



Society and Culture

Sociology

Study Guide

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Summary

What Is a Society?

According to sociologists, a **Society** is a group of people with common territory, interaction, and culture. **Social Groups** consist of two or more people who interact and identify with one another.

Territory: Most countries have formal boundaries and territory that the world recognizes as theirs. However, a society's boundaries don't have to be geopolitical borders, such as the one between the United States and Canada. Instead, members of a society, as well as nonmembers, must recognize particular land as belonging to that society.

Example: *The society of the Yanomamo has fluid but definable land boundaries. Located in a South American rain forest, Yanomamo territory extends along the border of Brazil and Venezuela. While outsiders would have a hard time determining where Yanomamo land begins and ends, the Yanomamo and their neighbors have no trouble discerning which land is theirs and which is not.*

Interaction: Members of a society must come in contact with one another. If a group of people within a country has no regular contact with another group, those groups cannot be considered part of the same society. Geographic distance and language barriers can separate societies within a country.

Example: *Although Islam was practiced in both parts of the country, the residents of East Pakistan spoke Bengali, while the residents of West Pakistan spoke Urdu. Geographic distance,*



Bangladesh. Within each newly formed society, people had a common culture, history, and language, and distance was no longer a factor.

Culture: People of the same society share aspects of their culture, such as language or beliefs. **Culture** refers to the language, values, beliefs, behavior, and material objects that constitute a people's way of life. It is a defining element of society.

Example: *Some features of American culture are the English language, a democratic system of government, cuisine (such as hamburgers and corn on the cob), and a belief in individualism and freedom.*

Pluralism

The United States is a society composed of many groups of people, some of whom originally belonged to other societies. Sociologists consider the United States a **Pluralistic Society**, meaning it is built of many groups. As societies modernize, they attract people from countries where there may be economic hardship, political unrest, or religious persecution. Since the industrialized countries of the West were the first to modernize, these countries tend to be more pluralistic than countries in other parts of the world.

Many people came to the United States between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries. Fleeing poverty and religious persecution, these immigrants arrived in waves from Europe and Asia and helped create the pluralism that makes the United States unique.

Pluralism In The Neighborhood

Both cities and regions reflect pluralism in the United States. Most major American cities have areas in which people from particular backgrounds are concentrated, such as Little Italy in New York, Chinatown in San Francisco, and Little Havana in Miami. Regionally, people of Mexican descent tend to live in those states that border Mexico. Individuals of Cuban descent are concentrated in Florida. Spanish-speaking people from other Caribbean islands, such as Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, are more likely to live in the Northeast.

Assimilation



Some practices that are common in other societies will inevitably offend or contradict the values and beliefs of the new society. Groups seeking to become part of a pluralistic society often have to give up many of their original traditions in order to fit in—a process known as **Assimilation**.

Example: *When people arrive in the United States from other countries, they most likely speak a foreign language. As they live here, they generally learn at least some English, and many become fluent. Their children are most likely bilingual, speaking English as well as the language of their parents. By the third generation, the language originally spoken by their grandparents is often lost.*

In pluralistic societies, groups do not have to give up all of their former beliefs and practices. Many groups within a pluralistic society retain their ethnic traditions.

Example: *Although Chinese immigrants started arriving in the United States 150 years ago, Chinese-American communities still follow some traditions, such as celebrating the Lunar New Year.*

Melting Pot?

The United States is commonly referred to as a **Melting Pot**, a society in which people from different societies blend together into a single mass. Some sociologists prefer the term “multicultural,” pointing out that even if a group has been in this country for many generations, they probably still retain some of their original heritage. The term “**Multiculturalism**” recognizes the original heritages of millions of Americans, noting that Americans who are originally from other societies do not necessarily have to lose their individual markers by melting into the mainstream.

Equality

In a truly pluralistic society, no one group is officially considered more influential than another. In keeping with this belief, the United States does not, for example, put a legal quota on how many Italian Americans can vote in national elections, how many African Americans may run for public

informal mechanisms, such as prejudice and discrimination, work to keep many groups out of the political process or out of certain neighborhoods.

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