TERRIBLE

MAGNIFICENT

SOCIOLOGY

LISA WADE

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PREFACE

When I was a child, I did not live in so-called good school districts. I never took an AP class; if I was "gifted," nobody in my high school much noticed. I took the SAT but didn't know I was supposed to study for it. Though I applied to a handful of colleges, I was only admitted to one. And when I arrived for move-in day, it was the first time I'd ever set foot on a college campus. I never could have imagined that someday I would write a book like this.

Sociology has given me so much: a career, peers, even friends. It has given me a platform from which to contribute meaningfully to public debate. But more than anything, it's given me purpose. Sociology helps us see the social forces that transcend the individual and, with that lens, it empowers us to try to make the world a better place. To teach sociology is to give people the tools they need to remake their societies. And while I've had the opportunity to share sociology with many different kinds of people in myriad ways, this book is among the most incredible opportunities I've ever been afforded.

First and foremost, I wanted the book to be a good read. I devoted myself to writing crisply and engagingly. I looked for rich examples and clear statistics. I steered into rather than away from emotions, knowing that sociology not only can, but *should*, inspire curiosity, awe, intrigue, and delight, as well as disappointment, frustration, and even righteous anger. There is no excuse for sociology to be anything but riveting.

I did my best to do justice to the diversity of voices that have contributed to sociological thought, both in the past and today. That meant not only being inclusive but placing this wide array of scholars shoulder to shoulder with those who have historically been lifted up as our "founding fathers." To do this, I was determined to be inclusive far beyond the central sociological concerns with race, class, and gender, and their intersections. Without diminishing the importance of these axes of identity, this book is also attentive to sexual orientation, disability, age, body size, citizenship status,

the rural/urban divide, and more. I teach expressly about the value of standpoint, while modeling what it means to take diversity of viewpoint seriously. I hope readers will see themselves reflected not just in what sociologists study but in who sociologists are.

My vision also included a somewhat different approach to the lay of the sociological land. I start with an innovative chapter on the self. Most readers have grown up with the tradition of American individualism, an ideology that sits uncomfortably alongside sociology's basic premise: that there are social forces that transcend individuals. I tackle this problem head-on. In Chapter 1, I show that the individual self is, paradoxically, itself a social fact. Prepped with this astounding idea, readers are better able to accept the role of social facts in shaping other features of daily life.

I also felt it was important to include a chapter that theorizes social organizations, institutions, and structures. These are challenging ideas that deserve careful explication, especially if readers are to fully comprehend the nature of social inequality. This book takes the time to fully introduce them. Likewise, I include a chapter on elite power. All too often we focus on the disadvantages that accrue to some but fail to shine a light on the advantages that accrue to others—and the work they do to preserve those advantages. Elites do not go unexamined here.

I introduce historical figures and sociological research methods throughout the text instead of at the beginning. I do not expect readers to care about the modes of data collection for findings they have not yet encountered and the history of a field they have not yet studied. So, these things are introduced when they become relevant to the book's overall intellectual trajectory. Comprehensive discussions of both sociological history and research methods are also included as appendices.

Roughly speaking, the book is organized in such a way as to introduce core theoretical concepts, address the complex phenomena of social inequality, and explore the potential for social change. Instead of sending readers off with just a few inspiring words, each of the final three chapters is aimed at empowering people to become not just sociological thinkers but engaged and efficacious members of their communities, both large and small. The

book ends optimistically, without downplaying the real challenges we face or laying all the responsibility for social change on the next generation.

There is so much more to tell about the earnest care that's been poured into this text. We agonized over punctuation, obsessed over prose, carefully unwrapped concepts, and made harmony out of the whole. Suffice to say, *Terrible Magnificent Sociology* comes out of a deep respect for sociology, a true love of writing, and genuine hope for the future.

None of this would have been possible without the help, support, and encouragement of dozens of others. Most notably, Dr. Myra Marx Ferree. In 2006, as I was finishing up graduate school, Myra changed my life, and not for the first time. Long story short, she asked if I wanted to coauthor a sociology of gender textbook that W. W. Norton had been nagging her to write for quite some time. Of course, I said yes! Seven years later, we released *Gender: Ideas, Interactions, Institutions*. That experience gave me the confidence to write *American Hookup: The New Culture of Sex on Campus*, a book that was released to the general public. Academics aren't always well-suited to writing such books, so I am forever indebted to Nathaniel Jacks and Alane Mason for taking a chance on me. *American Hookup* presented me with an opportunity to become a better writer, and I grasped it. Only then, with that and *Gender* under my belt, did I think I could write a textbook like this one.

To all of you at Norton, thank you from the bottom of my heart. As an employee-owned company, you stand proudly behind the texts you publish. You've placed great trust in me. Even now, I remain surprised and delighted at your willingness to support my vision. You gave me free rein to write this book as I pleased; I hope it doesn't disappoint. Thank you specifically to the entire team that has supported its development and launch, including assistant editor Erika Nakagawa, project editor Laura Dragonette, designer Marisa Nakasone, photo editor Catherine Abelman, text permissions specialist Josh Garvin, copy editor Laura Sewell, and production manager Ben Reynolds. A big thank you also to media editor Eileen Connell, associate media editor Ariel Eaton, and media editorial assistant Alexandra Park for your work in creating a thoughtful, cohesive, and engaging digital support package.

Above all, I am grateful to my editor, Sasha Levitt. As a solo author, I leaned heavily on Sasha's expertise. She was my most attentive sounding board, a generous reader of early and all drafts, and an inspirational critic. She steered me off more than one bad path and set me on countless good ones. Alongside practical support, she has offered endless enthusiasm. After four books together, we have become a fantastic team, and good friends too. I hope we continue to write books together for a very, very long time.

Over the years, I've subjected many unsuspecting students to drafts of this book. Thank you to the Occidental College Sociology 101 students who read rough chapters in class. I hope the free textbook was worth it! And thank you to Aaron Hammonds, Claire Krelitz, Sean Ransom, Naomi Schiller, and Carrie Wade for your careful and thoughtful feedback. I am grateful, also, to the *Terrible Magnificent Sociology* Book Club: Alejandra Arroyo, Allen Chen, Taylor Gorretta, Matthew Hao, Kailey Hecht, Anna Lipton, Estephany Lopez, Claudia Oppermann, Megan Purdome, and Michaela Smith-Simmons. Long before the book had its improbable name, these students went over each draft chapter with a fine-tooth comb, looking for opportunities to improve the writing, pedagogy, and narrative. Their fingerprints are all over this text, and it is immeasurably better for their contributions.

As the book reached maturity, it benefited tremendously from the feedback provided by the following reviewers:

REVIEWERS

Alison Better, Kingsborough Community College, CUNY

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And with that, dear book, you are released into the world. We wish so much for you! May you inspire students to read for class every day. May you enliven discussion and make your instructors' workload light. May students genuinely like you; may they sometimes decide to keep you! May you help students discover their own identities as sociologists and a pathway to graduation and beyond. And may you spark a lifelong love for sociology in all who encounter you.

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INTRODUCTION
THE SCIENCE OF SOCIAL FACTS

Some 70,000 years ago, humans began migrating out of Africa. This migration would lead us to settle the farthest reaches of vast continents. We came to live alongside ice caps in the Arctic and under the hot sun of the equator, in underground caves and on the peaks of mountains, in the desert and in the swamp, on plains and in jungles. We crossed oceans to reach the most remote of islands. Today, we live on checkerboards of cultivated crops and in landscapes made of concrete, glass, and steel. We've been to the moon. Someday we might live on Mars.

What is it about us that has enabled this? We're vulnerable to heat and cold. We don't have much in the way of teeth, horns, or claws. We're not particularly fast and have limited ability to climb or dig. We can't even growl. Even our closest relatives are more impressive physically. Chimpanzees are stronger and more nimble, with fur coats, formidable fangs, and big toes like thumbs. If a human and a chimpanzee found themselves alone on a desert island, which one would be more likely to survive? Honestly, probably the chimpanzee.

Put a thousand chimpanzees up against as many humans, though, and it'd be smarter to place your bet on us. "All the huge achievements of humankind throughout history," writes the Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari, "have been based on this ability to cooperate flexibly and in large numbers."[1] *That* is what makes us special. We have a remarkable ability to tolerate one another, even when we're strangers and even under duress. Try putting 400 chimpanzees shoulder to shoulder and knee to seat in an airplane on its way from New York to Los Angeles. It would be a bloodbath. But humans do this easily. We cooperate. We organize. We share. We're really, really good at working together.

In fact, we've evolved to work together. We're a social species, one designed to live in cooperative communities. Most people find isolation to be emotionally wrenching. Even fake exclusion—like playing a computer game in which people throw a Frisbee back and forth to each other but not to you—has been shown to cause distress.[2] Actual solitary confinement is torture. In prison, it increases the likelihood a person will experience anxiety, depression, and psychosis.[3]

The exquisite synchrony of marching bands, both musically and in movement, is the kind of coordination that has made humans so successful as a species.

For humans, it's unnatural to be alone. It's always been that way. We were social when *Homo sapiens* came into existence some 300,000 years ago. In fact, we'd already been social for millions of years; the species that would evolve into modern humans was a social one too. Across environments, across continents, across millennia, the presence of other people has been as constant in our lives as oxygen.

As the science of society, sociology is the field that takes this fact most seriously.

Glossary

[sociology](.)
> the science of society

Endnotes

- Note 01:Yuval Noah Harari, "What Explains the Rise of Humans?," filmed June 2015 at TEDGlobal London, video, 17:00, https://www.ted.com/talks/yuval_noah_harari_what_explains_the_rise_of_humans?language=en.Return to reference 1
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SOCIAL FACTS

Sociology is founded on the idea that individuals both influence and are influenced by their communities. Acknowledging this requires a genuine humility. Especially today, and especially in wealthy democracies, we're told to think for ourselves, to do for ourselves, to *be* ourselves. "To thine own self be true," Shakespeare wrote. Or, as we might say today, "You do you." Both phrases evoke the idea that we have an authentic self—one separate from society—and that finding and nurturing that self is essential for a good life.

The truth is less grand but infinitely more beautiful.

It's true that we're born an individual, but we don't remain one. At birth, we join a stream of consciousness hundreds of thousands of years old. We inherit a rich history full of legends, wishes, wisdom, and folly. Though we're all unique, different from all the roughly 108 billion other human consciousnesses that have ever existed on the planet, we're also inevitably and inescapably tied to the other people around us. That's the intriguing paradox that is the premise of sociology: We are individuals, but we are not, have never been, and were never meant to be alone.

A French social scientist, Émile Durkheim coined the term "social facts" in 1895.

Even more humbling, human civilization is indifferent to any one of us. Some people would miss us if we were gone, of course, but social life would otherwise go on unimpeded. There are powerful realities brought into existence by humans, in other words, that are bigger than any individual human. Sociologists call these things social facts, products of human interaction with persuasive or coercive power that exist externally to any individual.[4] The phrase was coined in 1895 by Émile (pronounced *eh-meel*) Durkheim (1858–1917), a French social scientist who contributed to the development of sociology.

This book employs an expansive definition of the social fact, encompassing anything produced collectively by people that exerts a force upon us. These range from the trivial to the momentous. That many people around the world traditionally greet each other by shaking hands, for example, is a social fact. Handshakes only exist because humans shake hands. Handshakes also exist independently of you and me. People have been shaking hands for over 2,000 years. Obviously almost everyone who's ever shaken another person's hand is dead by now. And yet, the practice persists.

Handshaking stuck around because it has a persuasive or coercive power. Other people expect to be greeted with a handshake, and doing otherwise can seem strange or rude. Refusing to shake a person's hand might even be interpreted as hostile. So you could decide that you'd rather greet people some other way, but there would be a price to pay. Strained relations, at best. So we keep shaking hands and the behavior is given a life span that exceeds any one of ours.

Because so much of our reality is social, when describing the whole range of social facts, it may be easiest to start by listing what facts are nonsocial. We'd be hard-pressed to change the gravitational pull of the earth, for example. Likewise, the fact of the sun, our solar system, and the universe. But beyond that, things get less clear. In many ways, even nature is a social fact. We're a species that molds nature to suit our own ends. We manicure our backyards, city parks, and college campuses. We build freeways, bridges, and borders between nations that channel the movement of the earth's inhabitants. As a result of agriculture, wheat now covers about 870,000 square miles of the earth's surface.[5] When stay-at-home orders

went into effect in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, machines measuring our planet's vibrations registered a sudden stillness.[6] When our natural environment is a product of human interaction with persuasive or coercive power, it can be fairly described as a social fact.

Seen from above, the island of Manhattan is a striking example of how humans cultivate the natural world.

Between nature itself and the handshake are countless other social facts. They include the ways in which we fall in love and build families, our morals and methods of worship, how we play and fight, and so much more. Our nations, economies, and wars are social facts. Our ways of knowing, from medicine to mathematics, are social facts—as is sociology itself, along with all the sciences that humans have invented and developed.

In elaborating on this idea, Durkheim helped invent a new object of inquiry. Geologists studied geological facts, biologists studied biological facts, physicists studied physical facts, and now sociologists studied social facts.

If it sounds obvious today, it wasn't then. Durkheim named something that hadn't yet been named. And though social facts depend on humans for their existence, they're as real as any other facts. On this, Durkheim was insistent. Social facts are no less real for being social than rocks are for being geological, cells are for being biological, and fission is for being physical. Social facts are real things and as important to study as any other fact of life. Hence, sociology was born as the science of social facts.

Glossary

social facts
> products of human interaction with persuasive or coercive power that
> exist externally to any individual

Endnotes

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STUDYING SOCIAL FACTS

At the time, the notion of studying society scientifically was new. Psychologists and biologists studied individuals and their bodies, artists and writers explored the human experience, and philosophers theorized as to what was real and good, but few had thought to put the tools of the scientific method to the task of understanding society itself. In staking a claim on sociology as a science, Durkheim made society into an object of *empirical inquiry*, meaning that it involves looking to the world for evidence with which scientists can test their hunches. Scientists call this evidence [data](#), or systematically collected sets of empirical observations.

After a visit to the United States in 1834 to observe the local customs, the British sociologist Harriet Martineau wrote the first sociological research methods book.
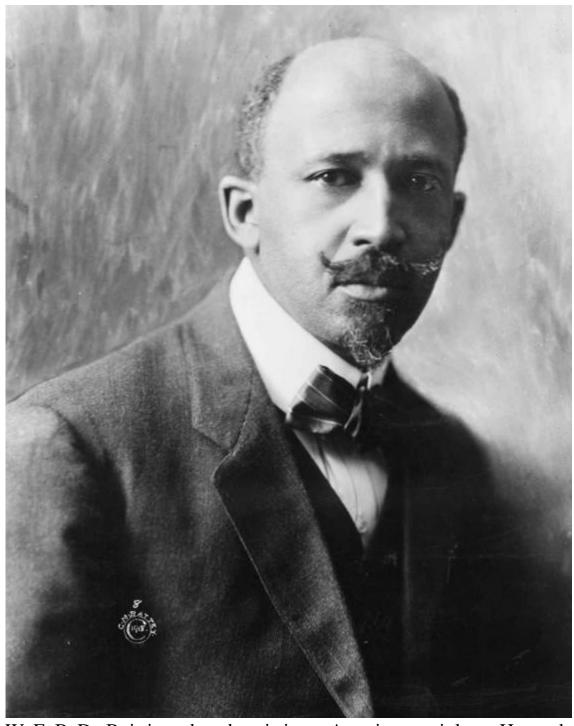
To collect data, scholars pose research questions, queries about the world that can be answered empirically. And they answer those questions with sociological research methods, or scientific strategies for collecting

empirical data about social facts. In 1895, Durkheim published a book titled *The Rules of Sociological Method*, a manual for how to study society scientifically.[7] His was the second book on the topic. The first—*How to Observe Morals and Manners*—was written almost sixty years earlier by a British sociologist named Harriet Martineau (1802–1876).[8]

Sociological research methods include a wide variety of both qualitative and quantitative strategies for collecting data. [Qualitative research methods] involve careful consideration and discussion of the meaning of nonnumerical data. Qualitative data comes from in-person interviews, images, and text, or through observation. This kind of research is excellent for understanding how people feel, think, and behave.

[Quantitative research methods] involve examining numerical data with mathematics. This type of research was introduced by another pioneering sociologist, W. E. B. Du Bois (pronounced the American way instead of the French way; that is, *du boyz* instead of *du bwah*). While in graduate school at Harvard, Du Bois (1868–1963) studied at the University of Berlin with social scientists who were inventing *statistics*, a mathematical approach to research that involves collecting, manipulating, and analyzing numerical data. When Du Bois returned to the United States, he was one of only a handful of Americans trained in such methods.

Du Bois recognized the value of quantitative methods because he was trying to communicate facts about Black people to a racist audience. He was born in 1868 to African American parents five years after the end of legal human slavery in the United States. This was not a time of peace and harmony. The country was extending equal protection of the law, citizenship rights, and the right to vote to men of all races—except, in irony most deep, to American Indians—and attempting to reconcile the North and South and adjust to a new economy.[9] These changes were bitterly and violently resisted, especially but not exclusively in the South.

W. E. B. Du Bois introduced statistics to American sociology. He used social science to advocate for Black Americans.

Du Bois knew that convincing a reluctant majority to understand Black life in the United States would require extremely credible tools. Statistics were a

way to ensure that his research would be taken seriously. And it was. Du Bois would become one of the most important Black thinkers in American history, and one of his legacies would be mathematical approaches to data analysis. Thanks in part to him, today's sociologists use ever more sophisticated statistical tools to understand their data.

Du Bois, Durkheim, and Martineau were all insistent that sociological research be systematic and impartial, with the aim of producing accurate findings. Math, though, wasn't the only skill sociologists needed to acquire. Martineau added that studying people in their societies required sociological sympathy, the skill of understanding others as they understand themselves. To Martineau, this was important for two reasons.

First, as a type of curiosity, sociological sympathy was an essential tool of data collection. A scholar without it, she argued, is "like one who, without hearing the music, sees a roomful of people begin to dance."[10] Such a person could describe the scene but not fully comprehend its nature. Thus, they might see people moving about in rhythm but miss its role in producing joy or sparking romance.

Second, Martineau argued that only a sociologist with sociological sympathy could be impartial. Only by adopting the point of view of the person being studied are we able to avoid judging them by our own standards. True objectivity, she argued, is not value-neutral but an earnest attempt to understand others' values.

As different research methods are introduced throughout this book, features titled "The Science of Sociology" offer a brief discussion of each method. These are regular reminders that sociology is rooted in the scientific method. They'll also reveal that sociologists are creative and resourceful scientists who've developed a wide range of research methods. For an overview, you can turn to the back of the book and read "A Guide to Sociological Research."

This guide also includes a lengthy discussion of professional research ethics, or the set of moral principles that guide empirical inquiry. These principles include *respect* (treating people as autonomous individuals with the right to make informed decisions), *justice* (conducting research that is

fair, nondiscriminatory, and nonexploitative), and *beneficence* (doing more good than harm). Practices designed to honor these principles include reporting conflicts of interest, attaining informed consent from research subjects, ensuring confidentiality, and minimizing deception.

THE SCIENCE OF SOCIOLOGY

One aim of sociological research is to build [sociological theory](#), or empirically based explanations and predictions about relationships between social facts. Sociological theories are more than just beliefs; they're conclusions based on the findings of sociological research, some of which spans decades. Theories aim to describe *probabilistic* cause-and-effect relationships, or ones that are likely but not inevitable. To study social facts, then, is to look for [social](#) [patterns](#): explainable and foreseeable similarities and differences among people influenced by the social conditions in which they live.

Theories start off as sets of related hypotheses and are rigorously tested using both quantitative and qualitative research methods. Theories are always tentative, meaning that scholars are ready to reject or change their theories if the data don't support them. Being willing to change our minds about what we think we know is the core of scientific inquiry, in sociology no less than anywhere else.

Most sociologists also agree that theories are strongest when they're built by many different kinds of scholars asking questions from various [standpoints](#), or points of view grounded in lived reality.[11] Standpoint theory was originally developed by women of color, like Chicana sociologist Maxine Baca Zinn and Black sociologist Bonnie Thornton Dill. "Lived experience," they write, "creates alternative ways of understanding the social world and the experience of different groups of [people] within it."[12] All standpoints, especially the ones we hear less often, are important for understanding the world. Our personal biographies shape our questions, our research methods, our analysis and insights, and our conclusions. So, if we want sociology to explain the full breadth of social life, everyone has to be involved in its production.

In addition to developing sociological theory, a second aim of sociological research is to support [public sociology](#). This involves using sociological

theory to make societies better. As the "A Short History of Sociology" unit at the back of the book makes clear, this has always been a central goal of sociology. In the 1800s, Martineau, for example, wrote forcefully about the oppression of women, the enslavement of African Americans, economic inequality, and political disenfranchisement.[13] In *Society in America*, published in 1836, she asked how it was possible that so many U.S. citizens could tolerate these injustices in light of the promise, stated in the Declaration of Independence, that "all men are created equal." Martineau meant for her research to "inform some minds" and "stir up others."[14]

In this sense, sociology is not like other sciences. The power with which sociology is concerned is not geological, chemical, or physical, but social, meaning that sociologists are attentive to the power relationships that exist among us. Sociology doesn't shy away from the hard questions, ones about oppression and exploitation. For this reason, writes the Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell, sociology sometimes "speaks in tones that can offend about power, privilege, and the possibilities of change."[15] It may inform some minds and stir up others. Some may perceive sociology's interest in inequality as evidence of a lack of objectivity. In fact, it is the opposite. Like all social facts, social injustice is real. And sociology is the best intellectual tool we have for alleviating it.

This book takes you on a journey through sociological knowledge and theory. It includes thousands of facts produced by sociologists and describes dozens of research studies in detail. It also introduces you in small doses to sociological research methods. The book also highlights important figures in sociology and offers insight into their standpoints. This will give you a sense of what drives sociologists to ask the questions they do and why diversity is essential to good sociological theory. Hopefully, this will also give you an opportunity to practice your sociological sympathy. Some of the conclusions sociologists draw may not resonate with you. Martineau would recommend that we approach with curiosity if we want to be truly impartial. Always listen for the music.

By the end, you'll have developed a sociological imagination.[16] This is the capacity to consider how people's lives—including our own—are shaped by the social facts that surround us. A sociological imagination will help you

think even more intelligently about your social worlds, understand how they affect your life and the lives of others, and envision different ways of organizing societies, perhaps even better ones. Ultimately, the goal of this book is to help you strengthen your sociological imagination and empower you to understand and influence our shared lives.

We begin right at the center of the paradox that is sociology: the relationship between the individual and society. Letting go of the idea that we're each somehow unaffected by the world around us is an essential first step in developing a sociological imagination. To that end, the next chapter makes an argument that the self is a social fact. Get ready to think about yourself in an entirely new way. ■

COMING UP...

WHAT DOES IT MEAN to say that the self is a social fact? The next chapter suggests that we each develop a sense of self in cooperation with other people, both those we know and those we imagine. We further cultivate that sense of self by thinking frequently about how we want others to see us and working to perfect that self. And we tell stories about our selves in an effort to understand who we are and communicate that to others.

The idea that our self doesn't come spontaneously from somewhere inside of us may be unsettling, but scientists studying the relationship between our psychologies and societies have shown that a sense of self emerges only at the intersection of the two. As I'll emphasize, this doesn't mean that you're not *real*, but it does mean that who you are, and who you will become, is influenced by your social environment. This can be a tough pill to swallow, but I hope the next chapter convinces you that the idea of the social self is not only plausible but more inspirational than the alternative.

Chapter 1 will also introduce you to two research methods, one qualitative and one quantitative.

Welcome to sociology! I'm so glad you're here.

Glossary

data
> systematically collected sets of empirical observations

research questions
> queries about the world that can be answered empirically

sociological research methods
> scientific strategies for collecting empirical data about social facts

qualitative research methods
> tools of sociological inquiry that involve careful consideration and discussion of the meaning of nonnumerical data

quantitative research methods
> tools of sociological inquiry that involve examining numerical data with mathematics

sociological sympathy
> the skill of understanding others as they understand themselves

research ethics
> the set of moral principles that guide empirical inquiry

sociological theory
> empirically based explanations and predictions about relationships between social facts

social patterns
> explainable and foreseeable similarities and differences among people influenced by the social conditions in which they live

standpoints
> points of view grounded in lived reality

public sociology
> the work of using sociological theory to make societies better

sociological imagination
> the capacity to consider how people's lives—including our own—are shaped by the social facts that surround us

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- Note 13: Martineau, *How to Observe Morals and Manners*, 27.Return to reference 13
- Note 14: Ibid, 23.Return to reference 14
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1
THE SELF

IN THIS CHAPTER...

THE PARADOX AT the center of sociology is the fact that although we are individuals, we are not, have never been, and were never meant to be alone. This chapter attempts to resolve that paradox by arguing that our individuality doesn't bubble up from some place deep within us but instead emerges out of interactions with others.

- Humans have the remarkable ability to think about ourselves. That is, we can both do the thinking and be the thing that's being thought about. The sociologist George Herbert Mead captured this by suggesting that we all have an "I" that contemplates a "me." When we see ourselves in a mirror and say, "That's me," our *I* does the recognizing, while our *me* is recognized.
- We're concerned with how others see us, too, and that influences how we see ourselves in turn. Sociologist Charles Horton Cooley theorized that in forming our self-concept, we imagine what other people think about us. He described the self that emerges out of this process as the *looking-glass self*, one that's a consequence of seeing ourselves as we think other people see us.
- We also place ourselves on a life trajectory. We have a sense of where we've been and where we're going. This is our *self-narrative*, a story we tell about the origin and likely future of our selves. Our self-narratives are stories, built only partly on facts and written in collaboration with others.

For all these reasons, our sense of self is a product of human interaction; that is, a social fact.

As you read this chapter, you'll also notice introductions to two research methods:

- The *in-depth interview* is a research method that involves an intimate conversation between the researcher and a research subject.
- The *laboratory experiment* is a research method that involves a test of a hypothesis under carefully controlled conditions.

"Biology gives you a brain. Life turns it into a mind."

—JEFFREY EUGENIDES

One day, a researcher installed a very large mirror in an enclosure containing three Asian elephants: Happy, Patty, and Maxine.[1] The elephants poked and prodded the mirror. They probed underneath, around, and over it. With a little experimentation, they recognized that *they* were the animals in the mirror. They then showed curiosity as to their own appearance. Maxine, for example, was seen opening her mouth to get a good look at her teeth.

This is an example of the mirror test. It's a way to find out whether animals can learn to recognize themselves. Passing the test—being able to tell the difference between another animal and one's own reflection—is taken as strong evidence that a species has the capacity for self-awareness, the ability to be conscious of and able to reflect on one's own existence. To be self-aware is to be a thinking thing that thinks, among other things, about itself.

Though failing the mirror test is not conclusive evidence that an animal *isn't* self-aware, it's surprising how many animals have not yet passed. Sea lions, giant pandas, octopuses, many species of monkeys, and several species of apes have failed the mirror test. Only a handful of animals pass. Seeing themselves in the mirror, magpies will preen. A dolphin will swirl its head and flip upside down. A manta ray will blow bubbles out of curiosity. A chimpanzee, our closest relative, often takes the opportunity to turn around, look over its shoulder, and inspect its rear end.

Like elephants, magpies, and chimpanzees, humans are self-aware. None of us is born this way. Until about four months old, infants are just bundles of perception. They can't differentiate between objects, other people, their environment, and their own bodies. They certainly haven't learned to notice their own existence. Humans won't pass the mirror test until they're between sixteen and twenty-four months old.

Slowly, the brain puts the information together. It notes the synchronized activity in the brain cells that control motion (telling the arm to swing), the ones that process vision (of a flailing fist), and the ones that recognize sensation (when it whacks the side of its crib). Over time, the brain is able

to separate the child's body from the other things in its environment. *I did that*, it might understand. *I am a thing*.

Dolphins, chimpanzees, orcas, and magpies have passed the mirror test, a demonstration of self-awareness. Gorillas have not yet conclusively passed.

I am. This is quite a remarkable thing to think, and this chapter is about what it means for humans to be able to think it. It's about how we become aware of ourselves and others, how those others shape the person we become, and how we maintain a sense of self over a lifetime. Ultimately, this chapter is about how our connections to others make us who we are, ending with the startling idea that we are each a social fact. We start with a careful consideration of what it means to recognize the self.

Endnotes

- Note 01: Joshua M. Plotnik, Frans B. M. de Waal, and Diana Reiss, "Self-recognition in an Asian Elephant," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 103 (November 2006): 17053–17057.Return to reference 1

THE SELF

To think *I am* is to make oneself simultaneously the subject and the object of thought. When we think it, we're both the thing doing the thinking (the subject) and the thing we're thinking about (the object). We can think about ourselves, in other words, the same way that we think about other things. If I scan a typical bathroom, for example, I might see a bathtub, a sink, a towel rack, and myself in the mirror. Among the things I see is *me*, and I can think about myself in the same way that I can think about the fixtures in the room.

In the early 1900s, the sociologist George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) described this dual thinking by differentiating between the "I" and the "me."[2] The *me* is the object of thought: the self we see in the mirror, *our personal person*, the one that is us. As we grow up, the me is the us that we try to get graduated from school and employed in a good job. When one day we see our picture on the wall as Employee of the Month, we say, "That's me!" The me is whom we're proud of being when things go well. It's also whom we're ashamed of when we make decisions that embarrass us.

The *I*, in contrast, is the subject of thought, the person feeling pride or embarrassment. The I is the part of the self that's judging and making judgment calls. It's the part of the self that sets our goals and evaluates our progress. The I is the one that monitors our behavior, trying to ensure that we make the impressions we want to make. It's the part that thinks *Don't mess this up!* during a job interview, *Do they like me?* when we're talking to someone cute, and *What will people think of me?* when we've been caught doing something wrong. Mead described the I as a "running current of awareness," an observer of the me, always watching, planning, and considering.[3]

As an example, think about how people manage their social media accounts. A typical person will have at least one account that's either public or followed by a combination of friends, family, and acquaintances. When they post on it, they'll consider how their followers will perceive the text or

images they upload. They ask themselves, in other words, how the post will make them appear to others. The image they choose to present in light of this consideration is their me. And the person doing the considering is their I. They're contemplating: *What do I want others to think of me?* Depending on the desired outcome, the I decides what to post. The me that is then represented is true but also filtered. It's a specific version of you. It's the me your I decides to present to the wider world.

Negotiating the sometimes-treacherous currents of social media requires us to be able to think about other people in complex ways. To do that, we need to develop a [theory of mind](): the recognition that other minds exist, followed by the realization that we can try to imagine others' mental states. We begin developing a theory of mind when we're babies. About the same time that toddlers start to recognize themselves in the mirror, they begin to notice that they're not the only thinking thing in their environment. In other words, they discover not only that *they* exist, but that *other people* exist. Soon a child will be able to imagine what's going on in other people's minds and, against all odds, even feel what other people feel.

By two years old, children are able to express themselves—they know they feel, want, and think—and they're able to imagine that other people also feel, want, and think. Soon they'll be able to be competitive with a sibling who they think has the same wants, know that their caregivers will be pleased if they follow instructions, and learn to play cooperative games like hide-and-seek. All these things require the ability to imagine what's going on in someone else's mind.

We all went through this developmental process, and as we practiced these skills, our theory of mind became quite sophisticated. We practiced gift giving, which requires imagining what someone might like and how an object might fit into their life. We learned to lie, which involves trying to place a false belief into the mind of another. By the time we were in elementary school, we could effectively model the collective effort of many brains at once. Participating in a team sport like basketball or playing multiplayer online games, for example, requires us to coordinate our actions with others by simultaneously imagining what *many* other minds are thinking.

Within the first few months of life, our brains were also reaching into the brains of other people, closing the distance between them and us. Our brains do this with *mirror neurons*, cells in our brains that fire in identical ways whether we're observing or performing an action.[4] If I happen to watch you scratch your elbow, for example, the mirror neurons in my brain will light up as if *I* scratched *my* elbow. In fact, a scientist watching my brain would not be able to tell if I had scratched my elbow or you had scratched yours. These brain cells, in other words, don't differentiate between the self and others. Mirror neurons link one brain to another as if they were not two minds but one.

Mirror neurons also respond to emotions. To a mirror neuron, smiling and watching someone else smile are the same. Someone smiles, and our brain smiles with them. So we don't just *understand* that the smiling person is happy, we actually *feel* happy. If your heart has ever been warmed when the couple in a romantic comedy finally admits they're in love, or if you've felt rage tighten your throat in response to someone else's mistreatment, or if you've shared in the joy of a child discovering something new, then you have mirror neurons. My personal weakness is the medal ceremony at the Olympics. How do the happy tears of an athlete I've never met, accepting a medal half a world away, threaten to come streaming out of *my* face? Part of my brain can't tell the difference between someone else's joy and my own. And, so, I am overcome.

Most of us have mirror neuron systems that are just sensitive enough. They allow us to feel what others are feeling without becoming so engrossed in other people's minds that we forget our own. Some people aren't in this "Goldilocks" zone. Their mirror neurons are either too hot or too cold. Some scientists think, for instance, that a cool system helps explain some of the symptoms of autism spectrum disorder.[5] People with autism often struggle to understand what other people are feeling. We take for granted that we can tell if someone is happy, sad, or angry. Someone with autism may find this genuinely difficult.

Conversely, some people have mirror neuron systems that are too hot.[6] Interviewed on National Public Radio, a woman named Amanda recalled as a child following a young man around at a Christmas party.[7] "People were

hugging him like they hadn't seen him in a while," she said. And every time he got a hug, she would feel as if *she* were getting a hug. "It was like a warm rush up the spine," she said. "And I followed him around, like, the whole entire evening because it was just so nice." It sounds nice, but ultimately her heightened ability to feel what other people are feeling forced Amanda to restrict her contact with others. If people experience pleasure, she experiences pleasure too. But if people get hurt, so does she. Even mundane activities can be extraordinarily uncomfortable. When she watches other people eat, she explained, "It feels like they're shoving food in my mouth." Amanda's mirror neuron system is too hot.

Luckily, most of us have systems that are "just right," and it's a wonderful thing. Scientists and philosophers had long speculated as to the exact mechanism by which humans came to understand and care for one another so intimately. It was a compelling mystery specifically because, in a very real way, we aren't connected at all. We're separate, locked up in our own skulls, inescapably and existentially alone. And yet, the human brain has a way to ease this loneliness. Our biology has provided a way to bring the minds of others tantalizingly close.

Paradoxically, it is out of this closeness that our individuality emerges.

Glossary

theory of mind
      the recognition that other minds exist, followed by the realization that we can try to imagine others' mental states

Endnotes

- Note 02: George H. Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1934).Return to reference 2
- Note 03: George H. Mead, "The Social Self," *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods* 10 (1913): 374–380.Return to reference 3
- Note 04: Marco Iacoboni, *Mirroring People*: *The Science of Empathy and How We Connect with Others* (New York: Picador, 2008).Return to reference 4
- Note 05: Jillian M. Saffin and Hassaan Tohid, "Walk like Me, Talk like Me: The Connection Between Mirror Neurons and Autism Spectrum Disorder," *Neurosciences Journal* 21, no. 2 (2016): 108–119.Return to reference 5
- Note 06: Michael J. Banissy, Roi Cohen Kadosh, Gerrit W. Maus, Vincent Walsh, and Jamie Ward, "Prevalence, Characteristics, and a Neurocognitive Model of Mirror-Touch Synaesthesia," *Experimental Brain Research* 198, no. 2 (2009): 261–272.Return to reference 6
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REFLECTING ON THE SELF

In 1902, almost one hundred years before scientists discovered mirror neurons, and eighty years before the first mirror test, the sociologist Charles Horton Cooley (1864–1929) used a different mirror metaphor to explain how humans come to understand themselves, or develop a *self-concept*. This is more than self-awareness, the simple knowledge of our own existence; a self-concept is our understanding of *who* we are based on our personality traits, physical characteristics, ancestry, and biographies. Together with George Herbert Mead—he of the I and the me—Cooley became one of the founders of a field called *social psychology*, the study of the interface between the individual and society. Social psychologists argue that we can't understand either our psychologies or our societies independently of each other. The "mind is social," Cooley insisted, and "society is mental."[8]

Like all scholars, Cooley was motivated to study the relationship between the self and society in part because of his own experiences. He was a shy child and prone to illness, which left him isolated from his peers.[9] He was also intimidated by his high-achieving parents, who had equally high expectations for him. Being socially awkward may have made him hyperaware of the gazes of others, especially if they reflected things he didn't like.

Ultimately, Cooley developed a new theory of the self. Our self-concepts, he argued, could only arise socially, in the presence of other people, through a process in which we choose, interpret, and imagine the views of others. He called this the looking-glass self, the self that emerges as a consequence of seeing ourselves as we think other people see us.[10] According to this theory, other people are looking glasses (or mirrors) reflecting a vision from which we form our self-concepts.

Other people are certainly the source of our first ideas about our selves. Before we're even born, our caregivers are busy defining us. To start, they give us our names. We may come into this world as a Charity or a Chardonnay. A Forrest or a Hunter. A Mary or a Jesús. Our parents decide

that we're sweet, feisty, or curious long before we could possibly come to those conclusions on our own, and certainly before we have the capacity to challenge them. "He's a kicker," a soccer-loving expectant mom might say proudly as she cringes, smiles, and rubs her belly. "She's the shy one," a dad might tell people about his preschool-age daughter, labeling her with a personality trait that may just be a developmental stage. When parental perceptions stick, kids might grow up to think "I'm sporty" or "I'm an introvert." Our first self is given to us by the people around us.

Babies are attributed personality traits and talents, engaged in activities, and given toys. Each of these choices by adults can contribute to the formation of a self.

As we get older, we continue to look to the people around us—our friends, family, and teachers—to inform our self-concept. Some are significant figures, others we encounter only in passing, but anyone can influence how we think about our selves. Mercifully, research shows that we tend to overestimate the extent to which other people like us, so the self-concepts we derive from this process are generally pretty positive.[11]

We also learn to speculate as to what *generalized others* might think of us. These are imagined members of specific social groups. Generalized others represent types of people, with a greater or lesser degree of specificity. We easily divide up the generalized other into categories: teenagers, musicians, NASCAR-lovers, dog people. When we think it's relevant, we tap into our ideas of how an average member of one of these groups might evaluate us. In doing so, we take the perspective of the generalized other. When we look at our behind in the mirror like a chimpanzee, for example, we might be wondering what a generalized other might think of it.

Consider what's going on when people text erotic images to one another. The sociologist Morgan Johnstonbaugh did just this, conducting 101 in-depth interviews with college students (see "The Science of Sociology").[12] In-depth interviews are intimate conversations between a researcher and a *research subject*, a person who agrees to participate in a research project. In interviews, research subjects are offered the opportunity to open up about their personal experiences. Johnstonbaugh asked her interviewees about their motivations and experiences with "sexting," which she defined as the electronic sharing of nude or semi-nude images.

Johnstonbaugh discovered that her female-identified interviewees often sent sexts to their female friends with the express purpose of eliciting positive feedback. "You can't always count on a guy to give you exactly what you want," said one woman. "[Y]ou want someone to be like, I see you, I recognize you for the goddess that you are," she explained. And her female friends were happy to respond that way.

Another interviewee explained why she was happy to see her friends' nudes and respond with support and encouragement. "[G]irls just like don't hear that enough," she told Johnstonbaugh. "[W]e have to struggle already so much in the society as it is [so] women supporting other women and just being like . . . 'you look wonderful and you should know that,' is important." These young women sought the gazes of friends whom they trusted to be complimentary. In doing so, they cultivated looking glasses that would reflect them back as they wanted to see themselves and hoped generalized others would see them that way too.

THE SCIENCE OF SOCIOLOGY

In-depth Interviews

The in-depth interview is a research method that involves an intimate conversation between the researcher and a research subject. Interviews are designed to capture the responses of a few people in great depth (a couple dozen, perhaps, or up to several hundred). Interviews tend to be *semi-structured*, meaning that questions are decided ahead of time, but the researcher is allowed to ask different questions depending on the flow of conversation. And the questions are usually *open-ended*. That is, instead of asking questions that can be answered with a yes or no, open-ended questions are designed to elicit lengthy, free-ranging answers. The resulting data are excellent for understanding how people experience their lives and form their opinions.

Researchers generally type out their interviews word for word. The resulting documents are then subjected to coding, a process in which segments of text are identified as belonging to relevant categories. These categories, or *codes*, will refer to concrete or abstract features of the conversation that are relevant to the research question. Johnstonbaugh, for example, coded for whether her interviewees said they sent sexts in the hopes of receiving a compliment, a laugh, or an invitation to come over, among other things. After coding, researchers count how frequently certain codes appear and among whom, looking for patterns in how people experience or explain their lives.

In almost all research involving people, sociologists are ethically obligated to protect their research subjects' identities. Usually this means ensuring *confidentiality*. This is a promise that the researcher will not release personal information that can be connected to the research subject, including the fact of their participation. To preserve confidentiality, researchers refrain from releasing the names of people who've participated and keep data in secure locations. After research is completed, they may

permanently separate people's real names from the data and destroy any evidence of the connection. When they talk or write about their findings, researchers will also assign *pseudonyms*, or fictitious names, to interviewees. ∎

All these reflections are at least somewhat distorted.[13] The looking glass is a bit like a fun house mirror; we need to do quite a bit of guesswork as to whether the reflected image is accurate. Moreover, as we try to guess what other people really think of us, we often add a fair bit of distortion ourselves. Thanks to the inescapable fact of our separateness, we can never truly see what others see, so we use our theory of mind and our mirroring brains to make guesses. In fact, studies show that our self-concepts have more in common with what we *think* other people think of us than what they actually think. These observations led Cooley to summarize his theory this way: "I am not what I think I am. I am not what you think I am. I am what I think you think I am."[14]

We're looking glasses for others too. Other people are trying to discern who they are from us at the same time we're seeing a vision of ourselves. Like any two mirrors that are opposite each other, the result is a recursive set of reflections: mirrors facing each other in perfect symmetry, each reflecting the other reflecting itself, repetitively into the infinite distance. "I imagine your mind," Cooley explained, "and especially what your mind thinks about my mind, and what your mind thinks about what my mind thinks about your mind" and so on.[15] The only way to opt out of the infinity mirror is to opt out of social interaction altogether.

To see or not to see

Christopher Knight tried to opt out. In 2013, Knight was arrested while raiding a summer camp in central Maine. His mug shot revealed an aging White man with a bald head and scraggly beard wearing the same pair of eyeglasses he'd worn for his senior high school portrait in 1984. He was charged with approximately 1,000 burglaries of camp kitchens and lake cabins in the area.

Knight had lived alone in the woods for a long time. "For how long?" asked the police officer after Knight was arrested. He paused and said that he left the same year the Chernobyl nuclear power plant exploded. That was 1986. "I just walked away," he said.

While he was in jail awaiting trial, Knight reluctantly agreed to be interviewed by a journalist named Michael Finkel. Sitting across from each other, separated by a pane of plastic, the two squared off. Finkel wanted Knight's story to tell us something profound about the human condition. Knight thought this was ridiculous. "Some people want me to be this warm and fuzzy person," he said, annoyed. "All filled with friendly hermit wisdom. Just spouting off fortune-cookie lines from my hermit home."[16]

Knight insisted that there wasn't anything to tell. Out in the woods alone, he said, the human condition didn't reveal itself. It just *went away*. Without other people, he explained, "I lost my identity." His self didn't change, and he certainly didn't become more true to himself, more "authentic" somehow. He continued:

> With no audience, no one to perform for, I was just there. There was no need to define myself; I became irrelevant.......I didn't even have a name. I never felt lonely. To put it romantically: I was completely free.[17]

Knight had retreated into a world in which there were no individuals, where neither he nor anyone else existed. Without other people, there were no looking glasses to reflect him. No I and no me. With the exception of his

raids of nearby cabins, during which he tried to avoid being caught, he may have even lost the habit of imagining what generalized others might think of him. Why bother? In the woods, without anyone around, and without the anticipation of an encounter, there was no need to define himself. Like a chipmunk, he slept and stayed warm and nibbled on snacks. He existed, but, in a certain way, he had no self-concept. He was, as he put it, "just there," unreflective, unreflected. Without looking glasses to peer into, he disappeared to himself.

Very few of us flee the company of others entirely. Instead, like sexting teenagers, most of us curate our collection of looking glasses. We seek ones that reflect the person we want to be and, to the extent that we can, avoid the rest. Sometimes that means changing who we are so as to give the right impression.[18] Other times, we manage our self-concept strategically. Sometimes people's ideas about us are contradictory, giving us an opportunity to pick and choose the self we want to embrace. Your mom might say "you're talented" and your dad might say "you're very hardworking" and you might side with one or the other, or both. Often, we simply reject or accept someone's ideas about us. My ex might think I'm a jerk, for example, and I may disagree. Your dog might think you're the best person in the universe, and you might decide that dogs have pretty good judgment.

For twenty-seven years, Christopher Knight lived alone in this secret camp in the woods. In the absence of others, he stopped thinking about what others thought of him, and then stopped thinking much about himself at all.

We may try to pick and choose whose opinions to care about, but this doesn't mean we're immune from caring what others think. It's exactly because we *do* care that we sometimes insist that we do not. And how could we not? Thanks to mirror neurons, we feel other people's emotions as if they were our own. So, if someone looks at us with disgust, disdain, or hatred, their negative perception of us threatens to become part of our self-image. Our mirror neurons can't tell the difference between someone else hating us and us hating ourselves. No wonder we generally avoid people who we think dislike us. From this point of view, that old piece of advice so often given by adults to teenagers—that we shouldn't care what other people think—sounds pretty unrealistic.

Ultimately, whether we accept or reject someone's opinion of us is influenced by whether we like it, whether it's part of our self-concept already, and whether it's reinforced by other available looking glasses. It

also depends on whether we have an intimate relationship with the person, identify with them as a similar kind of person, or see them as someone who can fairly evaluate us.[19] When a person also falls into a group of generalized others that we identify as important, we tend to take their reflections of us more seriously. So, if you're a young woman growing up in Florida, you may find it somewhat easy to ignore what your seventy-two-year-old Minnesotan uncle thinks of you, and a little less easy to ignore what your friends at school think.

Whatever power we exert in shaping others' perceptions, and despite our ability to reject at least some of the ones we don't like, our self is still dependent on those looking glasses. It's hard to imagine we're funny if no one ever laughs at our jokes. But, if they do, we may develop our sense of humor to keep them laughing. In this way, the looking-glass self is a self-fulfilling prophecy, a phenomenon in which what people believe is true becomes true, even if it wasn't originally true.[20] Applied to the self, it goes something like this: If enough people consistently reflect us in a certain way, their impressions will shape our impression of ourselves, and we will act accordingly, bringing into existence the self that they originally saw.

In an excellent demonstration of the self-fulfilling prophecy, a group of researchers tested whether wearing cologne changed men's behavior in ways that made them more attractive to women.[21] They did a laboratory experiment, a test of a hypothesis under carefully controlled conditions (see "The Science of Sociology"). They randomly assigned thirty-five men to apply a scented or non-scented body spray, then asked the men how confident they felt about their attractiveness. Men who applied the scented spray reported feeling more confident than those who'd applied the non-scented spray. All the men were then filmed introducing themselves to a hypothetical "attractive woman."

A panel of eight women were then asked to watch the videos and judge the men's attractiveness. They weren't told that the men had been given body spray of any kind and they, of course, could not smell them. Nevertheless, the men who'd been randomly assigned a fragrance were rated as more attractive. The fragrance made the men *feel* more attractive, which gave them a boost in confidence; that confidence made them more attractive to

the women observers. The fragrance, in other words, induced a self-fulfilling prophecy. By making the men feel more attractive, it actually made them so. Summarizing the study, the sociologist Bradley Wright explained: "The secret may not be whether a woman thinks a man smells good, but rather whether a man thinks he smells good."[22] To paraphrase Cooley, "I am not as sexy as I think I am. I am not as sexy as you think I am. I am as sexy as I think you think I am."

THE SCIENCE OF SOCIOLOGY

Experimental Research in the Laboratory

A laboratory experiment is a research method that involves a test of a hypothesis under carefully controlled conditions. In laboratory experiments, researchers bring research subjects into a *lab*, a room specifically designed for experiments. In the lab, researchers attempt to keep the experience of every subject exactly the same, with one exception: the independent variable.

A variable is simply any measurable phenomenon that varies. An *independent variable* is one that's hypothesized to influence the dependent variable, or cause an effect. A *dependent variable* is one that's hypothesized to be influenced by the independent variable; it's the phenomenon expected to show an effect. Any other variables that might influence the dependent variable are called *control variables*. They reflect the phenomena that researchers attempt to keep exactly the same, or "hold constant," so that changes in the dependent variable can be attributed to the independent variable specifically.

Experimenters assign research participants to one of two groups. Members of the experimental group go through the experience that researchers believe might influence the dependent variable. Members of the control group do not go through that experience. After the experiment is over, the researchers look to see whether the independent variable influenced the dependent variable by comparing the data collected from each group.

In the lab study about the effects of body spray, for example, the use of scented or non-scented body spray was the independent variable and women's evaluation of the men's attractiveness was the dependent variable. Other features of the room and the experience were held constant, so every test of the hypothesis proceeded in exactly the same way. The men in the study were randomly assigned to either the experimental or the control group so that each group was about equally handsome on average.

Laboratory experiments are one of the few research methods that allow scientists to make causal claims, or assertions that an independent variable is directly and specifically responsible for producing a change in a dependent variable. Almost all other research methods only facilitate correlational claims, assertions that changes in an independent variable correspond to changes in a dependent variable but not in a way that can be proven causal. ∎

Our self-concept, then, emerges out of a lifetime of interactions, both real and imagined. Based on these experiences, we come to understand ourselves as a certain kind of person. We're active participants in this process. We have some choices as to what looking glasses to seek out and take most seriously, but we don't develop a self-concept alone. We need others to figure out who we are.

If our self is a product of our interactions with others, though, why do we feel like the same person from day to day? Cooley says that our selves are stable when our circumstances are stable. I'm a college professor, for example, so you'd be right to guess that I enjoy telling other people about ideas. That feels like a fixed thing about me. But is it? Do I keep showing up to teach classes because my self doesn't change? Or does my self stay the same because I keep showing up to teach classes? Does your life stay the same because your personality does? Or is your personality stable because your life stays the same? Cooley believed the latter: Our personalities feel fixed largely because our life circumstances are relatively stable.

We also stabilize our selves by seeking out others who reflect back at us the people we think we are, even at the expense of thinking better of ourselves.[23] In a study of college students living in residence halls, for example, people with strong self-concepts were more likely to want to continue to live with their roommate one year later if their roommate saw them as they saw themselves.[24] Likewise, the most happily married couples are ones who have accurate understandings of each other, not overly romantic ones. We like people who validate our self-concepts, even at the expense of more positive evaluations.

It can be invigorating to shake things up, even if just a little, by taking a vacation, getting a new job, or switching schools. And sometimes we face identity crises that prompt real self-reflection and reinvention, like becoming aware of new facts about our ancestry or beginning to question the gender we were assigned at birth. Outside of these events, however, we rarely change very much. We're attached to our selves. And so are the people around us. If we start acting noticeably differently, it can make others uncomfortable. If the foodie becomes a picky eater overnight, if the football fan loses interest in the game, if the introvert converts to an extrovert, people don't take it in stride. Change, even when it's neither positive nor negative, is disconcerting.

Our selves tend to resist change, too, because our lifetime of formative experiences is a buffer against sudden shifts. Our self-understanding is usually more influential than either our own whims or the whims of others. Even when we go somewhere new or surround ourselves with fresh looking glasses, we know who we are and where we've been. Whether we're in São Paulo, Seoul, or Saskatchewan, we remember who we were back home.

Unless, of course, we don't.

Glossary

looking-glass self
> the self that emerges as a consequence of seeing ourselves as we think other people see us

in-depth interview
> a research method that involves an intimate conversation between the researcher and a research subject

coding
> a process in which segments of text are identified as belonging to relevant categories

self-fulfilling prophecy
> a phenomenon in which what people believe is true becomes true, even if it wasn't originally true

laboratory experiment
> a research method that involves a test of a hypothesis under carefully controlled conditions

variable
> any measurable phenomenon that varies

experimental group
> the group in a laboratory experiment that undergoes the experience that researchers believe might influence the dependent variable

control group
> the group in a laboratory experiment that does not undergo the experience that researchers believe might influence the dependent variable

causal claims
> assertions that an independent variable is directly and specifically responsible for producing a change in a dependent variable

correlational claims
> assertions that changes in an independent variable correspond to changes in a dependent variable but not in a way that can be proven causal

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THE STORY OF THE SELF

The role of memory in holding together a sense of self is acutely illustrated by the story of someone whose memory was lost. This is what happened to a twenty-eight-year-old American named David MacLean. One day, he found himself standing in a busy train station in India, and he didn't know who he was. He could remember how to walk, talk, and read. He remembered his email password and the things he learned in school. But he couldn't remember anything about his life or the people he knew. Nor did he know why he was in India. "It was darkness darkness darkness, then snap," he wrote. "Me. Now awake."[25]

The first person to speak to him was a police officer. MacLean explained that he was lost and couldn't remember who he was. The officer replied, kindly: "I am here for you. I have seen this many times before. You foreigners come to my country and do your drugs and get confused. It will be all right, my friend."

MacLean's brain flickered. He had a sudden vision of a dirty mattress in a run-down room and a redheaded girl, he said, "coming toward me twirling little baggies." It was comforting to have a memory, despite the unpleasant conclusion he drew. Although it pained him to recall the drug use, in a way he wished he were still the person he used to be. "A drug addict could cry over his wasted life," he said. "I was worse than a drug addict—I was nothing." The police officer took him to an internet café and he logged into his email, figured out who his parents were, and sent a cry for help.

Later, MacLean would be diagnosed with retrograde amnesia, a loss of the ability to recall anything that happened before an injury or illness. The closest thing most of us will ever experience to retrograde amnesia is the occasional morning when we're woken suddenly out of an especially deep sleep. It can take us a few seconds to remember who we are upon waking. *Just darkness darkness darkness, then snap. Now awake.* It can make us momentarily confused about where we are, what day it is, and what we're

supposed to be doing, but it takes our brain only microseconds to reassemble our reality. Then we get up and proceed with our lives.

Imagine if that feeling never left us. That was what MacLean experienced. To have amnesia, he wrote, was to have a pulsing, palpable nothingness inside:

> I could feel the heavy absence in my brain, like a static cloud. I couldn't remember anything past waking up. There was a thick mass of nothing up there. ......I was alone, alone with no idea how far I was from anyone who knew me. I was alone and empty and terrified.[26]

His memory was gone and, with it, his self-concept.

Remembering our selves

Cases of amnesia like MacLean's show us that our self-concept is reliant on our ability to reassemble our reality, like we do routinely each morning. Our reality is our self-narrative, a story we tell about the origin and likely future of our selves.[27] We write it in collaboration with others, though we are its primary author and editor. The non-amnesiac brain remembers its self-narrative. This is how our I recognizes our me every morning. We recall a journey—we note where we've been and where we're going—and then get out of bed and step back on the path.

MacLean's amnesia left him with no such narrative, and he felt this absence acutely. He described himself as a "blank sheet that had just been rolled in the typewriter. No backstory, no motivation, no distinguishing characteristics." He didn't know where he'd been or where he was going and that left him with absolutely no idea as to who he was. He had no narrative.

Someone gave him a cigarette, which he smoked with relish, though he later learned that he'd never smoked a day in his life. Another offered him a glass of Scotch and he recoiled from the taste, only to discover later that he'd been an avid drinker. He leaned heavily on the looking glasses around him for guidance. "All I had to go on for my identity was the reactions of the people around me," he explained. "I assembled a working self out of the behavior of others." And it was a self-fulfilling prophecy: "People treated me a certain way and I became the kind of person who is treated like that."

When a person imagines themselves to be fulfilling the wildest dreams of their ancestors, they are placing their life story into a larger narrative. This changes the meaning of their personal accomplishments.

Like the idea of a drug addict's "wasted life," many of the self-narratives we employ are prepackaged, including familiar characters and plot lines. People rise from "rags to riches" or find themselves "born again."[28] You can too. "Love at first sight" stories send a message about how we find soulmates. "Coming out" stories offer models for how Two-Spirit, LGBTQIA, asexual, or polyamorous people should process and respond to their desires. Attend any Alcoholics Anonymous meeting and you might hear a narrative about "rock bottom," implying a transition between the harmful path that brought the person there and a path of redemption.

We sometimes even nest our narratives in the narratives of others.[29] Those of us whose self-concepts are shaped by the stories we tell about our ancestors, for example, are framing our lives as another chapter in a longer story. We may be a child of immigrants, whose parents braved a new land to give us a better life; a third-generation Louisianan who's carrying on the family tradition of crab fishing; or an adherent of Judaism who's reminded at the annual Passover seder to carry on the legacy of the Jews who came before.

Our self-narrative, then, is built out of a lifetime of experiences and drawn from prepackaged stories. It's the source of our self-concept and what makes it feel real. Being able to pull events and episodes out of our past to explain our present gives our self-concept a feeling of authenticity. *Look*, we say to others and ourselves, *I was always this way* or *I'm this way because of that* or *I share my story with people like me*. Out of our experiences and cultural narratives, we craft a believable story, one that makes our self feel coherent, stable, and authentic.

But it's never wholly true.

Between fact and fiction

Our self-narrative is not a true story. First, it's not true because most of us forget almost everything that happens to us. Most every conversation, meal, game, and exam are lost to our conscious memory. They're not special enough to merit remembering. Or they were, and they didn't stick anyway.

Second, of the events we do remember, we have considerable leeway in deciding which are plot points, which characters play a starring role, and which story arcs to draw out. Likewise, we can usually discount the things and people in our past that contradict our narrative. In other words, the version of our selves we believe in is probably far more coherent than our actual life history can support. Our self-narrative isn't a faithful account of our life; it's an imaginative one.

Well into my twenties, for example, I told people I grew up on a farm. I described a childhood filled with barbed wire fences, mud pits, and trees to climb. There was an enormous gentle-hearted horse named Jughead, a spotted goat named Joker, and a menagerie of guinea pigs, rabbits, cats and dogs, chickens, and the occasional pair of ducks. We also had a black cow named Valentine that we rode awkwardly; it's very uncomfortable to ride a cow, in case you haven't tried.

I always talked about the farm as if I were describing my life. Then one day it dawned on me that I wasn't. I didn't grow up on a farm. I grew up in the city of San Jose, California, on the border of Milpitas in the left side of a duplex in a crowded multiracial neighborhood. Granted, I spent every summer on the farm with my cousins—the stories were real—but it was *they* who grew up on a farm. Not me.

Those summer months were so memorable, though, and I recalled them with such enthusiasm that I came to *feel like* and *identify as* a farm girl. It became part of my story, even though it wasn't technically accurate. In a way, I was unconsciously telling a lie to get at something that felt true. It's a common type of misrepresentation.

Think about how routinely we're asked to tell the story of our lives. You probably told some version of your self-narrative as part of your college application. In writing it, you may have made an argument about your self. The act of making that argument might have strengthened that self-narrative in your own mind. It may feel more true today than it did the day before you wrote it, especially if you were validated with college admission.

As a child, I spent my summers with my sister, cousins, and a whole host of farm animals. That's me in the middle with Cookie, a Shetland pony. Even though I grew up in San Jose, California, I came to identify as a farm girl.

We tell other kinds of stories in other contexts: with new friends, to therapists, on dates, and in all manner of situations. When we tell these personal stories, we usually do so with a goal other than accuracy.[30] We may be trying to bond with someone, be understood, affirm someone else's experiences, get sympathy, put on a brave face, seem wise, or get a job or a

laugh. Each of these goals changes how we draw out the story, what we emphasize and what we leave out. Over time, the real story can get lost in our memory. This makes our autobiographical memories particularly vulnerable to distortion.

In fact, our strongest memories are the ones *most* likely to be untrue. That's because the more often we recall a memory, the less well we remember it. It feels like the opposite must be the case—that recalling memories would keep them fresh in our minds—but that's not how memory works. Instead, each time we recall a memory, we add the recollection to the memory itself. Over time, all the recollections blend in with the original memory, and their content slowly drifts.

To put it metaphorically, if a memory were an oil painting, it wouldn't be finished and hung up on the wall for later reference. Instead, it would stay on the easel. Each time we recalled the memory, we'd paint over it again. The first time, we'd likely repaint it quite faithfully because the original painting would be right there in front of us. It would be easy to copy precisely. But the second time we recalled it, we'd do so just a little less perfectly because, with a layer of paint on top, we wouldn't be able to see it quite as crisply as we did the first time. The third time we recalled it, we'd paint over it again. And so on. Each recollection would mean a new layer of paint. Over time, the content, color, and texture of the painting would inevitably change. The original would get quite lost underneath all those recollections.

Memory distortion is so predictable, and it occurs with such swiftness, that experts recommend trying to avoid recalling memories when accuracy is important. For example, police officers are now advised not to ask eyewitnesses to describe a person they saw committing a crime. Doing so actually reduces the likelihood that they'll be able to accurately pick a guilty person out of a lineup.[31] Recalling the face, even one time, distorts the memory, making it harder for witnesses to recognize the person when they see them again.

Counterintuitively, then, it's our most often recalled memories that are most likely to be untrue. The memories that we most relish, and the ones that most torture us, become the most distorted, because we think about them

over and over again until they've taken on a life of their own. To our brain, the last recall is as true as the first.

Meanwhile, some of the memories out of which we build our self-narrative are complete fabrications. Our brain is vulnerable to suggestion. In a famous study, research subjects were asked to look over an advertisement featuring a child shaking hands with Bugs Bunny at Disneyland.[32] Sometime later, a third of the research subjects said they remembered meeting Bugs themselves. This, of course, is impossible; Bugs Bunny belongs to Disney's competitor, Warner Bros. We may resist the idea that this could happen to us, but it almost certainly already has. We all have false memories—probably pretty elaborate ones—and we have no way of knowing which ones they are.

David MacLean's memory of using drugs, for example—the vivid images of a freckled redhead grinning and shaking a small bag of white powder, of shooting drugs into his veins, of a filthy mattress on the floor of a dirty room—were all invented by his brain in response to the policeman's suggestion that he was disoriented because he was high. MacLean wasn't a drug user. His amnesia was a rare side effect of a then-common medicine given to Americans traveling to countries with a risk of malaria. Physicians confirmed that he'd not been taking any illegal drugs. There was no redhead. There never was.

Glossary

[self-narrative](#)
    a story we tell about the origin and likely future of our selves

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THE SELF AS A SOCIAL FACT

Our brain has a great imagination. It forgets things, it alters memories, it makes stuff up, it merges memories together, it even borrows memories, taking the experiences of others and folding them into our own. Mirror neurons make us especially vulnerable to this. Inside of our head, our brain thinks all of this is real, no matter how warped, twisted, or contrived the memories really are. Maybe there never was a cow named Valentine on my cousins' farm. No amount of digging around in my brain trying to remember her will prove it. And, because of the oil painting effect, the more effort I put into remembering her, the less likely I'll be able to recall her with any clarity at all.

Our sense of self, then, is not true in the normal sense of the word. Instead, it's a messy mix of constantly evolving memories, most of which are semi-true at best, that are passed back and forth between us and the people in our lives who serve as looking glasses.

As we narrate our past, we're also imagining possible future selves.[33] Some of these selves are the selves we think we ought to be, others are who we fear we'll be, and still others are versions of our selves we hope to be. We work these out in collaboration with others too.[34] Our looking glasses affirm or refute possibilities for our coming selves, encouraging us or casting doubt on this version or that. All their feedback shapes who we can imagine being tomorrow and the next day. And the self-fulfilling prophecy plays a role here too.

Our past self, our present self, and our future selves are all, in other words, social facts. From the moment we develop self-awareness, we begin constructing a self-concept out of our interactions with others, committing to memory a narrative about who we are, dismissing and misremembering things inconsistent with our self story, and imagining who we might be in the future. These experiences really do shape who we are, giving our self-concepts an impressive stability most of the time.

The precise nature of our consciousness, then, is a product of human interaction. Had we been born one hundred years ago, on the other side of the world, or into a different family, we'd be different, maybe a lot different than we are today. Of course, this doesn't mean that our self isn't *real*. Quite the contrary. To Durkheim's point, we are real because social facts are real. Surround yourself with different looking glasses, and you might change, but you'll change into a quite different *and equally real* version of yourself. Who will you be tomorrow? It depends. ∎

COMING UP...

IN THE INTRODUCTION, this book suggested that we're surrounded by *social* facts. This chapter made an argument that one of those facts is our sense of self. From our earliest moments, we look to others as an important source of self-understanding. And throughout life, we refine our self-concept. We internalize others' gazes but also choose looking glasses that reflect what we want to see. We resist and challenge some people's impressions of us too. But no matter what conclusions we come to, we don't imagine who we are in a social vacuum.

Out of these experiences, we develop a self-narrative. These stories serve a social purpose. They help us communicate to others who we *feel* we are and enable us to craft the kinds of relationships we need and desire. They're also the basis on which we plot our future selves, imagining ourselves on a coherent trajectory.

The next chapter will show that in becoming who we are, we become more than just social. We become *cultural*. Human groups collectively imbue the world around them with symbolic meaning. These meanings are arbitrary; they can be and often are different from group to group. But they're also social facts. So, to get along with others, we must become familiar with the symbolic meanings shared by members of our group and act accordingly.

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2
CULTURE & CONSTRUCTION

IN THIS CHAPTER...

THE LAST CHAPTER argued that the self is a social fact developed in concert with the people around us. This chapter explores those people. Its main argument is that all human groups have unique *cultures*, a word we use to describe shared ideas, as well as objects, practices, and bodies that reflect them.

- Humans engage with their natural environment, but they also act in relation to an intricate series of *social constructs*, defined as influential and shared interpretations of reality that vary across cultures.
- We learn these social constructs through *socialization*, a lifelong learning process by which we become members of our cultures and subcultures. Media is a source of this socialization. So are the people around us.
- Socialization is also a force behind what we value. Both our sense of right and wrong, and our rationales for why we believe what we do, have culture as their source. Hence, sociologists warn against *ethnocentrism*, or assuming that one's own culture is superior to the cultures of others.

Two research methods round out this chapter:

- *Social network analysis* involves the mapping of social ties and exchanges between them.
- *Biosocial research methods* investigate relationships between sociological variables and biological ones.

"The easiest way to get brainwashed is to be born."

—ROBERT ANTON WILSON

In 1893, the U.S. Supreme Court convened to decide a fateful case. Its task: to determine, once and for all, whether the tomato was a fruit or a vegetable. The case was brought by a family with the last name of Nix who had a tomato-importing business. At the time, the law required that taxes be

collected on imported vegetables but not fruit. The lawyers for the Nix family argued that the tomato was a fruit and, therefore, exempt from taxation.

Science was on their side. Botanists define fruit according to whether the structure plays a role in plant reproduction. Any plant product with one or more seeds is a fruit, whereas vegetables don't have seeds. All other plant products—stems, roots, leaves, and some seeds themselves—are vegetables. We call children the "fruit of our loins" (and not the "vegetables of our loins") for exactly this reason.

Most of us are not botanists, however; we're people who put food in our mouths. That is, we're generally more interested in how *we* use the parts of plants than in how *plants* use them. In the United States, we tend to divide plant products according to whether they're sweet or savory. If we eat them for dinner, they're vegetables. And if we eat them for dessert, they're fruit.

When the Nix family brought their question to the Court and the botanists made their case about the tomatoes, the justices said, "We don't care," or something to that effect. Here's some of the text of their unanimous opinion:

> Botanically speaking, tomatoes are the fruit of a vine. ......But in the common language of the people, whether sellers or consumers of provisions, all these are vegetables which are grown in kitchen gardens, and which, whether eaten cooked or raw, are ......usually served at dinner in, with, or after the soup, fish, or meats which constitute the principal part of the repast, and not, like fruits generally, as dessert.[1]

Tomatoes *are* fruit, in other words, but Americans prefer to think of them as vegetables. So, the Nix family had to pay the tax.

What is the tomato? Yes, it's a reproductive strategy for a plant indigenous to Mexico, but it's more than that to us. It's salsa, spaghetti with meatballs, a Bloody Mary, a BLT. To the Nix family, the tomato was their livelihood. To the Supreme Court, it was commerce: a product that could be taxed to build roads and bridges. To the chef, it's an ingredient: a source of sauces,

carrier of spices, and symbol of summertime. To the heckler, it's used as a classic insult, thrown at an entertainer who's bombing on stage. The tomato is all these things. In this the Supreme Court was right. What really matters to us isn't what the tomato *is*, but what we make of it.

The tomato is also an example of something that makes humans unusual among animals. Thanks to our powerful brains, we don't just encounter the world; we embellish it. We layer an intricate fantasy world onto reality. Just as we see criticism in a tossed tomato, we see love in a golden ring, rage in a middle finger, and friendship in a bracelet made of string. For humans, reality is embroidered with meaning, adorned with significance, and heavy with value.

We pay attention to this fantasy world if we know what's good for us. A red light doesn't mean stop—not *really*—but to ignore one is to risk injury, a fine, or a lawsuit. The lines on the map we call borders aren't natural, but cross one without a country's permission and we can get thrown in jail. We can try to use our middle finger to say "I love you," but it will take quite a bit of explaining. And if we keep putting tomatoes in the fruit salad, we'll stop getting invited to potlucks.

This chapter is about the ideas with which humans elaborate their lives. It's an introduction to [culture](#), the word we use to describe differences in groups' shared ideas, as well as the objects, practices, and bodies that reflect those ideas. It's also an exploration of [socialization](#), that lifelong learning process by which we become members of our cultures. Through socialization, we become [culturally competent](#), able to understand and navigate our cultures with ease. Let's start with social construction.

Glossary

culture
> differences in groups' shared ideas, as well as the objects, practices, and bodies that reflect those ideas

socialization
> the lifelong learning process by which we become members of our cultures

culturally competent
> able to understand and navigate our cultures with ease

Endnotes

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SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

By virtue of being different things to different people, the tomato is a [social construct](), an influential and shared interpretation of reality that will vary across time and space.[2] Social constructs emerge out of [social construction](), the process by which we layer objects with ideas, fold concepts into one another, and build connections between them. Generally, members of the same culture share similar social constructs. For this reason, they have staying power; no one person can change them at will. We can try, of course—hence, the tomato going all the way to the Supreme Court—but real change requires a culturewide shift.

Essentially all human communication depends on social constructs, starting with language. Even saying "hello" depends on them. An *h* represents a *huh* sound. Add it to the other line drawings—the swirly *e*, upright *l*s, and self-contained *o*—and you have a collection of letters and series of sounds we recognize as a friendly greeting. Language is merely a very complex and evolving set of social constructs.

But human language is far more expressive than mere letters and sounds. Everything is steeped in meaning. We communicate with cowboy hats, by how we cross our legs, and by whether we own a pit bull or a poodle. We can tell someone we love them with words. Or we can tell them with a thoughtful gift, a home-cooked meal, walks in the park, slow dancing, a hand on the small of the back, long mornings in bed, a "good night" text, or a soft touch. Thanks to social construction, everyday life is exponentially more eloquent than it would be otherwise.

Social constructs are often quite formidable social facts. Consider one of the most essential social constructs in American life: the zinc and copper coins, green pieces of paper, and electronic code we call money. These are mostly worthless in and of themselves, but we've agreed that they stand in for values. Thus, we're able to exchange them for an unimaginably wide range of necessities, luxuries, and experiences.

Money is entirely made up. A fiction. A lie. But it's powerful and coercive. In exchange for it, many of us will strain and sweat, tolerate boredom or disgust, spend our time and energy on strangers, and do things we quite dislike or perhaps even believe immoral. We do this with half or more of our waking lives, often until we're too old to do much of anything at all. Because money is how we survive in the world today, the vast majority of us are forced to do something to make it. And, if we can't make enough, we really do suffer.

As illustrated in Table 2.1, social constructs come in many varieties. Rings, middle fingers, and bracelets made of string—like dollar bills—are a type of social construct called a *signifier*, a thing that stands for something else: in these cases, love, anger, and friendship. Language is made up largely of signifiers. An *h* signifies *huh* and the word *hippopotamus* signifies a giant, gregarious, aquatic artiodactyl with stumpy legs and thick skin.
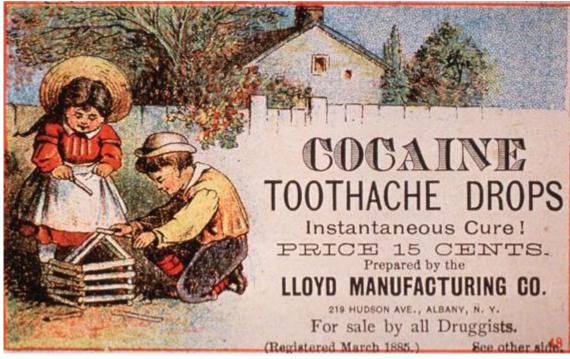
TABLE 2.1: Types of Social Constructs

Social Construct	Definition	Examples
Signifiers	things that stand for other things	emojis, a thumbs-up, diamond rings, the Christian cross
Categories	subsets of things that we believe are sufficiently similar to one another to be considered the same	"pets" (a subset of animals), "blue" (a subset of the spectrum), "blouses" (a subset of shirts)
Binaries	categories we see as opposites or otherwise in opposition	good and evil, friends and enemies, legal and illegal

Associations	ideas that have nothing special in common except for the fact that they're connected by a third idea	rainbows and flags (LGBTQIA pride), roses and diamonds (love), red and green (Christmas)
Sequences	ideas arranged into a specific chronological order	outline, draft, edit; hug, kiss, fondle; marry, buy a house, have kids
Hierarchies	ideas placed into ranked relationships	Nordstrom is higher end than Kohl's, mammals are more important than insects, it's better to be young than old

Social constructs also include *categories*, subsets of things that we believe are sufficiently similar to one another to be considered the same, yet different enough from other things to be considered distinct.[3] We put some physically altering substances into the category of "illegal drugs," for example, while others are categorized as "prescriptions." The same chemical substance might be called one or the other depending on how a person attains it and from whom. And sometimes we move substances from one category to the other; marijuana used to be illegal and now is a prescription in many states, whereas heroin used to be a prescription and is now illegal. Still other stimulants and depressants—like coffee, tea, soda, and beer—escape the categories altogether and are simply called "drinks." These categories are socially constructed. We accept them because they're familiar, not because they make sense. Because they're both in the category of "alcohol," for example, we associate beer with wine, though wine has at least as much in common with the grape juice we give to toddlers.

Sometimes categories are explicitly contrasted to one another in the form of *binaries*, categories we see as opposites. We oppose business to pleasure,

humans to animals, and married to single. But humans *are* animals and business can be pleasurable; some technically single people are all-but-married and some married people are all-but-single. We socially construct these categories as meaningfully opposed and nonoverlapping, even though life usually fails to obey such simple divisions.

This 1885 advertisement for cocaine recommends it as a cure for children's toothaches. Substances like cocaine, opium, and morphine used to be categorized as medicine but have since been recategorized as illegal drugs.

Within categories, ideas become linked by *association*. Associated ideas are ones with nothing particular in common except for the fact that they're connected by virtue of a third idea. Pigs and chickens, for instance, have no special relationship in nature, but bacon and eggs come together on our plates because they're linked by the idea of breakfast. We usually wear formal dresses with heels not because we couldn't wear sneakers, but because sneakers don't fall into the category of evening wear and dresses and heels do.

Finally, we socially construct sequences and hierarchies. *Sequences* are ideas arranged into a specific order. *Hierarchies* are ideas placed into ranked relationships. People generally believe, for example, that a "main course" should come after soup or salad and before a sweet dessert. That's a socially constructed sequence. Thanks in part to the Olympic medal ceremony, people also tend to think of gold as better than silver and silver as better than bronze. That's a socially constructed hierarchy.

Taken together, the universe of ideas and their relationships to one another form a [symbolic structure](#), a constellation of social constructs connected and opposed to one another in overlapping networks of meaning. Ideas fall into categories, often multiple ones, connecting across and within them to other ideas, which are linked in sequences and ranked in hierarchies, connecting still to other ideas. We call it a structure because it's a complex and relatively rigid network. The meanings it contains allow us to communicate with each other, but the symbolic structure is unyielding, making it difficult to communicate in ways that it doesn't support. In the same way that it's hard to say "vacation" with the word "hippopotamus," in other words, it's hard to say "Great job!" with a thumbs-down.

In the symbolic structure that most of us are probably familiar with, for example, blue-collar work is associated with certain kinds of vehicles, like the pickup truck. Trucks are tied to country music and cowboy hats, associated via the category of rural life, which is opposed in a binary to urban life in cities. People in cities are more likely than people in the country to vote Democratic, the political party signified by the color blue. In that context, to be blue is to be a "lefty." We call our political parties "right" and "left," which implies an opposed binary that makes Republicans and Democrats into moral opponents. And some would say that Republicans, more so than Democrats, value blue-collar work.

Maybe that all sounded familiar, but maybe it didn't. There's no universal symbolic structure. Signifiers, sequences, associations, and other social constructs aren't the same everywhere. That's because the symbolic structure varies by culture.

Glossary

social construct
> an influential and shared interpretation of reality that will vary across time and space

social construction
> the process by which we layer objects with ideas, fold concepts into one another, and build connections between them

symbolic structure
> a constellation of social constructs connected and opposed to one another in overlapping networks of meaning

Endnotes

- Note 02: Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Doubleday, 1966).[Return to reference 2](#)
- Note 03: Eviatar Zerubavel, "Lumping and Splitting: Notes on Social Classification," *Sociological Forum* 11, no. 3 (1996): 421–433.[Return to reference 3](#)

CULTURE

Culture is a wide-ranging word that sweeps into its definition most of the things about people that vary from place to place. This includes *cultural objects*, like the stop sign. These are natural items given symbolic meaning, or natural resources extracted and molded to serve cultural purposes. It also includes *cultural cognitions*, like the idea that red means stop. These are shared ideas and values. The term also refers to *cultural practices*, like the fact that most of us stop (or almost stop) at stop signs most of the time. Practices are habits, routines, and rituals that people frequently perform. And, finally, cultural practices produce *cultural bodies*, culturally influenced shapes and sizes, capacities, and physiological processes. When our foot moves to the brake reflexively when we see a stop sign coming, for example, it's because our body has been culturally conditioned to respond in just that way.

Human beings are not unique in having cultures. *Social learning*—or the transmission of knowledge and practices from one individual to another via observation, instruction, or reward and punishment—has been documented in rats, birds, whales and dolphins, nonhuman primates, and more. Different groups of orcas (also known as killer whales), for example, have different languages. From one group to the next, their sets of calls and whistles are "as different as Greek and Russian."[4] Small pods have distinct dialects. Different groups of orcas also eat different foods, even when they share potential prey. Some groups eat marine mammals like sea lions; others only eat fish. Scientists have observed that the cultural differences are so great that orcas generally won't mate with orcas from other clans.

Though humans are not the only animals to have culture, it's probably fair to say that we're *especially* cultural. For hundreds of thousands of years, we've passed down ideas, behaviors, and objects from one generation to another, relieving each new generation of the need to acquire knowledge from scratch and giving them the opportunity to build on what others have learned. This is true in arenas as wide-ranging as art, mathematics, and human rights. As the German sociologist Karl Mannheim observed:

"Strictly speaking it is incorrect to say that the single individual thinks. Rather it is more correct to insist that they participate in thinking further what others have thought before them."[5]

When we speak of culture, then, we're really talking about *cumulative* culture. Those of us alive today are merely at the forefront of hundreds of thousands of generations. We're modifying, advancing, and revolutionizing what we've inherited. Often, we make our societies better; sometimes we make them worse. Human cultures, in other words, evolve, though not always in the direction we desire. They've been doing so, along with human bodies, since the first *Homo sapiens* walked the earth.

Anthropologists call this parallel biological and cultural evolution *dual inheritance theory*.[6] It's the notion that humans are products of the interaction of genetic and cultural evolution. Our genetic evolution influences our cultural evolution, and vice versa. Every human society has specific practices that guide how we accomplish basic biological necessities like eating, reproducing, and staying warm and dry. And, as our cultural practices shift, they put pressure on our genes, newly selecting for some and making others newly disadvantageous.

Cultural innovation, in fact, is probably why humans became suddenly and substantially smarter around 70,000 years ago. The innovation was fire.[7] Cooking made food more digestible, giving humans the ability to consume the extra energy needed to build bigger brains. We call this the cognitive revolution, and it's why we named ourselves *Homo sapiens* (Latin for "wise man"). The practice of cooking, a *cultural* innovation, changed the human body and, thus, the future of our species.

No need to reinvent the wheel. Human culture is cumulative, so each generation inherits the knowledge of their parents, builds upon it, then passes more developed knowledge down to their own children, and so on.

As the art of cooking was passed down across generations of people who spread out across the globe, it also evolved. Human creativity interacted with our diverse environments, producing an incredible range of diets. In Peru, potatoes account for 74 percent of caloric intake; Peruvians cultivate over 3,000 varieties.[8] In Somalia, more than half of calories consumed come from milk, mostly from camels.[9] Traditionally, in Greenland, 75 percent of Inuit calories came from fat harvested from marine mammals. Like orcas, our cuisines vary by clan.[10]

The same variety characterizes our architecture, fashion, rituals, and routines. This cultural diversity makes travel captivating. It can be deliciously energizing, a feast for the senses that inspires us to see our environment anew. Travel can also be quite disorienting. Our cultural competency is compromised; we can't quite be sure what's going on or how to communicate effectively. We call this feeling *culture shock*, and it's a reminder that we aren't born knowing how to get along as a member of a human group. This is something we have to learn from others and it's a lifelong journey, involving adaptation to new, contradictory, and constantly changing cultures. This lifelong journey is called socialization