I began Dumpster diving [scavenging in a large garbage bin] about a year before I became homeless. . . . The area I frequent is inhabited by many affluent college students. I am not here by chance; the Dumpsters in this area are very rich. Students throw out many good things, including food. In particular they tend to throw everything out when they move at the end of a semester, before and after breaks, and around midterm, when many of them despair of college. So I find it advantageous to keep an eye on the academic calendar.

I learned to scavenge gradually, on my own. Since then I have initiated several companions into the trade. I have learned that there is a predictable series of stages a person goes through in learning to scavenge.

At first the new scavenger is filled with disgust and self-loathing. He is ashamed of being seen and may lurk around, trying to duck behind things, or he may dive at night. (In fact, most people instinctively look away from a scavenger. By skulking around, the novice calls attention to himself and arouses suspicion. Diving at night is ineffective and needlessly messy.) . . . That stage passes with experi-
ence. The scavenger finds a pair of running shoes that fit and look and smell brand-
new. . . . He begins to understand: People throw away perfectly good stuff, a lot of per-
fectly good stuff.

At this stage, Dumpster shyness begins to dissipate. The diver, after all, has the last
laugh. He is finding all manner of good things that are his for the taking. Those who
disparage his profession are the fools, not he.

—AUTHOR LARS EIGNER recalls his experiences as a Dumpster diver while
living under a shower curtain in a stand of bamboo in a public park.
Eighner became homeless when he was evicted from his “shack” after
being unemployed for about a year. (Eighner, 1993: 111–119)

Eighner’s “diving” activities reflect a specific pattern of
social behavior. All activities in life—including scav-
enging in garbage bins and living “on the streets”—are
social in nature. Homeless persons and domiciled
persons (those with homes) live in social worlds that
have predictable patterns of social interaction. Social
interaction is the process by which people act
toward or respond to other people and is the founda-
tion for all relationships and groups in society. In this
chapter, we look at the relationship between social
structure and social interaction. In the process, home-
lessness is used as an example of how social problems
occur and how they may be perpetuated within social
structures and patterns of interaction.

Social structure is the complex framework of soci-
etal institutions (such as the economy, politics, and
religion) and the social practices (such as rules and
social roles) that make up a society and that orga-
nize and establish limits on people’s behavior. This
structure is essential for the survival of society and for
the well-being of individuals because it provides a
social web of familial support and social relationships
that connects each of us to the larger society. Many
homeless people have lost this vital linkage. As a
result, they often experience a loss of personal dignity
and a sense of moral worth because of their “home-
less” condition (Snow and Anderson, 1993).

Who are the homeless? Before reading on, take the
quiz on homelessness in Box 5.1. The characteristics of
the homeless population in the United States vary
widely. Among the homeless are single men, single
women, and families. In recent years, families with
children have accounted for 40 percent of the home-
less population (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2005).
Further, people of color are overrepresented among the
homeless. In 2004, African Americans made up 49
percent of the homeless population, whites (Cauca-
sians) 35 percent, Latinas/os (Hispanics) 13 percent,
Native Americans 2 percent, and Asian Americans 1
percent (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2005). These
percentages obviously vary across communities and
different areas of the country.
Homeless persons come from all walks of life. They include undocumented workers, parolees, runaway youths and children, Vietnam veterans, and the elderly. They live in cities, suburbs, and rural areas. Contrary to popular myths, most of the homeless are not on the streets by choice or because they were deinstitutionalized by mental hospitals. Not all of the homeless are unemployed. About 22 percent of homeless people hold full- or part-time jobs but earn too little to find an affordable place to live (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2005).

**SHARPENING YOUR FOCUS**

How do societies change over time?

What are the components of social structure?

Why do societies have shared patterns of social interaction?

How are daily interactions similar to being onstage?

Do positive changes in society occur through individual efforts or institutional efforts?

**Social Structure: The Macrolevel Perspective**

Social structure provides the framework within which we interact with others. This framework is an orderly, fixed arrangement of parts that together make up the whole group or society (see Figure 5.1). As defined in Chapter 1, a *society* is a large social grouping that shares the same geographical territory and is subject to the same political authority and dominant cultural expectations. At the macrolevel, the social structure of a society has several essential elements: social institutions, groups, statuses, roles, and norms.

Functional theorists emphasize that social structure is essential because it creates order and predictability in a society (Parsons, 1951). Social structure is also...
important for our human development. As we saw in Chapter 4, we develop a self-concept as we learn the attitudes, values, and behaviors of the people around us. When these attitudes and values are part of a predictable structure, it is easier to develop that self-concept.

Social structure gives us the ability to interpret the social situations we encounter. For example, we expect our families to care for us, our schools to educate us, and our police to protect us. When our circumstances change dramatically, most of us feel an acute sense of anxiety because we do not know what to expect or what is expected of us. For example, newly homeless individuals may feel disoriented because they do not know how to function in their new setting. The person is likely to ask questions: “How will I survive on the streets?” “Where do I go to get help?” “Should I stay at a shelter?” “Where can I get a job?” Social structure helps people make sense out of their environment, even when they find themselves on the streets.

In addition to providing a map for our encounters with others, social structure may limit our options and place us in arbitrary categories not of our own choosing. Conflict theorists maintain that there is more to social structure than is readily visible and that we must explore the deeper, underlying structures that determine social relations in a society. Karl Marx suggested that the way economic production is organized is the most important structural aspect of any society. In capitalistic societies, where a few people control the labor of many, the social structure reflects a system of relationships of domination among categories of people (for example, owner–worker and employer–employee).

Social structure creates boundaries that define which persons or groups will be the “insiders” and which will be the “outsiders.” Social marginality is the state of being part insider and part outsider in the social structure. Sociologist Robert Park (1928) coined this term to refer to persons (such as immigrants) who simultaneously share the life and traditions of two distinct groups. Social marginality results in stigmatization. A stigma is any physical or social attribute or sign that so devalues a person’s social identity that it disqualifies that person from full social acceptance (Goffman, 1963b). A convicted criminal, wearing a prison uniform, is an example of a person who has been stigmatized; the uniform says that the person has done something wrong and should not be allowed unsupervised outside the prison walls.

**BOX 5.1 Sociology and Everyday Life**

**How Much Do You Know About Homeless Persons?**

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*Answers on page 140.*
Components of Social Structure

The social structure of a society includes its social positions, the relationships among those positions, and the kinds of resources attached to each of the positions. Social structure also includes all the groups that make up society and the relationships among those groups (Simmel, 1988). We begin by examining the social positions that are closest to the individual.

Status

A status is a socially defined position in a group or society characterized by certain expectations, rights, and duties. Statuses exist independently of the specific people occupying them (Linton, 1936); the statuses of professional athlete, rock musician, professor, college student, and homeless person all exist exclusive of the specific individuals who occupy these social positions. For example, although thousands of new students arrive on college campuses each year to occupy the status of first-year student, the status of college student and the expectations attached to that position have remained relatively unchanged for the past one hundred years.

Does the term status refer only to high-level positions in society? No, not in a sociological sense. Although many people equate the term status with high levels of prestige, sociologists use it to refer to all socially defined positions—high rank and low rank. For example, both the position of director of the Department of Health and Human Services in Washington, D.C., and that of a homeless person who is paid about five dollars a week (plus bed and board) to clean up the dining room at a homeless shelter are social statuses (see Snow and Anderson, 1993).

Take a moment to answer the question “Who am I?” To determine who you are, you must think about your social identity, which is derived from the statuses

BOX 5.1 Sociology and Everyday Life

Answers to the Sociology Quiz on Homeless Persons

1. False. Less than 6 percent of all homeless people are that way by choice.
2. False. Most homeless persons did not inflict upon themselves the conditions that produced their homelessness. Some are the victims of child abuse or violence.
3. False. Many homeless people are among the working poor. Minimum-wage jobs do not pay enough for an individual to support a family or pay inner-city rent.
4. False. Most homeless people are not mentally ill; estimates suggest that about one-fourth of the homeless are emotionally disturbed.
5. False. Many homeless persons panhandle to pay for food, a bed at a shelter, or other survival needs.
6. False. Most homeless people are not heavy drug users. Estimates suggest that about one-third of the homeless are substance abusers. Many of these are part of the one-fourth of the homeless who are mentally ill.
7. False. Although an encounter with a homeless person occasionally ends in tragedy, most homeless persons are among the least threatening members of society. They are often the victims of crime, not the perpetrators.
8. True. Scholars have found that homelessness has always existed in the United States. However, the number of homeless persons has increased or decreased with fluctuations in the national economy.
9. True. Families with children are the fastest growing category of homeless persons in the United States. The number of such families nearly doubled between 1984 and 1989, and continues to do so. Many homeless children are alone. They may be runaways or "throwaways" whose parents do not want them to return home.
10. True. Some homeless persons have attended college and graduate school, and many have completed high school.

Sources: Based on Kroloff, 1993; Liebow, 1993; Snow and Anderson, 1993; U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2005; Vissing, 1996; and Waxman and Hinderliter, 1996.

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you occupy and is based on your status set. A status set comprises all the statuses that a person occupies at a given time. For example, Maria may be a psychologist, a professor, a wife, a mother, a Catholic, a school volunteer, a Texas resident, and a Mexican American. All of these socially defined positions constitute her status set.

**ASCRIBED AND ACHIEVED STATUS** Statuses are distinguished by the manner in which we acquire them. An *ascribed status* is a social position conferred at birth or received involuntarily later in life, based on attributes over which the individual has little or no control, such as race/ethnicity, age, and gender. For example, Maria is a female born to Mexican American parents; she was assigned these statuses at birth. She is an adult and—if she lives long enough—will someday become an “older adult,” which is an ascribed status received involuntarily later in life. An *achieved status* is a social position that a person assumes voluntarily as a result of personal choice, merit, or direct effort. Achieved statuses (such as occupation, education, and income) are thought to be gained as a result of personal ability or successful competition. Most occupational positions in modern societies are achieved statuses. For instance, Maria voluntarily assumed the statuses of psychologist, professor, wife, mother, and school volunteer. However, not all achieved statuses are positions that most people would want to attain; for example, being a criminal, a drug addict, or a homeless person is a negative achieved status.

Ascribed statuses have a significant influence on the achieved statuses we occupy. Race/ethnicity, gender, and age affect each person’s opportunity to acquire certain achieved statuses. Those who are privileged by their positive ascribed statuses are more likely to achieve the more prestigious positions in a society. Those who are disadvantaged by their ascribed statuses may more easily acquire negative achieved statuses.

**MASTER STATUS** If we occupy many different statuses, how can we determine which is the most important? Sociologist Everett Hughes has stated that societies resolve this ambiguity by determining master statuses. A *master status is the most important status a person occupies*; it dominates all of the individual’s other statuses and is the overriding ingredient in determining a person’s general social position (Hughes, 1945). Being poor or rich is a master status that influences many other areas of life, including health, education, and life opportunities. Historically, the most common master statuses for women have related to positions in the family, such as daughter, wife, and mother. For men, occupation has usually been the most important status, although occupation is increasingly a master status for many women as well. “What do you do?” is one of the first questions many people ask when meeting another.

**status** a socially defined position in a group or society characterized by certain expectations, rights, and duties.

**ascribed status** a social position conferred at birth or received involuntarily later in life based on attributes over which the individual has little or no control, such as race/ethnicity, age, and gender.

**achieved status** a social position that a person assumes voluntarily as a result of personal choice, merit, or direct effort.

**master status** the most important status that a person occupies.
Occupation provides important clues to a person’s educational level, income, and family background. An individual’s race/ethnicity may also constitute a master status in a society in which dominant-group members single out members of other groups as “inferior” on the basis of real or alleged physical, cultural, or nationality characteristics (see Feagin and Feagin, 2003).

Master statuses are vital to how we view ourselves, how we are seen by others, and how we interact with others. Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg is both a U.S. Supreme Court justice and a mother. Which is her master status? Can you imagine how she would react if attorneys arguing a case before the Supreme Court treated her as if she were a mother rather than a justice? Lawyers wisely use “justice” as her master status and act accordingly.

Master statuses confer high or low levels of personal worth and dignity on people. Those are not characteristics that we inherently possess; they are derived from the statuses we occupy. For those who have no residence, being a homeless person readily becomes a master status regardless of the person’s other attributes. Homelessness is a stigmatized master status that confers disrepute on its occupant because domiciled people often believe that a homeless person has a “character flaw.” Sometimes this assumption is supported by how the media frame stories about homeless people (see Box 5.2). The circumstances under which someone becomes homeless determine the extent to which that person is stigmatized. For example, individuals who become homeless as a result of natural disasters (such as a hurricane or a brush fire) are not seen as causing their homelessness or as being a threat to the community. Thus, they are less likely to be stigmatized. However, in cases in which homeless persons are viewed as the cause of their own problems, they are more likely to be stigmatized and marginalized by others. Snow and Anderson (1993: 199) observed the effects of homelessness as a master status:

It was late afternoon, and the homeless were congregated in front of [the Salvation Army shelter] for dinner. A school bus approached that was packed with Anglo junior high school students being bused from an eastside barrio school to their upper-middle and upper-class homes in the city’s northwest neighborhoods. As the bus rolled by, a fusillade of coins came flying out the windows, as the students made obscene gestures and shouted, “Get a job.” Some of the homeless gestured back, some scrambled for the scattered coins—mostly pennies—others angrily threw the coins at the bus, and a few seemed oblivious to the encounter. For the passing junior high schoolers, the exchange was harmless fun, a way to work off the restless energy built up in school; but for the homeless it was a stark reminder of their stigmatized status and of the extent to which they are the objects of negative attention.

**STATUS SYMBOLS** When people are proud of a particular social status that they occupy, they often choose to use visible means to let others know about their position. **Status symbols** are material signs that inform others of a person’s specific status. For example, just as wearing a wedding ring proclaims that a person is married, owning a Rolls-Royce announces that one has “made it.” As we saw in Chapter 3, achievement and success are core U.S. values. For this reason, people who have “made it” frequently want to display symbols to inform others of their accomplishments.
Components of Social Structure

Status symbols for the domiciled and for the homeless may have different meanings. Among affluent persons, a full shopping cart in the grocery store and bags of merchandise from expensive department stores indicate a lofty financial position. By contrast, among the homeless, bulging shopping bags and overloaded grocery carts suggest a completely different status. Carts and bags are essential to street life; there is no other place to keep things, as shown by this description of Darian, a homeless woman in New York City:

The possessions in her postal cart consist of a whole house full of things, from pots and pans to books, shoes, magazines, toilet articles, personal papers and clothing, most of which she made herself. . . .

BOX 5.2 Framing Homelessness in the Media

Thematic and Episodic Framing

They live—and die—on a traffic island in the middle of a busy downtown street, surviving by panhandling drivers or turning tricks. Everyone in their colony is hooked on drugs or alcohol. They are the harpest face of the homeless in San Francisco.

The traffic island where these homeless people live is a 40-by-75 foot triangle chunk of concrete just west of San Francisco's downtown. . . . The little concrete divider wouldn’t get a second glance, or have a name—if not for the colony that lives there in a jumble of shopping carts loaded with everything they own. It’s called Homeless Island by the shopkeepers who work near it and the street sweepers who clean it; to the homeless, it is just the Island. The inhabitants live hand-to-mouth, sleep on the cement and abuse booze and drugs, mostly heroin. There are at least 3,000 others like them in San Francisco, social workers say. They are known as the “hard core,” the people most visible on the streets, the most difficult to help. . . . (Fagan, 2003)

This news article is an example of typical media framing of stories about homeless people. The full article includes statements about how the homeless of San Francisco use drugs, lack ambition, and present a generally disreputable appearance on the streets. This type of framing of stories about the homeless is not unique. According to the media scholar Eungjun Min (1999: ix), media images typically portray the homeless as “drunk, stoned, crazy, sick, and drug abusers.” Such representations of homeless people limit our understanding of the larger issues surrounding the problem of homelessness in the United States.

Most media framing of newspaper articles and television reports about the problem of homelessness can be classified into one of two major categories: thematic framing and episodic framing. Thematic framing refers to news stories that focus primarily on statistics about the homeless population and recent trends in homelessness. Examples include stories about changes in the U.S. poverty rate and articles about states and cities that have had the largest increases in poverty. Most articles of this type are abstract and impersonal, primarily presenting data and some expert’s interpretation of what those data mean. Media representations of this type convey a message to readers that “the poor and homeless are faceless.” According to some analysts, thematic framing of poverty is often dehumanizing because it “ignores the human tragedy of poverty—the suffering, indignities, and misery endured by millions of children and adults” (Mantsios, 2003: 101).

By contrast, episodic framing presents public issues such as poverty and homelessness as concrete events, showing them to be specific instances that occur more or less in isolation. For example, a news article may focus on the problems of one homeless family, describing how the parents and kids live in a car and eat meals from a soup kitchen. Often, what is not included is the big picture of homelessness: How many people throughout the city or nation are living in their cars or in shelters? What larger structural factors (such as reductions in public and private assistance to the poor, or high rates of unemployment in some regions) contribute to or intensify the problem of homelessness in this country?

For many years, the poor have been a topic of interest to journalists and social commentators. Between 1851 and 1995, the New York Times alone printed 4,126 articles that had the word poverty in the headline. How stories about the poor and homeless are framed in the media has been and remains an important concern for each of us because these reports influence how we view the less fortunate in our society. If we come to see the problem of homelessness as nothing more than isolated statistical data or as marginal situations that affect only a few people, then we are unable to make a balanced assessment of the larger social problems involved. How are the poor and homeless represented in news reports and the television entertainment shows you watch? Are the larger social issues surrounding homelessness discussed within the context of these shows? Should they be?
Because of its weight and size, Darian cannot get the cart up over the curb. She keeps it in the street near the cars. This means that as she pushes it slowly up and down the street all day long, she is living almost her entire life directly in traffic. She stops off along her route to sit or sleep for awhile and to be both stared at as a spectacle and to stare back. Every aspect of her life including sleeping, eating, and going to the bathroom is constantly in public view. . . . [S]he has no space to call her own and she never has a moment’s privacy. Her privacy, her home, is her cart with all its possessions. (Rousseau, 1981: 141)

For homeless women and men, possessions are not status symbols as much as they are a link with the past, a hope for the future, and a potential source of immediate cash. As Snow and Anderson (1993: 147) note, selling personal possessions is not uncommon among most social classes; members of the working and middle classes hold garage sales, and those in the upper classes have estate sales. However, when homeless persons sell their personal possessions, they do so to meet their immediate needs, not because they want to “clean house.”

Roles

Role is the dynamic aspect of a status. Whereas we occupy a status, we play a role. A role is a set of behavioral expectations associated with a given status. For example, a carpenter (employee) hired to remodel a kitchen is not expected to sit down uninvited and join the family (employer) for dinner.

Role expectation is a group’s or society’s definition of the way that a specific role ought to be played. By contrast, role performance is how a person actually plays the role. Role performance does not always match role expectation. Some statuses have role expectations that are highly specific, such as that of surgeon or college professor. Other statuses, such as friend or significant other, have less-structured expectations. The role expectations tied to the status of student are more specific than those of being a friend. Role expectations are typically based on a range of acceptable behavior rather than on strictly defined standards.

Our roles are relational (or complementary); that is, they are defined in the context of roles performed by others. We can play the role of student because someone else fulfills the role of professor. Conversely, to perform the role of professor, the teacher must have one or more students.

Parents sometimes experience role conflict when they are faced with societal expectations that they will earn a living for their family and that they will also be good parents to their children. This father seeks to take care of his sick daughter at the same time that he knows that he has responsibilities at work that he should be fulfilling.

Role ambiguity occurs when the expectations associated with a role are unclear. For example, it is not always clear when the provider–dependent aspect of the parent–child relationship ends. Should it end at age eighteen or twenty-one? When a person is no longer in school? Different people will answer these questions differently depending on their experiences and socialization, as well as on the parents’ financial capability and psychological willingness to continue contributing to the welfare of their adult children.

Role conflict and role strain Most people occupy a number of statuses, each of which has numerous role expectations attached. For example, Charles is a student who attends morning classes at the university, and he is an employee at a fast-food restaurant, where he works from 3:00 to 10:00 p.m. He is also Stephanie’s boyfriend, and she would like to see him more often. On December 7, Charles has a final exam at 7:00 p.m., when he is supposed to be working. Mean-
Role conflict occurs when incompatible role demands are placed on a person by two or more statuses held at the same time. When role conflict occurs, we may feel pulled in different directions. To deal with this problem, we may prioritize our roles and first complete the one we consider to be most important. Or we may compartmentalize our lives and “insulate” our various roles (Merton, 1968). That is, we may perform the activities linked to one role for part of the day and then engage in the activities associated with another role in some other time period or elsewhere. For example, under routine circumstances, Charles would fulfill his student role for part of the day and his employee role for another part of the day. In his current situation, however, he is unable to compartmentalize his roles.

Role conflict may occur as a result of changing statuses and roles in society. Research has found that women who engage in behavior that is gender-typed as “masculine” tend to have higher rates of role conflict than those who engage in traditional “feminine” behavior (Basow, 1992). According to the sociologist Tracey Watson (1987), role conflict can sometimes be attributed not to the roles themselves but to the pressures people feel when they do not fit into culturally prescribed roles. In her study of women athletes in college sports programs, Watson found role conflict in the traditionally incongruent identities of being a woman and being an athlete. Even though the women athletes in her study wore makeup and presented a conventional image when they were not on the basketball court, their peers in school still saw them as “female jocks,” thus leading to role conflict.

Whereas role conflict occurs between two or more statuses (such as being homeless and being a temporary employee of a social services agency), role strain takes place within one status. Role strain occurs when incompatible demands are built into a single status that a person occupies (Goode, 1960). For example, many women experience role strain in the labor force because they hold jobs that are “less satisfying and more stressful than men’s jobs since they involve less money, less prestige, fewer job openings, more career roadblocks, and so forth” (Basow, 1992: 192). Similarly, married women may experience more role strain than married men because of work overload, marital inequality with their spouse, exclusive parenting responsibilities, unclear expectations, and lack of emotional support.

Recent social changes may have increased role strain in men. In the family, men’s traditional position of dominance has eroded as more women have entered the paid labor force and demanded more assistance in child-rearing and homemaking responsibilities. Role strain may occur among African American men who have internalized North American cultural norms regarding masculinity yet find it very difficult (if not impossible) to attain cultural norms of achievement, success, and power because of racism and economic exploitation (Basow, 1992).

Sexual orientation, age, and occupation are frequently associated with role strain. Lesbians and gay men often experience role strain because of the pressures associated with having an identity heavily stigmatized by the dominant cultural group (Basow, 1992). Women in their thirties may experience the highest levels of role strain; they face a large amount of stress in terms of role demands and conflicting work and family expectations (Basow, 1992). Dentists, psychiatrists, and police officers have been found to experience high levels of occupation-related role strain, which may result in suicide. (The concepts of role expectation, role performance, role conflict, and role strain are illustrated in Figure 5.2.)

Individuals frequently distance themselves from a role they find extremely stressful or otherwise problematic. Role distancing occurs when people consciously foster the impression of a lack of commitment or attachment to a particular role and merely go through the motions of role performance (Goffman, 1961b).
People use distancing techniques when they do not want others to take them as the “self” implied in a particular role, especially if they think the role is “beneath them.” While Charles is working in the fast-food restaurant, for example, he does not want people to think of him as a “loser in a dead-end job.” He wants them to view him as a college student who is working there just to “pick up a few bucks” until he graduates. When customers from the university come in, Charles talks to them about what courses they are taking, what they are majoring in, and what professors they have. He does not discuss whether the bacon cheeseburger is better than the chili burger. When Charles is really involved in role distancing, he tells his friends that he “works there but wouldn’t eat there.”

**ROLE EXIT**  Role exit occurs when people disengage from social roles that have been central to their self-identity (Ebaugh, 1988). Sociologist Helen Rose Fuchs Ebaugh studied this process by interviewing ex-convicts, ex-nuns, retirees, divorced men and women, and others who had exited voluntarily from significant social roles. According to Ebaugh, role exit occurs in four stages. The first stage is doubt, in which people experience frustration or burnout when they reflect on their existing roles. The second stage involves a search for alternatives; here, people may take a leave of absence from their work or temporarily separate from their marriage partner. The third stage is the turning point, at which people realize that they must take some final action, such as quitting their job or getting a divorce. The fourth and final stage involves the creation of a new identity.

Exiting the “homeless” role is often very difficult. The longer a person remains on the streets, the more difficult it becomes to exit this role. Personal resources diminish over time. Possessions are often stolen, lost, sold, or pawned. Work experience and skills become outdated, and physical disabilities that prevent individuals from working are likely to develop. However, a number of homeless people are able to exit this role.
Groups
Groups are another important component of social structure. To sociologists, a social group consists of two or more people who interact frequently and share a common identity and a feeling of interdependence. Throughout our lives, most of us participate in groups: our families and childhood friends, our college classes, our work and community organizations, and even society.

Primary and secondary groups are the two basic types of social groups. A primary group is a small, less specialized group in which members engage in face-to-face, emotion-based interactions over an extended period of time. Primary groups include our family, close friends, and school- or work-related peer groups. By contrast, a secondary group is a larger, more specialized group in which members engage in more impersonal, goal-oriented relationships for a limited period of time. Schools, churches, and corporations are examples of secondary groups. In secondary groups, people have few, if any, emotional ties to one another. Instead, they come together for some specific, practical purpose, such as getting a degree or a paycheck. Secondary groups are more specialized than primary ones; individuals relate to one another in terms of specific roles (such as professor and student) and more-limited activities (such as course-related endeavors). Primary and secondary groups are further discussed in Chapter 6 (“Groups and Organizations”).

Social solidarity, or cohesion, relates to a group’s ability to maintain itself in the face of obstacles. Social solidarity exists when social bonds, attractions, or other forces hold members of a group in interaction over a period of time (Jary and Jary, 1991). For example, if a local church is destroyed by fire and congregation members still worship together in a make-shift setting, then they have a high degree of social solidarity.

Many of us build social networks that involve our personal friends in primary groups and our acquaintances in secondary groups. A social network is a series of social relationships that links an individual...
Social networks work differently for men and women, for different races/ethnicities, and for members of different social classes. Traditionally, people of color and white women have been excluded from powerful “old-boy” social networks. At the middle- and upper-class levels, individuals tap social networks to find employment, make business deals, and win political elections. However, social networks typically do not work effectively for poor and homeless individuals. Snow and Anderson (1993) found that homeless men have fragile social networks that are plagued with instability. Homeless men often do not even know one another’s “real” names.

Sociological research on the homeless has noted the social isolation experienced by people on the streets. Sociologist Peter H. Rossi (1989) found that a high degree of social isolation exists because the homeless are separated from their extended family and former friends. Rossi noted that among the homeless who did have families, most either did not wish to return or believed that they would not be welcome. Most of the avenues for exiting the homeless role and acquiring housing are intertwined with the large-scale, secondary groups that sociologists refer to as formal organizations.

A formal organization is a highly structured group formed for the purpose of completing certain tasks or achieving specific goals. Many of us spend most of our time in formal organizations, such as colleges, corporations, or the government. Chapter 6 ("Groups and Organizations") analyzes the characteristics of bureaucratic organizations; however, at this point we should note that these organizations are a very important component of social structure in all industrialized societies. We expect such organizations to educate us, solve our social problems (such as crime and homelessness), and provide work opportunities.

Today, formal organizations such as the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty work with groups around the country to make people aware that homelessness must be viewed within the larger context of poverty and to educate the public on the nature and extent of homelessness among various categories of people in the United States (see Figure 5.3, "Who Are the Homeless?").

Social Institutions
At the macrolevel of all societies, certain basic activities routinely occur—children are born and socialized, goods and services are produced and distributed, order is preserved, and a sense of purpose is maintained (Abberle et al., 1950; Mack and Bradford, 1979). Social institutions are the means by which these basic needs are met. A social institution is a set of organized beliefs and rules that establishes how a society will attempt to meet its basic social needs. In the past, these needs have centered around five basic social institutions: the family, religion, education, the economy, and the government or politics. Today, mass media, sports, science and medicine, and the military are also considered to be social institutions.

What is the difference between a group and a social institution? A group is composed of specific, identifiable people; an institution is a standardized way of doing something. The concept of “family” helps to distinguish between the two. When we talk about “your family” or “my family,” we are referring

**Figure 5.3** Who Are the Homeless?

![Pie chart showing the distribution of homeless individuals by race/ethnicity and gender.](Image)

to a specific family. When we refer to the family as a social institution, we are talking about ideologies and standardized patterns of behavior that organize family life. For example, the family as a social institution contains certain statuses organized into well-defined relationships, such as husband–wife, parent–child, and brother–sister. Specific families do not always conform to these ideologies and behavior patterns.

Functional theorists emphasize that social institutions exist because they perform five essential tasks:

1. **Replacing members.** Societies and groups must have socially approved ways of replacing members who move away or die. The family provides the structure for legitimated sexual activity—and thus procreation—between adults.
2. **Teaching new members.** People who are born into a society or move into it must learn the group’s values and customs. The family is essential in teaching new members, but other social institutions educate new members as well.
3. **Producing, distributing, and consuming goods and services.** All societies must provide and distribute goods and services for their members. The economy is the primary social institution fulfilling this need; the government is often involved in the regulation of economic activity.
4. **Preserving order.** Every group or society must preserve order within its boundaries and protect itself from attack by outsiders. The government legitimates the creation of law enforcement agencies to preserve internal order and some form of military for external defense.
5. **Providing and maintaining a sense of purpose.** In order to motivate people to cooperate with one another, a sense of purpose is needed.

Although this list of functional prerequisites is shared by all societies, the institutions in each society perform these tasks in somewhat different ways depending on their specific cultural values and norms.

Conflict theorists agree with functionalists that social institutions are originally organized to meet basic social needs. However, they do not believe that social institutions work for the common good of everyone in society. For example, the homeless lack the power and resources to promote their own interests when they are opposed by dominant social groups. From the conflict perspective, social institutions such as the government maintain the privileges of the wealthy and powerful while contributing to the powerlessness of others (see Domhoff, 2002). For example, U.S. government policies in urban areas have benefited some people but exacerbated the problems of others.

Urban renewal and transportation projects have caused the destruction of low-cost housing and put large numbers of people “on the street” (Katz, 1989). Similarly, the shift in governmental policies toward the mentally ill and welfare recipients has resulted in more people struggling—and often failing—to find affordable housing. Meanwhile, many wealthy and privileged bankers, investors, developers, and builders have benefited at the expense of the low-income casualties of those policies.

**Societies, Technology, and Sociocultural Change**

As we think about homeless people today, it is difficult to realize that for people in some societies being without a place of residence is a way of life. Where people live and the mode(s) of production they use to generate a food supply are related to *subsistence technology*—the methods and tools that are available for acquiring the basic needs of daily life. Social scientists have identified five types of societies based on various levels of subsistence technology: hunting and gathering, horticultural and pastoral, agrarian, industrial, and postindustrial societies. The first three of these—hunting and gathering, horticultural and pastoral, and agrarian—are also referred to as preindustrial societies. According to the social scientists Gerhard Lenski and Jean Lenski, societies change over time through the process of *sociocultural evolution*, the changes that occur as a society gains new technology (see Nolan and Lenski, 1999). However, not all anthropologists and sociologists agree on the effects of new technology.

**Hunting and Gathering Societies**

At present, fewer than 250,000 people support themselves solely through hunting, fishing, and gathering wild plant foods (Haviland, 1999). However, from the origins of human existence (several million years ago) until about 10,000 years ago, hunting and gathering societies were the only type of human society...
that existed. Hunting and gathering societies use simple technology for hunting animals and gathering vegetation. The technology in these societies is limited to tools and weapons that are used for basic subsistence, including spears, bows and arrows, nets, traps for hunting, and digging sticks for plant collecting. All tools and weapons are made of natural materials such as stone, bone, and wood.

In hunting and gathering societies, the basic social unit is the kinship group or family. People do not have private households or residences as we think of them. Instead, they live in small groups of about twenty-five to forty people. Kinship ties constitute the basic economic unit through which food is acquired and distributed. With no stable food supply, hunters and gatherers continually search for wild animals and edible plants. As a result, they remain on the move and seldom establish a permanent settlement (Nolan and Lenski, 1999).

Hunting and gathering societies are relatively egalitarian. Because it is impossible to accumulate a surplus of food, there are few resources upon which individuals or groups can build a power base. Some specialization (division of labor) occurs, primarily based on age and sex. Young children and older people are expected to contribute what they can to securing the food supply, but healthy adults of both sexes are expected to obtain most of the food. In some societies, men hunt for animals and women gather plants; in others, both women and men gather plants and hunt for wild game, with women more actively participating when smaller animals are nearby (Lorber, 1994; Volti, 1995).

In these societies, education, religion, and politics are not formal social institutions. Instead, their functions take place on an informal basis in the kinship group, which is responsible for teaching children basic survival skills such as how to hunt and gather food. Religion is based on animism, the belief that spirits inhabit virtually everything in the world. There is no organized religious body; the shaman, or religious leader, exercises some degree of leadership but receives no material rewards for his duties and is expected to work like everyone else to obtain food (Nolan and Lenski, 1999). Contemporary hunting and gathering societies are located in relatively isolated geographical areas. However, some analysts predict that these groups will soon cease to exist, as food producers with more dominating technologies usurp the geographic areas from which these groups have derived their food supply (Nolan and Lenski, 1999).

Horticultural and Pastoral Societies

The period between 13,000 and 7,000 B.C.E. ("before the common era") marks the beginning of horticultural and pastoral societies. During this period, there was a gradual shift from collecting food to producing food, a change that has been attributed to three factors: (1) the depletion of the supply of large game animals as a source of food, (2) an increase in the size of the human population to feed, and (3) dramatic weather and environmental changes that probably occurred by the end of the Ice Age (Ferraro, 1992).

Why did some societies become horticultural while others became pastoral? Whether horticultural activities or pastoral activities became a society’s primary mode of food production was related to water supply, terrain, and soils. Pastoral societies are based on technology that supports the domestication of large animals to provide food and emerged in mountainous regions and areas with low amounts of annual rainfall. Pastoralists—people in pastoral societies—typically remain nomadic as they seek new grazing lands and water sources for their animals. Horticultural societies are based on technology that supports the cultivation of plants to provide food. These societies emerged in more fertile areas that were better suited for growing plants through the use of hand tools.

The family is the basic unit in horticultural and pastoral societies. Because they typically do not move as often as hunter-gatherers or pastoralists, horticultur-
alists establish more permanent family ties and create complex systems for tracing family lineage. Some social analysts believe that the invention of a hoe with a metal blade was a contributing factor to the less nomadic lifestyle of the horticulturalists. Unlike the digging stick, use of the metal-blade hoe made planting more efficient and productive. Horticulturists using a hoe are able to cultivate the soil more deeply, and crops can be grown in the same area for longer periods. As a result, people become more sedentary, remaining settled for longer periods in the same location.

Unless there are fires, floods, droughts, or environmental problems, herding animals and farming are more reliable sources of food than hunting and gathering. When food is no longer in short supply, more infants are born, and children have a greater likelihood of surviving. When people are no longer nomadic, children are viewed as an economic asset: They can cultivate crops, tend flocks, or care for younger siblings.

Division of labor increases in horticultural and pastoral societies. As the food supply grows, not everyone needs to be engaged in food production. Some people can pursue activities such as weaving cloth or carpets, crafting jewelry, serving as priests, or creating the tools needed for building the society’s structure. Horticultural and pastoral societies are less egalitarian than hunter-gatherers. Even though land is initially communally controlled (often through an extended kinship group), the idea of property rights emerges as people establish more-permanent settlements. At this stage, families with the largest surpluses not only have an economic advantage but also gain prestige and power, including the ability to control others. Slavery is a fairly common practice, and being a slave is a hereditary status in some pastoral societies.

In simple horticultural societies, a fairly high degree of gender equality exists because neither sex controls the food supply. Women contribute to food production because hoe cultivation is compatible with child care (Basow, 1992). In contemporary horticultural societies, women still do most of the farming while men hunt game, clear land, work with arts and crafts, make tools, participate in religious and ceremonial activities, and engage in war (Nielsen, 1990). Gender inequality is greater in pastoral societies because men herd the large animals and women contribute relatively little to subsistence production. In some herding societies, women’s primary value is seen as their ability to produce male offspring so that the family lineage can be preserved and a sufficient number of males are available to protect the group against enemy attack (Nielsen, 1990).

Education, religion, and politics remain relatively informal in horticultural and pastoral societies. Boys learn how to plant and harvest crops, domesticate large animals, and fight. Girls learn how to do domestic chores, care for younger children, and, sometimes, cultivate the land. In horticultural societies, religion is based on ancestor worship; in pastoral societies, religion is based on belief in a god or gods, who are believed to take an active role in human affairs. Politics is based on a simple form of government that is backed up by military force.

### Agrarian Societies

About five to six thousand years ago, agrarian (or agricultural) societies emerged, first in Mesopotamia and Egypt and slightly later in China. **Agrarian societies use the technology of large-scale farming, including animal-drawn or energy-powered plows and equipment, to produce their food supply.** Farming made it possible for people to spend their entire lives in the same location, and food surpluses made it possible for people to live in cities where they were not directly involved in food production. Unlike the digging sticks and hoes that had previously been used in farming, the use of animals to pull plows made it possible for people to generate a large surplus of food. In agrarian societies, land is cleared of all vegetation and cultivated with the use of the plow, a process that not only controls the weeds that might kill crops but also helps maintain the fertility of the soil. The land can be used more or less continuously because the plow turns the topsoil, thus returning more nutrients to the soil. In some cases, farmers reap several harvests each year from the same plot of land.

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**hunting and gathering societies** societies that use simple technology for hunting animals and gathering vegetation.

**pastoral societies** societies based on technology that supports the domestication of large animals to provide food, typically emerging in mountainous regions and areas with low amounts of annual rainfall.

**horticultural societies** societies based on technology that supports the cultivation of plants to provide food.

**agrarian societies** societies that use the technology of large-scale farming, including animal-drawn or energy-powered plows and equipment, to produce their food supply.
In agrarian societies, social inequality is the highest of all preindustrial societies in terms of both class and gender. The two major classes are the landlords and the peasants. The landlords own the fields and the harvests produced by the peasants. Inheritance becomes important as families of wealthy landlords own the same land for generations. By contrast, the landless peasants enter into an agreement with the landowners to live on and cultivate a parcel of land in exchange for part of the harvest or other economic incentives. Over time, the landlords grow increasingly wealthy and powerful as they extract labor, rent, and taxation from the landless workers. Politics is based on a feudal system controlled by a political-economic elite made up of the ruler, his royal family, and members of the landowning class. Peasants have no political power and may be suppressed through the use of force or military power.

Gender-based inequality grows dramatically in agrarian societies. Men gain control over both the disposition of the food surplus and the kinship system (Lorber, 1994). Because agrarian tasks require more labor and greater physical strength than horticultural ones, men become more involved in food production. Women may be excluded from these tasks because they are seen as too weak for the work or it is believed that their child-care responsibilities are incompatible with the full-time labor that the tasks require (Nielsen, 1990). As more people own land or businesses, the rules pertaining to marriage become stronger, and women's lives become more restricted. Men demand that women practice premarital virginity and marital fidelity so that “legitimate” heirs can be produced to inherit the land and other possessions (Nielsen, 1990). This belief is supported by religion, which is a powerful force in agrarian societies. In simple agrarian societies, the gods are seen as being concerned about the individual’s moral conduct. In advanced agrarian societies, monotheism (belief in one god) replaces a belief in multiple gods. Today, gender inequality continues in agrarian societies; the division of labor between women and men is very distinct in areas such as parts of the Middle East. Here, women's work takes place in the private sphere (inside the home), and men's work occurs in the public sphere, providing men with more recognition and greater formal status.

**Industrial Societies**

*Industrial societies are based on technology that mechanizes production.* Originating in England during the Industrial Revolution, this mode of production dramatically transformed predominantly rural and agrarian societies into urban and industrial societies. Chapter 1 describes how the revolution first began in Britain and then spread to other countries, including the United States.

Industrialism involves the application of scientific knowledge to the technology of production, thus making it possible for machines to do the work previously done by people or animals. New technologies, such as the invention of the steam engine and fuel-power machinery, stimulated many changes. Before the invention of the steam engine, machines were run by natural sources (such as wind or water mills) or harnessed power (either human or animal power). The steam engine made it possible to produce goods by machines powered by fuels rather than undependable natural sources or physical labor.

As inventions and discoveries build upon one another, the rate of social and technological change increases. For example, the invention of the steam engine brought about new types of transportation, including trains and steamships. Inventions such as electric lights made it possible for people to work around the clock without regard to whether it was daylight or dark outside. Take a look around you: Most of what you see would not exist if it were not for industrialization. Cars, computers, electric lights, stereos, telephones, and virtually every other possession we own are the products of an industrial society.
Industrialism changes the nature of subsistence production. In countries such as the United States, large-scale agribusinesses have practically replaced small, family-owned farms and ranches. However, large-scale agriculture has produced many environmental problems while providing solutions to the problem of food supply.

In industrial societies, a large proportion of the population lives in or near cities. Large corporations and government bureaucracies grow in size and complexity. The nature of social life changes as people come to know one another more as statuses than as individuals. In fact, a person's occupation becomes a key defining characteristic in industrial societies, whereas his or her kinship ties are most important in preindustrial societies. Although time is freed up for leisure activities, many people still work long hours or multiple jobs.

Social institutions are transformed by industrialism. The family diminishes in significance as the economy, education, and political institutions grow in size and complexity. Although the family is still a major social institution for the care and socialization of children, it loses many of its other production functions to businesses and corporations. The family is now a consumption unit, not a production unit. In advanced industrial societies such as the United States, families take on many diverse forms, including single-parent families, single-person families, and stepfamilies (see Chapter 15, “Families and Intimate Relationships”). Although the influence of traditional religion is diminished in industrial societies, religion remains a powerful institution. Religious organizations are important in determining what moral issues will be brought to the forefront (e.g., unapproved drugs, abortion, and violence and sex in the media) and in trying to influence lawmakers to pass laws regulating people's conduct. Politics in industrial societies is usually based on a democratic form of government. As nations such as South Korea, the People's Republic of China, and Mexico have become more industrialized, many people in these nations have intensified their demands for political participation.

Although the standard of living rises in industrial societies, social inequality remains a pressing problem. As societies industrialize, the status of women tends to decline further. For example, industrialization in the United States created a gap between the nonpaid work performed by women at home and the paid work that was increasingly performed by men and unmarried girls. The division of labor between men and women in the middle and upper classes also became much more distinct: Men were responsible for being "breadwinners"; women were seen as "homemakers" (Amott and Matthaei, 1996). This gendered division of labor increased the economic and political subordination of women. Likewise, although industrialization was a source of upward mobility for many whites, most people of color were left behind (Lorber, 1994). In short, industrial societies have brought about some of the greatest innovations in all of human history, but they have also maintained and perpetuated some of the greatest problems, including violence; race-, class-, and gender-based inequalities; and environmental degradation.

**Postindustrial Societies**

A postindustrial society is one in which technology supports a service- and information-based economy. As discussed in Chapter 1, postmodern (or "postindustrial") societies are characterized by an information explosion and an economy in which large numbers of people either provide or apply information or are employed in service jobs (such as fast-food server or health care worker). For example, banking, law, and the travel industry are characteristic forms of employment in postindustrial societies, whereas producing steel or automobiles is representative of employment in industrial societies, whereas producing steel or automobiles is representative of employment in industrial societies. There is a corresponding rise of a consumer society and the emergence of a global village in which people around the world communicate with one another by electronic technologies such as television, telephone, fax, e-mail, and the Internet.

Postindustrial societies produce knowledge that becomes a commodity. This knowledge can be leased or sold to others, or it can be used to generate goods, services, or more knowledge. In the previous types of societies we have examined, machinery or raw materials are crucial to how the economy operates. In postindustrial societies, the economy is based on involvement with people and communications technologies such as the mass media, computers, and the World Wide Web. For example, recent information from the U.S. Census Bureau indicates that more than half of all U.S. households have at least one computer.
In postindustrial economies, many service- and information-based jobs are located in countries far removed from where a corporation’s consumers actually live. These call center employees in India are helping customers around the world.

(see “Census Profiles: Computer and Internet Access in U.S. Households”). Some analysts refer to postindustrial societies as “service economies,” based on the assumption that many workers provide services for others. Examples include home health care workers and airline flight attendants. However, most of the new service occupations pay relatively low wages and offer limited opportunities for advancement.

Previous forms of production, including agriculture and manufacturing, do not disappear in postindustrial societies. Instead, they become more efficient through computerization and other technological innovations. Work that relies on manual labor is often shifted to less technologically advanced societies, where workers are paid low wages to produce profits for corporations based in industrial and postindustrial societies.

Knowledge is viewed as the basic source of innovation and policy formulation in postindustrial societies. As a result, education becomes one of the most important social institutions (Bell, 1973). Formal education and other sources of information become crucial to the success of individuals and organizations. Scientific research becomes institutionalized, and new industries—such as computer manufacturing and software development—come into existence that would not have been possible without the new knowledge and technological strategies. (The features of the different types of societies, distinguished by technoeconomic base, are summarized in Table 5.1.) Throughout this text, we will examine key features of postindustrial societies as well as the postmodern theoretical perspectives that have come to be associated with the process of postindustrialism.

Stability and Change in Societies

How do societies maintain some degree of social solidarity in the face of the changes we have described? As you may recall from Chapter 1, theorists using a functionalist perspective focus on the stability of societies and the importance of equilibrium even in times of rapid social change. By contrast, conflict perspectives highlight how societies go through continuous struggles for scarce resources and how innovation, rebellion, and conquest may bring about social change. Sociologists Emile Durkheim and Ferdinand Tönnies developed typologies to explain the processes of stability and change in the social structure of societies. A typology is a classification scheme containing two or more mutually exclusive categories that are used to compare different kinds of behavior or types of societies.

Durkheim: Mechanical and Organic Solidarity

Emile Durkheim (1933/1893) was concerned with the question “How do societies manage to hold together?” He asserted that preindustrial societies are held together by strong traditions and by the members’ shared moral beliefs and values. As societies industrialized and developed more specialized economic activities, social solidarity came to be rooted in the members’ shared dependence on one another. From Durkheim’s perspective, social solidarity derives from a society’s social structure, which, in turn, is based on the society’s division of labor. Division of labor refers to how the various tasks of a society are divided up
and performed. People in diverse societies (or in the same society at different points in time) divide their tasks somewhat differently, based on their own history, physical environment, and level of technological development.

To explain social change, Durkheim categorized societies as having either mechanical or organic solidarity. Mechanical solidarity refers to the social cohesion of preindustrial societies, in which there is minimal division of labor and people feel united by shared values and common social bonds. Durkheim used the term mechanical solidarity because he believed that people in such preindustrial societies feel a more or less automatic sense of belonging. Social interaction is characterized by face-to-face, intimate, primary-group relationships. Everyone is engaged in similar work, and little specialization is found in the division of labor.

Organic solidarity refers to the social cohesion found in industrial (and perhaps postindustrial) societies, in which people perform very specialized tasks and feel united by their mutual dependence. Durkheim chose the term organic solidarity because he believed that individuals in industrial societies come to rely on one another in much the same way that the organs of the human body function interdependently. Social interaction is less personal, more status oriented, and more focused on specific goals and objectives. People no longer rely on morality or shared values for social solidarity; instead, they are bound together by practical considerations. Which of Durkheim’s categories most closely describes the United States today?

### Tönnies: Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft

Sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (1855–1936) used the terms Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft to characterize the degree of social solidarity and social control found in societies. He was especially concerned about what happens to social solidarity in a society when a “loss of community” occurs.

The Gemeinschaft (guh-MINE-shoft) is a traditional society in which social relationships are

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**Mechanical solidarity** Emile Durkheim’s term for the social cohesion of preindustrial societies, in which there is minimal division of labor and people feel united by shared values and common social bonds.

**Organic solidarity** Emile Durkheim’s term for the social cohesion found in industrial societies, in which people perform very specialized tasks and feel united by their mutual dependence.

**Gemeinschaft** (guh-MINE-shoft) a traditional society in which social relationships are based on personal bonds of friendship and kinship and on intergenerational stability.
Table 5.1  Technoeconomic Bases of Society

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Change from Prior Society</th>
<th>HUNTING AND GATHERING</th>
<th>HORTICULTURAL AND PASTORAL</th>
<th>AGRARIAN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economic Characteristics</td>
<td>Hunting game, gathering roots and berries</td>
<td>Use of hand tools, such as digging stick and hoe</td>
<td>Use of animal-drawn plows and equipment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of Surplus</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Planting crops, domestication of animals for food</td>
<td>Labor-intensive farming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inheritance</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Men begin to control societies</td>
<td>Men who own land or herds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control over Procreation</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Increasingly by men</td>
<td>Patrilineal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s Status</td>
<td>Relative equality</td>
<td>Decreasing in move to pastoralism</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Adapted from Lorber, 1994: 140.

based on personal bonds of friendship and kinship and on intergenerational stability. These relationships are based on ascribed rather than achieved status. In such societies, people have a commitment to the entire group and feel a sense of togetherness. Tönnies (1963/1887) used the German term Gemeinschaft because it means “commune” or “community”; social solidarity and social control are maintained by the community. Members have a strong sense of belonging, but they also have very limited privacy.

By contrast, the Gesellschaft (guh-ZELL-shoft) is a large, urban society in which social bonds are based on impersonal and specialized relationships, with little long-term commitment to the group or consensus on values. In such societies, most people are “strangers” who perceive that they have very little in common with most other people. Consequently, self-interest dominates, and little consensus exists regarding values. Tönnies (1963/1887) selected the German term Gesellschaft because it means “association”; relationships are based on achieved statuses, and interactions among people are both rational and calculated.

Social Structure and Homelessness

In Gesellschaft societies such as the United States, a prevailing core value is that people should be able to take care of themselves. Thus, many people view the homeless as “throwaways”—as beyond help or as having already had enough done for them by society. Some argue that the homeless made their own bad decisions, which led them into alcoholism or drug addiction, and should be held responsible for the consequences of their actions. In this sense, homeless people serve as a visible example to others to “follow the rules” lest they experience a similar fate.

Alternative explanations for homelessness in Gesellschaft societies have been suggested. Elliot Liebow (1993) notes that homelessness is rooted in poverty; overwhelmingly, homeless people are poor people who come from poor families. Homelessness is a “social class phenomenon, the direct result of a steady, across-the-board lowering of the standard of living of the working class and lower class” (Liebow, 1993: 224). As the standard of living falls, those at the bottom rungs of society are plunged into homelessness. The problem is exacerbated by a lack of jobs. Of those
who find work, a growing number work full time, year-round, but remain poor because of substandard wages. Half of the households living below the poverty line pay more than 70 percent of their income for rent—if they are able to find accommodations that they can afford at all (Roob and McCambridge, 1992). Clearly, there is no simple answer to the question about what should be done to help the homeless. Nor, as discussed in Box 5.3, is there any consensus on what rights the homeless have in public spaces, such as parks and sidewalks. The answers we derive as a society and as individuals are often based on our social construction of this reality of life.

### Table 5.1 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Change from Prior Society</th>
<th>INDUSTRIAL</th>
<th>POSTINDUSTRIAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economic Characteristics</td>
<td>Invention of steam engine</td>
<td>Invention of computer and development of “high-tech” society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of Surplus</td>
<td>Mechanized production of goods</td>
<td>Information and service economy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men who own means of production</td>
<td>Corporate shareholders and high-tech entrepreneurs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Bilateral</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Bilateral</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s Status</td>
<td>Men—but less so in later stages</td>
<td>Varies by class, race, and age</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Social Interaction: The Microlevel Perspective

So far in this chapter, we have focused on society and social structure from a macrolevel perspective, seeing how the structure of society affects the statuses we occupy, the roles we play, and the groups and organizations to which we belong. Functionalist and conflict perspectives provide a macrosociological overview because they concentrate on large-scale events and broad social features. For example, sociologists using the macrosociological approach to study the homeless might analyze how social institutions have operated to produce current conditions. By contrast, the symbolic interactionist perspective takes a microsociological approach, asking how social institutions affect our daily lives. We will now look at society from the microlevel perspective, which focuses on social interactions among individuals, especially face-to-face encounters.

Social Interaction and Meaning

When you are with other people, do you often wonder what they think of you? If so, you are not alone! Because most of us are concerned about the meanings...
Chapter 5 • Society, Social Structure, and Interaction

**BOX 5.3 Sociology and Social Policy**

### Homeless Rights Versus Public Space

I had a bit of a disturbing experience yesterday as I was running errands downtown. First, I was glad to see the south Queen sidewalk east of University [in Toronto, Canada] open. (Months of construction on the new opera house had blocked it off.) As I continued walking eastward past the acclaimed new structure (where I have enjoyed a performance or two) I wondered why the sidewalk was so narrow. It seems this stretch of Queen should feel a bit grander. When I reached the corner of Queen and Bay, I saw some police officers and city workers “taking action on sidewalk clearance.” They were clearing a homeless person’s worldly belongings off the sidewalk. Using shovels. And a pickup truck. . . .

I think what I saw yesterday is unacceptable. Sure, the situation is complicated. Yes, there are a lot of stakeholders and stories to appreciate. But it’s unfairness I want to see shoveled out of public space. Not people. Not blankets. Not kindness. And I hope I’m not alone. (Sandals, 2007)

“Public space protection” has become an issue in many cities, both in the United States and elsewhere. Record numbers of homeless individuals and families seek refuge on the streets and in public parks because they have nowhere else to go. However, this seemingly individualistic problem is actually linked to larger social concerns, including unemployment, lack of job training and education, lack of affordable housing, and cutbacks in social service agency budgets. The problem of homelessness also raises significant social policy issues, including the extent to which cities can make it illegal for people to remain for extended periods of time in public spaces.

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that others ascribe to our behavior, we try to interpret their words and actions so that we can plan how we will react toward them (Blumer, 1969). We know that others have expectations of us. We also have certain expectations about them. For example, if we enter an elevator that has only one other person in it, we do not expect that individual to confront us and stare into our eyes. As a matter of fact, we would be quite upset if the person did so.

Social interaction within a given society has certain shared meanings across situations. For instance, our reaction would be the same regardless of which elevator we rode in which building. Sociologist Erving Goffman (1963b) described these shared meanings in his observation about two pedestrians approaching each other on a public sidewalk. He noted that each will tend to look at the other just long enough to acknowledge the other’s presence. By the time they are about eight feet away from each other, both individuals will tend to look downward. Goffman referred to this behavior as civil inattention—the ways in which an individual shows an awareness that another is present without making this person the object of particular attention. The fact that people engage in civil inat-
Should homeless persons be allowed to sleep on sidewalks, in parks, and in other public areas? This issue has been the source of controversy in a number of cities. As these cities have sought to improve their downtown areas and public spaces, they have taken measures to enforce city ordinances controlling loitering (standing around or sleeping in public spaces), “aggressive panhandling,” and disorderly conduct. For example, Santa Monica, California, passed a law that makes it illegal for a person to occupy the doorway of a business between the hours of 11 P.M. and 7 A.M. if the owner has posted a sign to that effect (Wood, 2002).

Advocates for the homeless and civil liberties groups have filed lawsuits in several cities claiming that the rights of the homeless are being violated by the enforcement of these laws. The lawsuits assert that the homeless have a right to sleep in parks because no affordable housing is available for them. Advocates also argue that panhandling is a legitimate means of livelihood for some of the homeless and is protected speech under the First Amendment. In addition, they accuse public and law enforcement officials of seeking to punish the homeless on the basis of their “status,” a cruel and unusual punishment prohibited by the Eighth Amendment.

The “homeless problem” is not a new one for city governments. Of the limited public funding that is designated for the homeless, most has been spent on shelters that are frequently overcrowded and otherwise inadequate. Officials in some cities have given homeless people a one-way ticket to another city. Still others have routinely run them out of public spaces.

What responsibility does society have to the homeless? Are laws restricting the hours that public areas or parks are open to the public unfair to homeless persons? Should city workers remove cardboard boxes, blankets, and other “makeshift” homes created by the homeless in parks? Some critics have argued that if the homeless and their advocates win these lawsuits, what they have won (at best) is the right for the homeless to live on the street, to slowly freeze to death, and to drink themselves into oblivion with the option of continuing to forgo seeking the help they need. Others have disputed this assertion and note that if society does not make available affordable housing and job opportunities, the least it can do is stop harassing homeless people who are getting by as best they can. What do you think? What rights are involved? Whose rights should prevail?

Sources: Based on Kaufman, 1996; Sandals, 2007; and Wood, 2002.
Most of us take for granted the social structures, institutions, and interactions that support and sustain us in our everyday lives. But what if those structures and patterns were suddenly taken from us by a natural disaster such as a hurricane, tornado, or earthquake? How might we feel if we found ourselves homeless, adrift from the people we know and love, and unsure of where to turn for the physical and emotional assistance we would so clearly need in a time of crisis?

Sociological disaster research has recently shed new light on such questions in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, which struck New Orleans, Louisiana; Biloxi, Mississippi; and other Gulf Coast areas with such force that people were “dumbfounded by the scope and severity of the storm’s impacts and equally astonished by the sheer incompetence of the governmental response to the largest catastrophe to strike the nation in the last one hundred years,” as sociologist Kathleen Tierney (2006: 207) has pointed out. More than eighteen hundred people lost their lives as a result of the storm, and hundreds of thousands of people became homeless, losing clothing and personal possessions and in many instances becoming separated from family members and pets.

Picture yourself in each of these photos, and think about how important your family, friends, and familiar places are to you. Doing so helps us gain a better understanding of why sociologists believe that social institutions and social interactions are so important in defining who we are and what we want to become.

Homelessness and being uprooted from familiar surroundings became a recurring issue for many Hurricane Katrina evacuees. First, they became homeless as a result of the natural disaster. Next, many of them remained homeless when Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) trailers did not arrive as scheduled. Finally, as in this photo, some of them were evicted from hotels and other temporary housing as a result of disputes over funding from federal emergency programs.
Social Structure in Turmoil

The family as a social institution is responsible for supporting its members, especially in times of crisis. Were it not for the kind hearts and generosity of family members, many more hurricane victims would have been forced to stay in public shelters. Case in point—here you see a family in Houston, Texas, who invited relatives who were left homeless because of Hurricane Katrina to stay with them even though it entailed fifteen people living together in a three-bedroom home. Think about situations in your own life when your family has helped you. What alternatives would you have had without them?

Social Institutions and Stability

The first day of classes at a new school had a distinctly different meaning for children displaced by the Katrina disaster. A loving mother greets her children as they return to temporary shelter from school, where she hopes that they will find stability until they can return to the family's home. What part do social institutions such as the family and education play in providing stability in your life?

Social Interaction and Resilience

Thanks to the kindness of strangers, life goes on for many natural disaster victims. Although the young woman pictured here was staying in a 240-square-foot FEMA trailer as a result of Hurricane Katrina, and although her life had been changed dramatically as a result of the storm, she was still able to attend her high school prom wearing a dress donated by a generous young woman in Maryland.

Re-creating Social Structure

Volunteer organizations, city leaders in communities throughout the United States, and governmental agencies such as FEMA struggled to meet the most basic needs of individuals and families displaced by rising water and the destruction of their homes. Here evacuees from Hurricane Katrina found temporary shelter in the Austin, Texas, convention center while other housing arrangements were being made for them. In the aftermath of a major crisis, people seek to re-create social structure through groups and organizations that have been established to deal with catastrophes and by reestablishing their social networks and statuses as quickly as possible.
black person you’re reminded how you’re perceived in society. You walk the streets at night; white people cross the streets. I’ve seen white couples and individuals dart in front of cars to not be on the same side of the street. Just the other day, I was walking down the street, and this white female with a child, I saw her pass a young white male about 20 yards ahead. When she saw me, she quickly dragged the child and herself across the busy street. . . . [When I pass,] white men tighten their grip on their women. I’ve seen people turn around and seem like they’re going to take blows from me. . . . So, every day you realize [you’re black]. Even though you’re not doing anything wrong; you’re just existing. You’re just a person. But you’re a black person perceived in an unblack world. (qtd. in Feagin, 1991: 111–112)

As this passage indicates, social encounters have different meanings for men and women, whites and people of color, and individuals from different social classes. Members of the dominant classes regard the poor, unemployed, and working class as less worthy of attention, frequently subjecting them to subtle yet systematic “attention deprivation” (Derber, 1983). The same can certainly be said about how members of the dominant classes “interact” with the homeless.

The Social Construction of Reality

If we interpret other people’s actions so subjectively, can we have a shared social reality? Some symbolic interaction theorists believe that there is very little shared reality beyond that which is socially created. Symbolic interactionists refer to this as the social construction of reality—the process by which our perception of reality is largely shaped by the subjective meaning that we give to an experience (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). This meaning strongly influences what we “see” and how we respond to situations.

When you watch a football game, do you “see” the same game as everyone else? The answer is “no,” according to researchers who asked Princeton and Dartmouth students to watch a film of a recent game between their two schools. The students were instructed to watch for infractions of the rules by each team. Although both groups saw the same film, the Princeton students saw twice as many rule infractions involving the Dartmouth team as the Dartmouth students saw. The researchers noted that one version of what transpired at the game was just as “real” to one person as another (entirely different) version was to another person (Hastorf and Cantril, 1954). When we see what we want or expect to see, we are engaged in the social construction of reality.

As discussed previously, our perceptions and behavior are influenced by how we initially define situa-
tions: We act on reality as we see it. Sociologists describe this process as the definition of the situation, meaning that we analyze a social context in which we find ourselves, determine what is in our best interest, and adjust our attitudes and actions accordingly. This can result in a self-fulfilling prophecy—a false belief or prediction that produces behavior that makes the originally false belief come true (Merton, 1968).

An example would be a person who has been told repeatedly that she or he is not a good student; eventually, this person might come to believe it to be true, stop studying, and receive failing grades.

People may define a given situation in very different ways, a tendency demonstrated by the sociologist Jacqueline Wiseman (1970) in her study of “Pacific City’s” skid row. She wanted to know how people who live or work on skid row (a run-down area found in all cities) felt about it. Wiseman found that homeless persons living on skid row evaluated it very differently from the social workers who dealt with them there. On the one hand, many of the social workers “saw” skid row as a smelly, depressing area filled with men who were “down-and-out,” alcoholic, and often physically and mentally ill. On the other hand, the men who lived on skid row did not see it in such a negative light. They experienced some degree of satisfaction with their “bottle clubs [and a] remarkably indomitable and creative spirit”—at least initially (Wiseman, 1970: 18). As this study shows, we define situations from our own frame of reference, based on the statuses that we occupy and the roles that we play.

Dominant-group members with prestigious statuses may have the ability to establish how other people define “reality” (Berger and Luckmann, 1967: 109). Some sociologists have suggested that dominant groups, particularly higher-income white males, in influential economic and political statuses, perpetuate their own world view through ideologies that are frequently seen as “social reality.” For example, the sociologist Dorothy E. Smith (1999) points out that the term “Standard North American Family” (meaning a heterosexual two-parent family) is an ideological code promulgated by the dominant group to identify how people’s family life should be arranged. According to Smith (1999), this code plays a powerful role in determining how people in organizations such as the government and schools believe that a family should be. Likewise, the sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (1998) argues that “reality” may be viewed differently by African American women and other historically oppressed groups when compared to the perspectives of dominant-group members. However, according to Collins (1998), mainstream, dominant-group members sometimes fail to realize how much they could learn about “reality” from “outsiders.” As these theorists state, social reality and social structure are often hotly debated issues in contemporary societies.

Ethnomethodology

How do we know how to interact in a given situation? What rules do we follow? Ethnomethodologists are interested in the answers to these questions. Ethnomethodology is the study of the commonsense knowledge that people use to understand the situations in which they find themselves (Heritage, 1984: 4). Sociologist Harold Garfinkel (1967) initiated this approach and coined the term: ethnography for “people” or “folk” and methodology for “a system of methods.” Garfinkel was critical of mainstream sociology for not recognizing the ongoing ways in which people create reality and produce their own world. Consequently, ethnomethodologists examine existing patterns of conventional behavior in order to uncover people’s background expectancies—that is, their shared interpretation of objects and events—as well as their resulting actions. According to ethnomethodologists, interaction is based on assumptions of shared expectancies. For example, when you are talking with someone, what expectations do you have that you will take turns? Based on your background expectancies, would you be surprised if the other person talked for an hour and never gave you a chance to speak?

To uncover people’s background expectancies, ethnomethodologists frequently break “rules” or act as though they do not understand some basic rule of social life so that they can observe other people’s responses. In a series of breaching experiments, Garfinkel assigned different activities to his students to see how breaking the unspoken rules of behavior created confusion.

The ethnomethodological approach contributes to our knowledge of social interaction by making us

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**social construction of reality** the process by which our perception of reality is shaped largely by the subjective meaning that we give to an experience.

**self-fulfilling prophecy** the situation in which a false belief or prediction produces behavior that makes the originally false belief come true.

**ethnomethodology** the study of the commonsense knowledge that people use to understand the situations in which they find themselves.
Dramaturgical Analysis

Erving Goffman suggested that day-to-day interactions have much in common with being on stage or in a dramatic production. **Dramaturgical analysis is the study of social interaction that compares everyday life to a theatrical presentation.** Members of our “audience” judge our performance and are aware that we may slip and reveal our true character (Goffman, 1959, 1963a). Consequently, most of us attempt to play our role as well as possible and to control the impressions we give to others. **Impression management (presentation of self)** refers to people’s efforts to present themselves to others in ways that are most favorable to their own interests or image.

For example, suppose that a professor has returned graded exams to your class. Will you discuss the exam and your grade with others in the class? If you are like most people, you probably play your student role differently depending on whom you are talking to and what grade you received on the exam. Your “presentation” may vary depending on the grade earned by the other person (your “audience”). In one study, students who all received high grades (“Ace–Ace encounters”) willingly talked with one another about their grades and sometimes engaged in a little bragging about how they had “aced” the test. However, encounters between students who had received high grades and those who had received low or failing grades (“Ace–Bomber encounters”) were uncomfortable. The Aces felt as if they had to minimize their own grade. Consequently, they tended to attribute their success to “luck” and were quick to offer the Bombers words of encouragement. On the other hand, the Bombers believed that they had to praise the Aces and hide their own feelings of frustration and disappointment. Students who received low or failing grades (“Bomber–Bomber encounters”) were more comfortable when they talked with one another because they could share their negative emotions. They often indulged in self-pity and relied on face-saving excuses (such as an illness or an unfair exam) for their poor performances (Albas and Albas, 1988).

In Goffman’s terminology, **face-saving behavior** refers to the strategies we use to rescue our performance when we experience a potential or actual loss of face. When the Bombers made excuses for their low scores, they were engaged in face-saving; the Aces attempted to help them save face by asserting that the test was unfair or that it was only a small part of the final grade. Why would the Aces and Bombers both participate in face-saving behavior? In most social interactions, all role players have an interest in keeping the “play” going so that they can maintain their overall definition of the situation in which they perform their roles.

Goffman noted that people consciously participate in **studied nonobservance**, a face-saving technique in which they choose to ignore evidence that might expose a discrepancy between their performance and their expectations. For example, if a Bomber received a high grade when he or she believed the test was unfair, the Bomber might choose to ignore the discrepancy between the grade received and the expectation about the fairness of the test (Goffman, 1959).
which one role player ignores the flaws in another’s performance to avoid embarrassment for everyone involved. Most of us remember times when we have failed in our role and know that it is likely to happen again; thus, we may be more forgiving of the role failures of others.

Social interaction, like a theater, has a front stage and a back stage. The front stage is the area where a player performs a specific role before an audience. The back stage is the area where a player is not required to perform a specific role because it is out of view of a given audience. For example, when the Aces and Bombers were talking with each other at school, they were on the “front stage.” When they were in the privacy of their own residences, they were in “back stage” settings—they no longer had to perform the Ace and Bomber roles and could be themselves.

The need for impression management is most intense when role players have widely divergent or devalued statuses. As we have seen with the Aces and Bombers, the participants often play different roles under different circumstances and keep their various audiences separated from one another. If one audience becomes aware of other roles that a person plays, the impression being given at that time may be ruined. For example, homeless people may lose jobs or the opportunity to get them when their homelessness becomes known. One woman had worked as a receptionist in a doctor’s office for several weeks but was fired when the doctor learned that she was living in a shelter (Liebow, 1993). However, the homeless do not passively accept the roles into which they are cast. For the most part, they attempt—as we all do—to engage in impression management in their everyday life.

The dramaturgical approach helps us think about the roles we play and the audiences who judge our presentation of self. Like all other approaches, it has its critics. Sociologist Alvin Gouldner (1970) criticized this approach for focusing on appearances and not the underlying substance. Others have argued that Goffman’s work reduces the self to “a peg on which the clothes of the role are hung” (see Burns, 1992) or have suggested that this approach does not place enough emphasis on the ways in which our everyday interactions with other people are influenced by occurrences within the larger society. For example, if some members of Congress belittle the homeless as being lazy and unwilling to work, it may become easier for people walking down a street to do likewise. Goffman’s defenders counter that he captured the essence of society because social interaction “turns out to be not only where most of the world’s work gets done, but where the solid buildings of the social world are in fact constructed” (Burns, 1992: 380). Goffman’s work was influential in the development of the sociology of emotions, a relatively new area of theory and research.

### The Sociology of Emotions

Why do we laugh, cry, or become angry? Are these emotional expressions biological or social in nature? To some extent, emotions are a biologically given sense (like hearing, smell, and touch), but they are also social in origin. We are socialized to feel certain emotions, and we learn how and when to express (or not express) those emotions (Hochschild, 1983).

How do we know which emotions are appropriate for a given role? Sociologist Arlie Hochschild (1983) suggests that we acquire a set of feeling rules that shapes the appropriate emotions for a given role or specific situation. These rules include how, where, when, and with whom an emotion should be expressed. For example, for the role of a mourner at a funeral, feeling rules tell us which emotions are required (sadness and grief, for example), which are acceptable (a sense of relief that the deceased no longer has to suffer), and which are unacceptable (enjoyment of the occasion expressed by laughing out loud) (see Hochschild, 1983: 63–68).

Feeling rules also apply to our occupational roles. For example, the truck driver who handles explosive cargo must be able to suppress fear. Although all jobs place some burden on our feelings, emotional labor occurs only in jobs that require personal contact with the public or the production of a state of mind (such as hope, desire, or fear) in others (Hochschild, 1983). With emotional labor, employees must display only certain carefully selected emotions. For example, flight attendants are required to act friendly toward passengers, to be helpful and open to requests, and to maintain an “omnipresent smile” in order to enhance the customers’ status. By contrast, bill collectors are encouraged to show anger and make threats to customers, thereby supposedly deflating the customers’ status and wearing down their presumed resistance to paying past-due bills. In both jobs, the employees are expected to show feelings that are often not their true ones (Hochschild, 1983).
Emotional labor may produce feelings of estrangement from one’s “true” self. C. Wright Mills (1956) suggested that when we “sell our personality” in the course of selling goods or services, we engage in a seriously self-alienating process. In other words, the “commercialization” of our feelings may dehumanize our work role performance and create alienation and contempt that spill over into other aspects of our life (Hochschild, 1983; Smith and Kleinman, 1989).

Do all people experience and express emotions the same way? It is widely believed that women express emotions more readily than men; as a result, very little research has been conducted to determine the accuracy of this belief. In fact, women and men may differ more in the way they express their emotions than in their actual feelings. Differences in emotional expression may also be attributed to socialization, for the extent to which men and women have been taught that a given emotion is appropriate (or inappropriate) to their gender no doubt plays an important part in their perceptions.

Social class is also a determinant in managed expression and emotion management. Emotional labor is emphasized in middle- and upper-class families. Because middle- and upper-class parents often work with people, they are more likely to teach their children the importance of emotional labor in their own careers than are working-class parents, who tend to work with things, not people (Hochschild, 1983). Race is also an important factor in emotional labor. People of color spend much of their life engaged in emotional labor because racist attitudes and discrimination make it continually necessary to manage one’s feelings.

Clearly, Hochschild’s contribution to the sociology of emotions helps us understand the social context of our feelings and the relationship between the roles we play and the emotions we experience. However, her thesis has been criticized for overemphasizing the cost of emotional labor and the emotional controls that exist outside the individual (Wouters, 1989). The context in which emotions are studied and the specific emotions examined are important factors in determining the costs and benefits of emotional labor.

Nonverbal Communication

In a typical stage drama, the players not only speak their lines but also convey information by nonverbal communication. In Chapter 3, we discussed the importance of language; now we will look at the messages we communicate without speaking. Nonverbal communication is the transfer of information between persons without the use of words. It includes not only visual cues (gestures, appearances) but also vocal features (inflection, volume, pitch) and environmental factors (use of space, position) that affect meanings (Wood, 1999). Facial expressions, head movements, body positions, and other gestures carry as much of the total meaning of our communication with others as our spoken words do (Wood, 1999).

Nonverbal communication may be intentional or unintentional. Actors, politicians, and salespersons
may make deliberate use of nonverbal communication to convey an idea or “make a sale.” We may also send nonverbal messages through gestures or facial expressions or even our appearance without intending to let other people know what we are thinking.

**FUNCTIONS OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION** Nonverbal communication often supplements verbal communication (Wood, 1999). Head and facial movements may provide us with information about other people’s emotional states, and others receive similar information from us (Samovar and Porter, 1991a). We obtain first impressions of others from various kinds of nonverbal communication, such as the clothing they wear and their body positions.

Our social interaction is regulated by nonverbal communication. Through our body posture and eye contact, we signal that we do or do not wish to speak to someone. For example, we may look down at the sidewalk or off into the distance when we pass homeless persons who look as if they are going to ask for money.

Nonverbal communication establishes the relationship among people in terms of their responsiveness to and power over one another (Wood, 1999). For example, we show that we are responsive toward or like another person by maintaining eye contact and attentive body posture and perhaps by touching and standing close. By contrast, we signal to others that we do not wish to be near them or that we dislike them by refusing to look them in the eye or stand near them. We can even express power or control over others through nonverbal communication. Goffman (1956) suggested that demeanor (how we behave or conduct ourselves) is relative to social power. People in positions of dominance are allowed a wider range of permissible actions than are their subordinates, who are expected to show deference. *Deference* is the

**nonverbal communication** the transfer of information between persons without the use of words.
symbolic means by which subordinates give a required permissive response to those in power; it confirms the existence of inequality and reaffirms each person’s relationship to the other (Rollins, 1985).

**FACIAL EXPRESSION, EYE CONTACT, AND TOUCHING** Deference behavior is important in regard to facial expression, eye contact, and touching. This type of nonverbal communication is symbolic of our relationships with others. Who smiles? Who stares? Who makes and sustains eye contact? Who touches whom? All these questions relate to demeanor and deference; the key issue is the status of the person who is doing the smiling, staring, or touching relative to the status of the recipient (Goffman, 1967).

Facial expressions, especially smiles, also reflect gender-based patterns of dominance and subordination in society. Typically, white women have been socialized to smile and frequently do so even when they are not actually happy (Halberstadt and Saitta, 1987). Jobs held predominately by women (including flight attendant, secretary, elementary schoolteacher, and nurse) are more closely associated with being pleasant and smiling than are “men’s jobs.” In addition to smiling more frequently, many women tend to tilt their heads in deferential positions when they are talking or listening to others. By contrast, men tend to display less emotion through smiles or other facial expressions and instead seek to show that they are reserved and in control (Wood, 1999).

Women are more likely to sustain eye contact during conversations (but not otherwise) as a means of showing their interest in and involvement with others. By contrast, men are less likely to maintain prolonged eye contact during conversations but are more likely to stare at other people (especially men) in order to challenge them and assert their own status (Pearson, 1985).

Eye contact can be a sign of domination or deference. For example, in a participant observation study of domestic (household) workers and their employers, the sociologist Judith Rollins (1985) found that the domestics were supposed to show deference by averting their eyes when they talked to their employers. Deference also required that they present an “exaggeratedly subservient demeanor” by standing less erect and walking tentatively.

Touching is another form of nonverbal behavior that has many different shades of meaning. Gender and power differences are evident in tactile communication from birth. Studies have shown that touching has variable meanings to parents: Boys are touched more roughly and playfully, whereas girls are handled more gently and protectively (Condry, Condry, and Pogatshnik, 1983). This pattern continues into adulthood, with women touched more frequently than men. Sociologist Nancy Henley (1977) attributed this pattern to power differentials between men and women and to the nature of women’s roles as mothers, nurses, teachers, and secretaries. Clearly, touching has a different meaning to women than to men. Women may hug and touch others to indicate affection and emotional support, but men are more likely to touch others to give directions, assert power, and express sexual interest (Wood, 1999). The “meaning” we give to touching is related to its “duration, intensity, frequency, and the body parts touching and being touched” (Wood, 1994: 162).

**PERSONAL SPACE** Physical space is an important component of nonverbal communication. Anthropologist Edward Hall (1966) analyzed the physical distance between people speaking to each other and found that the amount of personal space that people prefer varies from one culture to another. **Personal space is the immediate area surrounding a person that the person claims as private.** Our personal space is contained within an invisible boundary surrounding our body, much like a snail’s shell. When others invade our space, we may retreat, stand our ground, or even...
lash out, depending on our cultural background (Samovar and Porter, 1991a).

Age, gender, kind of relationship, and social class are important factors in the allocation of personal space. Power differentials between people (including adults and children, men and women, and dominant-group members and people of color) are reflected in personal space and privacy issues. With regard to age, adults generally do not hesitate to enter the personal space of a child (Thorne, Kramarae, and Henley, 1983). Similarly, young children who invade the personal space of an adult tend to elicit a more favorable response than do older uninvited visitors (Dean, Wil- lis, and la Rocco, 1976). The need for personal space appears to increase with age (Baxter, 1970; Aiello and Jones, 1971), although it may begin to decrease at about age forty (Heshka and Nelson, 1972).

For some people, the idea of privacy or personal space is an unheard-of luxury afforded only to those in the middle and upper classes. As we have seen in this chapter, homeless bag ladies may have as their only personal space the bags they carry or the shopping carts they push down the streets. Some of the homeless may try to “stake a claim” on a heat grate or the same bed in a shelter for more than one night, but such claims have dubious authenticity in a society in which the homeless are assumed to own nothing and to have no right to lay claim to anything in the public domain.

In sum, all forms of nonverbal communication are influenced by gender, race, social class, and the personal contexts in which they occur. Although it is difficult to generalize about people’s nonverbal behavior, we still need to think about our own nonverbal communication patterns. Recognizing that differences in social interaction exist is important. We should be wary of making value judgments—the differences are simply differences. Learning to understand and respect alternative styles of social interaction enhances our personal effectiveness by increasing the range of options we have for communicating with different people in diverse contexts and for varied reasons (Wood, 1999). (Concept Table 5.A summarizes the microlevel approach to social interaction.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept Table 5.A</th>
<th>Social Interaction: The Microlevel Perspective</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Interaction and Meaning</td>
<td>In a given society, forms of social interaction have shared meanings, although these may vary to some extent based on race/ethnicity, gender, and social class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Construction of Reality</td>
<td>The process by which our perception of reality is largely shaped by the subjective meaning that we give to an experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnomethodology</td>
<td>Studying the commonsense knowledge that people use to understand the situations in which they find themselves makes us aware of subconscious social realities in daily life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dramaturgical Analysis</td>
<td>The study of social interaction that compares everyday life to a theatrical presentation—it includes impression management (people’s efforts to present themselves favorably to others).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sociology of Emotions</td>
<td>We are socialized to feel certain emotions, and we learn how and when to express (or not express) them.</td>
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<td>Nonverbal Communication</td>
<td>The transfer of information between persons without the use of speech, such as by facial expressions, head movements, and gestures.</td>
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Future Changes in Society, Social Structure, and Interaction

The social structure in the United States has been changing rapidly in recent decades. Currently, there are more possible statuses for persons to occupy and roles to play than at any other time in history. Although achieved statuses are considered very important, ascribed statuses still have a significant effect on the options and opportunities that people have.

Ironically, at a time when we have more technological capability, more leisure activities and types of entertainment, and more quantities of material goods available for consumption than ever before, many people experience high levels of stress, fear for their lives because of crime, and face problems such as homelessness. In a society that can send astronauts into space to perform complex scientific experiments, is it impossible to solve some of the problems that plague us here on Earth?

personal space the immediate area surrounding a person that the person claims as private.
Chapter 5 • Society, Social Structure, and Interaction

You Can Make a Difference

Offering a Helping Hand to Homeless People

When you pull up at an intersection and see a person holding a torn piece of cardboard with a handwritten sign on it, how do you react? Many of us shy away from chance encounters such as this because we know, without actually looking, that the sign says something like “Homeless, please help.” In an attempt to avoid eye contact with the person on the street corner, we suddenly look with newfound interest at something lying on our car seat, or we check our appearance in the rear-view mirror, or we adjust the radio. In fact, we do just about whatever it takes to divert our attention, making eye contact with this person impossible until the traffic light changes and we can be on our way.

Does this scenario sound familiar? Many of us see homeless individuals on street corners and elsewhere as we go about our daily routine. We are uncomfortable in their presence because we don’t know what we can do to help them, or even if we should. Frequently, we hear media reports stating that some allegedly homeless people abuse the practice of asking for money on the streets and that many are faking injury or poverty so that they can take advantage of generous individuals. Stereotypes such as this are commonplace when some laypersons, members of the media, and politicians describe the homeless in America. But this is far from the entire picture: Many homeless people are in need of assistance, and many of the homeless are children, persons with disabilities, and people with other problems.

Individuals and groups often show initiative in trying to solve some of our pressing problems (see Box 5.4). For example, Ellen Baxter has single-handedly tried to create housing for hundreds of New York City’s homeless by reinventing well-maintained, single-room-occupancy residential hotels to provide cheap lodging and social services (Anderson, 1993).

However, individual initiative alone will not solve all our social problems in the future. Large-scale, formal organizations must become more responsive to society’s needs.

At the microlevel, we need to regard social problems as everyone’s problem; if we do not, they have a way of becoming everyone’s problem anyway.
that make it difficult, if not impossible, for them to earn enough money to pay for housing in many cities.

Do all of these “big picture” problems in our society mean that we have no individual responsibility to help homeless people? We do not necessarily have to hand money over to the person on the street to help individuals who are homeless. There are other, and perhaps even better, ways in which we can provide help to the homeless through our small acts of generosity and kindness.

In some communities, college students lead the way in helping homeless individuals and families. Some programs help homeless children by providing them with clothing, other basic necessities, and even school supplies so that the children will feel comfortable in a classroom setting. Still other college students work in, or run, homeless shelters in their communities. Harvard University students, along with some city officials and church leaders in Cambridge, Massachusetts, for example, created the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter in 1983 to address the housing needs of the area’s poorest residents. Although it was hoped that the shelter would be a temporary project that would be rendered unnecessary when society recognized and dealt with its homeless problem, the shelter was still in existence in the 2000s. According to Alina Das, a former volunteer director at the shelter, “I have learned more about humanity and life within these walls than I have learned anywhere else. For students, the shelter is more than a place to stay. . . . most important, we try to foster a sense of dignity” (Powell, 2001).

As organizers of some college groups that seek to help the homeless have suggested, individuals without homes need food, clothing, and shelter, but they also need compassion and caring that extends beyond what most bureaucratic organizations can offer. Below are a few ways in which you and others at your school might help homeless individuals and families in your community:

- **Understand who the homeless are** so that you can help dispel the stereotypes often associated with homeless people. Learn what causes homelessness, and remember that each person’s story is unique.
- **Buy Street News** if you live in an urban area where this biweekly newspaper is sold. Homeless individuals receive a small amount from every paper they sell, and this money goes into a special savings account earmarked for rent.
- **Give money, clothing, and/or recyclables to organizations that aid the homeless.** In addition to money or clean, usable clothing, recyclable cans and bottles are helpful because they can be turned into small sums of money for living expenses.
- **Volunteer at a shelter, soup kitchen, or battered women’s shelter** where you can help staff and other volunteers meet the daily needs of people who are without shelter and food, as well as women and children who need assistance in getting away from abusive relationships with family members.
- **Look for campus organizations that work with the homeless, or create your own and enlist friends and existing organizations (such as your service organization, sorority, or fraternity) to engage in community service projects that will benefit both the temporarily and permanently homeless.**

For additional ways you can help the homeless, see Just Give.org ([http://www.justgive.org](http://www.justgive.org)) on the Internet or check with shelters in your area.

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**Chapter Review**

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- **How does social structure shape our social interactions?**

The stable patterns of social relationships within a particular society make up its social structure. Social structure is a macrolevel influence because it shapes and determines the overall patterns in which social interaction occurs. Social structure provides an ordered framework for society and for our interactions with others.

- **What are the main components of social structure?**

Social structure comprises statuses, roles, groups, and social institutions. A status is a specific position in a
group or society and is characterized by certain expectations, rights, and duties. Ascribed statuses, such as gender, class, and race/ethnicity, are acquired at birth or involuntarily later in life. Achieved statuses, such as education and occupation, are assumed voluntarily as a result of personal choice, merit, or direct effort. We occupy a status, but a role is the set of behavioral expectations associated with a given status. A social group consists of two or more people who interact frequently and share a common identity and sense of interdependence. A formal organization is a highly structured group formed to complete certain tasks or achieve specific goals. A social institution is a set of organized beliefs and rules that establishes how a society attempts to meet its basic needs.

- **What are the functionalist and conflict perspectives on social institutions?**

According to functionalist theorists, social institutions perform several prerequisites of all societies: replace members; teach new members; produce, distribute, and consume goods and services; preserve order; and provide and maintain a sense of purpose. Conflict theorists suggest that social institutions do not work for the common good of all individuals. Institutions may enhance and uphold the power of some groups but exclude others, such as the homeless.

- **What are the major types of societies?**

Social scientists have identified five types of societies. Three of these are referred to as preindustrial societies—hunting and gathering, horticultural and pastoral, and agrarian societies. The other two are industrial and postindustrial societies. Industrial societies are characterized by mechanized production of goods. Postindustrial societies are based on technology that supports an information-based economy in which providing services is based on knowledge more than on the production of goods.

- **How do societies maintain stability in times of social change?**

According to Emile Durkheim, although changes in social structure may dramatically affect individuals and groups, societies manage to maintain some degree of stability. People in preindustrial societies are united by mechanical solidarity because they have shared values and common social bonds. Industrial societies are characterized by organic solidarity, which refers to the cohesion that results when people perform specialized tasks and are united by mutual dependence.

- **How do Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft societies differ in social solidarity?**

According to Ferdinand Tönnies, the *Gemeinschaft* is a traditional society in which relationships are based on personal bonds of friendship and kinship and on intergenerational stability. The *Gesellschaft* is an urban society in which social bonds are based on impersonal and specialized relationships, with little group commitment or consensus on values.

- **What is the dramaturgical perspective?**

According to Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical analysis, our daily interactions are similar to dramatic productions. Presentation of self refers to efforts to present our own self to others in ways that are most favorable to our own interests or self-image.

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Questions for Critical Thinking

1. Think of a person you know well who often irritates you or whose behavior grates on your nerves (it could be a parent, friend, relative, or teacher). First, list that person’s statuses and roles. Then analyze the person’s possible role expectations, role performance, role conflicts, and role strains. Does anything you find in your analysis help to explain the irritating behavior? How helpful are the concepts of social structure in analyzing individual behavior?

2. Are structural problems responsible for homelessness, or are homeless individuals responsible for their own situation? Use functionalist, conflict, symbolic interactionist, and postmodernist theoretical perspectives as tools for analyzing this issue.

3. You are conducting field research on gender differences in nonverbal communication styles. How are you going to account for variations among age, race, and social class?

4. When communicating with other genders, races, and ages, is it better to express and acknowledge different styles or to develop a common, uniform style?

Resources on the Internet

Chapter-Related Websites

The following websites have been selected for their relevance to the topics in this chapter. These sites are among the more stable, but please note that website addresses change frequently. For an updated list of chapter-related websites with URL links, please visit the Sociology in Our Times website (www.thomsonedu.com/sociology/kendall).

The Emile Durkheim Archive

http://durkheim.itgo.com/main.html

Visit this website to learn more about Emile Durkheim and his contributions to sociology. Click on “solidarity” for additional information about Durkheim’s concepts of mechanical and organic solidarity.

The National Coalition for the Homeless

http://www.nationalhomeless.org

The mission of this organization is to end homelessness. Its website provides facts about homelessness, information on legislation and policy, personal stories, and additional resources pertinent to the study of homelessness.

The Psychology of Cyberspace

http://www.rider.edu/~suler/psycyber/psycyber.html

This site features an online hypertext book that explores social interaction and cyberspace, with links to additional sites that investigate the implications of cyberspace for interpersonal interaction.

The Kendall Companion Website

www.thomsonedu.com/sociology/kendall

Visit this book’s companion website, where you’ll find more resources to help you study and successfully complete course projects. Resources include quizzes, flash cards, and updated web links, as well as special features such as GSS Data and Census 2000 information that put powerful research results at your fingertips.