CHAPTER 6

Social Groups
Group Characteristics and Dynamics
Formal Organizations in Global Perspective
Alternative Forms of Organization
Organizations in the Future

CHAPTER FOCUS QUESTION: Why is it important for groups and organizations to enhance communication among participants and improve the flow of information while protecting the privacy of individuals?

Okay, I think I’ll share why FaceBook works for me and keeps me coming back. I was hesitant to sign up in the first place, I was afraid it would be a lame fad. . . . Since college is fairly dynamic (new classes every quarter), a directory of friends and students remains very dynamic and gives me a reason to come back (to see how friends are doing and what classes they are taking). Also it is cool to look up people you have in class and see what they are interested in. Who knows, it might help you start a conversation sometime (although, it might freak them out if you already know their interests). . . .

—A MALE COLLEGE STUDENT in Washington state (in a comment posted at Linden, 2005) explaining why he likes Facebook, a highly popular website that tallies 250 million hits every day and ranks ninth on overall traffic on the Internet

Do you think that even 5 percent of people [on Facebook and other networking sites] really connect with people in their network who want them to do the same kewl stuff as them? I doubt it, unless they already knew that person and just didn’t know about their hobbies. The truth is none of
these sites really connects people. That requires ongoing new information (like web bulletin boards, attending meetings). Or heaven forbid, actual human contact.

—ANOTHER MALE COLLEGE STUDENT (in a comment posted at Linden, 2005) claiming that individuals do not really connect with each other online despite the amount of time that they may spend on websites claiming to connect students through their common interests, lifestyles, and attitudes.

The problem with facebook.com is people are putting their pictures, cell phone numbers and addresses on the Internet. The Internet is open to anyone. That’s just asking for someone to knock on your door. . . . It may seem cool that you know a bunch of people, but it won’t be cool if a strange person knows too much about you.

—A JUNIOR IN A TEXAS COLLEGE describing her concerns about facebook.com (Sheppard, Texas 2005)

According to sociologists, we need groups and organizations—just as we need culture and socialization—to live and participate in a society. Historically, the basic premise of groups and organizations was that individuals engage in face-to-face interactions in order to be part of such a group; however, millions of people today communicate with others through the Internet, cell phones, and other forms of information technology that make it possible for them to “talk” with individuals they have never met and who may live thousands of miles away. A variety of networking websites, including Facebook, MySpace, Friendster, and xuqa, now compete with, or in some cases replace, live, person-to-person communications. For many college students, Facebook has become a fun way to get to know other people, to join online groups with similar interests or activities, and to plan “real-life” encounters. Despite the wealth of information and opportunities for new social connections that such websites offer, many of our daily activities require that we participate in social groups and formal organizations where face-time—time spent interacting with others on a face-to-face basis, rather than via Internet or cell phone—is necessary.

What do social groups and formal organizations mean to us in an age of rapid telecommunications? What is the relationship between information and social organizations in societies such as ours? How can we balance the information that we provide to other people about us with our own right to privacy and need for security? These questions are of interest to sociologists who seek to apply the sociological imagination to their studies of social groups, bureaucratic organizations, social networking, and virtual communities. Before we take a closer look at groups and organizations, take the quiz in Box 6.1 on personal privacy in groups, in formal organizations, and on the Internet.

Have Facebook and other networking websites influenced our social interactions and group participation? Why are face-to-face encounters in groups and organizations still important in everyday life?
SHARPPENING YOUR FOCUS

What constitutes a social group?
How are groups and their members shaped by group size, leadership style, and pressures to conform?
What is the relationship between information and social organizations in societies such as ours?
What purposes does bureaucracy serve?
What alternative forms of organization exist as compared with the most widespread forms today?

Social Groups

Three strangers are standing at a street corner waiting for a traffic light to change. Do they constitute a group? Five hundred women and men are first-year graduate students at a university. Do they constitute a group? In everyday usage, we use the word *group* to mean any collection of people. According to sociologists, however, the answer to these questions is no; individuals who happen to share a common feature or to be in the same place at the same time do not constitute social groups.

Groups, Aggregates, and Categories

As we saw in Chapter 5, a *social group* is a collection of two or more people who interact frequently with one another, share a sense of belonging, and have a feeling of interdependence. Several people waiting for a traffic light to change constitute an *aggregate*—a collection of people who happen to be in the same place at the same time but share little else in common. Shoppers in a department store and passengers on an airplane flight are also examples of aggregates. People in aggregates share a common purpose (such as purchasing items or arriving at their destination) but generally do not interact with one another, except perhaps briefly. The first-year graduate students, at least initially, constitute a *category*—a number of people who may never have met one another but share a similar characteristic (such as education level, age, race, or gender). Men and women make up categories, as do Native Americans and Latinos/as, and victims of sexual or racial harassment. Categories are not social groups because the people in them usually do not create a social structure or have anything in common other than a particular trait.

Occasionally, people in aggregates and categories form social groups. For instance, people within the category known as “graduate students” may become an aggregate when they get together for an orientation to graduate school. Some of them may form social groups as they interact with one another in classes and seminars, find that they have mutual interests and concerns, and develop a sense of belonging to the group. Information technology raises new and interesting questions about what constitutes a group. For example, some people question whether we can form a social group on the Internet (see Box 6.2 on page 180).

Types of Groups

As you will recall from Chapter 5, groups have varying degrees of social solidarity and structure. This structure is flexible in some groups and more rigid in others. Some groups are small and personal; others are large and impersonal. We more closely identify with the members of some groups than we do with others.

COOLEY’S PRIMARY AND SECONDARY GROUPS  Sociologist Charles H. Cooley (1963/1909) used the term *primary group* to describe a small, less specialized group in which members engage in face-to-face, emotion-based interactions over an extended period of time. We have primary relationships with other individuals in our primary groups—that is, with our *significant others*, who frequently serve as role models.

In contrast, you will recall, a *secondary group* is a larger, more specialized group in which the members engage in more impersonal, goal-oriented relationships for a limited period of time. The size of a secondary group may vary. Twelve students in a graduate seminar may start out as a secondary group but eventually become a primary group as they get to know one another and communicate on a more personal basis. Formal organizations are secondary groups, but
they also contain many primary groups within them. For example, how many primary groups do you think there are within the secondary-group setting of your college?

**SUMNER’S INGROUPS AND OUTGROUPS** All groups set boundaries by distinguishing between insiders who are members and outsiders who are not. Sociologist William Graham Sumner (1959/1906) coined the terms ingroup and outgroup to describe people’s feelings toward members of their own and other groups. An *ingroup* is a group to which a person belongs and with which the person feels a sense of identity. An *outgroup* is a group to which a person does not belong and toward which the person may feel a sense of competitiveness or hostility. Distinguishing between our ingroups and our outgroups helps us establish our individual identity and self-worth. Likewise, groups are solidified by ingroup and outgroup distinctions; the presence of an enemy or hostile group binds members more closely together (Coser, 1956).

---

**BOX 6.1 Sociology and Everyday Life**

**How Much Do You Know About Privacy in Groups, in Formal Organizations, and on the Internet?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>True</th>
<th>False</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. A fast-food restaurant can legally require all employees under the age of twenty-one to submit to periodic, unannounced drug testing.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Members of a high school football team can be required to submit to periodic, unannounced drug testing.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Parents of students at all U.S. colleges and universities are entitled to obtain a transcript of their children’s college grades, regardless of the student’s age.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. A company has the right to keep its employees under video surveillance at all times while they are on company property—even in the company’s restrooms.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. A private club has the right to require an applicant for membership to provide his or her Social Security number as a condition of membership.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. If a person applies for a job in a workplace that has more than twenty-five employees, the employer can require that person to provide medical information or take a physical examination prior to offering him or her a job.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Students at a church youth group meeting who hear one member of the group confess to an illegal act can be required to divulge what that member said.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. A student’s privacy is protected when using a computer, even if it is owned by the college or university, because deleting an e-mail or other document from a computer prevents anyone else from examining that document.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Answers on page 178.*

---

**aggregate** a collection of people who happen to be in the same place at the same time but share little else in common.

**category** a number of people who may never have met one another but share a similar characteristic, such as education level, age, race, or gender.

**ingroup** a group to which a person belongs and with which the person feels a sense of identity.

**outgroup** a group to which a person does not belong and toward which the person may feel a sense of competitiveness or hostility.
Sometimes the distinction between what constitutes an ingroup and an outgroup is subtle. Other times, it is not subtle at all. The word *club* suggests that organizations such as this country club are for “members only,” and that other people should not enter. The club may even post a sign at its entrance that states “Members Only” and use security personnel to ensure that nonmembers do not encroach on its grounds. Boundary distinctions are often reflected in symbols such as emblems or clothing. Members of the country club are given membership cards to gain access to the club’s facilities or to charge food to their account. They may wear sun visors and shirts with the country club’s logo on them. All these symbols denote that the bearer/wearer is a member of the ingroup; they are status symbols. However, group boundaries are not always that formal. For example, friendship groups usually do not have clear guidelines for membership; rather, the boundaries tend to be very informal and vaguely defined.

**BOX 6.1 Sociology and Everyday Life**

### Answers to the Sociology Quiz on Privacy

1. **True.** In all but a few states, an employee in the private sector of the economy can be required to submit to a drug test even when nothing about the employee’s job performance or history suggests illegal drug use. An employee who refuses can be terminated without legal recourse.

2. **True.** The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that schools may require students to submit to random drug testing as a condition to participating in extracurricular activities such as sports teams, the school band, the future homemakers’ club, the cheerleading squad, and the choir.

3. **False.** The Family Educational Right to Privacy Act, which allows parents of a student under age eighteen to obtain their child’s grades, requires the student’s consent once he or she has attained age eighteen; however, that law applies only to institutions that receive federal educational funds.

4. **False.** An employer may not engage in video surveillance of its employees in situations where they have a reasonable right of privacy. At least in the absence of a sign warning of such surveillance, employees have such a right in company restrooms.

5. **True.** Although the Privacy Act of 1974 makes it illegal for federal, state, and local governmental agencies to deny rights, privileges, or benefits to individuals who refuse to provide their Social Security number unless disclosure is required by law, no federal law extends this prohibition to private groups and organizations.

6. **False.** The Americans with Disabilities Act prohibits employers in workplaces with more than twenty-five employees from asking job applicants about medical information or requiring a physical examination prior to employment.

7. **True.** Although confidential communications made privately to a minister, priest, rabbi, or other religious leader (or to an individual the person reasonably believes to hold such a position) generally cannot be divulged without the consent of the person making the communication, this does not apply when other people are present who are likely to hear the statement.

8. **False.** Deleting an e-mail or other document from a computer does not actually remove it from the computer’s memory. Until other files are entered that write over the space where the document was located, experts can retrieve the document that was deleted.
Ingroup and outgroup distinctions may encourage social cohesion among members, but they may also promote classism, racism, sexism, and ageism. Ingroup members typically view themselves positively and members of outgroups negatively. These feelings of group superiority, or ethnocentrism, are somewhat inevitable. However, members of some groups feel more free than others to act on their beliefs. If groups are embedded in larger groups and organizations, the large organization may discourage such beliefs and their consequences (Merton, 1968). Conversely, organizations may covertly foster these ingroup/outgroup distinctions by denying their existence or by failing to take action when misconduct occurs.

**REFERENCE GROUPS** Ingroups provide us not only with a source of identity but also with a point of reference. A reference group is a group that strongly influences a person’s behavior and social attitudes, regardless of whether that individual is an actual member. When we attempt to evaluate our appearance, ideas, or goals, we automatically refer to the standards of some group. Sometimes, we will refer to our membership groups, such as family or friends. Other times, we will rely on groups to which we do not currently belong but that we might wish to join in the future, such as a social club or a profession. We may also have negative reference groups. For many people, the Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazi skinheads are examples of negative reference groups because most people’s racial attitudes compare favorably with such groups’ blatantly racist behavior.

Reference groups help explain why our behavior and attitudes sometimes differ from those of our membership groups. We may accept the values and norms of a group with which we identify rather than one to which we belong. We may also act more like members of a group we want to join than members of groups to which we already belong. In this case, reference groups are a source of anticipatory socialization. Many people have more than one reference group and often receive conflicting messages from these groups about how they should view themselves. For most of us, our reference-group attachments change many times during our life course, especially when we acquire a new status in a formal organization.

**NETWORKS** A network is a web of social relationships that links one person with other people and, through them, with other people they know. Frequently, networks connect people who share common interests but who otherwise might not identify and interact with one another. For example, if A is tied to B, and B is tied to C, then a network is more likely to be formed among individuals A, B, and C. If this seems a little confusing at first, let’s assume that Alice knows of Dolores and Eduardo only through her good friends Bill and Carolyn. For almost a year, Alice has been trying (without success) to purchase a house she can afford. Because large numbers of people are moving into her community, the real estate market is “tight,” and houses frequently sell before a “for sale” sign goes up in the yard. However, through her friends Bill and Carolyn, Alice learns that their friends—Dolores and Eduardo—are about to put their house up for sale. Bill and Carolyn call Dolores and Eduardo to set up an appointment for Alice to see the house before it goes on the real estate market. Thanks to Alice’s network, she is able to purchase the house before other people learn that it is for sale. Although Alice had not previously met Dolores and Eduardo, they are part of her network through her friendship with Bill and Carolyn. Scarce resources (in this case, the number of affordable houses available) are unequally distributed, and people often must engage in collaboration and competition in their efforts
to deal with this scarcity. Another example of the use of networks to help overcome scarce resources is recent college graduates who seek help from friends and acquaintances in order to find a good job.

What are your networks? For a start, your networks consist of all the people linked to you by primary ties, including your relatives and close friends. Your networks also include your secondary ties, such as acquaintances, classmates, professors, and—if you are employed—your supervisor and co-workers. However, your networks actually extend far beyond these ties to include not only the people that you know, but also the people that you know of—and who know of you—through your primary and secondary ties. In fact, your networks potentially include a pool of between 500 and 2,500 acquaintances, if you count the connections of everyone in your networks (Milgram, 1967). Today, the term networking is widely used to describe the contacts that people make to find jobs or other opportunities; however, sociologists have studied social networks for many years in an effort to learn more about the linkages between individuals and their group memberships.

**Group Characteristics and Dynamics**

What purpose do groups serve? Why are individuals willing to relinquish some of their freedom to participate in groups? According to functionalists, people form groups to meet instrumental and expressive needs. Instrumental, or task-oriented, needs cannot always be met by one person, so the group works cooperatively to fulfill a specific goal. For example, think of how hard it would be to function as a one-person football team or to single-handedly build a skyscraper. Groups help members do jobs that are impossible to do alone or that would be very difficult and time-consuming at best. In addition to instrumental needs, groups also help people meet their expressive, or emotional, needs, especially those involving self-expression and support from family, friends, and peers.

Although not disputing that groups ideally perform such functions, conflict theorists suggest that groups also involve a series of power relationships whereby the needs of individual members may not be equally
define a **social group** as a collection of two or more people who interact frequently with one another, share a sense of belonging, and have a feeling of interdependence, this definition suggests that people must have a sense of place (be in the same place at the same time at least part of the time) in order to establish a true social group or community. However, this definition was developed before the Internet provided people with the rapid communications that connect them with others around the world today. Are we able to form groups and establish communities with people whom we have never actually met?

Some social scientists believe that virtual communities established on the Internet constitute true communities (see Wellman, 2001). However, the sociologists Robyn Bateman Driskell and Larry Lyon examined existing theories and research on this topic and concluded that true communities cannot be established in the digital environment of cyberspace. According to Driskell and Lyon, although the Internet provides us with the opportunity to share interests with others whom we have not met (such as through chat groups) and to communicate with people we already know (such as by e-mail and instant messaging), the original concept of community, which “emphasized local place, common ties, and social interaction that is intimate, holistic, and all-encompassing,” is lacking (Driskell and Lyon, 2002: 6). Virtual communities do not have geographic and social boundaries, are limited in their scope to specific areas of interest, are psychologically detached from close interpersonal ties, and have only limited concern for their “members” (Driskell and Lyon, 2002). In fact, if we spend many hours in social isolation doing impersonal searches for information, the Internet may reduce community, rather than enhance it.

The Internet provides a rapid means of communication among people who have computers and Internet access, but this may not add up to the establishment of true social groups and true communities in the traditional sociological sense of these terms. Even so, it is possible that the Internet will create a “weak community replacement” for people based on a virtual community of specialized ties developed by e-mail correspondence and chatroom discussions (Driskell and Lyon, 2002). Do you think that chat groups are accurately framed in descriptions by Internet service providers, or are they overrated or misrepresented to potential participants?

We will now look at certain characteristics of groups, such as how size affects group dynamics.

**Group Size**

The size of a group is one of its most important features. Interactions are more personal and intense in a **small group**, a collectivity small enough for all members to be acquainted with one another and to interact simultaneously.

Sociologist Georg Simmel (1950/1902–1917) suggested that small groups have distinctive interaction patterns that do not exist in larger groups. According to Simmel, in a **dyad**—a group composed of two members—the active participation of both members is crucial for the group’s survival. If one
member withdraws from interaction or “quits,” the group ceases to exist. Examples of dyads include two people who are best friends, married couples, and domestic partnerships. Dyads provide members with a more intense bond and a sense of unity not found in most larger groups.

When a third person is added to a dyad, a triad, a group composed of three members, is formed. The nature of the relationship and interaction patterns changes with the addition of the third person. In a triad, even if one member ignores another or declines to participate, the group can still function. In addition, two members may unite to create a coalition that can subject the third member to group pressure to conform. A coalition is an alliance created in an attempt to reach a shared objective or goal. If two members form a coalition, the other member may be seen as an outsider or intruder. Like dyads, triads can exist as separate entities or be contained within formal organizations.

As the size of a group increases beyond three people, members tend to specialize in different tasks, and everyday communication patterns change. For instance, in groups of more than six or seven people, it becomes increasingly difficult for everyone to take part in the same conversation; therefore, several conversations will probably take place simultaneously. Members are also likely to take sides on issues and form a number of coalitions. In groups of more than ten or twelve people, it becomes virtually impossible for all members to participate in a single conversation unless one person serves as moderator and guides the discussion. As shown in Figure 6.1, when the size of the group increases, the number of possible social interactions also increases.

Although large groups typically have less social solidarity than small ones, they may have more power. However, the relationship between size and power is more complicated than it might initially seem. The power relationship depends on both a group’s absolute size and its relative size (Simmel, 1950/1902–1917; Merton, 1968). The absolute size is the number of members the group actually has; the relative size is the number of potential members. For example, suppose that three hundred people (out of many thousands) who have been the victims of sexual harassment band together to “march on Washington” and demand more stringent enforcement of harassment laws. Although three hundred people is a large number in some contexts, opponents of this group would argue that the low turnout demonstrates that harassment is not as big a problem as some might think. At the same time, the power of a small group to demand change may be based on a “strength in numbers” factor if the group is seen as speaking on behalf of a large number of other people (who are also voters).

Larger groups typically have more formalized leadership structures. Their leaders are expected to perform a variety of roles, some related to the internal workings of the group and others related to external relationships with other groups.

Group Leadership

What role do leaders play in groups? Leaders are responsible for directing plans and activities so that the group completes its task or fulfills its goals. Primary groups generally have informal leadership. For example, most of us do not elect or appoint leaders in our own families. Various family members may assume a leadership role at various times or act as leaders for specific tasks. In traditional families, the father or eldest male is usually the leader. However, in today’s more diverse families, leadership and power are frequently in
question, and power relationships may be quite different, as discussed later in this text. By comparison, larger groups typically have more formalized leadership structures. Their leaders are expected to perform a variety of roles, some related to the internal workings of the group and others related to external relationships with other groups. For example, leadership in secondary groups (such as colleges, governmental agencies, and corporations) involves a clearly defined chain of command, with written responsibilities assigned to each position in the organizational structure.

**Leadership Functions** Both primary and secondary groups have some type of leadership or positions that enable certain people to be leaders, or at least to wield power over others. From a functionalist perspective, if groups exist to meet the instrumental and expressive needs of their members, then leaders are responsible for helping the group meet those needs. **Instrumental leadership** is goal or task oriented; this type of leadership is most appropriate when the group’s purpose is to complete a task or reach a particular goal. **Expressive leadership** provides emotional support for members; this type of leadership is most appropriate when the group is dealing with emotional issues, and harmony, solidarity, and high morale are needed. Both kinds of leadership are needed for groups to work effectively. Traditionally, instrumental and expressive leadership roles have been limited by gender socialization. Instrumental leadership has been linked with men, whereas expressive leadership has been linked with women. Social change in recent years has somewhat blurred the distinction between gender-specific leadership characteristics, but these outdated stereotypes have not completely disappeared (Basow, 1992).

**Leadership Styles** Three major styles of leadership exist in groups: authoritarian, democratic, and laissez-faire. **Authoritarian leaders make all major group decisions and assign tasks to members.** These leaders focus on the instrumental tasks of the group and demand compliance from others. In times of crisis, such as a war or natural disaster, authoritarian leaders may be commended for their decisive actions. In other situations, however, they may be criticized for being dictatorial and for fostering intergroup hostility. By contrast, **democratic leaders encourage group discussion and decision making through consensus building.**
discussion and decision making through consensus building. These leaders may be praised for their expressive, supportive behavior toward group members, but they may also be blamed for being indecisive in times of crisis.

Laissez-faire literally means “to leave alone.” Laissez-faire leaders are only minimally involved in decision making and encourage group members to make their own decisions. On the one hand, laissez-faire leaders may be viewed positively by group members because they do not flaunt their power or position. On the other hand, a group that needs active leadership is not likely to find it with this style of leadership, which does not work vigorously to promote group goals.

Studies of kinds of leadership and decision-making styles have certain inherent limitations. They tend to focus on leadership that is imposed externally on a group (such as bosses or political leaders) rather than leadership that arises within a group. Different decision-making styles may be more effective in one setting than another. For example, imagine attending a college class in which the professor asked the students to determine what should be covered in the course, what the course requirements should be, and how students should be graded. It would be a difficult and cumbersome way to start the semester; students might spend the entire term negotiating these matters and never actually learn anything.

Group Conformity

To what extent do groups exert a powerful influence in our lives? Groups have a significant amount of influence on our values, attitudes, and behavior. In order to gain and then retain our membership in groups, most of us are willing to exhibit a high level of conformity to the wishes of other group members. Conformity is the process of maintaining or changing behavior to comply with the norms established by a society, subculture, or other group. We often experience powerful pressure from other group members to conform. In some situations, this pressure may be almost overwhelming.

In several studies (which would be impossible to conduct today for ethical reasons), researchers found that the pressure to conform may cause group members to say they see something that is contradictory to what they are actually seeing or to do something that they would otherwise be unwilling to do. As we look at two of these studies, ask yourself what you might have done if you had been involved in this research.

ASCH’S RESEARCH Pressure to conform is especially strong in small groups in which members want to fit in with the group. In a series of experiments conducted by Solomon Asch (1955, 1956), the pressure toward group conformity was so great that participants were willing to contradict their own best judgment if the rest of the group disagreed with them.

One of Asch’s experiments involved groups of undergraduate men (seven in each group) who were allegedly recruited for a study of visual perception. All the men were seated in chairs. However, the person in the sixth chair did not know that he was the only actual subject; all the others were assisting the researcher. The participants were first shown a large card with a vertical line on it and then a second card with three vertical lines (see Figure 6.2). Each of the seven participants was asked to indicate which of the three lines on the second card was identical in length to the “standard line” on the first card.

In the first test with each group, all seven men selected the correct matching line. In the second trial,
all seven still answered correctly. In the third trial, however, the actual subject became very uncomfortable when all the others selected the incorrect line. The subject could not understand what was happening and became even more confused as the others continued to give incorrect responses on eleven out of the next fifteen trials.

If you had been in the position of the subject, how would you have responded? Would you have continued to give the correct answer, or would you have been swayed by the others? When Asch (1955) averaged the responses of all fifty actual subjects who participated in the study, he found that about 33 percent routinely chose to conform to the group by giving the same (incorrect) responses as Asch's assistants. Another 40 percent gave incorrect responses in about half of the trials. Although 25 percent always gave correct responses, even they felt very uneasy and "knew that something was wrong." In discussing the experiment afterward, most of the subjects who gave incorrect responses indicated that they had known the answers were wrong but decided to go along with the group in order to avoid ridicule or ostracism.

After conducting additional research, Asch concluded that the size of the group and the degree of social cohesion felt by participants were important influences on the extent to which individuals respond to group pressure. In dyads, for example, the subject was much less likely to conform to an incorrect response from one assistant than in four-member groups. This effect peaked in groups of approximately seven members and then leveled off (see Figure 6.3).

Not surprisingly, when groups were not cohesive (when more than one member dissented), group size had less effect. If even a single assistant did not agree with the others, the subject was reassured by hearing someone else question the accuracy of incorrect responses and was much less likely to give a wrong answer himself.

One contribution of Asch's research is the dramatic way in which it calls our attention to the power that groups have to produce a certain type of conformity. Compliance is the extent to which people say (or do) things so that they may gain the approval of other people. Certainly, Asch demonstrated that people will bow to social pressure in small-group settings. From a sociological perspective, however, the study was flawed because it involved deception about the purpose of the study and about the role of individual group members. Moreover, the study included only male college students, thus making it impossible for us to generalize its findings to other populations, including women and people who were not undergraduates. Would Asch's conclusions have been the same if women had participated in the study? Would the same conclusions be reached if the study were conducted today? We cannot answer these questions with certainty, but the work of Solomon Asch and his student, Stanley Milgram, have had a lasting impact on social science perceptions about group conformity and obedience to authority.

**MILGRAM'S RESEARCH** How willing are we to do something because someone in a position of authority has told us to do it? How far are we willing to go in following the demands of that individual? Stanley Milgram (1963, 1974) conducted a series of controversial experiments to find answers to these questions about people's obedience to authority. Obedience is a form of

---

**Figure 6.2  Asch's Cards**

Although Line 2 is clearly the same length as the line in the lower card, Solomon Asch's research assistants tried to influence "actual" participants by deliberately picking Line 1 or Line 3 as the correct match. Many of the participants went along rather than risking the opposition of the "group."

---

**laissez-faire leaders** leaders who are only minimally involved in decision making and who encourage group members to make their own decisions.

**conformity** the process of maintaining or changing behavior to comply with the norms established by a society, subculture, or other group.
compliance in which people follow direct orders from someone in a position of authority.

Milgram’s subjects were men who had responded to an advertisement for participants in an experiment. When the first (actual) subject arrived, he was told that the study concerned the effects of punishment on learning. After the second subject (an assistant of Milgram’s) arrived, the two men were instructed to draw slips of paper from a hat to get their assignments as either the “teacher” or the “learner.” Because the drawing was rigged, the actual subject always became the teacher, and the assistant the learner. Next, the learner was strapped into a chair with protruding electrodes that looked something like an electric chair. The teacher was placed in an adjoining room and given a realistic-looking but nonoperative shock generator. The “generator’s” control panel showed levels that went from “Slight Shock” (15 volts) on the left, to “Intense Shock” (255 volts) in the middle, to “DANGER: SEVERE SHOCK” (375 volts), and finally to “XXX” (450 volts) on the right.

The teacher was instructed to read aloud a pair of words and then repeat the first of the two words. At that time, the learner was supposed to respond with the second of the two words. If the learner could not provide the second word, the teacher was instructed to press the lever on the shock generator so that the learner would be punished for forgetting the word. Each time the learner gave an incorrect response, the teacher was supposed to increase the shock level by 15 volts. The alleged purpose of the shock was to determine if punishment improves a person’s memory.

What was the maximum level of shock that a “teacher” was willing to inflict on a “learner”? The learner had been instructed (in advance) to beat on the wall between him and the teacher as the experiment continued, pretending that he was in intense pain. The teacher was told that the shocks might be “extremely painful” but that they would cause no permanent damage. At about 300 volts, when the learner quit responding at all to questions, the teacher often turned to the experimenter to see what he should do next. When the experimenter indicated that the teacher should give increasingly painful shocks, 65 percent of the teachers administered shocks all the way up to the “XXX” (450-volt) level (see Figure 6.4). By this point in the process, the teachers were frequently sweating, stuttering, or biting on their lip. According to Milgram, the teachers (who were free to leave whenever they wanted to) continued in the experiment because they were being given directions by a person in a position of authority (a university scientist wearing a white coat).
What can we learn from Milgram's study? The study provides evidence that obedience to authority may be more common than most of us would like to believe. None of the “teachers” challenged the process before they had applied 300 volts. Almost two-thirds went all the way to what could have been a deadly jolt of electricity if the shock generator had been real. For many years, Milgram’s findings were found to be consistent in a number of different settings and with variations in the research design (Miller, 1986).

This research once again raises some questions originally posed in Chapter 2 concerning research ethics. As was true of Asch’s research, Milgram’s subjects were deceived about the nature of the study in which they were asked to participate. Many of them found the experiment extremely stressful. These conditions cannot be ignored by social scientists because subjects may receive lasting emotional scars from such research. It would be virtually impossible today to obtain permission to replicate this experiment in a university setting.

GROUP CONFORMITY AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT  Let’s look at a more contemporary example of how social science research can help us learn about the ways in which group conformity may contribute to a complex social problem such as sexual harassment, which consists of unwanted sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, or other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature.

Psychologist John Pryor (Pryor and McKinney, 1991) has conducted behavioral experiments on college campuses to examine the social dynamics of harassment. In one of his studies, a graduate student (who was actually a member of the research team) led research subjects to believe that they would be training undergraduate women to use a computer. The actual purpose of the experiment was to observe whether the trainers (subjects) would harass the women if given the opportunity and encouraged to do so. By design, the graduate student purposely harassed the women (who were also part of the research team), setting an example for the subjects to follow.

Pryor found that when the “trainers” were led to believe that sexual harassment was condoned and then were left alone with the women, they took full advantage of the situation in 90 percent of the experiments. Shannon Hoffman, one of the women who participated in the research, felt vulnerable because of the permissive environment created by the men in charge:

It was very uncomfortable for me. I realized that had it been out of the experimental setting that, as a woman, I would have been very nervous with someone that close to me and reaching...
around me. So it kind of made me feel a little bit powerless as far as that goes because there was nothing I could do about it. But I also realized that in a business setting, if this person really was my boss, that it would be harder for me to send out the negative signals or whatever to try to fend off that type of thing. (PBS, 1992)

This research suggests a relationship between group conformity and harassment. Sexual harassment is more likely to occur when it is encouraged (or at least not actively discouraged) by others. When people think they can get away with it, they are more likely to engage in such behavior.

**Groupthink**

As we have seen, individuals often respond differently in a group context than they might if they were alone. Social psychologist Irving Janis (1972, 1989) examined group decision making among political experts and found that major blunders in U.S. history may be attributed to pressure toward group conformity. To describe this phenomenon, he coined the term **groupthink**—the process by which members of a cohesive group arrive at a decision that many individual members privately believe is unwise. Why not speak up at the time? Members usually want to be “team players.” They may not want to be the ones who undermine the group’s consensus or who challenge the group’s leaders. Consequently, members often limit or withhold their opinions and focus on consensus rather than on exploring all of the options and determining the best course of action. Figure 6.5 summarizes the dynamics and results of groupthink.

The tragic 2003 explosion of the space shuttle Columbia while preparing to land has been cited as an example of this process. During takeoff, a chunk of insulated foam fell off the bipod ramp of the external fuel tank, striking and damaging the shuttle’s left wing. Although some NASA engineers had previously raised concerns that hardened foam popping off the fuel tank could cause damage to the ceramic tiles protecting the shuttle, and although their concerns were again raised following Columbia’s liftoff, these concerns were overruled by NASA officials prior to and during the flight (Glanz and Wong, 2003; Schwartz, 2003). One analyst subsequently described the way that NASA dealt with these concerns as an example of “the ways that smart people working collectively can be dumber than the sum of their brains” (Schwartz and Wald, 2003: WK3).

**Social Exchange/Rational Choice Theories**

Social exchange/rational choice theories focus on the process by which actors—individuals, groups, corporations, or societies, for example—settle on one optimal outcome out of a range of possible choices. The foundation of this approach is the doctrine of **utilitarianism**—a belief that the purpose of all action should be to bring about the greatest happiness to the greatest number of people. An example of this belief is found in the assertion of early economist Adam Smith (1766/1776) that individuals who are allowed to make economic decisions free from the external constraints of government will make the best decisions not only for themselves but also for the entire society.

Social exchange theories are based on the assumption that **self-interest** is the basic motivating factor in people’s interactions. According to this approach, people learn to adjust their behavior so that they receive rewards from others rather than negative responses or punishment (Homans, 1974). When people do not give and take in a manner that is deemed appropriate by other group members, conflict often ensues, and relationships among people may be destabilized (Gouldner, 1960). Consider this example of give and take: A good friend offers you a gift, but you decide to refuse it. What factors contribute to your decision? Self-interest—such as keeping the friendship or acquiring a possession of some worth—might dictate that you accept the gift. However, other factors may also be involved. What if you do not like the gift or do not want to feel obligated to reciprocate in some manner? The offer of the gift forces you to assess your self-interest in the situation: What will you gain or lose by accepting or rejecting the gift? Ultimately, your decision may cause solidarity or conflict; it may stabilize or destabilize your relationship with the other person.

Now, if we think of a similar exchange involving **words** rather than tangible objects, a similar process occurs. In work settings, for example, an exchange might involve conferring a reward (prestige) on someone in return for a valuable contribution (such as expert advice) (see Homans, 1958, 1974; and Blau, 1964, 1975). Based on self-interest, a person may accept or reject the statements or implicit assumptions of another person. In fact, people often compete with one another as they seek to maximize their rewards and minimize their punishments (Blau, 1964, 1975). People do not always gain reciprocal benefits from exchanges with others, particularly in situations where
one person in the exchange occupies a dominant power position over another person (Emerson, 1962).

Rational choice theorists have analyzed situations in which the actors have differing amounts of power. Rational choice theories are based on the assumption that social life can be explained by means of models of rational individual action (Outhwaite and Bottomore, 1994). Accordingly, rational choice theorists are more concerned with explaining social outcomes than in predicting what an individual will do in a particular situation (Hechter and Kanazawa, 1997).

Rational choice theory assumes that actors are purposeful or intentional in their decisions; however, many theorists acknowledge that not all actions are necessarily rational and that people do not always act rationally (Hechter and Kanazawa, 1997).

---

**Figure 6.5  Janis’s Description of Groupthink**

In Janis’s model, prior conditions such as a highly homogeneous group with committed leadership can lead to potentially disastrous “groupthink,” which short-circuits careful and impartial deliberation. Events leading up to the tragic 2003 explosion of the space shuttle Columbia have been cited as an example of this process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Process of Groupthink</th>
<th>Example: Columbia Explosion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PRIOR CONDITIONS</strong></td>
<td>NASA had previously orchestrated many successful shuttle missions and was under pressure to complete additional space missions that would fulfill agency goals and keep its budget intact.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolated, cohesive, homogeneous decision-making group</td>
<td><strong>SYMPTOMS OF GROUPTHINK</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of impartial leadership</td>
<td>Although Columbia’s left wing had been damaged on takeoff when a chunk of insulated foam from the external fuel tank struck it, NASA did not regard this as a serious problem because it had occurred on previous launches. Some NASA engineers stated that they did not feel free to raise questions about problems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High stress</td>
<td><strong>DEFECTIVE DECISION MAKING</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CONSEQUENCES</strong></td>
<td>The debate among engineers regarding whether the shuttle had been damaged to the extent that the wing might burn off on reentry was not passed on to the shuttle crew or to NASA’s top officials in a timely manner because either the engineers harbored doubts about their concerns or were unwilling to believe that the mission was truly imperiled.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor decisions</td>
<td><strong>CONSEQUENCES</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sources:** Broder, 2003; Glanz and Wong, 2003; Schwartz (with Wald), 2003; Schwartz and Broder, 2003; Schwartz and Wald, 2003.
What are the key elements of rational choice theories? According to the sociologist James S. Coleman (1990), actors and resources are important factors in rational choice. Actors may include individuals, groups, corporations, and societies. Resources comprise the things over which actors have control and in which they have some interest. Major constraints on actors’ choices are the scarcity of resources and structural restrictions (Marsden, 1983). Actors with fewer resources are less likely to pursue the most highly valued goal or end. They may decide to go for the next-most-attractive goal or end out of fear that they will lose the chance to acquire even the next-most-attractive end if they initially pursue an unrealistic goal or expectation. For example, suppose that Zoe, who has very few economic resources, wants to attend an Ivy League university (her most-highly-valued goal). Although her first-choice school sends her a letter of acceptance, it does not offer her a scholarship. Meanwhile, a large state university (her next-most-attractive goal) admits her and offers her a full four-year scholarship. When Zoe weighs her options—attending “Ivy U” by taking out large student loans and getting a job or attending “State U” on a full scholarship that gives her time to study—she may select her next-most-attractive goal, whereas individuals with greater economic resources would probably attend their first-choice institution.

In addition to availability of resources, a second major constraint on actors’ choices is social institutions (Friedman and Hechter, 1988). Institutional constraints such as rules, laws, ordinances, corporate policies, and religious doctrines limit actors’ available choices. Using a rational choice approach, the sociologist Michael Hechter (1987) studied what happens when people “do their own thing” in an organization. Among other findings, Hechter concluded that organizations with large numbers of employees hire others (including security guards, managers, and inspectors) to control people’s behavior so that they will not unduly pursue their propensity to maximize their own gain or pleasure, particularly at the expense of the organization.

**Types of Formal Organizations**

We join some organizations voluntarily and others out of necessity. Sociologist Amitai Etzioni (1975) classified formal organizations into three categories—normative, coercive, and utilitarian—based on the nature of membership in each.

**Normative Organizations** We voluntarily join normative organizations when we want to pursue some common interest or gain personal satisfaction or prestige from being a member. Political parties, ecological activist groups, religious organizations, parent–teacher associations, and college sororities and fraternities are examples of normative, or voluntary, associations.

Class, gender, and race are important determinants of a person’s participation in a normative association. Class (socioeconomic status based on a person’s education, occupation, and income) is the most significant predictor of whether a person will participate in mainstream normative organizations; membership costs may exclude some from joining. Those with higher socioeconomic status are more likely to be not only members but also active participants in these groups. Gender is also an important determinant. Half of the voluntary associations in the United States have all-female memberships; one-fifth are all male. However, all-male organizations usually have higher levels of prestige than all-female ones (Odendahl, 1990).

Throughout history, people of all racial–ethnic categories have participated in voluntary organizations, but the involvement of women in these groups has largely gone unrecognized. For example, African American women were actively involved in antislavery societies in the nineteenth century and in the civil rights movement in the twentieth century (see Scott, 1990). Other normative organizations focusing on civil rights, self-help, and philanthropic activities in which African American women and men have been involved include the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Urban League. Similarly, Native American women have participated in the American Indian Movement, a group organized to fight problems ranging from po-

---

**Formal Organizations in Global Perspective**

Over the past century, the number of formal organizations has increased dramatically in the United States and other industrialized nations. Previously, everyday life was centered in small, informal, primary groups, such as the family and the village. With the advent of industrialization and urbanization (as discussed in Chapter 1), people’s lives became increasingly dominated by large, formal secondary organizations. A formal organization, you will recall, is a highly structured secondary group formed for the purpose of achieving specific goals in the most efficient manner. Formal organizations (such as corporations, schools, and government agencies) usually keep their basic structure for many years in order to meet their specific goals.
Apple brutality to housing and employment discrimination (Feagin and Feagin, 2003). Mexican American women (as well as men) have held a wide range of leadership positions in La Raza Unida Party and the League of United Latin American Citizens, organizations oriented toward civic activities and protest against injustices (Amott and Matthaei, 1996).

**COERCIVE ORGANIZATIONS** Unlike normative organizations, people do not voluntarily become members of coercive organizations — associations that people are forced to join. Total institutions, such as boot camps, prisons, and some mental hospitals, are examples of coercive organizations. As discussed in Chapter 4, the assumed goal of total institutions is to resocialize people through incarceration. These environments are characterized by restrictive barriers (such as locks, bars, and security guards) that make it impossible for people to leave freely. When people leave without being officially dismissed, their exit is referred to as an “escape.”

**UTILITARIAN ORGANIZATIONS** We voluntarily join utilitarian organizations when they can provide us with a material reward we seek. To make a living or earn a college degree, we must participate in organizations that can provide us these opportunities. Although we have some choice regarding where we work or attend school, utilitarian organizations are not always completely voluntary. For example, most people must continue to work even if the conditions of their employment are less than ideal. (Concept Table 6.A reviews types of groups, sizes of groups, and types of formal organizations.)

**Bureaucracies**

The bureaucratic model of organization remains the most universal organizational form in government, business, education, and religion. A *bureaucracy is an organizational model characterized by a hierarchy*...
of authority, a clear division of labor, explicit rules and procedures, and impersonality in personnel matters.

Sociologist Max Weber (1968/1922) was interested in the historical trend toward bureaucratization that accelerated during the Industrial Revolution. To Weber, the bureaucracy was the most “rational” and efficient means of attaining organizational goals because it contributed to coordination and control. According to Weber, rationality is the process by which traditional methods of social organization, characterized by informality and spontaneity, are gradually replaced by efficiently administered formal rules and procedures. bureaucracy can be seen in all aspects of our lives, from small colleges with perhaps a thousand students to multinational corporations employing many thousands of workers worldwide.

In his study of bureaucracies, Weber relied on an ideal-type analysis, which he adapted from the field of economics. An ideal type is an abstract model that describes the recurring characteristics of some phenomenon (such as bureaucracy). To develop this ideal type, Weber abstracted the most characteristic bureaucratic aspects of religious, educational, political, and business organizations. For example, to develop an ideal type for bureaucracy in higher education, you would need to include the relationships among governing bodies (such as boards of regents or trustees), administrators, faculty, staff, and students. You would also have to include the rules and policies that govern the school’s activities (such as admissions criteria, grading policies, and graduation requirements). Although no two schools would have exactly the same criteria, the ideal-type constructs would be quite similar. Weber acknowledged that no existing organization would exactly fit his ideal type of bureaucracy (Blau and Meyer, 1987).

### Ideal Characteristics of Bureaucracy

Weber set forth several ideal-type characteristics of bureaucratic organizations. Weber’s model (see Figure 6.6) highlights the organizational efficiency and productivity that bureaucracies strive for in these five central elements of the ideal organization:

**Division of Labor** Bureaucratic organizations are characterized by specialization, and each member has highly specialized tasks to fulfill.

**Hierarchy of Authority** In a bureaucracy, each lower office is under the control and supervision of a higher one. Those few individuals at the top of the hierarchy

---

**Concept Table 6.A**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of Groups and Organizations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Types of Social Groups</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small, less specialized group in which members engage in face-to-face, emotion-based interaction over an extended period of time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larger, more specialized group in which members engage in more impersonal, goal-oriented relationships for a limited period of time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ingroup</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A group to which a person belongs and with which the person feels a sense of identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outgroup</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A group to which a person does not belong and toward which the person may feel a sense of competitiveness or hostility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A group that strongly influences a person’s behavior and social attitudes, regardless of whether the person is actually a member</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Group Size</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dyad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A group composed of two members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A group composed of three members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A highly structured secondary group formed for the purpose of achieving specific goals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Types of Formal Organizations</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Normative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizations we join voluntarily to pursue some common interest or gain personal satisfaction or prestige by joining</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coercive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associations that people are forced to join (total institutions such as boot camps and prisons are examples)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilitarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizations we join voluntarily when they can provide us with a material reward that we seek</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
have more power and exercise more control than do the many at the lower levels. Those who are lower in the hierarchy report to (and often take orders from) those above them in the organizational pyramid. Persons at the upper levels are responsible not only for their own actions but also for those of the individuals they supervise.

**Rules and Regulations** Rules and regulations establish authority within an organization. These rules are typically standardized and provided to members in a written format. In theory, written rules and regulations offer clear-cut standards for determining satisfactory performance so that each new member does not have to reinvent the rules.

**Qualification-Based Employment** Bureaucracies require competence and hire staff members and professional employees based on specific qualifications. Individual performance is evaluated against specific

---

**Figure 6.6 Characteristics and Effects of Bureaucracy**

The very characteristics that define Weber’s idealized bureaucracy can create or exacerbate the problems that many people associate with this type of organization. Can you apply this model to an organization with which you are familiar?
standards, and promotions are based on merit as spelled out in personnel policies.

**Impersonality** Bureaucracies require that everyone must play by the same rules and be treated the same. Personal feelings should not interfere with organizational decisions.

**CONTEMPORARY APPLICATIONS OF WEBER’S THEORY** How well do Weber’s theory of rationality and his ideal-type characteristics of bureaucracy withstand the test of time? Over 100 years later, many organizational theorists still apply Weber’s perspective. For example, the sociologist George Ritzer used Weber’s theories to examine fast-food restaurants such as McDonald’s. According to Ritzer, the process of “McDonaldization” has become a global phenomenon as four elements of rationality can be found in fast-food restaurants and other “speedy” or “jiffy” businesses (such as Sir Speedy Printing and Jiffy Lube). Ritzer (2000a:433) identifies four dimensions of formal rationality—efficiency, predictability, emphasis on quantity rather than quality, and control through nonhuman technologies—that are found in today’s fast-food restaurants:

- **Efficiency** means the search for the best means to the end; in the fast-food restaurant, the drive-through window is a good example of heightening the efficiency of obtaining a meal.
- **Predictability** means a world of no surprises; the Big Mac in Los Angeles is indistinguishable from the one in New York; similarly, the one we consume tomorrow or next year will be just like the one we eat today. Rational systems tend to emphasize quantity, usually large quantities, rather than quality. The Big Mac is a good example of this emphasis on quantity rather than quality. Instead of the human qualities of a chef, fast-food restaurants rely on nonhuman technologies like unskilled cooks following detailed directions and assembly-line methods applied to the cooking and serving of food. Finally, such a formally rational system brings with it various irrationalities, most notably the demystification and dehumanization of the dining experience.

Although still useful today, Weber’s ideal type largely failed to take into account the informal side of bureaucracy.

**THE INFORMAL SIDE OF BUREAUCRACY** When we look at an organizational chart, the official, formal structure of a bureaucracy is readily apparent. In practice, however, a bureaucracy has patterns of activities and interactions that cannot be accounted for by its organizational chart. These have been referred to as bureaucracy’s other face (Page, 1946).
The informal side of a bureaucracy is composed of those aspects of participants’ day-to-day activities and interactions that ignore, bypass, or do not correspond with the official rules and procedures of the bureaucracy. An example is an informal “grapevine” that spreads information (with varying degrees of accuracy) much faster than do official channels of communication, which tend to be slow and unresponsive. The informal structure has also been referred to as work culture because it includes the ideology and practices of workers on the job. Workers create this work culture in order to confront, resist, or adapt to the constraints of their jobs, as well as to guide and interpret social relations on the job (Zavella, 1987). Today, computer networks and e-mail offer additional opportunities for workers to enhance or degrade their work culture. Some organizations have sought to control offensive communications so that workers will not be exposed to a hostile work environment brought about by colleagues, but such control has raised significant privacy issues (see Box 6.3).

**POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF INFORMAL STRUCTURE** Is informal structure good or bad? Should it be controlled or encouraged? Two schools of thought have emerged with regard to these questions. One approach emphasizes control (or eradication) of informal groups; the other suggests that they should be nurtured. Traditional management theories are based on the assumption that people are basically lazy and motivated by greed. Consequently, informal groups must be controlled (or eliminated) in order to ensure greater worker productivity.

By contrast, the other school of thought asserts that people are capable of cooperation. Thus, organizations should foster informal groups that permit people to work more efficiently toward organizational goals. Chester Barnard (1938), an early organizational theorist, focused on the functional aspects of informal groups. He suggested that organizations are cooperative systems in which informal groups “oil the wheels” by providing understanding and motivation for participants. In other words, informal networks serve as a means of communication and cohesion among individuals, as well as protect the integrity of the individual (Barnard, 1938; Perrow, 1986).

The human relations approach, which is strongly influenced by Barnard’s model, views informal networks as a type of adaptive behavior that workers engage in because they experience a lack of congruence between their own needs and the demands of the organization (Argyris, 1960). Organizations typically demand dependent, childlike behavior from their members and strive to thwart the members’ ability to grow and achieve “maturity” (Argyris, 1962). At the
BOX 6.3 Sociology and Social Policy

Computer Privacy in the Workplace

I think I’m getting paranoid. When I’m at work, I think somebody is watching me. When I send an e-mail or search the Web, I wonder who knows about it besides me. Don’t get me wrong. I get all my work done first, but when I have some spare time, I may play a computer game or check out some website I’m interested in. I know that when I’m at work, my time belongs to the company, but somehow I still feel like it’s an invasion of my privacy for some computer to monitor every single thing I do. I mean, I work for a company that makes cardboard boxes, not the CIA!

—A student in one of the author’s classes, expressing her irritation over computer surveillance at work

Do employers really have the right to monitor everything that their employees do on company-owned computers? Generally speaking, the answer is yes, and the practice is widespread. A recent survey found that about one-half of all U.S. companies monitor their employees’ e-mail and more than 60 percent of employers monitor Internet connections (American Management Association, 2001).

Employers assert not only that they have the right to engage in such surveillance but also that it may be necessary for them to do so for their own protection. As for their right to do so, they note that they own the computer, pay for the Internet service, and pay the employee to spend his or her time on company business. As for it possibly being necessary for them to monitor their employees’ computer usage, employers argue that they may be held legally responsible for harassing or discriminatory e-mail sent on company computers and that surveillance is the only way to protect against such liability. As a result, many employers take the position, according to the Privacy Foundation’s Stephen Keating (qtd. in Agonafir, 2002), that “You leave your First Amendment [privacy] rights at the door when you work for a private employer. That’s the way it has always been.”

In most instances, courts have upheld monitoring even when the employees were not aware of the surveillance, and according to the American Management Association (2001), about one-third of all U.S. employers who engage in computer surveillance do not advise their employees that they are doing so. (At the time of this writing, Connecticut is the only state which requires that employees be notified of monitoring before it can legally occur.)

In several high-profile cases, the firing of an employee based on his or her “inappropriate” e-mail has been upheld even when the employer’s stated policy was not to monitor employee e-mail.

Yet there are valid arguments against computer surveillance as well, and invasion of a worker’s privacy is certainly one of them. When an employee makes a personal phone call while at work, and it is a local or toll-free call, the employee usually has a reasonable expectation of privacy—a reasonable belief that neither fellow workers nor his or her employer is eavesdropping on that call. How about “snail mail”? An employee has a reasonable expectation of privacy that the employer will not steam open a personal letter addressed to the employee, read it, and resell the envelope.

Why should an e-mail exchange with friends or relatives not be equally private and protected? If the employer is going to read an employee’s e-mail or track the person’s Internet activities, shouldn’t the employer at least have to make sure that its workers are aware of that policy?

Regarding the argument that personal e-mail wastes the employer’s time, privacy advocates state that most employees who exchange personal e-mails or surf the Internet while at work are either doing so on their own time during breaks or at least at times when they have a “free” moment or two. If an employee’s productivity falls below expected levels, shouldn’t that be obvious to his or her boss without snooping on the employee’s e-mail?

Finally, with regard to the employer possibly being held responsible for its employees’ actions, Chief Judge Edith H. Jones (qtd. in Gordon, 2001) of the U.S. Fifth Circuit Court has observed that “It seems highly disproportionate to inflict a monitoring program that may invade thousands of people’s privacy for the sake of exposing a handful of miscreants.” The need to prevent a crime or to protect a company against potential liability must be balanced against each individual’s privacy rights.

Ultimately, this balancing must be done by the legislature or the courts. Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, numerous analysts have called for greater Internet security, whereas other analysts have argued that U.S. citizens are being asked to relinquish too many of their rights in the interest of security. There are no easy answers to this pressing social policy issue, but it should remain a concern for all who live in a democratic society. Where do you stand on this topic? Why?
same time, members have their own needs to grow and mature. Informal networks help workers fill this void. Large organizations would be unable to function without strong informal norms and relations among participants (Blau and Meyer, 1987).

More recent studies have confirmed the importance of informal networks in bureaucracies. Whereas some scholars have argued that women and people of color receive fairer treatment in larger bureaucracies than they do in smaller organizations, others have stressed that they may be categorically excluded from networks that are important for survival and advancement in the organization (Kanter, 1993/1977; South et al., 1982; Benokraitis and Feagin, 1995; Feagin, 1991).

Informal networks thrive in contemporary organizations because e-mail and websites have made it possible for people to communicate throughout the day without ever having to engage in face-to-face interaction. The need to meet at the water fountain or the copy machine in order to exchange information is long gone: Workers now have an opportunity to tell one another—and higher-ups, as well—what they think.

Problems of Bureaucracies

The characteristics that make up Weber’s “rational” model of bureaucracy have a dark side that has frequently given this type of organization a bad name. Three of the major problems of bureaucracies are (1) inefficiency and rigidity, (2) resistance to change, and (3) perpetuation of race, class, and gender inequalities.

INEFFICIENCY AND RIGIDITY Bureaucracies experience inefficiency and rigidity at both the upper and lower levels of the organization. The self-protective behavior of officials at the top may render the organization inefficient. One type of self-protective behavior is the monopolization of information in order to maintain control over subordinates and outsiders. Information is a valuable commodity in organizations, and those persons in positions of authority guard information because it is a source of power for them—others cannot “second-guess” their decisions without access to relevant (and often “confidential”) information (Blau and Meyer, 1987).

When those at the top tend to use their power and authority to monopolize information, they also fail to communicate with workers at the lower levels. As a result, they are often unaware of potential problems facing the organization and of high levels of worker frustration. Bureaucratic regulations are written in far greater detail than is necessary in order to ensure that almost all conceivable situations are covered. Goal displacement occurs when the rules become an end in themselves rather than a means to an end, and organizational survival becomes more important than achievement of goals (Merton, 1968).

Inefficiency and rigidity occur at the lower levels of the organization as well. Workers often engage in ritualism; that is, they become most concerned with “going through the motions” and “following the rules.” According to Robert Merton (1968), the term bureaucratic personality describes those workers who are more concerned with following correct procedures than they are with getting the job done correctly. Such workers are usually able to handle routine situations effectively but are frequently incapable of handling a unique problem or an emergency. Thorstein Veblen (1967/1899) used the term trained incapacity to characterize situations in which workers have become so highly specialized, or have been given such fragmented jobs to do, that they are unable to come up with creative solutions to problems. Workers who have reached this point also tend to experience bureaucratic alienation—they really do not care what is happening around them.

RESISTANCE TO CHANGE Once bureaucratic organizations are created, they tend to resist change. This resistance not only makes bureaucracies virtually impossible to eliminate but also contributes to bureaucratic enlargement. Because of the assumed relationship between size and importance, officials tend to press for larger budgets and more staff and office space. To justify growth, administrators and managers must come up with more tasks for workers to perform.

Resistance to change may also lead to incompetence. Based on organizational policy, bureaucracies tend to promote people from within the organization. As a consequence, a person who performs satisfactorily in one position is promoted to a higher level in the organization. Eventually, people reach a level that is beyond their knowledge, experience, and capabilities.

**goal displacement** a process that occurs in organizations when the rules become an end in themselves rather than a means to an end, and organizational survival becomes more important than achievement of goals.

**bureaucratic personality** a psychological construct that describes those workers who are more concerned with following correct procedures than they are with getting the job done correctly.
Chapter 6 • Groups and Organizations

PERPETUATION OF RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER INEQUALITIES

Some bureaucracies perpetuate inequalities of race, class, and gender because this form of organizational structure creates a specific type of work or learning environment. This structure was typically created for middle- and upper-middle-class white men, who for many years were the predominant organizational participants.

For people of color, entry into dominant white bureaucratic organizations does not equal actual integration (Feagin, 1991). Instead, many have experienced an internal conflict between the bureaucratic ideals of equal opportunity and fairness and the prevailing norms of discrimination and hostility that exist in many organizations. Research has found that people of color are more adversely affected than dominant-group members by hierarchical bureaucratic structures and exclusion from informal networks.

Like racial inequality, social class divisions may be perpetuated in bureaucracies (Blau and Meyer, 1987). The theory of a “dual labor market” has been developed to explain how social class distinctions are perpetuated through different types of employment. Middle- and upper-middle-class employees are more likely to have careers characterized by higher wages, more job security, and opportunities for advancement. By contrast, poor and working-class employees tend to have high aspirations and high self-esteem. They feel loyalty to the organization and typically see their job as a means for mobility and growth.

Bureaucracy and Oligarchy

Why do a small number of leaders at the top make all the important organizational decisions? According to the German political sociologist Robert Michels (1949/1911), all organizations encounter the iron law of oligarchy—the tendency to become a bureaucracy ruled by the few. His central idea was that those who control bureaucracies not only wield power but also have an interest in retaining their power. Michels found that the hierarchical structures of bureaucracies and oligarchies go hand in hand. On the one hand, power may be concentrated in the hands of a few people because rank-and-file members must inevitably delegate a certain amount of decision-making authority to their leaders. Leaders have access to information that other members do not have, and they have “clout,” which they may use to protect their own interests. On the other hand, oligarchy may result when individuals have certain outstanding qualities that make it possible for them to manage, if not control, others. The members choose to look to their leaders for direction; the leaders are strongly motivated to maintain the power and privileges that go with their leadership positions.

Are there limits to the iron law of oligarchy? The leaders in most organizations do not have unlimited power. Divergent groups within a large-scale organization often compete for power, and informal networks can be used to “go behind the backs” of leaders.
In addition, members routinely challenge, and sometimes they (or the organization’s governing board) remove leaders when they are not pleased with their actions.

**Alternative Forms of Organization**

Many organizations have sought new and innovative ways to organize work more efficiently than the traditional hierarchical model. In the early 1980s, there was a movement in the United States to humanize bureaucracy—to establish an organizational environment that develops rather than impedes human resources. More-humane bureaucracies are characterized by (1) less-rigid hierarchical structures and greater sharing of power and responsibility by all participants, (2) encouragement of participants to share their ideas and try new approaches to problem solving, and (3) efforts to reduce the number of people in dead-end jobs, train people in needed skills and competencies, and help people meet outside family responsibilities while still receiving equal treatment inside the organization (Kanter, 1983, 1985, 1993/1977). However, this movement has been overshadowed by globalization and the perceived strengths of systems of organizing work in other nations, such as Japan.

**Organizational Structure in Japan**

For several decades, the Japanese model of organization has been widely praised for its innovative structure. Let’s briefly compare the characteristics of large Japanese corporations with their U.S.-based counterparts.

**LONG-TERM EMPLOYMENT AND COMPANY LOYALTY** Until recently, many Japanese employees remained with the same company for their entire career, whereas their U.S. counterparts often changed employers every few years. Likewise, Japanese employers in the past had an obligation not to “downsize” by laying off workers or cutting their wages. Although the practice of lifetime employment has been replaced by the concept of long-term employment, workers in Japan often have higher levels of job security than do workers in the United States.

According to advocates, the Japanese system encourages worker loyalty and a high level of productivity. Managers move through various parts of the organization and acquire technical knowledge about the workings of many aspects of the corporation, unlike their U.S. counterparts, who tend to become highly specialized (Sengoku, 1985). Unlike top managers in the United States who have given themselves pay raises and bonuses even when their companies were financially strapped and laying off workers, many Japanese managers have taken pay cuts under similar circumstances.

Japanese management is characterized as being people oriented, taking a long-term view, and having a culture that focuses on how work gets done rather than on the end result alone. Having respect for employees and emphasizing long-term goals appear to have made Japanese automobile manufacturers more successful than some U.S. companies that are now laying off large numbers of workers. How work is

---

**iron law of oligarchy** according to Robert Michels, the tendency of bureaucracies to be ruled by a few people.
organized, such as by the use of quality circles, may also affect job satisfaction and worker productivity.

**QUALITY CIRCLES** Small work groups made up of about five to fifteen workers who meet regularly with one or two managers to discuss the group’s performance and working conditions are known as *quality circles*. The purpose of this team approach to management is both to improve product quality and to lower product costs. Workers are motivated to save the corporation money because they, in turn, receive bonuses or higher wages for their efforts. Quality circles have been praised for creating worker satisfaction, helping employees develop their potential, and improving productivity (Ishikawa, 1984). Because quality circles focus on both productivity and worker satisfaction, they (at least ideally) meet the needs of both the corporation and the workers.

Would the Japanese model work in the United States? Although the possibility of implementing the Japanese approach in U.S.-based corporations has been widely discussed, its large-scale acceptance is doubtful. Cultural traditions in Japan place greater emphasis on the importance of the group rather than

---

**BOX 6.4 You Can Make a Difference**

**Developing Invisible (but Meaningful) Networks on the Web**

**Sept. 7**

Hello! Hello! Is anybody getting this message? I’m lost in Cyberspace and I don’t know if I am getting through to anyone! Please write back if you have received this message!!

**Sept. 8**

We got your message. Who are you? Where are you? We are 5th graders at Perry Central School. We live in Perry County, Indiana. Where are you from? Can we help? Signed, Darrin, Jenna, Becky (qtd. in Kranning and Ehman, 1999)

As a result of this initial e-mail exchange, fifth-grade students at a rural Indiana elementary school began an extended project (“Mysteries from History”) with college students taking a computer education class at Indiana University. Although this collaboration initially was established by a fifth-grade teacher (Antoinette Kranning) and a college professor (Lee Ehman), projects such as this could be established by computer-savvy students in other college classes or by a campus service organization.

Let’s look at how “Mysteries from History” works. Students in the computer education class pose historical mysteries for the fifth graders to solve through research and group problem-solving skills. For example, students are told that one mystery person worked in a hospital as a nurse during the Civil War and later became a famous writer, and the students are to guess the identity of this individual. Although the fifth graders’ initial choice was Clara Barton, they realized that Louisa May Alcott was the correct choice after their research because only Alcott had gone on to become a famous writer. Other mystery questions were posed about other famous people in history, and the fifth graders became very excited as the project progressed. As one student stated, “I’m really enjoying e-mail. I felt very excited when I got my first message. It felt great. I felt like I was a detective searching for clues to a mystery” (qtd. in Kranning and Ehman, 1999).

Through this collaborative project, both the fifth graders and the college students benefited. The college students learned how to interact as a group with a class of young students via the Internet, and they also picked up valuable teaching tips from the fifth-grade teacher, particularly regarding how elementary-school students learn about history (Kranning and Ehman, 1999). Likewise, the fifth graders learned how to find information and how to work collaboratively on a project.

Although the nature of groups and organizations has changed with new technologies, and although some people believe that computer networks are not equal to face-to-face interactions, all of us are increasingly involved in computer networks because they allow us to create a range of new social spaces in which we can meet and interact with one another. These social spaces might otherwise not exist: Collaborations between a group of fifth graders and a group of college students would be less likely to occur without technologies such as the Internet. From this perspective, if we are able to create social spaces where we can help others to do things—such as learn history, become savvy Internet users, or feel that they are part of a special group—we can make a difference in their lives by connecting people to people.

What kinds of meaningful social spaces might be created through a class you are taking or a service organization to which you belong? Social spaces on the Internet can be used for a variety of purposes, including discussing topics of mutual interest, learning from one another, working on collaborative projects, entertaining one another, and playing games. Are there ways in which your class or organization (with guidance from a faculty member) might create cross-age or cross-cultural collaborations that would help others to do things—such as learn history, become savvy Internet users, or feel that they are part of a special group—where we can make a difference in their lives by connecting people to people?
the individual, and workers in the United States are not likely to embrace this idea because it directly conflicts with the values of individualism and personal achievement so strongly held by many in this country (Ouchi, 1981). Many U.S. workers are also unwilling to make a long-term commitment to one corporation for fear that they may be laid off or forced into early retirement.

In recent years, however, more organizations in the United States have developed a participatory management style in hopes of producing greater worker satisfaction and higher rates of productivity and profits (see Florida and Kenney, 1991).

**Organizations in the Future**

What is the best organizational structure for the future? Of course, this question is difficult to answer because it requires the ability to predict economic, political, and social conditions. Nevertheless, we can make several observations.

Organizational theorists have suggested a horizontal model for corporations in which both hierarchy and functional or departmental boundaries would largely be eliminated. In the horizontal structure, a limited number of senior executives would still fill support roles (such as finance and human resources) while everyone else would work in multidisciplinary teams and perform core processes (such as product development or sales generation). Organizations would have fewer layers between company heads and the staffers responsible for any given process. Performance objectives would be related to the needs of customers; people would be rewarded not just for individual performance but for skills development and team performance. If such organizations become a reality, organizational charts will more closely resemble a pepperoni pizza than the traditional pyramid-shaped stack of boxes connected by lines.

Ultimately, everyone has a stake in seeing that organizations operate in as humane a fashion as possible and that channels for opportunity are widely available to all people regardless of race, gender, or class. Workers and students alike can benefit from organizational environments that make it possible for people to explore their joint interests without fear of losing their privacy or being pitted against one another in a competitive struggle for advantage. (For an example of students working together on a meaningful activity that benefits others, see Box 6.4.)

**Chapter Review**

- How do sociologists distinguish among social groups, aggregates, and categories?

Sociologists define a social group as a collection of two or more people who interact frequently, share a sense of belonging, and depend on one another. People who happen to be in the same place at the same time are considered an aggregate. Those who share a similar characteristic are considered a category. Neither aggregates nor categories are considered social groups.

- How do sociologists classify groups?

Sociologists distinguish between primary and secondary groups. Primary groups are small and personal, and members engage in emotion-based interactions over an extended period. Secondary groups are larger and more specialized, and members have less personal and more formal, goal-oriented relationships. Sociologists also divide groups into ingroups, outgroups, and reference groups. Ingroups are groups to which we belong and with which we identify. Outgroups are groups we do not belong to or perhaps feel hostile toward. Reference groups are groups that strongly influence people's behavior whether or not they are actually members.
• **What is the significance of group size?**
  In small groups, all members know one another and interact simultaneously. In groups with more than three members, communication dynamics change, and members tend to assume specialized tasks.

• **What are the major styles of leadership?**
  Leadership may be authoritarian, democratic, or laissez-faire. Authoritarian leaders make major decisions and assign tasks to individual members. Democratic leaders encourage discussion and collaborative decision making. Laissez-faire leaders are minimally involved and encourage members to make their own decisions.

• **What do experiments on conformity show us about the importance of groups?**
  Groups may have significant influence on members' values, attitudes, and behaviors. In order to maintain ties with a group, many members are willing to conform to norms established and reinforced by group members.

• **What are the strengths and weaknesses of bureaucracies?**
  A bureaucracy is a formal organization characterized by hierarchical authority, division of labor, explicit procedures, and impersonality. According to Max Weber, bureaucracy supplies a rational means of attaining organizational goals because it contributes to coordination and control. A bureaucracy also has an informal structure, which includes the daily activities and interactions that bypass the official rules and procedures. The informal structure may enhance productivity or may be counterproductive to the organization. A bureaucracy may be inefficient, resistant to change, and a vehicle for perpetuating class, race, and gender inequalities.

---

### Questions for Critical Thinking

1. Who might be more likely to conform in a bureaucracy, those with power or those wanting more power?
2. Although there has been much discussion recently concerning what is and what is not sexual harassment, it has been difficult to reach a clear consensus on what behaviors and actions are acceptable. What are some specific ways that both women and men can avoid contributing to an atmosphere of sexual harassment in organizations? Consider team relationships, management and mentor relationships, promotion policies, attitudes, behavior, dress and presentation, and after-work socializing.
3. Do the insights gained from Milgram's research on obedience outweigh the elements of deception and stress that were forced on its subjects?
4. If you were forming a company based on humane organizational principles, would you base the promotional policies on merit and performance or on affirmative action goals?
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).

Historical Background of Organizational Behavior
http://web.cba.neu.edu/~ewertheim/introd/history.htm
Created by Edward G. Wertheim of the College of Business Administration at Northeastern University, this site provides a good introduction to the study of organizational behavior and addresses many of the major works in the field.

McDonaldization
The objective of this site is to educate the public about the McDonaldization of America. In addition to presenting information on George Ritzer’s text The McDonaldization of Society, the site features an introduction to the concept of McDonaldization, related topics, articles, news, and interesting links.

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.