The human interaction that is the focus of role behavior takes place in groups and within the context of a society. In this section, we will examine the features of group structure and the characteristics of the most common types of groups. We also will explore the characteristics of the various types of societies that exist in the world.

What Is a Group?

A group is a set of two or more people who interact on the basis of shared expectations and who possess some degree of common identity. A group can be very small—two people on a date, for example. Or it can be very large—500 soldiers at boot camp. A group can be very intimate, as in the case of the family. Or it can be very formal, as in the case of people attending a conference.

Our definition sets forth four requirements for a group. First, there must be two or more people. Even if you are with just one other person, you are part of a group. Second, there must be interaction. If you exchange greetings with a friend in the hall at school, interaction has taken place. Interaction occurs whenever the actions of one person cause another person or persons to act. Third, the members of the group must have shared expectations. Fourth, the members must possess some sense of common identity.

The last three requirements—interaction, shared expectations, and a common identity—are the factors that distinguish a group from an aggregate or a social category. When people gather in the same place at the same time but lack organization or lasting patterns of interaction, they form an aggregate. People waiting to board a plane or standing in a ticket line at the movies are examples of aggregates. In the case of social categories, it is not necessary for the people to interact in any way. A social category simply is a means of classifying people according to a shared trait or a common status. Students, women, and the elderly are examples of social categories.

Groups can differ in many ways. Three of the most common ways in which groups differ are in terms of the length of time they remain together, their organizational structure, and their size.

Not only do these girls form a group, but they also are part of the social category of teenagers.
The members of this Native American family make up a primary group. It is within the family that most people first learn about their cultural backgrounds. Because family relationships are long term and intimate, the lessons learned within this primary group are particularly important.

**Time.** Some groups we participate in meet once and never meet again. Other groups, such as the family, exist for many years. Most groups fall somewhere in between these two extremes. Regardless of the type of group, however, contact is not continuous. Few people spend 24 hours a day with their families, for example. Instead, family members meet as a group during different periods of the day, such as at breakfast or dinner.

**Organization.** The organization of groups can be either formal or informal. In a formal group, the structure, goals, and activities of the group are clearly defined. In an informal group, on the other hand, there is no official structure or established rules of conduct. The student government in your school is a formal group. All meetings are conducted according to specific rules. The goals of the group are stated in the constitution, and norms for all occasions are listed in the bylaws. A set of officers carries out specific roles in the group. Your circle of friends, on the other hand, would be an example of an informal group.

**Size.** Groups also can vary in size. Some groups are very small, while other groups are enormous. The smallest group possible, a group with two members, is called a dyad. In a dyad, each member of the group has direct control over the group's existence. If one member leaves the group, the group ends. Consequently, decision making in a dyad can be difficult. If the two members fail to agree, one member must convince the other member to change his or her position or the group may cease to exist.

According to sociologist Georg Simmel, a major change occurs in groups when group size increases from two to three members. A threeperson group is called a triad. In a triad, the group takes on a life of its own, independent of any individual member. No one person can disband the group. Also, decision making in a triad usually is easier than in a dyad, since two-against-one alliances can form in cases of disagreement.

How large can a small group be? Sociologists consider a small group to be a group with few enough members that everyone is able to interact on a face-to-face basis. They have found that 15 is about the largest number of people that can work well in one group. When the group is larger than that, the members have a tendency to sort themselves into smaller groups.

**Types of Groups**

We all are members of different types of groups. Among the most common types of groups are primary groups, secondary groups, reference groups, ingroups, and outgroups.

**Primary and Secondary Groups.** One of the easiest ways to classify groups is on the basis of the degree of intimacy that occurs among group members. When social scientists study group relationships, they often start with a description of the two opposite extremes. Between the extremes they run a line called a continuum. Group relations can then be arranged on this line so that the continuum shows the range of possible relationships. One such continuum shows the range of primary—secondary group relationships.

At the left-hand extreme of the continuum are primary groups. A primary group is a small group of people who interact over a relatively long
period of time on a direct and personal basis. In primary group relationships, the entire personality of the individual is taken into account. The relationships are intimate and often face to face. Communication is deep and intense, the structure is informal, and personal satisfactions are of primary importance. Family relationships probably are the most primary of all our group relationships.

On the opposite end of the continuum are secondary groups. A secondary group is a group in which interaction is impersonal and temporary in nature. Secondary group relationships involve a reaction to only a part of the individual’s personality. The person’s importance to the group lies in the function that he or she performs in the group. Secondary group relationships also tend to be casual and limited in personal involvement. An individual can be replaced easily by anyone who can carry out the specific tasks needed to achieve the group’s goals. This characteristic is particularly important because secondary groups generally are organized around specific goals.

Suppose, for example, an employer hires someone to unload sacks of cement from railroad cars. The employer is not concerned about the person’s entire personality, whether he or she attends religious services regularly, has leisure-time activities, or has gleaming white teeth. The employer is interested only in one aspect of the employee’s personality—his or her ability to unload the bags of cement. If the person cannot handle the responsibilities of the job, the employer is likely to find someone else who can.

Actually, many of our relationships probably fall closer to the middle than to the ends of the continuum. And this is the purpose of the continuum—to show the degree to which a relationship possesses either of the extreme characteristics. The diagram on this page shows how we can place our various relationships on the primary–secondary continuum.

It also is possible for primary and secondary relationships to exist in the same group. In most secondary groups to which we belong, we develop some primary relationships. On the job, for example, many relationships are quite formal and functional. Employees have specific tasks to perform. Most people, however, form primary relationships with some of the people at work. They do this simply because they enjoy being with these people.

**Reference Groups.** People usually perform their social roles and judge their own behaviors with reference to the standards set by a particular group or groups. They do not even have to belong to the group. As long as people identify with the group’s standards and attitudes, the group influences their behavior. Any group with whom individuals identify and whose attitudes and values they often adopt is called a reference group.

Friendship groups or school clubs serve as reference groups for many students. Members of a particular occupation often serve as reference groups for adults. As children grow up, or as adults adjust to changing social conditions, they often change their reference groups. The choice of reference groups is particularly important because groups can have both positive and negative effects on behavior.
Ingroups and Outgroups. All groups have boundaries—methods of distinguishing between members and nonmembers. When a group's boundaries are clearly marked, group members tend to think in terms of ingroups and outgroups. The group that a person belongs to and identifies with is called an ingroup. Any group that the person does not belong to or identify with is called an outgroup. Both primary and secondary groups can serve as ingroups and outgroups.

Most ingroups exhibit three characteristics. First, group members tend to separate themselves from other groups through the use of symbols. For example, groups often use names, slogans, clothing, or badges as forms of identification. Second, members view themselves in terms of positive images, while they view outgroups in terms of negative images. Finally, ingroups generally compete with outgroups, even to the point of engaging in conflict.

Social Networks. We all belong to more than one group and interact with more than one set of people. The web of relationships that is formed by the sum total of a person’s interactions with other people is termed a social network. Social networks include both direct and indirect relationships. Direct relationships consist of the people we interact with in our primary and secondary group relationships. Indirect relationships include the people we know or who know us but with whom we have little or no interaction, such as friends of a friend.

Unlike actual groups, social networks do not have clear boundaries and do not give rise to a common sense of identity. They do, however, provide us with a feeling of community and with opportunities for career and social advancement. In some instances, knowing the “right” person can mean the difference between getting and not getting a job. Social networks also provide a support system that can help us through stressful periods. The Case Study on page 75 discusses the role of social networks among the elderly.

Types of Societies

Societies can be classified in a variety of ways. One of the most common ways in which sociologists classify societies is by their subsistence strategies. A subsistence strategy is the way in which a society uses technology to provide for the needs of its members.

When societies are classified by subsistence strategy, it is possible to place them on a continuum from simple to complex. At the far left of the continuum are those societies in which the majority of the population is engaged in meeting basic needs, particularly the need for food. The division of labor—the specialization by individuals or groups in the performance of specific economic activities—is very simple in these societies. As we move toward the right on the continuum, subsistence strategies become more efficient. Consequently, it takes fewer people to provide the necessary food and basic goods. This allows the division of labor to become more complex as individuals pursue new occupations.

Sociologists classify societies as either preindustrial, industrial, or postindustrial on the basis of subsistence strategies. In a preindustrial society, food production—which is carried out through the use of human and animal labor—is the main economic activity. Preindustrial societies can be subdivided into hunting and gathering, pastoral, horticultural, or agricultural, depending on
The Social Networks of the Elderly

We have defined a social network as the web of relationships that is formed by the sum total of an individual's interactions with other people. The people who make up a social network—family, friends, neighbors, business associates, and members of the community—engage in a series of reciprocal exchanges, sometimes offering help and support and at other times receiving it.

The composition of a person's social network changes over time. As an adolescent, family and friends tend to occupy the majority of positions in a person's social network. As an adult, neighbors, business associates, and members of the community play increasingly important roles.

The social networks of the elderly have long been of interest to sociologists. The general public sometimes views the elderly as being dependent on society. Their participation in society is viewed as a one-way receipt of services rather than as a reciprocal exchange. Sociologists have found, however, that as a group the elderly have much to offer. Most of the elderly successfully play out the many roles that are associated with being family members, friends, neighbors, good citizens, and community volunteers.

Strong social networks are extremely important for the elderly. Most elderly people wish to remain independent as long as possible. One way in which independence can be maintained is through establishing reciprocal networks with their families. In this exchange process, the elderly receive affection, comfort, help, and support from their families. In return, the elderly provide help to their children in the form of gifts and money, baby-sitting services, affection, and advice. Furthermore, grandparents, particularly grandmothers, often become the center of family activities, serving to hold the family together.

Another way in which the elderly maintain their independence is through the establishment of social networks with friends and neighbors. These networks are based on a mutual system of exchange. All members of the network socialize with one another, share feelings, and offer mutual support and assistance. Studies have shown that the elderly depend on their friends and neighbors for day-to-day help, turning to their families only in times of emergency or when they need major assistance.

Many elderly people also remain active in community life. For instance, they form networks with many volunteer associations, such as clubs, churches, and synagogues. The Foster Grandparent program is a voluntary association that has proved to be beneficial to children and "grandparents" alike. Research has documented the positive effects that older volunteers can have on the emotional and intellectual development of children.

Community service can play a very important role in the life of the elderly. Community-based social networks can help older people develop new roles when their former roles of workers or full-time parents have ended. The skills that people used on the job, for example, often can be put to valuable use in the community on a volunteer basis. Two organizations that rely on older individuals as a source of volunteers are the Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) and the Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE). RSVP places volunteers in settings such as schools, hospitals, libraries, courtrooms, day-care centers, and nursing homes. SCORE volunteers offer management assistance to small businesses and community organizations.

As we move into the twenty-first century, the social networks of the elderly will take on added importance. Already in some places around the nation, the elderly are serving as a reliable pool of part-time workers. This trend will undoubtedly continue as our population continues to age.
The Fulani of northern Africa are pastoralists who rely on domesticated animals for subsistence.

their level of technology and mode of subsistence. In an **industrial society**, the mechanized production of goods is the main economic activity. In a **postindustrial society**, on the other hand, economic activity centers on the production of information and the provision of services.

**Hunting and Gathering Societies.** The main form of subsistence in a **hunting and gathering society** is the daily collection of wild plants and animals. Because hunters and gatherers must move around frequently in search of food, they do not build permanent villages or create a wide variety of artifacts. The need for mobility also serves to limit the size of hunting and gathering societies. Such societies generally consist of fewer than 40 people and almost never exceed 100 people. Statuses within the group are relatively equal and decisions are reached through general agreement. The family forms the main social unit, with most societal members being related by birth or by marriage. This type of organization means that most social functions—including production and education—are carried out by the family.

**Pastoral Societies.** Pastoralism represents a slightly more efficient form of subsistence. Rather than searching for food on a daily basis, members of a **pastoral society** rely on domesticated herd animals to meet the bulk of their dietary needs. Because the size of herds can be increased over time, pastoralists are able to produce more food than is immediately needed. Increased food supplies enable pastoral societies to support larger populations. Surplus food also leads to the development of economic and political institutions.

Surplus food gives rise to an economic institution by creating inequalities in wealth and by providing goods that can be traded with other societies. A political institution arises as some individuals acquire power through increased wealth. The transmission of wealth and power from generation to generation within a family forms the basis of hereditary chieftainships, the typical form of government in pastoral societies.

Most pastoral societies move regularly in search of new grazing land for their animals. In some instances, all members of the society move with the herds, trading with other societies for the crops needed to supplement their diets. In other instances, some members of the society remain in villages where they grow their own crops.

**Horticultural Societies.** Vegetables grown in garden plots that have been cleared from the jun-
gle or forest provide the main source of food in a **horticultural society**. The most common technique used to clear plots is the “slash and burn” method. In this method, the wild vegetation is cut and burned and the ashes are used as fertilizer. After clearing a plot, horticulturalists cultivate the land for one or more seasons. Cultivation is carried out using human labor and simple tools such as hoes and digging sticks.

When the land becomes barren, the horticulturalists clear a new plot and leave the old plot to revert to its natural state. After several years, they return to the original plot and begin the process again. By rotating their garden plots, horticulturalists can stay in one area for a fairly long period of time. This allows them to build semipermanent or permanent villages. The size of the villages depends on the amount of land available for farming. Villages can range from as few as 30 people to as many as 2,000 people.

Economic and political institutions are better developed in horticultural societies than they are in pastoral societies. This is due in large part to the more settled nature of horticultural life. Surplus food once again leads to the accumulation of wealth and different levels of power within society. Thus hereditary chiefships also are characteristic of horticultural societies, as is trade. In more advanced horticultural societies, trade and wars between societies serve to strengthen the economic and political institutions.

Food surpluses also mean that some people are freed from the need to produce food. Specialized roles thus are a part of horticultural life. Among the most important roles are traders, shamans (religious leaders), and craftspeople. Role specialization, in conjunction with the relatively permanent village life, allows horticulturalists to create a wide variety of artifacts.

**Agricultural Societies.** In an **agricultural society**, draft animals and plows are used in the tilling of fields. This technological innovation allows agriculturalists to plant more crops than is possible when only human labor is used. Crop yields are further increased by irrigation. Unlike horticulturalists, who must wait for the rainy season before planting, agriculturalists can plant at various times during the year and bring water to the fields through canals. In addition, irrigation makes it possible for a field to be used year after year. Terracing—the practice of cutting fields into the side of hills—also increases crop yields by making additional lands available for farming.

Higher crop yields mean that agricultural societies can support populations that run into the millions. Higher crop yields also mean that fewer people are needed to work the fields. Consequently, although most people still work in food production, a sizable percentage of the population is able to engage in specialized roles. Specialization, in turn, leads to the development of cities, as individuals engaged in specialized roles come together in central areas.

As the number of cities within a society increases, power often becomes concentrated in the hands of a single individual. This power is transferred from generation to generation, usually in the form of a hereditary monarchy. In more complex agricultural societies, the government appears for the first time as a separate institution. The tendency for agricultural societies to engage in warfare means that a formal military structure also arises. To assist in warfare, agricultural societies often construct roads and build navies.

All of these factors work together to increase trade in agricultural societies. Increased trade, in turn, leads to a number of significant cultural advances. To facilitate trade, for instance, **barter**—the practice of exchanging one good for another—is replaced by the use of money as the medium of exchange. In addition, a system of writing is developed to assist the government, landowners, and traders in keeping records.

It is with agricultural societies that sharp status differences first arise. Most people in an agricultural society fall into one of two groups: landowners or peasants. These two groups are at opposite ends of the social ladder. The small group of landowners controls the wealth and power in society. The large peasant group provides the labor on which the landowners’ wealth and power depend.

**Industrial Societies.** In industrial societies, the emphasis shifts from the production of food to the production of manufactured goods. This shift is made possible by changes in production methods. In preindustrial societies, food and goods are produced using human and animal labor. Production is slow and the number of goods that
can be produced is limited by the number of available workers. In industrial societies, on the other hand, the bulk of production is carried out through the use of machines. Thus production can be increased by adding more machines or by developing new technologies.

The use of machines in the production process affects all features of industrial society, beginning with the size of the population and the nature of the economy. Industrialization affects population size by increasing the amount of food that can be produced. The more food that is produced, the more people the society can support. Industrialization changes the nature of the economy by reducing the demand for agricultural laborers. These workers are free to transfer their labors to the production of goods. The size of the industrial work force increases as new technologies make it possible to manufacture a wider variety of goods.

Industrialization also changes the location of work activities. In preindustrial societies, most economic activities are carried out within the bounds of the family setting. With the coming of machines, however, production moves from the home to factories. This, in turn, encourages urbanization—the concentration of the population in cities. People move off the farms and to the cities to be near the major sources of employment. As a result, much daily interaction takes place in secondary groups.

In addition to changing the location of work, industrialization changes the nature of work. In preindustrial societies, craftspeople are responsible for manufacturing an entire product. With the rise of machines, however, the goal becomes efficiency. To increase efficiency, the production process is divided into a series of specific tasks, with each task being assigned to a specific person. Thus an individual seldom completes an entire product. Instead, the worker performs the same task over and over. Although this greatly increases productivity, it serves to reduce the level of skill required of most workers and tends to create boredom on the job.

Industrialization also changes the role of the family in society. In preindustrial societies, the family is the primary social institution. Production and education, for instance, are the responsibility of the family. This is not true in industrial societies, however. Not only does production take place outside the bounds of the family, so does education. The need for mass literacy leads industrial societies to establish programs of mandatory education. The role of religion in society also is changed by industrialization. In advanced industrial societies, religious beliefs often must compete with the values and beliefs presented by science, education, and the government.

One of the positive effects of industrialization is the freedom to compete for social position. In preindustrial societies, most social statuses are ascribed. Thus it is difficult for individuals to work their way up the social ladder. In industrial societies, on the other hand, most statuses are achieved. As a result, individuals have more control over their positions in the social structure.

Postindustrial Societies. We usually think of the United States as an industrial society. And without a doubt, the nation does produce a wide range of goods. But in terms of the major emphasis in the economy, the United States, like many Western nations and Japan, actually is a postindustrial society. In a postindustrial society, much of the economy is involved in the production of information and the provision of services. In the United States, for instance, less than 3 percent of
the work force is employed in agriculture and less than 26 percent is employed in the production of goods.

Many significant social changes result from the transition from an industrial society to a postindustrial society. The standard of living, for instance, becomes higher as wages increase for much of the population and as science and technology improve the quality of life. A wider range of employment opportunities and an increased emphasis on education also affect the standard of living by making it easier for people to move up the social ladder through career advancement.

In general, postindustrial societies place strong emphasis on the roles of science and education in society. The future is seen as being dependent on technological advances. The rights of individuals and the search for personal fulfillment also take on added importance. Belief in these rights leads to a strong emphasis on social equality and democracy. We will examine the characteristics of postindustrialism more thoroughly in Chapter 13.

**Contrasting Societies.** Sociologists have long been interested in how the social structures of preindustrial and industrial societies differ. In 1893, for instance, Emile Durkheim introduced the concepts of mechanical and organic solidarity to describe the types of social relationships found in preindustrial and industrial societies. According to Durkheim, preindustrial societies are held together by mechanical solidarity—the close-knit social relationships that result when a small group of people share the same values and perform the same tasks.

As the division of labor within societies becomes more complex, mechanical solidarity gives way to the organic solidarity that is characteristic of industrial societies. Organic solidarity is the impersonal social relationships that arise with increased job specialization. This increased specialization means that individuals no longer can provide for all of their own needs. Thus they become dependent on others for aspects of their survival. As a result, many societal relationships are based on need rather than on shared values.

The German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (TURN-yeas) (1855–1936) also was interested in the ways in which simple and complex societies differ. Tönnies was able to distinguish two ideal types of societies based on the structure of social relationships and the degree of shared values among societal members. He called these two types of societies Gemeinschaft (ga-MINE-shoft), which is the German word for "community," and Gesellschaft (ga-ZELL-shoft), which is the German word for "society."

**Gemeinschaft** refers to societies in which most members know one another. Relationships in such societies are close and activities center on the family and the community. In a Gemeinschaft, people share a strong sense of group solidarity. A preindustrial society and a rural village in a more complex society are examples of a Gemeinschaft.

In a Gesellschaft, on the other hand, most social relationships are based on need rather than on emotion. Thus relationships in a Gesellschaft are impersonal and often temporary. Traditional values generally are weak in such societies, and individual goals are more important than group goals. A modern urban society such as the United States is an example of a Gesellschaft.

**SECTION 2 REVIEW**

**DEFINE** dyad, triad, small group, social network

1. **Identifying Ideas** (a) What is a group? (b) Describe three of the most common features that are used to distinguish among groups.

2. **Organizing Ideas** What are the main characteristics of the five types of groups discussed in this section?

3. **Summarizing Ideas** List the characteristics of hunting and gathering, pastoral, horticultural, agricultural, industrial, and postindustrial societies.

4. **Understanding Ideas** (a) Describe what is meant by mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity. (b) What characteristics define a society as being either Gemeinschaft or Gesellschaft?