



Social Interaction in Everyday Life

CHAPTER

6

Sociology points to the many rules that guide behaviour in everyday situations. The more we learn about the rules of social interaction, the better we can play the game.



CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This chapter takes a “micro-level” look at society, examining patterns of everyday social interaction. First, the chapter identifies important social structures, including status and role. Then it explains how we construct reality through social interaction. Finally, it applies the lessons learned to everyday experiences involving emotion, gender and humour.

Matt and Dianne are on their way to visit friends in an unfamiliar section of Calgary. They are now late because, for the last 20 minutes, they have been going in circles looking for Riverview Drive. Matt, gripping the wheel ever more tightly, is doing a slow burn. Dianne, sitting next to him, looks straight ahead, afraid to utter a word. Both realize that the evening is off to a bad start.

Here we have a simple case of two people unable to locate the home of some friends. But Matt and Dianne are lost in more ways than one, failing to see why they are growing more and more angry with their situation and with each other.

Consider the predicament from the man’s point of view. Matt cannot tolerate getting lost—the longer he drives around, the more incompetent he feels. Dianne is seething, too, but for a different reason. She does not understand why Matt refuses to pull over and ask for directions. If she were driving, she fumes to herself, they would be comfortably settled with their friends by now.

Why don’t men ask for directions? Because men value their independence, they are uncomfortable asking for help—and are also reluctant to accept it. To men, asking for assistance is an admission of inadequacy, a sure sign that others know something they do not. So what if it takes Matt a few more minutes to find Riverview Drive on his own, keeping his self-respect in the process?

Women are more in tune with others and strive for connectedness. From Dianne’s point of view, asking for help is right because sharing information builds social bonds and gets the job done. Asking for directions seems as natural to her as searching on his own is to Matt. Obviously, getting lost is sure to result in conflict as long as neither understands the other’s point of view.



Such everyday experiences are the focus of this chapter. The central concept is **social interaction**, *the process by which people act and react in relation to others*. We begin by presenting several important sociological concepts that describe the building blocks of common experience and then explore the almost magical way that face-to-face interaction creates the reality in which we live.

Social Structure: A Guide to Everyday Living

Members of every society rely on social structure to make sense of everyday situations and frame their lives. The world can be confusing—even frightening—when society’s rules are unclear. We now take a closer look at the ways societies set the rules of everyday life.

Status

In every society, one of the building blocks of everyday life is **status**, *a social position that a person holds*. In general use, the word *status*

means “prestige,” in the sense that a university president is of higher status than a newly hired assistant professor. But sociologically speaking, “president,” “professor,” and “student” are statuses within the university organization. Status is part of social identity and helps define our relationships to others. As Georg Simmel (1950; orig. 1902), one of the founders of sociology, once pointed out, before we can deal with anyone, we need to know *who* the person is.

Status Set

Each of us holds many statuses at once. The term **status set** refers to *all of the statuses that a person holds at a given time*. A teenage girl is a daughter to her parents, a sister to her brother, a student at school, and a goalie on her hockey team. Status sets change over the life course. A child grows up to become a parent, a student graduates to become a lawyer, and a single person marries to become a husband or wife, sometimes becoming single again as a result of death or divorce. Joining an organization or finding a job enlarges our status set; withdrawing from activities makes it smaller. Over a lifetime, people gain and lose dozens of statuses.

social interaction the process by which people act and react in relation to others

status a social position that a person holds

status set all of the statuses that a person holds at a given time

ascribed status a social position that someone receives at birth or assumes involuntarily later in life

achieved status a social position that someone assumes voluntarily and that reflects personal ability and effort

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Statuses can be ascribed (meaning “given” or “assigned”) or achieved (meaning “earned”). Generally, people can describe the social positions they hold as one type or another, but most statuses are a combination of the two—partly given and partly earned.



Governor General Michaëlle Jean, who is commander-in-chief of Canadian Forces, is reviewing troops in this photo. In any rigidly ranked setting, no interaction can proceed until people assess each other’s social standing; thus, military personnel wear clear insignia to designate their level of authority. Don’t we size up one another in much the same way in routine interaction, noting a person’s rough age, quality of clothing, and manner for clues about social position?

Ascribed and Achieved Status

Sociologists classify statuses in terms of how people obtain them. An **ascribed status** is a social position that someone receives at birth or assumes involuntarily later in life. Examples of statuses that are generally ascribed include being a daughter, an Aboriginal person, a teenager, or a widower. Ascribed statuses are matters about which people have little or no choice. In contrast, an **achieved status** refers to a social position that someone assumes voluntarily and that reflects personal ability and effort. Among achieved statuses are being an honour student, an Olympic athlete, a spouse, a computer programmer, a Rhodes Scholar, or a thief. In each case, the individual has at least some choice in the matter.

In practice, of course, most statuses involve some combination of ascription and achievement. That is, ascribed status affects achieved status. Adults who achieve the status of lawyer, for example, are likely to share the ascribed trait of being born into relatively privileged families. And any person of privileged sex, race, ethnicity, or age has far more opportunity to realize desirable achieved statuses than does someone without such advantages. In contrast, less desirable statuses such as criminal, drug addict, or welfare recipient are more easily acquired by people born into poverty.

Master Status

Some statuses matter more than others. A **master status** is a status that has exceptional importance for social identity, often shaping a



Mike Myers poses with Lorne Michaels after the two unveiled their stars on the Canadian Walk of Fame in Toronto in 2003. Are there qualities that make Mike Myers a role model for young people?

person’s entire life. For many people, occupation is a master status since it conveys a great deal about social background, education, and income. Family of birth or marriage can function this way, too. Being an Eaton, a McCain, a Trudeau, a Mulroney, or a Stronach is enough by itself to push an individual into the limelight. Most societies of the world also limit the opportunities of women, whatever their abilities, making gender, too, a master status.

In a negative sense, serious disease also operates as a master status. Sometimes even lifelong friends avoid people with cancer, AIDS, or mental illness—simply because of the illness. In part, this is because we do not know what to say or how to act. We sometimes dehumanize people with physical disabilities by perceiving them only in terms of their disability. Although it is not a disability in the same sense, being too tall (e.g., a 6’4” woman), too fat, or too thin can act as a master status that gets in the way of normal social interaction.

Role

A second important social structure is **role**, *behaviour expected of someone who holds a particular status*. A person *holds* a status and *performs* a role (Linton, 1937a). For example, holding the status of student leads you to perform the roles of attending classes and completing assignments.

Both statuses and roles vary by culture. In North America, the status of “uncle” refers to the brother of either your mother or your father, and the role of your maternal and paternal uncles might be much the same. In Vietnam, however, the word for “uncle” is

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To get at the distinction between ascribed and achieved status, make a list of 10 statuses you hold and then try to classify them. That this is not an easy task can be illustrated by the status of “mother.” One *achieves* the status of mother by getting pregnant and giving birth (or by adoption), but, once the baby is born, his or her existence makes “mother” an *ascribed* or “given” status.

Remember that *status* refers to a social position, while *role* refers to behaviour. One *holds* a status and *performs* a role.

master status a status that has exceptional importance for social identity, often shaping a person’s entire life.

role behaviour expected of someone who holds a particular status

role set a number of roles attached to a single status

role conflict conflict among the roles connected to two or more statuses

role strain tension among the roles connected to a single status

different on the mother’s and father’s sides of the family and implies different responsibilities. In every society, actual role performance varies according to an individual’s unique personality, although some societies permit more individual expression of a role than others.

Role Set

Because we hold many statuses at once—a status set—everyday life is a mix of multiple roles. Robert Merton (1968) introduced the term **role set** to identify *a number of roles attached to a single status*. Figure 6–1 shows four statuses of one person, each status linked to a different role set. First, in her status as a professor, this woman interacts with students (teacher role) and with other academics (colleague role). Second, in her status as a researcher, she gathers and analyzes data (fieldwork role) that she uses in her publications (author role). Third, the woman occupies the status of wife, with a marital role (such as confidante and sexual partner) toward her husband, with whom she shares household duties (domestic role). Fourth, she holds the status of mother, with routine responsibilities for her children (maternal role), as well as toward their school and other organizations in her community (civic role).

A global perspective shows that the roles people use to define their lives differ from society to society. In general, in low-income countries, people spend fewer years as students, and family roles are often very important to social identity. In high-income nations, people spend more years as students, and family roles typically are less important to social identity. Another dimension of difference involves housework. As Global Map 6–1 on page 130 shows, especially in poor countries, housework falls heavily on women.

Role Conflict and Role Strain

People in modern, high-income nations juggle many responsibilities demanded by their various statuses and roles. As most mothers—and more and more fathers—can testify, the combination of parenting and working outside the home is physically and emotionally draining. Sociologists therefore recognize **role conflict** as *conflict among the roles connected to two or more statuses*. We experience role conflict when we find ourselves pulled in various directions as we try to respond to the many statuses we hold. One response to role conflict is deciding that something has to go. More than one politician, for example, has decided not to run for office because of the conflicting demands of a hectic campaign schedule and family life. In other cases, people put off having children in order to stay on the fast track for career success.

Even roles linked to a single status may make competing demands on us. **Role strain** refers to *tension among the roles connected to a single status*. A professor may enjoy being friendly with students; at the same time, however, she must maintain the personal distance needed in order to evaluate students fairly. In short, performing the various roles attached to even one status can be something of a balancing act.

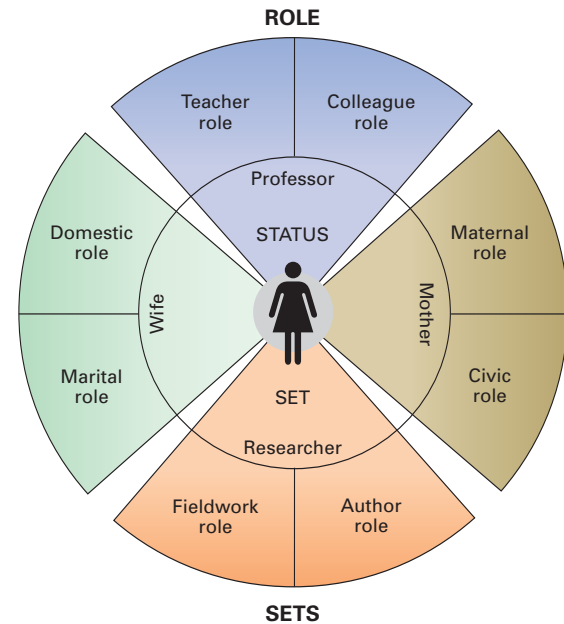


FIGURE 6–1 Status Set and Role Set

A status set includes the statuses a person holds at a given time. Because each status usually involves more than one role, a role set is even larger.

Source: Created by John J. Macionis.

One strategy for minimizing role conflict is separating parts of our lives so that we perform roles for one status at one time, and place and carry out roles connected to another status in a completely different setting. A familiar example is leaving the job at work before heading home to one’s family. Clearly, people who work from their homes—full-time or part of the time, like most of your professors—have considerable difficulty separating job and family life.

Role Exit

After she left the life of a Catholic nun to become a university sociologist, Helen Rose Fuchs Ebaugh (1988) began to study her own experience of *role exit*, the process by which people disengage from important social roles. Studying a range of “exes”—including ex-nuns, ex-doctors, ex-husbands, and ex-alcoholics—Ebaugh identified elements common to the process of becoming an “ex.” According to her, the process begins as people come to doubt their ability to continue in a certain role. As they imagine alternative roles, they eventually reach a tipping point when they decide to pursue a new life.

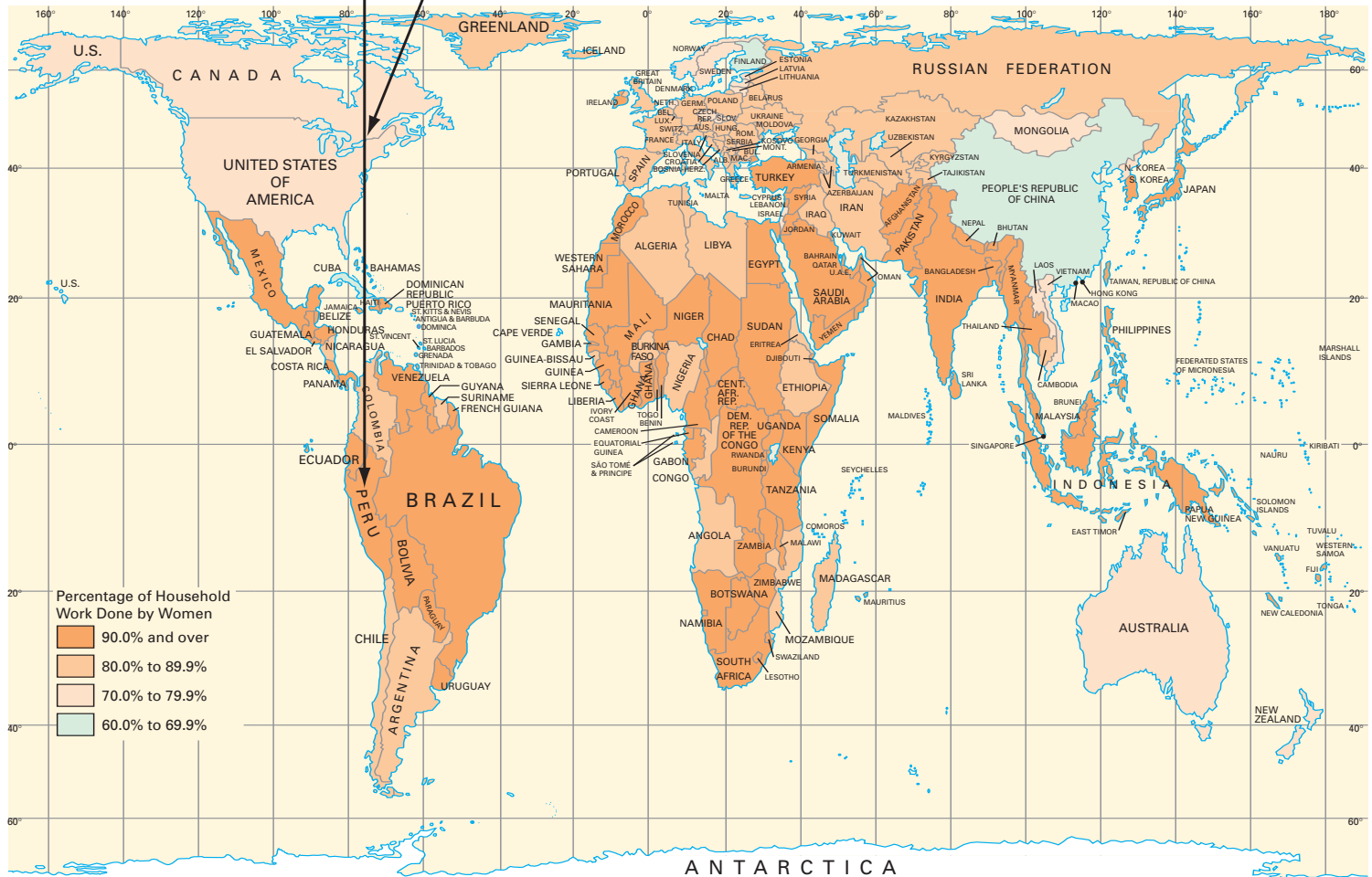
Even as people are moving on, however, a past role can continue to influence their lives. “Exes” carry with them a self-image shaped by an earlier role, which can interfere with building a new sense of

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Lucia Hernandez is a 28-year-old mother of two in Lima, Peru, who works full-time and also does all of the housework.

Monique Tremblay, also 28, shares a Montreal apartment with her fiancé. Although they agreed to share the housework, she still does most of it.

Role conflict and role strain are easy to confuse, unless you remember that it takes two to have conflict. Therefore, role conflict arises among roles linked to separate statuses while role strain is tension arising among roles linked to a single status. Applying these concepts to your own life can help you keep them straight.



Window on the World

GLOBAL MAP 6-1 Housework in Global Perspective

Throughout the world, housework is a major part of women's routines and identities. This is especially true in poor societies of Latin America, Africa, and Asia, where women are not generally in the paid labour force. But Canadian society also defines housework and child care as feminine activities, even though a majority of women work outside the home. Note that Finland and China, which are highly dissimilar, are both at the lower end of the scale on which housework equals women's work.

Source: *Peters Atlas of the World* (1990); updated by John J. Macionis.

self. For example, an ex-nun may hesitate to wear stylish clothing and makeup. "Exes" must also rebuild relationships with people who knew them in their earlier life. Learning new social skills is another challenge. For example, ex-nuns who enter the dating scene after decades in the church are often surprised to learn that sexual norms are very different from those they knew when they were teenagers.

The Social Construction of Reality

While behaviour is guided by status and role, each human being has considerable ability to shape what happens moment to moment. "Reality," in other words, is not as fixed as we may think. The phrase **social construction of reality** identifies *the process by which people*

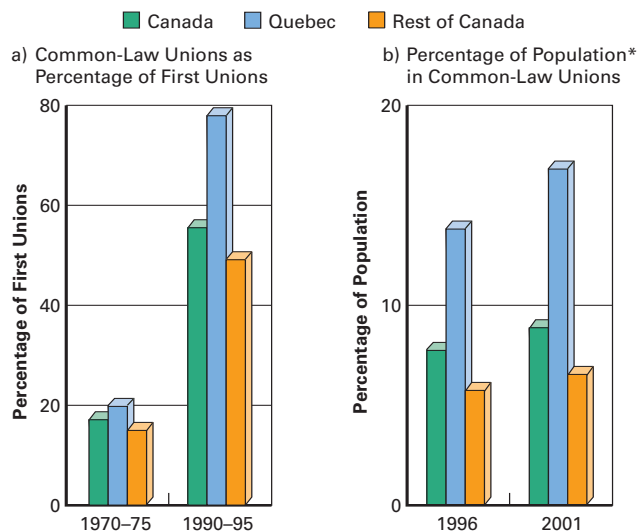
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The “social construction of reality” is a concept that is central to sociology and specifically to symbolic interactionism. It means that people create, recreate, and maintain social reality through social interaction. The “reality” of your peer group depends on the nature and continuity of your interaction with other members. The same is true of your sociology class or your family.

People use internet sites such as MySpace, Facebook, or YouTube to present themselves to others, thereby creating a “reality” that may bear little resemblance to the reality constructed through their face-to-face interactions.

social construction of reality the process by which people creatively shape reality through social interaction

FIGURE 6–2 The Prevalence of Common-Law Unions in Canada, Quebec, and the Rest of Canada (1970 to 2001)



*Refers to population 15 years of age and older.

Source: Adapted by L.M. Gerber from Statistics Canada (1996a, 2001). Source: (a) Adapted by L.M. Gerber from Turcotte and Bélanger (2000); (b) Adapted by L.M. Gerber from Statistics Canada (1996a, 2001).



Flirting is an everyday experience in reality construction. Each person offers information to the other, and hints at romantic interest. Yet the interaction proceeds with a tentative and often humorous air so that either individual can withdraw at any time without further obligation.

creatively shape reality through social interaction. This is the foundation of sociology’s symbolic-interaction paradigm, as described in earlier chapters. It means that social interaction amounts to negotiating reality.

One area in which personal decisions have restructured social reality is that of family formation. Figure 6–2a reveals that between 1970 and 1995 the proportion of first unions that were common-law increased dramatically—from 17 to 57 percent across Canada and from 21 to an astounding 80 percent in Quebec. As Quebec couples negotiated the terms of their first unions, *eight out of ten* chose to cohabit rather than marry. Figure 6-2b reveals that the Quebec lead in the formation of common-law unions persists to Census 2001. The collective impact of these common-law unions on the institution of marriage is far greater than that of the gays and lesbians who benefit from the redefinition of marriage to include same-sex couples. For the symbolic interactionist, the important elements in this restructuring of social life are the personal decisions made in choosing cohabitation.

For another example of the social construction of reality, consider how this excerpt from “True Trash,” a short story by Margaret Atwood, illustrates one way that names and clothing styles construct a certain type of person.

Eleven years later Donny is walking along Yorkville Avenue, in Toronto, in the summer heat. He’s no longer Donny. At some point, which even he can’t remember exactly, he has changed into Don. He’s wearing sandals,

and a white Indian-style shirt over his cut-off jeans. He has longish hair and a beard. The beard has come out yellow, whereas the hair is brown. He likes the effect: WASP Jesus or Hollywood Viking, depending on his mood. He has a string of wooden beads around his neck.

This is how he dresses on Saturdays, to go to Yorkville; to go there and just hang around, with the crowds of others who are doing the same. Sometimes he gets high, on the pot that circulates as freely as cigarettes did once. He thinks he should be enjoying this experience more than he actually does.

During the rest of the week he has a job in his father’s law office. He can get away with the beard there, just barely, as long as he balances it with a suit. (But even the older guys are growing their sideburns and wearing coloured shirts, and using words like “creative” more than they used to.) He doesn’t tell the people he meets in Yorkville about this job, just as he doesn’t tell the law office about his friends’ acid trips. He’s leading a double life. It feels precarious, and brave. (1991:30–31)

This situation reveals the drama by which human beings create reality. Of course, not everyone enters a negotiation with equal standing. The fact that Donny was the son of the lawyer in whose office he was working likely helped him bridge the two realities.

● MAKING THE GRADE

The Thomas theorem is the useful idea that reality, although created by our interaction, has real effects and consequences.

Ethnomethodology is a long word for a simple idea. To test people's assumptions about life's everyday rules, try breaking them.

● **Thomas theorem** situations we define as real become real in their consequences
ethnomethodology the study of the way people make sense of their everyday surroundings

The Thomas Theorem

Donny's impression management allowed him to be part of the Yorkville scene and his father's law office. W.I. Thomas (1966:301; orig. 1931) succinctly expressed this insight in what has come to be known as the **Thomas theorem**: *Situations we define as real become real in their consequences.* Applied to social interaction, Thomas's insight means that although reality is initially "soft" as it is fashioned, it can become "hard" in its effects. In the case of Donny, having succeeded as a member in two very different groups, he is able to lead a double life.

Ethnomethodology

Most of the time, we take social reality for granted. To become more aware of the world we help create, Harold Garfinkel (1967) devised **ethnomethodology**, *the study of the way people make sense of their everyday surroundings.* This approach begins by pointing out that everyday behaviour rests on a number of assumptions. When you ask someone the simple question "How are you?" you usually want to know how the person is doing in general, but you might really be wondering how the person is dealing with a specific physical, mental, spiritual, or financial challenge. However, the person being asked probably assumes that you are not really interested in details about any of these things, and that you are just being polite.

One good way to uncover the assumptions we make about reality is to purposely *break the rules*. For example, the next time someone greets you by saying "How're you doing?" offer details from your last physical examination, or explain all of the good and bad things that have happened since you woke up that morning, and see how the person reacts. To test assumptions about how closely people should stand to each other while talking, slowly move closer to another person during a conversation. What happens if you face the back of the elevator, or—if you are a woman—you take your boyfriend or partner's hand from the front?

The results are predictable, because we all have some idea of what the "rules" of everyday interaction are. Witnesses to your rule breaking will most likely become confused or irritated by your unexpected behaviour, a reaction that helps us see not only what the "rules" are but also how important they are to everyday reality.

Reality Building: Class and Culture

People do not build everyday experience out of thin air. In part, how we act or what we see in our surroundings depends on our interests. Gazing at the sky on a starry night, for example, lovers discover romance and scientists see hydrogen atoms fusing into helium. Social



People build reality from their surrounding culture. Yet, because cultural systems are marked by diversity and even outright conflict, reality construction always involves tensions and choices. Turkey is a nation with a mostly Muslim population, but it is also a country that has embraced Western culture. Here, women confront starkly different definitions of what is "feminine."

Stanton R. Winter, *The New York Times*.

background also affects what we see: For this reason, residents of affluent Westmount in Montreal experience the city differently from those living in the city's east end, where the unemployment rate is one of the highest in Canada.

In global perspective, reality construction is even more variable. People waiting for a bus in London, England, typically queue in a straight line; people in Montreal wait in a much less orderly fashion. Constraints on women in Saudi Arabia—for example, they are not allowed to drive cars—would be incomprehensible here. Although the birth rate is rising in Moscow, where women perceive increased economic security, it remains low in the rest of Russia, where economic turmoil persists. In Canada, people assume that "a short walk" means a few blocks or a few minutes; in the Andes Mountains of Peru, this same phrase means a few kilometres.

The point is that people build reality from the surrounding culture. Chapter 3 ("Culture") explains how people the world over find different meanings in specific gestures, so that inexperienced travellers can find themselves building an unexpected and unwelcome reality. Similarly, in a study of popular culture, Shively (1992) screened "westerns" to men of European descent and to Aboriginal

● MAKING THE GRADE

To make sure that you understand Goffman's dramaturgical analysis, try applying the technique to a lecture, a rock concert, a job interview, or a church service. Wherever people try to manage the presentation of self, you can analyze social interaction in terms of a theatrical performance. Think of stage (and backstage), costume, script, role, rehearsal, and, ultimately, performance.

dramaturgical analysis the study of social interaction in terms of theatrical performance

SOCIOLOGY AND THE MEDIA



Disease and Disability in Hollywood Film: Twenty Years of Change

Jamie Foxx won an Oscar (for best actor) for his brilliant portrayal of the blind musician Ray Charles. This film, *Ray*, is part of a series that has raised public awareness of the challenges faced—and frequently overcome—by people with disabilities. This is good news for people with disabilities as well as for the people who help them. Most importantly, people with disabilities are being portrayed with greater accuracy and realism, so that the public learns what it means to live with a specific illness or disability. These films give human faces to various conditions and remove some of the fear that comes with lack of knowledge or unfamiliarity. They also illustrate the powerful grip of a master status defined by disability as well as the consequences of these disabilities for presentation of self and the performances of everyday life.

The first of these influential movies, *The Miracle Worker*, came out in 1962, telling the story of Helen Keller who, though both deaf and blind, was taught to communicate by her persistent tutor, Annie Sullivan. The Helen Keller National Center for Deaf-Blind Youths and Adults is still reaping the benefits of that film more than 40 years later.

In the last two decades, people with a wide range of disabilities have been the subjects of perhaps 15 major motion pictures. So important are these films that it seems one cannot win an Oscar or a nomination for best actor without playing a severely troubled or challenged character.

Dustin Hoffman portrays a man with autism in *Rain Man*, Anthony Hopkins plays a man who is criminally insane in *The Silence of the Lambs*, and Al Pacino portrays blindness in *Scent of a Woman*. Tom Hanks has AIDS in *Philadelphia* and is developmentally challenged in *Forrest Gump*. In *Leaving Las Vegas*, Nicholas Cage portrays an alcoholic, while Jack Nicholson plays someone with obsessive-compulsive disorder in *As Good as It Gets*. Leonardo DiCaprio portrays a developmentally challenged younger brother, Arnie, in *What's Eating Gilbert Grape*—and later plays the disturbed and reclusive Howard Hughes in *The Aviator*.

Each of these powerful films takes us into a previously unknown world and allows us to identify with someone who faces seemingly insurmountable physical and psychological challenges. These films destigmatize disabilities and encourage donations to meaningful causes. At the very least, after viewing them, we should be more sensitive to and empathetic with the disabled people we encounter. In addition, we might be more willing to donate time or money to the organizations that do research and provide services for people with a range of disabilities. Often the actors themselves take up the cause, using their clout to raise funds, as did Tom Hanks after portraying a man with AIDS in *Philadelphia*.

Among the films that depict the triumph of talent or genius over the adversity of physical or psychological disability are *My Left Foot*, in which

Daniel Day-Lewis portrays Irish writer/artist Christy Brown, whose cerebral palsy leaves him in total control of only his left foot; *Shine*, in which Geoffrey Rush portrays Australian concert pianist David Helfgott, whose early career is ruined by a nervous breakdown; *A Beautiful Mind*, in which Russell Crowe assumes the role of John Nash, mathematical genius and Nobel Laureate, who suffers from paranoid schizophrenia; and *Ray*, in which Jamie Foxx plays Ray Charles, whose musical talent prevails despite blindness and drug addiction. Each story, embellished though it is by Hollywood, is based on a true story and on the life of a real—and inspiring—individual. In each case, the individual achieves greatness despite the overarching master status defined by his disability. In these films, we see performances—or presentation of self—at two levels: those of the characters portrayed in the films and those of the brilliant actors who portray them.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. Can you point to specific lessons about disabilities that we can learn from films?
2. Have you seen any of the films mentioned in this box? Why did you choose to see them and what were your reactions?
3. Can you apply dramaturgical analysis to these films? Can you do so at the two levels noted above?

Source: Based, in part, on Haberman (2005).

men. The men in both categories claimed to enjoy the films, but for very different reasons. The men of European descent interpreted the films as praising rugged people striking out for the West and conquering the forces of nature. The Aboriginal men saw in the same films a celebration of land and nature. It is as if people in the two groups saw two different films.

Films can also have an effect on the reality we all experience. The film *Ray*, about the life of the musician Ray Charles, who overcame the challenge of blindness, is only the latest in a series of films that have changed the public's awareness of disabilities. (See the Sociology and the Media box.)

Dramaturgical Analysis: “The Presentation of Self”

As noted in the Canadian Sociology: Distinctive Touches section of Chapter 1, Erving Goffman is another sociologist who studied social interaction, explaining how people live their lives much like actors performing on a stage. If we imagine ourselves as directors observing what goes on in the theatre of everyday life, we are doing what Goffman called **dramaturgical analysis**, *the study of social interaction in terms of theatrical performance*.

SEEING SOCIOLOGY in Everyday Life

The performance or presentation of self by your doctor or professor is easy to analyze. What about the presentation of self that takes place on Facebook or an online dating site? Do some of the same principles and concepts apply?

presentation of self a person's efforts to create specific impressions in the minds of others

non-verbal communication communication using body movements, gestures, and facial expressions rather than speech



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Dramaturgical analysis offers a fresh look at the concepts of “status” and “role.” A status is like a part in a play, and a role serves as a script, supplying dialogue and action for the characters. Goffman described each individual’s “performance” as the **presentation of self**, a person’s efforts to create specific impressions in the minds of others. This process, sometimes called *impression management*, begins with the idea of personal performance (Goffman, 1959, 1967). The Sociology and the Media box on page 133 invites you to try your hand at dramaturgical analysis, by taking a look at presentation of self and performance in the context of master status based on disability—in the context of major Hollywood films.

Performances

As we present ourselves in everyday situations, we reveal information—consciously and unconsciously—to others. Our performance includes the way we dress (costume), the objects we carry (props), and our tone of voice and gestures (manner). In addition, we vary our performances according to where we are (the set). We may joke loudly in a restaurant, for example, but lower our voices when entering a church or other place of worship. People also design settings, such as homes or offices, to bring about desired reactions in others.

An Application: The Doctor’s Office

Consider how a physician uses an office to convey particular information to the audience of patients. The fact that physicians enjoy high prestige and power is clear on entering a doctor’s office. First, the doctor is nowhere to be seen. Instead, in what Goffman describes as the “front region” of the setting, each patient encounters a receptionist, or

gatekeeper, who decides whether and when the patient can meet the doctor. A simple glance around the doctor’s waiting room, with patients—often impatiently—waiting to be invited into the inner sanctum, leaves little doubt that the doctor and the staff are in charge.

The “back region” of the setting is composed of the examination room plus the doctor’s private office. Once inside the office, a patient can see a wide range of props, such as medical books and framed degrees, that give the impression that the doctor has the specialized knowledge necessary to call the shots. The doctor is often seated behind a desk—the larger the desk, the greater the statement of power—and a patient is given only a chair.

The doctor’s appearance and manner offer still more information. The white lab coat (costume) may have the practical function of keeping clothes from becoming dirty, but its social function is to let others know at a glance the physician’s status. A stethoscope around the neck, and a medical chart in hand (more props), have the same purpose. A doctor uses highly technical language that is often mystifying to a patient, again emphasizing that the doctor is in charge. Finally, a patient usually uses the title “doctor,” but the doctor often addresses a patient by his or her first name, which further shows the doctor’s dominant position. The overall message of a doctor’s performance is clear: “I will help you, but you must allow me to take charge.”

Non-verbal Communication

The novelist William Sansom describes a fictional Mr. Preedy, an English vacationer on a beach in Spain:

He took care to avoid catching anyone’s eye. First, he had to make it clear to those potential companions of his holiday that they were of no concern to him whatsoever. He stared through them, round them, over them—eyes lost in space. The beach might have been empty. If by chance a ball was thrown his way, he looked surprised; then let a smile of amusement light his face (Kindly Preedy), looked around dazed to see that there were people on the beach, tossed it back with a smile to himself and not a smile at the people . . .

[He] then gathered together his beach-wrap and bag into a neat sand-resistant pile (Methodical and Sensible Preedy), rose slowly to stretch his huge frame (Big-Cat Preedy), and tossed aside his sandals (Carefree Preedy, after all). (1956:230–231)

Without saying a single word, Mr. Preedy offers a great deal of information about himself to anyone watching him. This is the process of **non-verbal communication**, *communication using body movements, gestures, and facial expressions rather than speech*.

People use many parts of the body to convey information to others through *body language*. Facial expressions are the most important type of body language. Smiling, for instance, shows pleasure, although we distinguish among the deliberate smile of Kindly Preedy

● MAKING THE GRADE

Telling a lie can be difficult because we cannot control body language reliably. What kinds of body language have allowed you to detect lies told to you?



Hand gestures vary widely from one culture to another. Yet people everywhere chuckle, grin, or smirk to indicate that they don't take another person's performance seriously. Therefore, the world over, people who cannot restrain their mirth tactfully cover their faces.

on the beach, a spontaneous smile of joy at seeing a friend, a pained smile of embarrassment after spilling a cup of coffee, and the full unrestrained smile of self-satisfaction we often associate with winning some important contest.

Eye contact is another key element of non-verbal communication. Generally, we use eye contact to invite social interaction. Someone across the room “catches your eye,” sparking a conversation. Avoiding another's eyes, in contrast, discourages communication. Hands, too, speak for us. Common hand gestures in our society convey, among other things, an insult, a request for a ride, an invitation for someone to join us, or a demand that others stop in their tracks. Gestures also supplement spoken words; for example, pointing at someone in a threatening way gives greater emphasis to a word of warning, just as shrugging the shoulders adds an air of indifference to the phrase “I don't know,” and rapidly waving the arms adds urgency to the single word “Hurry!”

Body Language and Deception

As any actor knows, it is very difficult to pull off a perfect performance. In everyday performances, unintended body language can contradict our planned meaning: A teenage boy offers an explanation for getting home late, for example, but his mother doubts his words because he avoids looking her in the eye. The movie star on a television talk show claims that her recent flop at the box office is “no big deal,” but the nervous swing of her leg suggests otherwise. Because non-verbal communication is hard to control, it offers clues to deception, in much the same way that changes in breathing, pulse rate, perspiration, and blood pressure recorded on a lie detector indicate that a person is lying.

Can you tell an honest smile from a phoney one? Detecting phoney performances is difficult, because no one bodily gesture tells

us that someone is lying. But because any performance involves so much body language, few people can lie without some slip-up, raising the suspicions of a careful observer. The key to detecting lies is to view the whole performance with an eye for inconsistencies.

Gender and Performances

Because women are socialized to respond to others, they tend to be more sensitive than men to non-verbal communication. In fact, gender is a central element in personal performances, particularly with regard to demeanour, personal space, facial expression, and touching.

Demeanour—the way we act and carry ourselves—is a clue to social power. Simply put, powerful people enjoy more freedom in how they act. Off-colour remarks, swearing, or putting one's feet on the desk may be acceptable for the boss but rarely for employees. Similarly, powerful people can interrupt others, while less powerful people are expected to show respect through silence (Henley et al., 1992; Johnson, 1994; Smith-Lovin and Brody, 1989). Because women generally occupy positions of lesser power, demeanour is a gender issue as well. As Chapter 13 (“Gender Stratification”) explains, close to half of all working women in Canada hold clerical or service jobs under the control of supervisors who are usually men. Women, then, learn to craft their personal performances more carefully than men and to defer to men more often in everyday interaction.

How much space does a personal performance require? Power plays a key role here; the more power you have, the more space you use. Men typically command more space than women, whether pacing back and forth before an audience or casually sitting on a bench. Why? Our culture traditionally has measured femininity by how *little* space women occupy with the standard of “daintiness”—and masculinity by how *much* territory a man controls with the standard of “turf” (Henley et al., 1992).

For both sexes, the concept of **personal space** refers to *the surrounding area over which a person makes some claim to privacy*. In Canada, people typically position themselves some distance apart when speaking, though this distance varies depending on how well the speakers know each other; throughout the Middle East, in contrast, people stand much closer when conversing. Just about everywhere, men—with their greater social power—often intrude into women’s personal space. If a woman moves into a man’s personal space, however, her movement is likely to be interpreted as a sign of sexual interest.

For most North Americans, eye contact encourages interaction. In conversations, women hold eye contact more than men. But men have their own brand of eye contact: staring. When men stare at women, they are claiming social dominance and defining women as sexual objects. While it often shows pleasure, smiling can also be a sign of trying to please someone or of submission. In a male-dominated world, it is not surprising that women smile more than men (Henley et al., 1992). Note, however, that most Aboriginal cultures have quite different patterns of eye contact; for men and women, staring is discourteous and eye contact is made only fleetingly, perhaps in greeting or to check to see if someone else has finished speaking.

Finally, mutual touching suggests intimacy and caring. Apart from close relationships, touching is generally something men do to women but, in North American culture, rarely do to other men. A male physician touches the shoulder of his female nurse as they examine a report, a young man touches the back of his woman friend as he guides her across the street, or a male skiing instructor touches young women as he teaches them to ski. In such examples, the intent of touching may be harmless and may bring little response, but it amounts to a subtle ritual by which men claim dominance over women.

The Thinking Critically box moves social interaction from physical space to cyberspace. Note that we socially construct and reconstruct reality through online interaction—just as we do through face-to-face contact.

Idealization

People behave the way they do for many, often complex, reasons. Even so, Goffman suggests, we construct performances to *idealize* our intentions. That is, we try to convince others, and perhaps ourselves, that what we do reflects ideal cultural standards rather than selfish motives. Idealization is easily illustrated by returning to the world of doctors and patients. In a hospital, doctors engage in a performance commonly described as “making rounds.” Entering the room of a patient, the doctor often stops at the foot of the bed and silently reads the patient’s chart. Afterwards, doctor and patient talk briefly. In ideal terms, this routine involves a doctor making a personal visit to check on a patient’s condition. In reality, the picture is not so perfect. A

doctor may see several dozen patients a day and remember little about many of them. Reading the chart is a chance to recall the patient’s name and medical problems, but revealing the impersonality of medical care would undermine the cultural ideal of the doctor as being deeply concerned about the welfare of others.

Doctors, professors, and other professionals typically idealize their motives for entering their chosen careers. They describe their work as “making a contribution to science,” “helping others,” “serving the community,” or even “answering a calling from God.” Rarely do they admit the more common, less honourable, motives: the income, power, prestige, and leisure time that these occupations provide.

We all use idealization to some degree. When was the last time you smiled and spoke politely to someone you do not like? Such little deceptions help us get through everyday life. Even when we suspect that others are putting on an act, we are unlikely to challenge their performances, for reasons we shall examine next.

Embarrassment and Tact

The famous speaker keeps mispronouncing the dean’s name; the visiting ambassador rises from the table to speak, unaware of the napkin still hanging from her neck; the president becomes ill at a state dinner. As carefully as individuals may craft their performances, slip-ups of all kinds occur. The result is *embarrassment*, discomfort following a spoiled performance. Goffman describes embarrassment as “losing face”—that is, temporarily losing some of the prestige associated with a status. Embarrassment is an ever-present danger because idealized performances usually contain some deception. In addition, most performances involve juggling so many elements that one thoughtless moment can shatter the intended impression.

A curious fact is that an audience often overlooks flaws in a performance, allowing an actor to avoid embarrassment. If we do point out a misstep—“Excuse me, but your fly is open”—we do it quietly and only to help someone avoid even greater loss of face. In Hans Christian Andersen’s classic fable “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” the child who blurts out the truth—that the emperor is parading about naked—is scolded for being rude.

Often, members of an audience actually help the performer recover a flawed performance. *Tact*, then, amounts to helping someone “save face.” After hearing a supposed expert make an embarrassingly inaccurate remark, for example, people may tactfully ignore the comment, as if it had never been spoken, or treat what was said as a joke, perhaps with mild laughter. Or they may simply respond, “I’m sure you didn’t mean that,” hearing the statement but not allowing it to destroy the actor’s performance. With this in mind, we can understand Abraham Lincoln’s comment: “Tact is the ability to describe others the way they see themselves.” Tact is so common because embarrassment creates discomfort for the actor *and* for everyone else. Just as a theatre audience feels uneasy when an actor forgets a

● MAKING THE GRADE

When Marshall McLuhan said “the medium is the message,” he was saying that the telephone, radio, laptop, or videogame is as much the “message” as the information it conveys. We are reshaped by these technologies themselves.

THINKING CRITICALLY



Social Interaction: Life, Work, and Leisure in Cyberspace

Any technology tends to create a new human environment . . . Technological environments are not merely passive containers of people but are active processes that reshape people and other technologies alike. In our time the sudden shift from the mechanical technology of the wheel to the technology of electric circuitry represents one of the major shifts of all historical time. (Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 1969)

When Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone in 1874 and made the first long-distance call between Brantford and Paris, Ontario, people were astounded as he talked to others who were far away. People reeled in amazement once again when Guglielmo Marconi received the first transatlantic wireless (radio) message on a hilltop at St. John’s, Newfoundland (1901), and when the first television signal was broadcast (1928).

Is today’s new information technology once again restructuring reality? Absolutely. Computers and other information technologies have already altered the Canadian economy: The manufacture of material goods (paper, steel, and cars) has been overshadowed in the post-industrial era by the creation of ideas and images. This changes the nature of work, the skills needed for employment, our legal definition of property, as well as our social and work relationships or interactions.

Whereas technology traditionally merely sustained human relationships already formed from face-to-face contact, an internet relationship can be initiated technologically. Because they are so disembodied, so devoid of physical presence . . . divisions between man and woman, old and young, strong and weak, sick and healthy, cool dude and nerd begin to be bridged as in few other ways. (Goyder, 1997:186)

This “disembodiment” through modern technology allows the creation of completely new online relationships, identities, and patterns of social interaction. Film director Atom Egoyan

argues that social schizophrenia is a common result of the differences between Facebook profiles and those of the real people involved. In *Adoration*, Egoyan explores the far-reaching consequences—for a young teenage boy’s identity and pubescent sense of self—of creating a false persona online (Monk, 2009). As dramatic as this film may be, it reflects the experience of ordinary people who engage in fanciful or embellished presentation of self online.

Just as new information technology disembodies us, it erodes the importance of place in our lives. Bell’s telephone was able to “reshape people”—to borrow McLuhan’s phrase—by greatly extending the “reach” of their ears. At that time, because sound travelled along wires, Bell knew exactly where the call was going. A century later, cellular technology allows us to reach someone anywhere on Earth—or even in flight. Similarly, technological advances are reconstructing the workplace so that “the new factory” is now any place with a computer terminal or fax machine—including one’s home. Even the centuries-old concepts of “national boundaries” and “citizenship” have grown fuzzy under the influence of recent technology. Consider an employee who logs on to a computer terminal in Vancouver and connects to a U.S. bank in Manhattan (her employer), where she processes transactions throughout the day. Is this “electronic migrant” part of the workforce of Canada or the United States?

More than 30 years ago, Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan predicted that nations and their boundaries would be unable to survive the new electronic technologies with their power of “totally involving all people in all other people.” He would argue that, under the influence of border-jumping technologies such as the internet, our borders and our Canadian identity are challenged. In effect, instantaneous communication catapults us into McLuhan’s “global village.”

The BlackBerry (a Canadian invention) revolutionizes the conduct of business by facilitating instant communication among those who are wired 24/7; in effect, it is a pocket-sized office that allows for the transmission of voice, visual images, email messages, and even

attachments—to almost any location on Earth. As a result of such technologies, corporate or home offices have escaped the confines of physical space or place.

Of course, there is no more basic foundation for our sense of reality than that reflected in the timeless adage “Seeing is believing.” So advanced is our technology that digital imagery allows photographers to combine and manipulate pictures to show almost anything. Computer animation enables movie producers to have humans interact with lifelike dinosaurs, and the technology of “virtual reality” means that, when connected to computers, we can see, hear, and even feel the “touch” of another person thousands of kilometres away.

Finally, new information technology is reshaping the university and college scene. Historically, publishers have produced textbooks that augment the instruction of a classroom teacher. But books are becoming a smaller and smaller part of publishers’ offerings, as we witness a proliferation of images on tape, film, disk, or online. In the years to come, textbooks themselves may gradually be replaced by CD-ROMS. In a world of interactive computer-based instruction, will students still need to travel to classrooms to learn? When even science can be taught with animated computer graphics (simulating a laboratory experiment, for example), might the university or college campus eventually become obsolete?

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. Have you embellished or added false information to the personal profiles you “published” online? Will you someday regret intimate revelations posted on Facebook or Twitter?
2. As the “electronic age” unfolds further, what changes would you predict in our everyday interactions involving family, friends, school, recreation, entertainment, work, and the economy?
3. Do you think that virtual learning and virtual universities or colleges will eliminate the campus as we know it today?

● MAKING THE GRADE

Emotions are complex and reflect both biological and cultural forces. Sociologists are interested in the effects of culture on our emotional lives.



To most of us, these expressions convey (*from left*) anger, fear, disgust, happiness, surprise, and sadness. But do people around the world define them in the same way? Research suggests that most human beings experience the same basic emotions and display them to others in the same basic ways. Culture plays a part by specifying the situations that trigger one emotion or another.

Adapted from Ekman and Friesen (1975).

line, people who observe awkward behaviour are reminded of how fragile their own performances are. Socially constructed reality thus functions like a dam holding back a sea of chaos. When one person's performance springs a leak, others tactfully help make repairs. Everyone, after all, lends a hand in building reality, and no one wants it suddenly swept away.

In sum, Goffman's research shows that, although behaviour is spontaneous in some respects, it is more patterned than it appears on the surface. Four centuries ago, Shakespeare captured this idea in memorable lines that still ring true:

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)

Interaction in Everyday Life: Three Applications

The final sections of this chapter illustrate the major elements of social interaction by focusing on three dimensions of everyday life: emotions, language, and humour.

Emotions: The Social Construction of Feeling

Emotions, more commonly called *feelings*, are an important element of human social life. In truth, what we *do* often matters less than how we *feel* about it. Emotions seem very personal because they are private. Even so, just as society guides our behaviour, it guides our emotional life.

The Biological Side of Emotions

Studying people all over the world, Paul Ekman (1980a, 1980b) reports that people everywhere recognize and express six basic emotions: happiness, sadness, anger, fear, disgust, and surprise. In addition, he found that people everywhere use the same facial expressions to show these emotions. Some emotional responses are “wired” into human beings—that is, they are biologically programmed in our facial features, muscles, and central nervous system. Why? From an evolutionary perspective, emotions have biological roots, but they also serve a social purpose: supporting group life. Emotions are powerful forces that allow us to overcome our self-centredness and build connections with others. Thus, the capacity for emotion arose in our ancestors along with the capacity for culture (Turner, 2000).

The Cultural Side of Emotions

Culture, however, does play an important role in guiding human emotions. As Ekman explains, culture determines the *trigger* for emotion. Whether a specific event is defined as joyous (causing happiness), insulting (arousing anger), a loss (producing sadness), or mystical (provoking surprise and awe) is a function of culture. Culture also provides rules or contexts for the *display* of emotions. For example, most of us express emotions more freely with family members than we do with workplace colleagues. Similarly, we expect children to express emotions to parents, but parents to hide their emotions from their children. Furthermore, culture guides how we *value* emotions. Some societies encourage the expression of emotion; others expect members to control their feelings and maintain a “stiff upper lip.” Gender also plays a part; traditionally, many cultures expect women to show emotions, but consider emotional expression by men to be a sign of weakness. In some cultures, of course, this pattern is less pronounced or even reversed.

● MAKING THE GRADE

Our language attributes power and dominance to men and devalues women. Altering this pattern involves the adoption of gender neutral words: *fisher* instead of *fisherman*, *police officer* instead of *policeman*, *host* for *host* or *hostess*.

Emotions on the Job

Most people are freer to express their feelings at home than on the job. The reason, as Hochschild (1979, 1983) explains, is that the typical company tries to regulate the behaviour and emotions of its employees. Take the case of an airline flight attendant who offers passengers a meal and a smile. While this smile may convey real pleasure at serving the customer, Hochschild's study points to a different conclusion: The smile is an emotional script demanded by the airline as the right way to do the job. Therefore, we see that the "presentation of self" described by Erving Goffman can involve not just surface acting but also the "deep acting" of emotions. Thus, we socially construct our emotions as part of everyday reality, a process sociologists call *emotion management*.

Language: The Social Construction of Gender

As Chapter 3 ("Culture") explains, language is the thread that weaves members of a society into the symbolic web we call culture. Language communicates not only a surface reality but also deeper levels of meaning. One such level involves gender. Language defines men and women differently in terms of both power and value (Henley et al., 1992; Thorne et al., 1983).

Language and Power

A young man proudly rides his new motorcycle up his friend's driveway and boasts, "Isn't she a beauty?" On the surface, the question has little to do with gender. Yet why does he use the pronoun *she* to refer to his prized possession? The answer is that men often use language to establish control over their surroundings. In Roman and medieval Europe, a woman was legally the possession of a man (her father, brother, spouse, or guardian)—a situation that has changed in law only in recent years. But everyday language retains this concept when a man attaches a female pronoun to a motorcycle or boat or car, *because* it reflects the power of ownership.

Perhaps this is also why, in North America and elsewhere, a woman who marries usually takes the last name of her husband. When Joe Clark became Canada's prime minister in 1979, he encountered hostility and resistance from some quarters because his wife, Maureen McTeer, had retained her birth name; the attitude seemed to reflect the idea that if a man cannot control his wife, how can he possibly run the country? Stephen Harper, leader of Canada's Conservative Party, is married to Lauren Teskey, who also kept her unmarried name; on her husband becoming prime minister, she seems to have become Lauren Harper. On the other hand, in Quebec, women are not merely encouraged to retain their birth names; the law actually requires them to do so.

Language and Value

Typically, the English language treats as masculine whatever has great value, force, or significance. For instance, the word *virtuous* (meaning "morally worthy" or "excellent") comes from the Latin word *vir*, meaning "man." On the other hand, the adjective *hysterical* (meaning "emotionally out of control") is taken from the Greek word *hystera*, meaning "uterus." In many familiar ways, language also confers different value on the two sexes. Traditional masculine terms such as *king* and *lord* have a positive meaning, while comparable feminine terms, such as *queen*, *madam*, and *dame*, can have negative meanings. Similarly, use of the suffixes *-ette* and *-ess* to denote femininity usually devalues the words to which they are added. For example, a *major* has higher standing than a *majorette*, as does a *host* in relation to a *hostess*, or a *master* in relation to a *mistress*. Language both mirrors social attitudes and helps perpetuate them.

Language and Attention

Language also shapes reality by directing greater attention to masculine endeavours. Consider our use of personal pronouns. In the English language, the plural pronoun *they* is neutral, as it refers to both sexes. But the corresponding singular pronouns *he* and *she* specify gender. Formerly, it was grammatical practice to use *he*, *his*, and *him* to refer to all people. As such, readers were to assume that the bit of wisdom "He who hesitates is lost" refers to women as well as to men. But this practice also reflected the traditional cultural pattern of ignoring the lives of women. This factual statement is a classic example: "Man, like other mammals, breast-feeds his young."

The English language has no gender-neutral, third-person-singular personal pronoun. Recently, however, the plural pronouns *they* and *them* have gained currency as singular pronouns in speech (e.g., "A person should do as they please"). This usage remains controversial—because it violates grammatical rules—but spoken English is now evolving to accept such gender-neutral constructions.

Even as the English language changes in response to social imperatives, gender is likely to remain a source of miscommunication between women and men. A booklet titled *Words That Count Women Out/In* (Ontario, 1992) examines some of the most common assumptions and barriers that have made the transition to gender-inclusive language troublesome. The authors point out that sexist language can even be found in the one piece of music that all Canadians hear and sing so frequently:

O Canada! Our home and native land!
True patriot love in all thy sons command.

Our national anthem, the symbol of our democratic spirit, excludes half of the population—women—as well as immigrants who are not native to Canada.

● MAKING THE GRADE

Humour is an important component of social interaction everywhere, but it does not necessarily travel well. In a world with multiple cultures, one can expect problems in “translation” because “getting it” requires insider knowledge of language, symbols, people (e.g., Jean Chrétien, Newfies), or history. Of course, some jokes do have universal appeal.

Reality Play: The Social Construction of Humour

Humour plays an important part in everyday life. Everyone laughs at a joke, but few people think about what makes something funny. We can apply many of the ideas developed in this chapter to explain how, by using humour, we “play with reality” (Macionis, 1987b).

The Foundation of Humour

Humour is produced by the social construction of reality; it arises as people create and contrast two different realities. Generally, one reality is *conventional*—that is, what people in a specific situation expect. The other reality is *unconventional*, an unexpected violation of cultural patterns. Humour therefore arises from contradiction, ambiguity, and double meanings found in differing definitions of the same situation.

There are countless ways to mix realities and generate humour. Contrasting realities are found in statements that contradict themselves, such as “Nostalgia is not what it used to be”; statements that repeat themselves, such as Yogi Berra’s line “It’s *déjà vu* all over again”; or statements that mix up words, such as Oscar Wilde’s quip “Work is the curse of the drinking class.” Even switching around syllables does the trick, as in the case of the country song “I’d Rather Have a Bottle in Front of Me than a Frontal Lobotomy.”

Of course, a joke can be built the other way around, so that the audience is led to expect an unconventional answer and then receives a very ordinary one. When a reporter asked the famous criminal Willy Sutton why he robbed banks, for example, he replied dryly, “Because that’s where the money is.” However a joke is constructed, the greater the opposition or difference between the two definitions of reality, the greater the humour.

When telling jokes, a comedian uses various strategies to strengthen this opposition and make the joke funnier. One common technique is to present the first, or conventional, remark in conversation with another actor, then to turn toward the audience (or the camera) to deliver the second, unexpected, line. In a Marx Brothers film, Groucho remarks, “Outside of a dog, a book is a man’s best friend”; then, raising his voice and turning to the camera, he adds, “And *inside* of a dog, it’s too dark to read!” Such “changing channels” emphasizes the difference between the two realities. Following the same logic, stand-up comedians may “reset” the audience to conventional expectations by interjecting the phrase, “But seriously, folks” between jokes.

People who like to tell jokes pay careful attention to their performance—the precise words they use and the timing of their delivery. A joke is well told if the teller creates the sharpest possible opposition between the realities; in a careless performance, the joke falls flat. Because the key to humour lies in the collision of realities, we can see why the climax of a joke is termed the *punch* line.

The Dynamics of Humour: “Getting It”

After someone tells you a joke, have you ever had to say, “I don’t get it”? To “get” humour, you must understand both the conventional and the unconventional realities well enough to appreciate their difference. Someone telling a joke may make getting it harder by leaving out some important information. In such cases, listeners must pay attention to the stated elements of the joke and then fill in the missing pieces on their own. A simple example is the comment made by the movie producer Hal Roach on his one-hundredth birthday: “If I had known I would live to be one hundred, I would have taken better care of myself!” Here, getting the joke depends on realizing that Roach must have taken pretty good care of himself to make it to one hundred. Or take one of W.C. Fields’ lines: “Some weasel took the cork out of my lunch.” Here is an even more complex joke: “What do you get if you cross an insomniac, a dyslexic, and an agnostic? Answer: A person who stays up all night wondering if there is a dog.” To get this joke, you must know that insomnia is an inability to sleep, that dyslexia can cause a person to reverse the letters in words, and that an agnostic doubts the existence of God.

The Globe and Mail, under “Your Morning Smile,” published a submission by Torontonians Poly O’Keefe: “What was the name of the first sociologist to study the impact of new communications technology on society? Answer: E-mail Durkheim” (August 2, 1997:A1). Getting this joke requires some knowledge of sociology. Needless to say, your recognition chuckle would have been more spontaneous had you encountered this tidbit out of context in the newspaper.

Why would someone telling a joke want the hearer to make this sort of effort to understand it? Our enjoyment of a joke is increased by the pleasure of figuring out all of the pieces needed to “get it.” In addition, getting the joke makes you an “insider” compared to those who don’t “get it.” We have all experienced the frustration of *not* getting a joke: fear of being judged stupid, along with a sense of being excluded from shared pleasure. People may tactfully explain a joke so that no one feels left out, but, as the old saying goes, if a joke has to be explained, it isn’t very funny.

The Topics of Humour

All over the world, people smile and laugh, making humour a universal element of human culture. But, because people live in different cultures, humour rarely travels well. This travel journal entry provides an illustration:

October 1, Kobe, Japan. Can you share a joke with people who live halfway around the world? At dinner, I ask two Japanese college women to tell me a joke. “You know ‘crayon’?” Asako asks. I nod. “How do you ask for a crayon in Japanese?” I respond that I have no idea. She laughs out loud as she says what sounds like “crayon crayon.” Her companion Mayumi laughs too. My wife and I

● MAKING THE GRADE

While jokes don't travel well, humour is universal. All cultures use humour to create a sense of belonging, to make fun of powerful people, to defuse tense situations, or to put down others.

sit awkwardly, straight-faced. Asako relieves some of our embarrassment by explaining that the Japanese word for "give me" is kureyo, which sounds like "crayon." I force a smile. [John J. Macionis]

What is humorous to the Japanese may be lost on the Chinese, Iraqis, or Canadians. Even the social diversity of this country means that different types of people will find humour in different situations. Newfoundlanders, Québécois, Inuit, and Albertans have their own brands of humour, as do Canadians of Italian or Jamaican origin. Teenage girls, middle-aged men, Bay Street brokers, and rodeo riders will have specific kinds of jokes that they find funny. But for everyone, topics that lend themselves to double meanings or controversy generate humour. The first jokes many of us learned as children concerned bodily functions that kids are not supposed to talk about. The mere mention of "unmentionable acts" or even certain parts of the body can dissolve young faces in laughter.

Are there jokes that do break through the culture barrier? Yes, but they must touch on universal human experiences such as, for example, turning on a friend:

I think of a number of jokes, but none seems likely to work in this cross-cultural setting. Is there something more universal? Inspiration: "Two fellows are walking in the woods and come upon a huge bear. One guy leans over and tightens up the laces on his running shoes. 'Jake,' says the other, 'what are you doing? You can't outrun this bear!' 'I don't have to outrun the bear,' responds Jake. 'I just have to outrun you!' " Smiles all around. [John J. Macionis]

The controversy found in humour often walks a fine line between what is funny and what is "sick." Before and during the Middle Ages, people used the word *humours* (derived from the Latin *humidus*, meaning "moist") to refer to four bodily fluids that were thought to regulate a person's temperament and, therefore, their health. Researchers today document the power of humour to reduce stress and improve health, confirming the old saying that "Laughter is the best medicine" (Bakalar, 2005; Haig, 1988).

Then, too, every social group considers certain topics too sensitive for humorous treatment. Of course, you can still joke about them, but doing so risks criticism for telling a "sick" joke, or being labelled "sick" yourself. People's religious beliefs, tragic accidents, or appalling crimes are the stuff of jokes that are "sick" jokes or without humour. Even all these years later, no one jokes about the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

The Functions of Humour

Humour is found everywhere because it works as a safety valve for potentially disruptive sentiments. Put another way, it provides an acceptable way to discuss sensitive topics without appearing to be

serious. Having said something controversial, people can use humour to defuse the situation by simply stating, "I didn't mean anything—it was just a joke!" People also use humour to relieve tension in uncomfortable situations. One study of medical examinations found that most patients try to joke with doctors to ease their own nervousness (Baker et al., 1997).

As Canadians, we use humour to express our common identity. By laughing at ourselves or putting ourselves down, we reinforce a sense of our common bond. In a panel discussion called "Why Are Canadians So Funny?" moderator Michael J. Fox noted that *Maclean's* asked its readers to fill in the blank at the end of the phrase "As Canadian as . . ." to counterbalance the motto "As American as apple pie." According to Fox, the winning entry was "As Canadian as possible under the circumstances" (Vowell, 1999).

Or Canada's idea of a joke is debating a constitutional accord as a matter of life and death, and then changing the subject. "Canada is a nation without a punch line." These jokes play on Canadian insecurity about who we are. In the midst of the deep divisions caused by the constitutional discussions of the 1980s and 1990s, the second joke reminds us that we have a common national identity. We are "insiders" to the joke, not only because we are familiar with the debate but also because we recognize a pattern that characterizes our country. Because anglophones share constitutional angst with the Québécois, this joke should be funny in French. Would Americans find the joke funny? Further analysis of Canadian humour appears in the Seeing Sociology in Everyday Life box on pages 142–143.

Humour and Conflict

Humour may be a source of pleasure, but it can also be used to put down others. Men who tell jokes about women, for example, typically are expressing some measure of hostility toward them (Benokraitis and Feagin, 1995; Powell and Paton, 1988). Similarly, jokes about gay people reveal tensions about sexual orientation. Real conflict can be masked by humour in situations where one or both parties choose not to bring the conflict out into the open (Primeggia and Varacalli, 1990).

"Put-down" jokes make one category of people feel good at the expense of another. After collecting and analyzing jokes from many societies, Christie Davies (1990) confirmed that ethnic conflict is one driving force behind humour in most of the world. The typical ethnic joke makes fun of some disadvantaged category of people, at the same time making the joke teller feel superior. Given the Anglo-Saxon and French traditions of Canadian society, ethnic and racial minorities have long been the butt of jokes, as have Newfoundlanders ("Newfies") in eastern Canada, Irish in England, Sikhs in India, Turks in Germany, and Kurds in Iraq.

At times, people belonging to cultural minorities turn the joke on themselves. Peter Berger (1997) points out that Jews are so good at this that their jokes have become part of the larger American repertoire. This kind of humour illustrates that "jokes can summarize an

● MAKING THE GRADE

Typically, Canadian humour plays on our fragile common “identity” and involves putting ourselves down. Perhaps because of our insecurities, we seem to have a huge appetite for political humour.

SEEING SOCIOLOGY IN EVERYDAY LIFE



The Social Construction of Reality: Reflections on Canadian Humour

One could argue that humour or comedy is one of Canada’s most successful cultural exports. Among the Canadian comedians who “made it big” in the United States are Dan Aykroyd, John Candy, Jim Carrey, Tom Green, Rich Little, Lorne Michaels, Mike Myers, Leslie Nielsen, and Martin Short. Does Canada produce more comedians per capita than the United States? Perhaps. If so, what is it about Canada that nurtures the comic spirit or talent?

Canadian humour often plays on insecurities regarding our common “identity” or our place on the world stage. Look back at the Sociology and the Media box in Chapter 3 (“Culture”) on pages 62–63, which lists entries made to the *National Post*’s (2007) “Canada in six words or less” contest. All of those entries say something about our Canadian identity—many of them are self-deprecating or poke fun at Canadians, and many of them are funny. Consider the following examples:

- “Proud to be humble”
- “Endless possibilities squandered in political correctness”
- “Canada: Mostly OK”
- “Canada: We shall overcome”

- “Proud to be smug”
- “Morally superior. Just ask us”
- “Patriotic and proud of it . . . shh”
- “*Saturday Night Live*’s unofficial training camp”

Compared to other countries, we may stand out for our willingness to put ourselves down. Note that all but the last of these examples start on a high note and then fall flat. The incongruity comes from their unexpected endings (or the surprising reconstruction of reality).

John Robert Colombo began collecting Canadian jokes in 1967, the country’s centennial year, and compiled them into an “at once scandalous, subversive and hilarious book,” *The Penguin Book of Canadian Jokes* (2001). In his preface (p. x), he quotes Jan Morris, an Anglo-Welsh writer, who observed that the “genius of Canada remains essentially a deflationary genius” and that it is “part of the Canadian genius . . . to reduce the heroic to the banal.” Morris is noting the propensity of Canadians to put themselves down.

The first chapter in Colombo’s book, “Our Sense of Ourselves,” opens with an assessment by Marshall McLuhan, who is asked if there is a

Canadian identity. “No there is no Canadian identity. Canadians are the only people in the world who have learned to live without a national identity” (p. 1). This is followed (pp. 2, 3) by definitions of a Canadian, including this sample:

A Canadian is someone who . . .
thinks an income tax refund is a gift from the government.
doesn’t know anyone who owns a flag.
is convinced that democracy involves keeping your opinions to yourself.
says “Sorry” when you accidentally bump into him.
spends an inordinate amount of time trying to define what a Canadian is.

What other kinds of jokes did Colombo gather in his 30-odd year search? He found that many people were required to change light bulbs and many chickens crossed the road. There are jokes about beavers, the maple leaf, Mounties, kayaks, and canoes—as well as many places known to Canadians (e.g., Toronto, Barrie, Kamloops, Moose Jaw, Shawinigan). There are jokes about body parts and functions—including the

often complex situation in wondrously economical ways, simplifying and illuminating and definitely providing some cognitive benefit” (p. 137). One of Berger’s examples reveals the feelings of the Québécois, who believe that they exist on an island of French in an English-speaking ocean:

In a village in Quebec a little girl goes out to collect mushrooms when the Virgin Mary appears to her. The little girl sinks to her knees and says: “*Ah, vous êtes Notre Dame! Vous êtes si belle. Vous êtes magnifique. Je vous*

adore. Je vous aime.” And the Virgin Mary replies: “I’m sorry. I don’t speak French.”

Aboriginal Canadians also create this kind of humour. Many Aboriginal comedians have become popular with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal audiences. Actor Graham Greene has been featured often on the CBC’s *Royal Canadian Air Farce*. And the CBC radio program *Dead Dog Café* had the effect of illuminating Aboriginal culture: It is corny, satirical, and right on!

● MAKING THE GRADE

Telling and responding to jokes involves people in the social construction of reality—often turning conventional understanding upside down.

sexual—and ones dealing with various occupations (e.g., farmer, lawyer, travelling salesman, soldier, evangelist, Montreal taxi driver, businessman). There are also a number of jokes by and about famous people, such as Stephen Leacock, Marshall McLuhan, Wayne Gretzky (and other hockey greats), early feminist Nellie McClung, and Ottawa's late mayor Charlotte Whitton. Albertans, Quebecers, and Newfies are fair game—and Newfies tell the best Newfie jokes—but there are few jokes about specific religious or ethnic groups in Colombo's collection. French Canadians and "Indians" are notable exceptions to this rule, but then they comprise "founding nations" rather than ordinary ethnic groups.

And *many* of the included jokes deal with politics: Canada's federal and provincial politicians, including whole sections on Pierre Elliott Trudeau and Brian Mulroney; government programs or policies, such as multiculturalism, welfare, and separatism; and political ideologies and parties. In fact, Colombo claims, "There is a Canadian preference for political humour over all other kinds. We love to put down our Prime Ministers, provincial Premiers and other elected representatives. We particularly

enjoy disparaging our non-elected Senators" (2001:132). Putting down powerful people is uniquely satisfying.

Anyone who doubts the Canadian appetite for political humour need only watch the CBC comedies *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*, *The Rick Mercer Report*, and *Royal Canadian Air Farce* (which ran on CBC radio, television, or both for 35 years—until December 31, 2008). All three shows cover the news and have their own recurring characters, but inevitably they tend to make fun of our politicians: The actors on *Air Farce* parodied Jean Chrétien, Paul Martin, Lucien Bouchard, Preston Manning, Belinda Stronach, and Stephen Harper with uncanny skill. These shows are so popular and influential that our politicians respond positively to invitations to appear on them—in the flesh, so to speak. By allowing the comedians to poke fun at them in person, the politicians reveal their vulnerable human selves, stripped of the trappings of power.

When Canadians tell and respond to jokes, they are involved in the social construction of reality—often turning conventional definitions of

social situations and relationships upside down. They forge bonds with people who "get it" on the basis of shared understandings or a common identity, sharpen the boundaries between "us" and "them," and deal with tensions and hostilities through the safety valve of humour. Humour, more often than not, is lost in translation from one language to another. Even when the language remains the same, a joke told in one social setting or cultural milieu can fall flat in another when listeners fail to "get it." Shared meanings make our jokes funny to our fellow Canadians.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. How do you feel when someone tells a joke and you "get it"? How do you feel when you *don't* "get it"?
2. Have you ever thought about what makes a joke funny or which jokes make you laugh the hardest?
3. Why can jokes serve as icebreakers to diffuse tensions between individuals or groups of people?

Disadvantaged people, of course, also make fun of the powerful, as well as themselves, although they usually do so discreetly. Women routinely joke about men, and poor people poke fun at the rich. Throughout the world, people target their leaders with humour, and officials in some countries take such jokes seriously enough to vigorously repress them. Political jokes are "subversive by definition" (Berger, 1997).

In sum, the significance of humour is much greater than first impressions suggest. Humour amounts to a means of mental escape

from a conventional world that is not entirely to our liking (Flaherty, 1984, 1990; Yoels and Clair, 1995). With that in mind, it makes sense that a disproportionate number of North America's comedians come from among the ranks of oppressed people, including Jews and Blacks. They also come, disproportionately, from Canada. As long as we maintain a sense of humour, we assert our freedom and are no longer prisoners of reality; in doing so, we change the world and ourselves just a little.



To reinforce your understanding of this chapter, and to identify topics for further study, visit MySocLab at www.pearsoned.ca/mysoclab/macionis for diagnostic tests and a multimedia ebook.

Seeing SOCIOLOGY in Everyday Life

HOW DO WE ALL CONSTRUCT THE REALITY WE EXPERIENCE? This chapter suggests that Shakespeare might have had it right when he said, “All the world’s a stage.” And if so, then the internet may be the latest and greatest stage so far. When we use websites such as Facebook, as Goffman explains, we present ourselves as we want others to see us. Everything we write about ourselves as well as how we arrange our page creates an impression in the mind of anyone interested in “checking us out.” Take a look at the Facebook page below, paying careful attention to its details. What is the young man explicitly saying about himself? What can you read “between the lines”? That is, what information can you identify that he may be trying to conceal, or at least purposely not be mentioning? How honest do you think his “presentation of self” is? Why?



HINT: Just about every element of a presentation conveys information about us to others, so all of the information found on a website like this one is significant. Some information is intentional—for example, what people write about themselves and the photos they choose to post. Other information may be unintentional but is nevertheless picked up on by the careful viewer who may be noting (1) the length and tone of the person’s profile (Is it a long-winded list of talents and accomplishments, or humorous and modest?), (2) the language used (poor grammar may be a clue to educational level), and (3) at what hour of the day or night the person wrote the material (a person creating his profile at 11 p.m. on a Saturday night may not be quite the party person he describes himself to be).

Applying Sociology in Everyday Life

1. Identify five important ways in which you “present yourself” to others: the way you decorate your dorm room, apartment, or house; the way you dress; and the way you behave on a date, in class, on Facebook, or at a job interview. In each case, think about what you are trying to say about yourself. Has your “presentation of self” changed in recent years? If so, how and why?
2. During one full day, every time somebody asks, “How are you?” or “How’s it goin’?” stop and actually give a complete and truthful answer. What happens when you respond to a polite question in an honest way? Listen to how people respond, and also watch their body language. What can you conclude?
3. Stroll around downtown or in a local mall. Pay attention to how many women and men you find at each location. From your observations, are there stores that are “gendered” so that there are “female spaces” and “male spaces”? How and why are spaces “gendered”?

CHAPTER 6 Social Interaction in Everyday Life

Social Structure: A Guide to Everyday Living

SOCIAL STRUCTURE refers to social patterns that guide our behaviour in everyday life. The building blocks of social structure are

- **STATUS**—a social position that is part of our social identity and that defines our relationships to others
- **ROLE**—the action expected of a person who holds a particular status

pp. 127–128

✓ *A person holds a status and performs a role.*

A status can be either an

- **ASCRIBED STATUS**, which is involuntary (for example, being a teenager, an orphan, or an Aboriginal person), or an
- **ACHIEVED STATUS**, which is earned (for example, being an honours student, a pilot, or a thief).

A **MASTER STATUS**, which can be either ascribed or achieved, has special importance for a person's identity (for example, being blind, a doctor, or a Trudeau).

p. 128

ROLE CONFLICT results from tension among roles linked to two or more statuses (for example, a woman who juggles her responsibilities as a mother and a corporate CEO).

ROLE STRAIN results from tension among roles linked to a single status (for example, the college professor who enjoys personal interaction with students but at the same time knows that social distance is necessary in order to evaluate students fairly).

p. 129

✓ *A person's status set changes over the life course (p. 127).*

✓ *The role sets attached to a single status vary from society to society around the world (p. 129).*

social interaction (p. 127) the process by which people act and react in relation to others

status (p. 127) a social position that a person holds

status set (p. 127) all the statuses that a person holds at a given time

ascribed status (p. 128) a social position that someone receives at birth or assumes involuntarily later in life

achieved status (p. 128) a social position that someone assumes voluntarily and that reflects personal ability and effort

master status (p. 128) a status that has exceptional importance for social identity, often shaping a person's entire life

role (p. 128) behaviour expected of someone who holds a particular status

role set (p. 129) a number of roles attached to a single status

role conflict (p. 129) conflict among the roles connected to two or more statuses

role strain (p. 129) tension among the roles connected to a single status

The Social Construction of Reality

Through **SOCIAL INTERACTION**, we construct the reality we experience.

- For example, two people interacting both try to shape the reality of their situation.

pp. 130–131

The **THOMAS THEOREM** says that the reality people construct in their interaction has real consequences for the future.

- For example, a teacher who believes a certain student to be intellectually gifted may well encourage exceptional academic performance.

p. 132

ETHNOMETHODOLOGY is a strategy to reveal the assumptions people have about their social world.

- We can expose these assumptions by intentionally breaking the "rules" of social interaction and observing the reactions of other people.

p. 132

Both **CULTURE** and **SOCIAL CLASS** shape the reality people construct.

- For example, a "short walk" for a Torontonian is a few city blocks, but for a peasant in Latin America, it could be a few miles.

pp. 132–133

✓ *Through the social construction of reality, people creatively shape their social world.*

Dramaturgical Analysis: “The Presentation of Self”

DRAMATURGICAL ANALYSIS explores social interaction in terms of theatrical performance: A status operates as a part in a play, and a role is a script.

PERFORMANCES are the way we present ourselves to others.

- Performances are both conscious (intentional action) and unconscious (non-verbal communication).
- Performances include costume (the way we dress), props (objects we carry), and manner (tone of voice and gestures).

pp. 133–134

GENDER affects performances because men typically have greater social power than women. Gender differences involve *demeanour, use of space, facial expressions, and touching*.

- **DEMEANOUR**—With greater social power, men have more freedom in how they act.
- **USE OF SPACE**—Men typically command more space than women.
- **STARING** and **TOUCHING** are generally done by men to women.
- **SMILING**, as a way to please another, is more commonly done by women.

pp. 135–136

IDEALIZATION of performances means we try to convince others that our actions reflect ideal culture rather than selfish motives.

p. 136

EMBARRASSMENT is the “loss of face” in a performance. People use **TACT** to help others “save face.”

pp. 136–138

dramaturgical analysis (p. 133) Erving Goffman’s term for the study of social interaction in terms of theatrical performance

presentation of self (p. 134) Erving Goffman’s term for a person’s efforts to create specific impressions in the minds of others

non-verbal communication (p. 134) communication using body movements, gestures, and facial expressions rather than speech

personal space (p. 136) the surrounding area over which a person makes some claim to privacy

Interaction in Everyday Life: Three Applications

EMOTIONS: The Social Construction of **FEELING**

The same basic emotions are biologically programmed into all human beings, but culture guides what triggers emotions, how people display emotions, and how people value emotions. In everyday life, the presentation of self involves managing emotions as well as behaviour.

pp. 138–139

LANGUAGE: The Social Construction of **GENDER**

Gender is an important element of everyday interaction. Language defines women and men as different types of people, reflecting the fact that society attaches greater power and value to what is viewed as masculine.

p. 139

REALITY PLAY: The Social Construction of **HUMOUR**

Humour results from the difference between conventional and unconventional definitions of a situation. Because humour is a part of culture, people around the world find different situations funny.

pp. 140–143