends, and only 20–35 percent by strangers (Barkan, 2012). A woman is thus two to four times more likely to be raped by someone she knows than by a stranger.

In 2011, sexual assaults of hotel housekeepers made major headlines after the head of the International Monetary Fund was arrested for allegedly sexually assaulting a hotel housekeeper in New York City; the charges were later dropped because the

prosecution worried about the housekeeper's credibility despite forensic evidence supporting her claim. Still, in the wake of the arrest, news stories reported that hotel housekeepers sometimes encounter male guests who commit sexual assault, make explicit comments, or expose themselves. A hotel security expert said in one news story, "These problems happen with some regularity. They're not rare, but they're not common either." A housekeeper recalled in the same story an incident when she was vacuuming when a male guest appeared: "[He] reached to try to kiss me behind my ear. I dropped my vacuum, and then he grabbed my body at the waist, and he was holding me close. It was very scary." She ran out of the room when the guest let her leave but did not call the police. A hotel workers union official said housekeepers often refused to report sexual assault and other incidents to the police because they were afraid they would not be believed or that they would get fired if they did so (Greenhouse, 2011, p. B1).

Explaining Rape and Sexual Assault

Sociological explanations of rape fall into cultural and structural categories similar to those presented earlier for sexual harassment. Various "rape myths" in our culture support the absurd notion that women somehow enjoy being raped, want to be raped, or are "asking for it" (Franiuk, Seefelt, & Vandello, 2008). One of the most famous scenes in movie history occurs in the classic film *Gone with the*

Wind, when Rhett Butler carries a struggling Scarlett O'Hara up the stairs. She is struggling because she does not want to have sex with him. The next scene shows Scarlett waking up the next morning with a satisfied, loving look on her face. The not-so-subtle message is that she enjoyed being raped (or, to be more charitable to the film, was just playing hard to get).

A related cultural belief is that women somehow ask or deserve to be raped by the way they dress or behave. If she dresses attractively or walks into a bar by herself, she wants to have sex, and if a rape occurs, well, then, what did she expect? In the award-winning film *The Accused*, based on a true story, actress Jodie Foster plays a woman who was raped by several men on top of a pool table in a bar. The film recounts how members of the public questioned why she was in the bar by herself if she did not want to have sex and blamed her for being raped.

A third cultural belief is that a man who is sexually active with a lot of women is a stud and thus someone admired by his male peers. Although this belief is less common in this day of AIDS and other STDs, it is still with us. A man with multiple sex partners continues to be the source of envy among many of his peers. At a minimum, men are still the ones who have to "make the first move" and then continue making more moves. There is a thin line between being sexually assertive and sexually aggressive (Kassing, Beesley, & Frey, 2005).

These three cultural beliefs—that women enjoy being forced to have sex, that they ask or deserve to be raped, and that men should be sexually assertive or even aggressive—combine to produce a cultural recipe for rape. Although most men do not rape, the cultural beliefs and myths just described help account for the rapes that do occur. Recognizing this, the contemporary women's movement began attacking these myths back in the 1970s, and the public is much more conscious of the true nature of rape than a generation ago. That said, much of the public still accepts these cultural beliefs and myths, and prosecutors continue to find it difficult to win jury convictions in rape trials unless the woman who

was raped had suffered visible injuries, had not known the man who raped her, and/or was not dressed attractively (Levine, 2006).

Structural explanations for rape emphasize the power differences between women and men similar to those outlined earlier for sexual harassment. In societies that are male dominated, rape and other violence against women is a likely outcome, as they allow men to demonstrate and maintain their power over women. Supporting this view, studies of preindustrial societies and of the fifty states of the United States find that rape is more common in societies where women have less economic and political power (Baron & Straus, 1989; Sanday, 1981). Poverty is also a predictor of rape; although rape in the United States transcends social class boundaries, it does seem more common among poorer segments of the population than among wealthier segments, as is true for other types of violence (Truman & Rand, 2010). Scholars think the higher rape rates among the poor stem from poor men trying to prove their "masculinity" by taking out their economic frustration on women (Martin, Vieraitis, & Britto, 2006).

Key Takeaways

- Up to one-third of US women experience a rape or sexual assault, including attempts, in their lifetime.
- Rape and sexual assault result from a combination of structural and cultural factors. In states and nations where women are more unequal, rape rates tend to be higher.

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7.5 The Benefits and Costs of Being Male

Learning Objectives

1. List some of the benefits of being male.
2. List some of the costs of being male.

Most of the discussion so far has been about women, and with good reason: In a sexist society such as our own, women are the subordinate, unequal sex. But *gender* means more than *female*, and a few comments about men are in order.

Benefits

We have already discussed gender differences in occupations and incomes that favor men over women. In a patriarchal society, men have more wealth than women and more influence in the political and economic worlds more generally.

Men profit in other ways as well. In Chapter 6 "Racial and Ethnic Inequality", we talked about white privilege, or the advantages that whites automatically have in a racist society whether or not they realize they have these advantages. Many scholars also talk about **male privilege**, or the advantages that males automatically have in a patriarchal society whether or not they realize they have these advantages (McIntosh, 2007).

A few examples illustrate male privilege. Men can usually walk anywhere they want or go into any bar they want without having to worry about being raped or sexually harassed. Susan Griffin was able to write "I have never been free of the fear of rape" because she was a woman; it is no exaggeration to say that few men could write the same thing and mean it. Although some men are sexually harassed, most men can work at any job they want without having to worry about sexual harassment. Men can walk down the street without having strangers make crude remarks about their looks, dress, and sexual behavior. Men can ride the subway system in large cities without having strangers grope them, flash them, or rub their bodies against them. Men can apply for most jobs without worrying about being rejected because of their gender, or, if hired, not being promoted because of their gender. We could go on with many other examples, but the fact remains that in a patriarchal society, men automatically have advantages just because they are men, even if race/ethnicity, social class, and sexual orientation affect the degree to which they are able to enjoy these advantages.

Costs

Yet it is also true that men pay a price for living in a patriarchy. Without trying to claim that men have it as bad as women, scholars are increasingly pointing to the problems men face in a society that promotes male domination and traditional standards of masculinity such as assertiveness, competitiveness, and toughness (Kimmel & Messner, 2010). Socialization into masculinity is thought to underlie many of the emotional problems men experience, which stem from a combination of their emotional inexpressiveness and reluctance to admit to, and seek help for, various personal problems (Wong & Rochlen, 2005). Sometimes these emotional problems build up and explode, as mass shootings by males at schools and elsewhere indicate, or express themselves in other ways. Compared to girls, for example, boys are much more likely to be diagnosed with emotional disorders, learning disabilities, and attention deficit disorder, and they are also more likely to commit suicide and to drop out of high school.

Men experience other problems that put themselves at a disadvantage compared to women. They commit much more violence than women do and, apart from rape and sexual assault, also suffer a much higher rate of violent victimization. They die earlier than women and are injured more often. Because men are less involved than women in child rearing, they also miss out on the joy of parenting that women are much more likely to experience.

Growing recognition of the problems males experience because of their socialization into masculinity has led to increased concern over what is happening to American boys. Citing the strong linkage between masculinity and violence, some writers urge parents to raise their sons differently in order to help our society reduce its violent behavior (Corbett, 2011). In all these respects, boys and men—and our nation as a whole—are paying a very real price for being male in a patriarchal society.

For Your Review

1. What do you think is the most important advantage, privilege, or benefit that men enjoy in the United States? Explain your answer.
2. What do you think is the most significant cost or disadvantage that men experience? Again, explain your answer.

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7.6 Reducing Gender Inequality

Learning Objectives

1.   Describe any three policies or programs that should help reduce gender inequality.
2.   Discuss possible ways of reducing rape and sexual assault.

Gender inequality is found in varying degrees in most societies around the world, and the United States is no exception. Just as racial/ethnic stereotyping and prejudice underlie racial/ethnic inequality (see Chapter 6 "Racial and Ethnic Inequality"), so do stereotypes and false beliefs underlie gender inequality. Although these stereotypes and beliefs have weakened considerably since the 1970s thanks in large part to the contemporary women's movement, they obviously persist and hamper efforts to achieve full gender equality.

  A sociological perspective reminds us that gender inequality stems from a complex mixture of cultural and structural factors that must be addressed if gender inequality is to be reduced further than it already has been since the 1970s. Despite changes during this period, children are still socialized from birth into traditional notions of femininity and masculinity, and gender-based stereotyping incorporating these notions still continues. Although people should certainly be free to pursue whatever family and

career responsibilities they desire, socialization and stereotyping still combine to limit the ability of girls and boys and women and men alike to imagine less traditional possibilities. Meanwhile, structural obstacles in the workplace and elsewhere continue to keep women in a subordinate social and economic status relative to men.

To reduce gender inequality, then, a sociological perspective suggests various policies and measures to address the cultural and structural factors that help produce gender inequality. These steps might include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. Reduce socialization by parents and other adults of girls and boys into traditional gender roles.
2. Confront gender stereotyping by the popular and news media.
3. Increase public consciousness of the reasons for, extent of, and consequences of rape and sexual assault, sexual harassment, and pornography.
4. Increase enforcement of existing laws against gender-based employment discrimination and against sexual harassment.
5. Increase funding of rape-crisis centers and other services for girls and women who have been raped and/or sexually assaulted.
6. Increase government funding of high-quality day-care options to enable parents, and especially mothers, to work outside the home if they so desire, and to do so without fear that their finances or their children's well-being will be compromised.
7. Increase mentorship and other efforts to boost the number of women in traditionally male occupations and in positions of political leadership.

As we consider how best to reduce gender inequality, the impact of the contemporary women's movement must be neither forgotten nor underestimated. Since it began in the late 1960s, the women's movement has generated important advances for women in almost every sphere of life. Brave women (and some men) challenged the

status quo by calling attention to gender inequality in the workplace, education, and elsewhere, and they brought rape and sexual assault, sexual harassment, and domestic violence into the national consciousness. For gender inequality to continue to be reduced, it is essential that a strong women's movement continue to remind us of the sexism that still persists in American society and the rest of the world.

Reducing Rape and Sexual Assault

As we have seen, gender inequality also manifests itself in the form of violence against women. A sociological perspective tells us that cultural myths and economic and gender inequality help lead to rape, and that the rape problem goes far beyond a few psychopathic men who rape women. A sociological perspective thus tells us that our society cannot just stop at doing something about these men. Instead it must make more far-reaching changes by changing people's beliefs about rape and by making every effort to reduce poverty and to empower women. This last task is especially important, for, as Randall and Haskell (1995, p. 22) observed, a sociological perspective on rape "means calling into question the organization of sexual inequality in our society."

Aside from this fundamental change, other remedies, such as additional and better funded rape-crisis centers, would help women who experience rape and sexual assault. Yet even here women of

color face an additional barrier. Because the antirape movement was begun by white, middle-class feminists, the rape-crisis centers they founded tended to be near where they live, such as college campuses, and not in the areas where women of color live, such as inner cities and Native American reservations. This meant that women of color who experienced sexual violence lacked the kinds of help available to their white, middle-class counterparts (Matthews, 1989), and despite some progress, this is still true today.

Key Takeaways

- Certain government efforts, including increased financial support for child care, should help reduce gender inequality.
- If gender inequality lessens, rape and sexual assault should decrease as well.

For Your Review

1. To reduce gender inequality, do you think efforts should focus more on changing socialization practices or on changing policies in the workplace and schools? Explain your answer.
2. How hopeful are you that rape and sexual assault will decrease significantly in your lifetime?

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Summary

1.   *Sex* is a concept that refers to biological differences between females and males, while *gender* is a concept that refers to a society's expectations of how females and males should think and behave.

2.   In understanding gender differences, scholars continue to debate the value of biological explanations. Biological explanations are provocative but ultimately imply that gender differences are inevitable and that the status quo must be maintained. In contrast, cultural and socialization explanations imply some hope for changing gender roles and for reducing gender inequality.

3.   Many studies emphasize that socialization leads children in the United States to adopt the gender roles associated with femininity and masculinity. Parents view and interact with their daughters and sons differently, and children continue to learn their gender roles from their peers, schools, the mass media, and religion.

4.   Feminism refers to the belief that women should be equal to men. With feminism defined in this way, many more people hold feminist beliefs than might be willing to admit to it.

5.   Gender inequality in the workplace is manifested through the gender gap in earnings and through sexual harassment. Women earn only about 80 percent of what men earn. Several reasons account

for this gap, including sex segregation in the workplace, women's caring roles, the devaluing of women's work, and outright sex discrimination by employers. Sexual harassment against women is quite common and stems from cultural beliefs about women's and men's roles and structural differences in the workplace in power between women and men.

6. Women of color experience a triple burden based on their gender, race/ethnicity, and social class. Even though white women earn less money and are poorer than white men, women of color earn less money and are poorer than white women.

7. Violence against women is another manifestation of gender inequality. Research shows that up to one-third of US women will be raped or sexually assaulted and that about 70–80 percent of their assailants will be men they know.

8. In a patriarchal society men enjoy privileges just for being male, whether or not they recognize these privileges. At the same time, men also experience disadvantages, including violent behavior and victimization and higher rates of certain emotional problems than those experienced by women.

Using What You Know

A friend of yours is working twenty hours per week in a local restaurant during the academic year to earn money

for her tuition. She tells you that her manager has pressured her to go out on a date with him and has hinted she could be fired if she refuses. Your friend likes working there otherwise and makes good tips, but she is now dreading having to go to work. With the tight job market, she fears not being able to find other work if she quits, and she's afraid of being fired or not believed if she complains to state authorities. She asks you what she should do. What do you tell her?

What You Can Do

To help reduce gender inequality, you may wish to do any of the following:

1. Contribute money to a local, state, or national organization that provides treatment to adolescent girls with drug, alcohol, or other problems.
2. Volunteer at a rape crisis center or for a rape hotline.
3. Start or join a group on your campus that focuses on gender issues.
4. Start or join a group on your campus or in the local community that focuses on getting middle-school girls more interested in math and the sciences.

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CHAPTER 8: SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND INEQUALITY

Social Problems in the News

"Miami Beach to Fire Two Officers in Gay Beating at Park," the headline said. City officials in Miami Beach, Florida, announced that the city would fire two police officers accused of beating a gay man two years earlier and kicking and arresting a gay tourist who came to the man's defense. The tourist said he called 911 when he saw two officers, who were working undercover, beating the man and kicking his head. According to his account, the officers then shouted antigay slurs at him, kicked him, and arrested him on false charges. The president of Miami Beach Gay Pride welcomed the news of the impending firing. "It sets a

precedent that you can't discriminate against anyone and get away with it," he said. "[The two officers] tried to cover it up and arrested the guy. It's an abuse of power. Kudos to the city. They've taken it seriously."

Source: Smiley & Rothaus, 2011

From 1933 to 1945, Adolf Hitler's Nazi regime exterminated 6 million Jews in the Holocaust, but it also persecuted millions of other people, including gay men. Nazi officials alleged that these men harbored what they termed a "degeneracy" that threatened Germany's "disciplined masculinity." Calling gay men "antisocial parasites" and "enemies of the state," the Nazi government arrested more than 100,000 men for violating a law against homosexuality, although it did not arrest lesbians because it valued their child-bearing capacity. At least 5,000 gay men were imprisoned, and many more were put in mental institutions. Several hundred other gay men were castrated, and up to 15,000 were placed in concentration camps, where most died from disease, starvation, or murder. As the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (2011) summarizes these events, "Nazi Germany did not seek to kill all homosexuals. Nevertheless, the Nazi state, through active persecution, attempted to terrorize German homosexuals into sexual and social conformity, leaving thousands dead and shattering the lives of many more."

This terrible history reminds us that sexual orientation has often resulted in inequality of many kinds, and, in the extreme case of the Nazis, inhumane treatment that included castration, imprisonment, and death. The news story that began this chapter makes clear that sexual orientation still results in violence, even if this violence falls short of what the Nazis did. Although the gay rights movement has achieved much success, sexual orientation continues to result in other types of inequality as well. This chapter examines the many forms of inequality linked to sexual orientation today. It begins with

a conceptual discussion of sexual orientation before turning to its history, explanation, types of inequality, and other matters.

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8.1 Understanding Sexual Orientation

Learning Objectives

1. Define sexual orientation and gender identity.
2. Describe what percentage of the US population is estimated to be LGBT.
3. Summarize the history of sexual orientation.
4. Evaluate the possible reasons for sexual orientation.

Sexual orientation refers to a person's preference for sexual relationships with individuals of the other sex (*heterosexuality*), one's own sex (*homosexuality*), or both sexes (*bisexuality*). The term also increasingly refers to *transgender* (also *transgendered*) individuals, those whose behavior, appearance, and/or **gender identity** (the personal conception of oneself as female, male, both, or neither) departs from conventional norms. Transgendered individuals include *transvestites* (those who dress in the clothing of the opposite sex) and *transsexuals* (those whose gender identity differs from their physiological sex and who sometimes undergo a sex change). A *transgender woman* is a person who was born biologically as a male and becomes a woman, while a *transgender man* is a person who was born biologically as a woman and becomes a man. As you almost certainly know, *gay* is the common term now used for any homosexual individual; *gay men* or *gays* is the common

term used for homosexual men, while *lesbian* is the common term used for homosexual women. All the types of social orientation just outlined are often collectively referred to by the shorthand *LGBT* (lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender). As you almost certainly also know, the term *straight* is used today as a synonym for heterosexual.

Counting Sexual Orientation

We will probably never know precisely how many people are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered. One problem is conceptual. For example, what does it mean to be gay or lesbian? Does one need to actually have sexual relations with a same-sex partner to be considered gay? What if someone is attracted to same-sex partners but does not actually engage in sex with such persons? What if someone identifies as heterosexual but engages in homosexual sex for money (as in certain forms of prostitution) or for power and influence (as in much prison sex)? These conceptual problems make it difficult to determine the extent of homosexuality (Gates, 2011).

It is difficult for several reasons to know exactly how many people are LGBT.

thaths – [A gay couple watching the parade](#) – CC BY-NC 2.0.

A second problem is empirical. Even if we can settle on a definition of homosexuality, how do we then determine how many people fit this definition? For better or worse, our best evidence of the number of gays and lesbians in the United States comes from surveys that ask random samples of Americans various questions about their sexuality. Although these are anonymous surveys, some individuals may be reluctant to disclose their sexual activity and thoughts to an interviewer. Still, scholars think that estimates from these surveys are fairly accurate but also that they probably underestimate by at least a small amount the number of gays and lesbians.

During the 1940s and 1950s, sex researcher Alfred C. Kinsey carried out the first notable attempt to estimate the number of gays and lesbians (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953). His project interviewed more than 11,000 white women and men about their sexual experiences, thoughts, and attractions, with each subject answering hundreds of questions. While most individuals had experiences and feelings that were exclusively heterosexual, a significant number had experiences and

feelings that were either exclusively homosexual or both heterosexual and homosexual in varying degrees. These findings led Kinsey to reject the popular idea back then that a person is necessarily either heterosexual or homosexual (or straight or gay, to use the common modern terms). As he wrote, "It is a characteristic of the human mind that tries to dichotomize in its classification of phenomena...Sexual behavior is either normal or abnormal, socially acceptable or unacceptable, heterosexual or homosexual; and many persons do not want to believe that there are gradations in these matters from one to the other extreme" (Kinsey et al., 1953, p. 469). Perhaps Kinsey's most significant and controversial finding was that gradations did, in fact, exist between being exclusively heterosexual on the one hand and exclusively homosexual on the other hand. To reflect these gradations, he developed the well-known *Kinsey Scale*, which ranks individuals on a continuum ranging from 0 (exclusively heterosexual) to 6 (exclusively homosexual).

In terms of specific numbers, Kinsey found that (a) 37 percent of males and 13 percent of females had had at least one same-sex experience; (b) 10 percent of males had mostly homosexual experiences between the ages of 16 and 55, while up to 6 percent of females had mostly homosexual experiences between the ages of 20 and 35; (c) 4 percent of males were exclusively homosexual after adolescence began, compared to 1–3 percent of females; and (d) 46 percent of males either had engaged in both heterosexual and homosexual experiences or had been attracted to persons of both sexes, compared to 14 percent of females.

An estimated 3.8 percent of the US adult population identifies as LGBT. This figure amounts to about 9 million people.

Nathan Rupert – [Crazy fun loving lesbian couple](#) – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

More recent research updates Kinsey's early findings and, more important, uses nationally representative samples of Americans (which Kinsey did not use). In general, this research suggests that Kinsey overstated the numbers of Americans who have had same-sex experiences and/or attractions. A widely cited survey carried out in the early 1990s by researchers at the University of Chicago found that 2.8 percent of men and 1.4 percent of women self-identified as gay/lesbian or bisexual, with greater percentages reporting having had sexual relations with same-sex partners or being attracted to same-sex persons (see [Table 5.1 "Prevalence of Homosexuality in the United States"](#)). In the 2010 General Social Survey (GSS), 1.8 percent of men and 3.3 percent of women self-identified as gay/lesbian or bisexual. In the 2006–2008 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) conducted by the federal

government (Chandra, Mosher, Copen, & Sionean, 2011), 2.8 percent of men self-identified as gay or bisexual, compared to 4.6 percent of women (ages 18–44 for both sexes).

Table 5.1 Prevalence of Homosexuality in the United States

Activity, attraction, or identity	Men (%)	Women (%)
Find same-sex sexual relations appealing	4.5	5.6
Attracted to people of same sex	6.2	4.4
Identify as gay or bisexual	2.8	1.4
At least one sex partner of same sex during past year among those sexually active	2.7	1.3
At least one sex partner of same sex since turning 18	4.9	4.1

Source: Data from Laumann, E. O., Gagnon, J. H., Michael, R. T., & Michaels, S. (1994). *The social organization of sexuality*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

These are all a lot of numbers, but demographer Gary J. Gates (2011) drew on the most recent national survey evidence to come up with the following estimates for adults 18 and older:

- 3.5 percent of Americans identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual,

and 0.3 percent are transgender; these figures add up to 3.8 percent of Americans, or 9 million people, who are LGBT.

- 3.4 percent of women and 3.6 percent of men identify as LGB.
- 66.7 percent of LGB women identify as bisexual, and 33.3 percent identify as lesbian; 33.3 percent of LGB men identify as bisexual, and 66.7 percent identify as gay. LGB women are thus twice as likely as LGB men to identify as bisexual.
- 8.2 percent of Americans, or 19 million people, have engaged in same-sex sexual behavior, with women twice as likely as men to have done so.
- 11 percent of Americans, or 25.6 million people, report having some same-sex sexual attraction, with women twice as likely as men to report such attraction.

The overall picture from these estimates is clear: Self-identified LGBT people comprise only a small percentage of the US population, but they amount to about 9 million adults and undoubtedly a significant number of adolescents. In addition, the total number of people who, regardless of their sexual orientation, have had a same-sex experience is probably at least 19 million, and the number who have had same-sex attraction is probably at least 25 million.

Sexual Orientation in Historical Perspective

Based on what is known about homosexuality in past societies, it should be no surprise that so many people in the United States

identify as gay/lesbian or have had same-sex experiences. This historical record is clear: Homosexuality has existed since ancient times and in some societies has been rather common or at least fully accepted as a normal form of sexual expression.

In the great city of Athens in ancient Greece, male homosexuality (to be more precise, sexual relations between a man and a teenaged boy and, less often, between a man and a man) was not only approved but even encouraged. According to classical scholar K. J. Dover (1989, p. 12), Athenian society "certainly regarded strong homosexual desire and emotion as normal," in part because it also generally "entertained a low opinion of the intellectual capacity and staying-power of women." Louis Crompton (2003, p. 2), who wrote perhaps the definitive history of homosexuality, agrees that male homosexuality in ancient Greece was common and notes that "in Greek history and literature...the abundance of accounts of homosexual love overwhelms the investigator." He adds,

> Greek lyric poets sing of male love from almost the earliest fragments down to the end of classical times...Vase-painters portray scores of homoerotic scenes, hundreds of inscriptions celebrate the love of boys, and such affairs enter into the lives of a long catalogue of famous Greek statesmen, warriors, artists, and authors. Though it has often been assumed that the love of males was a fashion confined to a small intellectual elite during the age of Plato, in fact it was pervasive throughout all levels of Greek society and held an honored place in Greek culture for more than a thousand years, that is, from before 600 B.C.E. to about 400 C.E.

Male homosexuality in ancient Rome was also common and accepted as normal sexuality, but it took a different form from than in ancient Greece. Ancient Romans disapproved of sexual relations between a man and a freeborn male youth, but they approved of relations between a slave master and his youthful male slave. Sexual activity of this type was common. As Crompton (2003, p. 80) wryly

notes, "Opportunities were ample for Roman masters" because slaves comprised about 40 percent of the population of ancient Rome. However, these "opportunities" are best regarded as violent domination by slave masters over their slaves.

By the time Rome fell in 476 CE, Europe had become a Christian continent. Influenced by several passages in the Bible that condemn homosexuality, Europeans considered homosexuality a sin, and their governments outlawed same-sex relations. If discovered, male homosexuals (or any men suspected of homosexuality) were vulnerable to execution for the next fourteen centuries, and many did lose their lives. During the Middle Ages, gay men and lesbians were stoned, burned at the stake, hanged, or beheaded, and otherwise abused and mistreated. Crompton (2003, p. 539) calls these atrocities a "routine of terror" and a "kaleidoscope of horrors." Hitler's persecution of gay men several centuries after the Middle Ages ended had ample precedent in European history.

In contrast to the European treatment of gay men and lesbians, China and Japan from ancient times onward viewed homosexuality much more positively in what Crompton (2003, p. 215) calls an "unselfconscious acceptance of same-sex relations." He adds that male love in Japan during the 1500s was "a national tradition—one the Japanese thought natural and meritorious" (Crompton, 2003, p. 412) and very much part of the *samurai* (military nobility) culture of preindustrial Japan. In China, both male and female homosexuality were seen as normal and even healthy sexual outlets. Because Confucianism, the major Chinese religion when the Common Era began, considered women inferior, it considered male friendships very important and thus may have unwittingly promoted same-sex relations among men. Various artistic and written records indicate that male homosexuality was fairly common in China over the centuries, although the exact numbers can never be known. When China began trading and otherwise communicating with Europe during the Ming dynasty, its tolerance for homosexuality shocked and disgusted Catholic missionaries and other Europeans. Some

European clergy and scientists even blamed earthquakes and other natural disasters in China on this tolerance.

In addition to this body of work by historians, anthropologists have also studied same-sex relations in small, traditional societies. In many of these societies, homosexuality is both common and accepted as normal sexual behavior. In one overview of seventy-six societies, the authors found that almost two-thirds regarded homosexuality as "normal and socially acceptable for certain members of the community" (Ford & Beach, 1951, p. 130). Among the Azande of East Africa, for example, young warriors live with each other and are not allowed to marry. During this time, they often have sex with younger boys. Among the Sambia of New Guinea, young males live separately from females and have same-sex relations for at least a decade. It is felt that the boys would be less masculine if they continued to live with their mothers and that the semen of older males helps young boys become strong and fierce (Edgerton, 1976).

This brief historical and anthropological overview provides ready evidence of what was said at its outset: Homosexuality has existed since ancient times and in some societies has been rather common or at least fully accepted as a normal form of sexual expression. Although Western society, influenced by the Judeo-Christian tradition, has largely condemned homosexuality since Western civilization began some 2,000 years ago, the great civilizations of ancient Greece and ancient China and Japan until the industrial age approved of homosexuality. In these civilizations, male homosexuality was fairly common, and female homosexuality was far from unknown. Same-sex relations are also fairly common in many of the societies that anthropologists have studied. Although Western societies have long considered homosexuality sinful and unnatural and more generally have viewed it very negatively, the historical and anthropological record demonstrates that same-sex relationships are far from rare. They thus must objectively be regarded as normal expressions of sexuality.

In fact, some of the most famous individuals in Western political,

literary, and artistic history certainly or probably engaged in same-sex relations, either sometimes or exclusively: Alexander the Great, Hans Christian Andersen, Marie Antoinette, Aristotle, Sir Francis Bacon, James Baldwin, Leonard Bernstein, Lord Byron, Julius Caesar, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Frederick the Great, Leonardo de Vinci, Herman Melville, Michelangelo, Plato, Cole Porter, Richard the Lionhearted, Eleanor Roosevelt, Socrates, Gertrude Stein, Pyotr Tchaikovsky, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Tennessee Williams, Oscar Wilde, and Virginia Woolf, to name just a few. Regardless or perhaps in some cases because of their sexuality, they all made great contributions to the societies in which they lived.

Explaining Sexual Orientation

We have seen that it is difficult to determine the number of people who are gay/lesbian or bisexual. It is even more difficult to determine why some people have these sexual orientations while most do not, and scholars disagree on the "causes" of sexual orientation (Engle, McFalls, Gallagher, & Curtis, 2006; Sheldon, Pfeffer, Jayaratne, Feldbaum, & Petty, 2007). Determining the origins of sexual orientation is not just an academic exercise. When people believe that the roots of homosexuality are biological or that gays otherwise do not choose to be gay, they are more likely to have positive or at least tolerant views of same-sex behavior. When they believe that homosexuality is instead merely a personal choice, they

are more likely to disapprove of it (Sheldon et al., 2007). For this reason if for no other, it is important to know why some people are gay or bisexual while most are not.

Studies of the origins of sexual orientation focus mostly on biological factors and on social and cultural factors, and a healthy scholarly debate exists on the relative importance of these two sets of factors.

Biological Factors

Research points to certain genetic and other biological roots of sexual orientation but is by no means conclusive. One line of research concerns genetics. Although no "gay gene" has been discovered, studies of identical twins find they are more likely to have the same sexual orientation (gay or straight) than would be expected from chance alone (Kendler, Thornton, Gilman, & Kessler, 2000; Santtila et al., 2008). Because identical twins have the same DNA, this similarity suggests, but does not prove, a genetic basis for sexual orientation. Keep in mind, however, that any physical or behavioral trait that is *totally* due to genetics should show up in both twins or in neither twin. Because many identical twins do *not* have the same sexual orientation, this dissimilarity suggests that genetics are far from the only cause of sexual orientation, to the extent they cause it at all. Several methodological problems also cast doubt on findings from many of these twin studies. A recent review concluded that the case for a genetic cause of sexual orientation is far from proven: "Findings from genetic studies of homosexuality in humans have been confusing—contradictory at

worst and tantalizing at best—with no clear, strong, compelling answer."

Despite scholarly speculation, sexual orientation does not appear to be affected by the level of prenatal hormones.

il-young ko – pregnant – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Another line of research concerns brain anatomy, as some studies find differences in the size and structure of the hypothalamus, which controls many bodily functions, in the brains of gays versus the brains of straights (Allen & Gorski, 1992). However, other studies find no such differences (Lasco, Jordan, Edgar, Petito, & Byne, 2002). Complicating matters further, because sexual behavior can affect the hypothalamus (Breedlove, 1997), it is difficult to determine whether any differences that might be found reflect the influence of the hypothalamus on sexual orientation, or instead the influence of sexual orientation on the hypothalamus (Sheldon et al., 2007).

A third line of biological research concerns hormonal balance in the womb, with scientists speculating that the level of prenatal androgen affects which sexual orientation develops. Because prenatal androgen levels cannot be measured, studies typically measure it only indirectly in the bodies of gays and straights by comparing the lengths of certain fingers and bones that are thought to be related to prenatal androgen. Some of these studies suggest

that gay men had lower levels of prenatal androgen than straight men and that lesbians had higher levels of prenatal androgen than straight women, but other studies find no evidence of this connection (Martin & Nguyen, 2004; Mustanski, Chivers, & Bailey, 2002). A recent review concluded that the results of the hormone studies are "often inconsistent" and that "the notion that non-heterosexual preferences may reflect [deviations from normal prenatal hormonal levels] is not supported by the available data" (Rahman, 2005, p. 1057).

Social and Cultural Factors

Sociologists usually emphasize the importance of socialization over biology for the learning of many forms of human behavior. In this view, humans are born with "blank slates" and thereafter shaped by their society and culture, and children are shaped by their parents, teachers, peers, and other aspects of their immediate social environment while they are growing up.

Given this standard sociological position, one might think that sociologists generally believe that people are gay or straight not because of their biology but because they learn to be gay or straight from their society, culture, and immediate social environment. This, in fact, was a common belief of sociologists about a generation ago (Engle et al., 2006). In a 1988 review article, two sociologists concluded that "evidence that homosexuality is a social construction [learned from society and culture] is far more powerful than the evidence for a widespread organic [biological] predisposition toward homosexual desire" (Risman & Schwartz,

1988, p. 143). The most popular introductory sociology text of the era similarly declared, "Many people, including some homosexuals, believe that gays and lesbians are simply 'born that way.' But since we know that even heterosexuals are not 'born that way,' this explanation seems unlikely...Homosexuality, like any other sexual behavior ranging from oral sex to sadomasochism to the pursuit of brunettes, is learned" (Robertson, 1987, p. 243).

However, sociologists' views of the origins of sexual orientation have apparently changed since these passages were written. In a recent national survey of a random sample of sociologists, 22 percent said male homosexuality results from biological factors, 38 percent said it results from both biological and environmental (learning) factors, and 39 percent said it results from environmental factors (Engle et al., 2006). Thus 60 percent (= 22 + 38) thought that biology totally or partly explains male homosexuality, almost certainly a much higher figure than would have been found a generation ago had a similar survey been done.

In this regard, it is important to note that 77 percent (= 38 + 39) of the sociologists still feel that environmental factors, or socialization, matter as well. Scholars who hold this view believe that sexual orientation is partly or totally learned from one's society, culture, and immediate social environment. In this way of thinking, we learn "messages" from all these influences about whether it is OK or not OK to be sexually attracted to someone from our own sex and/ or to someone from the opposite sex. If we grow up with positive messages about same-sex attraction, we are more likely to acquire this attraction. If we grow up with negative messages about same-sex attraction, we are less likely to acquire it and more likely to have heterosexual desire.

It is difficult to do the necessary type of research to test whether socialization matters in this way, but the historical and cross-cultural evidence discussed earlier provides at least some support for this process. Homosexuality was generally accepted in ancient Greece, ancient China, and ancient Japan, and it also seemed rather common in those societies. The same connection holds true in

many of the societies that anthropologists have studied. In contrast, homosexuality was condemned in Europe from the very early part of the first millennium CE, and it seems to have been rather rare (although it is very possible that many gays hid their sexual orientation for fear of persecution and death).

So where does this leave us? What are the origins of sexual orientation? The most honest answer is that we do not yet know its origins. As we have seen, many scholars attribute sexual orientation to still unknown biological factor(s) over which individuals have no control, just as individuals do not decide whether they are left-handed or right-handed. Supporting this view, many gays say they realized they were gay during adolescence, just as straights would say they realized they were straight during their own adolescence; moreover, evidence (from toy, play, and clothing preferences) of future sexual orientation even appears during childhood (Rieger, Linsenmeier, Bailey, & Gygax, 2008). Other scholars say that sexual orientation is at least partly influenced by cultural norms, so that individuals are more likely to identify as gay or straight and be attracted to their same sex or opposite sex depending on the cultural views of sexual orientation into which they are socialized as they grow up. At best, perhaps all we can say is that sexual orientation stems from a complex mix of biological and cultural factors that remain to be determined.

The official stance of the American Psychological Association (APA) is in line with this view. According to the APA, "There is no consensus among scientists about the exact reasons that an individual develops a heterosexual, bisexual, gay, or lesbian orientation. Although much research has examined the possible genetic, hormonal, developmental, social, and cultural influences on sexual orientation, no findings have emerged that permit scientists to conclude that sexual orientation is determined by any particular factor or factors. Many think that nature and nurture both play complex roles; most people experience little or no sense of choice about their sexual orientation" (American Psychological Association, 2008, p. 2).

Although the exact origins of sexual orientation remain unknown, the APA's last statement is perhaps the most important conclusion from research on this issue: Most people experience little or no sense of choice about their sexual orientation. Because, as mentioned earlier, people are more likely to approve of or tolerate homosexuality when they believe it is not a choice, efforts to educate the public about this research conclusion should help the public become more accepting of LGBT behavior and individuals.

Key Takeaways

- An estimated 3.8 percent, or 9 million, Americans identify as LGBT.
- Homosexuality seems to have been fairly common and very much accepted in some ancient societies as well as in many societies studied by anthropologists.
- Scholars continue to debate the extent to which sexual orientation stems more from biological factors or from social and cultural factors and the extent to which sexual orientation is a choice or not a choice.

For Your Review

1. Do you think sexual orientation is a choice, or not? Explain your answer.
2. Write an essay that describes how your middle school and high school friends talked about sexual

orientation generally and homosexuality specifically.

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8.2 Public Attitudes about Sexual Orientation

> **Learning Objectives**
>
> 1. Understand the extent and correlates of heterosexism.
> 2. Understand the nature of public opinion on other issues related to sexual orientation.
> 3. Describe how views about LGBT issues have changed since a few decades ago.

As noted earlier, views about gays and lesbians have certainly been very negative over the centuries in the areas of the world, such as Europe and the Americas, that mostly follow the Judeo-Christian tradition. There is no question that the Bible condemns homosexuality, with perhaps the most quoted Biblical passages in this regard found in Leviticus:

- "Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable" (Leviticus 18:22).
- "If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They must be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads" (Leviticus 20:13).

The Bible contains several passages that appear to condemn homosexuality.

The important question, though, is to what extent these passages should be interpreted literally. Certainly very few people today believe that male homosexuals should be executed, despite what Leviticus 20:13 declares. Still, many people who condemn homosexuality cite passages like Leviticus 18:22 and Leviticus 20:13 as reasons for their negative views.

This is not a theology text, but it is appropriate to mention briefly two points that many religious scholars make about what the Bible says about homosexuality (Helminiak, 2000; Via & Gagnon, 2003).

First, English translations of the Bible's antigay passages may distort their original meanings, and various contextual studies of the Bible suggest that these passages did not, in fact, make blanket condemnations about homosexuality.

Second, and perhaps more important, most people "pick and choose" what they decide to believe from the Bible and what they decide not to believe. Although the Bible is a great source of inspiration for many people, most individuals are inconsistent when it comes to choosing which Biblical beliefs to believe and about which beliefs not to believe. For example, if someone chooses to disapprove of homosexuality because the Bible condemns it, why does this person not also choose to believe that gay men should be executed, which is precisely what Leviticus 20:13 dictates? Further, the Bible calls for many practices and specifies many penalties that even very devout people do not follow or believe. For example, most people except for devout Jews do not keep kosher, even though the Bible says that everyone should do this, and most people certainly do not believe people who commit adultery, engage in premarital sex, or work on the Sabbath should be executed, even though the Bible says that such people should be executed. Citing the inconsistency with which most people follow Biblical commands, many religious scholars say it is inappropriate to base public views about homosexuality on what the Bible says about it.

We now turn our attention to social science evidence on views about LGBT behavior and individuals. We first look at negative attitudes and then discuss a few other views.

The Extent of Heterosexism

in the United States

We saw in earlier chapters that *racism* refers to negative views about, and practices toward, people of color, and that *sexism* refers to negative views about, and practices toward, women. **Heterosexism** is the analogous term for negative views about, and discriminatory practices toward, LGBT individuals and their sexual behavior.

There are many types of negative views about LGBT and thus many ways to measure heterosexism. The General Social Survey (GSS), given regularly to a national sample of US residents, asks whether respondents think that "sexual relations between two adults of the same sex" are always wrong, almost always wrong, sometimes wrong, or not wrong at all. In 2010, almost 46 percent of respondents said same-sex relations are "always wrong," and 43 percent responded they are "not wrong at all" (see Figure 5.1 "Opinion about "Sexual Relations between Two Adults of the Same Sex," 2010").

# Figure 5.1 Opinion about "Sexual Relations between Two Adults of the Same Sex," 2010
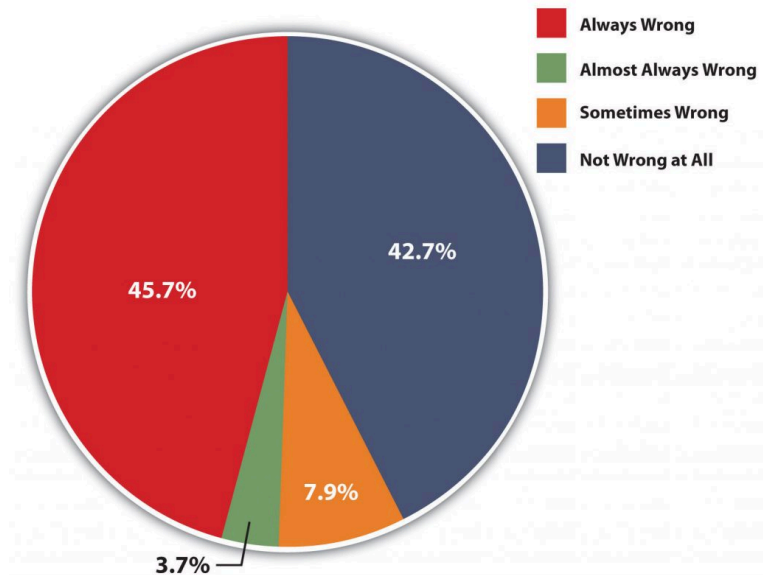
As another way of measuring heterosexism, the Gallup poll asks whether "gay or lesbian relations" are "morally acceptable or morally wrong" (Gallup, 2011). In 2011, 56 percent of Gallup respondents answered "morally acceptable," while 39 percent replied "morally wrong."

   Although Figure 5.1 "Opinion about "Sexual Relations between Two Adults of the Same Sex," 2010" shows that 57.3 percent of Americans (= 45.7 + 3.7 + 7.9) think that same-sex relations are at least sometimes wrong, public views regarding LGBT have notably become more positive over the past few decades. We can see evidence of this trend in Figure 5.2 "Changes in Opinion about "Sexual Relations between Two Adults of the Same Sex," 1973–2010", which shows that the percentage of GSS respondents who say same-sex relations are "always wrong" has dropped considerably since the GSS first asked this question in 1973, while the percentage

who respond "not wrong at all" has risen considerably, with both these changes occurring since the early 1990s.

Figure 5.2 Changes in Opinion about "Sexual Relations between Two Adults of the Same Sex," 1973–2010
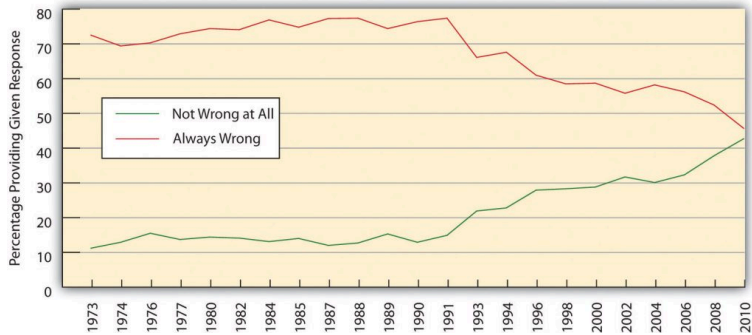
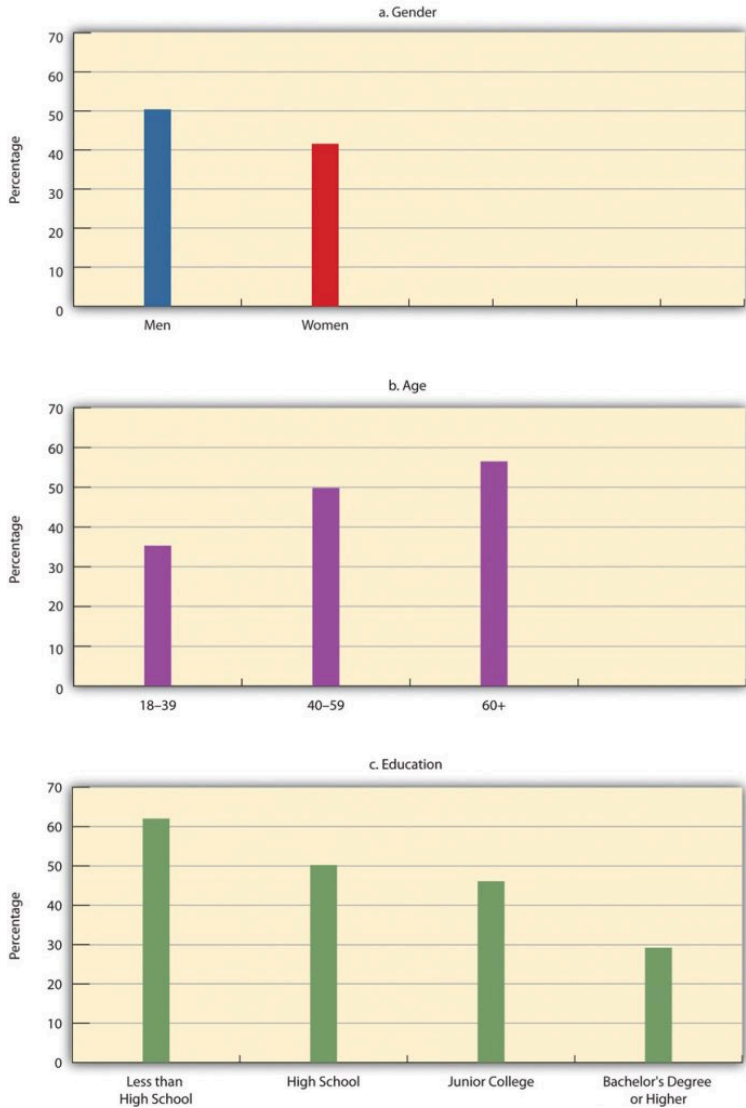Source: Data from General Social Surveys. (1973–2010). Retrieved from http://sda.berkeley.edu/cgi-bin/hsda?harcsda+gss10.

Trends in Gallup data confirm that public views regarding homosexuality have become more positive in recent times. Recall that 56 percent of Gallup respondents in 2011 called same-sex relations "morally acceptable," while 39 percent replied "morally wrong." Ten years earlier, these percentages were 40 percent and 53 percent, respectively, representing a marked shift in public opinion in just a decade.
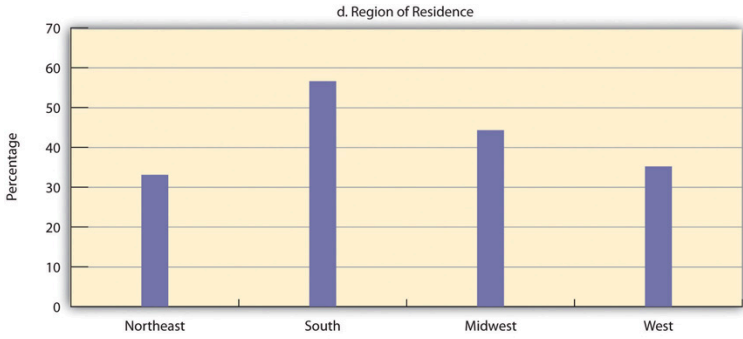
Correlates of Heterosexism

Scholars have investigated the sociodemographic factors that predict heterosexist attitudes. Reflecting the sociological axiom that our social backgrounds influence our attitudes and behavior, several aspects of our social backgrounds influence views about gays and lesbians. Among the most influential of these factors are gender, age, education, region of residence, and religion. We can illustrate each of these influences with the GSS question on whether same-sex relations are wrong, using the response "always wrong" as a measure of heterosexism.

- **Gender.** Men are somewhat more heterosexist than women (see part **a** of Figure 5.3 "Correlates of Heterosexism (Percentage Saying That Same-Sex Relations Are "Always Wrong")").
- **Age.** Older people are considerably more heterosexist than younger people (see part **b** of Figure 5.3 "Correlates of Heterosexism (Percentage Saying That Same-Sex Relations Are "Always Wrong")").
- **Education.** Less educated people are considerably more heterosexist than more educated people (see part **c** of Figure 5.3 "Correlates of Heterosexism (Percentage Saying That Same-Sex Relations Are "Always Wrong")").
- **Region of residence.** Southerners are more heterosexist than non-Southerners (see part **d** ofFigure 5.3 "Correlates of Heterosexism (Percentage Saying That Same-Sex Relations Are "Always Wrong")").
- **Religion.** Religious people are considerably more heterosexist than less religious people (see part **e** of Figure 5.3 "Correlates of Heterosexism (Percentage Saying That Same-Sex Relations Are "Always Wrong")").

Figure 5.3 Correlates of Heterosexism (Percentage Saying That Same-Sex Relations Are "Always Wrong")

d. Region of Residence

e. Self-proclaimed Religiosity

Source: Data from General Social Survey. (2010). Retrieved from http://sda.berkeley.edu/cgi-bin/ hsda?harcsda+gss10.

Because young people are especially likely to be accepting of homosexuality, attitudes about LGBT issues should continue to improve as the older population passes away.

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The age difference in heterosexism is perhaps particularly interesting. Many studies find that young people—those younger than 30—are especially accepting of homosexuality and of same-sex marriage. As older people, who have more negative views, pass away, it is likely that public opinion as a whole will become more accepting of homosexuality and issues related to it. Scholars think this trend will further the legalization of same-sex marriage and the establishment of other laws and policies that will reduce the discrimination and inequality that the LGBT community experiences (Gelman, Lax, & Phillips, 2010).

Opinion on the Origins of Sexual Orientation

Earlier we discussed scholarly research on the origins of sexual orientation. In this regard, it is interesting to note that the US public is rather split over the issue of whether sexual orientation is in-born or instead the result of environmental factors, and also over the closely related issue of whether it is something people are able to choose. A 2011 Gallup poll asked, "In your view, is being gay or lesbian something a person is born with, or due to factors such as upbringing and environment?" (Jones, 2011). Forty percent of respondents replied that sexual orientation is in-born, while 42 percent said it stems from upbringing and/or environment. The 40 percent in-born figure represented a sharp increase from the 13 percent figure that Gallup obtained when it first asked this question in 1977. A 2010 CBS News poll, asked, "Do you think being homosexual is something people choose to be, or do you think it is something they cannot change?" (CBS News, 2010). About 36 percent of respondents replied that homosexuality is a choice, while 51 percent said it is something that cannot be changed, with the remainder saying they did not know or providing no answer. The 51 percent "cannot change" figure represented an increase from the 43 percent figure that CBS News obtained when it first asked this question in 1993.

Other Views

The next section discusses several issues that demonstrate inequality based on sexual orientation. Because these issues are so controversial, public opinion polls have included many questions about them. We examine public views on some of these issues in this section.

A first issue is same-sex marriage. The 2010 GSS asked whether respondents agree that "homosexual couples should have the right to marry one another": 53.3 percent of respondents who expressed an opinion agreed with this statement, and 46.7 percent disagreed, indicating a slight majority in favor of legalizing same-sex marriage (SDA, 2010). In 2011, an ABC News/Washington Post poll asked about same-sex marriage in a slightly different way: "Do you think it should be legal or illegal for gay and lesbian couples to get married?" A majority, 51 percent, of respondents replied "legal," and 45 percent replied "illegal" (Langer, 2011). Although only bare majorities now favor legalizing same-sex marriage, public views on this issue have become much more positive in recent years. We can see dramatic evidence of this trend in [Figure 5.4 "Changes in Opinion about Same-Sex Marriage, 1988–2010 (Percentage Agreeing That Same-Sex Couples Should Have the Right to Marry; Those Expressing No Opinion Excluded from Analysis)"](), which shows that the percentage agreeing with the GSS question on the right of same-sex couples to marry has risen considerably during the past quarter-century.

Figure 5.4 Changes in Opinion about

Same-Sex Marriage, 1988–2010 (Percentage Agreeing That Same-Sex Couples Should Have the Right to Marry; Those Expressing No Opinion Excluded from Analysis)
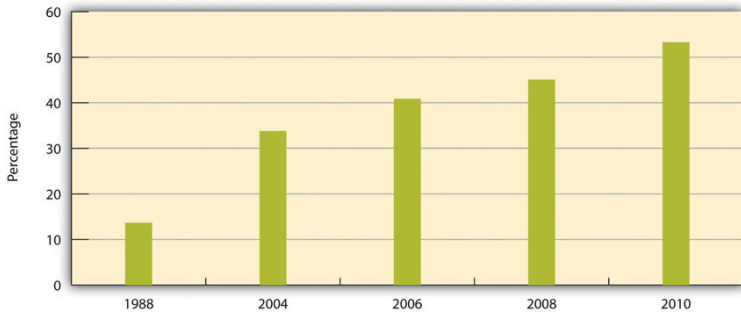
Source: Data from General Social Surveys. (1988–2010). Retrieved from http://sda.berkeley.edu/cgi-bin/hsda?harcsda+gss10.

In a related topic, public opinion about same-sex couples as parents has also become more favorable in recent years. In 2007, 50 percent of the public said that the increasing number of same-sex couples raising children was "a bad thing" for society. By 2011, this figure had declined to 35 percent, a remarkable decrease in just four years (Pew Research Center, 2011).

A second LGBT issue that has aroused public debate involves the right of gays and lesbians to serve in the military, which we discuss further later in this chapter. A 2010 ABC News/Washington Post poll asked whether "gays and lesbians who do not publicly disclose their sexual orientation should be allowed to serve in the military" (Mokrzycki, 2010). About 83 percent of respondents replied they "should be allowed," up considerably from the 63 percent figure that this poll obtained when it first asked this question in 1993 (Saad, 2008).

A third issue involves the right of gays and lesbians to be free from job discrimination based on their sexual orientation, as federal law does *not* prohibit such discrimination. A 2008 Gallup poll asked whether "homosexuals should or should not have equal rights in terms of job opportunities." About 89 percent of respondents replied that there "should be" such rights, and only 8 percent said there "should not be" such rights. The 89 percent figure represented a large increase from the 56 percent figure that Gallup obtained in 1977 when Gallup first asked this question.

Two Brief Conclusions on Public Attitudes

We have had limited space to discuss public views on LGBT topics, but two brief conclusions are apparent from the discussion. First, although the public remains sharply divided on various LGBT issues and much of the public remains heterosexist, views about LGBT behavior and certain rights of the LGBT community have become markedly more positive in recent decades. This trend matches what we saw in earlier chapters regarding views concerning people of color and women. The United States has without question become less racist, less sexist, and less heterosexist since the 1970s.

Second, certain aspects of people's sociodemographic backgrounds influence the extent to which they do, or do not, hold heterosexist attitudes. This conclusion is not surprising, as sociology has long since demonstrated that social backgrounds

influence many types of attitudes and behaviors, but the influence we saw earlier of sociodemographic factors on heterosexism was striking nonetheless. These factors would no doubt also be relevant for understanding differences in views on other LGBT issues. As you think about your own views, perhaps you can recognize why you might hold these views based on your gender, age, education, and other aspects of your social background.

Key Takeaways

- Views about LGBT behavior have improved markedly since a generation ago. More than half the US public now supports same-sex marriage.
- Males, older people, the less educated, Southerners, and the more religious exhibit higher levels of heterosexism than their counterparts.

For Your Review

1. Reread this section and indicate how you would have responded to every survey question discussed in the section. Drawing on the discussion of correlates of heterosexism, explain how knowing about these correlates helps you understand why you hold your own views.
2. Why do you think public opinion about LGBT behavior and issues has become more positive during

the past few decades?

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8.3 Inequality Based on Sexual Orientation

> ## *Learning Objectives*
>
> 1. Understand the behavioral, psychological, and health effects of bullying and other mistreatment of the LGBT community.
> 2. Evaluate the arguments for and against same-sex marriage.
> 3. Provide three examples of heterosexual privilege.

Until just a decade ago, individuals who engaged in consensual same-sex relations could be arrested in many states for violating so-called sodomy laws. The US Supreme Court, which had upheld such laws in 1986, finally outlawed them in 2003 in *Lawrence v. Texas*, 539 US 558, by a 6–3 vote. The majority opinion of the court declared that individuals have a constitutional right under the Fourteenth Amendment to engage in consensual, private sexual activity.

Until the Supreme Court's Lawrence v. Texas ruling just a decade ago, individuals who engaged in consensual same-sex relations could be arrested in many states.

philippe leroyer – [Kiss In (08)](#) – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Despite this landmark ruling, the LGBT community continues to experience many types of problems. In this regard, sexual orientation is a significant source of social inequality, just as race/ethnicity, gender, and social class are sources of social inequality. We examine manifestations of inequality based on sexual orientation in this section.

Bullying and Violence

The news story that began this chapter concerned the reported beatings of two gay men. Bullying and violence against adolescents and adults thought or known to be gay or lesbian constitute perhaps

the most serious manifestation of inequality based on sexual orientation. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (2011), 1,277 hate crimes (violence and/or property destruction) against gays and lesbians occurred in 2010, although this number is very likely an underestimate because many hate crime victims do not report their victimization to the police. An estimated 25 percent of gay men have been physically or sexually assaulted because of their sexual orientation (Egan, 2010), and some have been murdered. Matthew Shepard was one of these victims. He was a student at the University of Wyoming in October 1998 when he was kidnapped by two young men who tortured him, tied him to a fence, and left him to die. When found almost a day later, he was in a coma, and he died a few days later. Shepard's murder prompted headlines around the country and is credited with winning public sympathy for the problems experienced by the LGBT community (Loffreda, 2001).

Gay teenagers and straight teenagers thought to be gay are very often the targets of taunting, bullying, physical assault, and other abuse in schools and elsewhere (Denizet-Lewis, 2009). Survey evidence indicates that 85 percent of LGBT students report being verbally harassed at school, and 40 percent report being verbally harassed; 72 percent report hearing antigay slurs frequently or often at school; 61 percent feel unsafe at school, with 30 percent missing at least one day of school in the past month for fear of their safety; and 17 percent are physically assaulted to the point they need medical attention (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010).

The bullying, violence, and other mistreatment experienced by gay teens have significant educational and mental health effects. The most serious consequence is suicide, as a series of suicides by gay teens in fall 2010 reminded the nation. During that period, three male teenagers in California, Indiana, and Texas killed themselves after reportedly being victims of antigay bullying, and a male college student also killed himself after his roommate broadcast a live video of the student making out with another male (Talbot, 2010).

In other effects, LGBT teens are much more likely than their straight peers to skip school; to do poorly in their studies; to drop

out of school; and to experience depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem (Mental Health America, 2011). These mental health problems tend to last at least into their twenties (Russell, Ryan, Toomey, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2011). According to a 2011 report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), LGBT teens are also much more likely to engage in risky and/or unhealthy behaviors such as using tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs, having unprotected sex, and even not using a seatbelt (Kann et al., 2011). Commenting on the report, a CDC official said, "This report should be a wake-up call. We are very concerned that these students face such dramatic disparities for so many different health risks" (Melnick, 2011).

Ironically, despite the bullying and other mistreatment that LBGT teens receive at school, they are much more likely to be disciplined for misconduct than straight students accused of similar misconduct. This disparity is greater for girls than for boys. The reasons for the disparity remain unknown but may stem from unconscious bias against gays and lesbians by school officials. As a scholar in educational psychology observed, "To me, it is saying there is some kind of internal bias that adults are not aware of that is impacting the punishment of this group" (St. George, 2010).

This candlelight vigil honored the memory of Matthew Shepard, a gay college student, who was tortured, tied, to a fence, and left to die in Wyoming in 1998. He was in a coma when he was found and died a few days later.

Children and Our Future

The Homeless Status of LGBT Teens

Many LGBT teens are taunted, bullied, and otherwise mistreated at school. As the text discusses, this mistreatment affects their school performance and psychological well-being, and some even drop out of school as a result. We often think of the home as a haven from the realities of life, but the lives of many gay teens are often no better at home. If they come out (disclose their sexual orientation) to their parents, one or both parents often reject them. Sometimes they kick their teen out of the home, and sometimes the teen leaves because the home environment has become intolerable. Regardless of the reason, a large number of LGBT teens become homeless. They may be living in the streets, but they may also be living with a friend, at a homeless shelter, or at some other venue. But the bottom line is that they are not living at home with a parent.

The actual number of homeless LGBT teens will probably never be known, but a study in Massachusetts of more than 6,300 high school students was the first to estimate the

prevalence of their homelessness using a representative sample. The study found that 25 percent of gay or lesbian teens and 15 percent of bisexual teens are homeless in the state, compared to only 3 percent of heterosexual teens. Fewer than 5 percent of the students in the study identified themselves as LGB, but they accounted for 19 percent of all the homeless students who were surveyed. Regardless of their sexual orientation, some homeless teens live with a parent or guardian, but the study found that homeless LGBT teens were more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to be living without a parent.

Being homeless adds to the problems that many LGBT teens already experience. Regardless of sexual orientation, homeless people of all ages are at greater risk for victimization by robbers and other offenders, hunger, substance abuse, and mental health problems.

The study noted that LGBT teen homelessness may be higher in other states because attitudes about LGBT status are more favorable in Massachusetts than in many other states. Because the study was administered to high school students, it may have undercounted LGBT teens, who are more likely to be absent from school.

These methodological limitations should not obscure the central message of the study as summarized by one of its authors: "The high risk of homelessness among sexual minority teens is a serious problem requiring immediate attention. These teens face enormous risks and all types of obstacles to succeeding in school and are in need of a great deal of assistance."

Sources: Connolly, 2011; Corliss, Goodenow, Nichols, & Austin, 2011

Employment Discrimination

Federal law prohibits employment discrimination based on race, nationality, sex, or religion. Notice that this list does *not* include sexual orientation. It is entirely legal under federal law for employers to refuse to hire LGBT individuals or those perceived as LGBT, to fire an employee who is openly LGBT or perceived as LGBT, or to refuse to promote such an employee. Twenty-one states do prohibit employment discrimination based on sexual orientation, but that leaves twenty-nine states that do not prohibit such discrimination. Employers in these states are entirely free to refuse to hire, fire, or refuse to promote LGBT people (openly LGBT or perceived as LGBT) as they see fit. In addition, only fifteen states prohibit employment discrimination based on gender identity (transgender), which leaves thirty-five states in which employers may practice such discrimination (Human Rights Campaign, 2011).

The Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA), which would prohibit job discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity, has been proposed in Congress but has not come close to passing. In response to the absence of legal protection for LGBT employees, many companies have instituted their own policies. As of March 2011, 87 percent of the *Fortune* 500 companies, the largest 500 corporations in the United States, had policies prohibiting sexual orientation discrimination, and 46 percent had policies prohibiting gender identity discrimination (Human Rights Campaign, 2011).

National survey evidence shows that many LGBT people have, in fact, experienced workplace discrimination (Sears & Mallory, 2011). In the 2008 GSS, 27.1 percent of LGB respondents said they had been verbally harassed at work during the past five years, and 7.1 percent said they had been either fired or not hired during the same period (SDA, 2008). In other surveys that are not based on nationally representative samples, the percentage of LGB respondents who

report workplace harassment or discrimination exceeds the GSS's figures. Not surprisingly, more than one-third of LGB employees say they conceal their sexual orientation in their workplace. Transgender people appear to experience more employment problems than LGB people, as 78 percent of transgender respondents in one study reported some form of workplace harassment or discrimination. Scholars have also conducted field experiments in which they send out resumes or job applicants to prospective employers. The resumes are identical except that some mention the applicant is LGB, while the others do not indicate sexual orientation. The job applicants similarly either say they are LGB or do not say this. The LGB resumes and applicants are less likely than their non-LGB counterparts to receive a positive response from prospective employers.

LGBT people who experience workplace harassment and discrimination suffer in other ways as well (Sears & Mallory, 2011). Compared to LGBT employees who do not experience these problems, they are more likely to have various mental health issues, to be less satisfied with their jobs, and to have more absences from work.

Applying Social Research

How Well Do the Children of Same-Sex Couples Fare?

Many opponents of same-sex marriage claim that children are better off if they are raised by both a mother and a father and that children of same-sex couples fare worse as a result. As the National Organization for Marriage (National Organization for Marriage, 2011) states, "Two men might each be a good father, but neither can be a mom. The ideal for children is the love of their own mom and dad. No same-sex couple can provide that."

Addressing this contention, social scientists have studied the children of same-sex couples and compared them to the children of heterosexual parents. Although it is difficult to have random, representative samples of same-sex couples' children, a growing number of studies find that these children fare at least as well psychologically and in other respects as heterosexual couples' children.

Perhaps the most notable published paper in this area appeared in the *American Sociological Review*, the preeminent sociology journal, in 2001. The authors, Judith Stacey and Timothy J. Biblarz, reviewed almost two dozen studies that had been done of same-sex couples' children. All these studies yielded the central conclusion that the psychological well-being of these children is no worse than that of heterosexual couples' children. As the authors summarized this conclusion and its policy implications, "Because every relevant study to date shows that parental sexual orientation per se has no measurable effect on the quality of parent-child relationships or on children's mental health or social adjustment, there is no evidentiary basis for considering parental sexual orientation in decisions about children's 'best interest.'"

Biblarz and Stacey returned to this issue in a 2010 article in the Journal of Marriage and the Family, the preeminent

journal in its field. This time they reviewed almost three dozen studies published since 1990 that compared the children of same-sex couples (most of them lesbian parents) to those of heterosexual couples. They again found that the psychological well-being and social adjustment of same-sex couples' children was at least as high as those of heterosexual couples' children, and they even found some evidence that children of lesbian couples fare better in some respects than those of heterosexual couples. Although the authors acknowledged that two parents are generally better for children than one parent, they concluded that the sexual orientation of the parents makes no difference overall. As they summarized the body of research on this issue: "Research consistently has demonstrated that despite prejudice and discrimination children raised by lesbians develop as well as their peers. Across the standard panoply of measures, studies find far more similarities than differences among children with lesbian and heterosexual parents, and the rare differences mainly favor the former."

This body of research, then, contributes in important ways to the national debate on same-sex marriage. If children of same-sex couples indeed fare well, as the available evidence indicates, concern about these children's welfare should play no part in this debate.

Same-Sex Marriage

Same-sex marriage has been one of the most controversial social issues in recent years. Nearly 650,000 same-sex couples live together in the United States (Gates, 2012). Many of them would like to marry, but most are not permitted by law to marry. In May 2012, President Obama endorsed same-sex marriage.

The issue of same-sex marriage has aroused much controversy in recent years. As of June 2012, same-sex couples could marry in only seven states and the District of Columbia.

Elvert Barnes – [70a Marriage Equality US Capitol](#) – CC BY-SA 2.0.

We saw earlier that a narrow margin of Americans now favors the right of same-sex couples to marry, and that public opinion in favor of same-sex marriage has increased greatly in recent times. As of June 2012, same-sex marriage was legal in seven states (Connecticut, Iowa, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Vermont, and Washington) and the District of Columbia. Nine other states permitted same-sex couples to form civil unions or domestic partnerships, which provide some or many of the various legal benefits that married spouses enjoy. In the remaining thirty-

five states, same-sex couples may not legally marry or form civil unions or domestic partnerships. The federal Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), passed in 1996 (and under legal dispute at the time of this writing), prohibits federal recognition of same-sex marriage. This means that even when same-sex couples legally marry because their state allows them to, they do not enjoy the various federal tax, inheritance, and other benefits that married couples enjoy. Most of the states that do not allow same-sex marriage also have laws that prohibit recognition of same-sex marriages performed in the states that allow them.

Arguments against same-sex marriage. Opponents of same-sex marriage make at least three central points (Emrich, 2009; National Organization for Marriage, 2011). First, and in no particular order, marriage is intended to procreate the species, and same-sex couples cannot reproduce. Second, the children that same-sex couples do have through adoption or artificial means experience various psychological problems because their parents are gay or lesbian and/or because they do not have both a father and a mother. Third, allowing gays and lesbians to marry would undermine the institution of marriage.

Arguments for same-sex marriage. In reply, proponents of same-sex marriage make their own points (Barkan, Marks, & Milardo, 2009; Human Rights Campaign, 2009). First, many heterosexual couples are allowed to marry even though they will not have children, either because they are not able to have them, because they do not wish to have them, or because they are beyond childbearing age. Second, studies show that children of same-sex couples are at least as psychologically healthy as the children of opposite-sex couples (see Note 5.12 "Children and Our Future"). Third, there is no evidence that legalizing same-sex marriage has weakened the institution of marriage in the few states and other nations that have legalized it (see Note 5.14 "Lessons from Other Societies").

Lessons from Other Societies

Same-Sex Marriage in the Netherlands

At the time of this writing, same-sex marriage was legal in ten nations: Argentina, Belgium, Canada, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, South Africa, and Sweden. All these nations have legalized it since 2001, when the Netherlands became the first country to do so. Because more than a decade has passed since this notable event, it is informative to examine how, if at all, legalization has affected the lives of gays and lesbians and the institution of marriage itself in the Netherlands.

One thing is clear: There is no evidence that the institution of marriage in the Netherlands has in any respect become weaker because same-sex couples have been allowed to marry since 2001. Heterosexual couples continue to marry, and the institution appears at least as strong as it was before 2001. It also seems clear that same-sex marriages are working and that same-sex married couples' unions are accepted as normal features of contemporary Dutch life. As Vera Bergkamp, a gay rights

leader in the Netherlands said, "Gay marriage is Holland's best export because we have shown that it is possible."

In an interesting development, same-sex couples have not exactly rushed to marry. There was an initial spurt in 2001, and many such couples have married since. However, the Dutch government estimates that only 20 percent of same-sex couples have married compared to 80 percent of heterosexual couples.

Three reasons may account for this disparity. First, there is less pressure from family and friends for same-sex couples to marry than for heterosexual couples to marry. As Bergkamp put it, "For heterosexuals, it's normal when you're in a steady relationship for more than a year, that a lot of people start asking, 'well when are you getting married?' With two women or two men you don't get that yet." Second, fewer same-sex couples than heterosexual couples decide to marry in order to have children. Third, gays and lesbians in the Netherlands are thought to be somewhat more individualistic than their heterosexual counterparts.

The same-sex couples who have married in the Netherlands seem happy to have done so, at least according to anecdotal evidence. As one same-sex spouse reflected on her marriage, "It was a huge step. For me it was incredible…I'd been to my brother's wedding and my sister's wedding and their spouses were welcomed into the family. Now finally I was able to have my family take my partner in. The moment we got married there was a switch, she was now one of us."

The experience of the Netherlands is mirrored in the other nine nations that have legalized same-sex marriage.

Legalization seems to be working from all accounts, and the institution of marriage seems to be thriving at least as well as in other nations. As the first openly gay member of the Dutch parliament who played a key role in legalization wryly described its outcome, "Heterosexual couples did not turn away from the institution of marriage, and nor did the world isolate my country. After the Netherlands acted, civilization as we know it didn't end." As the United States continues to debate same-sex marriage, it has much to learn from the Netherlands and the other nations that have legalized this form of marriage.

Sources: Ames, 2011; Badgett, 2009; Dittrich, 2011

Although the children of same-sex couples fare at least as well as those of heterosexual couples, it is still difficult in many states for same-sex couples to adopt a child. Two states at the time of this writing, Mississippi and Utah, prohibit adoptions by same-sex couples, but half of the other states make it very difficult for these adoptions to occur (Tavernise, 2011). For example, in some states social workers are required to prefer married heterosexual couples over same-sex couples in adoption decisions. Moreover, several states require that a couple must be married to be adopted; in these states, a single gay or lesbian may adopt, but not a same-sex couple. Still, adoptions by same-sex couples have become more numerous in recent years because of the number of children waiting for adoption and because public opinion about gays and lesbians has become more favorable.

Costs of the Illegality of Same-Sex Marriage

Marriage provides many legal rights, benefits, and responsibilities for the two spouses. Because same-sex couples are not allowed to marry in most states and, even if they do marry, are currently denied federal recognition of their marriage, they suffer materially in numerous ways. In fact, there are more than 1,000 federal rights that heterosexual married couples receive that no married same-sex couple is allowed to receive (Shell, 2011).

We have space here to list only a few of the many costs that the illegality of same-sex marriage imposes on same-sex couples who cannot marry and on the same-sex couples whose marriages are not federally recognized (Human Rights Campaign, 2009):

- Spouses have visitation rights if one of them is hospitalized as well as the right to make medical decisions if one spouse is unable to do so; same-sex couples do not have these visitation rights.
- Same-sex couples cannot file joint federal tax returns or joint state tax returns (in the states that do not recognize same-sex marriage), potentially costing each couple thousands of dollars every year in taxes they would not have to pay if they were able to file jointly.
- Spouses receive Social Security survivor benefits averaging more than $5,500 annually when a spouse dies; same-sex couples do not receive these benefits.
- Many employers who provide health insurance coverage for the spouse of an employee do not provide this coverage for a same-sex partner; when they do provide this coverage, the employee must pay taxes on the value of the coverage.
- When a spouse dies, the surviving spouse inherits the

> deceased spouse's property without paying estate taxes; the surviving partner of a same-sex couple must pay estate taxes.

Notice that many of these costs are economic. It is difficult to estimate the exact economic costs of the illegality of same-sex marriage, but one analysis estimated that these costs can range from $41,000 to as much as $467,000 over the lifetime of a same-sex couple, depending on their income, state of residence, and many other factors (Bernard & Leber, 2009).

Military Service

LGBT individuals traditionally were not permitted to serve in the US military. If they remained in the closet (hid evidence of their sexual orientation), of course, they could serve with impunity, but many gays and lesbians in the military were given dishonorable discharges when their sexual orientation was discovered. Those who successfully remained in the closet lived under continual fear that their sexual orientation would become known and they would be ousted from the military.

As a presidential candidate in 1992, Bill Clinton said he would end the ban on LGBT people in the military. After his election, his intention to do so was met with fierce opposition by military leaders, much of the Congress, and considerable public opinion. As a compromise, in 1993 the government established the so-called don't-ask, don't-tell (DADT) policy. DADT protected members of the military from being asked about their sexual orientation, but it also stipulated that they would be discharged from the military

if they made statements or engaged in behavior that indicated an LGBT orientation. Because DADT continued the military ban on LGBT people, proponents of allowing them to serve in the military opposed the policy and continued to call for the elimination of any restrictions regarding sexual orientation for military service.

In response to a lawsuit, a federal judge in 2010 ruled that DADT was unconstitutional. Meanwhile, Barack Obama had also called for the repeal of DADT, both as a presidential candidate and then as president. In late 2010, Congress passed legislation repealing DADT, and President Obama signed the legislation, which took effect in September 2011. Official discrimination against gays and lesbians in the military has thus ended, and they may now serve openly in the nation's armed forces. It remains to be seen, however, whether they will be able to serve without facing negative experiences such as verbal and physical abuse.

Physical and Mental Health

It is well known that HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) and AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) racked the LGBT community beginning in the 1980s. Many gays and lesbians eventually died from AIDS-related complications, and HIV and AIDS remain serious illnesses for gays and straights alike. An estimated 1.2 million Americans now have HIV, and about 35,000 have AIDS. Almost 50,000 Americans are diagnosed with HIV annually, and more than half of these new cases are men who have had sex with other men. Fortunately, HIV can now be controlled fairly well by

appropriate medical treatment (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011).

It is less well known that LGBT adults have higher rates than straight adults of other physical health problems and also of mental health problems (Frost, Lehavot, & Meyer, 2011; Institute of Medicine, 2011). These problems are thought to stem from the stress that the LGBT community experiences from living in a society in which they frequently encounter verbal and physical harassment, job discrimination, a need for some to conceal their sexual identity, and lack of equal treatment arising from the illegality of same-sex marriage. We saw earlier that LGBT secondary school students experience various kinds of educational and mental health issues because of the mistreatment they encounter. By the time LGBT individuals reach their adult years, the various stressors they have experienced at least since adolescence have begun to take a toll on their physical and mental health.

The stress of being LGBT in a society that disapproves of this sexual orientation is thought to account for the greater likelihood of LGBT people to have physical and mental health problems.

Patrik Nygren – [LGBT rights](#) – CC BY-SA 2.0.

Because stress is thought to compromise immune systems, LGBT individuals on the average have lower immune functioning and

lower perceived physical health than straight individuals. Because stress impairs mental health, they are also more likely to have higher rates of depression, loneliness, low self-esteem, and other psychiatric and psychological problems, including a tendency to attempt suicide (Sears & Mallory, 2011). Among all LGBT individuals, those who have experienced greater levels of stress related to their sexual orientation have higher levels of physical and mental health problems than those who have experienced lower levels of stress. It is important to keep in mind that these various physical and mental health problems do not stem from an LGBT sexual orientation in and of itself, but rather from the experience of living as an LGBT individual in a *homophobic* (disliking LGBT behavior and individuals) society.

Despite the health problems that LGBT people experience, medical students do not learn very much about these problems. A recent survey of medical school deans found that one-third of medical schools provide no clinical training about these health issues, and that students in the medical schools that do provide training still receive only an average of five hours of training (Obedin-Maliver et al., 2011). The senior author of the study commented on its findings, "It's great that a lot of schools are starting to teach these topics. But the conversation needs to go deeper. We heard from the deans that a lot of these important LGBT health topics are completely off the radar screens of many medical schools" (White, 2011).

Heterosexual Privilege

In earlier chapters, we discussed the related concepts of *white privilege* and *male privilege*. To recall, simply because they are white, whites can go through their daily lives without worrying about or experiencing the many kinds of subtle and not-so-subtle negative events that people of color experience. Moreover, simply because they are male, men can go through their daily lives without worrying about or experiencing the many kinds of subtle and not-so-subtle negative events that women experience. Whether or not they are conscious of it, therefore, whites and men are automatically privileged compared to people of color and women, respectively.

An analogous concept exists in the study of sexual orientation and inequality. This concept is **heterosexual privilege**, which refers to the many advantages that heterosexuals (or people perceived as heterosexuals) enjoy simply because their sexual orientation is not LGBT. There are many such advantages, and we have space to list only a few:

- Heterosexuals can be out day or night or at school or workplaces without fearing that they will be verbally harassed or physically attacked because of their sexuality or that they will hear jokes about their sexuality.
- Heterosexuals do not have to worry about not being hired for a job, about being fired, or not being promoted because of their sexuality.
- Heterosexuals can legally marry everywhere in the United States and receive all the federal, state, and other benefits that married couples receive.
- Heterosexuals can express a reasonable amount of affection (holding hands, kissing, etc.) in public without fearing negative reactions from onlookers.

- Heterosexuals do not have to worry about being asked why they prefer opposite-sex relations, being criticized for choosing their sexual orientation, or being urged to change their sexual orientation.
- Heterosexual parents do not have to worry about anyone questioning their fitness as parents because of their sexuality.
- Heterosexuals do not have to feel the need to conceal their sexual orientation.
- Heterosexuals do not have to worry about being accused of trying to "push" their sexuality onto other people.

People Making a Difference

Improving the Family Lives of LGBT Youth

Many organizations and agencies around the country aim to improve the lives of LGBT teens. One of them is the Family Acceptance Project (FAP) at San Francisco State University, which focuses on the family problems that LGBT teens often experience. According to its website, FAP is "the only community research, intervention, education and policy initiative that works to decrease major health and related risks for [LGBT] youth, such as suicide, substance

abuse, HIV and homelessness—in the context of their families. We use a research-based, culturally grounded approach to help ethnically, socially and religiously diverse families decrease rejection and increase support for their LGBT children."

To accomplish its mission, FAP engages in two types of activities: research and family support services. In the research area, FAP has published some pioneering studies of the effects of school victimization and of family rejection and acceptance on the physical and mental health of LGBT teens during their adolescence and into their early adulthood. In the family support services area, FAP provides confidential advice, information, and counseling to families with one or more LGBT children or adolescents, and it also has produced various educational materials for these families and for professionals who deal with LGBT issues. At the time of this writing, FAP was producing several documentary videos featuring LGBT youth talking about their family situations and other aspects of their lives. Its support services and written materials are available in English, Spanish, and Cantonese.

Through its pioneering efforts, the Family Acceptance Project is one of many organizations making a difference in the lives of LGBT youth. For further information about FAP, visit http://familyproject.sfsu.edu.

Key Takeaways

- Bullying, taunting, and violence are significant problems for the LGBT community.
- LGBT people are at greater risk for behavioral and physical and mental health problems because of the many negative experiences they encounter.
- Federal law does not protect LGBT individuals from employment discrimination.
- The children of same-sex couples fare at least as well as children of heterosexual couples.

For Your Review

1. Do you know anyone who has ever been bullied and taunted for being LGBT or for being perceived as LGBT? If so, describe what happened.
2. Write a brief essay in which you summarize the debate over same-sex marriage, provide your own view, and justify your view.

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8.4 Improving the Lives of the LGBT Community

The inequality arising from sexual orientation stems from long-standing and deep-rooted prejudice against nonheterosexual attraction and behavior and against the many people whose sexual orientation is not heterosexual. We have seen in this chapter that attitudes about and related to same-sex sexuality have become markedly more positive since a generation ago. Reflecting this trend, the number of openly gay elected officials and candidates for office has increased greatly since a generation ago, and the sexual orientation of candidates appears to be a nonissue in many areas of the nation (Page, 2011). In a 2011 Gallup poll, two-thirds of Americans said they would vote for a gay candidate for president, up from only one-fourth of Americans in 1978 (Page, 2011). Also in 2011, the US Senate confirmed the nomination of the first openly gay man for a federal judgeship (Milbank, 2011). To paraphrase the slogan of a nationwide campaign aimed at helping gay teens deal with bullying and other mistreatment, it is getting better.

Much of this improvement must be credited to the gay rights movement that is popularly thought to have begun in June 1969 in New York City after police raided a gay bar called the Stonewall

Inn and arrested several people inside. A crowd of several hundred people gathered and rioted in protest that night and the next night. The gay rights movement had begun.

Despite the advances this movement has made and despite the improvement in public attitudes about LGBT issues, we have seen in this chapter that LGBT people continue to experience many types of inequality and other problems. As with inequality based on race and/or ethnicity, social class, and gender, there is much work still to be done to reduce inequality based on sexual orientation.

For such inequality to be reduced, it is certainly essential that heterosexuals do everything possible in their daily lives to avoid any form of mistreatment of LGBT individuals and to treat them as they would treat any heterosexual. Beyond this, certain other measures should help address LGBT inequality. These measures might include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. Parents should make clear to their children that all sexual orientations are equally valid. Parents whose child happens to be LGBT should love that child at least as much as they would love a heterosexual child.
2. School programs should continue and strengthen their efforts to provide students a positive environment in regard to sexual orientation and to educate them about LGBT issues. Bullying and other harassment of LGBT students must not be tolerated. In 2011, California became the first state to require the teaching of gay and lesbian history; other states should follow this example.
3. Federal law should prohibit employment discrimination against LGBT people, and same-sex marriages should become legal throughout the United States. In the meantime, new legislation should provide same-sex couples the same rights, responsibilities, and benefits that heterosexual married couples have.
4. Police should continue to educate themselves about LGBT issues and should strengthen their efforts to ensure that

physical attacks on LGBT people are treated at least as seriously as attacks on heterosexual people are treated.

Key Takeaways

- Although the gay rights movement has made significant advances, many types of inequality based on sexual orientation continue to exist.
- Several measures should be begun or continued to reduce inequality based on sexual orientation.

For Your Review

1. Is there a gay rights advocacy group on your campus? If so, what is your opinion of it?
2. How do you think parents should react if their teenaged daughter or son comes out to them? Explain your answer.

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Summary

1.   Sexual orientation refers to a person's preference for sexual relationships with individuals of the other sex, one's own sex, or both sexes. The term also increasingly refers to *transgender* individuals, whose behavior, appearance, and/or gender identity departs from conventional norms.

2.   According to national survey evidence, almost 4 percent of American adults identify as LGBT (lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender), a figure equivalent to 9 million adults. Almost 20 million have engaged in same-sex relations.

3.   Male homosexuality in ancient Greece and Rome seems to have been accepted and rather common, but Europe, the Americas, and other areas influenced by the Judeo-Christian tradition have long viewed homosexuality very negatively. In many societies studied by anthropologists, homosexuality is rather common and considered a normal form of sexuality.

4.   Scholars continue to debate whether sexual orientation is more the result of biological factors or social and cultural factors. Related to this debate, the public is fairly split over the issue of whether sexual orientation is a choice or something over which people have no control.

5.   Heterosexism in the United States is higher among men than among women, among older people than younger people, among the less educated than among

the more highly educated, among Southerners than among non-Southerners, and among more religious people than among less religious people. Levels of heterosexism have declined markedly since a generation ago.

6.   Sexual orientation is a significant source of inequality. LGBT individuals experience bullying, taunting, and violence; they may experience employment discrimination; and they are not allowed to marry in most states. Because of the stress of living as LGBT, they are at greater risk than heterosexuals for several types of physical and mental health problems.

Using What You Know

You're working in a medium-sized office and generally like your coworkers. However, occasionally you hear them make jokes about gays and lesbians. You never laugh at these jokes, but neither have you ever said anything critical about them. Your conscience is bothering you, but you also know that if you tell your supervisor or coworkers that their joking makes you feel uncomfortable, they may get angry with you and even stop talking to you. What do you decide to do?

What You Can Do

To help reduce inequality based on sexual orientation, you may wish to do any of the following:

1. Start or join an LGBT advocacy group on your campus.
2. Write a letter to the editor in favor of same-sex marriage.
3. Urge your US Senators and Representative to pass legislation prohibiting employment discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.
4. Work for a social service agency in your local community that focuses on the needs of LGBT teens.

CHAPTER 9: AGING AND AGEISM

Social Problems in the News

"Still Working: Economy Forcing Retirees to Re-enter Workforce," the headline said. The story featured four seniors, ranging in age from 66 to their eighties, in southern California who had retired several years ago but were now trying to get back into the labor force. Because of the faltering economy and rising costs, they were having trouble affording their retirement. They were also having trouble finding a job, in part because they lacked the computer skills that are virtually a necessity in today's world to find and perform a job. One of the unemployed seniors was a retired warehouse worker who did not know how to fill out a job application online. He said, "To say I have computer skills—no, I don't. But I can learn. I will do

anything to get work." An official in California's Office on Aging indicated that employers who hire older people would be happy they did so: "You know the person's going to come in and you know they're going to accomplish something while they're there. And, they are a wellspring of knowledge."

Source: Barkas, 2011

The number of older Americans is growing rapidly. As this news story suggests, they have much to contribute to our society. Yet they also encounter various problems because of their advanced age. We appreciate our elderly but also consider them something of a burden. We also hold unfortunate stereotypes of them and seemingly view old age as something to be shunned. Television commercials and other advertisements extol the virtues of staying young by "washing away the gray" and by removing all facial wrinkles. In our youth-obsessed culture, older people seem to be second-class citizens. This chapter discusses views about aging and the ways in which old age is a source of inequality.

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9.1 The Concept and Experience of Aging

Because we all want to live into old age, the study of age and aging helps us understand something about ourselves and a stage in the life course we all hope to reach.

Here is why you should want to know about aging and the problems older people face: *You will be old someday.* At least you will be old if you do not die prematurely from an accident, cancer, a heart attack, some other medical problem, murder, or suicide. Although we do not often think about aging when we are in our late teens and early twenties, one of our major goals in life is to become old. By studying age and aging and becoming familiar with some of the problems facing the elderly now and in the future, we are really studying something about ourselves and a stage in the life course we all hope to reach.

The study of aging is so important and popular that it has its own name, **gerontology**. S*ocial gerontology* is the study of the social aspects of aging (Novak, 2012). The scholars who study aging are called *gerontologists*. The people they study go by several names, most commonly "older people," "elders," and "the elderly." The latter term is usually reserved for those 65 or older, while "older people" and "elders" often include people in their fifties as well as those 60 or older.

Dimensions of Aging

Age and aging have four dimensions. The dimension most of us think of is **chronological age**, defined as the number of years since someone was born. A second dimension is **biological aging**, which refers to the physical changes that "slow us down" as we get into our middle and older years. For example, our arteries might clog

up, or problems with our lungs might make it more difficult for us to breathe. A third dimension, **psychological aging**, refers to the psychological changes, including those involving mental functioning and personality, that occur as we age. Gerontologists emphasize that chronological age is not always the same thing as biological or psychological age. Some people who are 65, for example, can look and act much younger than some who are 50.

The fourth dimension of aging is social. **Social aging** refers to changes in a person's roles and relationships, both within their networks of relatives and friends and in formal organizations such as the workplace and houses of worship. Although social aging can differ from one individual to another, it is also profoundly influenced by the *perception* of aging that is part of a society's culture. If a society views aging positively, the social aging experienced by individuals in that society will be more positive and enjoyable than in a society that views aging negatively. As we shall see, though, the perception of aging in the United States is not very positive, with important consequences for our older citizens.

Key Takeaways

- The study of the elderly and aging helps us understand problems in a state of the life course we all hope to reach.
- Biological aging refers to the physical changes that accompany the aging process, while psychological aging refers to the psychological changes that occur.
- Social aging refers to the changes in a person's roles and relationships as the person ages.

> ## *For Your Review*
>
> 1.   Think about an older person whom you know. To what extent has this person experienced psychological aging? To what extent has this person experienced social aging?
> 2.   The text states that the perception of aging in the United States is not very positive. What do you think accounts for this?

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Novak, M. (2012). *Issues in aging* (3rd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.

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9.2 Perspectives on Aging

Recall that social aging refers to changes in people's roles and relationships in a society as they age. Social gerontologists have tried to explain how and why the aging process in the United States and other societies occurs. Their various explanations, summarized in Table 6.1 "Theory Snapshot", help us understand patterns of social aging. They fall roughly into either the functionalist, social interactionist, or conflict approaches.

Table 6.1 Theory Snapshot

Theoretical perspective	Major assumptions
Disengagement theory	To enable younger people to assume important roles, a society must encourage its older people to disengage from their previous roles and to take on roles more appropriate to their physical and mental decline. This theory is considered a functionalist explanation of the aging process.
Activity theory	Older people benefit themselves and their society if they continue to be active. Their positive perceptions of the aging process are crucial to their ability to remain active. This theory is considered an interactionist explanation of the aging process.
Conflict theory	Older people experience age-based prejudice and discrimination. Inequalities among the aged exist along the lines of gender, race/ethnicity, and social class. This theory falls into the more general conflict theory of society.

One of the first explanations was called **disengagement theory** (Cumming & Henry, 1961). This approach assumed that all societies must find ways for older people's authority to give way to younger people. A society thus encourages its elderly to disengage from their previous roles and to take on roles more appropriate to their physical and mental decline. In this way, a society effects a smooth transition of its elderly into a new, more sedentary lifestyle and ensures that their previous roles will be undertaken by a younger generation that is presumably more able to carry out these roles. Because disengagement theory assumes that social aging preserves a society's stability and that a society needs to ensure that disengagement occurs, it is often considered a functionalist explanation of the aging process.

A critical problem with this theory was that it assumes that older people are no longer capable of adequately performing their previous roles. However, older people in many societies continue to perform their previous roles quite well. In fact, society may suffer if its elderly do disengage, as it loses their insight and wisdom. It is also true that many elders cannot afford to disengage from their previous roles; if they leave their jobs, they are also leaving needed sources of income, as the opening news story discussed, and if

they leave their jobs and other roles, they also reduce their social interaction and the benefits it brings.

Today most social gerontologists prefer **activity theory**, which assumes that older people benefit both themselves and their society if they remain active and try to continue to perform the roles they had before they aged (Choi & Kim, 2011). As they perform their roles, their perception of the situations they are in is crucial to their perception of their aging and thus to their self-esteem and other aspects of their psychological well-being. Because activity theory focuses on the individual and her or his perception of the aging process, it is often considered a social interactionist explanation of social aging.

One criticism of activity theory is that it overestimates the ability of the elderly to maintain their level of activity: Although some elders can remain active, others cannot. Another criticism is that activity theory is too much of an individualistic approach, as it overlooks the barriers many societies place to successful aging. Some elders are less able to remain active because of their poverty, gender, and social class, as these and other structural conditions may adversely affect their physical and mental health. Activity theory overlooks these conditions.

Explanations of aging grounded in conflict theory put these conditions at the forefront of their analyses. A **conflict theory** of aging, then, emphasizes the impact of **ageism**, or negative views about old age and prejudice and discrimination against the elderly (Novak, 2012). According to this view, older workers are devalued because they are no longer economically productive and because their higher salaries (because of their job seniority), health benefits, and other costs drive down capitalist profits. Conflict theory also emphasizes inequality among the aged along gender, race/ethnicity, and social class lines. Reflecting these inequalities in the larger society, some elders are quite wealthy, but others are very poor.

One criticism of conflict theory is that it blames ageism on modern, capitalist economies. However, negative views of the

elderly also exist to some extent in modern, socialist societies and in preindustrial societies. Capitalism may make these views more negative, but such views can exist even in societies that are not capitalistic.

For Your Review

1. Which theory of aging—disengagement theory, activity theory, or conflict theory—makes the most sense to you? Why?

References

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9.3 Life Expectancy and the Graying of Society

When we look historically and cross-culturally, we see that *old age* is a relative term, since few people in preindustrial times or in poor countries today reach the age range that most Americans would consider to be old, say 65 or older. When we compare contemporary societies, we find that **life expectancy**, or the average age to which people can be expected to live, varies dramatically across the world. As Figure 6.1 "Average Life Expectancy across the Globe (Years)" illustrates, life expectancy in North America, most of Europe, and Australia averages 75 years or more, while life expectancy in most of Africa averages less than 60 years (Population Reference Bureau, 2011).

Figure 6.1 Average Life Expectancy across the Globe (Years)
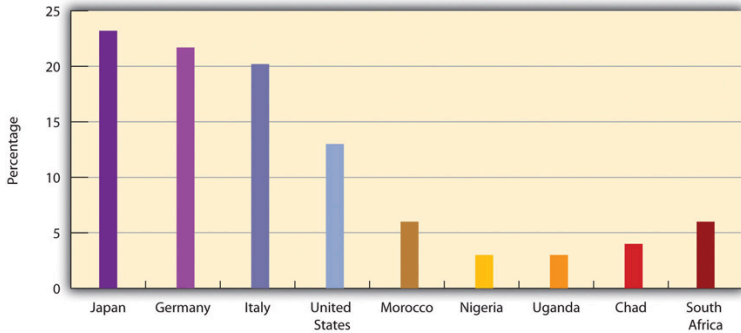

75+
70–74.9
65–69.9
60–64.9
<60
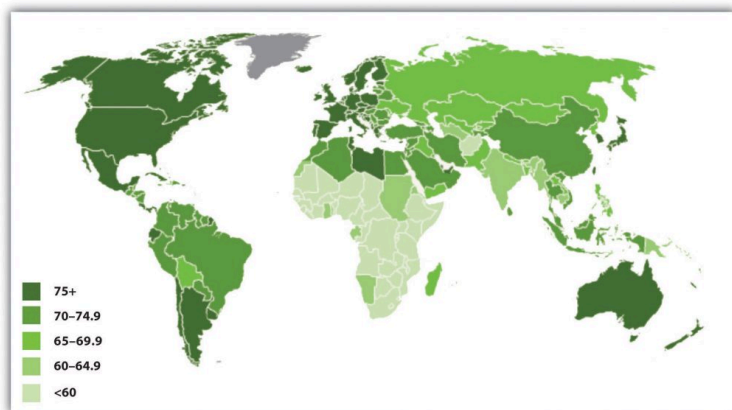
Source: Adapted from Population Reference Bureau. (2011). The world at 7 billion: World population data sheet: Life expectancy. Retrieved from http://www.prb.org/publications/datasheets/2011/world-population-data-sheet/world-map.aspx#/map/lifeexp.

What accounts for these large disparities? The major factor is the wealth or poverty of a nation, as the wealthiest nations have much longer life expectancies than the poorest ones. This is true because, as Chapter 5 "Poverty" noted, the poorest nations by definition have little money and few other resources. They suffer from hunger, AIDS, and other diseases, and they lack indoor plumbing and other modern conveniences found in almost every home in the wealthiest nations. As a result, they have high rates of infant and childhood mortality, and many people who make it past childhood die prematurely from disease, starvation, and other problems.

These differences mean that few people in these societies reach the age of 65 that Western nations commonly mark as the beginning of old age. Figure 6.2 "Percentage of Population Aged 65 or Older, 2011" depicts the percentage of each nation's population that is 65 or older. Not surprisingly, the nations of Africa have very low numbers

of people 65 or older. In Uganda, for example, only 3 percent of the population is at least 65, compared to 13 percent of Americans and 20–21 percent of Germans and Italians.

Figure 6.2 Percentage of Population Aged 65 or Older, 2011

Source: Adapted from Population Reference Bureau. (2011). *2011 world population data sheet*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from http://www.prb.org/pdf11/2011population-data-sheet_eng.pdf.

Despite these international disparities, life expectancy overall has been increasing around the world. It was only 46 years worldwide in the early 1950s but was 69 in 2009 and is expected to reach about 75 by 2050 (Population Reference Bureau, 2011). This means that the number of people 65 or older is growing rapidly; they are expected to reach almost 1.5 billion worldwide by 2050, three times their number today and five times their number just twenty years ago (United Nations Population Division, 2011). Despite international differences in life expectancy and the elderly percentage of the

population, the world as a whole is decidedly "graying," with important implications for the cost and quality of elder care and other issues.

Older people now constitute 15 percent of the combined population of wealthy nations, but they will account for 26 percent by 2050.

Pedro Ribeiro Simões – Warming the bones – CC BY 2.0.

As life expectancy rises in poor nations, these nations will experience special problems (Hayutin, 2007). One problem will involve paying for the increased health care that older people in these nations will require. Because these nations are so poor, they will face even greater problems than the industrial world in paying for such care and for other programs and services their older citizens will need. Another problem stems from the fact that many poor nations are beginning or continuing to industrialize and urbanize. As they do so, traditional family patterns, including respect for the elderly and the continuation of their roles and influence, may weaken. One reason for this is that urban families have smaller dwelling units in which to accommodate their elderly relatives and lack any land onto which they can build new housing. Families in poor nations will thus find it increasingly difficult to accommodate their elders.

Life Expectancy in the United States

Life expectancy has been increasing in the United States along with the rest of the world (see [Figure 6.3 "Changes in US Life Expectancy at Birth, 1900–2010"](#)). It rose rapidly in the first half of the twentieth century and has increased steadily since then. From a low of 47.3 years in 1900, it rose to about 71 years in 1970 and 77 years in 2000 and to more than 78 years in 2010. Americans born in 2010 will thus be expected to live about 31 years longer than those born a century earlier.

Figure 6.3 Changes in US Life Expectancy at Birth, 1900–2010
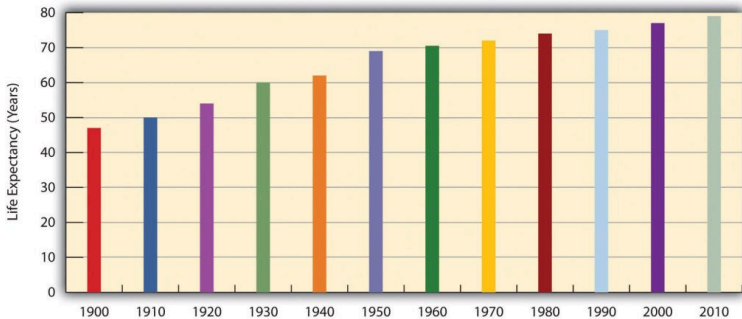
Sources: Data from Arias, E. (2010). United States life tables, 2006. *National Vital Statistics Reports*, 58(21), 1–40.

During the next few decades, the numbers of the elderly will increase rapidly thanks to the large baby boom generation born after World War II (from 1946 to 1964) that is now entering its mid-sixties. Figure 6.4 "Past and Projected Percentage of US Population Aged 65 or Older, 1900–2050" shows the rapid rise of older Americans (65 or older) as a percentage of the population that is expected to occur. Elders numbered about 3.1 million in 1900 (4.1 percent of the population), number about 40 million today, and are expected to reach 89 million by 2050 (20.2 percent of the population). The large increase in older Americans overall has been called the *graying of America* and will have important repercussions for elderly care and other aspects of old age in the United States, as we discuss later.

Figure 6.4 Past and Projected Percentage of US Population Aged 65 or Older, 1900–2050

Source: Data from Administration on Aging. (n.d.). Projected future growth of the

older population by age: 1900–2050. Retrieved from http://www.aoa.gov/AoARoot/Aging_Statistics/future_growth/future_growth.aspx.
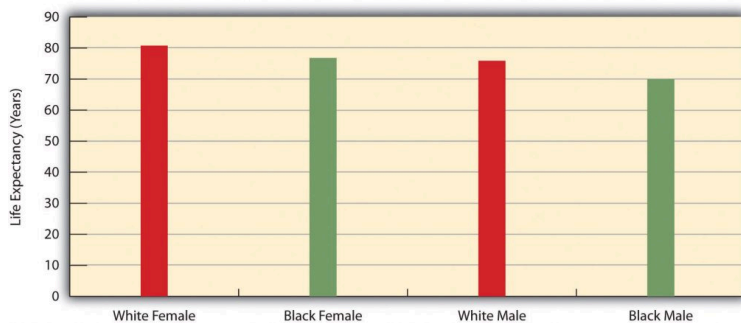
Inequality in Life Expectancy

We have seen that inequality in life expectancy exists around the world, with life expectancy lower in poor nations than in wealthy nations. Inequality in life expectancy also exists *within* a given society along gender, race/ethnicity, and social class lines.

For gender, the inequality is in favor of women, who for both biological and social reasons outlive men across the globe. In the United States, for example, girls born in 2007 could expect to live 80.4 years on the average, but boys only 75.4 years.

In most countries, race and ethnicity combine with social class to produce longer life expectancies for the (wealthier) dominant race, which in the Western world is almost always white. The United States again reflects this international phenomenon: Whites born in 2007 could expect to live 78.4 years on the average, but African Americans only 73.6 years. In fact, gender and race combine in the United States to put African American males at a particular disadvantage, as they can expect to live only 70.0 years (see Figure 6.5 "Sex, Race, and Life Expectancy for US Residents Born in 2007"). The average African American male will die almost 11 years earlier than the average white woman.

Figure 6.5 Sex, Race, and Life Expectancy for US Residents Born in 2007

Source: Data from National Center for Health Statistics, US Department of Health and Human Services. (2010). Health, United States, 2010, with special feature on death and dying. Retrieved from http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hus/hus10.pdf.

Key Takeaways

- Life expectancy differs widely around the world and is much higher in wealthy nations than in poor nations.
- Life expectancy has also been increasing around the world, including in the United States, and the increasing number of older people in the decades ahead will pose several serious challenges.
- Inequality in life expectancy exists within a given society along gender, race/ethnicity, and social class lines.

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9.4 Biological and Psychological Aspects of Aging

Learning Objectives

1. Describe any four biological changes associated with aging.
2. List any three steps that individuals can try to undertake to achieve successful aging.

Like many other societies, the United States has a mixed view of aging and older people. While we generally appreciate our elderly, we have a culture oriented toward youth, as evidenced by the abundance of television characters in their twenties and lack of those in their older years. As individuals, we do our best not to look old, as the many ads for wrinkle creams and products to darken gray hair attest. Moreover, when we think of the elderly, negative images often come to mind. We often think of someone who has been slowed by age both physically and mentally. She or he may have trouble walking up steps, picking up heavy grocery bags, standing up straight, or remembering recent events. The term *senile* often comes to mind, and phrases like "doddering old fool," "geezer," and other disparaging remarks sprinkle our language when we talk about them. Meanwhile, despite some improvement, the elderly are

often portrayed in stereotypical ways on television and in movies (Lee, Carpenter, & Meyers, 2007).

How true is this negative image? What do we know of physical and psychological changes among the elderly? How much of what we think we know about aging and the elderly is a myth, and how much is reality? Gerontologists have paid special attention to answering these questions (Novak, 2012).

Biological changes certainly occur as we age. The first signs are probably in our appearance. Our hair begins to turn gray, our (male) hairlines recede, and a few wrinkles set in. The internal changes that often accompany aging are more consequential, among them being that (a) fat replaces lean body mass, and many people gain weight; (b) bone and muscle loss occur; (c) lungs lose their ability to take in air, and our respiratory efficiency declines; (d) the functions of the cardiovascular and renal (kidney) systems decline; (e) the number of brain cells declines, as does brain mass overall; and (f) vision and hearing decline. Cognitive and psychological changes also occur. Learning and memory begin declining after people reach their seventies; depression and other mental and/or emotional disorders can set in; and dementia, including Alzheimer's disease, can occur.

Because our society values youthfulness, many people try to do their best not to look old.

FoundryParkInn – [Men's Facial](#) – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

All these conditions yield statistics such as follows: about half of people 65 or older have arthritis or high blood pressure; almost one-fifth have coronary heart disease; more than one-fifth have diabetes; and about 60 percent of women in their seventies have osteoporosis (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention & The Merck Company Foundation, 2007; Crawthorne, 2008).

Still, the nature and extent of all these changes vary widely among older people. Some individuals are frail at 65, while others remain vigorous well into their seventies and beyond. People can be "old" at 60 or even 50, while others can be "young" at 80. Many elders are

no longer able to work, but others remain in the labor force. All in all, then, most older people do not fit the doddering image myth and can still live a satisfying and productive life (Rowe et al., 2010).

Enhancing Vitality for Successful Aging

To what extent are the effects of biological and psychological aging the inevitable results of chronological aging? Gerontologists are still trying to understand what causes these effects, and their explanations center on such things as a declining immune system, the slowing of cellular replication, and other processes that need not concern us here.

One thing is clear: We can all take several steps to help us age better, because what we do as we enter our older years matters much more than genetics (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention & The Merck Company Foundation, 2007; Crawthorne, 2008). To the extent this is true, the effects of biological and psychological aging are not necessarily inevitable, and "successful aging" is possible. The steps highlighted in the gerontological literature are by now almost a cliché, but regular exercise, good nutrition, and stress reduction stand at the top of most gerontologists' recommendations for continued vitality in later life. In fact, Americans live about ten years less than an average set of genes should let them live because they do not exercise enough and because they eat inadequate diets.

Research by social gerontologists suggests at least two additional steps older people can take if they want "successful aging." The first is involvement in informal, personal networks of friends, neighbors, and relatives. The importance of such networks is one of the most thoroughly documented in the social gerontological literature (Binstock & George, 2006) (see [Note 6.23 "Applying Social Research"](#)). Networks enhance successful aging for at least two reasons. First, they provide practical support, such as help buying groceries and visiting the doctor, to the elderly who need it. Second, they help older people maintain their self-esteem, meet their desire for friendships, and satisfy other emotional needs.

Children and Our Future

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

An increasing number of grandparents are raising their grandchildren. Almost 6 million children, or about 8 percent of all children, live in a household headed by a grandparent, up from 4.5 million in 2000. Grandparents are the sole caregiver for almost 3 million of these children because the child's parents are absent for several reasons: The parents may have died, they may be in jail or prison or have been unable to deal with substance abuse, a child may

have been removed from a parent because of parental abuse, or a child may have been abandoned.

In the remaining households where a parent is present, grandparents (usually the grandmother) are still the primary caregivers or at least play a major role in raising the child; the same is true of many grandparents who live near their grown child's home. In today's faltering economy, many grandparents are also helping their children out with the expenses of raising their grandchild and running a home. As a family expert with AARP explained, "Grandparents have become the family safety net, and I don't see that changing any time soon. While they will continue to enjoy their traditional roles, including spending on gifts for grandchildren, I see them increasingly paying for the extras that parents are struggling to keep up with—sports, camps, tutoring or other educational needs, such as music lessons."

Estella Hyde, 65, and her husband live near Erie, Pennsylvania. They began raising their granddaughter, who started college in fall 2011, when she was one-year-old after her mother said she did not want to raise her. Ms. Hyde called for more government assistance for people in her situation: "It never happens in a happy situation where a son or daughter comes and says, 'I need you to raise a child for me.' We were very lucky, we were able to financially take care of her and support her. But many grandparent caregivers need other sources of assistance."

Many grandparents consider the caregiving and financial support they provide for a grandchild to be both a joy and a privilege. But as their numbers grow, many such grandparents are also finding their involvement to also be somewhat of a physical and/or financial burden. As their

numbers continue to grow, it will be important for the federal and state governments to provide them the assistance that Estella Hyde advocated.

Sources: Whitley & Kelley, 2007; Yen, 2011

A second step for successful aging suggested by scholarly research is religious involvement (Moberg, 2008), which enhances psychological well-being for at least two reasons. As people worship in a congregation, they interact with other congregants and, as just noted, enhance their social support networks. Moreover, as they practice their religious faith, they reduce their stress and can cope better with personal troubles. For both these reasons, attendance at religious services and the practice of prayer are thought to enhance psychological well-being among older people. Some elders cannot attend religious services regularly because they have health problems or are no longer able to drive a car. But prayer and other private devotional activities remain significant for many of them. To the extent that religion makes a difference for elders' well-being, health-care facilities and congregations should do what they can to enable older adults to attend religious services and to otherwise practice their religious faith.

Applying Social Research

Friendships and Successful Aging

As the text discusses, social networks improve the lives of older Americans by providing both practical and emotional support. Early research on social networks and aging focused more on relatives than on friends. Rebecca G. Adams, former president of the Southern Sociological Society, was one of the first sociologists to emphasize the role that friends can also play in the lives of the elderly. She interviewed seventy older women who lived in a Chicago suburb and asked them many questions about the extent and quality of their friendships.

In one of her most important findings, Adams discovered that the women reported receiving more help from friends than other researchers had assumed was the case. The women were somewhat reluctant to ask friends for help but did so when family members were not available and when they would not overly inconvenience the friends whom they asked for help. Adams also found that "secondary" friendships—those involving friends that a woman spent time with but with whom she was not especially close—were more likely than "primary" friendships (very

close friendships) to contribute to her interviewees' psychological well-being, as these friendships enabled the women to meet new people, to become involved in new activities, and thus to be engaged with the larger society. This finding led Adams to conclude that one should not underestimate how important friends are to older people, particularly to the elderly without family. Friends are an important source of companionship and possibly a more important source of service support than most of the current literature suggests.

Adams also asked the women about their friendships with men. The seventy women she interviewed reported 670 friendships, of which only 3.6 percent were with men. (About 91 percent were with other women, and 6 percent were with couples.) Although prior research had assumed that the number of these friendships is small because there are so few unmarried elderly men compared to the number of unmarried elderly women, Adams discovered from her interviews some additional reasons. Her respondents interpreted *any* friendship with a man as a courting or romantic friendship, which they thought would be viewed negatively by their children and by their peers. Adopting a traditional gender-role orientation, they also expected any man they might marry to be able to protect them physically and financially. Yet they also realized that any elderly man they might know would be very likely unable to do so. For all these reasons, they shied away from friendships with men.

Work by Adams and other social scientists on the friendships and other aspects of the social support systems for older Americans has contributed greatly to our understanding of the components of successful aging.

Practically speaking, it points to the need for programs and other activities to make it easier for the elderly to develop and maintain friendships with both sexes to improve their ability to meet both their practical and emotional needs.

Sources: Adams, 1985, 1986; Roscow, 1967

Key Takeaways

- Certain biological, cognitive, and psychological changes occur as people age. These changes reinforce the negative view of the elderly, but this view nonetheless reflects stereotypes and myths about aging and the elderly.
- Regular exercise, good nutrition, stress reduction, involvement in personal networks, and religious involvement all enhance successful aging.

For Your Review

1. Do you think the negative view of older people that is often found in our society is an unfair stereotype, or do you think there is actually some truth to this stereotype? Explain your answer.
2. Referring back to Chapter 1 "Understanding Social

's discussion of Émile Durkheim, how does research that documents the importance of personal networks for successful aging reflect Durkheim's insights?

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9.5 Problems Facing Older Americans

Learning Objectives

1.　Present a brief sociodemographic profile of the US elderly.
2.　Discuss the several problems experienced by the US elderly.
3.　Describe how the social attitudes of older Americans generally differ from those of younger Americans.

We now turn our attention to older people in the United States. We first sketch a demographic profile of our elderly and then examine some of the problems they face because of their age and because of ageism.

Who Are the Elderly?

presents the demographic composition of Americans aged 65 or older. Slightly more than half the elderly are 65–74 years of age, and about 57 percent are female, reflecting males' shorter life spans as discussed earlier. About 80 percent of the elderly are non-Latino whites, compared to about 66 percent in the population as a whole; 8.6 percent are African American, compared to about 13 percent of the population; and 7.0 percent are Latino, compared to 15 percent of the population. The greater proportion of whites among the elderly and lower proportions of African Americans and Latinos reflects these groups' life expectancy differences discussed earlier and also their differences in birth rates.

Table 6.2 Demographic Composition of the Elderly, 2010

Age	
65–74 years	52.3%
75–84 years	33.4%
85 years and over	14.3%
Gender	
Female	56.9%
Male	43.1%
Race and/or ethnicity*	
White, non-Latino	80.1%
African American	8.6%
Latino	7.0%
Asian/Pacific Islander	3.5%
Amer. Ind., Esk., Aleut.	0.6%
Two or more races	0.7%
Living in poverty	9.0%
Marital status	
Married	57.6%
Widowed	28.1%
Divorced	10.0%
Never married	4.3%
Years of school completed	
0–8 years	10.2%
1–3 years of high school	10.3%
High school graduate	36.4%
1–3 years of college	20.6%
College graduate	22.5%
Labor force participation	
Employed	16.2%
Unemployed	1.2%
* 2009 data	

Not in labor force	82.6%
Household income*	
Under $15,000	18.8%
$15,000–$24,999	20.7%
$25,000–$34,999	15.4%
$35,000–49,999	15.1%
$50,000–$74,999	14.2%
$75,000–$99,999	6.5%
$100,000 and over	9.4%
* 2009 data	

Source: Data from US Census Bureau. (2012). *Statistical abstract of the United States: 2012.* Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office. Retrieved from http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab.

The lower proportions of African Americans and Latinos among the elderly partly reflect these groups' lower life expectancies.

Evgeni Zotov – Grandparents – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

The percentage of elders living in poverty is 9.0, compared to 15.1 percent of the entire population. Although most elders have fixed incomes, the fact that their family size is usually one or two means

that they are less likely than younger people to live in poverty. In fact, today's elderly are financially much better off than their grandparents were, thanks to Social Security, Medicare (the federal health insurance program for older Americans), pensions, and their own assets. We will revisit the health and financial security of elders a little later.

Turning to education, about 22 percent of the elderly are college graduates, compared to about 29 percent of the population as a whole. This difference reflects the fact that few people went to college when today's elderly were in their late teens and early twenties. However, it is still true that today's elders are better educated than any previous generation of elders. Future generations of the elderly will be even better educated than those now.

While most elders are retired and no longer in the labor force, about 16 percent do continue to work (see Table 6.2 "Demographic Composition of the Elderly, 2010"). These seniors tend to be in good health and to find their jobs psychologically satisfying. Compared to younger workers, they miss fewer days of work for health or other reasons and are less likely to quit their jobs for other opportunities (Sears, 2009).

Although we emphasized earlier that many older Americans do not fit the negative image with which they are portrayed, it is still true that they face special problems because of their age and life circumstances and because of ageism. We discuss some of these here.

Physical and Mental Health

Perhaps the problem that comes most readily to mind is health, or, to be more precise, poor health. It is true that many older people remain in good health and are fully able to function mentally and physically (Rowe et al., 2010). Still, the biological and psychological effects of aging do lead to greater physical and mental health problems among the elderly than in younger age groups, as we briefly discussed earlier. These problems are reflected in responses to the General Social Survey (GSS) question, "Would you say your own health, in general, is excellent, good, fair, or poor?" [Figure 6.6 "Age and Self-Reported Health"](#) shows that the elderly are more likely than the nonelderly to report that their health is only fair or poor.

Figure 6.6 Age and Self-Reported Health
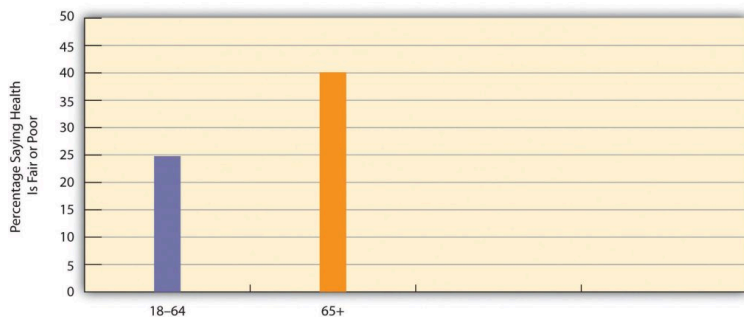
The elderly's perception of their own health is supported by government estimates of chronic health conditions for older Americans. Of all people aged 65 or older not living in a nursing home or other institution, almost 50 percent have arthritis, 56 percent have high blood pressure, 32 percent have heart disease, 35 percent have hearing loss, 18 percent have vision problems, and 19 percent have diabetes (these numbers add up to more than 100 percent as people may have several health conditions) (Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics, 2010). These rates are much higher than those for younger age groups.

The elderly also suffer from dementia, including Alzheimer's disease, which affects almost 13 percent of people 65 or older (Alzheimer's Association, 2009). Another mental health problem is depression, which affects almost 15 percent of people 65 or older. Because of mental or physical disability, about two-thirds of all people 65 or older need help with at least one "daily living" activity, such as preparing a meal (Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics, 2010).


Older people visit the doctor and hospital more often than younger people. Partly for this reason, adequate health care for the elderly is of major importance.

If the elderly have more health problems, then adequate care for them is of major importance. They visit the doctor and hospital more often than their middle-aged counterparts. Medicare covers about one-half of their health-care costs; this is a substantial amount of coverage but still forces many seniors to pay thousands of dollars annually themselves. Some physicians and other health-care providers do not accept Medicare "assignment," meaning that the patient must pay an even higher amount. Moreover, Medicare pays little or nothing for long-term care in nursing homes and other institutions and for mental health services. All these factors mean that older Americans can still face high medical expenses or at least pay high premiums for private health insurance.

In addition, Medicare costs have risen rapidly along with other health-care costs. Medicare expenditures soared from about $37 billion in 1980 to more than $500 billion today (see Figure 6.7 "Medicare Expenditures, 1980–2010"). As the population continues to age and as health-care costs continue to rise, Medicare expenses will continue to rise as well, making it increasingly difficult to find the money to finance Medicare.

Figure 6.7 Medicare Expenditures, 1980–2010
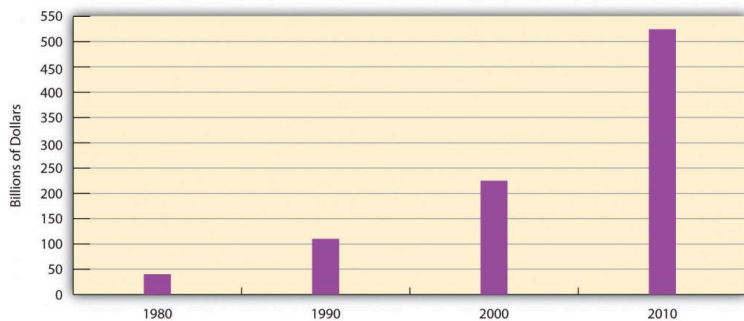
Source: Data from Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. (n.d.). National health expenditure data. Retrieved from http://www.hhs.gov.

Nursing Home Care

While most older Americans live by themselves or with their families, a small minority live in group settings. A growing type of group setting is the *continuous care retirement community*, a setting of private rooms, apartments, and/or condominiums that offers medical and practical care to those who need it. In some such communities, residents eat their meals together, while in others they cook for themselves. Usually these communities offer above-average recreational facilities and can be very expensive, as some require a lifetime contract or at least monthly fees that can run into the thousands of dollars.

Nursing homes are often understaffed to save costs and are also generally not subject to outside inspection. These conditions help contribute to the neglect of nursing home residents.

Sheila – Christian Nursing Home – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

For elders who need high-level medical care or practical support, nursing homes are the primary option. About 16,100 nursing homes exist, and 3.9 percent of Americans 65 or older live in them (Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics, 2010). About three-fourths of all nursing home residents are women. Almost all residents receive assistance in bathing and showering, 80 percent receive help in using the bathroom, and one-third receive help in eating.

As noted earlier, Medicare does not pay for long-term institutional care for most older Americans. Because nursing home care costs at least $70,000 yearly, residents can quickly use up all their assets and then, ironically, become eligible for payments from *Medicaid*, the federal insurance program for people with low incomes.

If one problem of nursing homes is their expense, another problem is the quality of care they provide. Because their residents are typically in poor physical and/or mental health, their care must be the best possible, as they can do little to help themselves if their

care is substandard. As more people enter nursing homes in the years ahead, the quality of nursing home care will become even more important. Yet there is much evidence that nursing home care is often substandard and is replete with neglect and abuse (DeHart, Webb, & Cornman, 2009).

Financial Security and Employment

Earlier we noted that the elderly are less likely than younger age groups to live in poverty and that their financial status is much better than that of previous generations of older people. One reason for this is Social Security: If Social Security did not exist, the poverty rate of the elderly would be 45 percent, or five times higher than the actual rate (Kerby, 2012). Without Social Security, then, nearly half of all people 65 or older would be living in official poverty, and this rate would be even much higher for older women and older persons of color. However, this brief summary of their economic well-being obscures some underlying problems (Carr, 2010; Crawthorne, 2008).

First, recall Chapter 5 "Poverty"'s discussion of *episodic poverty*, which refers to the drifting of many people into and out of poverty as their jobs and other circumstances change. Once they become poor, older people are more likely than younger ones to *stay* poor, as younger people have more job and other opportunities to move out of poverty. Recall also that the official poverty rate obscures the fact that many people live just above it and are "near poor." This is

especially true of the elderly, who, if hit by large medical bills or other expenses, can hardly afford to pay them.

Second, the extent of older Americans' poverty varies by sociodemographic factors and is much worse for some groups than for others (Carr, 2010). Older women, for example, are more likely than older men to live in poverty for at least two reasons. Because women earn less than men and are more likely to take time off from work during their careers, they have lower monthly Social Security benefits than men and smaller pensions from their employers. As well, women outlive men and thus use up their savings. Racial and ethnic disparities also exist among the elderly, reflecting poverty disparities in the entire population, as older people of color are much more likely than older whites to live in poverty (Carr, 2010). Among women 65 and older, 9 percent of whites live in poverty, compared to 27 percent of African Americans, 12 percent of Asians, and 21 percent of Hispanics.

Older women are more likely than older men to live in poverty.

Christian Haugen – [Old woman feeding the pigeon](#) – CC BY 2.0.

Third, monthly Social Security benefits are tied to people's earnings before retirement; the higher the earnings, the higher the monthly benefit. Thus a paradox occurs: People who earn low wages will

get lower Social Security benefits after they retire, even though they need *higher* benefits to make up for their lower earnings. In this manner, the income inequality that exists before retirement continues to exist after it.

This paradox reflects a wider problem involving Social Security. However helpful it might be in aiding older Americans, the aid it provides lags far behind comparable programs in other wealthy Western nations (see [Note 6.27 "Lessons from Other Societies"](#)). Social Security payments are low enough that almost one-third of the elderly who receive no other income assistance live in official poverty. For all these reasons, Social Security is certainly beneficial for many older Americans, but it remains inadequate compared to what other nations provide.

Lessons from Other Societies

Aging Policy and Programs in the Netherlands and Sweden

A few years ago, AARP assessed quality-of-life issues for older people and the larger society in sixteen wealthy democracies (the nations of North America and Western Europe, along with Australia and Japan). Each nation was

rated (on a scale of 1–5, with 5 being the highest score) on seventeen criteria, including life expectancy, health care for the elderly, pension coverage, and age-discrimination laws. Of the sixteen nations, the Netherlands ranked first, with a total score of 64, while Italy ranked last, with a score of 48; the United States was thirteenth, with a score of 50. Despite its immense wealth, then, the United States lagged behind most other democracies. Because a "perfect" score would have been 85 (17 × 5), even the Netherlands fell short of an ideal quality of life as measured by the AARP indicators.

Why did the United States not rank higher? The experience of the Netherlands and Sweden, both of which have longer life expectancies than the United States, points to some possible answers. In the Netherlands, everyone at age 65 receives a full pension that does not depend on how much money they earned while they were working, and everyone thus gets the same amount. This amount is larger than the average American gets, because Social Security does depend on earnings and many people earned fairly low amounts during their working years. As a result, Dutch elderly are much less likely than their American counterparts to be poor. The Dutch elderly (and also the nonelderly) have generous government insurance for medical problems and for nursing home care; this financial help is much higher than older Americans obtain through Medicare.

As one example, the AARP article mentioned an elderly Dutch woman who had cancer surgery and thirty-two chemotherapy treatments, for which she paid nothing. In the United States, the chemotherapy treatments would have cost at least $30,000. Medicare would have covered

only 80 percent of this amount, leaving a patient to pay $6,000.

The Netherlands also helps its elderly in other ways. One example is that about one-fourth of that nation's elderly receive regular government-subsidized home visits by health-care professionals and/or housekeepers; this practice enables the elderly to remain independent and avoid having to enter a nursing home. In another example, the elderly also receive seven days of free riding on the nation's rail system.

Sweden has a home-care visitation program that is similar to the Netherlands' program. Many elderly are visited twice a day by a care assistant who helps them bathe and dress in the morning and go to bed at night. The care assistant also regularly cleans their residence and takes them out for exercise. The Swedish government pays about 80 percent of the costs of this assistance and subsidizes the remaining cost for elderly who cannot afford it. Like the Netherlands' program, Sweden's program helps the elderly to remain independent and live at home rather than enter a nursing institution.

Compared to the United States, then, other democracies generally provide their elderly less expensive or free health care, greater financial support during their retirement, and home visits by health-care professionals and other assistants. In these and other ways, these other governments encourage "active aging." Adoption of similar policies in the United States would improve the lives of older Americans and perhaps prolong their life spans.

Sources: Edwards, 2004; Hartlapp & Schmid, 2008; Ney, 2005

Older people who want to work may have trouble finding employment because of age discrimination and other factors.

Wikimedia Commons – CC BY 2.0.

Workplace Ageism

Older Americans also face problems in employment. Recall that about 16 percent of seniors remain employed. Other elders may wish to work but are retired or unemployed because several obstacles make it difficult for them to find jobs. First, many workplaces do not permit the part-time working arrangements that many seniors favor. Second, and as the opening news story indicated, the rise in high-tech jobs means that older workers would need to be retrained for many of today's jobs, and few retraining programs exist. Third, although federal law prohibits age discrimination in employment, it exists anyway, as employers do not

think older people are "up to" the job, even though the evidence indicates they are good, productive workers (Berger, 2009; Roscigno, 2010). Finally, earnings above a certain level reduce Social Security benefits before full retirement age, leading some older people to avoid working at all or to at least limit their hours. All these obstacles lead seniors to drop out of the labor force or to remain unemployed (Gallo, Brand, Teng, Leo-Summers, & Byers, 2009).

Age discrimination in the workplace merits some further discussion. According to sociologist Vincent J. Roscigno (2010), survey evidence suggests that more than half of older workers have experienced or observed age discrimination in the workplace, and more than 80 percent of older workers have experienced or observed jokes, disrespect, or other prejudicial comments about old age. Roscigno notes that workplace ageism receives little news media attention and has also been neglected by social scientists. This is so despite the related facts that ageism in the workplace is common and that the older people who experience this discrimination suffer financial loss and emotional problems. Roscigno (2010, p. 17) interviewed several victims of age discrimination and later wrote, "Many conveyed fear of defaulting on mortgages or being unable to pay for their children's college after being pushed out of their jobs. Others expressed anger and insecurity over the loss of affordable health insurance or pension benefits…Just as prevalent and somewhat surprising to me in these discussions were the less-tangible, yet deeper social-psychological and emotional costs that social science research has established for racial discrimination or sexual harassment, for instance, but are only now being considered in relation to older workers."

One of the people Roscigno interviewed was a maintenance worker who was laid off after more than two decades of working for his employer. This worker was both hurt and angry. "They now don't want to pay me my pension," he said. "I was a good worker for them and always did everything they asked. I went out of my way to help train people and make everything run smoothly, so everybody was

happy and it was a good place to work. And now this is what I get, like I never really mattered to them. It's just not right" (Roscigno, 2010, p. 17).

Bereavement and Social Isolation

"We all need someone we can lean on," as a famous Rolling Stones song goes. Most older Americans do have adequate social support networks, which, as we saw earlier, are important for their well-being. However, a significant minority of elders live alone and do not see friends and relatives as often as they wish. Bereavement takes a toll, as elders who might have been married for many years suddenly find themselves living alone. Here a gender difference again exists. Because women outlive men and are generally younger than their husbands, they are three times more likely than men (42 percent compared to 13 percent) to be widowed and thus much more likely to live alone (see Table 6.3 "Living Arrangements of Noninstitutionalized Older Americans, 2010").

Table 6.3 Living Arrangements of Noninstitutionalized Older Americans, 2010

	Men (%)	Women (%)
Living alone	19	41
Living with spouse	70	37
Other arrangement	11	21

Source: Data from Administration on Aging. (2011). A profile of older Americans: 2011. Retrieved from http://www.aoa.gov/aoaroot/aging_statistics/Profile/2011/docs/2011profile.pdf.

Many elders have at least one adult child living within driving distance, and such children are an invaluable resource. At the same time, however, some elders have no children, because either they have outlived their children or they never had any. As baby boomers begin reaching their older years, more of them will have no children because they were more likely than previous generations to not marry and/or to not have children if they did marry. Baby boomers thus face a relative lack of children to help them when they enter their "old-old" years (Leland, 2010).

Bereavement is always a difficult experience, but because so many elders lose a spouse, it is a particular problem in their lives. The grief that usually follows bereavement can last several years and, if it becomes extreme, can involve anxiety, depression, guilt, loneliness, and other problems. Of all these problems, loneliness is perhaps the most common and the most difficult to overcome.

Elder Abuse

Some seniors fall prey to their own relatives who commit **elder abuse** against them. Such abuse involves one or more of the following: physical or sexual violence, psychological or emotional abuse, neglect of care, or financial exploitation (Novak, 2012). Accurate data are hard to come by since few elders report their abuse, but estimates say that at least 10 percent of older Americans have suffered at least one form of abuse, amounting to hundreds of thousands of cases annually. However, few of these cases come to the attention of the police or other authorities (National Center on Elder Abuse, 2010).

Although we may never know the actual extent of elder abuse, it poses a serious health problem for the elders who are physically, sexually, and/or psychologically abused or neglected, and it may even raise their chances of dying. One study of more than 2,800 elders found that those who were abused or neglected were three times more likely than those who were not mistreated to die during the next thirteen years. This difference was found even after injury and chronic illness were taken into account (Horn, 1998).

A major reason for elder abuse seems to be stress. The adult children and other relatives who care for elders often find it an exhausting, emotionally trying experience, especially if the person they are helping needs extensive help with daily activities. Faced with this stress, elders' caregivers can easily snap and take out their frustrations with physical violence, emotional abuse, or neglect of care.

Senior Power: Older Americans as a Political Force

Older Americans often hold strong views on issues that affect them directly, such as Medicare and Social Security. In turn, politicians often work to win the older vote and shape their political stances accordingly.

During the past few decades, older people have become more active politically on their own behalf.

Marc Nozell – Bernie Sanders – CC BY-NC 2.0.

To help address all the problems discussed in the preceding pages, several organizations have been established since the 1980s to act as interest groups in the political arena on behalf of older Americans (Walker, 2006). One of the most influential groups is the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), which is open to people 50 or older. AARP provides travel and other discounts to its members and lobbies Congress and other groups extensively on elderly issues. Its membership numbers about 40 million, or 40 percent of the over-50 population. Some critics say AARP focuses too much on its largely middle-class membership's self-interests instead of working for more far-reaching economic changes that might benefit the

older poor; others say its efforts on Medicare, Social Security, and other issues do benefit the elderly from all walks of life. This controversy aside, AARP is an influential force in the political arena because of its numbers and resources.

A very different type of political organization of the elderly was the Gray Panthers, founded by the late Maggie Kuhn in 1970 (Kuhn, Long, & Quinn, 1991). Although this group has been less newsworthy since Kuhn's death in 1995, at its height it had some eighty-five local chapters across the nation and 70,000 members and supporters. A more activist organization than AARP and other lobbying groups for the elderly, the Gray Panthers took more liberal stances. For example, it urged the establishment of a national health-care service and programs to increase affordable housing for the elderly.

As older Americans have engaged the political process on their own behalf, critics have charged that programs for the elderly are too costly to the nation, that the elderly are better off than groups like AARP claim, and that new programs for the elderly will take even more money from younger generations and leave them insufficient funds for their own retirement many years from now. Their criticism, which began during the 1980s, is termed the **generational equity** argument (Williamson, McNamara, & Howling, 2003).

Advocates for the elderly say the generational equity critics exaggerate the financial well-being of older Americans and neglect the fact that many older Americans, especially women and those of color, are poor or near poor and thus need additional government aid. Anything we can do now to help the aged, they continue, will also help future generations of the elderly. As Lenard W. Kaye (1994, p. 346) observed in an early critique of the generational equity movement, "In the long run, all of us can expect to live into extended old age, barring an unexpected fatal illness or accident. To do injustice to our current generation of elders, by means of policy change, can only come back to haunt us as each and every one of us—children, young families, and working people—move toward the latter stages of the life course."

People Making a Difference

College Students Helping Senior Citizens

After Hurricane Irene swept up the East Coast in August 2011, many towns and cities faced severe flooding. One of these towns was Cranford, New Jersey, just southwest of Newark. Streets and hundreds of homes flooded, and many residents' belongings were ruined.

Union County College, which has campuses in Cranford and a few other towns, came to Cranford residents' aid. As the college president explained in late August, "Many of the town's residents are senior citizens. Even though the fall term won't begin until Sept. 1, we've still got a number of strong men and women on campus to help residents clear out their basements and help move whatever people needed moved."

Led by the dean of college life, a dozen or so students went house-to-house on a Cranford street that experienced the worst flooding to aid the town's senior citizens and younger ones as well. The dean later recalled, "Everyone we met was just so happy to see us there helping

out. Sometimes they had plenty of work for us. Other times, they just smiled and said they were glad to know we cared."

A news report summarized the impact of the students' assistance: "In the coming weeks and months, Cranford residents will be able to recover what their town lost to Irene. But they may never forget the damage Irene caused, nor are they likely to forget how Union County College's students came to help them in their time of need." At a time of crisis, the staff and students of Union County College in the small town of Cranford, New Jersey, made a big difference in the lives of Cranford's senior citizens and younger residents alike.

Source: Cranford Chronicle, 2011

Key Takeaways

- The US elderly experience several health problems, including arthritis, high blood pressure, heart disease, hearing loss, vision problems, diabetes, and dementia.
- Nursing home care in the United States is very expensive and often substandard; neglect and abuse of nursing home residents is fairly common.
- Despite help from Social Security, many older Americans face problems of financial security.
- It is difficult to determine the actual extent of elder abuse, but elder abuse often has serious consequences for the health and lives of older Americans.

- During the last few decades, older Americans have been active in the political process on their own behalf and today are an important political force in the United States.

For Your Review

1. What do you think is the worst or most serious problem facing the US elderly? Explain your answer.
2. The text suggests that the lives of the US elderly would be improved if the United States were to adopt some of the policies and practices that other nations have for their elderly. Explain why you agree or disagree with this suggestion.

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9.6 Reducing Ageism and Helping Older Americans

Learning Objectives

1.   Understand the contradictory impulses that make it difficult to predict the future for older Americans.
2.   Discuss any two programs or policies that should help address some of the problems facing older Americans.

We have seen some contradictory impulses that make it difficult to predict the status of older Americans in the decades ahead. On the one hand, the large number of baby boomers will combine with increasing longevity to swell the ranks of the elderly; this process has already begun and will accelerate during the coming years. The inevitable jump in the size of the aged population may strain Social Security, Medicare, and other programs for the aged. On the other hand, the baby boomer generation will reach its old age as a much better educated and more healthy and wealthy group than any previous generation. It will likely participate in the labor force, politics, and other arenas more than previous generations of elders and, as has been true for some time, exert a good deal of influence on national political and cultural affairs.

Although this sounds like a rosier picture, several concerns remain. Despite the relative affluence of the baby boomers, segments of the group, especially among women and people of

color, remain mired in poverty, and these segments will continue to be once they reach their older years. Moreover, the relative health of the baby boomers means that they will outlive previous generations of the aged. Yet as more of them reach the ranks of the "old-old," they will become frailer and require care from health-care professionals and organizations and from social support networks. As noted earlier, some may not have children and will be in even more need of help.

Although older Americans fare much better than their counterparts in poor nations, they fare not nearly as well as their counterparts in other wealthy democracies, which generally provide many more extensive and better-funded programs and services for their elderly. Older Americans also continue to confront stereotypes and prejudicial attitudes that add to the burden many of them already face from the biological process of aging.

A sociological understanding of aging and ageism reminds us that many of the problems that older Americans face are ultimately rooted not in their chronological age but rather in the stereotypes about them and in the lack of adequate social programs like those found throughout other Western nations. This understanding also reminds us that the older Americans who face the most severe problems of health, health care, and financial security are women and people of color and that their more severe problems reflect the many inequalities they have experienced throughout the life course, long before they reached their older years. These inequalities accumulate over the years to leave them especially vulnerable when they finally arrive into their sixties.

With this understanding, it becomes clear that efforts to improve the lives of older Americans must focus on providing them with more numerous and more extensive social services and programming of many kinds and on reducing the stereotypes and prejudicial attitudes that many Americans hold of older people. Possibilities involving improved social services and programming might be drawn from the example provided by other Western

nations and include the following (Rowe et al., 2010; Uhlenberg, 2009):

1. An expansion of Social Security to provide a much more comfortable life for all older Americans, regardless of their earnings history, and thus regardless of their gender and race/ethnicity.
2. An expansion of Medicare and other health aid for older Americans to match the level of health-care assistance provided by many other Western nations. In one particular area that needs attention, Medicare pays for nursing home care only after nursing home patients use up most of their own assets, leaving a patient's spouse with severe financial problems. Other Western nations pay for nursing home care from the outset, and the United States should adopt this practice.
3. The establishment of more flexible work hours, job-sharing arrangements, and other policies that would enhance the ability of older people to work part-time or full-time.
4. Increase paid and volunteer opportunities for older adults to help take care of young children and adolescents, especially those who are poor or otherwise disadvantaged, in schools and other settings, creating a win-win situation for both the older adults and the children.
5. As with stereotypical and prejudicial views based on gender and on race/ethnicity, greater educational efforts should be launched to reduce stereotyping and prejudicial attitudes based on aging. Like sexism and racism, ageism has no place in a nation like the United States, which has historically promised equality and equal opportunity for all.

Beyond all these measures, aging scholars emphasize the need to help *future* older populations by investing in younger people. As a group of several scholars has noted, "Many of the key determinants of successful aging are cumulative, occurring throughout the

lifetime and, importantly, starting in early childhood. The people who will turn 65 between 2050 and 2070 have already been born. If we want to promote their health and well-being into old age, we need to begin now, when they are infants and children. Childhood and early adolescent experiences leave a footprint for many functions in older age. Failing to invest in education and health throughout childhood and young adulthood is short-sighted" (Rowe et al., 2010, p. 24).

Key Takeaways

- Although the number of older Americans will be increasing in the years ahead, the baby boomers who are now reaching old age will be better educated and wealthier than older Americans of past generations.
- Efforts to help older Americans would benefit from relying on the models practiced by other Western democracies.

For Your Review

1. What do you think is the most important action the United States should take to help older Americans?
2. Does it make sense for the United States to follow the example of other democracies as it tries to help older Americans, or is the United States different enough from these nations that it does not make

sense to do so? Explain your answer.

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Summary

1. Gerontology is the study of aging. Gerontologists study the biological, psychological, and social dimensions of aging. Social gerontologists focus on social aging and distinguish several dimensions of aging, which refers to changes in people's roles and relationships as they age.

2. The perception and experience of aging vary from one society to another and within a given society over time.

3. Sociological explanations of aging include disengagement theory, activity theory, and conflict theory. Disengagement theory emphasizes the need of society to disengage its elders from their previous roles to pave the way for a younger and presumably more able generation to take over those roles. In contrast, activity theory assumes that elders need to remain active to enhance their physical and mental health. Conflict theory emphasizes ageism, or discrimination and prejudice against the elderly, and the structural barriers society poses to elders' economic and other aspects of overall well-being.

4. Life expectancy differs dramatically around the world and within the United States, where it's lower for men and lower for people of color. Because life expectancy has increased, people are living longer, resulting in a "graying of society." In the United States, the imminent entrance of the baby boom

generation into its older years will further fuel a large rise in the number of older Americans. This graying of society may strain traditional economic and medical programs for their care and affect views of aging and the elderly.

5. Although aging involves several physiological and psychological changes, negative stereotypes of aging and the elderly exaggerate the extent and impact of these changes. Proper exercise, nutrition, and stress reduction can minimize the effects of aging, as can religious involvement and informal social support networks.

6. As a diverse group, older Americans differ greatly in terms of wealth and poverty, education, health, and other dimensions. They face several problems because of their age, including illness and disability, financial security, employment obstacles, and elder abuse. For several reasons, older Americans generally hold more conservative views on social and moral issues. At the same time, groups working on behalf of older Americans in the political arena have succeeded in bringing elder issues to the attention of public officials and political parties.

7. As the ranks of older Americans swell in the years ahead, elders will be better educated and wealthier than their predecessors, but their sheer numbers may impose considerable strain on social institutions. Already there are signs of perceived conflict between the needs of the elderly and those of younger generations. However, advocates for older Americans believe that efforts to help elders now will in the long run help younger Americans when they finally reach

their old age.

Using What You Know

It is about twenty years from now, and a close friend of yours is facing a difficult decision. Her mother is in failing health and might have the onset of dementia. It has become increasingly apparent that she can no longer live alone, and your friend is trying to decide whether to have her mother come live with her, to arrange for in-home care for her, or to place her into residential care. What advice do you give to your friend?

What You Can Do

To help reduce inequality based on aging and ageism and the problems facing older people, you may wish to do any of the following:

1. Volunteer at a senior citizens' center, residential care facility, or nursing home.
2. Write a letter to the editor about media stereotypes about older people.
3. Start a group on your campus to educate students

about the problems facing senior citizens.

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Social Issues in the News

"America's First Muslim College to Open This Fall," the headline said. The United States has hundreds of colleges and universities run by or affiliated with the Catholic Church and several Protestant and Jewish denominations, and now it was about to have its first Muslim college. Zaytuna College in Berkeley, California, had just sent out acceptance letters to students who would make up its inaugural class in the fall of 2010. The school's founder said it would be a Muslim liberal arts college whose first degrees would be in Islamic law and theology and in the Arabic language. The chair of the college's academic affairs committee explained, "We are trying to graduate well-rounded students who will be skilled in a liberal arts education with the ability to engage in a wider framework of society and the variety of issues that confront them....We are thinking of how to set up students for success. We don't see any contradiction between religious and secular subjects."

The college planned to rent a building in Berkeley during its first several years and was doing fund-raising to pay for the eventual construction or purchase of its own campus. It hoped to obtain academic accreditation within a decade.

Because the United States has approximately 6 million Muslims whose numbers have tripled since the 1970s, college officials were optimistic that their new institution would succeed. An official with the Islamic Society of North America, which aids Muslim communities and organizations and provides chaplains for the U.S. military, applauded the new college. "It tells me that Muslims are coming of age," he said. "This is one more thing that makes Muslims part of the mainstream of America. It is an important part of the development of our community." (Oguntoyinbo, 2010)

The opening of any college is normally cause for celebration, but the news about this particular college aroused a mixed reaction. Some people wrote positive comments on the Web page on which this news article appeared, but two anonymous writers left very negative comments. One asked, "What if they teach radical Islam?" while the second commented, "Dose [*sic*] anyone know how Rome fell all those years ago? We are heading down the same road."

As the reaction to this news story reminds us, religion and especially Islam have certainly been hot topics since 9/11, as America continues to worry about terrorist threats from people with Middle Eastern backgrounds. Many political and religious leaders urge Americans to practice religious tolerance, and advocacy groups have established programs and secondary school curricula to educate the public and students, respectively. Colleges and universities have responded with courses and workshops on Islamic culture, literature, and language. The controversy over Islam is just one example of the strong passions that religion and religious differences often arouse, in part because religion involves our dearest values.

This chapter presents a sociological understanding of religion. We begin by examining religion as a social institution and by sketching its history and practice throughout the world today. We then turn to the several types of religious organizations before concluding with a discussion of various aspects of religion in the United States.

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10.1 Religion as a Social Institution

Learning Objectives

1. Describe the difference between sacred beliefs and profane beliefs.
2. Explain what Émile Durkheim tried to understand about religion.

Religion clearly plays an important role in American life. Most Americans believe in a deity, three-fourths pray at least weekly, and more than half attend religious services at least monthly. We tend to think of religion in individual terms because religious beliefs and values are highly personal for many people. However, religion is also a social institution, as it involves patterns of beliefs and behavior that help a society meet its basic needs, to recall the definition of social institution in Chapter 3 "Social Structure and Social Interaction". More specifically, **religion** is the set of beliefs and practices regarding sacred things that help a society understand the meaning and purpose of life.

More than half of all Americans attend religious services at least once per week. This illustrates the important role that religion plays in American life.

Because it is such an important social institution, religion has long been a key sociological topic. Émile Durkheim (1915/1947) observed long ago that every society has beliefs about things that are supernatural and awe-inspiring and beliefs about things that are more practical and down-to-earth. He called the former beliefs **sacred** beliefs and the latter beliefs **profane** beliefs. Religious beliefs and practices involve the sacred: they involve things our senses cannot readily observe, and they involve things that inspire in us awe, reverence, and even fear.

Durkheim did not try to prove or disprove religious beliefs. Religion, he acknowledged, is a matter of faith, and faith is not provable or disprovable through scientific inquiry. Rather, Durkheim tried to understand the role played by religion in social life and the impact on religion of social structure and social change. In short, he treated religion as a social institution.

Sociologists since his time have treated religion in the same way. Anthropologists, historians, and other scholars have also studied religion. Historical work on religion reminds us of the importance of religion since the earliest societies, while comparative work on contemporary religion reminds us of its importance throughout

the world today. Accordingly, Chapter 10 "Religion", Section 17.2 "Religion in Historical and Cross-Cultural Perspective" examines key aspects of the history of religion and its practice across the globe.

Key Takeaways

- As a social institution, religion helps a society meet its basic needs.
- Émile Durkheim distinguished between sacred beliefs and profane beliefs and wrote about the role religion played in social life.

For Your Review

1. Explain why religion should be regarded as a social institution.

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1. 10.2 Religion in Historical and Cross-Cultural Perspective

Learning Objectives

1. Describe key developments in the history of religion since ancient times.
2. List the major religions in the world today.
3. Outline key beliefs of each of these religions.

Every known society has practiced religion, although the nature of religious belief and practice has differed from one society to the next. Prehistoric people turned to religion to help them understand birth, death, and natural events such as hurricanes. They also relied on religion for help in dealing with their daily needs for existence: good weather, a good crop, an abundance of animals to hunt (Noss & Grangaard, 2008).

Although the world's most popular religions today are **monotheistic** (believing in one god), many societies in ancient times, most notably Egypt, Greece, and Rome, were **polytheistic** (believing in more than one god). You have been familiar with their names since childhood: Aphrodite, Apollo, Athena, Mars, Zeus, and many others. Each god "specialized" in one area; Aphrodite, for example, was the Greek goddess of love, while Mars was the Roman god of war (Noss & Grangaard, 2008).

Ancient Greece and Rome were polytheistic, as they believed in many gods. This statue depicts Zeus, the king of gods in Greek mythology.

Alun Salt – Apollo of Centocelle – CC BY-SA 2.0.

During the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church dominated European life. The Church's control began to weaken with the Protestant Reformation, which began in 1517 when Martin Luther, a German monk, spoke out against Church practices. By the end of the century, Protestantism had taken hold in much of Europe. Another founder of sociology, Max Weber, argued a century ago that the rise of Protestantism in turn led to the rise of capitalism. In his great book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber wrote that Protestant belief in the need for hard work and economic success as a sign of eternal salvation helped lead to the rise of capitalism and the Industrial Revolution (Weber, 1904/1958). Although some scholars challenge Weber's views for several reasons, including the fact that capitalism also developed among non-Protestants, his analysis remains a compelling treatment of the relationship between religion and society.

Moving from Europe to the United States, historians have documented the importance of religion since the colonial period. Many colonists came to the new land to escape religious

persecution in their home countries. The colonists were generally very religious, and their beliefs guided their daily lives and, in many cases, the operation of their governments and other institutions. In essence, government and religion were virtually the same entity in many locations, and church and state were not separate. Church officials performed many of the duties that the government performs today, and the church was not only a place of worship but also a community center in most of the colonies (Gaustad & Schmidt, 2004). The Puritans of what came to be Massachusetts refused to accept religious beliefs and practices different from their own and persecuted people with different religious views. They expelled Anne Hutchinson in 1637 for disagreeing with the beliefs of the Puritans' Congregational Church and hanged Mary Dyer in 1660 for practicing her Quaker faith.

Key World Religions Today

Today the world's largest religion is *Christianity*, to which more than 2 billion people, or about one-third the world's population, subscribe. Christianity began 2,000 years ago in Palestine under the charismatic influence of Jesus of Nazareth and today is a Western religion, as most Christians live in the Americas and in Europe. Beginning as a cult, Christianity spread through the Mediterranean and later through Europe before becoming the official religion of the Roman Empire. Today, dozens of Christian denominations exist in the United States and other nations. Their views differ in many respects, but generally they all regard Jesus as the son of God, and

many believe that salvation awaits them if they follow his example (Young, 2010).

The second largest religion is *Islam*, which includes about 1.6 billion Muslims, most of them in the Middle East, northern Africa, and parts of Asia. Muhammad founded Islam in the 600s A.D. and is regarded today as a prophet who was a descendant of Abraham. Whereas the sacred book of Christianity and Judaism is the Bible, the sacred book of Islam is the Koran. The Five Pillars of Islam guide Muslim life: (a) the acceptance of Allah as God and Muhammad as his messenger; (b) ritual worship, including daily prayers facing Mecca, the birthplace of Muhammad; (c) observing Ramadan, a month of prayer and fasting; (d) giving alms to the poor; and (e) making a holy pilgrimage to Mecca at least once before one dies.

These individuals are praying at a mosque, the place of worship for the religion of Islam. Islam is the world's second largest religion, with an estimated 1.6 billion adherents.

Omar Chatriwala – Praying late into the night – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

The third largest religion is *Hinduism*, which includes more than 800 million people, most of whom live in India and Pakistan. Hinduism began about 2000 B.C. and, unlike Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, has no historic linkage to any one person and no real belief in one omnipotent deity. Hindus live instead according to a

set of religious precepts called *dharma*. For these reasons Hinduism is often called an *ethical religion*. Hindus believe in reincarnation, and their religious belief in general is closely related to India's caste system, as an important aspect of Hindu belief is that one should live according to the rules of one's caste.

Buddhism is another key religion and claims almost 400 million followers, most of whom live in Asia. Buddhism developed out of Hinduism and was founded by Siddhartha Gautama more than 500 years before the birth of Jesus. Siddhartha is said to have given up a comfortable upper-caste Hindu existence for one of wandering and poverty. He eventually achieved enlightenment and acquired the name of Buddha, or "enlightened one." His teachings are now called the *dhamma*, and over the centuries they have influenced Buddhists to lead a moral life. Like Hindus, Buddhists generally believe in reincarnation, and they also believe that people experience suffering unless they give up material concerns and follow other Buddhist principles.

Another key religion is *Judaism*, which claims more than 13 million adherents throughout the world, most of them in Israel and the United States. Judaism began about 4,000 years ago when, according to tradition, Abraham was chosen by God to become the progenitor of his "chosen people," first called Hebrews or Israelites and now called Jews. The Jewish people have been persecuted throughout their history, with anti-Semitism having its ugliest manifestation during the Holocaust of the 1940s, when 6 million Jews died at the hands of the Nazis. One of the first monotheistic religions, Judaism relies heavily on the *Torah*, which is the first five books of the Bible, and the *Talmud* and the *Mishnah*, both collections of religious laws and ancient rabbinical interpretations of these laws. The three main Jewish dominations are the Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform branches, listed in order from the most traditional to the least traditional. Orthodox Jews take the Bible very literally and closely follow the teachings and rules of the Torah, Talmud, and Mishnah, while Reform Jews think the Bible is mainly

a historical document and do not follow many traditional Jewish practices. Conservative Jews fall in between these two branches.

A final key religion in the world today is *Confucianism*, which reigned in China for centuries but was officially abolished in 1949 after the Chinese Revolution ended in Communist control. People who practice Confucianism in China today do so secretly, and its number of adherents is estimated at some 5 or 6 million. Confucianism was founded by K'ung Fu-tzu, from whom it gets its name, about 500 years before the birth of Jesus. His teachings, which were compiled in a book called the *Analects*, were essentially a code of moral conduct involving self-discipline, respect for authority and tradition, and the kind treatment of everyone. Despite the official abolition of Confucianism, its principles continue to be important for Chinese family and cultural life.

As this overview indicates, religion takes many forms in different societies. No matter what shape it takes, however, religion has important consequences. These consequences can be both good and bad for the society and the individuals in it. Sociological perspectives expand on these consequences, and we now turn to them.

Key Takeaways

- Although the Catholic Church dominated medieval Europe, Protestantism took hold by the end of the 16th century. According to Max Weber, Protestantism in turn helped lead to the rise of capitalism.
- The major religions in the world today are Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Confucianism.

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10.3 Sociological Perspectives on Religion

Learning Objectives

1. Summarize the major functions of religion.
2. Explain the views of religion held by the conflict perspective.
3. Explain the views of religion held by the symbolic interactionist perspective.

Sociological perspectives on religion aim to understand the functions religion serves, the inequality and other problems it can reinforce and perpetuate, and the role it plays in our daily lives (Emerson, Monahan, & Mirola, 2011). Table 17.1 "Theory Snapshot" summarizes what these perspectives say.

Table 17.1 Theory Snapshot

Theoretical perspective	Major assumptions
Functionalism	Religion serves several functions for society. These include (a) giving meaning and purpose to life, (b) reinforcing social unity and stability, (c) serving as an agent of social control of behavior, (d) promoting physical and psychological well-being, and (e) motivating people to work for positive social change.
Conflict theory	Religion reinforces and promotes social inequality and social conflict. It helps convince the poor to accept their lot in life, and it leads to hostility and violence motivated by religious differences.
Symbolic interactionism	This perspective focuses on the ways in which individuals interpret their religious experiences. It emphasizes that beliefs and practices are not sacred unless people regard them as such. Once they are regarded as sacred, they take on special significance and give meaning to people's lives.

The Functions of Religion

Much of the work of Émile Durkheim stressed the functions that religion serves for society regardless of how it is practiced or of what specific religious beliefs a society favors. Durkheim's insights continue to influence sociological thinking today on the functions of religion.

First, religion *gives meaning and purpose to life*. Many things in life are difficult to understand. That was certainly true, as we have seen, in prehistoric times, but even in today's highly scientific age, much of life and death remains a mystery, and religious faith and belief help many people make sense of the things science cannot tell us.

Second, religion *reinforces social unity and stability*. This was one

of Durkheim's most important insights. Religion strengthens social stability in at least two ways. First, it gives people a common set of beliefs and thus is an important agent of socialization (see Chapter 2 "Socialization"). Second, the communal practice of religion, as in houses of worship, brings people together physically, facilitates their communication and other social interaction, and thus strengthens their social bonds.

The communal practice of religion in a house of worship brings people together and allows them to interact and communicate. In this way religion helps reinforce social unity and stability. This function of religion was one of Émile Durkheim's most important insights.

A third function of religion is related to the one just discussed. Religion *is an agent of social control and thus strengthens social order*. Religion teaches people moral behavior and thus helps them learn how to be good members of society. In the Judeo-Christian

tradition, the Ten Commandments are perhaps the most famous set of rules for moral behavior.

A fourth function of religion is *greater psychological and physical well-being.* Religious faith and practice can enhance psychological well-being by being a source of comfort to people in times of distress and by enhancing their social interaction with others in places of worship. Many studies find that people of all ages, not just the elderly, are happier and more satisfied with their lives if they are religious. Religiosity also apparently promotes better physical health, and some studies even find that religious people tend to live longer than those who are not religious (Moberg, 2008). We return to this function later.

A final function of religion is that it may *motivate people to work for positive social change.* Religion played a central role in the development of the Southern civil rights movement a few decades ago. Religious beliefs motivated Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights activists to risk their lives to desegregate the South. Black churches in the South also served as settings in which the civil rights movement held meetings, recruited new members, and raised money (Morris, 1984).

Religion, Inequality, and Conflict

Religion has all of these benefits, but, according to conflict theory, it can also reinforce and promote social inequality and social conflict.

This view is partly inspired by the work of Karl Marx, who said that religion was the "opiate of the masses" (Marx, 1964). By this he meant that religion, like a drug, makes people happy with their existing conditions. Marx repeatedly stressed that workers needed to rise up and overthrow the bourgeoisie. To do so, he said, they needed first to recognize that their poverty stemmed from their oppression by the bourgeoisie. But people who are religious, he said, tend to view their poverty in religious terms. They think it is God's will that they are poor, either because he is testing their faith in him or because they have violated his rules. Many people believe that if they endure their suffering, they will be rewarded in the afterlife. Their religious views lead them not to blame the capitalist class for their poverty and thus not to revolt. For these reasons, said Marx, religion leads the poor to accept their fate and helps maintain the existing system of social inequality.

As [Chapter 7 "Gender Inequality"](#) discussed, religion also promotes gender inequality by presenting negative stereotypes about women and by reinforcing traditional views about their subordination to men (Klassen, 2009). A declaration a decade ago by the Southern Baptist Convention that a wife should "submit herself graciously" to her husband's leadership reflected traditional religious belief (Gundy-Volf, 1998).

As the Puritans' persecution of non-Puritans illustrates, religion can also promote social conflict, and the history of the world shows that individual people and whole communities and nations are quite ready to persecute, kill, and go to war over religious differences. We see this today and in the recent past in central Europe, the Middle East, and Northern Ireland. Jews and other religious groups have been persecuted and killed since ancient times. Religion can be the source of social unity and cohesion, but over the centuries it also has led to persecution, torture, and wanton bloodshed.

News reports going back since the 1990s indicate a final problem that religion can cause, and that is sexual abuse, at least in the Catholic Church. As you undoubtedly have heard, an unknown number of children were sexually abused by Catholic priests and

deacons in the United States, Canada, and many other nations going back at least to the 1960s. There is much evidence that the Church hierarchy did little or nothing to stop the abuse or to sanction the offenders who were committing it, and that they did not report it to law enforcement agencies. Various divisions of the Church have paid tens of millions of dollars to settle lawsuits. The numbers of priests, deacons, and children involved will almost certainly never be known, but it is estimated that at least 4,400 priests and deacons in the United States, or about 4% of all such officials, have been accused of sexual abuse, although fewer than 2,000 had the allegations against them proven (Terry & Smith, 2006). Given these estimates, the number of children who were abused probably runs into the thousands.

Symbolic Interactionism and Religion

While functional and conflict theories look at the macro aspects of religion and society, symbolic interactionism looks at the micro aspects. It examines the role that religion plays in our daily lives and the ways in which we interpret religious experiences. For example, it emphasizes that beliefs and practices are not sacred unless people regard them as such. Once we regard them as sacred, they take on special significance and give meaning to our lives. Symbolic interactionists study the ways in which people practice their faith and interact in houses of worship and other religious settings, and

they study how and why religious faith and practice have positive consequences for individual psychological and physical well-being.

The cross, Star of David, and the crescent and star are symbols of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, respectively. The symbolic interactionist perspective emphasizes the ways in which individuals interpret their religious experiences and religious symbols.

zeevveez – Star of David Coexistence- 2 – CC BY 2.0.

Religious symbols indicate the value of the symbolic interactionist approach. A crescent moon and a star are just two shapes in the sky, but together they constitute the international symbol of Islam. A cross is merely two lines or bars in the shape of a "t," but to tens of millions of Christians it is a symbol with deeply religious significance. A Star of David consists of two superimposed triangles in the shape of a six-pointed star, but to Jews around the world it is a sign of their religious faith and a reminder of their history of persecution.

Religious rituals and ceremonies also illustrate the symbolic interactionist approach. They can be deeply intense and can involve crying, laughing, screaming, trancelike conditions, a feeling of

oneness with those around you, and other emotional and psychological states. For many people they can be transformative experiences, while for others they are not transformative but are deeply moving nonetheless.

Key Takeaways

- Religion ideally serves several functions. It gives meaning and purpose to life, reinforces social unity and stability, serves as an agent of social control, promotes psychological and physical well-being, and may motivate people to work for positive social change.
- On the other hand, religion may help keep poor people happy with their lot in life, promote traditional views about gender roles, and engender intolerance toward people whose religious faith differs from one's own.
- The symbolic interactionist perspective emphasizes how religion affects the daily lives of individuals and how they interpret their religious experiences.

For Your Review

1. Of the several functions of religion that were discussed, which function do you think is the most important? Why?
2. Which of the three theoretical perspectives on

religion makes the most sense to you? Explain your choice.

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Key Takeaways

- Religion ideally serves several functions. It gives meaning and purpose to life, reinforces social unity and stability, serves as an agent of social control, promotes psychological and physical well-being, and may motivate people to work for positive social change.
- On the other hand, religion may help keep poor people happy with their lot in life, promote traditional views about gender roles, and engender intolerance toward people whose religious faith differs from one's own.
- The symbolic interactionist perspective emphasizes how religion affects the daily lives of individuals and how they interpret their religious experiences.

For Your Review

1. Of the several functions of religion that were discussed, which function do you think is the most important? Why?
2. Which of the three theoretical perspectives on religion makes the most sense to you? Explain your choice.

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10.4 Types of Religious Organizations

Learning Objectives

1. List the different types of religious organizations.
2. Describe the defining characteristics of each type of religious organization.

Many types of religious organizations exist in modern societies. Sociologists usually group them according to their size and influence. Categorized this way, three types of religious organizations exist: church, sect, and cult (Emerson, Monahan, & Mirola, 2011). A church further has two subtypes: the ecclesia and denomination. We first discuss the largest and most influential of the types of religious organization, the ecclesia, and work our way down to the smallest and least influential, the cult.

Church: The Ecclesia and Denomination

A **church** is a large, bureaucratically organized religious organization that is closely integrated into the larger society. Two types of church organizations exist. The first is the **ecclesia**, a large, bureaucratic religious organization that is a formal part of the state and has most or all of a state's citizens as its members. As such, the ecclesia is the national or state religion. People ordinarily do not join an ecclesia; instead they automatically become members when they are born. A few ecclesiae exist in the world today, including Islam in Saudi Arabia and some other Middle Eastern nations, the Catholic Church in Spain, the Lutheran Church in Sweden, and the Anglican Church in England.

As should be clear, in an ecclesiastic society there may be little separation of church and state, because the ecclesia and the state are so intertwined. In some ecclesiastic societies, such as those in the Middle East, religious leaders rule the state or have much influence over it, while in others, such as Sweden and England, they have little or no influence. In general the close ties that ecclesiae have to the state help ensure they will support state policies and practices. For this reason, ecclesiae often help the state solidify its control over the populace.

The second type of church organization is the **denomination**, a large, bureaucratic religious organization that is closely integrated into the larger society but is not a formal part of the state. In modern pluralistic nations, several denominations coexist. Most people are members of a specific denomination because their parents were members. They are born into a denomination and generally consider themselves members of it the rest of their lives, whether or not they actively practice their faith, unless they convert to another denomination or abandon religion altogether.

The Megachurch

A relatively recent development in religious organizations is the rise of the so-called *megachurch*, a church at which more than 2,000 people worship every weekend on the average. Several dozen have at least 10,000 worshippers (Priest, Wilson, & Johnson, 2010; Warf & Winsberg, 2010); the largest U.S. megachurch, in Houston, has more than 35,000 worshippers and is nicknamed a "gigachurch." There are more than 1,300 megachurches in the United States, a steep increase from the 50 that existed in 1970, and their total membership exceeds 4 million. About half of today's megachurches are in the South, and only 5% are in the Northeast. About one-third are nondenominational, and one-fifth are Southern Baptist, with the remainder primarily of other Protestant denominations. A third spend more than 10% of their budget on ministry in other nations. Some have a strong television presence, with Americans in the local area or sometimes around the country watching services and/or preaching by televangelists and providing financial contributions in response to information presented on the television screen.

Compared to traditional, smaller churches, megachurches are more concerned with meeting their members' practical needs in addition to helping them achieve religious fulfillment. Some even conduct market surveys to determine these needs and how best to address them. As might be expected, their buildings are huge by any standard, and they often feature bookstores, food courts, and sports and recreation facilities. They also provide day care, psychological counseling, and youth outreach programs. Their services often feature electronic music and light shows.

Although megachurches are popular, they have been criticized for being so big that members are unable to develop the close bonds with each other and with members of the clergy characteristic of smaller houses of worship. Their supporters say that megachurches

involve many people in religion who would otherwise not be
involved.

Sect

A sect is a relatively small religious organization that is not closely integrated into the larger society and that often conflicts with at least some of its norms and values. The Amish, who live in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and many other states, are perhaps the most well-known example of a sect in the United States today.

Ted Knudsen – Amish – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

A **sect** is a relatively small religious organization that is not closely
integrated into the larger society and that often conflicts with at
least some of its norms and values. Typically a sect has broken away
from a larger denomination in an effort to restore what members of
the sect regard as the original views of the denomination. Because
sects are relatively small, they usually lack the bureaucracy of

denominations and ecclesiae and often also lack clergy who have received official training. Their worship services can be intensely emotional experiences, often more so than those typical of many denominations, where worship tends to be more formal and restrained. Members of many sects typically proselytize and try to recruit new members into the sect. If a sect succeeds in attracting many new members, it gradually grows, becomes more bureaucratic, and, ironically, eventually evolves into a denomination. Many of today's Protestant denominations began as sects, as did the Mennonites, Quakers, and other groups. The Amish in the United States are perhaps the most well-known example of a current sect.

Cult

A **cult** is a small religious organization that is at great odds with the norms and values of the larger society. Cults are similar to sects but differ in at least three respects. First, they generally have not broken away from a larger denomination and instead originate outside the mainstream religious tradition. Second, they are often secretive and do not proselytize as much. Third, they are at least somewhat more likely than sects to rely on *charismatic leadership* based on the extraordinary personal qualities of the cult's leader.

Although the term *cult* today raises negative images of crazy, violent, small groups of people, it is important to keep in mind that major world religions, including Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, and denominations such as the Mormons all began as cults. Research challenges several popular beliefs about cults, including

the ideas that they brainwash people into joining them and that their members are mentally ill. In a study of the Unification Church (Moonies), Eileen Barker (1984) found no more signs of mental illness among people who joined the Moonies than in those who did not. She also found no evidence that people who joined the Moonies had been brainwashed into doing so.

Another image of cults is that they are violent. In fact, most are not violent. However, some cults have committed violence in the recent past. In 1995 the *Aum Shinrikyo* (Supreme Truth) cult in Japan killed 10 people and injured thousands more when it released bombs of deadly nerve gas in several Tokyo subway lines (Strasser & Post, 1995). Two years earlier, the Branch Davidian cult engaged in an armed standoff with federal agents in Waco, Texas. When the agents attacked its compound, a fire broke out and killed 80 members of the cult, including 19 children; the origin of the fire remains unknown (Tabor & Gallagher, 1995). A few cults have also committed mass suicide. In another example from the 1990s, more than three dozen members of the Heaven's Gate cult killed themselves in California in March 1997 in an effort to communicate with aliens from outer space (Hoffman & Burke, 1997). Some two decades earlier, more than 900 members of the People's Temple cult killed themselves in Guyana under orders from the cult's leader, Jim Jones (Stoen, 1997).

Key Takeaways

- The major types of religious organization are the church, sect, and cult. Two types of church organizations include the ecclesia and denomination.
- Although the term *cult* brings to mind negative connotations, several world religions began as cults,

and most of today's cults are not violent.

For Your Review

1. Write a brief essay in which you outline the differences among the church, sect, and cult.
2. When you hear the word *cult*, is your initial reaction positive, negative, or neutral? Explain your answer.

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10.5 Religion in the United States

The United States is generally regarded as a fairly religious nation. In a 2009 survey administered by the Gallup Organization to 114 nations, 65% of Americans answered yes when asked, "Is religion an important part of your daily life?" (Crabtree, 2010). In a 2007 Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life survey, about 83% of Americans expressed a religious preference, 61% were official members of a local house of worship, and 39% attended religious services at least weekly (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2008). These figures show that religion plays a significant role in the lives of many Americans.

Moreover, Americans seem more religious than the citizens of almost all the other democratic, industrialized nations with which the United States is commonly compared. Evidence for this conclusion comes from the 2009 Gallup survey mentioned in the preceding paragraph. Whereas 65% of Americans said religion was an important part of their daily lives, comparable percentages from

other democratic, industrialized nations included the following: Spain, 49%; Canada, 42%; France, 30%; United Kingdom, 27%; and Sweden, 17% (Crabtree, 2010). Among its peer nations, then, the United States stands out for being religious.

When we consider all the nations of the world, however, the U.S. ranking is much lower. In more than half the nations surveyed by Gallup in 2009, at least 84% of respondents said religion was an important part of their daily lives. The U.S. rate of 65% ranked 85th out of the 114 nations in this survey (Crabtree, 2010). However, because the United States ranks higher than most of the democratic, industrialized nations with which it is most aptly compared, it makes sense to regard the United States as fairly religious. The "Learning From Other Societies" box discusses what else can be learned from the international comparisons in the Gallup survey.

Learning From Other Societies

Poverty and the Importance of Religion

The 2009 Gallup international survey on religion discussed in the text revealed an interesting pattern that is

relevant for understanding religious differences among the 50 states of the United States.

Of the 114 nations included in the Gallup survey, people in the poorest nations were most likely to say that religion was an important part of their daily lives, and people in the richest nations were least likely to feel this way. The 10 most religious nations according to this measure, with at least 98% of their populations saying that religion was an important part of their daily lives, all had a per-capita gross domestic product (GDP) below $5,000: Bangladesh, Niger, Yemen, Indonesia, Malawi, Sri Lanka, Somaliland region, Djibouti, Mauritania, and Burundi. In contrast, among the 10 least religious nations, with 30% or fewer saying religion was important, were some of the world's wealthiest nations: Sweden, Denmark, Japan, Hong Kong, the United Kingdom, and France. In the world's poorest nations, those whose per-capita GDP is below $2,000, the median proportion whose citizens are religious according to the Gallup measure was 95%; in the richest nations, those whose per-capita GDP is above $25,000, the same median proportion was only 47%.

A Gallup report concluded that these results demonstrate "the strong relationship between a country's socioeconomic status and the religiosity of its residents" (Crabtree, 2010). Drawing on research by sociologists and other social scientists, the report explained that religion helps people in poorer nations cope with the many hardships that poverty creates.

Gallup's international findings and explanation for the poverty-religiosity relationship pattern they exhibited helps explain differences among the 50 states in the United States. In 2008, Gallup conducted surveys in each state in

which respondents were asked whether religion was an important part of their daily lives. The 11 highest ranking states, with at least 74% of their populations saying that religion was an important part of their daily lives, were all Southern states. Mississippi ranked highest at 85%.

There are many reasons for the high degree of Southern religiosity, and a Gallup report noted that the states differ in their religious traditions, denominations, and racial and ethnic compositions (Newport, 2009). Although these and other factors might help explain Southern religiosity, it is notable that the Southern states are also generally the poorest in the nation. If the poorest nations of the world are more religious in part because of their poverty, then the Southern states may also be more religious partly because of their poverty. In understanding religious differences among the different regions of the country, the United States has much to learn from the other nations of the world.
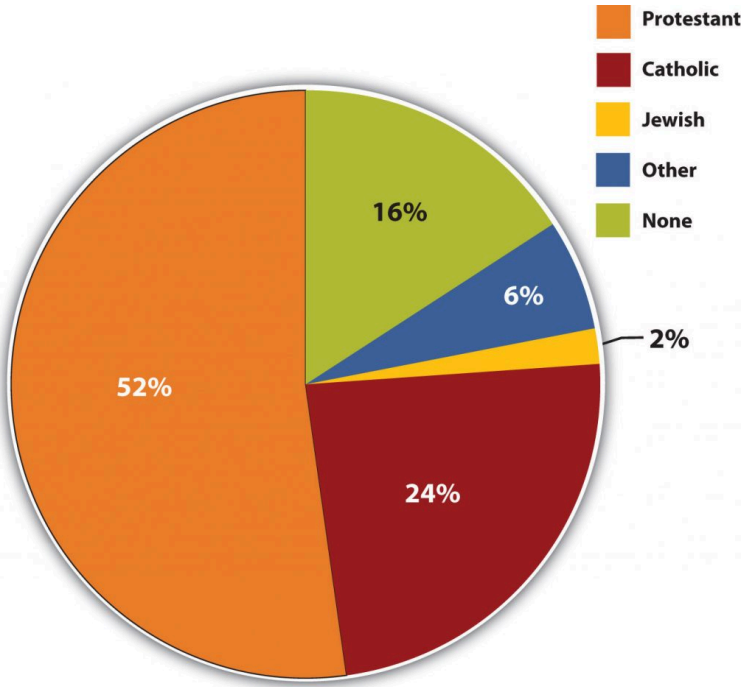
Religious Affiliation and Religious Identification

Religious affiliation is a term that can mean actual membership in a church or synagogue, or just a stated *identification* with a particular

religion whether or not someone actually belongs to a local house of worship. Another term for religious affiliation is **religious preference**. Recall from the Pew survey cited earlier that 83% of Americans express a religious preference, while 61% are official members of a local house of worship. As these figures indicate, more people identify with a religion than actually belong to it.

The Pew survey also included some excellent data on religious identification (see Figure 17.1 "Religious Preference in the United States"). Slightly more than half of Americans say their religious preference is Protestant, while about 24% call themselves Catholic. Almost 2% say they are Jewish, while 6% state another religious preference and 16% say they have no religious preference. Although Protestants are thus a majority of the country, the Protestant religion includes several denominations. About 34% of Protestants are Baptists; 12% are Methodists; 9% are Lutherans; 9% are Pentecostals; 5% are Presbyterians; and 3% are Episcopalians. The remainder identify with other Protestant denominations or say their faith is nondenominational. Based on their religious beliefs, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists are typically grouped together as Liberal Protestants; Methodists, Lutherans, and a few other denominations as Moderate Protestants; and Baptists, Seventh-Day Adventists, and many other denominations as Conservative Protestants.

Figure 17.1 Religious Preference in the United States

Source: Data from Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. (2008). *U.S. religious landscape survey*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center.

Correlates of Religious Affiliation

The religious affiliations just listed differ widely in the nature of

their religious belief and practice, but they also differ in demographic variables of interest to sociologists (Finke & Stark, 2005). For example, Liberal Protestants tend to live in the Northeast and to be well educated and relatively wealthy, while Conservative Protestants tend to live in the South and to be less educated and working-class. In their education and incomes, Catholics and Moderate Protestants fall in between these two groups. Like Liberal Protestants, Jews also tend to be well educated and relatively wealthy.

Race and ethnicity are also related to religious affiliation. African Americans are overwhelmingly Protestant, usually Conservative Protestants (Baptists), while Latinos are primarily Catholic. Asian Americans and Native Americans tend to hold religious preferences other than Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish.

Race and ethnicity are related to religious affiliation. African Americans are overwhelmingly Protestant, for example, while Latinos are primarily Catholic.

Older people are more likely than younger people to belong to a church or synagogue.

Asim Bharwani – Reading at the Wall – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Age is yet another factor related to religious affiliation, as older people are more likely than younger people to belong to a church or synagogue. As young people marry and "put roots down," their religious affiliation increases, partly because many wish to expose their children to a religious education. In the Pew survey, 25% of people aged 18–29 expressed no religious preference, compared to only 8% of those 70 or older.

Religiosity

People can belong to a church, synagogue, or mosque or claim a religious preference, but that does not necessarily mean they are very religious. For this reason, sociologists consider **religiosity**, or

the significance of religion in a person's life, an important topic of investigation.

Religiosity has a simple definition but actually is a very complex topic. What if someone prays every day but does not attend religious services? What if someone attends religious services but never prays at home and does not claim to be very religious? Someone can pray and read a book of scriptures daily, while someone else can read a book of scriptures daily but pray only sometimes. As these possibilities indicate, a person can be religious in some ways but not in other ways.

For this reason, religiosity is best conceived of as a concept involving several dimensions: experiential, ritualistic, ideological, intellectual, and consequential (Stark & Glock, 1968). *Experiential* religiosity refers to how important people consider religion to be in their lives and is the dimension used by the international Gallup Poll discussed earlier. *Ritualistic* religiosity refers to the extent of their involvement in prayer, reading a book of scriptures, and attendance at a house of worship. *Ideological* religiosity involves the degree to which people accept religious doctrine and includes the nature of their belief in a deity, while *intellectual* religiosity concerns the extent of their knowledge of their religion's history and teachings. Finally, *consequential* religiosity refers to the extent to which religion affects their daily behavior.

National data on prayer are perhaps especially interesting (see [Figure 17.2 "Frequency of Prayer"](#), as prayer occurs both with others and by oneself. Almost 60% of Americans say they pray at least once daily outside religious services, and only 7% say they never pray (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2008). Women are more likely than men to pray daily: 66% of women say they pray daily, versus only 49% of men. Daily praying is also more common among older people than younger people, among African Americans than whites, and among people without a college degree than those with a college degree. As these demographic differences indicate, the social backgrounds of Americans affect this important dimension of their religiosity.

Figure 17.2 Frequency of Prayer
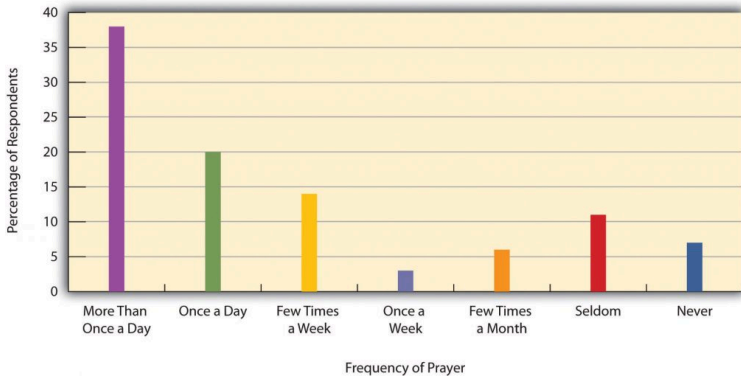
Source: Data from Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. (2008). *U.S. religious landscape survey*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center.

When we try to determine why some people are more religious than others, we are treating religiosity as a *dependent variable*. But religiosity itself can also be an *independent variable*, as it affects attitudes on a wide range of social, political, and moral issues. Generally speaking, the more religious people are, the more conservative their attitudes in these areas (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009). An example of this relationship appears in <u>Table 17.2 "Frequency of Prayer and Belief That Homosexual Sex Is "Always Wrong""</u>, which shows that people who pray daily are *much* more opposed to homosexual sex. The relationship in the table once again provides clear evidence of the sociological perspective's emphasis on the importance of social backgrounds for attitudes.

Table 17.2 Frequency of Prayer and Belief That Homosexual Sex Is "Always Wrong"

	Several times a day	Once a day	Several times a week	Once a week	Less than once a week	Never
Percentage saying "always wrong"	74.3	57.4	44.9	44.0	29.1	26.4

Source: Data from General Social Survey, 2008.

While religiosity can affect attitudes on various issues, it can also affect behavior and health. The "Sociology Making a Difference" box discusses the effects that religiosity may have.

Sociology Making a Difference

The Benefits of Religiosity

As discussed earlier, Durkheim considered religion a moral force for socialization and social bonding. Building on this insight, sociologists and other scholars have thought that religiosity might reduce participation in "deviant" behaviors such as drinking, illegal drug use, delinquency, and certain forms of sexual behavior. A growing body of research, almost all of it on adolescents, finds that this is indeed the case. Holding other factors constant, more religious adolescents are less likely than other adolescents to drink and take drugs, to commit various kinds of delinquency, to have sex during early adolescence or at all, and to have sex frequently if they do start having sex (Regenerus, 2007).

There is much less research on whether this relationship continues to hold true during adulthood. If religion might have more of an impact during adolescence, an impressionable period of one's life, then the relationship found during adolescence may not persist into adulthood. However, two recent studies did find that more religious, unmarried adults were less likely than other unmarried adults to have premarital sex partners (Barkan, 2006; Uecker, 2008). These results suggest that religiosity may indeed continue to affect sexual behavior and perhaps other behaviors during adulthood.

Sociologists and other scholars have also built on Durkheim's insights to assess whether religious involvement promotes better physical health and psychological well-being. As the earlier discussion of religion's functions noted, a growing body of research finds that various measures of religious involvement, but perhaps especially attendance at religious services, are positively associated with better physical and mental health. Religious

involvement is linked in many studies to lower rates of cardiovascular disease, hypertension (high blood pressure), and mortality (Ellison & Hummer, 2010; Green & Elliott, 2010). It is also linked to higher rates of happiness and lower rates of depression and anxiety.

These effects are thought to stem from several reasons. First, religious attendance increases social ties that provide emotional and practical support when someone has various problems and that also raise one's self-esteem. Second, personal religious belief can provide spiritual comfort in times of trouble. Third, and as noted in the preceding section, religious involvement promotes healthy lifestyles for at least some people, including lower use of tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs, and reduces the frequency of other risky behaviors such as gambling and unsafe sex. Lower participation in all of these activities helps in turn to increase one's physical and mental health.

In sum, research increasingly suggests that religiosity helps reduce risky, deviant behaviors and increase physical and psychological well-being. Although religion should not be forced on anyone, this body of research suggests that efforts that promote religiosity among both adolescents and adults may have the benefits just described. For example, older adults often have trouble traveling to a house of worship, whether they live at home or in an institutional setting such as a nursing home or assisted living center. Their well-being may be enhanced if they are provided free or low-cost transportation to attend a house of worship or if regular religious services are begun in the institutional settings that do not already have them. In helping demonstrate the benefits of religiosity in the areas discussed here, sociology has again made a difference.

Knowledge About Religion

Although the United States is a fairly religious nation, Americans "are also deeply ignorant about religion," according to a recent news report (Goodstein, 2010, p. A17). The report was based on a 2010 survey by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life of more than 3,400 U.S. residents. The survey respondents were asked 32 questions, mostly multiple-choice, about the Bible, the world's major religions, celebrated religious figures from various points in world history, and what U.S. Supreme Court rulings permit in the public practice of religion. Among other questions, respondents were asked what Ramadan is, where Jesus was born, who led the exodus out of Egypt in the Bible, and whose writings started the Protestant Reformation; they were also asked to identify the religious preference of the Dalai Lama, Joseph Smith, and Mother Teresa.

The average respondent provided correct answers to only half the questions. Researchers considered most of the questions to be fairly easy, but a few of the questions were fairly difficult.

For example, whereas 89% of respondents knew that teachers in public schools may not lead a class in prayer and 71% knew that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, only 54% knew that the Koran is the Islamic holy book, only 45% knew that the Jewish Sabbath begins on Friday, and only 23% knew that teachers in public schools are allowed to read from the Bible as an example of literature.

The respondents' level of education was strongly related to their percentage of correct answers. College graduates answered an average of 20.6 questions correctly, people who had taken only some college courses answered 17.5 questions correctly, and respondents with a high school degree or less answered 12.8 questions correctly. Higher scores were also achieved by respondents who were more religious, by men, by whites, and by non-Southerners (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2010).

Religiosity and College Students

During the last decade, the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California, Los Angeles, conducted a national longitudinal survey of college students' religiosity and religious beliefs (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2010). They interviewed more than 112,000 entering students in 2004 and more than 14,000 of these students in spring 2007 toward the end of their junior year. This research design enabled the researchers to assess whether and how various aspects of religious belief and religiosity change during college. Several findings were notable.

First, *religious commitment* (measures of the students' assessment of how important religion is to them) stayed fairly stable during college. Students who drank alcohol and partied the most were more likely to experience a decline in religious commitment, although a cause-and-effect relationship here is difficult to determine.
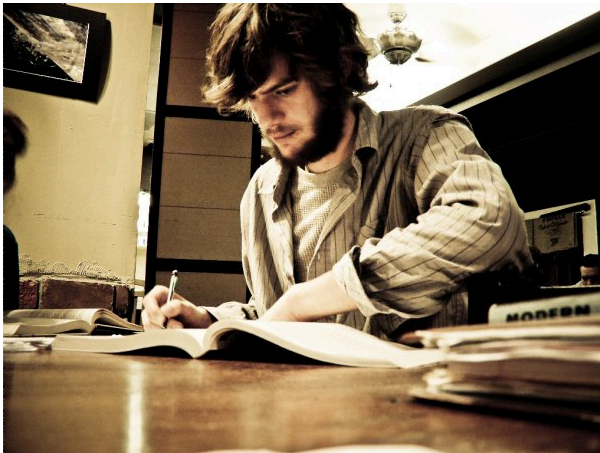
The frequency of prayer and attendance at religious services tend to decline during a person's college years.

Second, *religious engagement* (measures of religious services attendance, praying, religious singing, and reading sacred texts) declined during the college years. This decline was especially steep for religious attendance. Almost 40% of juniors reported less frequent attendance than during their high school years, while only 7% reported more frequent attendance.

Third, *religious skepticism* (measures of how well religion explains various phenomena compared to science) stayed fairly stable. Skepticism tended to rise among students who partied a lot, went on a study-abroad program, and attended a college with students who were very liberal politically.

Fourth, *religious/social conservatism* (views on such things as abortion, casual sex, and atheism) tended to decline during college, although the decline was not at all steep. This set of findings is in line with the research discussed earlier showing that students tend to become more liberal during their college years. To the extent students' views became more liberal, the beliefs of their friends among the student body mattered much more than the beliefs of their faculty.

Fifth, *religious struggle* (measures of questioning one's religious beliefs, disagreeing with parents about religion, feeling distant from God, and the like) tended to increase during college. This increase was especially high at campuses where a higher proportion of students were experiencing religious struggle when they entered college. Students who drank alcohol and watched television more often and who had a close friend or family member die were more likely to experience religious struggle, although a cause-and-effect relationship is again difficult to determine.

For Your Review

1. Do you consider yourself religious? Why or why not?
2. Why do you think religiosity is associated with more conservative views on social, moral, and political issues? What is it about religiosity that helps lead to such beliefs?

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10.6 Trends in Religious Belief and Activity

Learning Objectives

1. Summarize the evidence on the nature and extent of secularization.
2. Discuss trends in regard to religious conservatism in the United States.

Because religion is such an important part of our society, sociologists and other observers have examined how religious thought and practice have changed in the last few decades. Two trends have been studied in particular: (a) secularization and (b) the rise of religious conservatism.

Secularization

Secularization refers to the weakening importance of religion in a

society. It plays less of a role in people's lives, as they are less guided in their daily behavior by religious beliefs. The influence of religious organizations in society also declines, and some individual houses of worship give more emphasis to worldly concerns such as soup kitchens than to spiritual issues. There is no doubt that religion is less important in modern society than it was before the rise of science in the 17th and 18th centuries. Scholars of religion have tried to determine the degree to which the United States has become more secularized during the last few decades (Finke & Stark, 2005; Fenn, 2001).

The best evidence shows that religion has declined in importance since the 1960s but still remains a potent force in American society as a whole and for the individual lives of Americans (Finke & Scheitle, 2005). Although membership in mainstream Protestant denominations has declined since the 1960s, membership in conservative denominations has risen. Most people (92% in the Pew survey) still believe in God, and, as already noted, more than half of all Americans pray daily.

Scholars also point to the continuing importance of **civil religion**, or the devotion of a nation's citizens to their society and government (Santiago, 2009). In the United States, love of country—patriotism—and admiration for many of its ideals are widespread. Citizens routinely engage in rituals, such as reciting the Pledge of Allegiance or singing the national anthem, that express their love of the United States. These beliefs and practices are the secular equivalent of traditional religious beliefs and practices and thus a functional equivalent of religion.

The Rise of Religious

Conservatism

The rise of religious conservatism also challenges the notion that secularization is displacing religion in American life. **Religious conservatism** in the U.S. context is the belief that the Bible is the actual word of God. As noted earlier, religious conservatism includes the various Baptist denominations and any number of evangelical organizations, and its rapid rise was partly the result of fears that the United States was becoming too secularized. Many religious conservatives believe that a return to the teachings of the Bible and religious spirituality is necessary to combat the corrupting influences of modern life (Almond, Appleby, & Sivan, 2003).

The rise of religious conservatism in the United States was partly the result of fears that the nation was becoming too secularized.

Thomas Quine – [Small brick church](#) – CC BY 2.0.

Today about one-third of Americans state a religious preference for a conservative denomination (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2008). Because of their growing numbers, religious conservatives have been the subject of increasing research. They tend to hold

politically conservative views on many issues, including abortion and the punishment of criminals, and are more likely than people with other religious beliefs to believe in such things as the corporal punishment of children (Burdette, Ellison, & Hill, 2005). They are also more likely to believe in traditional roles for women.

Closely related to the rise of religious conservatism has been the increasing influence of what has been termed the "new religious right" in American politics (Martin, 2005; Capps, 1990; Moen, 1992). Since the 1980s, the religious right has been a potent force in the political scene at both the national and local levels, with groups like the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition effective in raising money, using the media, and lobbying elected officials. As its name implies, the religious right tries to advance a conservative political agenda consistent with conservative religious concerns. Among other issues, it opposes legal abortion, gay rights, and violence and sex in the media, and it also advocates an increased religious presence in public schools. Although the influence of the religious right has waned since the 1990s, its influence on American politics is bound to be controversial for many years to come.

Key Takeaways

- Despite concerns among many observers that secularization has been occurring, religion remains important in many Americans' lives and a potent force in American society.
- Membership in conservative denominations has increased in the United States in recent decades. Today about one-third of Americans state a religious preference for a conservative denomination.

Addressing Religious Issues: What Sociology Suggests

Sociological theory and research are relevant for understanding and addressing certain religious issues. One major issue today is religious intolerance. Émile Durkheim

did not stress the hatred and conflict that religion has promoted over the centuries, but this aspect of conflict theory's view of religion should not be forgotten. Certainly religious tolerance should be promoted among all peoples, and strategies for doing so include education efforts about the world's religions and interfaith activities for youth and adults. The Center for Religious Tolerance (http://www.c-r-t.org/index.php), headquartered in Sarasota, Florida, is one of the many local and national organizations in the United States that strive to promote interfaith understanding. In view of the hostility toward Muslims that increased in the United States after 9/11, it is perhaps particularly important for education efforts and other activities to promote understanding of Islam.

Religion may also help address other social issues. In this regard, we noted earlier that religious belief and practice seem to promote physical health and psychological well-being. To the extent this is true, efforts that promote the practice of faith may enhance one's physical and mental health.. In view of the health problems of older people and also their greater religiosity, some scholars urge that such efforts be especially undertaken for people in their older years (Moberg, 2008). We also noted that religiosity helps reduce drinking, drug use, and sexual behavior among adolescents and perhaps among adults. This does not mean that religion should be forced on anyone against his or her will, but this body of research does suggest that efforts by houses of worship to promote religious activities among their adolescents and younger children may help prevent or otherwise minimize risky behaviors during this important period of the life course.

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Summary

1.   All societies have beliefs and practices that help them understand supernatural and spiritual phenomena. Religion takes different forms in the many types of societies that have existed, but ultimately it seeks to make sense out of life, death, and the other mysteries of human existence.

2.   The world's major religions today include Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Judaism. They differ in many respects, including the nature of their belief in God, whether their religion began with the efforts of one particular individual, and whether a sacred text is involved.

3.   Religion serves several functions for society. It gives meaning and purpose to life, reinforces social stability and social control, and promotes physical and psychological well-being. Yet religion can also perpetuate social inequality and promote social conflict among peoples with different religious faiths. Traditionally religion has also reinforced gender

inequality. Symbolic interactionism explores the micro side of religion and focuses on the role religion plays in our daily lives and the ways in which we interpret religious experiences.

4. The primary types of religious organization include the church (either an ecclesia or a denomination), sect, and cult. These types differ in many ways, including their size and integration into society. Cults have a very negative image, but Christianity, Judaism, and various denominations all began as cults.

5. The United States is, according to many measures, one of the most religious societies in the industrial world. Most people believe in God, and a strong majority belong to a church or synagogue. Religious affiliation is related to several demographic variables in which sociologists are interested, including social class and race. Liberal Protestants and Jews tend to be relatively wealthy and well educated, while Conservative Protestants tend to be poorer and less educated. Catholics and Moderate Protestants tend to occupy a middle ground on these variables.

6. Religiosity is a multidimensional concept that gets beyond actual membership in a church or synagogue. The more religious people are, the more conservative they tend to be on various social and moral issues.

7. Two religious trends in recent decades in the United States include secularization and the rise of religious conservatism. Despite fears that the United States is becoming a less religious society, the best evidence indicates that religion continues to play an important role in the lives of individuals and their families. The rise of religious conservatism has an

important and controversial impact on national political affairs.

8. Religion seems to have at least two important effects on the lives of individuals. Higher levels of religiosity are associated with reduced involvement in deviant behavior and with greater physical and psychological well-being.

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