3.6: Social Interaction

Learning Objectives

- Describe what is meant by dramaturgy and by impression management.
- Distinguish between role and status.
- Provide one example of role conflict or role strain.
- Explain why new patterns of socialization might help address certain social ills in American society.

If socialization results from our social interaction with others, it is also true that we learn how to interact from our socialization. We have seen many examples of this process in this and previous chapters. Among other things, we learn how far apart to stand when talking to someone else, we learn to enjoy kissing, we learn how to stand and behave in an elevator, and we learn to shake hands when greeting someone.

Dramaturgy and Impression Management

From a sociological standpoint, much of our social interaction can be understood by likening it to a performance in a play.

Example 1:

As with so many things, Shakespeare said it best when he wrote,

All the world’s a stage,

And all the men and women merely players.
They have their exits and their entrances;

And one man in his time plays many parts. (As You Like It, act 2, scene 7)

From this perspective, each individual has many parts or roles to play in society, and many of these roles specify how we should interact in any given situation. These roles exist before we are born, and they continue long after we die. The culture of society is thus similar to the script of a play. Just as actors in a play learn what lines to say, where to stand on the stage, how to position their bodies, and so many other things, so do we learn as members of society the roles that specify how we should interact.

This fundamental metaphor was developed and popularized by sociologist Erving Goffman (1959) in what he called a dramaturgical approach. By this he meant that we can understand social interaction as if it were a theatrical performance. People who interact are actors on a stage, the things they say and do are equivalent to the parts actors play, and the people who observe their interaction are equivalent to the audience at a play.

Beyond these aspects of his theatrical analogy, Goffman also stressed that the *presentation of self* guides social interaction just as it guides behavior in a play. Actors in a play, he wrote, aim to act properly, which at a minimum means they need to say their lines correctly and in other ways carry out their parts as they were written. They try to convey the impression of their character the playwright had in mind when the play was written and the director has in mind when the play is presented.

Such impression management, Goffman wrote, also guides social interaction in everyday life. When people interact, they routinely try to convey a positive impression of themselves to the people with whom they interact. Our behavior in a job interview differs dramatically (pun intended) from our behavior at a party. The key dimension of social interaction, then, involves trying to manage the impressions we convey to the people with whom we interact. We usually do our best, consciously or unconsciously, to manage the impressions we convey to others and so to evoke from them reactions that will please us.
Goffman wrote about other aspects of social interaction that affect our efforts to manage these impressions. Again using his dramaturgical metaphor, he said that some interaction occurs in the “frontstage,” or front region, while other interaction occurs in the “backstage,” or back region. In a play, of course, the frontstage is what the audience sees and is obviously the location in which the actors are performing their lines. Backstage, they can do whatever they want, and the audience will have no idea of what they are doing (as long as they are quiet). Much of our everyday interaction is on the frontstage, where an audience can see everything we do and hear everything we say. But we also spend a lot of time on the backstage, by ourselves, when we can do and say things in private (such as singing in the shower) that we would not dare do or say in public.

How we dress is also a form of impression management. You are the same person regardless of what clothes you wear, but if you dress for a job interview as you would dress for a party (to use our earlier example), the person interviewing you would get an impression you might not want to be conveying. If you showed up for a medical visit and your physician were wearing a bathing suit, wouldn’t you feel just a bit uneasy?

People convey impressions not only through how they act and dress but also through how they arrange the appearance of the settings in which they interact. Consider the medical visit just mentioned. A physician tries to convey an impression of a serious, knowledgeable professional not only by how she or he dresses but also by how the waiting room looks. Usually the room is well furnished with clean, comfortable chairs and such magazines as *People*, *Time*, and *Newsweek*. What impression would be conveyed if the physician’s office looked shabby and even had a bad odor? What if it had *Playboy* in it? How long would you stay in that office?

Life is filled with impression management. Compare the decor of your favorite fast-food restaurant with that of a very expensive restaurant with which you might be familiar. Compare the appearance, dress, and demeanor of the servers and other personnel in the two establishments. The expensive restaurant is trying to convey an image that the food will be wonderful and that the time you spend there will be memorable and well worth the money. The fast-food restaurant is trying to convey just the opposite impression. In fact, if it looked too fancy, you would probably think it was too expensive.

Some people go to great efforts to manage the impressions they convey. You have probably done so in a job interview or on a date. In New York City, the capital of book publishing, editors of large publishing companies and “superagents” for authors are very conscious of the impressions they convey, because much of the publishing industry depends on gossip, impressions, and the development of rapport. Editors and agents often dine together in one of a few very expensive “power” restaurants, where their presence is certain to be noted. Publishers or senior editors who dine at these restaurants will eat only with celebrity authors, other senior editors or publishers, or important agents. Such agents rarely dine with junior editors, who are only “allowed” to eat with junior agents. To eat with someone “beneath” your standing would convey the wrong impression (Arnold, 1998). Arnold, M. (1998, June 11). Art of foreplay at the table. *The New York Times*, p. B3.

As these examples indicate, social reality is to a large extent socially constructed. It is what we make of it, and the individuals who interact help construct the reality of the situation in which they interact. Sociologists refer to this process as the social construction of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1963). Berger, P., & Luckmann, T. (1963). *The social construction of reality*. New York, NY: Doubleday. Although we usually come into a situation with shared understandings of what is about to happen, as the interaction proceeds the actors continue to define the situation and thus to construct its reality. This view lies at the heart of the symbolic interactionist perspective discussed in Chapter 1 "Sociology and the
Roles and Statuses

The related concepts of role and status help us further understand social interaction. Status has many meanings in the dictionary and also within sociology, but for now we will define it as the position that someone occupies in society. This position is often a job title, but many other types of positions exist: parent, sibling, relative, friend, and so forth. Any one individual often occupies several different statuses at the same time, and someone can simultaneously be a banker, Girl Scout troop leader, mother, school board member, volunteer at a homeless shelter, and wife. This someone would be very busy! We call all the positions an individual occupies that person's status set.

Sociologists often speak of three kinds of statuses. The first type is ascribed status, which is the status that someone is born with and has no control over. There are relatively few ascribed statuses; the most common ones are our biological sex, race, and parents' social class and religious affiliation. The second kind of status is called achieved status, which,
as the name implies, is a status you achieve, at some point after birth, sometimes through your own efforts and sometimes because good or bad luck befalls you. All the statuses in the example of the woman in the previous paragraph would be achieved statuses. The third type of status is called a master status. This is a status that is so important that it overrides other statuses you may hold. A physical disability often becomes a master status, because if you are confined to a wheelchair, to take one type of disability, this confinement becomes more important than the other statuses you have. For similar reasons, gender, race, and sexual orientation may also be considered master statuses, as these statuses often subject women, people of color, and gays and lesbians, respectively, to discrimination and other problems, no matter what other statuses they may have.

Whatever its type, every status is accompanied by a role, which is the behavior expected of someone—and in fact everyone—with a certain status. You and most other people reading this book are students. Despite all the other differences among you, you have at least this one status in common. As such, there is a role expected of you as a student (at least by your professors): this role includes coming to class regularly, doing all the reading assigned from this textbook, and studying the best you can for exams.

Because roles are the behavior expected of people in various statuses, they help us interact because we are familiar with the roles in the first place. Suppose you are shopping in a department store. Your status is a shopper, and the role expected of you as a shopper—and of all shoppers—involves looking quietly at various items in the store, taking the ones you want to purchase to a checkout line, and paying for them. The person who takes your money is occupying another status in the store that we call a cashier. The role expected of that cashier—and of all cashiers not only in that store but in every other store—is to accept your payment in a businesslike way and put your items in a bag.

This is all very automatic, and we often perform our roles without thinking about them. That is why social interaction is possible: if we always had to think about our roles before we performed them, social interaction would be slow, tedious, and fraught with error. (Analogously, if actors in a play always had to read the script before performing their lines, as an understudy sometimes does, the play would be slow and stilted.) It is when people violate their roles that the importance of roles is thrown into sharp relief. Suppose you were shopping in that department store just mentioned, and while you were in the checkout line the cashier asked you how your sex life has been! Now, you might expect such an intimate question from a very close friend, because discussions of intimate matters are part of the roles close friends play, but you would definitely not expect it from a cashier you do not know.

As this example suggests, the social construction of reality rests on shared assumptions, including our understanding of the roles expected of people in a given encounter, that are easily violated if one has the nerve to do so. If they are violated, social order might well break down, as you would quickly find if you dared to ask your cashier how her or his sex life has been, or if two people sitting in the front of a large lecture hall started kissing each other passionately. Sociologist Harold Garfinkel (1967) argued that unexpected events like these underscore how fragile social order is and remind us that people are constantly constructing the social reality of the situations in which they find themselves. To illustrate his point, he had his students perform a series of experiments, including acting like a stranger in their parents' home. Not surprisingly, their parents quickly became flustered and wondered what college was doing to their daughters and sons!
Roles and Personalities

As we have just seen, roles help us interact and help make social order possible. But they even can shape our personalities. The idea here is that if we assume a new role, the expectations of that role can change how we interact with others and the way we even think about ourselves. In short, roles can change our personalities.

A telling example of this effect comes from the story of a criminal justice professor from Florida named George Kirkham. In his classes, Kirkham would be critical of the harshness with which police treated suspects and other citizens. One day, some police officers in one of his classes said Kirkham could not begin to understand what it was like being a police officer, and they challenged him to become one. He took up the challenge by gaining admission to a police academy and going through the regular training program for all recruits. Kirkham (1984)Kirkham, G. L. (1984). A professor’s “street lessons.” In R. G. Culbertson (Ed.), “Order Under Law”: Readings in Criminal Justice (pp. 77–89). Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press. later recounted what happened on his first few days on the job. In one episode, he and his veteran partner went into a bar where an intoxicated patron had been causing trouble. Kirkham politely asked the patron to go with him outside. Evidently surprised by this new police officer’s politeness, the man instead swung at Kirkham and landed a blow. Kirkham could not believe this happened and was forced to subdue his assailant. In another episode, Kirkham and his partner were checking out the drivers of a double-parked car. An ugly crowd soon gathered and began making threats. Alarmed, Kirkham opened up his car’s trunk and pulled out a shotgun to keep the crowd away. In recounting this episode, Kirkham wrote that as a professor he quickly would have condemned the police officer he had now become. In a few short days, he had turned from a polite, kind professor into a gruff, angry police officer. His role had changed and, along with it, his personality.

Role Problems

Roles can help our interactions run smoothly and automatically and, for better or worse, shape our personalities, but they can also cause various kinds of problems. One such problem is role conflict, which occurs when the roles of our
many statuses conflict with each other. For example, say you are a student and also a parent. Your 3-year-old child gets sick. You now have a conflict between your role as a parent and your role as a student. To perform your role as a parent, you should stay home with your sick child. To perform your role as a student, you should go to your classes and take the big exam that had been scheduled weeks ago. What do you do?

Obviously, you cannot perform both roles at the same time. To resolve role conflict, we ordinarily have to choose between one role or the other, which is often a difficult choice to make. In this example, if you take care of your child, you miss your classes and exam; if you go to your classes, you have to leave your child at home alone, an unacceptable and illegal option. Another way to resolve role conflict is to find some alternative that would meet the needs of your conflicting roles. In our sick child example, you might be able to find someone to watch your child until you can get back from classes. It is certainly desirable to find such alternatives, but, unfortunately, they are not always forthcoming. If role conflict becomes too frequent and severe, a final option is to leave one of your statuses altogether. In our example, if you find it too difficult to juggle your roles as parent and student, you could stop being a parent—hardly likely!—or, more likely, take time off from school until your child is older. Most of us in these circumstances would try our best to avoid having to do this.

Another role-related problem is called role strain. Here you have one status, and a role associated with it, that is causing problems because of all the demands coming to you from people in other statuses with which your own status is involved. Suppose you were a high school principal. In your one role as a principal, you come into contact with people in several different statuses: teachers, students, custodial and support staff, the superintendent, school board members, the community as a whole, and the news media. These statuses may make competing demands on you in your one role as a principal. If your high school has a dress code, for example, the students may want you to abolish it, the teachers and superintendent may want you to keep it, and maybe the school board would agree with the students. As you try to please all of these competing factions, you certainly might experience some role strain!

A third type of role problem occurs when we occupy a status whose role demands a certain type of personality that differs from the one we actually have. Can you imagine a police officer who was afraid of guns? An athlete who was not competitive? Although most people avoid this type of role problem by not taking on a role to which their personality is ill suited, such problems occur nonetheless. For example, some people who dislike children and do not have the patience to be good parents end up being parents anyway. In another example, your author once knew a new professor who was woefully nervous lecturing in front of students. You might wonder why he became a professor in the first place, but he probably just loved the subject matter so much that he thought he would overcome his nervousness. He did not.

Socialization Practices and Improving Society

This chapter began with a news story about the beating and killing of a gay man and proceeded with the stories of two women who grew up in the South when it was racially segregated. These stories illustrate the power of socialization, which can have both good and bad consequences. Socialization into one’s culture is necessary for any society to exist, and socialization is also necessary for any one individual to be “human” in the social sense of the term, as our discussion of feral children indicated. Yet socialization can also result in attitudes and behaviors that most of us would rightly condemn. Socialization created the homophobic mentality that led three teenagers to beat Charlie Howard and throw him into a river, and it also created the racist mentality that Sarah Patton Boyle and Lillian Smith described in their accounts of growing up in the South. We learn to be good, cooperative members of society, but some of us also learn to
hate and to think that other kinds of people are inferior and perhaps even less than human.

For many of the social issues confronting the United States today—hate crimes, other crimes, violence against women, sexism, racism, and so forth—it might not be an exaggeration to say that new patterns of socialization are ultimately necessary if our society wants to be able to address these issues effectively. Parents of young children and adolescents bear a major responsibility for making sure our children do not learn to hate and commit harm to others, but so do our schools, mass media, and religious bodies. No nation is perfect, but nations like Japan have long been more successful than the United States in raising their children to be generous and cooperative. Their examples hold many good lessons for the United States to follow.

Conclusion

- A dramaturgical approach likens social interaction to a dramatic production.
- Individuals ordinarily try to manage the impression they make when interacting with others. Social interaction can be understood as a series of attempts at impression management.
- Roles exist before we are born and will endure after we die and mightily affect individual behavior.
- Various kinds of role strains and problems often occur as individuals try to perform the roles expected of them from the many statuses they occupy.
- New socialization practices might be necessary to address many of the social ills facing the United States and other societies.

For Your Review

1. Describe a recent example of how you tried to manage the impression you were conveying in a social interaction.
2. Describe a recent example of a role problem that you experienced and what you did, if anything, to reduce this problem.
3. If you were in charge of our society, what socialization practice would you most try to change to help improve our society? Explain your answer.