How many of the ordinary things we do every day are taught to us by others?
Think about what you did this morning. Probably you woke up to an alarm clock that you set last night to ensure that you would be on time for your classes or other obligations. When you got out of bed, you probably followed some kind of morning routine, such as taking a shower, brushing your teeth, getting dressed, and eating breakfast. For each of these activities, you may have not realized it, but you were following norms determined by you but by your culture and society. You were not born knowing that you need to shower every day and brush your teeth to stay clean, or that you should wear clothes to go to class and eat cereal for breakfast. These are things that you learned through your interactions with others.

From the time you were an infant, your family, peers, and others have taught you what you need to know to live in your society, such as how to keep yourself clean, what kinds of foods are typically eaten for breakfast and how, and the importance of being on time for your classes and other obligations. Imagine that you were born in a village in the highlands of Peru or 200 years ago. Your morning routine would be quite different!

You know what to do to start your day because you have undergone the process of socialization; that is, you have learned, through social interaction, how to follow the social norms and expectations of your society. In Chapter 4, you learned about how culture structures our lives within society, establishing norms and social patterns that we are expected to adhere to, but we are not born knowing how to fit into our culture. Through the process of socialization, individuals become functioning members of their society.

Socialization is part of a larger process of social reproduction, in which a society’s norms and values are passed on from generation to generation. Societies have continuity over time because individuals learn and internalize the values and norms of their society and pass them on to future generations. Values and norms of societies do change over time. Perhaps one of the first things you did today was check your phone for social media updates, certainly not something your grandmother did as part of her daily routine! And 200 years ago, few people bathed daily. But many structural components of societies remain the same from one generation to the next—such as the organization of our days around family and work obligations and the expectation that you must get dressed to begin your day. These are some of the social norms that have been passed down to you from your parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents.

Socialization begins the moment babies are born. Everything from the names they receive, to the blankets they snuggle in, to the hospitals where they are born, and the homes where they reside is part of their socialization. It is a process that continues throughout the life course, or the various stages of one’s life, from birth to death.

In different periods of life, individuals undergo new and different processes of socialization and resocialization, whereby they learn to adapt to new social norms and values. For example, when a young adult first moves out of her parents’ home, she must learn how to perform a new social role: that of an adult living independently who must shop, cook, clean, manage money, and pay her own bills. This role requires learning new skills and new norms and disengaging from old norms that were appropriate when living as a dependent child. Becoming an adult involves learning a whole new role set and associated norms.

CONSIDER THIS
Can you think of a resocialization process you have undergone?

Nature versus Nurture
Most of us cannot remember far enough back to recall when we first began to acquire the skills we need to live in society. We learn things like language, how to walk and feed ourselves, and basic hygiene when we are very young.
I was a latecomer to sociology. Astonishingly, although I had a lifelong interest in culture and society, I made it through my undergraduate degree with two majors—drama and classics—and not one sociology course. I was working in New York City as a costume designer when the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, occurred. Watching the towers fall convinced me that I didn’t have a sufficient framework or vocabulary for understanding the complexity of contemporary society, so I enrolled in an interdisciplinary master’s program at the New School for Social Research in New York. I took my first sociology course there and realized that sociology provides the conceptual framework I had been looking for to merge my interests in culture, politics, and society and make sense of the world around me. Both my PhD studies and my current research focus on the sociology of culture, with an emphasis on how societies remember and come to terms with violence. I currently teach sociology just a few blocks away from the World Trade Center site, at the Borough of Manhattan Community College, where I strive to demonstrate to students the value and importance of developing a sociological perspective.

Check Your Understanding

- What is socialization?
- When does socialization occur?
- What is social reproduction?

Understanding Theories of Socialization

5.2 According to George Herbert Mead, how does an individual develop a social self?

Sociologists have a deep interest in understanding why humans are the way we are. Although sociologists are not interested in any one particular individual, they are interested in individuals as they are situated in and shaped by society. It is therefore important for sociologists to understand how, through socialization, individuals develop into social beings capable of navigating the many demands of social life.

Because socialization is focused on the individual, sociological understanding of it is shaped by the micro-level symbolic interactionist approach, particularly the work of its founder, George Herbert Mead (1863–1931). In Chapter 2, you learned about symbolic interaction as a theoretical approach that focuses on the ways in which we construct meaning through our social interactions. Mead (1964) argued that it is through these symbolic interactions with others that we develop into social beings.

Mead’s Theory of Childhood Development

As you read in Chapter 2, Mead was influenced by Charles Horton Cooley’s concept of the looking glass self, which is a way of seeing yourself the way you think others see you.
Cooley believed that we adjust our behavior and selves according to how we imagine others perceive and judge us. Think about taking a “selfie”: when you snap a photo of yourself, you see yourself as you think others will see you, imagine their response, and adjust your appearance and expression accordingly. Taking a selfie is an example of your looking glass self. George Herbert Mead similarly saw the self as shaped by others through our social interactions. Like Cooley, Mead believed that we are not born with a sense of self but rather learn self-consciousness through our social interactions. Self-consciousness is an individual’s awareness of how others see her. The individual develops a sense of self through the reactions and attitudes of others. For example, babies are born completely unaware that they are individuals distinct from those individuals and things around them. This awareness is something that develops as babies grow into toddlers and interact with those around them.

Mead was particularly interested in the role of play in the development of children’s self-awareness. He maintained that children begin to develop into social beings who are aware of themselves as distinct individuals through what he termed taking the role of the other: that is, imitating those around them. Have you ever noticed a young child pushing a baby doll in a toy stroller? Or a toddler making mud “pies” in the sandbox? These children are imitating the grown-ups they see around them. As toddlers get older, they begin to put themselves in others’ positions in imagined scenarios like playing doctor or school. Although this may seem to be merely child’s play, Mead viewed it as an extremely important step toward developing a social self. In taking the role of the other, children begin to see themselves the way others see them while also starting to understand that they are separate individuals distinct from those around them and capable of compelling particular reactions from others.

As children get older, their play becomes more sophisticated, and they begin to play organized games. Mead uses the example of baseball to describe the
importance of these games in the further development of the social self. Through imitation, children put themselves in the shoes of a specific and particular other and begin to see themselves the way others see them. In organized games like baseball, individuals must be able to imagine and anticipate the actions of all of the other players. A shortstop needs to understand the role of the pitcher and catcher, as well as the other fielders and the batter. Furthermore, there are rules that all players must follow for the game to work, and they all must agree upon the goal. What emerges in this kind of play is not the specific other of imitation but what Mead describes as the generalized other: an other that represents the whole community of players and ultimately of society. Just as young children gain an understanding of what it means to perform the role of a specific other, like a parent or teacher, older children engaged in organized games develop an understanding of the larger rules, norms, and values of the society in which they live. This leads to the emergence of a self that responds not only to individual reactions but also to the norms and expectations of society.

What develops in these play and games stages is what Mead refers to as the “me,” which differs from the “I.” The “I” is the self’s unsocialized impulses and attitudes that respond to the reactions and attitudes of others in a creative and active way. But the “me,” the part of the self that has internalized the generalized reactions and attitudes of other members of society (the generalized other), often censors and hold back the “I.” The “me” is the side of our self that follows the norms and expectations of society and works to control our behavior accordingly.

ConSIDER THIS

How does a game like hide and seek teach children about the generalized other? What societal expectations does one learn in a game like hide and seek?

Check Your Understanding

- What is Cooley’s looking glass self?
- According to Mead, how do children develop a social self?
- What is the generalized other?
- What does Mead mean by the “I” versus the “me”?

Agents of Socialization

5.3 What are the key agents of socialization?

People, groups, institutions, and social contexts that contribute to our socialization are known as agents of socialization. We encounter different agents of socialization as we move through the life course. Primary socialization occurs from the time we are born to when we start school. During this time, we learn things like language and other foundational skills for life in society; at this point, the family is the primary agent of socialization. However, as we age, we move through many different social groups and contexts that shape us, such as sports teams or clubs, schools, religious organizations, and neighborhoods. Some of us may join the military, a highly powerful agent of socialization that has its own distinct set of norms and expectations, and each of us will move through more than one workplace, in which we will encounter distinct processes of socialization and resocialization. Socialization is a lifelong process and central to our experiences as social beings.

Family

Because family is generally the first agent of socialization and interaction with family is so intense in the years from infancy through childhood, family is the most influential agent of socialization. Although family structures vary widely in cultures and societies around the globe, most infants and children undergo significant socialization by their families.

In the Western world, the nuclear family predominates, meaning that children are usually raised by a mother, a father, and perhaps siblings. Throughout history and around the globe, extended families of grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins may be more typical family structures in which socialization occurs. And in today’s world, family structures are rapidly changing; for example, one in three children in the United States today lives with an unmarried parent (Livingston 2018)—and a growing number of children are being raised by same-sex couples (Goldberg and Conron 2018); you’ll learn more about the family in Chapter 11. No matter the family formation, family is an extremely important agent of socialization.

External social structures and forces influence socialization within families. Historically, the family one was born into determined one’s position in life. Although today there is more opportunity for social mobility, one’s social class still greatly influences how families socialize children. Sociologist Annette Lareau (2002) conducted a now classic study of the impact of social class on socialization,
finding that children in lower income families were more likely to “hang out,” play, and watch television in their free time, than middle-class children whose free time was structured with various extracurricular activities. A similar difference is reflected today in a newly emerging digital divide in U.S. society, with tweens and teens from lower income families spending significantly more time with media (two hours and forty-five minutes more) than their higher income peers (Common Sense Media 2018, 27). With growing worries about the impact of screen time on young people’s mental and physical health, performance in school, and general well-being, this gap is important; whereas some parts of the country are embracing technology for children (even creating entirely online preschools), many middle-class and upper-class families are trying to ban screen time for their children entirely (Bowles 2018). In Chapter 7, you will learn more about economic inequality, but we can begin to see how economic inequality shapes the process of socialization and is, in turn, reproduced through socialization.

We learn many essential things about our culture and society from our families, and their influence on us lasts a lifetime. Families teach us not only foundational skills like language and how to feed and dress ourselves but also the values, beliefs, and social norms that will shape us throughout our life course. We learn about gender roles and expectations by observing what our mothers and fathers and our brothers and sisters do and how they behave (Halpern and Perry-Jenkins 2016). For example, we might see our mothers cook, clean, and care for the children, while our fathers take out the trash, mow the lawn, and go off to work, reinforcing traditional expectations about gender roles, which we’ll learn more about in Chapter 8. As individuals get older, they encounter different agents of socialization that may reinforce or challenge the things that they have learned from their families.

**School**

School is a significant agent of socialization; in America, most children begin school by the age of five, if not before, and spend much of the next thirteen years in school, with the majority then going on to college. In school, students not only learn academic content, such as reading, writing, mathematics, science, social studies, and so on, but also important norms and values. Through this “hidden curriculum,” children learn how to interact with authority figures who are not their parents (teachers and administrators) and their peers (others in their age group). They also learn many rules and norms that are particular to the school context but can carry over into other settings, such as being quiet, raising one’s hand to speak, following instructions, obeying authority figures, not cheating, and working with others (Jackson 1968). Schools also teach students about cultural values. For example, in this country, most students recite the Pledge of Allegiance each day before class, reinforcing their “allegiance” to American culture and values. In fact, many would argue that socialization is school’s most important function in society (Parsons 1959; Gatto 2017).

Various social factors influence children’s experiences of socialization in schools. Educational psychologist Katherine Wentzel (2005), for example, found that students who are socially accepted and enjoy a “popular” status are more successful academically. Strong ties to peers from kindergarten through high school are linked to greater motivation in school and higher academic performance (Wentzel and Muenks 2016). This probably doesn’t surprise you as you think about your own experience in elementary, middle, and high school, when fitting in with your peers was so very important. But other social factors, such as social class, race and ethnicity, skin color, and gender, also affect one’s experience in school. For example, data from the U.S. Department of
Education in 2014 show that Black girls were suspended at a rate of 12 percent in comparison with a suspension rate of just 2 percent for White girls (Wun 2016). Other recent studies showed that not only are Black students more likely to be suspended than White students, but Black students with darker skin tones were two times more likely to be suspended than White classmates, though this was not the case for Black classmates with lighter skin tones (Blake et al. 2017). Likewise, Black students with dark skin tones have lower grade point averages than White students and Black students with lighter skin tones (Thompson and McDonald 2016, 101). Thus, the color of a child’s skin may play a role in determining whether she learns to like school and feels a sense of safety and belonging in the classroom or views school as a place where she does not belong or cannot succeed because she is perceived to be a troublemaker. In Chapter 9, you will learn about the impact of race on individuals and society and how racial inequalities are structured into social institutions like schools, affecting the experiences and socialization of students.

**CONSIDER THIS**

What are some elements of your high school’s “hidden curriculum”? Other than academics, what sorts of things did you learn in high school?
Peers

As children get older, they spend more time with their peers and less time with their families. Peers, then, become an increasingly important agent of socialization that can both reinforce and challenge what children have learned from the family. In school—and for many children today this can begin with preschool or daycare at age two or younger—children spend their days surrounded by other children of the same age, interacting with them both inside and outside the classroom. Peers become extremely powerful agents of socialization. You have, no doubt, heard the term peer pressure. Peers often expect conformity to a set of particular social norms relating to appearance, behavior, language, and so on. Accordingly, young people, surrounded by peers in school, often face pressure to conform to the norms accepted by their classmates.

Much of the sociological research on peers and socialization involves deviant behaviors, or behaviors that go against society’s norms, which you will learn more about in Chapter 6. A recent study, for example, found that adolescents associated with delinquent peers were more likely to be both bullies and victims of bullying (Cho and Lee 2018). Another recent study showed that middle school students were more likely to engage in homophobic teasing if their friends were doing the same thing (Merrin et al. 2017).

Peers are critical agents of socialization at various stages in the life course and can challenge the kinds of norms and values learned from families, teachers, and administrators. Peers expose us to new cultures, norms, values, and beliefs, some of which may manifest in deviant behaviors, but many of which can increase our acceptance and understanding of diversity and multiculturalism. For example, the Pew Research Center (2017) has found that 74 percent of Millennials (the generation born after 1981) support same-sex marriage, a proportion much higher than Generation X (65 percent) and Baby Boomers (56 percent).

Media

Media are an increasingly influential agent of socialization. Books, radio, and television have long been influential social forces, but today we live in an “information age” in which we have unprecedented access to media, much of them conveniently and constantly accessible on our smartphones and tablets. According to Nielson’s (2018) “Total Audience Report,” American adults spend more than 11 hours each day consuming various forms of media; another report found that 45 percent of teens said that they use the Internet “almost constantly,” while another 44 percent said that they go online several times a day (Anderson and Jiang 2018). We live in a media-saturated society and are very much shaped by this constant stream of images and information. Every movie we watch, magazine we flip through, or text we read contains messages that contribute to the ongoing shaping of our values and norms.

The huge recent increase in media consumption (see Figure 5.2) has led to many questions about how it is influencing society, especially young people. Recent studies have shown a link between screen time and symptoms of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (Chatterjee 2018) and between media consumption and depression and anxiety (Heid 2018). And since long before the creation of the Internet and iPhones, studies have tried to determine the effect of violent media on children and young adults. For example, a 1956 study by Alberta Siegel found that four-year-olds who watched Woody Woodpecker cartoons, in which said woodpecker frequently violently pecks those around him, later behaved more aggressively than four-year-olds who had watched Little Red Hen. In 1968, communications scholar George Gerbner established the Cultural Indicators research project at the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania to determine how television
shapes viewers’ perceptions of the world. The project’s analysis of thousands of hours of television programming led Gerbner to argue that television creates “mean world syndrome,” leading people to believe the world is more dangerous than it actually is. With young people exposed to so much media today, much of them depicting violence—an estimated 60 percent of all television shows contain acts of violence, including children’s Saturday morning cartoons, which have on average 16.7 violent acts per hour (Scharrer 2018)—these questions have become pressing, especially in the wake of mass violence committed by young people, such as mass shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut; Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina; and Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida.

CONSIDER THIS

How have the media served as an agent of your socialization? Think, for example, of one of your favorite movies when you were younger. What did that movie teach you about social and cultural norms, values, and beliefs? Have any of those norms, values, and beliefs been challenged as you have grown older?

Recent studies have looked at new forms of media, especially video games, to try to determine whether and to what extent they are linked to violent real-life acts. Most studies find that there is a link between violent media and later aggression and violence (e.g., Calvert et al. 2017; Gabbiadini et al. 2016; Hasan et al. 2018). However, most scholars agree that there is no one cause that can explain why someone becomes violent. And on the other side, scholars have found positive effects of video games, including greater empathy (Harrington and O’Connell 2016) and increased cooperation, even while playing violent video games (Adachi et al. 2016). What all scholars agree on, however, is that media are an extremely powerful agent of socialization to which individuals are exposed more and more.

Agents of Socialization for Adults

Although socialization may be most intense in our early years, we never stop being socialized. As individuals move into adulthood, they encounter new agents of socialization and have to unlearn some of their old norms and values. For example, for most people in cultures around the world, work is an important social context in which we spend much of our time. Before industrialization, most people did not work outside of their homes; they farmed or had trades in or very near their homes. Today that has changed, and most of us spend our workday in a different location, surrounded by people who are not our family and sometimes not even friends. Many Americans begin working when they are teenagers and continue to work for most of their lives.
Each new workplace constitutes a new set of agents of socialization, including bosses, colleagues, clients or customers, and others. In the workplace, individuals are expected to perform particular social roles and adhere to a slightly different set of social norms and values than what they might follow at home or in other contexts. For example, someone with tattoos covering her arms may need to wear long sleeves to work. A gay man or woman might pretend to be straight to avoid discrimination in the workplace. As of 2019, twenty-eight states do not have laws explicitly prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation (Movement Advancement Project 2019).

**Total Institutions.** Many people will at some point find themselves in what is known as a total institution, an institution that is closed to external influences in which a group of people live together, following a strictly structured routine (Goffman 1961). In a total institution, our sleep, work, and play all occur within the confines of one institution—rather than in different locations—under a single authority that oversees and administers these activities.

**CONSIDER THIS**

Describe how at least two different agents of socialization influenced your decision to attend college.

One example of a total institution is prison. According to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, in 2016, a total of 1,506,800 adults were incarcerated in state and federal prisons (Carson 2018). Each of these prisoners had to undergo resocialization upon entering prison, learning new norms to which they must adhere and new values. For example, prisoners must dress alike; eat, wake up, and sleep at the same time; and follow the orders of prison guards. At the same time, they must stop following the norms that structure life as a free individual, like getting up when they want to, eating what and when they wish, and following their former daily routines. They also must give up old values, like autonomy and their relationships with family and friends, and embrace new values, like keeping to oneself, defending oneself when challenged, and not “snitching.” Prisoners also learn a new language—prison slang—to communicate in this new social context.

Another total institution is the military, especially basic training or “boot camp.” Military recruits live, eat, and train together, following a strict schedule and rules that guide practically every moment of their lives. They must wear uniforms and shave their heads, march in line and chant together, and leave behind civilian concerns in the face of an all-encompassing basic training experience. They are resocialized to follow the norms and expectations of this new and total institution, changing from a civilian to a soldier.

**Check Your Understanding**

- What are agents of socialization?
- What are some of the most important agents of socialization and what do we learn from each?
- Why are the media an increasingly powerful agent of socialization? What kinds of things do they teach individuals?
- What are total institutions? How do they resocialize adults?
Gender Socialization

What is gender socialization?

Just as we learn the general norms and expectations of our society, we also learn the particular expectations of society when it comes to gender. Learning gender identity and roles through socialization is known as gender socialization. From birth—or arguably even as early as the sex of a baby is known—individuals are assigned gender roles and socialized through various socializing agents to perform these roles. From the way parents decorate a nursery and to how they dress their babies and how people interact with them, gender socialization is an ongoing process of learning the social expectations of males and females in one’s society and culture.

In one classic study, new mothers were observed to behave differently with a baby depending on whether the child was presented to them as a boy or a girl. Although the women all reported that they did not treat their own babies differently on the basis of their sex, they smiled more at the baby in the study if told it was a girl and held her closer to them. They were more likely to hold the boy away from them and to offer him a toy train to play with, rather than a doll (Will, Self, and Datan 1976). Although the baby was only six months old, clear gendered patterns in interaction emerged among these mothers, although they were unaware of them.

These subtle differences in how boys and girls are treated as babies are reinforced through other social agents over the life course; you’ll learn much more about gender socialization in Chapter 8. Throughout the process of socialization, gendered messages and expectations are all around us. Think, for example, about the kinds of toys children play with. How do “girl” toys versus “boy” toys help demonstrate what it means to be female or male in our society? Recall some of your favorite books or movies as a child: how did they help you understand what it means to be a boy or girl or man or woman? Think about the media that you consume today. What music, sports, movies, or other icons do you follow, and what do you learn from them about gender? Each different agent of socialization we encounter teaches us something about the expectations of us regarding gender.

Consider This

Think back on your experience with gender socialization. How did it affect how you learned your gender role?

In Chapter 8, you will learn much more about gender and sexuality. Gender socialization affects all aspects of both men’s and women’s lives, sometimes in seemingly trivial ways that can actually have a big impact. For example, a group of sociology students at William Paterson University in New Jersey noticed that because individuals are socialized to believe that menstruation is a private issue that should not be publicly discussed, many low-income women do not have access to a fundamental necessity: feminine hygiene products. These Sociologists in Action decided to do something about this to help women have a “happy period.”

Check Your Understanding

- What is gender socialization?
- Why is gender socialization important?
- What is an example of gender socialization?
**Status, Social Roles, and Identity**

#### 5.5 What are status, social roles, and identity?

Through the different agents of socialization, individuals learn the various social expectations of them in the different social statuses and social roles they occupy throughout their lives. As you will recall from earlier chapters, status is one’s position relative to others in society, while social roles are the expectations others have of us in particular status positions in terms of how we act, behave, dress, and so on.

Just as we perform distinct gender roles, as we move through our daily lives, we perform a range of other social roles that hold social expectations of us in terms of the norms we follow, how we dress and appear, the language we use, and how we behave. For example, let’s imagine a day in the life of an imaginary college student, Maria. Maria wakes up and is a roommate to the girls she lives with. On her way to class, she stops and buys a coffee and a muffin, and is a customer to the cashier.
In class, she plays the role of student; after class, she meets a group of students to work on a project, performing the role of a classmate. She meets some friends for lunch, playing the role of friend. After lunch, she goes to her job at the campus bookstore and is an employee to her boss, a colleague to her coworkers, and a retail assistant to the customers. Later on, she calls her parents, playing the role of daughter, and perhaps after that she goes out dancing as a friend. In each of these roles, Maria faces different expectations: she would not behave in class the way she behaves around her friends, just as she would not talk to customers in the bookstore the way she talks to her parents. At work, she might have to wear a uniform that she would not wear when she goes dancing with her friends. In each of these roles, Maria has a different status as well: when she is in the classroom as a student, she has a lower status than she has when she is with her friends, and she dresses, speaks, and acts accordingly.

Although it may sound exhausting (and sometimes is!) to perform so many social roles, each of us does this on a daily basis and usually moves seamlessly from one role and status to another. And while you might imagine that with your friends or family you are able to be your “true” self, you are still performing a role when you are with them. For each social context in which we find ourselves, there is a different set of social expectations of us in terms of our attitudes and behaviors.

Our social roles and statuses are not always compatible and comfortable. Sometimes we experience competing demands within a particular social role and status, or what is known as role strain. Maria may experience role strain in her role as a college student when she is required to do a sociology presentation on the same day that she has a physics exam. The demands of her role as a student to prepare for her presentation coincide with the expectations of her to study hard for her physics exam. These competing demands of her college student role result in a strain placed on Maria that is probably familiar to you!

Alternatively, when our different social roles conflict with one another, we experience role conflict. Now imagine that Maria’s younger sister is home sick from school and there is no one to stay home with her except Maria, who must miss class to do so. In this case, Maria’s role of student conflicts with her sister role; there is no way she can fulfill both roles at the same time. Although our roles have relatively clear expectations of us, this does not mean that they always fit together in a way that is comfortable, and we must constantly negotiate our social roles and statuses.

**Consider this**

List five social roles you perform in your daily life. What are the expectations of you in these roles in terms of how you behave, the norms you follow, the language you use, the way you dress, and so on? Have you experienced role strain in any of these roles? What about role conflict between two or more of them?

**Identity**

Through the process of socialization, we learn about our culture and society but also develop our distinct identities. **Identity** generally refers to the characteristics by which we are known. Some of the key sources of identity are factors determined by society, such as gender, social class, race, ethnicity, and so forth. These are social categories to which we belong that shape our social identity, that is, the identity that others ascribe to us. Think of the many ways others might describe you: a student, an athlete, a woman, a man, a daughter, a son, a father, a mother, and so on. Each of us has multifaceted social identities others assign to us. We also each have our
own understanding of who we are—self-identity—that is shaped by our interactions with others. Through individual agency and the social and symbolic world that individuals move through, identity is constantly shaped, reshaped, and negotiated through our interactions with others.

**Check Your Understanding**

- What are social roles?
- What is social status?
- How do role strain and role conflict differ? What are some examples of each?
- What is the difference between social identity and self-identity?

**Groups, Organizations, and Bureaucracies**

5.6 How can groups, formal organizations, and bureaucracies benefit individuals and societies?

With whom do you interact? You probably can’t answer that question without thinking about the groups you belong to—your classes, teams, religious organizations, workplace colleagues, study groups, and so on. A group is any set of two or more people with whom you share a sense of belonging, purpose, and identity.

**Types of Groups**

Throughout our lives, we become part of primary and secondary groups. Primary groups (e.g., family, close friends) tend to be smaller, more intimate, and longer lasting than other, secondary groups. Secondary groups are less personal, and some last just a short period of time (e.g., students assigned a class project, a party planning committee, a workers’ union).

**The Power of Groups: Formal Organizations and Bureaucracies**

Working in a group can help us accomplish tasks that would be much harder (e.g., studying for a final, painting a house) or impossible (e.g., raising a barn, moving a large refrigerator) to accomplish alone. Have you ever seen a one-person barn raising?

Formal organizations allow us to accomplish even larger tasks (e.g., giving local youth opportunities to play organized soccer, educating a nation’s children, selling goods to customers all over the world, providing medical care for a region of the country). Youth soccer leagues, education systems, multinational corporations, and hospitals are examples of formal organizations—planned secondary groups created to achieve a goal. Formal organizations follow a plan for dividing power, assign members to fill specific responsibilities, and have a system to replace individuals. For example, a soccer league divides power among the commissioner, coaches, assistant coaches, referees, and players. Each member of the league has set duties they must fulfill and rules to follow. If a referee gets caught letting her friends get away with fouling members of an opposing team, the commissioner will fire her and go through the (planned) process of filling her position with a new person.

As formal organizations grow and become more complex, they tend to become bureaucracies. Organizations that have the characteristics of an ideal bureaucracy are formal organizations designed to complete complex tasks rationally and with maximum efficiency. They have a standard set of rules that all employees must follow, a clear hierarchy of status positions with specific roles assigned to each, employees hired on the basis of their qualifications, and workers who interact impersonally with one another as they focus on carrying out their responsibilities as efficiently as possible (Weber [1947] 2012).

The media tends to portray bureaucracies as inefficient and cumbersome—and poorly run ones often fit this image. However, imagine trying to run a large formal organization like a university without such a system. Professors might teach only the courses they love to teach, deans might hire people on the basis of friendships rather than qualifications, department administrators might have to bribe custodians to clean their departments. It would be mayhem! Bureaucracies are vital components of almost all large formal organizations.

Our groups and our roles in them also affect how others view us, how we see ourselves, and how we behave. How might people view you differently depending on your status position at work, among your close friends, in your family? How would your status in these groups affect your image of yourself? What would you do to maintain or raise your status in a group?

Think about the last time you missed a joke but joined the laughter after it. You were acting as you thought you should, as a member of your group. As you will see below, different groups lead us to act in different ways.

**Check Your Understanding**

- What is a group?
- What are formal organizations?
Social Interaction

5.7 How do sociologists describe and analyze social interaction?

“All the world’s a stage, And all the men and women merely players; They have their exits and entrances, And one man in his time plays many parts.” Well before sociologists began to analyze individuals’ social interactions, or the way individuals behave and react in the presence of other people, Shakespeare penned this enduring description of the theatrical nature of human life. Almost four hundred years later, a Canadian American sociologist, Erving Goffman, built upon this insight and developed a dramaturgical approach to analyzing and explaining social interaction. As you learned in Chapter 2’s discussion of the symbolic interactionist theoretical approach, Goffman used the metaphor of theater to describe how our social lives are a kind of performance. We each play different roles as we move throughout social lives, performing for different audiences on various “stages,” just as Shakespeare suggested. Goffman is considered the pioneer of the study of social interaction in everyday contexts, or microsociology, and his work gives us tremendous insight into the sociological significance of our everyday behaviors and social interactions.

Social interaction is the basis for our lives within society. As we have seen, it is through social interaction that we develop a sense of self and undergo the socialization that allows us to live in society. Our everyday lives are made up of meaningful interactions with people we care about very much but also seemingly insignificant interactions: buying a cup of coffee, holding the door for someone, nodding at an acquaintance in passing, riding an elevator, and so on. Goffman believed that all moments in which we engage with others socially, no matter how fleeting, are fundamental to our lives as social beings.

Goffman argued that in social interactions, we use cues and clues from the individuals and objects around us to make meaning of what is going on, or to define the situation. As individuals, we become socialized into particular expectations about social interactions and use this knowledge to make sense of our social lives. In the way that we define the situation, we are also innovative and shape our own reality through the meanings we make of social interactions. Goffman focused much of his career on understanding why we act in the way we do in everyday situations.

Performances and Impression Management

In his book The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, Goffman (1959) developed his theatrical metaphor to describe how individuals’ social lives consist of a series of performances of social roles for different observers, or audiences. Like Cooley and Mead, Goffman believed that individuals are very attuned to and concerned about how others see them. So, in their performance of different social roles, they work hard to make sure that others see them the way they want to be seen. Because we construct reality in our social interactions, it is very important that when we perform particular social roles others believe that we are what we claim to be. For example, when you are performing the social role of student in the classroom, you are (hopefully!) working to make sure that your professor believes that you are, in fact, a good student: you come to class on time with your textbook, notebook and pen, or laptop; you raise your hand when you wish to speak; you make eye contact with your professor and nod along with what he or she is saying; and you take notes to show that you are following the class discussion (even if you are actually just doodling in your notebook!).

What you are doing when you perform this role of student is what Goffman termed impression management. Through impression management you present yourself the way you want others to see you. As a student, you take on a set of social expectations of your behavior and attitudes, and when you perform the role of student, you work hard to give off the right impression to your professor and classmates. As Goffman (1959, 208) would say, you are “successfully staging a character.”

In each performance, there is what Goffman (1959, 22) referred to as the front, or the “expressive equipment” the individual uses to define the situation and convince others of the sincerity of his or her performance. The front consists of the setting, appearance, and manner of the context in which a particular performance occurs. To continue the example of the social role of student, the setting for the performance of student is generally a classroom, which is equipped with all of the necessary items for students’ learning: desks, chairs, blackboards, screens and projectors, and the many “props” used by a student, such as backpacks, notebooks, textbooks, pens and pencils, and so on. As noted before,
these elements of setting are necessary for an individual to perform the role of student convincingly: a student who comes to class without a notebook and pen or computer will likely be perceived by his or her professor and classmates as unprepared.

Appearance consists of everything from dress to age, sex, and race or ethnicity, to nonverbal forms of communication like body language and gestures. For example, a student wearing the school colors and sitting up straight and attentive in the front row of the classroom will convey a very different impression to those around her than one slumped in the back row with a baseball cap pulled low over her face. Appearance and setting work in conjunction with manner, or the attitude conveyed by an individual in his or her particular social role. And it is through this combined front that an individual seeks to influence the perception others have of her.

CONSIDER THIS

Have you ever interviewed for a job? How did you engage in impression management to try to get hired? What about using impression management on a first date? What are some other examples of how you use impression management in your everyday life?

Regions: Front Stage and Back Stage

Goffman’s dramaturgical approach to describing our social lives goes further, to argue that there are also different regions in which we perform our interactions. The front stage is where we actively perform our roles, using impression management to compel a certain reaction from our audience. The back stage, on the other hand, is where we are “out of character” and no longer have to put on a performance.

In performing your role as student, you are front stage when you are in class. You are acting out the role of student for your audience (your professor and classmates), raising your hand to answer questions, taking notes, and nodding along as the professor speaks. You are putting on a show to convince those around you that you are an excellent student who is fulfilling society’s expectations of you as student. Perhaps, however, you pulled an all-nighter studying for your chemistry exam last night and did not prepare for class at all and are mostly trying to stay awake. As soon as you leave class, you might rush home and fall into bed, texting a good friend that you just fudged your way through sociology class. This is your back-stage region, where you no longer have to put on a performance.

It is important that we keep these regions separate in our social lives. For example, as a student, you might...
be embarrassed, or your grade might be affected, if it is obvious you are unprepared for class. It’s often even more important in the workplace to keep front stage and back stage separate. For example, if you work in a restaurant or retail store, you are probably told that “the customer is always right.” This means that you need to be polite even if the customer is nasty to you. You may wish to be rude back to him or her, and you might vent your frustrations to colleagues, but if your back-stage attitude toward the customer comes out when you are front stage, you may very well be fired.

Goffman constructed his theories on social interaction before the Internet and social media dramatically altered the ways in which we interact. Although maintaining a separation between front stage and back stage in face-to-face interaction often seems very straightforward, it is more difficult to do in online interactions. For example, have you ever accidentally “replied all” on an email that you intended to send just to the sender? Or sent a text message to the wrong person?

New online forms of interaction often make it more difficult for us to keep track of which region we are in and for whom we are performing. For example, in November 2018 a photograph was anonymously posted on Twitter of a group of male high school students from Baraboo High School in Wisconsin doing a Nazi salute. The photo went viral, and there was a media storm of criticism of the boys and school (Caron 2018). Although ultimately the students were not punished, this kind of blurring of “front”-stage and “back”-stage behavior can have serious repercussions for the actors involved. That same month, photos were posted on an Idaho school district’s Facebook page of teachers and staff dressed in stereotypical Mexican costumes, like sombreros, ponchos, and large mustaches, standing behind a cardboard border “wall” touting “Make America Great Again.” When these photos went viral and created a similar outcry, fourteen staff members were placed on administrative leave (Mervosh 2018). In both cases, the individuals (large groups of them!) failed to realize that this “back-stage” behavior becomes front stage when circulated on social media.

**CONSIDER THIS**

How do you maintain the distinction between the front-stage and back-stage regions in your online social media interactions, such as on Facebook or Instagram?

**Ethnomethodology**

Harold Garfinkel was another sociologist who focused his work on seemingly unimportant everyday social interactions. He gave the most basic, trivial, everyday occurrences the kind of attention “usually accorded extraordinary events” (Garfinkel 1967, 1). To do this, he created a field of study that he called ethnomethodology, the study of the “ethno” (meaning ordinary or everyday) methods people use to make sense of their social interactions.

Garfinkel’s focus was on language and the simplistic small talk that makes up many of our basic interactions with others. He argued that language is not as simple as it may seem. Take, for example, the question “What’s up?” If you are from this country, you probably know just what is meant by this question (something like “What is happening with you right now?”) and what kind of response is expected (e.g., “Not much!”). However, for someone who is not from here and does not know the social context and background in which this question is being asked, this is a very confusing question, the answer to which is not at all clear: perhaps “the sky” or “the ceiling”?

Garfinkel conducted a series of experiments to help understand this complexity of language and the norms that dictate our everyday interactions through language. He enlisted his college students to carry out experiments with friends and acquaintances in which they would pretend to not understand the conventions of small talk and instead push their conversation partners to be more specific and precise in what they were asking. Here is one example of an experiment (Garfinkel 1967, 44); S is the friend of E, the student experimenter:

**E:** How am I in regard to what? My health, my finances, my school work, my peace of mind, my . . . ?

**S:** [Red in the face and suddenly out of control.] Look! I was just trying to be polite. Frankly I don’t give a damn how you are.

Garfinkel and his students found that breaking the conventions of everyday small talk made people deeply uncomfortable and upset. We rely on others understanding our expectations when it comes to common verbal interactions, and it is unsettling and frustrating when these expectations are broken. Think of how annoying it is when you’ve politely asked someone “How are you?” as a form of small talk and you get their whole life story! Smooth navigation of such daily interactions requires shared cultural assumptions about how these interactions should proceed.
Conclusion

Through our interactions and the process of socialization, we learn how to act within our society and culture. This means that we are very much shaped by the place and time in which we are born and raised. This should call to mind C. Wright Mills’s concept of the sociological imagination and how individual lives are influenced by society and history.

Our social lives are structured by larger social and cultural patterns and norms that we learn through socialization. In each social context we find ourselves, we perform a different social role, based on the social expectations others have of us in that role. In these social interactions, we make meaning and construct the reality of our social lives. At the same time, however, there are limits to socialization and the social structures that pattern our behavior. Individuals, as you know, have free will and can make choices that breach or challenge social norms and expectations. Individuals can change the culture they live in, resisting the norms and values they were socialized to accept and instead creating social change. Thus, although socialization is a powerful phenomenon, you are not entirely a product of your culture but can also be an agent of change. You’ll learn more about deviance, or breaking social norms, in the next chapter.

REVIEW

5.1 What is socialization?
Socialization is the social process through which individuals learn the norms of the culture and society that they live in. Through the process of socialization, individuals become functioning members of their society. It is a lifelong process that begins when we are born and continues through our many stages. As we age, we may undergo resocialization as we enter different social contexts and learn new sets of social norms and expectations. Socialization contributes to social reproduction, the continuation of a society’s culture across generations.

5.2 According to George Herbert Mead, how does an individual develop a social self?
Mead’s theory of child development was inspired by another social psychologist, Charles Cooley, who argued that individuals develop a sense of self, what he termed the looking glass self, by imagining how others see us. Mead similarly believed that individuals develop into social beings through their interactions with others. This begins when very young children engage in what Mead called taking the role of the other, or imitating those around them, putting themselves in someone else’s shoes and seeing what kind of reaction they get. As they get older and engage in more organized games, like sports, they develop an understanding of the generalized other that represents society as a whole, with all of its norms and values.

5.3 What are the key agents of socialization?
Socialization occurs with individuals and within groups and social contexts, which are referred to as agents of socialization. Family is the primary agent of socialization, because it is generally the first group and sometimes only group an individual is exposed to in his or her earliest years. From our families, we learn many fundamental skills for life in society, such as language and how to feed and dress ourselves, as well as many other norms and values.

As we age, we encounter different agents of socialization like peers, schools, the media, work, and so on, learning from each different norms and values. Some adults end up in total institutions, where they must be resocialized into an entirely new culture and context.

5.4 What is gender socialization?
An extremely important aspect of socialization is learning gender roles and identity. Gender socialization begins the moment a baby is born (or that baby’s sex is determined), when that individual is...
assigned a gender role and socialized to perform that role. Gender socialization is an ongoing process of learning the social expectations of males and females in one’s society and culture.

5.5 What are status, social roles, and identity?
Throughout the process of socialization, individuals develop an individual identity and learn the various social expectations that come with the different social statuses and social roles that they occupy throughout their lives. Status is one’s position relative to others in society, while social roles are the expectations others have of us in particular statuses and positions. Identity is the characteristics by which we are known. Through individual agency and the social and symbolic world that we move through, our identity is constantly shaped, reshaped, and negotiated through our interactions with others.

5.6 How can groups, formal organizations, and bureaucracies benefit individuals and societies?
Groups give us a sense of identity and allow us to complete tasks that are difficult or impossible to do alone. We create planned groups called formal organizations (e.g., a youth soccer league, regional hospitals, multinational organizations, public school systems) to help us achieve complex goals in a deliberate way. Bureaucracies allow formal organizations to carry out multilayered tasks rationally and efficiently.

5.7 How do sociologists describe and analyze social interaction?
Sociologists Erving Goffman and Harold Garfinkel both believed that our everyday interactions with others were important to analyze sociologically because this kind of microsociology gives us great insight into our experiences as social beings. Goffman used a dramaturgical approach to argue that individuals’ social lives are a series of performances; we use impression management to perform our social roles in a way that compels others to see us the way we want to be seen. Garfinkel was especially concerned with how individuals make sense of what others say and do in everyday interactions. He created ethnomethodology as a field that could study how regular people make sense of the interactions that structure our social lives.

KEY TERMS

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