

[See this page in the course material.](#)

Learning Outcomes

- Describe the relationship between culture, society, and social institutions
- Identify and define social institutions

As you recall from earlier modules, **culture** describes a group's shared norms (or acceptable behaviors) and values, whereas **society** describes a group of people who live in a defined geographical area, and who interact with one another and share a common culture. For example, the United States is a society that encompasses many cultures. **Social institutions** are mechanisms or patterns of social order focused on meeting social needs, such as government, economy, education, family, healthcare, and religion. Some sociological methods focus on examining social institutions over time, or compare them to social institutions in other parts of the world. In the United States, for example, there is a system of free public education but no universal healthcare program, which is not the case in many other affluent, democratic countries. Throughout the rest of this course, we will devote much of our attention to studying these specific social institutions.

What behavioral rules are in effect when you encounter an acquaintance at school, work, or in the grocery store? Generally, we do not step back to consider all of the intricacies of such normative rules. We may simply say "Hello!" and ask, "How was your weekend?" or offer some other trivial question meant to be a friendly greeting. Rarely do we physically embrace or even touch the individual, and this is often because in *our* culture we see this as the norm, or the standard of acceptable social behavior. Only when confronted with a different norm do we begin to see cultural differences or even understand that this everyday behavior is part of a larger socialization process. In other cultures, not kissing and/or hugging could be viewed as rude, but in the United States, we have fairly rigid rules about personal space.

Watch It



Figure 1. The apps on a phone are like the cultural components of society.

One way to think about the relationship between society and culture is to consider the characteristics of a phone. The phone itself is like society, and the apps on the phone are like culture:

- Society and social institutions = the physical phone/protective phone case
 - The phone has a tangible structure, just as society has specific structures and institutions. Social institutions are like the hardware of the phone.
- Culture = software/apps
 - Apps and software are instructions on the phone that are intangible, just as intangible culture provides the rules and input that make society function.

The software and apps on the phone could be compared to culture. These are the pieces that give the phone a recognizable “personality”, just as the culture of a group describes its beliefs, practices, and guidelines for living. And just as phone apps go through updates or changes, culture can also evolve over time.



[Video Link](#)

Social institutions can be most visible when they break down. For example, for six days in January 2019, public school teachers in California went on strike. The Los Angeles school district (the second-largest in the nation) scrambled to provide substitute teachers and staff to stay with students after 30,000 teachers walked out, demanding smaller class sizes, more teachers and support staff, and a 6.5% raise. They eventually compromised with a 6% raise, more support staff, and a gradual reduction in class size, but the six days out of school cost the district over 125 million dollars. How do breakdowns of social institutions like this one (public education) affect individuals? How does it affect students? Parents? Teachers and administrators? How would the strike affect other school employees such as cafeteria workers or custodial staff? Our system of public education meets many complex societal needs, including the training and preparation of future voters and workers, but on a more pragmatic level it also provides a place for children to go while parents work.

Let's examine a complicated social institution—that of the family. When we think about family as a social institution, we might consider the ways in which the definition of family has changed over time and how this has produced new formal norms (i.e., state and federal laws). The family meets a variety of social needs—including legal (i.e., right to make medical decisions), economic (i.e., inheritance), and social/emotional. The legalization of same-sex marriage was an issue that divided many states and serves as an illustrative sociological example of the interplay between society and culture.

Watch It

Watch this video to see specific examples of social institutions.



[Video Link](#)

Try It

The terms _____ describes the beliefs, practices and artifacts of a group and _____ describes the relationships between the people who share those beliefs and practices. These terms are used interchangeably, but have nuances that differentiate them.

☐ imperialism; tradition

[See this interactive in the course material.](#)

Government, economy, education, family, healthcare, and religion are examples of _____.

☐ social institutions

[See this interactive in the course material.](#)

Glossary

culture: shared beliefs, values, and practices
social institutions: mechanisms or patterns of social order focused on meeting social needs, such as government, economy, education, family, healthcare, and religion
society: people who live in a definable, often geographically bordered community and who share a culture

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