Groups, Networks, and Organizations

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Human Relationships

At one level, sociology is the study of relationships: how they begin, function, change, and affect both individuals and the community. In this chapter we review the basic types of human relationships, from small and intimate groups to large and formal organizations, and discuss some of the consequences of these relationships.

Social Processes

Some relationships operate smoothly; others are plagued by conflict and competition. We use the term **social processes** to describe the types of interaction that go on in relationships. This section looks closely at four social processes that regularly occur in human relationships: *exchange*, *cooperation*, *competition*, and *conflict.*

Exchange

Exchange is voluntary interaction in which the parties trade tangible or intangible benefits with the expectation that all parties will benefit (Stolte, Fine, & Cook 2001). A wide variety of social relationships include elements of exchange. In friendships and marriages, exchanges usually include intangibles such as companionship, moral support, and a willingness to listen to the other's problems. In business or politics, an exchange may be more direct; politicians, for example, openly acknowledge exchanging votes on legislative bills—I'll vote for yours if you'll vote for mine.

Exchange relationships work well when people return the favors they receive, maintaining a balance between giving and taking (Molm & Cook 1995). The expectation that people maintain this balance is called the **norm of reciprocity** (Gouldner 1960; Uehara 1995). If you help your sister-in-law move, she is then obligated to you. Somehow she must pay you back. If she fails to do so, your relationship will likely suffer. By extension, it's wiser to refuse favors when you *don't* want a relationship with someone. For example, if someone you don't know well volunteers to type your term paper, you will probably be suspicious. Your first thought is likely to be, "What does this guy want from me?" If you don't want to owe this person a favor, you're better off typing your own paper. Nonsociologists might sum up the norm of reciprocity by concluding that there's no such thing as a free lunch.

Exchange is one of the most basic processes of social interaction. Almost all voluntary relationships involve the expectation of exchange. In marriage, for example, each partner is expected to provide affection and sexual access to the other.

An exchange relationship survives only if each party to the interaction gets something out of it. This doesn't mean that the rewards must be equal: They often aren't. Nor does this mean that each party to the exchange relationship has equal power; rather, the actor with greater control over a more valuable resource always has more power. In children's play groups, for example, one child may be treated badly by the other children and be allowed to play with them only if he agrees to give them his lunch or allows them to use his bicycle. If this boy has no one else to play with, he may find this relationship more rewarding than playing alone. Very unequal exchange relationships usually continue only when few good alternatives exist (Molm 2003; Stolte, Fine, & Cook 2001).

Social processes are the forms of interaction through which people relate to one another; they are the dynamic aspects of society.

Exchange is a voluntary interaction from which all parties expect some reward.

The **norm of reciprocity** is the expectation that people will return favors and strive to maintain a balance of obligation in social relationships.

Cooperation

Cooperation occurs when people work together to achieve shared goals. Exchange is a trade: I give you something and you give me something else in return. Cooperation is teamwork: people working together to achieve shared goals. Consider, for example, an intersection with a four-way stop sign. Although we may be tempted to speed through the stop sign, we rarely (if ever) do so because we know we'll get through more safely and more quickly if we take turns. Most continuing relationships have some element of cooperation. Spouses cooperate in raising their children; children cooperate in tricking their substitute teachers.

Cooperation also operates at a much broader social level. Neighbors may work together to fight against a proposed high-rise apartment building, and a nation's citizens may support higher taxes to provide health care for the needy. Individuals are most likely to cooperate when faced with a common threat, when cooperation seems in their economic self-interest, when they share a sense of community identity, and when they value belonging to a community (Van Vugt & Snyder 2002).

Competition

But sometimes people can't reach their goals through exchange or cooperation. If our goals are mutually exclusive (for example, I want to sleep and you want to play loud music, or we both want the same job), we cannot both achieve our goals. Situations like these foster *competition* or *conflict.*

Competition is any struggle over scarce resources that is regulated by shared rules. The rules usually specify the conditions under which winning will be considered fair and losing will be considered tolerable. When the norms are violated and rule-breaking is uncovered, competition may erupt into conflict.

One positive consequence of competition is that it stimulates achievement and heightens people's aspirations. It also, however, often results in personal stress, reduced cooperation, and social inequalities (elaborated on in Chapters 7 through 9).

Because competition often results in change, groups that seek to maximize stability often devise elaborate rules to avoid the appearance of competition. Competition is particularly problematic in informal groups such as friendships and marriages. Friends who want to stay friends will not compete for anything of high value; they might compete over computer game scores, but they won't compete for each other's spouses. Similarly, most married couples avoid competing for their children's affection because they realize that such competition could destroy their marriage.

Conflict

Cooperation is interaction that occurs when people work together to achieve shared goals.

Competition is a struggle over scarce resources that is regulated by shared rules.

Conflict is a struggle over scarce resources that is not regulated by shared rules; it may include attempts to destroy, injure, or neutralize one's rivals.

When a struggle over scarce resources is not regulated by shared rules, **conflict** occurs (Coser 1956). Because no tactics are forbidden and anything goes, conflict may include attempts to neutralize, injure, or destroy one's rivals. Conflict creates divisiveness rather than solidarity.

Conflict with outsiders, however, may enhance the solidarity of the group. Whether the conflict is between warring superpowers or warring street gangs, the us-against-them feeling that emerges from conflict with outsiders causes group members to put aside their jealousies and differences to work together. From nations to schools, groups have found that starting conflicts with outsiders helps to squash conflict within their own group. For example, some critics argue that U.S. politicians voted to invade Iraq in 2003 to divert the public's attention away from economic problems at home.

When the struggle for scarce resources (including children's toys) is not regulated by norms that specify the rules of fair play, conflict often results.

Social Processes in Everyday Life

Exchange, cooperation, competition, and even conflict are important aspects of our relationships with others. Few of our relationships involve just one type of group process. Even friendships usually involve some competition as well as cooperation and exchange. Similarly, relationships among competitors often involve cooperation.

We interact with people in a wide range of relationships, both temporary and permanent, formal and informal. In the rest of this chapter, we discuss three general types of relationships: *groups*, *social networks*, and *organizations*.

Groups

A **group** is a collection of two or more people that has two special characteristics: (1) Its members interact within a shared social structure of statuses, roles, and norms, and (2) its members recognize that they depend on each other. Groups may be large or small, formal or informal; they range from a pair of lovers to the residents of a local fraternity house to Toyota employees.

The distinctive nature of groups stands out when we compare them to other collections of people. *Categories* of people who share a characteristic, such as all dorm residents, bald-headed men, or Hungarians, are not groups because most members of this category never meet, let alone interact. Similarly, *crowds* who temporarily cluster together on a city bus or in a movie theater are not groups because they are not mutually dependent. Although they share certain norms, many of those norms (such as not staring) are designed to *reduce* their interactions with each other.

The distinguishing characteristics of groups hint at the rewards of group life. Groups are the people we take into account and the people who take us into account. They are the people with whom we share many norms and values. Thus, groups can foster solidarity and cohesion, reinforcing and strengthening our integration into society. When groups function well, they offer benefits ranging from sharing basic survival and problem-solving techniques to satisfying personal and emotional needs.

A **group** is two or more people who interact on the basis of shared social structure and recognize mutual dependency.

Conversely, when groups function poorly, they create anxiety, conflict, and social stress.

Types of Groups

Almost all students belong to a family group as well as to the student body of their college or university. And as students, they also interact with many different types of groups, such as sororities, athletic teams, sociology majors, dorm residents, and honor students. Obviously, some of these groups affect their members more than others do. This section discusses three types of groups: *reference groups*, *primary groups*, and *secondary groups*.

Reference Groups

If Jim belongs to a fraternity, it's likely that he often checks that his appearance, grades, athletic skills, and so on compare favorably with those of his fraternity brothers. If Nancy's church community is central to her life, she probably compares herself to other church members her age. The fraternity is Jim's *reference group* and the church community is Nancy's. **Reference groups** are groups that individuals compare themselves to regularly. Typically, individuals choose reference groups whose members are similar to themselves. Sometimes, however, they choose reference groups because they *aspire* to belong to that group. For example, before Mike joined the fraternity, he probably first looked for a fraternity whose members dressed more or less like he did and then bought a few new items to fit in even better.

The reference groups we choose have powerful effects on our lives. For example, decades of research suggest that happiness drops when we compare ourselves to others who are better off than we are—a situation known as **relative deprivation**. Conversely, happiness increases when we compare ourselves to those who are worse off.

The impact of relative deprivation was recently demonstrated in a study on military life conducted by Jennifer Hickes Lundquist (2008). Military life is not easy: Members of the armed forces must follow strict rules for all aspects of their lives, give up control over their schedules, and leave home and family—sometimes for life-threatening assignments—whenever ordered to do so.

Lundquist found that relative satisfaction with military life was essentially the reverse of satisfaction with civilian life: African American women were most satisfied with military life, followed by African American men, Latina women, Latino men, and then white women. White men were the least satisfied with military life, even though they were the most satisfied with civilian life.

What explained these findings? Lundquist found that satisfaction with military life depended primarily on whether individuals believed their lives in the military were better than the lives of people like them—their reference group—in civilian life. In fact, African Americans, Latinos, and women face less discrimination in the military than in civilian life, with women minorities gaining a double benefit (Lundquist 2008). Members of these groups were satisfied with military life because they realized that their pay, quality of life, and opportunities for promotion were better than they would be in civilian life. In contrast, white men were most likely to believe that people like them could do well in civilian life and so were *least* happy in the military.

Primary Groups

Primary groups are characterized by face-to-face interaction, and so they are typically informal, small, and personal (Cooley [1909] 1967). The family is a primary group, as are friendship networks, co-workers, and gangs. The relationships formed in these

Reference groups are groups that individuals compare themselves to regularly.

Relative deprivation exists when we compare ourselves to others who are better off than we are.

Primary groups are groups characterized by intimate, face-to-face interaction.

Whether our primary group is made of punks, athletes, or committed sunbathers, we tend to dress, behave, and believe in ways similar to that of other group members, thus reinforcing our connection to each other.

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groups are relatively permanent, generate a strong sense of loyalty and belongingness, constitute a basic source of identity, and strengthen our sense of social integration into society.

The major purpose of primary groups is to serve *expressive needs*: to provide individuals with emotional support and a sense of belonging to a social group. Your family and close friends, for example, probably feel obligated to help you when needed. You can call on them to listen to your troubles, to bring you soup when you have the flu, and to pick you up in the dead of night if your car breaks down.

Because we need primary groups so much, they have tremendous power to bring us into line. From society's point of view, this is the major function of primary groups: They are the major agents of social control. For example, most of us don't shoplift because we would be mortified if our parents, friends, or co-workers found out. The reason most soldiers go into combat is because their buddies are going. We tend to dress, act, vote, and believe in ways that will keep the support of our primary groups. In short, we conform. The law would be relatively helpless at keeping us in line if we weren't already restrained by the desire to stay in the good graces of our primary groups. One corollary of this, however, which Chapter 6 addresses, is that if our primary groups consider shoplifting or tax evasion acceptable, then our primary-group associations may lead us into law-breaking rather than conformity.

Secondary Groups

By contrast, **secondary groups** are formal, large, and impersonal. Whereas the major purpose of primary groups is to serve expressive needs, secondary groups usually form to serve *instrumental needs*—that is, to accomplish some specific task. The quintessential secondary group is entirely rational and contractual in nature; the participants interact solely to accomplish some purpose (earn credit hours, buy a pair of shoes, get a paycheck). Their interest in each other does not extend past this contract. The differences between these two types of groups are explored more fully in the Concept Summary: Differences between Primary and Secondary Groups on the next page.

Secondary groups are groups that are formal, large, and impersonal.

Differences between Primary and Secondary Groups

	Primary Groups	Secondary Groups
Size	Small	Large
Relationships	Personal, intimate	Impersonal, aloof
Communication	Face-to-face	Indirect—memos, telephone, etc.
Duration	Permanent	Temporary
Cohesion	Strong sense of loyalty, we-feeling	Weak, based on self-interest
Decisions	Based on tradition and personal feelings	Based on rationality and rules
Social structure	Informal	Formal—titles, officers, charters, regular meeting times, etc.
Purpose	Meet expressive needs—provide emotional support and social integration	Meet instrumental goals—accomplish specific tasks

The major purpose of secondary groups is accomplishing specific tasks. If you want to build an airplane, raise money for a community project, or teach introductory sociology to 2,000 students a year, then secondary groups are your best bet. They are responsible for building our houses, growing and shipping our vegetables, educating our children, and curing our ills. In short, we could not do without them.

The Shift to Secondary Groups

In preindustrial society, there were few secondary groups. Vegetables and houses were produced by families, not by Del Monte or Del Webb. Parents taught their own children, and neighbors nursed one another's ills. Under these conditions, primary groups served both expressive and instrumental functions. As society has become more industrialized, more and more of our instrumental needs are met by secondary rather than primary groups.

In addition to losing their instrumental functions to secondary groups, primary groups have suffered other threats in industrialized societies. Each year, about 13 percent of U.S. households move to a new residence (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2009). This fact alone means that our ties to friends, neighborhoods, and co-workers are seldom really permanent. People change jobs, spouses, and neighborhoods. One consequence of this breakdown of traditional primary groups is that many people rely on secondary groups even for expressive needs; if they have marriage problems, for example, they may join a support group rather than talk to a parent.

Many scholars have suggested that these inroads on the primary group represent a weakening of social control; that is, the weaker ties to neighbors and kin mean that people feel less pressure to conform. They don't have to worry about what the

Many of the groups we participate in combine characteristics of primary and secondary groups. The elementary school classroom is a secondary group, yet many of the friendships developed there will last for 6, 12, or even 40 years.

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neighbors will say because they haven't met them; they don't have to worry about what mother will say because she lives 2,000 miles away, and what she doesn't know won't hurt her. There is some truth in this suggestion, and it may be one of the reasons that small towns with stable populations are more conventional and have lower crime rates than do big cities with more fluid populations (an issue addressed more fully in Chapter 14).

Interaction in Groups

We spend much of our lives in groups. We have work groups, family groups, and peer groups. In class we have discussion groups, and everywhere we have committees. Regardless of the type of group, its operation depends on the quality of interaction among members. This section reviews some of the more important factors that affect interaction in small groups. As we will see, interaction is affected by group size, physical proximity, and communication patterns.
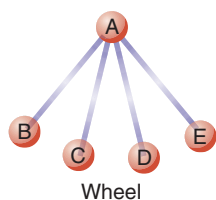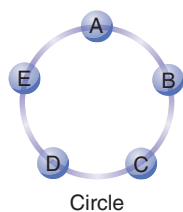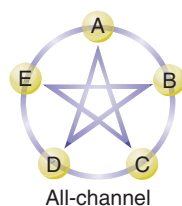
Size

The smallest possible group is two people. As the group grows to three, four, and more, its characteristics change. With each increase in size, each member has fewer opportunities to share opinions and contribute to decision making or problem solving: Think of the difference between being in a class of 15 students versus a class of 500. In many instances, the larger group can better solve problems and find answers. This benefit, however, comes at the expense of individual satisfaction. Although the larger group can generate more ideas, each person's ability to influence the group diminishes. As the group gets larger, interaction becomes more impersonal, more structured, and less personally satisfying.

Physical Proximity

Interaction occurs more often when group members are physically close to one another. This effect extends beyond the laboratory. You are more likely to become friends

Patterns of communication can affect individual participation and influence. In each figure the circles represent individuals and the lines represent the flow of communication. The all-channel network pattern provides the greatest opportunity for participation and occurs more often when participants differ little in status. The wheel pattern, by contrast, occurs most often when one individual has more status and power than do the others, such as in a classroom.

A
E   B
D   C
All-channel

A
E   B
D   C
Circle

A
B   C   D   E
Wheel

Cohesion in a group is characterized by high levels of interaction and by strong feelings of attachment and dependency.

with the student who sits next to you in class or who rooms next to you than with the student who sits at the end of your row or who rooms at the end of your hall.

Communication Patterns

Interaction of group members can be either facilitated or hindered by patterns of communication. Figure 5.1 shows some common communication patterns for five-person groups. The communication pattern allowing the greatest equality of participation is the *all-channel network.* In this pattern, each person can interact equally with every other person. Each participant has equal access to the others and an equal ability to become the focus of attention.

The other two common communication patterns allow for less interaction. In the *circle pattern*, people can speak only to their neighbors on either side. Although this pattern reduces interaction, it doesn't give one person more power than the others. In the *wheel pattern*, on the other hand, a single, pivotal individual holds most of the power in the group. For example, in a traditional classroom students primarily interact with the teacher, who directs the flow of interaction, rather than with other students.

Communication patterns are often created, either accidentally or purposefully, by the physical distribution of group members. When committee members sit at a roundtable, all-channel network or circle communication patterns easily emerge. When members instead sit at a rectangular table, the people at the two ends and in the middle of the long sides have more chance of participating in and influencing the group's decisions.

Cohesion

Another characteristic of groups is their degree of **cohesion**, or solidarity. A cohesive group is characterized by higher levels of interaction and by strong feelings of attachment and dependency. Because its members feel that their happiness or welfare depends on the group, the group can make extensive claims on the individual members (Hechter 1987). Cohesive adolescent friendship groups can enforce unofficial dress codes on their members; cohesive youth gangs can convince new male members to commit random murders and can convince new female members to submit to gang rapes.

Marriage, church, and friendship groups differ in their cohesiveness. What makes one marriage or church more cohesive than another? Among the factors are small size, similarity, frequent interaction, long duration, a clear distinction between insiders and outsiders, and few ties to outsiders (McPherson, Popielarz, & Drobnic 1992; McPherson & Smith-Lovin 2002). Although all legal marriages in our society are the same size (two members), a marriage in which the partners are more similar, spend more time together, and so on will generally be more cohesive than one in which the partners are dissimilar and see each other for only a short time each day.

Group Conformity

When a man opens a door for a woman, do you see traditional courtesy or sexist condescension? When you listen to Lil Wayne, Kelly Clarkson, or Coldplay, do you hear good music or irritating noise? Like taste in music, many of the things we deal with and believe in are not true or correct in any absolute sense; they are simply what our groups have agreed to accept as right. Researchers who look at individual decision making in groups find that group interaction increases conformity. This was famously demonstrated in two classic experiments by Solomon Asch (1955) and Stanley Milgram (1974).

The Asch Experiment

In Asch's experiment, the group consisted of nine college students, all supposedly unknown to each other. The experimenter told the students that they would be tested on their visual judgment. For example, in one test, the experimenter showed the students two cards. Card A showed only one very tall line; Card B showed one very tall line and two much shorter lines. The experimenter then asked the students to choose the line on Card B that most closely matched the (very tall) line on Card A. This was not a difficult task: Anyone with decent vision could tell that the two very tall lines were the best match.

Each group of students viewed pairs of cards like these 15 times. The first few times, all the students agreed on the obviously correct answer. In subsequent trials, however, the first eight students—in reality, all paid stooges of the experimenter—all gave the same, obviously wrong, answer. The real test came in seeing what the last student—the real subject of the experiment—would do. Would he go along with everybody else, or would he publicly disagree? Photographs of the experiment show that the real subjects wrinkled their brows, squirmed in their seats, gaped at their neighbors, and, 37 percent of the time, agreed with the wrong answer (Asch 1955).

The Milgram Experiment

The Milgram (1974) experiment provided even more troubling evidence of the power of groups to instill conformity. For this experiment, subjects were told that they would act as teachers in an experiment on learning. An experimenter instructed the "teacher" to read a list of word pairs to a "learner," who was expected to memorize them. Then the teacher would read the list a second time, providing only the first word in each pair plus four possible correct answers. If the learner gave the wrong answer, the teacher was instructed to give the correct answer and then administer an electric shock to the learner (placed in another room, out of sight of the teacher). The voltage of the shock increased with each wrong answer, and teachers were told by the experimenter (who stayed in the room throughout the experiment) to continue reading the list until the learner got all answers correct.

In reality, both the experimenter and the learner were working with Milgram. The real question was what the "teacher" would do. The results were horrifying: Two-thirds of the teachers continued giving shocks until stopped by the experimenter. Yet by this point the teachers had turned the dial on the "shock" machine past a point marked *Danger: Severe Shock* to one marked simply with three large red Xs. Meanwhile, the learners had first demanded to be let free, then screamed in pain, and then eventually fell silent.

In later experiments, Milgram tested the effect of putting the learner and teacher in the same room, having the experimenter leave the room, and having other teachers—all confederates—perform the same tasks as the teacher who was really under study. Conformity was highest in the presence of the experimenter and of other teachers who appeared to go along with the experimenter, and was lowest when the teacher had to physically hold the learner's hand on the electric shock equipment.

Sadly, later experiments in the United States and elsewhere continue to find that between 61 and 66 percent of individuals will inflict pain on others if instructed to do so by an experimenter (Blass 1999; Burger 2009). These results make it easier to understand why U.S. soldiers—already trained in obedience and in group solidarity—would severely mistreat prisoners when ordered to do so in Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo, and elsewhere.

Milgram, Stanley, Pps Manuscripts & Archives, Yale University

Understanding Small Group Conformity

In both the Asch and Milgram experiments, some subjects probably became convinced that they just couldn't see the lines clearly or that giving electric jolts to experimental subjects was acceptable. Others probably went along not because they were persuaded by the group but because they decided not to make waves. When the object being judged is subjective—whether Jennifer Hudson is better than Britney Spears, or football more interesting than basketball—the group is likely to influence not only public responses but also private views. Whether we go along because we are really convinced or because we are avoiding the hassles of being different, we all have a strong tendency to conform to the norms and expectations of our groups.

Yet small groups rarely have access to legal or formal sanctions—they usually can't throw those who disagree with them in jail or the like—so why do individuals so often go along with the group's opinions? First, all of us like to believe that we understand what's going on in the world around us. But this isn't always easy. A simple thermometer can tell you whether or not the temperature outside is above 90 degrees, but there's no way to know whether Iran will bomb Israel in the next year, for example. Individuals are especially likely to adopt group views when they are not sure their own knowledge or views are correct (Levine 2007). Second, individuals adopt group views because they fear being rejected by others if they don't (Levine 2007). The major weapons that groups use to punish nonconformity are ridicule and contempt, but their ultimate sanction is exclusion from the group. From "you're fired" to "you can't sit at our lunch table anymore," exclusion is one of the most powerful threats we can make against others. This form of social control is most effective in cohesive groups, but the Asch and Milgram experiments show that fear of rejection and embarrassment can induce conformity even among strangers.

Group Decision Making

One of the primary research interests in the sociology of small groups is how group characteristics (size, cohesion, and so on) affect group decision making. This research has focused on a wide variety of actual groups: flight crews, submarine crews, protest

organizers, business meetings, and juries, to name a few (e.g., Gastil, Burkhalter, & Black 2007; Ghaziani & Fine 2008).

Generally, groups strive to reach consensus; they would like all their decisions to be agreeable to every member. As the size of the group grows, consensus requires lengthy and time-consuming interaction so that everybody's objections can be clearly understood and incorporated. Thus, as groups grow in size, they often adopt the more expedient policy of majority rule. This policy results in quicker decisions, but often at the expense of individual satisfaction. It therefore reduces the cohesiveness of the group.

Choice Shifts

One of the most consistent findings of research on small groups is the tendency for group members' opinions to converge (or become more similar) over time. For example, in one experiment, the experimenter first asked several subjects to take a seat in a darkened room (Sherif 1936). The experimenter then flashed a dot of light on the front wall of the room and asked each subject to record his or her estimate of how far the dot moved during the experimental period. In reality, the dot didn't move at all. Afterwards, the experimenter asked the participants to share their answers. These answers varied considerably. Then the experimenter repeated the experiment four times. Each time the estimates grew closer. The final estimate given by each participant closely approximated the average of all participants' initial estimates.

Although groups typically move toward convergence, they do not always converge on a middle position. Instead, groups may reach consensus on an extreme position. This is called the *risky shift* when the group converges on a risky option and the *tame shift* when the choice is extremely conservative. Sometimes these choice shifts depend on persuasive arguments put forward by one or more members, but often they result from general norms in the group that favor either conservatism or risk (Davis & Stasson 1988; Jackson 2007). For example, one might expect a church steering committee to choose the safest option and a terrorist group to choose the riskiest option.

A special case of choice shift is *groupthink* (Janis 1982; Street 1997; Jackson 2007). **Groupthink** refers to situations in which the pressures to agree are so strong that they stifle critical thinking. For example, sociologist Diane Vaughan (1996) showed how groupthink contributed to the tragic 1986 explosion of the space shuttle *Challenger.* The engineers working on the *Challenger* all knew before the launch that the shuttle's O-rings probably would suffer some damage. But political pressures to launch the shuttle, coupled with a culture within NASA that rewarded risk taking, created a situation in which the engineers essentially convinced each other that the O-ring had little chance of failing. As this example illustrates, groupthink often results in bad decisions.

Social Networks

Each of us belongs to a variety of primary and secondary groups. Through these group ties we develop a **social network**. This social network is the total set of relationships we have. It includes our family, our insurance agent, our neighbors, some of our classmates and co-workers, and the people who belong to our clubs. Our social networks link us to hundreds of people in our communities and perhaps across the country and around the world.

Groupthink exists when pressures to agree are strong enough to stifle critical thinking.

A **social network** is an individual's total set of relationships.

focus on   A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Talking about AIDS in Mozambique

In addition to offering us friendship, job prospects, and help studying for exams, social networks have the potential to save our lives. This was a topic explored by sociologists Victor Agadjanian and Cecilia Menjívar in their research on AIDS in Mozambique, a country in southern Africa. Mozambique is among the poorest countries in the world and has one of the highest rates of infection with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS (Agadjanian and Menjívar 2002).

Because of Mozambique's poverty, most residents have very little access to information of any sort: Many live on scattered family farms where they rarely see a newspaper or interact even with neighbors, and few own even a radio, let alone a television or computer. Agadjanian and Menjívar's research examined how church membership affected individuals'

access to information about AIDS. Interestingly, they did *not* focus on the effect of religious beliefs or practices. Instead, they studied church congregations as *social networks*. Agadjanian and Menjívar found that Mozambique's churches divided into two basic types: large, *mainline* churches affiliated with international denominations such as Methodists, and smaller, *peripheral* churches that evolved in Africa and hold Pentecostal-type beliefs. Mainline churches offered a broad network of weak ties, while peripheral churches offered more strong ties.

The researchers found that both types of church memberships and social ties improved individuals' access to information about AIDS. Because mainline churches included doctors, nurses, and other educated people, the *weak* ties among members gave everyone access to relatively good information about AIDS. In addition, due to mainline churches' relatively liberal religious

views, they were willing to host occasional events for members on AIDS education.

On the other hand, the *strong* ties between members of *peripheral* churches made it easier for these individuals to talk about the need to prevent infection. For example, one peripheral church member explained:

> Those who aren't religious are at greater risks [of contracting HIV] because they have no one who can advise and tell them 'Hey, beware of AIDS.' Because here, among us, when I see that something's wrong, I say 'You go out [and have sex] at night… and get involved with women—you'll rot. Didn't you see what happened to so-and-so? He was buried because of AIDS. Hmm!'

Another told a researcher how he and his friends talk about AIDS during breaks in church services or while walking home from church: "We say, 'Hey, to protect yourself from AIDS you

Your social network does not include everybody with whom you have ever interacted. Many interactions, such as those with some classmates and neighbors, are so superficial that they cannot truly be said to be part of a relationship at all. Unless contacts develop into personal relationships that extend beyond a brief hello or a passing nod, they would not be included in your social network.

Social networks serve vital functions for individuals and for society. Strong social networks lead to lower risks of suicide and depression, better health, and longer life expectancy (Bearman & Moody 2004; Smith & Christakis 2008). They also increase the odds that individuals will care about and participate in political and civic issues (Putnam 2000; Wellman 1999). Thus the study of social networks is an important part of sociology.

Strong and Weak Ties

Although our insurance agent and our mother are both part of our social network, there is a qualitative difference between them. We can divide our social networks into two general categories of intimacy: *strong ties* and *weak ties.* **Strong ties** are relationships characterized by intimacy, emotional intensity, and sharing. **Weak ties** are relationships characterized by low intensity and emotional distance (Granovetter 1973). Co-workers, neighbors, fellow club members, distant cousins, and in-laws generally fall in this category. If you and the person you sit next to in class often chat about how you spent the weekend, and occasionally trade notes,

Strong ties are relationships characterized by intimacy, emotional intensity, and sharing.

Weak ties are relationships characterized by low intensity and lack of intimacy.

should stay with one girlfriend, use condoms. If you play a lot, have six, seven girlfriends, you won't even know how you'll get infected.'"

As these quotes suggest, even though both mainline and peripheral churches officially supported only abstinence or marital fidelity as a means of preventing AIDS, membership in either type of church increased individuals' exposure to the idea that condoms could also reduce their risk of infection.

MAP 5.1: Number of Persons Infected with HIV per 1,000 Residents, Ages 15 to 49
The rate of people infected with HIV (the virus that causes AIDS) is far higher in southern Africa (including Mozambique) than anywhere else in the world. In contrast, in the United States only 6 people per 1,000 are infected.
SOURCE: Population Reference Bureau (2008)

Number of Persons Infected with HIV per 1,000 Residents, Ages 15 to 49

- 10–26
- 2–9
- <2
- No data

1000 Km
1000 Mi.
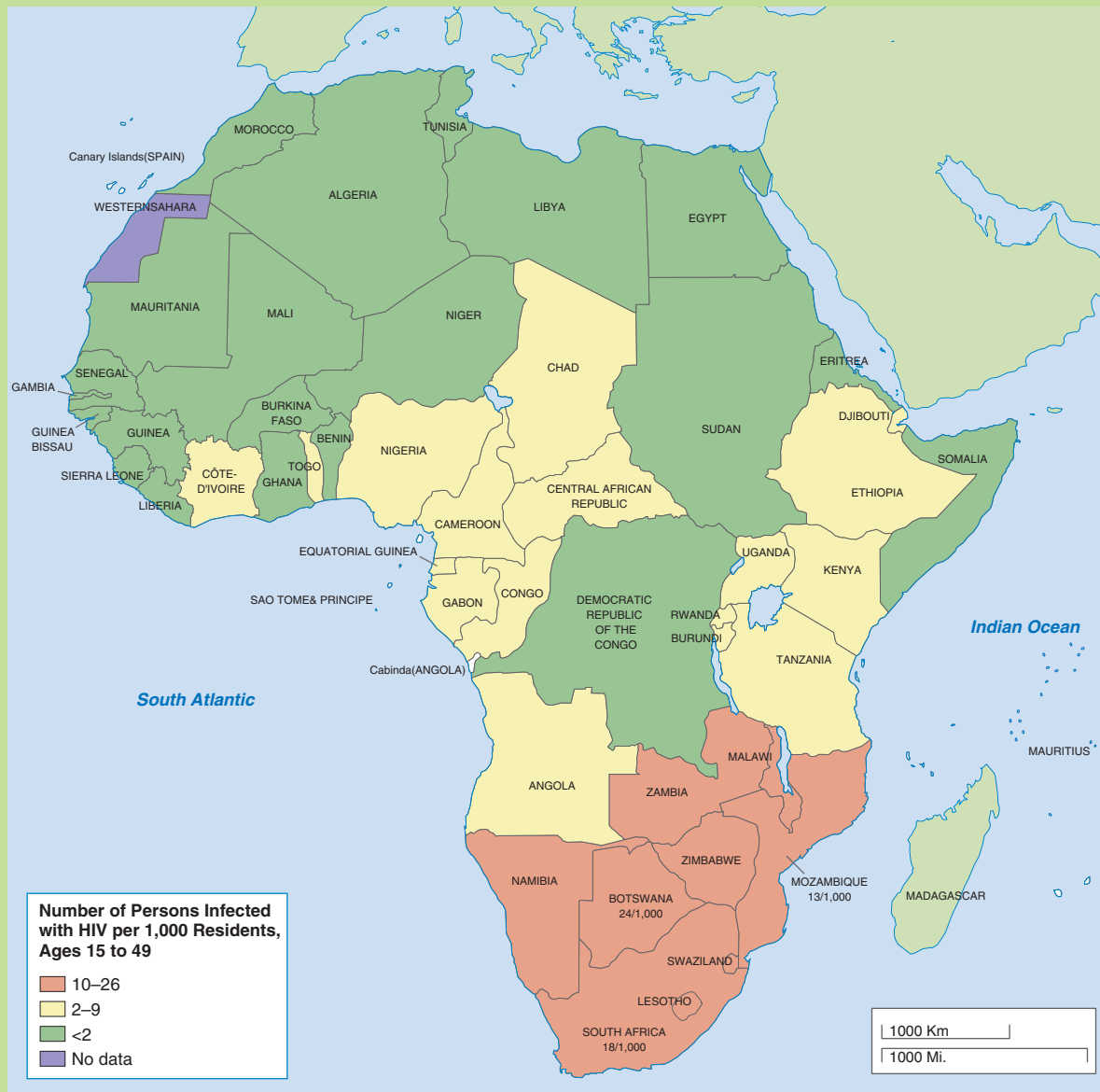
Strong ties to close friends and family are crucial for social life. All of us depend heavily on those with whom we have strong ties, in both good times and bads.

but never get together outside of class, you have a weak tie. If the two of you often hang out together, and you'd feel comfortable asking him or her for advice on your romantic relationships, you have a strong tie. In sum, strong ties *bond* us to those who are close to us, and weak ties *bridge* the gap between us and others with whom we are less closely tied.

Strong Ties

Strong ties are crucial for social life. If you are sick, or broke, or your car breaks down just when you need to get to campus for a final exam, it is your strong ties you will call on for help. These are the people who care the most about you, and whom you are most likely to care deeply about. Strong ties give us emotional support, financial help, and all sorts of practical aid when needed. However, strong ties can't always be relied on: When those you turn to are also financially or emotionally stressed to the limit, they may not be able to give you the help you need (Menjívar 2000). Not surprisingly, this problem is most severe among poor people, who need the most assistance but whose strong ties are least able to afford to help.

Across socioeconomic groups, Americans' strong ties decreased dramatically between 1985 and 2004 (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears 2006). When, in 1985, a national random sample of Americans were asked to name the people with whom they had discussed matters important to them during the previous six months, the most common response was to give three names. When the question was repeated with a similar sample in 2004, the most common response was "No one." This is a dramatic shift in only 19 years. In both surveys, the most common confidants were friends and spouses, but reliance on friends declined while reliance on spouses increased. Most telling, respondents were far less likely in 2004 to report that they turned to parents, children, siblings, co-workers, neighbors, or co-members of groups.

Several factors affect the number and composition of strong ties (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears 2006). The most important of these factors is education.

People with more education have more strong ties, have a greater diversity of strong ties, and rely less on kinship ties. People with more education are also more likely to have strong ties to influential people—lawyers and doctors rather than plumbers and mechanics. Nonwhites have fewer strong ties than do whites, especially with regard to kinship ties. Neither age nor gender affects the average number or type of strong ties (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears 2006). Decoding the Data: Strong Ties explores these issues further.

decoding the data

Strong Ties

Periodically, surveys ask Americans the number of people during the last six months with whom they had discussed matters important to them. The number who answered *zero* has increased substantially over time and is more common among some groups than among others.

SOURCE: General Social Survey. **http://sda.berkeley.edu**. Accessed May 2009.

Percentage Who Discussed Matters Important to Them with No One	
Race	
Whites	19.9
African Americans	37.6
Years of education	
0–8 years education	30.6
9–12 years	26
13 or more	20.1
Sex	
Males	24.2
Females	21.4
Year of survey	
1985	8.3
2004	22.6

Explaining the Data: Can you think of any sociological (not personality) reasons why African Americans are more likely than whites to have no one with whom they discuss important matters? What might explain why people with more education have more confidants? Why males have fewer confidants than do females? How did family life, work life, and social life change between 1985 and 2004? How might those changes have led to a decrease in confidants?

Critiquing the Data: Is the ability to discuss important matters with others a good way to measure strong ties? Can you think of any other measure that might better capture the nature of strong ties among African Americans, males, or less educated persons?

sociology and you

Being a college student affects your strong and weak ties. If you moved from home to go to college, your strong ties to family and high school friends probably weakened, especially if you moved far away. If you belong to a fraternity or sorority or live in a dorm, you have certainly added more weak ties and probably more strong ties as well. Moreover, your new ties to college students may serve you well in the future, as these new friends are likely to enter professional careers and to be good resources for you in many ways.

FIGURE 5.2 Jill's Ties and Groups
Everyone belongs to both primary and secondary groups. Within these groups we each have both weak and strong ties. Jill has strong ties to four of her sorority sisters, three of her classmates, her boyfriend, her father, and her brother. She has weak ties to her mother, her sister, her other sorority sisters, and her other classmates.
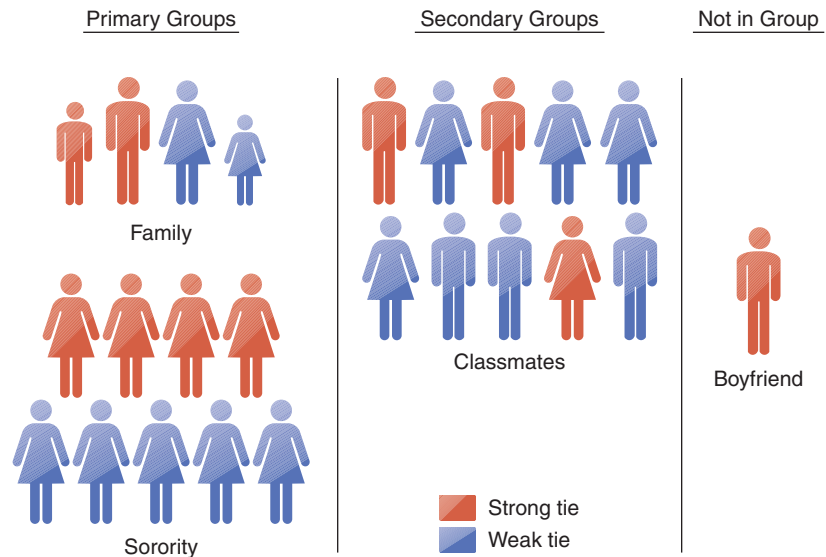
Weak Ties

Weak ties are also important to social life. For example, research indicates that many people first hear about jobs and career opportunities through weak ties (Granovetter 1974; Newman 1999b). In this and other instances, the more people you know, the better off you are.

As this suggests, weak ties are crucial whenever you need to learn or obtain something that requires a broad network. If you have a question about Microsoft Word, for example, you may well have a strong tie with someone who can answer it. If you have a question about Linux software, however, you'll probably need to turn to your large network of weak ties to find an answer.

One of the best sources of weak ties is the Internet: If you have a rare disease, enjoy an unusual hobby, or love an obscure band, you can easily create weak ties with others who share your needs or interests.

Ties versus Groups

The distinction between strong and weak ties obviously parallels the distinction between primary and secondary groups. The difference between these two sets of concepts is that strong and weak apply to one-to-one relationships, whereas primary and secondary apply to the group as a whole. We can have both strong and weak ties within the primary as well as the secondary group. (See Figure 5.2 for an illustration.)

For example, the family is obviously a primary group; it is relatively permanent, with strong feelings of loyalty and attachment. We are not equally intimate with every family member, however. We may be very close to our mother but estranged from our brother. Similarly, although the school as a whole is classified as a secondary group, we may have developed an intimate relationship, a strong tie, with one of our schoolmates. *Strong* and *weak* are terms used to describe the relationship between two individuals; *primary* and *secondary* are characteristics of the group as a whole.

Voluntary Associations

In addition to relationships formed with individuals, many of us voluntarily choose to join groups and associations. We may join a Bible study group, a soccer team, the Elks, or the Sierra Club. These groups, called **voluntary associations**, are nonprofit organizations designed to allow individuals an opportunity to pursue their shared interests collectively. They vary considerably in size and formality. Some—for example, the Elks and the Sierra Club—are very large and have national headquarters, elected officers, formal titles, charters, membership dues, regular meeting times, and national conventions. Others—for example, soccer teams and knitting groups—are small, informal groups that draw their membership from a local community or neighborhood.

Functions of Voluntary Associations

Voluntary associations are an important mechanism for enlarging our social networks. Most of the relationships we form in such associations will be weak ties. But voluntary associations also can introduce us to people with whom we will develop strong ties as close friends and intimates.

Voluntary associations perform an important function for individuals. Studies document that people who participate in them generally report greater personal happiness, longer life, more political participation, and a greater sense of community (Stalp, Radina, and Lynch 2008; Borgonovi 2008; Walker 2008; McFarland & Thomas 2006).

The correlation between high participation and greater satisfaction does not necessarily mean that joining a voluntary association is the road to happiness. At least part of the relationship between participation and happiness is undoubtedly due to the fact that happy people who feel politically effective and attached to their communities are more likely than others to join voluntary associations. It also appears to be true, however, that greater participation can be an avenue for achievement and can lead to feelings of integration and satisfaction.

Participation in Voluntary Associations

Although some social critics have argued that membership in U.S. voluntary associations has declined—a thesis popularized in the book *Bowling Alone*, by Robert Putnam (2000)—most observers believe that, if anything, participation has increased (Rich 1999). It is true that some large voluntary associations, such as the Elks and bowling leagues, have seen declines in membership. Other groups, however, are burgeoning, especially small local associations, groups focused on ethnicity or gender issues, alternative religious organizations, and Internet-based groups (Rich 1999).

Americans belong to an average of two voluntary associations, considerably above the average for industrialized nations (Curtis, Baer, & Grabb 2001). Among those who report membership, a large proportion are passive participants who belong in name only. They buy a membership in the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) when pressured to do so, but they don't go to meetings. Similarly, anyone who subscribes to *Audubon* magazine is automatically enrolled in the local Audubon Club, but few subscribers become active members. Because so many of our memberships are superficial, they are also temporary. Nevertheless, most people in the United States maintain continuous membership in at least one association.

Membership in voluntary associations is highest among middle-aged, married, well-educated, and middle-class individuals (Curtis, Grabb, & Baer 1992). In addition, having school-age children draws both men and women into youth-related groups and

Voluntary associations are nonprofit organizations designed to allow individuals an opportunity to pursue their shared interests collectively.

Joining an amateur baseball league or other voluntary association is guaranteed to increase our network of weak ties. If we become close friends with any fellow members or teammates, we also increase our network of strong ties.

so increases voluntary association membership (Rotow 2000). Interestingly, marriage increases men's participation in associations but not women's, primarily by drawing men into church-related groups. Conversely, full-time employment increases women's participation but not men's, primarily by drawing women into job-related groups. Taken together, these findings suggest that individuals are more likely to participate in voluntary associations when their neighborhood, work, children, or some other aspect of their lives provides them with opportunities to do so.

Community

In everyday life, we often hear about the benefits of having "community." Yet we rarely hear a clear definition of what this means. According to sociologists, a **community** is a collection of individuals characterized by dense, cross-cutting social networks (Wellman 1999). A community is strongest when all members connect to one another through complex overlapping ties.

Yet network ties need not be strong to have important consequences for individuals and the community. For example, research shows that even when neighbors share only weak ties, they often help each other in many ways—loaning tools, picking up the mail when a family is out of town, and the like (Wellman & Wortley 1990). Similarly, neighborhoods experience substantially less crime and delinquency when neighbors enjoy weak ties and so believe they have both the right and the obligation to sanction teenagers who throw trash, shout profanities, or otherwise misbehave (Sampson & Raudenbush 1999; Sampson, Morenoff, & Earls 1999; Sampson, Morenoff, & Gannon-Rowley 2002).

Computer Networks and Communities

With the exponential rise in use of the Internet, many individuals now seek and find online networks and communities (DiMiaggio et al. 2001; Wellman 1999; Wellman et al. 1996). The Internet's potential for promoting both strong and weak ties has been

A **community** is a collection of individuals characterized by dense, cross-cutting social networks.

Participating in computer games can increase social networks by helping each individual make new friends and by cementing existing friendships.

© Mark Peterson/Corbis

most impressively demonstrated by the spectacular rise of "social networking" sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and MySpace. Similarly, online discussion groups and chat rooms allow anyone to quickly send out a comment or request to a large and diverse audience. Although the quality of information and relationships obtained via the Internet can vary widely, the Internet does provide a wide network of weak ties to many people who might otherwise be isolated. Furthermore, because individuals often forward the comments or requests they receive to others, this network of weak ties can grow both broadly and quickly.

Although less common, online networks also can provide strong ties and a true sense of community. Even when individuals initially enter online groups simply to obtain information, those who stay typically do so because they enjoy the social support, companionship, and sense of community the group offers. Relatively strong online communities can form over anything from organizing political efforts to writing and sharing personal journals, each group fulfilling a different combination of instrumental and expressive functions. Many of the most popular online groups link people who share a health problem. Within these groups, individuals share not only suggestions regarding medical treatment but also their fears, sorrow, and triumphs as they grapple with their injuries or illnesses.

Interestingly, even participating in video and computer games—seemingly a highly individual activity—can *increase* individuals' social networks. This topic is explored more fully in Focus on Media and Culture: Gaming and Social Life on the next page.

Complex Organizations

Few people in our society escape involvement in large-scale organizations. Unless we are willing to retreat from society altogether, a major part of our lives is organization-bound. Even in birth and death, large, complex organizations (such as hospitals and

focus on   MEDIA AND CULTURE

Gaming and Social Life

According to various surveys, about two-thirds of college students play computer or video games at least occasionally and half of teenagers play a video game daily (Lenhart et al. 2008; Jones 2003). Many adults react to data like these with horror: Why, they ask, are young people spending hours sitting by themselves and staring at screens? And aren't these young people losing their connection to people and to society when they do so?

The short answer is probably no. Rather than isolating individuals from the social life around them, gaming is often a highly social pastime. In surveys, most young gamers report that gaming either increases or doesn't affect the time they spend with family and friends. Even frequent gamers spend no less time interacting with friends than do others. Instead, they report, gaming—whether online or offline—has helped them make new friends and cement existing friendships (Lenhart et al. 2008; Jones 2003). Both in their bedrooms and in college computer labs, young people often find that trading tips on new games or game strategies is a great way to share time with friends or start a conversation with a potential new friend (Lenhart et al. 2008; Jones 2003). Students also interact with other friends and potential friends in online message boards or using chat options on interactive, multi-player games. Gaming also can offer a low-key way for young people to "hang out" with parents and other adult relatives—and to get a chance to shine whenever they can help an older relative understand how to use a game. Thus gaming, it seems, more often increases rather than decreases social ties.

Gaming also may increase engagement with the broader society (or *civic engagement*). One of the most important predictors of whether individuals become active in their communities and society is whether they have opportunities to engage in activities that press them to think about others and about the greater good, such as helping others and debating ethical issues. Simulation games such as *The Sims* most obviously provide these opportunities, but even a violent, sexist, racist game can give gamers the opportunity to help other gamers. Young people who play games that give them opportunities for thinking about others and about the greater good are significantly more likely than other gamers to raise money for charity, participate in a protest, seek information online about current events, or persuade others to vote for a specific candidate—all measures of civic engagement (Lenhart et al. 2008). Unfortunately, these data can't tell us which is cause and which is effect: Does gaming lead to civic engagement, or are more-engaged students drawn to certain sorts of games? Regardless, it does seem clear that gaming does not *reduce* civic engagement.

Similarly, players of *The Sims* often adopt avatars (online alter-identities) that differ greatly from their real-life identities. Although players could use these avatars to explore all sorts of behaviors that they would never consider in real life, instead they typically have their avatars obey everyday norms for politeness and courtesy, essentially acting the same as they would if invited to dinner at someone else's home (Martey & Stromer-Galley 2007). Thus playing *The Sims* reinforces rather than challenges basic rules of social life.

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vital statistics bureaus) make demands on us. Throughout the in-between years, we are constantly adjusting to organizational demands.

Sociologists use the term **complex organizations** to refer to large, formal organizations with elaborate status networks (Handel 2002). Examples include universities, governments, corporations, churches, and voluntary associations such as fraternities or the Kiwanis Club.

These complex organizations make a major contribution to the overall quality of life within society. Because of their size and complexity, however, they don't supply the cohesion and personal satisfaction that smaller groups do. In fact, members often feel as if they are simply cogs in the machine rather than important people in their own right. This is nowhere more true than in a bureaucracy.

Bureaucracy is a special type of complex organization characterized by explicit rules and a hierarchical authority structure, all designed to maximize efficiency. In popular usage, bureaucracy often has a negative connotation: red tape, silly rules, and unyielding rigidity. In social science, however, it is simply an

Complex organizations are large, formal organizations with elaborate status networks.

Bureaucracy is a special type of complex organization characterized by explicit rules and hierarchical authority structure, all designed to maximize efficiency.

organization in which the roles of each actor have been carefully planned to maximize efficiency.

The "Ideal Type" of Bureaucracy: Weber's Theory

Most large, complex organizations are bureaucracies: IBM, the federal government, U.S. Steel, the Catholic Church, colleges, and hospitals. The classic description of an "ideal type" of bureaucracy was outlined a century ago by Max Weber ([1910] 1970a). By "ideal type," Weber did *not* mean that this is the *best* form of bureaucracy, merely that it is what bureaucracies are *expected* to be like. According to Weber, bureaucracies are expected to be characterized by the following:

1. *Division of labor.* Bureaucratic organizations employ specialists in each position and make them responsible for specific duties. Job titles and job descriptions specify who is to do what and who is responsible for each activity.
2. *Hierarchical authority.* Positions are arranged in a hierarchy so that each one is under the control and supervision of a higher position. Frequently referred to as chains of command, these lines of authority and responsibility are easily drawn on an organization chart, often in the shape of a pyramid.
3. *Rules and regulations.* All activities and operations of a bureaucracy are governed by abstract rules or procedures. These rules are designed to cover almost every possible situation that might arise: hiring, firing, and the everyday operations of the office. The object is to standardize all activities.
4. *Impersonal relationships.* Theoretically, interactions in a bureaucracy are guided by rules rather than by personal feelings, with the goal of eliminating favoritism and bias.
5. *Careers, tenure, and technical qualifications.* Candidates for bureaucratic positions are supposed to be selected on the basis of technical qualifications such as education, experience, or high scores on civil service examinations. Once selected for a position, individuals should advance in the hierarchy by means of achievement and seniority, and should be able to keep their jobs as long as their performance holds up.
6. *Efficiency.* Bureaucratic organizations are intended to maximize efficiency by coordinating the activities of a large number of people in the pursuit of organizational goals. From the practice of hiring on the basis of credentials rather than personal contacts to the rigid specification of duties and authority, the whole system is constructed to keep individuality, whim, and favoritism out of the operation of the organization.

Weber realized that few if any bureaucracies totally meet this description: Workers often must do tasks beyond those they are assigned; lines of authority are sometimes unclear; environments often change before new rules evolve to deal with those changes; biases like sexism and racism certainly can lead to the hiring of unqualified or less qualified persons; and organizations can, at times, be wildly inefficient. In addition, over the last quarter century American corporations, a major form of bureaucracy, have downsized and now contract out many services. In this new environment, workers have less guarantee of tenure, and corporations can't be as hierarchical, since they can't exert as much control over contracted workers—especially if the workers live half a world away (Scott 2004). Still, Weber's list of bureaucratic characteristics helps us understand the *expected* role and nature of bureaucracies.

Bureaucracies like McDonalds depend on hierarchical (top-down) control, a clear division of labor between different types of workers, and strict rules for how each type of worker should do his or her job.

Matthias Schrader/dpa/Landov

Real Bureaucracies: Organizational Culture

Weber's classic theory of bureaucracy almost demands not individuals, but robots who will follow every rule to the letter. Yet when workers really do follow every rule, no matter how nonsensical or unnecessary, work quickly grinds to a halt. In fact, in cities where police cannot legally strike, police unions sometimes instead protest through "slowdowns," in which officers follow every rule for the purpose of throwing the system into chaos. Not surprisingly, therefore, few organizations try to be totally bureaucratic. Instead, they strive to create an atmosphere of goodwill and common purpose among their members so that they all will apply their ingenuity and best efforts to meeting organizational goals (Kunda 1993). This goodwill is as essential to efficiency as are the rules.

Sociologists use the term **organizational culture** to refer to the pattern of norms and values that structures how business is actually carried out in an organization (Kunda 1993). The key to a successful organizational culture is cohesion, and most organizations strive to build cohesion among their members. They do this by encouraging interaction and loyalty among employees, and by such tactics as providing lunchrooms; sponsoring after-hours sports leagues and company picnics; and promoting unifying symbols such as company mascots. For example, Google is famous for such on-site "perks" as free massages, free gourmet meals, and volleyball courts. But many other organizations use less expensive versions of the same strategies. When organizational managers succeed at motivating loyalty, workers may be willing to skip vacations, work extremely long hours, and sacrifice time with family and friends; it is not uncommon for workers at "fun" companies like Google to work 12, 15, or even 24 hours a day to meet a deadline.

Compared with a business like Chrysler Motor Company, businesses like Google also stand out for their emphasis on flexibility and informal decision making. Why would this be so? Companies that develop software require creativity from their

Organizational culture refers to the pattern of norms and values that structures how business is actually carried out in an organization.

employees and must change strategies rapidly in response to changes in the broader environment and changes made by their competitors. In contrast, changes came slowly to the factory line at Chrysler—which may partly explain why it was forced to file for bankruptcy in 2009. The degree of bureaucratization in an organization is related to the degree of uncertainty in the organization's activities. When activities tend to be routine and predictable, the organization is likely to emphasize rules, central planning, and hierarchical chains of command. This explains why, for example, classrooms tend to be less bureaucratic and factories more bureaucratic.

Critiques of Bureaucracies

Bureaucracy is the standard organizational form in the modern world. Organizations from churches to governments are run along bureaucratic lines. Yet despite the widespread adoption of this organizational form, it has several major drawbacks. Three of the most widely acknowledged are as follows:

1. *Ritualism.* Rigid adherence to rules may mean that a rule is followed regardless of whether it helps accomplish the purpose for which it was designed. The rule becomes an end in itself rather than a means to an end. For example, individuals may struggle to arrive at 8 A.M. and leave at 4 P.M. when they could work more effectively from 10 to 6. Although the existence of a bureaucracy per se doesn't always breed rote adherence to rules (Foster 1990), an overemphasis on bureaucratic rules can stifle initiative and prevent the development of more efficient procedures.
2. *Alienation.* The emphasis on rules, hierarchies, and impersonal relationships can sharply reduce the cohesion of the organization. Reduced cohesion results in several drawbacks: It reduces social control, reduces member satisfaction and commitment, and increases staff turnover. All of these may interfere with the organization's ability to reach its goals.
3. *Structured inequality.* Critics charge that the modern bureaucracy with its multiple layers of authority is a profoundly antidemocratic organization. Bureaucracies concentrate power in the hands of a few people, whose decisions then pass down as orders to subordinates.

In addition to these concerns, more recent criticism has focused on the dangers of *McDonaldization* (Ritzer 1996). **McDonaldization** refers to the process through which a broad range of bureaucracies adopt management goals derived from the fast-food restaurant industry.

Not surprisingly, the McDonald's restaurant chain exemplifies the central management goals of McDonaldization: efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control. McDonald's streamlined its procedures to serve customers extremely rapidly (efficiency) and shifted from advertising how good its burgers taste (something that can't be measured) to advertising how many ounces of meat the burgers contain (calculability). McDonald's guarantees that a Big Mac in New York tastes exactly like a Big Mac in Des Moines (predictability). And each McDonald's restaurant requires its employees to follow strict guidelines for work procedures (control) and pressures customers to order and leave quickly by offering limited menus and uncomfortable seats (control and efficiency). These principles have now been adopted by all kinds of bureaucracies around the world, from drop-off laundries to "telephone-sex" businesses.

Ironically, the attempt to rationalize bureaucratic structures through McDonaldization often produces *irrational* consequences for the society as a whole. The disadvantages of McDonaldization stem directly from each supposed advantage.

McDonaldization is the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant—efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control—are coming to dominate more sectors of American society.

For instance, although it is more efficient for businesses to use voice-mail systems instead of operators, it is less efficient for the customers who must listen to a series of menus, hoping that they will reach the department they seek before getting disconnected. Moreover, businesses lose customers when customers hang up in frustration after getting lost in voice-mail mazes. Similarly, businesses like McDonald's make decisions based on calculations of how they can best generate a profit, but they do not calculate the impact of their business decisions on the environment or on the quality of life of their customers or workers. The predictability that chain stores and restaurants offer makes the world a less interesting place, as large national businesses drive out unique local businesses. And the control that McDonaldized organizations offer is frequently dehumanizing—something you have probably experienced every time your name and identity have been replaced by an institutional identification number.

Where This Leaves Us

Humans are social beings. We live our lives within relationships, groups, networks, and—whether we like it or not—complex organizations. Without these human connections we cannot survive, let alone thrive. Groups, networks, and organizations help us obtain the very basics of life—food, clothing, work, shelter, companionship, love. They also enable us to make our mark on the world, as we raise children within families, create better communities through voluntary associations, strive for success within complex organizations from schools to corporations, and so on. Yet working with others also carries risks, for exchange and cooperation can turn into competition and conflict, and groups can affect our ideas and behaviors in ways we may not even recognize. A sociological understanding of groups, networks, and organizations an help us understand, prevent, and, where necessary, counteract these effects.

Summary

1. Relationships are characterized by four basic social processes: exchange, cooperation, competition, and conflict.
2. Groups differ from crowds and categories in that group members take one another into account, and their interactions are shaped by shared expectations and interdependency.
3. Reference groups are groups that individuals compare themselves to regularly. Relative deprivation—which occurs when we compare ourselves to others who are better off than we are—can reduce happiness.
4. Primary groups are characterized by intimate, face-to-face interaction. They are essential to individual satisfaction and integration, and they are also primary agents of social control in society. Secondary groups are large, formal, and impersonal. They are generally task oriented and perform instrumental functions for societies and individuals.
5. Group size, proximity, and communication patterns all affect group interaction. Group interaction can lead to conformity and consensus among group members, sometimes around obviously incorrect decisions. The amount of interaction in turn affects group cohesion.
6. Each person has a social network that consists of both strong and weak ties. The number of strong ties is generally greater for individuals who are white and who have more years of education.
7. Strong ties are the people we can count on when we really need help of some sort. Weak ties, however, are more useful when we need to reach out to a broad social network, such as when searching for work.

8. Voluntary associations are nonprofit groups that bring together people with shared interests. They combine some of the expressive functions of primary groups with the instrumental functions of secondary groups.

9. When individuals are linked by dense, cross-cutting networks, they form a community. Communities have important influences on members, even when social ties within the community are relatively weak.

10. Complex organizations are large, formal organizations with elaborate status networks. Bureaucracies are complex organizations whose goal is to maximize efficiency. Bureaucracies are expected to be characterized by a division of labor; hierarchical authority; rules and regulations; impersonal social relations; an emphasis on careers, tenure, and technical qualifications; and an emphasis on efficiency.

11. Although most contemporary organizations are built on a bureaucratic model, many are far less rational than the classic model suggests. Critics of McDonaldization suggest that the bureaucratic emphasis on rationality can have irrational consequences. In addition, all effective bureaucracies must rely on organizational culture to inspire employees to give their best efforts and to help meet organizational goals.

Thinking Critically

1. Do social networking sites like Facebook serve as primary groups or secondary groups? Do they enforce group conformity? Explain, with examples.

2. Can you think of a situation in your life in which your behavior was more affected by a secondary than by a primary group?

3. Suppose you were trying to get help for a family member's substance-abuse problem. What would be the advantage of turning to your strong ties? your weak ties?

4. From your experience, what are some of the functions of bureaucracy? What are some of the problems?

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