



Chapter 6

STRUCTURES AND INSTITUTIONS

INTRODUCTION

Social life is highly organized and standardized in many ways. But it is not always clear *how* this organization occurs because much of it is implicit and taken for granted. Sociologists are interested in uncovering this hidden organization of society and a key way of doing so is through researching social structures and institutions. This chapter will begin by defining social structures and institutions before examining four important institutions which shape our behaviour and help to organize our social world: family, education, media and work. In our Provocation, we question whether Western societies are really meritocratic or whether the term itself fosters inequality.

THE STRUCTURES OF SOCIETY

Ever since the work of Marx, Durkheim and Weber, sociologists have approached society from two different perspectives (see [Chapter 4](#)). One group has tried to understand how and why individuals act, looking at their agency and the meanings developed in social interaction (a Weberian approach). The other perspective, the one we focus on in this chapter, interrogates the social structures of society – invisible frameworks which organize the social world around us and our interactions with each other (the approach of Marx and Durkheim).

A structural perspective contends that these structures exist outside of, and have primacy over, the individual. Individuals are constrained to act in the limited ways that are available in society (we discussed the *structure-agency debate* in [Chapter 3](#)). Social structures are supported, maintained and reproduced through social institutions, which we now turn to look at.

What is an institution?

When you hear the word ‘institution’, what do you think of? Perhaps a place or building, possibly an old hospital for people with mental health problems. Yet when sociologists discuss institutions, they are most often talking about social institutions, which sit within the wider structures in society. Social institutions can be defined as

‘systems of established and embedded social rules that structure social interactions’ (Hodgson 2006: 18). In other words, they embody the ‘rules of the game’ (North 1990: 3), determining how to behave appropriately in a particular society.

Some of these rules are upheld by **formal institutions**, such as the law, and are enforced by official agencies such as police, prosecutors and the judiciary. Formal institutions will often have buildings or places associated with them – we can think of courthouses that relate to the judiciary; prisons that relate to the police; and schools that relate to education. Yet the buildings themselves do not make the institution, they just consolidate it. Formal institutions are comprised of expectations and conventions, while the buildings are the physical spaces where these expectations are enforced.

Other rules are learned through **informal institutions**, like cultural customs and taboos, where rules are not written and enforced by agencies but are taken for granted and important to fitting in. These norms, usually unwritten, are created, communicated and enforced outside officially sanctioned channels.

Think about driving a car. Driving has many rules and conventions, some of which are upheld by formal institutions and others by informal institutions. Adhering to the speed limit and not driving while drunk are examples of conventions that are transmitted by the formal institution of law and enforced by agencies like the police. However, raising your hand to thank another driver who waited for you is a convention that is transmitted informally – by word of mouth and observation. These kind of actions are not enshrined in law but you might face social reprimand if you do not follow these informal rules.

Both formal and informal institutions can constrain and enable individual behaviour. The influence of institutions and the conventions they transmit means that individuals are pressured to act consistently with the dominant norms and expectations of their society. This is inherently constraining because it places limitations on people’s behaviours. But, institutions and conventions can also give us choices and make life easier and safer. Take again the example of driving: traffic lights force us to stop in particular places where we might not want to, but this also means that traffic flows more freely and safely.

Organizations are important parts of social institutions, although they can be conflated. For example, a university is an organization which sits within the larger institution of higher education. There are lots of universities (organizations), but only one overarching institution of higher education that educates adults to a particular standard.

Yet some sociologists will refer to organizations, such as an individual university, as an institution. This is because although the organization is part of a larger social institution, the organization itself might have its own particular norms and rules. This makes it an institution itself, while also being an organization within a larger institution.

Organizations and institutions tend to develop particular cultures which are unique to them, known as *institutional* or *organizational cultures*. These cultures can range from benevolent to exclusionary, which means that they purposefully or unknowingly exclude certain groups of people. This exclusion can be symbolic, where a group is made to feel unwelcome, or literal, where certain people cannot be a part of an organization because of some characteristic (like age, gender or race). We discuss issues of social exclusion and division in [Chapter 7](#).

Formal institutions: rules, such as the law, that are enforced by official agencies

Informal institutions: cultural customs and taboos, where rules are not written and enforced but are important to ‘fitting in’ in a culture

Organizations: physical entities that consolidate the norms and values and do the work of a particular institution