5.1A: Understanding Social Interaction

Learning Objectives

- Review the four types of social interactions: accidental, repeated, regular, and regulated

In sociology, social interaction is a dynamic sequence of social actions between individuals (or groups) who modify their actions and reactions due to actions by their interaction partner(s). Social interactions can be differentiated into accidental, repeated, regular and regulated.

A social interaction is a social exchange between two or more individuals. These interactions form the basis for social structure and therefore are a key object of basic social inquiry and analysis. Social interaction can be studied between groups of two (dyads), three (triads) or larger social groups.

Social structures and cultures are founded upon social interactions. By interacting with one another, people design rules, institutions and systems within which they seek to live. Symbols are used to communicate the expectations of a given society to those new to it, either children or outsiders. Through this broad schema of social development, one sees how social interaction lies at its core.

The empirical study of social interaction is one of the subjects of microsociology, which concerns the nature of everyday human social interactions and agency on a small scale. Methods include symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology, as well as later academic sub-divisions and studies like psychosocial studies, conversational analysis and human-computer interaction.

With symbolic interactionism, reality is seen as social, developed interaction with others. It argues that both individuals and society cannot be separated far from each other for two reasons. One being that they are both created through social interaction. The second reason is they cannot be understood in terms without the other. Ethnomethodology, an
offshoot of symbolic interactionism, which questions how people’s interactions can create the illusion of a shared social order despite not understanding each other fully and having differing perspectives.

Key Points

• A social interaction is an exchange between two or more individuals and is a building block of society. Social interaction can be studied between groups of two (dyads), three (triads) or larger social groups.

• By interacting with one another, people design rules, institutions and systems within which they seek to live. Symbols are used to communicate the expectations of a given society to those new to it.

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Key Terms

• dyad: A pair of things standing in particular relation; dyadic relation.

• Social Interaction: A social exchange between two or more individuals.

• social group: A collection of humans or animals that share certain characteristics, interact with one another, accept expectations and obligations as members of the group, and share a common identity.