6
Social Institutions

Family and Economy

What do social institutions have to do with your life? A lot! The makeup of your family, the laws you must follow, your professional career, your schooling, and even whether or not you believe in a higher power (and, if so, what kind of higher power) are all based on the social institutions in your society. You begin your life among family, and learn about the world through educational institutions (schools), religious institutions (including rituals surrounding birth, marriage, and death), and cultural institutions (TV, anyone?). Much of your education is about preparing for life within structured economic institutions (jobs, the labor market). All the while, your public life, and even your private one, is moved and shaped by the workings of political institutions. If the institutions change, so do you. Imagine how different your life would be if the United States did not uphold just one element of the bill of rights: the freedom, based in the first amendment, from unreasonable monitoring of personal phone and email conversations.

How do we know an institution when we see one? In everyday language, physical places, like a jail, are sometimes referred to as institutions. But in sociology, “institutions” refer to a realm of public action with its own sets of organized rules and beliefs that direct how a
society will carry out its basic needs. How do we know what is a basic need for a society? Create your own imaginary society and think about what you need to do for your society to survive. Keep in mind that you can eat what you like at home, but we all share the problem of where the garbage will go when you are done.

Imagine you and your fellow students are stranded on a distant planet that looks and feels like Earth but has no other human inhabitants. What is the first thing you would do? Almost certainly, you would (a) figure out what you need to do to survive and (b) start assigning people to those tasks you determined need doing. The first thing you would probably need to do is ensure some semblance of order for these undertakings. So, the first institution you would set up is some sort of government. (We’re assuming that there are a lot of other students with you, not just a few classmates.) Secondly, you would have to start producing some food, finding water, and arranging for some system to distribute these goods. Whether you all share equally or distribute the goods according to some complex system of entitlements, you would be creating a system that includes ownership and “exchange value.” In other words, you would be creating an economic institution, an institution that organizes how a society generates, allocates, and uses wares and services. Because the needs of your group on this distant world would be different from the needs of the society in which you actually live, you would not need the same institutions in the same way. But here is the interesting part about ideas and practices that become institutionalized: It is hard to imagine them differently. For that reason, you would have a very hard time creating a government or an economy that did not strongly resemble the one you know now (or at least one that you have read or heard about).

Although not everyone believes in or practices a religion, every known society has had some form of religious institution (just ask an Anthropologist). Would you and your companions adopt a unified system of belief to help you make sense of your new situation? If you were not rescued quickly, you might start (if you hadn’t already!) trying to establish, in an organized way, a connection between yourselves and a higher power. Organizing a new or reestablishing an old religion (from Earth) might help you come to terms with your situation, feel that someone (or thing) was watching over you, and enable you to believe that, eventually (if only when you die) you would be going to a better place, seeing old loved ones, and so forth. If you remained on the island-world for more than a very short period of time, you would also have to set up rules about who could have sex with whom (to avoid nasty fights and to protect physically vulnerable members of the population) and (eventually) who should take care of the offspring of such
unions (and how). In doing so, you would be establishing the institution of the family.

Finally, if you remained stuck on that planet, you would have to ensure that new members born into your society could learn your culture and the skills necessary to help your society survive. You would have to establish a social institution responsible for educating the members of your society. Once you had done so you would have established the fifth basic institution found in almost every society, an educational system.

As you have probably already noticed, these institutions are all related to one another. A functionalist would maintain that they are also all interdependent. Just as a living organism starts to die if a single one of its major organs (like the heart) starts to fail, functionalists maintain that if one institution is not working properly in a society, all the other ones (and the aggregate society) will suffer as well. For example, if our education system is not carrying out its function properly, young adults will not be prepared to get good jobs, and therefore will not be able to support a family, pay taxes, financially support their religious organizations, or buy goods. Eventually the faulty educational system would harm the family, economic, religious, and political institutions.

Unlike functionalists, conflict theorists examine the manner in which different interests in society work against one another. Karl Marx, for example, famously demonstrated that the worker class and the capitalist class were necessarily in conflict over just about everything that went on in society, from the organization of work to the proper use of police and courts to the workings of a free press. But conflict also occurs between social institutions.

Marx maintained that there was one institution that influenced and largely directed all the other institutions. According to Marx, as the type of economic system changed, so did the makeup of the other institutions. The government, the schools, the family, and religion were all tools for those who owned the means of production. Marxism, therefore, begins with the assumptions of economic determinism: that is, that the economic institutions shape the rest. Some political theorists, like Niccolo Machiavelli, are political determinists. (Machiavelli, who is most remembered for his classic text, The Prince, defined war as an extension of politics, merely another means by which leaders seek to extend their influence.) There are also those for whom religious institutions, or even social institutions (like systems of racial privilege) form the determining institution, with the rest following. Although all the major institutions are tied to one another in some way, in this chapter we will focus on the social institutions of the family and the economy.
THE FAMILY

Marx maintained that relations between family members and even the average size of families are influenced by changes in the economic system. For example, under an agrarian economic system, in which work was centered on the family, families were large so that they would produce many workers to till the land and produce crops. When societies became industrialized and work shifted into factories and other centralized locations, families became smaller. The move from farm to city meant that families could no longer feed themselves through producing more food in the fields. More children meant more mouths had to be fed through low-wage work in factories.

According to Karl Marx’s writing partner, Friedrich Engels, families maintain the economic system of capitalism and the existing class structure. Legal marriages were created so that men would be able to know clearly who their heirs were so that they could bequeath their wealth to their male offspring. A marriage contract transferred a kind of ownership of the bride from her father, whose name she bore, to the husband, whose name she adopted. The traditional patriarchal family structure also worked to perpetuate the capitalist economic system because it allowed men to devote themselves to making money while the wives took care of them, their children, and their home (for no pay). This system also contributed to the maintenance of gender inequality.

Whereas conflict theorists use a macro-level approach to see connections between families and economic systems, symbolic interactionists use a micro-level analysis to focus on how institutions influence
the roles men and women play and the status they assume in the family. Even today, and even in the most egalitarian nations in the world, gender socialization within families contributes to inequality between men and women.

A sociological study that examined power dynamics among two-income couples in Sweden indicates socialization can trump earning power even in one of the most gender egalitarian societies in the world. Gender-based socialization is prevalent even in Sweden. Growing up, Swedish girls are more likely than Swedish boys to be taught that they should think of others before themselves. This gender-based socialization resulted in the fact that the women in the study tended to feel more responsible for taking care of such household needs as buying food and clothes for the children. They often used their own money to buy goods for the household. Even though they each had the same amount of money to spend, the women ended up having less money to use for themselves and, therefore, less power to determine how the couple’s joint income should be spent. As the authors described the situation,

the women in the study seemed to subordinate their own needs to those of other family members, yet did not see their behaviour as sacrifice. Instead, it seemed to be something that they did without reflecting over the reasons or consequences.

Therefore, even though both husbands and wives in Sweden are likely to say they should share their income equally, the “women seemed to experience less influence over economic decision making and less access to personal spending money.”

However, even though gender inequality remains, the institution of the family is changing. Across the globe, the marriage rate is falling and the cohabitation rate is rising. For example, whereas the divorce rate in the United States remains relatively consistent (at almost 50%), the percentage of babies born to unwed parents has increased steadily since the late 1990s. According to the Center for Disease Control’s “National Vital Statistics Report 2003,” 4 34.6% of all babies in the United States are now born to unmarried women. As Stephanie Coontz, the author of Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy, or How Love Conquered Marriage, states, “From Turkey to South Africa to Brazil, countries are having to codify the legal rights and obligations of single individuals and unmarried couples raising children, including same-sex couples.” The pattern is clear: Fewer children are being raised by married parents.

Other changes to the institution of the family are now taking place. For example, same-sex marriage is now legal in Massachusetts. Also, most mothers now work outside the home (as well as in it). Today,
72% of mothers between the ages of 15 and 44 work outside the home. The percentage of mothers with infants who are employed has also increased dramatically over the past 20 years (31% in 1976 to 55% today). It’s important to note that this is not a new phenomenon for women in poverty, particularly women of color.

**Exercise 6.2 The Changing American Family**

There are multiple causes for the changes in the institution of the family noted above, both structural and cultural. However, there is ongoing debate as to whether these changes are more positive or negative for society. Write a 1-2 page essay that examines these changes in the family from either (a) a conflict perspective or (b) a functionalist perspective (if need be, refer to the descriptions of these perspectives in Chapter Two.) When writing your essay, be sure to

1. Provide an overview of how society operates according to that theoretical perspective and then apply that perspective to the changes in the social institution of the family.

2. Discuss whether or not someone coming from the theoretical perspective you chose would approve or disapprove of the changes in the family (and why or why not).

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**THE ECONOMIC SYSTEM**

Economies organize how a society creates, distributes, and uses its goods and services. Today, we live in a global economy in which the economic system of capitalism dominates. Goods and services are created and sold, for profit, across national borders at an increasingly rapid pace. Inequality among nations is related to what each contributes to and takes from the global economy. “Global north” nations (most postindustrial nations like the United States, Western European nations, and Japan) primarily contribute service work in the knowledge economy, with high skilled workers, whereas “global south” nations (e.g., most Latin American, African, Middle Eastern, and Asian nations) tend to produce raw materials and/or provide cheap labor to produce goods consumed in global north nations. To participate in the knowledge economy, nations need strong educational, banking, and legal systems, like those found in global north countries. The nations with those assets have benefited the most from the globalization process.
while using their economic advantage to increase their power in determining global governance and the future of the global economy.

Other sectors of the world have not benefited as much from globalization. The World Trade Organization (WTO), which oversees the terms of global trade; the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which manages global financial markets; and the World Bank, which provides loans for economic development, are primarily controlled by global north nations and influenced by the concerns of global corporations. For the most part, these organizations have had a net effect of increasing the power and wealth of global north nations while decreasing the power, wealth, and quality of life in global south nations. For instance, between 1984 and 1990, IMF and World Bank loans resulted in the net transfer of wealth and resources from global south nations to global north nations of more than $150 billion.9 For the most part, already poor nations have become even poorer as a result of the new global economy and the rules that give advantage to the already affluent nations. African, Latin American, and most Asian nations have very little bargaining power in the global economy and must find ways to compete in an economic system largely controlled by global north corporations and institutions.

For example, the United Nations’ 2005 “Report on the World Social Situation: The Inequality Predicament” notes that

the cumulative result of [global-north-encouraged] structural reform in Latin America over the past two decades has been a rise in inequality…. [Moreover], protectionist practices and agricultural subsidies in developed countries have led to a drop in agricultural productivity and, in turn, agricultural income. At present, the Latin American and Caribbean region imposes an 8.5 percent duty on non-agricultural imports from industrialized countries, but its own agricultural imports are subject to a 20.4 percent duty in industrialized countries, perpetuating rural poverty.10

**Exercise 6.3 The World Trade Organization**

2. Under “Resources” click on “top 10 documents.”
3. Read at least two of each of the “Documents Not Produced by the WTO” and the “Documents Produced by the WTO.”

(Continued)
Growing levels of inequality can also be seen within global north nations. In the United States, inequalities have steadily increased over the past 20 years, despite consistent growth in most measures of national economic health. In most states, middle-income families have seen a drop in their incomes during the 1990s, adjusting for inflation,

Exercise 6.4 Critiquing Modern Globalization


2. Write a 1–2 page essay outlining the major arguments being presented against the current manner of globalization.

Exercise 6.5 From Free Trade to Fair Trade


2. Write an essay outlining the suggestions made by the authors to move toward a different form of globalization. Do you agree or disagree with the authors? Think of some suggestions you might add and outline how they might be carried out.
whereas incomes increased substantially among the wealthiest 20%.\textsuperscript{11} Whereas the richest 1% of Americans possessed 20% of the wealth in 1975, by 2001, the richest 1% of Americans owned a full one-third (33\%) of the wealth of all Americans.\textsuperscript{12} A June 2005 article in *The New York Times* entitled “Richest Are Leaving Even the Rich Far Behind” pointed out that, in recent years, the richest Americans “have pulled far ahead of the rest of the population, . . . [and] have even left behind people making hundreds of thousands of dollars a year.”\textsuperscript{13} Even more startling is the fact that the poorest 20\% of people (more than 50 million Americans) have actually become poorer since 1980.\textsuperscript{14} One of the most drastic outcomes of these trends in wealth and poverty is that there are currently nearly 40 million Americans living in or at-risk of hunger.\textsuperscript{15}

Many of the hungry are the working poor. The following quote from “Betsy,” a middle-aged mother in *Hungry to Be Heard: Voices From a Malnourished America*\textsuperscript{16} illustrates this fact:

Right now I’m holding down two different jobs, one that’s pretty much full-time and then another one that gives me about 20 hours or so a week and this is six days a week that I’m working now. And I work hard, too, . . . I work real hard, and I’m tired from it as well. . . . But no matter [how hard I work] when it gets time to pay the bills we simply can’t get by on what I’m making. . . . Minimum wage at one place and a little better at the other doesn’t help me enough in terms of feeding my children, paying the bills, and providing as I need to for them.

At the low end of the global economic spectrum, men, women, and children find themselves forced to try to make a living on farms that can not compete with global agribusinesses (as seen above) or through minimum wage jobs or labor in “sweatshop” factories that offer low wages, hard work, and no benefits. As the quote above illustrates, the result is often hunger and deprivation for the workers and their families.

Although sweatshops are most common in global south nations because of lack of unions and inadequately enforced (if they exist at all) labor laws in such nations, there also remain pockets of sweatshops in global north nations as well, including many right here in the United States. Recognizing the existence of sweatshops in their own city and throughout the globe, the city government of San Francisco recently declared a campaign against sweatshops worldwide. The *San Francisco Chronicle* described the campaign and the problem of sweatshops this way:
By launching a campaign to eliminate worldwide sweatshop-labor abuse, San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom and Supervisor Tom Ammiano made a powerful statement denouncing a global travesty. From China to Mexico, garment workers—many of whom are young children—work up to 15 hours a day with no bathroom or eating breaks and make as little as 13 cents an hour.

But tucked away in San Francisco’s South of Market and in pockets of the Mission District, those who are looking can find similar conditions right here at home. These workers are mostly middle-age and older immigrant women, who have little education and speak no English. They work up to 12 hours a day with few or no breaks and get paid by “piece rates,” meaning, per garment. On average, this adds up to $1 or $2 an hour.  

The city of San Francisco is far from alone in its campaign against sweatshops. According to Global Exchange, in 2003, California passed legislation that sets no-sweat standards for the procurement of state clothing such as uniforms. Three other states—Maine, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania—have similar laws in place. Twenty-six cities, 28 school districts, and 10 counties also have no-sweat procurement regulations.

College students have been some of the most powerful opponents of sweatshops. On campuses across the nation, undergraduates have been striving to make sure that the apparel sold on their campus is made in sweat-free factories. More than 40 universities (such as Boston College, Michigan State University, Yale, University of Southern Mississippi, and UC Irvine), have joined the United Students Against Sweatshops’ (USAS) “Sweat Free” Campus Campaign.

Exercise 6.6 Students Creating Change: The Anti-Sweatshop Movement

Go to the USAS Web site at http://www.studentsagainstsweatshops.org/.

Write a two-page paper that describes (a) one campaign on which the USAS is currently working, (b) whether or not you could see yourself joining that campaign, and (c) why you could or could not see yourself participating in the campaign.
**Exercise 6.7  Work, Unemployment, and Our Changing Economy**

Go to the Web site for the U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics at http://www.bls.gov/oes/home.htm and search for “Mass Layoffs Summary.” Read the most recent Mass Layoffs Summary and answer the following questions:

1. What were the top three reasons (in order) for the most recent mass layoffs?
2. Which metropolitan area was most affected by recent mass layoffs?
3. How does the most recent quarterly report on mass layoffs compare to those of the previous 4 years?

Now go to http://www.google.com. Search for “Unemployment Insurance and [name of your state].”

1. What percentage of their salary would the unemployed receive in unemployment insurance (assuming they met the eligibility requirements for maximum unemployment insurance coverage in your state)?
2. For how long could they collect unemployment insurance?
3. How well do you think they could support themselves or a family on unemployment insurance? Elaborate.

**Exercise 6.8  Immigration and Citizenship**

Imagine you have a friend in Mexico who would like to come to the United States to make more money to support his or her family. You want to try to help him or her.

2. After looking at this Web site, how would you guide your Mexican friend in his or her effort to come to the United States?
3. What would make acquiring a green card fairly simple?
4. Do you think most Mexicans who would like to immigrate to the United States are able to do so legally, if they choose to do so? Why or why not?
Sociologist in Action: Alan Ashbaugh

In the following paragraphs, recent college graduate Alan Ashbaugh describes how he uses the sociological tools he gained as a sociology major at Colby College in Maine to bring about social justice locally, nationally, and globally.

Studying sociology greatly influenced the course of my life, giving me the tools to examine the social world, the skills and inspiration to affect positive change, and the direction to use my sociological training meaningfully and effectively.

In my sociology classes at Colby College, Waterville, Maine, I learned about the nature of society, the harsh and complex realities of social issues, and, most importantly, that change toward a more just world is possible. A sociological truth that I will always remember is that society is not a static, unstoppable force, as it is so often referred to in popular media, but it is instead a constantly emerging and shifting combination of individuals making decisions and taking action. Thus, the world is already changing; we need only to guide it in the right direction by taking effective social action.

Of the many issues we explored in my introductory sociology course, the one that stood out for me is the vast economic inequality in my own community and internationally, as well as the social classes that create and perpetuate these inequalities. A subsequent sociology course on globalization broadened my sociological perspective to focus on the global issues of poverty, inequality, and justice, and the impact of each individual’s actions on people worldwide. Examining these issues led me to a more vivid understanding of the social world, issues in my local and international communities, and a better sense of my place in Colby, Waterville, and society as a whole. This newfound understanding inspired me to get involved on and off campus, using my sociological training to move toward change. I became a founding leader of the Colby South End Coalition, which addresses the social and economic divide between Colby and its hometown of Waterville by encouraging volunteerism, dialogue, and a coming together of the two communities. I also took on the role as head of Colby Habitat for Humanity, which tackled economic inequality locally by connecting low-income families with decent, affordable housing. Moving beyond Waterville in scope, for the 2004 presidential election I helped to organize the Voter Coalition to “get out the vote,” and I traveled to Chile to investigate the social promise of the emerging concept of Corporate Social Responsibility.

Graduating from Colby in May 2005, I did not have a set career path. I only knew that I loved raising awareness of social issues and
bringing students together to take action, and that I wanted to continue to be socially active beyond college. My senior year I had the good fortune of learning about a job opportunity at an organization called Free the Children through an inspiring, socially involved professor in the Sociology department. Free the Children was founded in 1995 by a 12-year-old boy named Craig Kielburger, who was so appalled at the practice of child labor he had read about in the newspaper that he gathered a group of his friends and classmates to raise awareness and take action to effect change—exactly what I was passionate about. In the past 10 years, Free the Children has grown to become the largest network of children helping children through education, having built over 400 schools, educating more than 35,000 children every day, sent more than $9 million worth of medical supplies, and implemented alternative income projects benefiting more than 20,000 people in developing countries. Free the Children's mission and the work they do matched my own personal goals and beliefs, so I applied for the position just prior to graduation and was hired!

Today, as an International Youth Coordinator at Free the Children, I provide youth with the tools to make a difference in the world, such as information on social issues, effective fundraising and awareness-raising techniques, and the public speaking skills to powerfully communicate their passion to their peers. I use my sociological training each day in my work at Free the Children in examining the social issues that we are working to change, discovering the best ways to encourage and enable young people to effect positive change, and beyond. The image of society I formed from my sociology classes of a constantly emerging collection of individual actions, in conjunction with the social issues we studied, help me to remember every day the power that each individual has to make a huge difference and the tremendous importance of doing so.

SOURCE: Courtesy of Alan Ashbaugh.

❖ DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What role do you think economic globalization plays in legal and illegal immigration to the United States?

2. How do you think families support (or do not support) the current economic system in the United States?

3. How has your socialization process affected the roles you play in your family?
4. How has your socialization process affected the roles you play in the U.S. economy?

5. If you marry, do you think you will share domestic chores equally with your spouse? Why or why not?

6. Imagine that the institution of the family suddenly disappeared. How might our society be different without this primary institution? Do you think our society could survive without it? Why or why not?

❖ SUGGESTIONS FOR SPECIFIC ACTIONS

1. Research the family-related personnel policies at your college. Do you think they provide adequate benefits for employees who must care for a sick family member? If not, come up with a reasonable suggestion for policy reform and work with your student government leaders to present your ideas (and advocate for them) to the administration.

2. Research the policies that your college has for providing benefits to partners of LGBTI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersexed) employees. Are they the same as for the partners of heterosexual employees? If not, why not? How do your findings, in either case, reflect the values of your college (your institution!) and of the greater society? If you find inequalities and believe they need to be changed, what steps could you take to ensure that the partners of all employees receive equal benefits?21

3a. Go to the Immigration and Customs Enforcement Students and Exchange Visitors Web page at http://www.ice.gov/sevis/index.htm

3b. Interview the administrator on your campus who is in charge of International Students. Ask him or her how your school assists international students through the process of becoming visiting students on your campus.

3c. Interview five international students at your school. Ask them about the steps they went through to become visiting students at your school. Be sure to note any differences in their experiences and why these differences may have occurred (the year of their matriculation, the nation from which they came, their economic status, etc.).
3d. Use this information to create a resource for international students that could be put on your school Web site (if approved by your college or university administration).

4. Go to www.freethechildren.com After browsing through the Web site, go to the section that provides information on Child Labor and read this information (http://www.freethechildren.com/getinvolved/geteducated/childlabour.htm). One of the most powerful ways to fight against child labor is to ensure that children have schools to attend and the resources (school fees, books, uniforms, etc.) to afford to go. Now that you know about child labor and how important education is, you can start a campaign to raise money to build schools in child labor heavy regions. Check out the resources at http://www.freethechildren.com/getinvolved/buildaschool.htm and begin a school-building campaign at your college.

Please go to our Web site at http://www.sagepub.com/korgen to find further civic engagement opportunities, resources, and peer-reviewed articles related to this chapter.

ENDNOTES

1. Of course, some leave high school and join the military institution. Many do this in hopes of receiving the training and experience they need to succeed economically once they leave the military.

2. As this book was being written, Americans were debating the extent of the first-amendment–based freedom from unreasonable monitoring of personal phone and e-mail conversations.

15. The Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) 2005.
19. For example, the city of Bangor, Maine passed legislation stating: “All clothes available on local store shelves should be made according to established international standards of ethical production.” See http://www.pica.ws/cc/bgrccc.htm.
20. For more information about the campaign, go to http://www.studentsagainstsweatshops.org/campaigns/sweatfree_dday.php.
21. It is also important to note that being offered policies such as health insurance does not change the inequality in taxation that results from lack of recognition of the partner by the federal government. For example, if the partner from a same sex couple uses $20,000 worth of benefits, the partner with the medical benefits is taxed as if she earned that $20,000. So, equal benefits are a start but not a solution to this issue of inequality.

REFERENCES


