

Basic Terms for Describing Societies Used in Sociology and Anthropology¹

1. **SOCIETY**—an organized, self-sustaining system of relationships among a collection of human beings, usually claiming political sovereignty over a specific territory
2. **SOCIAL INSTITUTION**—an abstract pattern of behavior and relationships for accomplishing some social purpose(s), realized in terms of specific organizations, formal or informal—The major institutions in complex societies are the family, economy, polity, religion, and education.
3. **SOCIAL STRUCTURE**—the totality of institutions making up a society, including the architecture of the relations between institutions.
4. **SOCIAL ORGANIZATION**—a specific, organized structure of relationships, with a name, and a membership made up of individuals interacting as a self-conscious group
5. **PRIMARY RELATIONS**—relations between individuals "as individuals," involving intimacy, personal considerations, multiple purposes, and continuity and intermingling of personal biographies. Most often found in so-called primary groups such as close-knit families and peer groups.
6. **SECONDARY RELATIONS**—relations between individuals in terms of formal roles, characterized by impersonality, specific purposes, limited involvement, in the context of formal organizations—most often found in so-called secondary groups, such as businesses, schools, or governmental agencies
7. **SOCIAL STATUS**—social position in society or in an organization, the basis of social identity, and one's rank in a hierarchy of authority, wealth, and prestige
8. **SOCIAL ROLE**—the expected behavior pattern for one who occupies a status position
9. **CULTURE**—the totality of beliefs shared by members of a society, including existential and normative beliefs, language, traditions, ideology, religion, and technology
10. **BELIEFS**—any statement about reality held true by members of a society
 - A) **EXISTENTIAL BELIEFS**—beliefs about what "is," the basic stock of knowledge members of a society believe in, including scientific knowledge when and where it exists
 - B) **NORMATIVE BELIEFS**—beliefs about what "ought to be," often called *norms*
 - **SOCIAL NORM**—any rule or expectation regarding social conduct, thoughts, or emotions
 - **FOLKWAYS**—customary behavior associated with roles
 - **MORES**—the moral rules associated with roles
 - **VALUES**—basic states of affairs that members of a society strive to achieve, such as democracy, justice, success, or responsibility

¹ These are my preferred definitions. If you examine many textbooks, you will find that there are no exact definitions for any of these terms. However, the vast majority of them will mean more or less the same thing.