Social Structure and the Individual

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INDIVIDUAL AGENCY AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE

INTRODUCTION

☐   Why do people act the way they do?

☐   Are we forced into our actions and behaviors? Or do we freely choose how to act and behave?

A Beta Theta Pi Fraternity chapter. (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

On February 4, 2017, a sophomore at Penn State University died after a night of drinking and hazing during a pledging ritual at the Beta Theta Pi fraternity house. Timothy Piazza, the nineteen-year-old engineering student who died that night, and the eighteen fraternity brothers who were charged with his death did not expect Pledge Night to end so tragically. Timothy hoped he would be joining the Beta Theta Pi brotherhood, while the fraternity thought they would be welcoming the spring 2017 class of brothers. No one expected anyone to die or to be charged with manslaughter.

In some respects, what occurred at Penn State is not very different than what occurs on many college campuses across the country, especially at fraternity parties. Students played drinking games such as beer pong; they participated in drinking challenges such as The Gauntlet, where pledges had to move from one station to the next and consume different types of alcohol; and they engaged in binge drinking, consuming excessive amounts of alcohol in a short amount of time.

But as Eric Barron, President of Penn State University, noted, the details of Timothy's death are "heart-wrenching and incomprehensible."[1] Barron's comments were based on a grand jury investigation into the death.[2] The details from this report, many of which came from videos captured on security cameras

within the Beta Theta Pi fraternity house, point to a series of bad decisions, negligent behavior, and remorseful actions.

Most troubling was the fact that the fraternity brothers did not immediately seek medical attention for Timothy. Even after he consumed so much alcohol that he became unconscious and unresponsive, even after falling repeatedly down stairs and landing on his head, and even after his body was noticeably bruised, swollen, and bloodied, it was nearly twelve hours before someone finally called for an ambulance. By then it was too late. Timothy had a blood-alcohol level of nearly .40, a lacerated spleen, a fractured skull, and multiple brain injuries. He died soon after arriving at the emergency room.

Timothy Piazza's tragedy speaks to many of the themes we will discuss in this chapter: Where do we learn how to behave in different situations? What effect do groups have on who we are and what we choose to do? How do we develop preferences, aspirations, and attitudes? Do we have total free will to select a course of action or are our behaviors influenced by external pressures?

These questions are all relevant to what happened that night at the Beta Theta Pi house. Why, for example, did it take so long for these college students to seek help when they knew Timothy was in trouble? What was it about the situation that may have influenced their decision to wait nearly twelve hours before calling an ambulance? Was a group dynamic at work? Was there an unspoken set of rules that interfered with the judgment of some of the brothers? If these eighteen men saw someone in Timothy's condition elsewhere on campus or in public, would they be so negligent about finding immediate help?

And what about Timothy and the other recruits? Why did they wish to join Beta Theta Pi? How did they come to see being a member of this fraternity as such a valuable resource that they were willing to participate in this hazing ritual? Assuming these young men knew about the dangers of binge drinking, why did they still consent to follow the drinking demands of the pledge leaders? What identity where they hoping to secure by participating in these dangerous acts? What might they have given up if they had refused and left early that night?

The question of why we act the way we do is complicated and multi-faceted. Throughout this chapter, we will look at how our individual actions are strongly influenced by external factors. We focus on the rules we are expected to follow and the resources we have at our disposal or seek to acquire. But as we discuss in the last section, this is not a one-way relationship. Our individual behaviors and actions emerge from these larger structural dimensions, but also help to produce and perpetuate them.

We begin by examining one of the most important sociological concepts: social structure.

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

☐   What is social structure?

☐   What statuses do we hold?

☐   What roles do we fill?

☐   Why are groups, networks, and institutions important?

Imagine you are in a classroom. How can you exit the room? The only openings are doors and windows. Those are structural elements of the classroom that limit your actions. What if the doors and windows were blocked? Could you bust through the walls? Could you find a way to overcome the structure of the room?

(Source)

You can think of **social structure** as the boundaries people confront as they make decisions about their individual and collective actions. Structure often limits the choices people can make, but it also enables some to have choices that others may not have. In either case, structure does not determine our actions, but it does have a significant influence on the behaviors we choose.

When we talk about structural boundaries, we are referring to the rules and resources that guide our behavior.[3] Rules can be both formal (such as school dress codes and laws) and informal (such as whether you shake someone's hand to greet them or kiss them on the cheek). **Resources** are things we may have or that we acquire, such as money, education, and status, which are valuable or allow us to accomplish goals. Even race, gender, religion, nationality, ability, and age are structural resources.

A good example of how structural boundaries influence our actions can be found in the animated film *Kung Fu Panda.* In this much-beloved blockbuster, a rotund and clumsy noodle-maker named Po transforms into the Dragon Warrior, challenging social expectations for giant pandas like himself.[4] To become a martial arts master, Po must confront various structural hurdles. For example, his adoptive father, Mr. Ping the goose, could teach Po the family business of noodle-making, but lacks the knowledge to train Po in kung fu. Only by accidentally winning a contest does Po land the opportunity to train with Master Shifu at Jade Palace, a resource very few have access to. Po must convince Shifu and the skeptical martial arts students that he has the capacity to be the Dragon Warrior even though his pudgy figure does not conform to the typical appearance of a kung fu fighter. Ultimately, Po transforms limitations into resources, using his large

belly as a weapon, his insatiable appetite as a motivational tool to complete his training, and his perseverance to win the others' respect. In this film, we see how a character's trajectory is shaped by informal and formal rules, the resources they have and seek to acquire, and the choices they make each step of the way.

Rules and resources emerge in various elements of social structure, such as the social statuses, roles, groups, networks, and institutions that organize the way people go about their lives. As we discuss below, each of these elements of social structure shapes our lives in distinct ways. In some cases, they work together, such as when a student whose parent is a graduate of a highly prestigious university has a better chance of being accepted to that school than a student without a family connection to it. In that case, the applicant's network (family) leads to connections with an institution (the college) that may influence future chances in the labor market. In other cases, elements of social structure may have contradictory effects on us. For instance, women in high-status professions often encounter gendered expectations that undercut their career progress. Their role as women interacts with their presence in a high-status occupation to put them at

Kung Fu Panda, 2011. (Source)

a disadvantage. To understand how social structure plays a role in behavior and outcomes, we take a closer look at each element of structure.

Statuses

Table 1: Some Statuses of Several Famous Individuals

Status	Mark Zuckerberg	Homer Simpson	Jennifer Lopez	Neil deGrasse Tyson
Race-ethnicity	White	White	Latina	African-American
Sex	Male	Male	Female	Male
Class	Extremely wealthy	Working class	Wealthy	Wealthy
Occupation	CEO of Facebook	Nuclear power plant worker	Celebrity entertainer	Astrophysicist
Education	College dropout	High school graduate	College dropout	Ph.D.

What do celebrity singer-entertainer Jennifer Lopez, astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, and hapless cartoon dad and nuclear power plant worker Homer Simpson have in common? What sets them apart from each other? Their shared and differing identities point to **social**

statuses, or a person's or group's socially determined positions within a larger group or society. As we can see from Table 1, a person can hold more than one status at the same time.

As you look at Table 1, think about the following questions: How did they get these statuses? How do these statuses shape their actions? What resources do these statuses provide each of them? What other statuses do they hold?

Some of the statuses are the result of choices these individuals made, including their profession and education, while other statuses, such as race and sex, are part of their identities regardless of the choices they made. We can think about two broad categories of statuses—ascribed and achieved. An **achieved status** results at least in part from your efforts. Occupation, level of education, class, and marital status are generally achieved statuses. When a pledge is accepted as a member of a fraternity or sorority, the pledge achieves the status of brother or sister and gains an important structural resource that can be leveraged not only during college, but throughout life. For instance, their former brothers or sisters may later serve as important contacts for career opportunities. By contrast, an **ascribed status** is assigned to you by society without regard for your unique talents, efforts, or characteristics; this often happens at birth. Like achieved statuses, ascribed statuses such as race, ethnicity, sex, and age place individuals in **social hierarchies**, or ranking systems. Ascribed statuses also influence the resources society makes available to individuals.

Ascribed statuses such as race or sex are difficult to change, but their social meanings can be transformed. Consider the meanings of hairstyles and what they tell us about racial hierarchies. According to feminist scholar Cheryl Thompson, "For young Black girls, hair is not just something to play with, it is

Natural hair. (Source)

something that is laden with messages, and it has the power to dictate how others treat you, and in turn, how you feel about yourself."[5] Do you straighten it, braid it, add weaves, get dreadlocks, or wear it natural? These choices are not simply a matter of individual taste; beauty standards are structural rules that reinforce a hierarchy based on which types of physical features are most valued. In the U.S., the market for hair straightening products has boomed for over a century, reflecting the dominance of White beauty standards in our culture.

Even if a dominant beauty standard exists, not everyone will follow the structural rule. For example, by the 1960s, more Black women began to wear their hair natural, encouraged by the growing

Black Is Beautiful movement. One of Cheryl Thompson's interviewees, Ruth Smith, an immigrant from Trinidad who owns a natural hair salon in Toronto, discusses this challenge to White beauty standards: "When you can look in the mirror and you can see your natural kinky Afro or locs and it's yours and you can say, 'you know what, I like that' and you know why you have to like it, because that's what it is; when you get to the point, that's when you start to see your true beauty."[6] By embracing their natural hair, Smith and her clients may help change beauty standards.

At the same time, many women of color recognize that hairstyles involve more than just beauty. As scholar Noliwe Rooks explains, a hairstyle "could lead to acceptance or rejection from certain groups and social classes, and its styling could provide the possibility of a career."[7] For many years, natural hairstyles were viewed as unprofessional. This made it more difficult for women of color to enter lucrative, high-status professions such as law, finance, and business consulting unless they conformed to dominant beauty standards. These industries have an informal rule that women of color are expected to straighten their hair or wear weaves or a wig.

While this rule is increasingly flexible, it still impacts women's choices since working in a prestigious profession offers access to valuable structural resources (a high salary, the ability to network with high-status colleagues who may provide leads on even better opportunities, and influence in the community). As Rooks highlights, their appearance affects how Black women are perceived, treated, and given opportunities. Appearance is an individual choice that impacts how we feel about ourselves, how we're viewed by others, and even our opportunities. As we can see from this example, an ascribed status (such as race) often influences your achieved status (such as your career).

Figure 1: Median Annual Earnings by Education Level, U.S. Population Age 25 and over, 2015
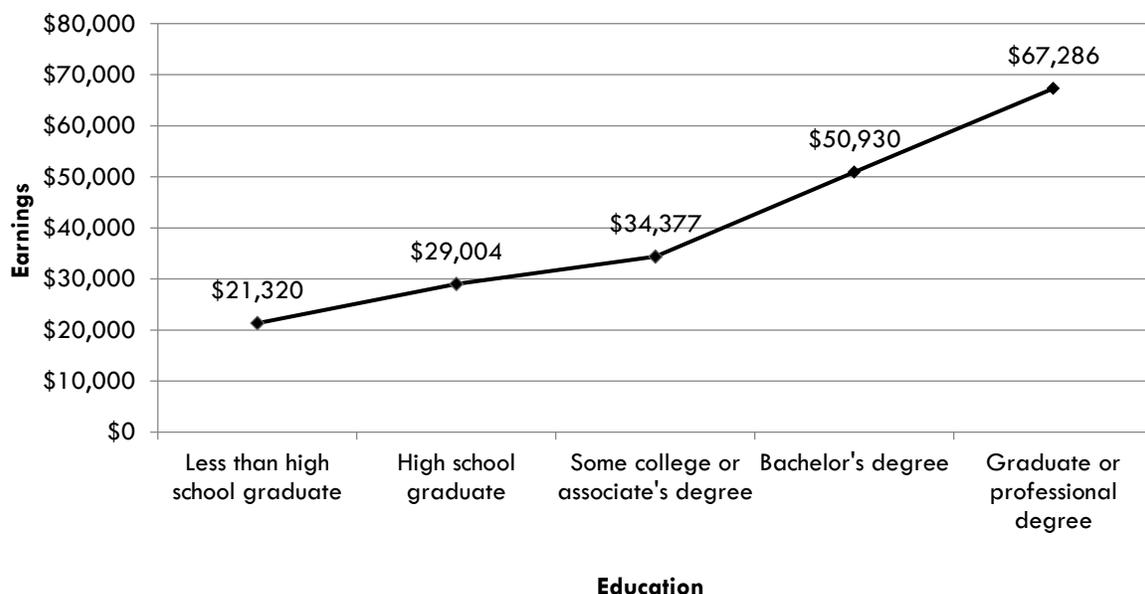

Source: American Community Survey 2015

Seeing social status as a structural resource has a long tradition in sociology. According to Max Weber, your social status is closely related to your **life chances**, or opportunities to provide yourself with material goods, positive living conditions, and favorable life experiences.[8] Occupying a high status in society improves your life chances, provides more structural resources, and brings greater access to social rewards.

For example, American children who do very well academically are more likely to enroll in college, complete a bachelor's degree, attend a selective institution, or get a graduate degree if they are from affluent families than if they are from low-income families.[9] Academic ability alone does not account for their level of educational attainment, or we would expect children from poorer families to do just as well as their richer counterparts. Why does this matter? Take a look at Figure 1; college graduates typically out-earn high school graduates by a wide margin. Affluent people can afford to continue their education after high school and pass those benefits on to their children through extracurricular activities, tutoring, and travel. By contrast, people in the lower social classes must devote a larger proportion of their limited resources to necessities such as housing, food, and transportation. They have fewer resources for extra tutoring, music or athletic lessons that might help a student stand out on college applications, or to support an adult child during several years of college. For both populations, social structure influences the life chances and opportunities of individuals, even if both sets of parents are equally eager for their children to attend college and both sets of children are equally academically capable of succeeding.[10]

Figure 2: Violent Crime Victimization Rate per 1,000 People by Household Income, 2008-2012
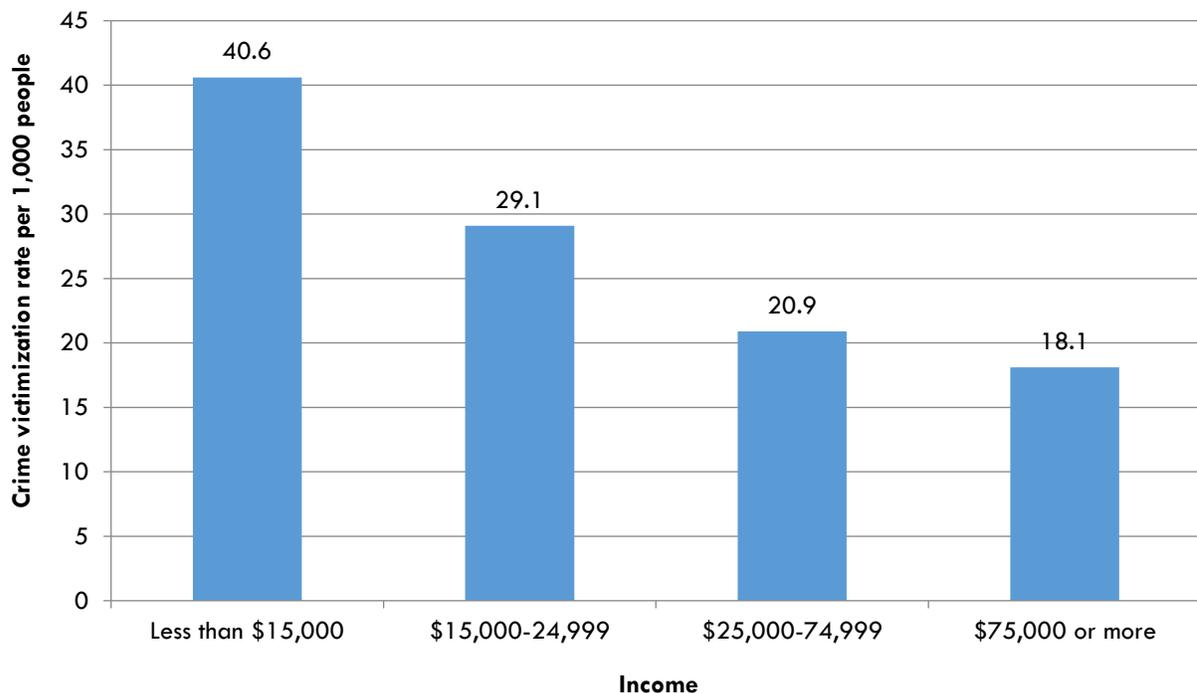
Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Crime Victimization Survey, 2008-2012

Income is related to other aspects of your life chances, such as health and crime. Residents in poor neighborhoods face greater exposure to environmental hazards, which contribute to health problems. Not

surprisingly, poor people suffer from serious, chronic illnesses such as asthma, diabetes, and heart disease more frequently than wealthier people. Poor children face higher infant mortality and obesity rates than their affluent counterparts.[11] And according to the U.S. Department of Justice's 2015 National Crime Victimization Survey, people in low-income families are more likely to be assaulted, raped, or robbed than are affluent people.[12] These examples further demonstrate the various ways that social structure, particularly status (in this case, social class), helps some individuals and hinders others.

Roles

Each status includes expectations about how someone with that status is supposed to behave and how others are supposed to behave toward them. A **social role** is a set of expectations about the behavior and attitudes of people who occupy a particular social status.

Social roles contribute to social stability by enabling us to anticipate the behavior of others and to adapt our own actions accordingly. However, social roles can be problematic because they can limit interactions and relationships. For example, if we view a person as only a "police officer" or a "boss," then we may have difficulty also seeing them as a neighbor or a friend.

Or consider Beyoncé, who juggles multiple, and sometimes conflicting, roles for her various statuses: singer, songwriter, dancer, actress, model, businesswoman, activist, philanthropist, parent, daughter, sister, and wife. Some of Beyoncé's fans may be thrilled to see her transcend her role as a celebrity by engaging in political activism. Other fans may be more excited to see her in her role as singer and dancer and less enthusiastic about her activism when she speaks out against police brutality or for transgender rights, gun control, and female empowerment.

Beyoncé. (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

Inconsistency between two or more of the roles we fill is **role conflict**. In most instances, role conflicts result in uncomfortable or awkward situations such as when you must decide between hanging out with your friends and joining your family to celebrate a relative's birthday. The role conflict you experience is the result of the competing structural rules you feel compelled to follow: the rules of friendship versus the rules of family.

In some situations, however, role conflicts can be more serious. One reason the individuals at the Beta Theta Pi fraternity house failed to act in time to save Timothy Piazza's life is that they were experiencing

role conflict. There was an inconsistency in how they were supposed to act based on their role as frat boys at a party and their role as adults encountering someone in medical trouble. If they had not been in their role as fraternity pledges and came across an unconscious student while they were walking across campus in the middle of the day, it is likely that they would have called for help immediately. But at the fraternity house on Pledge Night, by calling for medical assistance, the pledges would have risked being viewed as disloyal to the frat and therefore might not have been accepted as a brother, a role they desired. By contrast, in their role as a student outside the fraternity, they would face fewer structural rules inhibiting them from intervening as bystanders.

Much like the statuses we hold, our roles influence and are influenced by the social structure. Each role we fill has a certain set of rules that we may be expected to follow. These rules affect our actions, and also often enable or constrain our behaviors. Our roles provide us with valuable resources we can use as we take action; for example, being a fraternity member provides older members authority over pledges and the ability to give them orders. The roles we fill may grant us some degree of power—or lack of it—that could make it more or less likely that we will successfully take action in a crisis. The power social roles provide is particularly apparent in hazing rituals such as those Timothy Piazza participated in.

Groups

How we act is often influenced by the values, expectations, and behavior of people around us. For example, college fraternities try to instill a lifelong sense of solidarity among their members. They build that allegiance partly by forcing pledges to endure intense psychological and physical challenges, such as step dancing, binge drinking, or violent and degrading hazing. A tight bond is formed when pledges endure these tests together. At the same time, the recruits demonstrate that they trust their older "brothers" to have their back and that they are worthy of membership. Since refusing a challenge means giving up the chance to be a member, pledges often push themselves beyond their limits, sometimes with devastating effects, as was the case for Timothy Piazza.

Fraternities give us insight into how groups operate. A **social group** consists of two or more people with similar values and expectations who interact with one another on a regular basis. We seek out groups to establish friendships, accomplish goals, and fulfill social roles. Much of our social interaction takes place within groups and is influenced by the group's **norms**, or the rules and expectations by which a group guides the behavior of its members; behavior that meets these rules and expectations is **normative**. Groups provide members with valuable resources such as social support, a sense of collective identity, values, and opportunities for positive life chances.

Fraternities and sororities give first-year students at some universities a way to establish a large set of supportive friends as they transition to college life. After graduation, members gain access to other alumni affiliated with their organization, who may provide professional opportunities and mentorship. Groups may also punish people who violate social norms. In fraternities and sororities, this may include expulsion from the group and denial of the resources it provides. Other examples of social groups include families, sports teams, religious communities, and friendship circles.

Networks

We also build connections with others outside of groups. We may develop or join a **social network,** a series of social relationships that links a person directly to other individuals (such as friends) and indirectly to even more people (for instance, friends of friends). Social networks can constrain you by limiting the range of your interactions, but may also empower you by making vast resources available. Your friends on Facebook, followers on Twitter and Instagram, high school or college alumni association, or a professional organization you join form your social networks. These connections may reinforce or sway your political viewpoints, build or undermine your self-esteem, and even help you land a job.

Social media. (Source)

According to technology sociologist Manuel Castells, digital technology has transformed social networking.[13] We no longer need to maintain regular face-to-face contact with members of our social groups and networks. Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, Twitter, and other social media platforms have made digital social networks commonplace. The feedback we receive on social media influences our behavior. Individuals carefully curate digital personas to amass "likes" and avoid a "swipe left" with Photoshop-enhanced selfies, exotic vacation pics, and announcements of personal and professional accomplishments.[14]

Institutions

The final element of social structure brings together statuses, roles, groups, and networks. **Social institutions** are enduring practices and rules (both formal and informal) that organize a central domain of social life. Examples of social institutions include mass media, government, the economy, the family, the health care system, and the education system. All institutions provide individuals with important resources while simultaneously imposing rules on how we behave. For example, in the United States the institution of the government grants us the valuable resource of voting; however, it restricts voting to those aged eighteen or older. More recently, the government legalized same-sex marriage. This change in the structural rules

gave many more individuals the financial, social, and symbolic resources that heterosexual married couples have long benefited from. This governmental action also resulted in significant changes to the institution of the family.

Some sociologists argue that social institutions often maintain the status quo—the existing set of social patterns—including existing social inequalities. Consider the American education system. Most public schools in the U.S. are financed largely through local property taxes. Since houses are more expensive in more affluent areas, the property taxes in these neighborhoods allows residents to provide their children with better-equipped schools and better-paid teachers than in low-income areas. As a result, children from prosperous communities are often better prepared

White House illuminated in rainbow colors. (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

academically than children from impoverished areas. The structure of the nation's educational system allows such unequal treatment of school children. In response, groups such as the Campaign for Fiscal Equity, which advocates for more equitable educational funding policies in New York State, try to address these structural inequalities.[15]

Social structure is one of the most important concepts in sociology. Unfortunately, it is not always well defined or clearly understood. This section is designed to give you a better feel for what social structure is and why it is so important. We are not always aware of it, and we do not always see it, but all of our individual actions and behaviors are influenced by the larger social structure. And yet it is undeniable that we can still make choices about how we act in a given situation; our actions are not *determined* by social structure. For a more complete perspective, we have to consider the individual actor.

Review Sheet: Social structure

Key Points
- Social structure plays a powerful role in shaping individuals' lives as well as their access to valuable social resources.
- Social structure provides a set of rules that people must navigate.
- Social status is correlated with positive life chances and access to social rewards.
- While it is difficult to change one's ascribed status, the meaning of social statuses can be transformed.
- Ascribed status can influence one's achieved status.
- Social groups and networks influence the behavior of their members.
- Social institutions often reproduce the status quo, but they can also be avenues for social change.

Key People
- Noliwe Rooks
- Max Weber
- Manuel Castells
- Cheryl Thompson

Key Terms
- **Social structure** – The set of social statuses, roles, groups, networks, and institutions that organize and influence the way people go about their lives.
- **Resources** – Things which are valuable or allow us to accomplish goals.
- **Social status** – A person or group's socially-determined positions within a larger group or society.
- **Ascribed status** – Status assigned by society without regard for the person's unique talents, efforts, or characteristics.
- **Achieved status** – Status that results from your efforts.
- **Social role** – Set of expectations concerning the behavior and attitudes of people who occupy a particular social status.
- **Role conflict** – Inconsistency between two or more roles.
- **Life chances** – Opportunities to provide yourself with material goods, positive living conditions, and favorable life experiences.
- **Social group** – Two or more people with similar values and expectations who interact with one another on a regular basis.
- **Norms** – Rules and expectations by which a group guides the behavior of its members.
- **Social network** – Series of social relationships that link a person directly to other individuals and indirectly to even more people.
- **Social institutions** – Central domains of social life that guide our behaviors and meet our basic social needs.

THE INDIVIDUAL

☐   What is agency?

☐   How do we construct and maintain identities?

☐   How are we socialized to become members of society?

☐   How do agents of socialization shape our identities and behaviors?

Would you be willing to give up a goal you have worked diligently toward in order to help out someone in need? What if that someone was an opposing player in a competition? Would you sacrifice your own success to allow them to succeed?

These questions came to life for members of the women's softball teams at Central Washington and Western Oregon Universities. The two schools were playing a game that could have determined which team won the conference championship and earned a spot in the NCAA tournament, something neither team had ever accomplished. In the second inning of a scoreless tie, Sara Tucholsky came to the plate for Western Oregon. With two runners on base, Sara hit her first home run of her college career. In her shock and excitement, she forgot to touch first base. When she turned back to correct her error, her right knee gave out and she crumpled to the ground, unable to walk.

According to the umpires, if her coach replaced her with another runner, the home run would be nullified and count only as a single. The only home run she ever hit and the possibility of making it to the NCAA tournament were in jeopardy. At that point, Mallory Holtman, a senior from the opposing team, Central Washington, asked the umpires if she and her teammate, Liz Wallace, could carry Sara and have her touch each base with her left leg.

Softball players. (Source)

The umpires agreed this was allowable, and so began one of the most heartwarming displays of sportsmanship in college sports.[16]

What compelled Mallory to risk her team's success by helping a rival? Was there anything unique about this situation that might explain the actions of Mallory and her teammates? It's useful to look at which rules Mallory and Liz prioritized. They followed what they saw as the rules of sportsmanship by honoring the home run Sara earned. As fellow competitors, they believed that Sara's achievement should not be cancelled out due to an injury. In short, their actions were governed by the rules of fair play rather than the culture of competition.

Consider how the actions of the Central Washington players compare to the actions of the college men at the Beta Theta Pi fraternity house the night Timothy Piazza died. Unlike the Central Washington softball players, the fraternity brothers at Beta Theta Pi were inhibited from suspending the rules of their group and institution and coming to Timothy's aid. Why did these two sets of college students act so differently when they were similarly confronted with one of their peers in need?

These questions get at the issue of **agency**—our ability to act given the structural rules and resources that impact our behaviors. When sociologists speak about agency we are generally referring to the choices individuals make and the actions they ultimately take. As these two contrasting examples of college students demonstrate, our ability to act is always influenced by the social structure. None of us has total free will. Whether it's the rules we follow or ignore, or the resources we possess or lack, our agency is affected by external structural forces.

To fully comprehend agency and how our ability to act is formed, we need to better understand who we are as individuals. Try this exercise: Number a piece of paper 1-20 and at the top of the page write the question: Who Am I? Now try to fill in an answer for each of the twenty spaces.[17]

Who am I? (Source)

What did you come up with? Your list might contain status or role classifications such as daughter, Latino, friend, or student. Or perhaps social groups you belong to such as a team, club, or organization. Ideological beliefs such as conservative, progressive, atheist, or religious may also appear on your list. A few answers may reflect your

interests and ambitions, such as dancer, traveler, or future lawyer. It's likely that some responses reflected your self-evaluations, such as kind, loving, funny, or lazy.

The Twenty-Statements Test (TST) was developed over 60 years ago by Manford Kuhn and Thomas McPartland.[18] Sociologists and psychologists use it to understand how people identify themselves. It measures our **self-concept**, the thoughts and feelings we have of ourselves as physical, social, and emotional beings.[19]

A great follow-up question to the TST is to ask yourself: How did I develop my self-concept? How did I become who I am? These questions get at one of the most important sociological processes: **socialization**, the experiences that give us an identity and teach us the values, morals, beliefs, and ways of acting and thinking that are expected in our society.

One of the earliest sociologists to study the processes of identity formation and socialization was George Herbert Mead (1863-1931). In his classic book, *Mind, Self, and Society*, Mead argued that our sense of self develops from our social experiences and interactions.[20] Instead of assuming that we are born with our personalities already determined, Mead recognized that our identities are constructed through the social influences that we encounter in our daily lives. As we participate in social interactions we become aware of how others see us and how they expect us to act in certain situations. For Mead, a key component of how we develop a sense of self is being able to see ourselves through the eyes of others.

Preparing to face the world. (Source)

Think back to your first day of high school and you should be able to understand what Mead was getting at. If you were like most teenagers, you wanted to fit in and be accepted by your peers. As you got dressed in the morning you probably imagined how other students would react to your clothes, your hairstyle, your makeup, and your demeanor. Maybe you even tried out some greetings or body postures in the mirror. According to Mead, you were using the values and norms of the larger culture, the **generalized other**, as a way to guide your actions. Your agency was heavily influenced by the informal dress code (or rules) of the peer group and the resources you possessed, such as the appropriate shoes, clothing, backpack, make-up, and hair style.

As you walked nervously into school that first day and started interacting with classmates and teachers, you were probably imagining how you appeared to others. You may have also imagined their judgment of you: do you seem cool, nerdy, trendy, or boring? As you digested this information, you may

have developed a particular feeling—pride, shame, acceptance, rejection—which, in turn, may have affected your self-identity. This interactive process is what one of Mead's contemporaries, Charles Horton Cooley (1864-1929), referred to as the **looking-glass self**, the way our perception of how others see us affects our sense of self.[21]

Agents of socialization

The example of your first day of high school focuses on two influential factors that help shape your identity: the peer group and school. We refer to these as **agents of socialization** because they are among the individuals, groups, organizations, and institutions that influence your sense of self and help you learn how to be a member of society. Besides peer groups and schools, sociologists emphasize the family and the mass media as the two other most significant agents of socialization.

At various points in our lives, different agents of socialization are most important. Our friends might be most important during high school, but coworkers might become more important when we enter the labor force. Socialization is a life-long process, and our sense of self is always evolving, as is our understanding of what it means to be a member of society. Similarly, the rules we are expected to follow and the resources we may acquire constantly change and evolve as we enter new social environments. The socialization process does not just happen to us as children or young adults; it continues throughout our lives as we learn to become different people in different contexts, such as teenagers, workers, parents, or coaches.

We are also socialized to know our roles and statuses. According to sociologist Judith Lorber, we are socialized into our gender identities, status, and roles from birth.[22] Consider the clothes and toys babies and young children are given. If you encountered the baby in the picture to the right, would you assume that it's a girl? Parents often use colors to indicate their infant's gender

Baby in pink. (Source)

based on the current normative interpretation of pink as feminine and blue as masculine. Of course, some parents choose gender-neutral colors such as yellow or white, or challenge gender norms by dressing a boy in pink or a girl in blue.

Toys are also used to shape children's gender identities, status, and roles. Boys are generally offered cars, trains, blocks, balls, action figures, and toy guns, while girls are given dolls, Barbies, dollhouses, and toy makeup. These toys send messages about gender-appropriate rules of behavior and interest. They encourage boys to be mechanical, handy, athletic, and aggressive, while girls learn to be nurturing

homemakers concerned with their physical attractiveness. Some parents challenge these gender norms by giving Lego blocks to girls Lego blocks and stuffed animals or dolls to boys, or buying gender-neutral toys such as board games.

As we grow older, we get cues about gender norms from our peers, school, work, and the media. For many years, teachers, administrators, and even parents discouraged girls from exploring math and science, instead steering them toward the social sciences, humanities, and education. The structural boundaries of what is deemed an appropriate field of study for women and men have not only influenced the choices and opportunities of generations of students; these structural rules of gender tracking have contributed to women's subordinate economic position.[23]

Recently, concerted institutional efforts have challenged this educational gender tracking with computer-coding schools for girls, STEM scholarships for women, and representations of female scientists in the media. The rules about which subject areas are acceptable for specific genders are changing; as a result, women are increasingly acquiring the same educational resources and credentials as their male peers, though they remain a small minority of those earning degrees in areas such as computer science.

"Science Careers in Search of Women," Argonne National Laboratory. (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

The 2016 film *Hidden Figures* focuses on a team of female African American mathematicians who played a pivotal role in the success of early space missions at NASA, where jobs were segregated by gender, with women allowed to hold only select positions. When mathematician Katherine Johnson confronted one of the chief engineers at NASA about how job segregation hindered her ability to work, these structural barriers were removed. Other employees at NASA changed their perceptions and behaviors in response to the shifting rules by demonstrating greater respect and inclusivity toward Mrs. Johnson and other women like her.

When social expectations shift and we encounter a new set of group rules that guide our behavior, we often experience **resocialization**, the process of adopting new social norms and identities. Consider the resocialization process that young men experience when pledging a fraternity. They are encouraged to develop allegiance to a new "family," which often places great value on hetero-normative masculinity, or the dominant, widespread ideas of what it means to be a straight man. This includes displays of endurance, toughness, strength, the ability to control emotions, and sexual success with women. How do you think this compulsory allegiance and show of masculinity influenced the events that lead to Timothy Piazza's hazing death?

Sometimes we experience dramatic resocialization, greatly changing how we behave, what we think, and how we view ourselves. This is common in what Erving Goffman called **total institutions**, where groups of people are largely cut off from the wider society and their lives are largely controlled by the institution.[24] Military boot camp, prisons, mental institutions, and religious training organizations all commonly function as total institutions. They have near-complete control over the people in them; the institution decides when people eat or sleep, what they do all day, and when (or if) they can talk to people outside the institution. Total institutions usually resocialize residents into values, beliefs, and behaviors that suit the needs of the institution. For instance, religious organizations training nuns or monks may resocialize residents to reject pleasures or preferences from their old lives and adopt new standards of behavior. Military cadets learn to follow rigid military regulations for everything from their haircuts to how to make their beds; by doing so, the military is also training them to follow orders without question, no matter how small or seemingly unimportant the orders might be. Reducing signs of individuality—such as different hairstyles—also resocializes cadets to think of themselves as just one member of a larger unit.

Most of us like to think of ourselves as independent individuals who develop our own unique identities and sense of who we are. In truth, however, we evolve from the social worlds in which we live. We all have a strong sense of identity and we all exert our agency in each moment of our lives. But the way we come to see ourselves, the choices we make, and the behaviors we engage in are shaped by our place in the larger social structure. Whether we realize or like to admit it, our actions are deeply affected by structural rules and resources. None of us act in a vacuum devoid of societal influences.

At the same time, individuals are not robots or puppets with no control over their actions. We exert our agency and choose the actions we take, and we have some control over the structures that influence our lives. The central theme of this chapter, and one of the central themes of sociology, revolves around this dynamic interplay between individuals and social structure. As we will explain in the final section, individuals are both the products and the producers of social structure.

Review Sheet: The individual

Key Points

- Our ability to act according to our own will is shaped by the structural rules we encounter and resources at our disposal.
- Our sense of self may include classifications, social groups to which we belong, ideological beliefs, interests, ambitions, and self-evaluations.
- Our identities are constructed through the social influences that we encounter in our daily lives as well as how we see ourselves through the eyes of others.
- Our sense of self is always evolving, as is our understanding of what it means to be a member of society. The socialization process does not just happen to us as children or young adults; it occurs throughout our lives.
- The family, education, peer groups, and mass media are often identified as the four most important agents of socialization.

Key People

- Thomas McPartland
- Manford Kuhn
- George Herbert Mead
- Charles Horton Cooley
- Pierre Bourdieu
- Judith Lorber

Key Terms

- **Agency** – Acting on your own will.
- **Self-concept** – Thoughts and feelings we have of ourselves as physical, social, and emotional beings.
- **Socialization** – Experiences that give us an identity and that teach us how to be members of society.
- **Resocialization** – Socialization process by which we adopt new norms and identities.
- **Total institutions** – Institutions that exert near-total control over members' lives and engage in resocialization.
- **Generalized Other** – Values and norms of the larger culture that guide your actions.
- **Looking-Glass Self** – The way our perception of how others see us affects our sense of self.
- **Agents of socialization** – Individuals, groups, and organizations that influence your sense of self and help you learn the ways of being a member of society.

INDIVIDUAL AGENCY AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE

☐   What is the relationship between individual agency and social structure?

☐   How are individuals constrained and enabled by external forces?

☐   How does our behavior contribute to the construction of society?

☐   How are we products of the social world in which we live?

"If you're in hijab, then someone sees you and treats you accordingly. I feel more free. Especially men, they don't look at your appearance—they appreciate your intellectual abilities. They respect you." This comment came from a 22-year-old female Muslim-American college student.[25]

Some of you may be surprised by this young woman's perspective on **veiling**, the Muslim practice of wearing a hijab (hair covering) or veil. Yet it reflects the attitudes of some of the well-educated, middle-class, devout Muslim women living in Austin, TX that Jen'Nan Ghazal Read and John Bartowski interviewed in their 2000 study.[26] To uncover the diverse attitudes Muslim women have toward the practice of veiling, they spoke with college students, professionals, and homemakers ranging in age from 21 to 55. Some had recently arrived to the U.S., while the majority had lived in the country for at least a decade. Half wore a hijab.

Veiled and unveiled women. (Source)

The main questions the researchers explored were: How do Muslim communities expect women to behave? Should they wear a hijab or veil? And if so, why? How do these Muslim women explain their choices and decisions? In other words, the researchers were interested in learning more about the interplay between social structure and the individual.

All the interviewees noted that veiling was based on the belief that men are prone to sexual impulses, from which the hijab would supposedly protect women. Those who wore a veil had diverse attitudes toward their gender roles as Muslim women. Some felt liberated from the male gaze and more comfortable being in public among men. Some sensed that men took them more seriously as college students or professionals if they wore a veil. And some wanted to assert their Muslim identity in a visible way to forge connections with other Muslims in the community.

By contrast, many of the unveiled interviewees saw the hijab as a means for men to dominate women, assert gender differences, and reinforce patriarchy. As one unveiled woman bluntly stated, "The veil is used to control women."[27] They also felt that the hijab was not necessary to prove their religious piety, since they viewed veiling not as a divine commandment but as a political and cultural practice designed to differentiate Muslim women from Westerners and help men manage women's sexuality.

These women used their agency in deciding whether or not to veil, but their choices must be understood in the context of social structure, particularly the rules and resources provided by cultural expectations, religious traditions, and the political climate. Each of these women interpreted the rules of their faith individually, sorting out how to follow the rules of their religion and use these regulations as a resource to navigate the social world. For some women, that meant wearing the hijab to gain respect in a male-dominated society. For others, veiling was a way to express their religious identity. For a third group of women, not wearing the veil symbolized their challenge to male domination.

Aware of prevailing attitudes in the Muslim community and broader American society, these women faced the choice of whether to be visibly identifiable as Muslim. They had to weigh the benefits of building ties in the Muslim community against the potential risk of religious and ethnic discrimination. By making choices about veiling, they influenced social structure, including norms and attitudes concerning veiling in communities where Muslims are a religious minority. By framing veiling as empowering and liberating, some of the veiled women changed what it means to wear a hijab. The women who chose not to wear a veil also challenged Muslim norms while tacitly reinforcing Western attitudes about veiling.

The key point is that our individual actions, our agency, can reinforce the social structure in some situations and transform it in others. There is a constant interaction between agency—the ability to act on our own will—and social structure—the resources we can tap into as well as the rules we must navigate.

When we recognize the complex interconnection between agency and social structure we are exercising our **sociological imagination**.[28] As C. Wright Mills (1916-1962) pointed out, all of our actions, large and small, shape the world in which we live. At the same time, the social world shapes the actions we take. It's important to understand the two sides of this relationship—the extent to which we shape the social

world and the extent to which we are shaped by it—if we hope to fully understand why people behave the way they do and why society is organized as it is.

Sociologists often describe the relationship between individual action and the larger social structure in terms of micro-sociological and macro-sociological aspects of society. **Micro-sociology** focuses on individual identities and small-scale interactions with others. **Macro-sociology** takes aim at large-scale societal structures, including groups and institutions as well as social forces such as norms. Micro and macro theories help us understand the interplay between individuals and social structure, particularly in terms of our choices and actions. These theories provide different ways to view this relationship.

Herbert Blumer (1900-1987), one of the most well-known micro-sociological theorists, contributed to a theory called **symbolic interaction,** which studies human interaction by focusing on the words and gestures that people use and the meanings they create about the world.[29] From the perspective of symbolic interaction, individuals act toward things based on the meanings those things have for them. The meanings are developed through a process of socialization, and they may change over the life course. As individuals act toward things, they inevitably perpetuate or transform the meanings of the things that were influencing their actions in the first place.

We can illustrate the process of symbolic interaction by thinking about the women in Read and Bartowski's study. As young children, they learned from their parents, family members, and other adults in their community that the veil is an important religious symbol for Muslims. As these women entered adulthood, the veil took on a variety of additional cultural and political meanings, such as respectability, collective identity, and oppression. The way these women act toward the veil is dependent on the meaning the veil has for them at any given time in their lives. Sometimes, their actions can alter the meaning of veiling, such as when they wear the veil to achieve respect in school and work or when they reject the veil to call attention to patriarchy. Symbolic interactionists suggest that this process shows how individuals create social change. Through small-scale actions, individuals transform social norms and the widely-held meanings attached to people, things, and behaviors. This is how the micro influences the macro level of society.

Macro-sociologists take a different perspective, focusing first on societal influences. Robert Merton (1910-2003) argued that people make choices based on the resources available to achieve their goals.[30] The goals people hope to achieve often reflect social norms, such as financial security. When someone lacks access to socially acceptable pathways, they tend to seek other means to achieve culturally acceptable goals. For example, if someone does not have the financial means to attend college, they may seek other


Free Hugs. (Source)

avenues to support themselves, such as becoming an entrepreneur, entering the military, or even resorting to crime. In this way, the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities across society, a macro-sociological phenomenon known as the **structure of opportunity**, shapes the choices individuals make.

Sociologists must consider both micro and macro perspectives when we analyze individual choices and actions. We should also look at both sides of this relationship when we investigate how larger social structures such as groups and institutions are established, maintained, and transformed.

Figure 2: Relationship between the Individual and Social Structure

INDIVIDUAL

actions
identities

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

rules
resources
statuses
roles
groups
networks
institutions
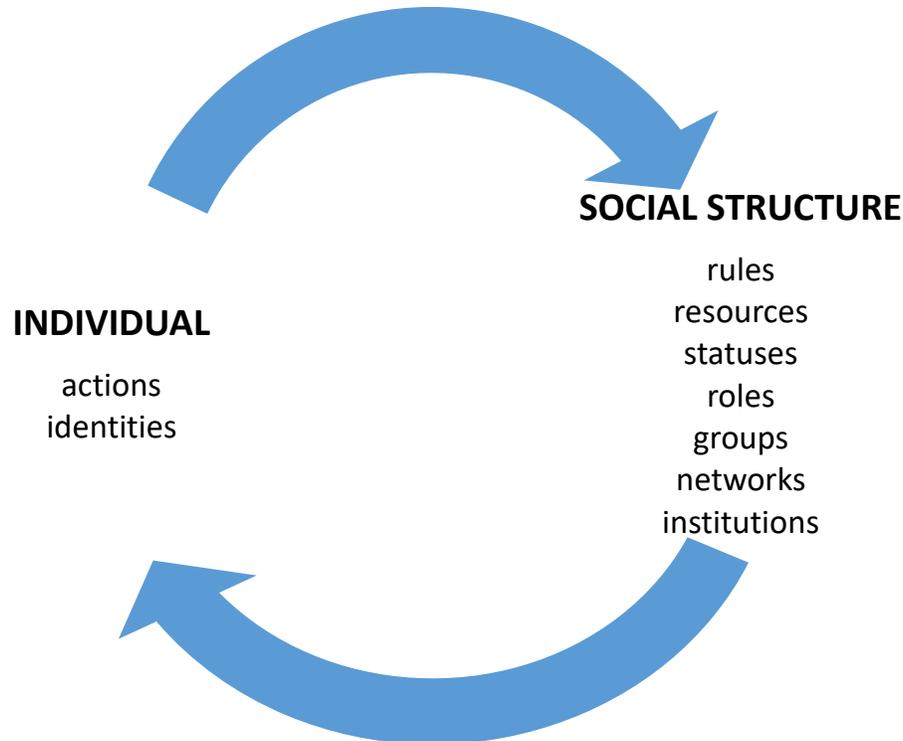
Let's revisit the example we started the chapter with to help us better understand these important points. What makes Timothy Piazza's death so tragic is that the other men attending the party did not use their agency in a way that may have saved his life. Those young men did not immediately call for help because they were following a specific set of structural rules pertaining to fraternity life and college partying. The fraternity chapter officers knew that Penn State had a zero-tolerance policy for underage drinking. Reporting the incident meant their organization could lose its charter and be banned from campus. The pledges did not want to jeopardize their own chances of gaining a valuable structural resource, membership in the fraternity. Their choice to delay calling for medical assistance was deeply affected by the social structure; it also negatively affected Timothy's chance of survival.

When the fraternity pledges and brothers weighed the consequences of helping Timothy, when the Muslim women contemplated whether to veil, and when the softball players considered aiding the competing team, they were all engaging in **reflexivity**—the process of evaluating our position in the social world, the rules we are expected to follow, and the resources we have or can acquire. Ultimately, we make a decision to

act in a certain way and our decision has consequences. In some instances, we reinforce the social structure through our individual choices and actions; in other instances, we may alter the social structure.

In either case, our actions and their corresponding effects reveal how we are both products and producers of the social world. We make reflexive choices about how to act, and those choices are informed by social structural rules and resources. In this sense, the social structure only exists because of the actions of individuals, and the actions of individuals are influenced by social structure. They mutually influence each other to create our ever-changing individual and social lives.

Review Sheet: Individual agency and social structure

Key Points

- There is a dynamic interplay between individual agency and social structure. Our actions are constrained and enabled by social structural rules and resources. Our actions also contribute to the construction of society.
- When deciding on a course of action, people take into consideration their social position, risks and rewards, structural rules, and available resources.
- It is important to use both micro and macro sociological perspectives when we analyze individual choices and social structural changes.
- Individuals make reflexive choices about how to act; those choices are influenced by social structural rules and resources.

Key People
- Jen'Nan Ghazal Read
- John Bartowski
- C. Wright Mills
- Herbert Blumer
- Robert Merton

Key Terms
- **Veiling** – Muslim practice of wearing a hijab or veil**.**
- **Sociological imagination** – An understanding of the interplay between social structure and agency.
- **Micro-sociology** – Analysis of individual identities and interactions.
- **Macro-sociology** – Analysis of large-scale social structures and forces.
- **Symbolic interaction** – The study of human interaction by focusing on the words and gestures that people use and the meanings they create about the world.
- **Structure of opportunity** – The unequal distribution of resources and opportunities across society.
- **Reflexivity** – Process of evaluating our position in the social world, the rules we are expected to follow, and the resources we have or can acquire.

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