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### Symbolic Interactionism and Dramaturgy

#### Key Concepts

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A cardinal principle of symbolic interactionism is that any empirically oriented scheme of human society, however derived, must respect the fact that in the first and last instances human society consists of people engaging in action.

~Blumer (1969:7)
Consider the following commonplace scenario: You hop on a bus only to find that most of the seats are already taken. However, you notice an empty seat nearby on which a passenger has placed his briefcase. As you approach the seat, you try to make eye contact with the passenger seated next to it, only to find that he pretends not to notice you. Pausing for a moment, you spot another empty seat at the rear of the bus. What do you do?

A. Attempt to make eye contact, say, “Excuse me, may I sit here” and wait for the passenger to move his briefcase.
B. Pick up the passenger’s briefcase and politely hand it to him as you proceed to sit down.
C. Stomp your feet and angrily blurt out, “Hey buddy, I paid for this ride—move your bag or I’ll do it for you,” and then sit down with a sigh of disdain next to the passenger.
D. Mutter some less-than-kind words as you pass the rider on your way to the back of the bus.

The purpose of this quiz lies not primarily in determining your answer but, rather, in calling your attention to the richness and complexity of social life that can be found under the surface of your response. Nothing short of a well-choreographed ballet is performed during this encounter. From determining the “definition of situation” as you read the meaning of the passenger’s briefcase placed on the empty seat and his attempt to avoid eye contact, to controlling (or not) your emotional reaction, the scene is a give-and-take dance of gestures. While it may seem to unfold spontaneously, such an encounter illustrates the constructed and ritualized nature of everyday interaction. For no one answer above is “right,” but each sheds light on how the meaning of gestures arises out of interaction and on the expectation that one’s self is to be treated with ceremonial care.

In this chapter we take up such issues through the works of three sociologists who have made significant contributions to interactionist approaches to social life. Such approaches highlight how the self and society are created and recreated during the course of interaction. We begin with an overview of the work of Herbert Blumer. In addition to coining the term “symbolic interactionism,” it was Blumer who set out the central theoretical and methodological principles that continue to shape much of the work in this field. We then turn to a discussion of Erving Goffman and his development of “dramaturgy,” a perspective that is informed not only by symbolic interactionism but also by Émile Durkheim’s insights into the ritual and moral realms of society. We conclude the chapter with a look at the work of Arlie Russell Hochschild, whose analyses of emotions expanded the theoretical and empirical terrain of symbolic interactionism. Moreover, Hochschild’s examination of gender and family dynamics in contemporary American society has provided important insights into the relationship between self-identity and broader social conditions.

**Herbert Blumer (1900–1987): A Biographical Sketch**

Herbert Blumer was born in St. Louis, Missouri, and attended the nearby University of Missouri, where he completed his undergraduate education as well as his master’s degree. After working for a couple of years as an instructor, he tried his hand at
professional football, playing for the Chicago Cardinals (now the Arizona Cardinals). While with the Cardinals he enrolled at the University of Chicago, where he earned his doctorate in 1928. At that time the sociology department was solidifying its reputation as a leading voice in the discipline. Known as the "Chicago School," the department was at the forefront in developing a sociology that, through detailed, empirical studies, explores how individuals understand and negotiate their everyday life.\(^1\) Blumer himself played a principal role in advancing the department’s framework for the discipline while serving on the faculty from 1927 to 1952.

His next move took him to the University of California, Berkeley, where he was hired to chair the school’s nascent sociology department. He spent the next twenty-five years at Berkeley, becoming a favorite professor among the students. His own reputation within the profession is revealed in part by his serving as secretary-treasurer and, in 1956, as president of the American Sociological Association (ASA). Blumer also served as editor of one of the discipline’s leading journals, *American Journal of Sociology*, from 1941 to 1952. In addition, in 1983 the ASA presented him with the award for a Career of Distinguished Scholarship. Herbert Blumer died in April 1987.

**INTELLECTUAL INFLUENCES AND CORE IDEAS**

While at the University of Chicago as a student and as a professor, Blumer was in the company of many of the leading figures in American sociology. Yet, his greatest intellectual debt is owed not to a sociologist but to a philosopher, George Herbert Mead (1863–1931). In fact, Blumer’s single most important contribution to sociology lies in his fashioning Mead’s pragmatist philosophy into one of the discipline’s major theoretical perspectives: symbolic interactionism. As such, this section focuses primarily on outlining Mead’s work and the ideas stemming directly from it.

At the center of symbolic interactionism is Mead’s view of the self. For Mead, the self does not passively react to its environment but, rather, actively creates the conditions to which it responds. Mead presented his views as a counter to those associated with behavioral psychology (an avowedly empirical branch of psychology committed

\(^1\)There are a number of works that examine the Chicago School and its impact on sociology. Three such books that may be of interest to readers are Martin Bulmer’s (1984) *The Chicago School of Sociology*, Robert Faris’s (1967) *Chicago Sociology, 1920–1932*, and Lewis and Smith’s (1980) *American Sociology and Pragmatism*. All are published by the University of Chicago Press.
to studying only observable actions) and its leading proponent John B. Watson (1878–1958).²

It is against this picture of a passive, nonreflexive self that Mead developed his own theoretical framework, which he labeled “social behaviorism.” For Mead, an essential aspect of the self is the mind. Instead of an ephemeral “black box” that is inaccessible to investigation, however, Mead viewed the mind as a behavioral process that entails a “conversation of significant gestures,” that is, an internal dialogue of words and actions whose meanings are shared by all those involved in a social act. In this internal conversation, the individual becomes an object to him- or herself through “taking the attitude of the other” and arouses in his or her own mind the same responses to one’s potential action that are aroused in other persons.³ Individuals then shape their actions on the basis of the imagined responses they attribute to others. Moreover, as we symbolically test alternative lines of conduct, we temporarily suspend our behaviors. Within the delay of responses produced by such testing lies the crux of intelligent behavior: controlling one’s present action with reference to ideas about the future consequences. Yet, self-control of what we say and do is in actuality a form of social control, as we check our behaviors—discarding some options while pursuing others—against the responses that we anticipate will be elicited from others.

³Behaviorists argue that understanding the self must be confined to studying the relationship between visible stimuli and the learned responses that are associated with them. This is tied to their assertion that human behavior differs little in principle from animal behavior: both can be explained and predicted on the basis of laws that govern the association of behavioral responses to external stimuli. Thus, as a learned response to a specific stimulus, a rabbit’s retreat from the path of a snake is no different in kind from a person’s efforts to perform well in her or his job. As you read in the chapter on exchange theory, this same view was expressed by B. F. Skinner, who was a disciple of Watson.

³Depending on the situation, “others” might be a specific person (a sibling or neighbor), an identifiable group (classmates or co-workers), or the community-at-large that Mead referred to as the “generalized other” (Southerners, Americans).
Symbolic interactionism that was formulated by Blumer. As a critic of Blumer’s views of interactionist theory and methods, Stryker’s own perspective was ill received by many and created an antagonistic schism within the field (Stryker 2003).

Identity theory is centered on specifying the reciprocal relationship between self and society—how each is a product and producer of the other—which was a central theme in Mead’s social psychology. Yet, Stryker intended to fashion a social structural version of symbolic interactionism. As he remarked, “A satisfactory theoretical framework must bridge social structure and person, must be able to move from the level of the person to that of large-scale social structure and back again” (1980:53). The “bridge” between these two levels is found in the concept of roles, or the behavioral expectations and meanings that are attached to positions located in the social structure. Roles allow us to predict the behavior of others and to orient our own conduct, thus making possible coordinated, organized interaction. Moreover, the concept of roles sheds light on the reciprocal relationship between self and society. “Asking how, or in what terms, society is patterned has led sociology to an image of society in terms of positions and roles. Given that the person is the other side of the society coin, then this view of society leads to an image of the person as a structure of positions and roles which, internalized, is the self” (ibid.:79).

This view leads to an understanding of the self that Mead (as well as Blumer) himself recognized but did not fully explore: a person has as many selves as he has patterned relations with others. To capture the complexity of the self and its connection to role-making, Stryker introduced three concepts: identity, identity salience, and commitment. An identity is a “part” of one’s self that is “called up” in the course of interacting with others. The number of identities a person possesses corresponds to the number of structured role relationships he participates in. Thus, a person’s self can be composed of multiple identities including child, parent, worker, friend, spouse, and so on (1980:60).

Identity salience refers to how the self is organized according to a hierarchy of identities. Not every identity has the same salience or importance to the individual, “such that the higher the identity in [the salience] hierarchy, the more likely that the identity will be invoked in a given situation or in many situations” (1980:61). When a situation structurally overlaps with other situations (for instance, your boss asks you to work a shift that conflicts with your class schedule), different identities are invoked. Which identity most influences an individual’s subsequent behavior, and how, depends on its location in the salience hierarchy. As a result, social structural characteristics—the presence or absence of situational overlaps—are directly tied to the self that is called up during interaction.

Rounding out Stryker’s identity theory and his attempt to explore the links between self and society is the concept of commitment. Here he notes that to the extent that a person’s relationship to others is dependent on being a specific kind of person, “one is committed to being that kind of person” (1980:61). Moreover, to the extent that maintaining one’s ties to a particular group of others is important to an individual, then he is committed to being a member of that group. In sum, because the forging of relationships with others is determined, in part, on the basis of identities and their salience for an individual, commitment is itself a reflection of identity salience (ibid.:61, 62). Yet, identities are themselves tied to socially structured role relationships that have been internalized as parts of one’s self. Social structure (society) creates identities (self) that (re)create social structure that creates identities that (re)create...
This view of the mind as a process of thinking that entails both self- and social control can be illustrated through any number of commonplace examples, for it is something we all continually experience. Consider, for instance, the internal conversation you engage in before asking someone out for a date, going on a job interview, determining how you will resolve an argument with a friend, or deciding whether to ask a question in class. In each case, you take the attitude of the other, viewing your self as an object as other individuals do during interaction. So, you may ask yourself, “What type of movie should I take him or her to?” or “What music should we listen to when we’re driving in the car?” Similarly, before raising your hand you may think, “Will I seem stupid if I ask the professor this question? Maybe it will seem like I’m trying to score ‘brownie’ points?” The answers to such questions, and hence the behavior you intend to undertake, are shaped by the responses evoked in your mind. The responses are not entirely your own, however. Instead, they reflect the assumed attitude that others take toward your behavior.

Our awareness of an object, gesture, or event makes it possible for us to form responses that indicate to others and ourselves how we are going to act in reference to the situation at hand. And in indicating our forthcoming responses we are at the same time indicating the meaning of the object, gesture, or event. Thus, Mead locates the source of meaning in social interaction. He defines meaning as a “threethread relationship” between (1) an individual’s gesture, (2) the adjustive response by another to that gesture, and (3) the completion of the social act initiated by the gesture of the first individual. Meaning is thus not an idea, but a response to a gesture developed within a social act. In other words, meaning does not exist within one’s consciousness, nor does it exist independently of the reality of interaction. One’s gesture to another (for example, asking someone, “May I borrow a pencil?”) refers to a desired result (getting a pencil) of the interaction. But an individual’s gesture is meaningful, or significant, only if it elicits the desired response from the person to whom it is directed. That is, your gesture has meaning only if the other person responds as you responded in your mind. If a person hands you a book instead of the pencil you asked for, your gesture lacked meaning, as the other’s behavior did not lead to the successful completion of the act. How many times have you said to someone, “You don’t understand what I’m saying,” when he did not respond as you had imagined he would. Such instances illustrate how meaning develops through a social process.

Blumer also contrasts symbolic interactionism with the views of psychological behaviorism by emphasizing interpretation. Interpretation entails constructing the meaning of another’s actions as well as one’s own, for meaning is not “released” by, or inherent in, the actions themselves, as the behaviorists would have us believe. As Blumer states,

human beings interpret or “define” each other’s actions instead of merely reacting to each other’s actions. Their “response” is not made directly to the actions of one another but instead is based on the meaning which they attach to such actions. Thus, human interaction is mediated by the use of symbols, by interpretation, or by ascertaining the meaning of one another’s actions. This interpretation is equivalent to inserting a process of interpretation between stimulus and response in the case of human behavior (1969:79).

Interpretation, then, is a behavioral process much like the mind, and, indeed, the two are closely related. Both are carried out through the conversation of gestures and symbols, and both are intertwined with the fundamental nature of the self: the consciousness of one’s self as an object.
Thus, self-consciousness is experienced “not directly, but only indirectly, from the particular standpoints of other individual[s] . . . or from the generalized standpoint of the social group as a whole to which he belongs” (Mead 1934/1962:138). In turn, seeing our self as an object becomes possible only by taking the attitudes of others toward our self. Moreover, from the perspective of symbolic interaction, self-consciousness has a most profound impact on social life, for it makes possible group or joint action. Blumer defines joint action as “the larger collective form of action that is constituted by the fitting together of the lines of behavior of the separate participants. . . . Joint actions range from a simple collaboration of two individuals to a complex alignment of the acts of huge organizations or institutions” (1969:70). Yet, whether it is a family gathering, a corporate merger, or a nation conducting foreign policy, each is the outcome of a reflexive, interpretative process in which participants assign meaning to the separate acts that together constitute the joint action. In other words, in order to align their behaviors with one another, individuals must construct a shared interpretation—by becoming an object to one’s self—of each other’s gestures. This alone allows for the formation of joint action, the building block of society.

The preceding discussion highlights the significance of meaning, interaction, and interpretation to interactionist accounts of social life. Together, these three concepts form the basis of the theory’s central premises. “The first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that things have for them. . . . The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one’s fellows. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters” (Blumer 1969:2). Thus, your response to another’s gesture—to copy your class notes, for instance—is dependent on how you define or give meaning to their request. But the meaning is not a product solely of your mind or inherent in the specific words used by the other person; instead, it is developed out of the interaction itself. While you may let some classmates copy your notes, you may refuse others depending on your interpretation of the motives (i.e., meaning) underlying their request. Was the person absent from class because of an illness, or is he trying to avoid doing the work? Perhaps he’s asking for the notes as a way to strike up a friendship. Knowing the answer to such questions, however, does not determine the decision for each and every individual. For some, being sick is not a valid reason for missing class, while others are more than happy to help out a slacker.

**Blumer’s Theoretical Orientation**

Blumer’s symbolic interactionism is individualistic and nonrationalist in orientation. His vision is one in which the social order—the patterning of social life—is continually constructed and reconstructed through the fitting together of acts by individuals (individualist) who are attempting to interpret and define the situations in which they find themselves (nonrationalist).

Turning first to the issue of order, Blumer’s individualist approach was developed in large measure through his critique of the then-dominant structural-functional paradigm (see Chapter 2), which is rooted in a collectivist orientation to social order. In numerous passages he chides functionalists for presenting an unrealistically static view of social life. For instance, in comparing symbolic interactionism with the
“conventional views of human society” (i.e., functionalism) on the question of social organization, Blumer remarks:

From the standpoint of symbolic interactionism, social organization is a framework inside of which acting units develop their actions. Structural features, such as “culture,” “social systems,” “social stratification,” or “social roles,” set conditions for their action but do not determine their action. People—that is, acting units—do not act toward culture, social structure or the like; they act toward situations. Social organization enters into action only to the extent to which it shapes situations in which people act, and to the extent to which it supplies fixed sets of symbols which people use in interpreting their situations. (1969:87, 88)

One of Blumer’s central theoretical objectives was to underscore the differences between symbolic interactionism and the more collectivist approaches such as functionalism that, to his mind, presented social structure as a “straitjacket” that determines the behavior of individuals and groups. While remarking that societal factors such as norms, values, culture, roles, and status positions (all collectivist concepts) play an important part in organizing social life, he nevertheless argued that they are significant “only as they enter into the process of interpretation and definition out of which joint actions are formed” (1969:75). Again quoting Blumer at some length on this point, he contended that symbolic interactionism

sees human society not as an established structure but as people meeting their conditions of life; it sees social action not as an emanation of societal structure but as a formation made by human actors; it sees this formation of action not as societal factors coming to expression through the medium of human organisms but as constructions made by actors out of what they
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Blumer’s remarks reveal a clear picture of the problem of order. Social life is seen as a dynamic process in which actors, through interpreting the gestures of others as well as their own, are at every moment creating and recreating the patterns of behavior that form the basis for the social order. However, when we turn to the problem of action (what motivates individuals or groups to act), the same explicitness is, unfortunately, not to be found. Like Mead, who was “only casually and tangentially interested in the self as a source of motivational energy, or as an object of affective attachment” (Wrong 1994:65), Blumer’s own “casual interest” on this issue leaves us with less to work with than we may like. Nevertheless, we can point out the general tendencies in Blumer’s symbolic interactionist perspective.

Blumer’s account of the self and interaction emphasizes the interpretive behaviors that individuals undertake when coordinating activities with others and assigning meaning to conduct and events. Moreover, in arguing that individuals approach situations pragmatically or as “problems” to be solved, he implies that we seek behaviors that “work.” Such a cognitive focus, however, should not be confused with a rationalist orientation to motivation. As we discussed in Chapter 1, rationalist presuppositions portray actors and groups as motivated principally by their self-interested maximization of rewards and minimizing of costs. However, far from suggesting that our actions are primarily shaped by an attempt to strategically maximize rewards, Blumer notes that in modern societies individuals “may fit their acts to one another... on the basis of compromise, out of duress, because they may use one another in achieving their respective ends, because it is the sensible thing to do, or out of sheer necessity” (1969:76). In the end, uncovering the motivations that propel actors is considered an open matter that cannot be reduced to any single factor.

To further explain Blumer’s theoretical orientation, briefly consider two of the core concepts of his theory discussed in the previous section. We focus on the issue of order as Blumer’s position on this point is stated more clearly. Blumer contends that meanings (our responses to objects, gestures, and events) are not fixed or external to interaction. On the contrary, it is during the process of interaction that meanings are created and responses carried out. Moreover, developing shared meanings forms the basis of any social act; it allows us to coordinate our activities with one another, that is, to form joint actions. This is suggestive of an individualist orientation to order, as actors are the source of meaning production and, thus, the source of the patterns and routines of social life.
Introduction to “The Methodological Position of Symbolic Interactionism”

In the following chapter taken from Symbolic Interactionism, Blumer begins by outlining the three fundamental premises that characterize this theoretical perspective, underscoring the concepts that form the core of this approach: meaning, interaction, and interpretation. He then moves to an analysis of the “root images” or central ideas that together comprise a symbolic interactionist account of the nature of society, the self, and action. Throughout his discussion, Blumer emphasizes the emergent character of social interaction and of society itself. Nowhere does he more succinctly make this point than when he remarks, “It is the social process in group life that creates and upholds the rules, not the rules that create and uphold group life” (1969:19). That joint actions, and the institutions that they sustain, take on repetitive and stable forms is a function not of an organization’s “inner dynamics” or “system requirements,” but of the recurring use of schemes of interpretation and definition. Thus, even established patterns of group life are constantly “formed anew” as they are “just as much a result of an interpretive process as is a new form of joint action that is being developed for the first time” (1969:18). Whether the occasion of a joint action is a first-time collaboration between new co-workers or a weekly family dinner, fitting together lines of conduct is based on the shared meanings that participants ascribe to the situation. And as Blumer reminds us, meanings “are themselves subject to pressure as well as to reinforcement, to incipient dissatisfaction as well as to indifference; they may be challenged as well as affirmed, allowed to slip along without concern as well as subjected to infusions of vigor” (ibid.).
Redfield, and Louis Wirth. Despite significant differences in the thought of such scholars, there is a great similarity in the general way in which they viewed and studied human group life. The concept of symbolic interactionism is built around this strand of general similarity. There has been no clear formulation of the position of symbolic interactionism, and above all, a reasoned statement of the methodological position of this approach is lacking. This essay is an effort to develop such a statement.

THE NATURE OF SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

Symbolic interactionism rests in the last analysis on three simple premises. The first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them. Such things include everything that the human being may note in his world—physical objects, such as trees or chairs; other human beings, such as a mother or a store clerk; categories of human beings, such as friends or enemies; institutions, such as a school or a government; guiding ideals, such as individual independence or honesty; activities of others, such as their commands or requests; and such situations as an individual encounters in his daily life. The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one’s fellows. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters. I wish to discuss briefly each of these three fundamental premises.

It would seem that few scholars would see anything wrong with the first premise—that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings which these things have for them. Yet, oddly enough, this simple view is ignored or played down in practically all of the thought and work in contemporary social science and psychological science. Meaning is either taken for granted and thus pushed aside as unimportant or it is regarded as a mere neutral link between the factors responsible for human behavior and this behavior as the product of such factors. We can see this clearly in the predominant posture of psychological and social science today. Common to both of these fields is the tendency to treat human behavior as the product of various factors that play upon human beings; concern is with the behavior and with the factors regarded as producing them. Thus, psychologists turn to such factors as stimuli, attitudes, conscious or unconscious motives, various kinds of psychological inputs, perception and cognition, and various features of personal organization to account for given forms or instances of human conduct. In a similar fashion sociologists rely on such factors as social position, status demands, social roles, cultural prescriptions, norms and values, social pressures, and group affiliation to provide such explanations. In both such typical psychological and sociological explanations the meanings of things for the human beings who are acting are either bypassed or swallowed up in the factors used to account for their behavior. If one declares that the given kinds of behavior are the result of the particular factors regarded as producing them, there is no need to concern oneself with the meaning of the things toward which human beings act; one merely identifies the initiating factors and the resulting behavior. Or one may, if pressed, seek to accommodate the element of meaning by lodging it in the initiating factors or by regarding it as a neutral link intervening between the initiating factors and the behavior they are alleged to produce. In the first of these latter cases the meaning disappears by being merged into the initiating or causative factors; in the second case meaning becomes a mere transmission link that can be ignored in favor of the initiating factors.

The position of symbolic interactionism, in contrast, is that the meanings that things have for human beings are central in their own right. To ignore the meaning of the things toward which people act is seen as falsifying the behavior under study. To bypass the meaning in favor of factors alleged to produce the behavior is seen as a grievous neglect of the role of meaning in the formation of behavior.

The simple premise that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meaning of such things is much too simple in itself to differentiate symbolic interactionism—there are several other approaches that share this premise.
A major line of difference between them and symbolic interactionism is set by the second premise, which refers to the source of meaning. There are two well-known traditional ways of accounting for the origin of meaning. One of them is to regard meaning as being intrinsic to the thing that has it, as being a natural part of the objective makeup of the thing. Thus, a chair is clearly a chair in itself, a cow a cow, a cloud a cloud, a rebellion a rebellion, and so forth. Being inherent in the thing that has it, meaning needs merely to be disengaged by observing the objective thing that has the meaning. The meaning emanates, so to speak, from the thing and as such there is no process involved in its formation; all that is necessary is to recognize the meaning that is there in the thing. It should be immediately apparent that this view reflects the traditional position of “realism” in philosophy—a position that is widely held and deeply entrenched in the social and psychological sciences. The other major traditional view regards “meaning” as a psychical accretion brought to the thing by the person for whom the thing has meaning. This psychical accretion is treated as being an expression of constituent elements of the person’s psyche, mind, or psychological organization. The constituent elements are such things as sensations, feelings, ideas, memories, motives, and attitudes. The meaning of a thing is but the expression of the given psychological elements that are brought into play in connection with the perception of the thing; thus one seeks to explain the meaning of a thing by isolating the particular psychological elements that produce the meaning. One sees this in the somewhat ancient and classical psychological practice of analyzing the meaning of an object by identifying the sensations that enter into perception of that object; or in the contemporary practice of tracing the meaning of a thing, such as let us say prostitution, to the attitude of the person who views it. This lodging of the meaning of things in psychological elements limits the processes of the formation of meaning to whatever processes are involved in arousing and bringing together the given psychological elements that produce the meaning. Such processes are psychological in nature, and include perception, cognition, repression, transfer of feelings, and association of ideas.

Symbolic interactionism views meaning as having a different source than those held by the two dominant views just considered. It does not regard meaning as emanating from the intrinsic makeup of the thing that has meaning, nor does it see meaning as arising through a coalescence of psychological elements in the person. Instead, it sees meaning as arising in the process of interaction between people. The meaning of a thing for a person grows out of the ways in which other persons act toward the person with regard to the thing. Their actions operate to define the thing for the person. Thus, symbolic interactionism sees meanings as social products, as creations that are formed in and through the defining activities of people as they interact. This point of view gives symbolic interactionism a very distinctive position, with profound implications that will be discussed later.

The third premise mentioned above further differentiates symbolic interactionism. While the meaning of things is formed in the context of social interaction and is derived by the person from that interaction, it is a mistake to think that the use of meaning by a person is but an application of the meaning so derived. This mistake seriously mars the work of many scholars who otherwise follow the symbolic interactionist approach. They fail to see that the use of meanings by a person in his action involves an interpretative process. In this respect they are similar to the adherents of the two dominant views spoken of above—to those who lodge meaning in the objective makeup of the thing that has it and those who regard it as an expression of psychological elements. All three are alike in viewing the use of meaning by the human being in his action as being no more than an arousing and application of already established meanings. As such, all three fail to see that the use of meanings by the actor occurs through a process of interpretation. This process has two distinct steps. First, the actor indicates to himself the things toward which he is acting; he has to point out to himself the things that have meaning. The making of such indications is an internalized social process in that the actor is interacting with himself. This interaction with himself is something other than an interplay of psychological elements; it is an instance of the person engaging in a process of communication with
himself. Second, by virtue of this process of communicating with himself, interpretation becomes a matter of handling meanings. The actor selects, checks, suspends, regroups, and transforms the meanings in the light of the situation in which he is placed and the direction of his action. Accordingly, interpretation should not be regarded as a mere automatic application of established meanings but as a formative process in which meanings are used and revised as instruments for the guidance and formation of action. It is necessary to see that meanings play their part in action through a process of self-interaction.

It is not my purpose to discuss at this point the merits of the three views that lodge meaning respectively in the thing, in the psyche, and in social action, nor to elaborate on the contention that meanings are handled flexibly by the actor in the course of forming his action. Instead, I wish merely to note that by being based on these three premises, symbolic interaction is necessarily led to develop an analytical scheme of human society and human conduct that is quite distinctive. It is this scheme that I now propose to outline.

Symbolic interactionism is grounded on a number of basic ideas, or “root images,” as I prefer to call them. These root images refer to and depict the nature of the following matters: human groups or societies, social interaction, objects, the human being as an actor, human action, and the interconnection of the lines of action. Taken together, these root images represent the way in which symbolic interactionism views human society and conduct. They constitute the framework of study and analysis. Let me describe briefly each of these root images.

Nature of human society or human group life. Human groups are seen as consisting of human beings who are engaging in action. The action consists of the multitudinous activities that the individuals perform in their life as they encounter one another and as they deal with the succession of situations confronting them. The individuals may act singly, they may act collectively, and they may act on behalf of, or as representatives of, some organization or group of others. The activities belong to the acting individuals and are carried on by them always with regard to the situations in which they have to act. The import of this simple and essentially redundant characterization is that fundamentally human groups or society exists in action and must be seen in terms of action. This picture of human society as action must be the starting point (and the point of return) for any scheme that purports to treat and analyze human society empirically. Conceptual schemes that depict society in some other fashion can only be derivations from the complex of ongoing activity that constitutes group life. This is true of the two dominant conceptions of society in contemporary sociology—that of culture and that of social structure. Culture as a conception, whether defined as custom, tradition, norm, value, rules, or such like, is clearly derived from what people do. Similarly, social structure in any of its aspects, as represented by such terms as social position, status, role, authority, and prestige, refers to relationships derived from how people act toward each other. The life of any human society consists necessarily of an ongoing process of fitting together the activities of its members. It is this complex of ongoing activity that establishes and portrays structure or organization. A cardinal principle of symbolic interactionism is that any empirically oriented scheme of human society, however derived, must respect the fact that in the first and last instances human society consists of people engaging in action. To be empirically valid the scheme must be consistent with the nature of the social action of human beings.

Nature of social interaction. Group life necessarily presupposes interaction between the group members; or, put otherwise, a society consists of individuals interacting with one another. The activities of the members occur predominantly in response to one another or in relation to one another. Even though this is recognized almost universally in definitions of human society, social interaction is usually taken for granted and treated as having little, if any, significance in its own right. This is evident in typical sociological and psychological schemes—they treat social interaction as merely a medium through which the determinants of behavior pass to produce the behavior. Thus, the typical sociological scheme ascribes behavior to such factors as status position, cultural prescriptions, norms, values, sanctions, role demands,
and social system requirements; explanation in terms of such factors suffices without paying attention to the social interaction that their play necessarily pre-supposes. Similarly, in the typical psychological scheme such factors as motives, attitudes, hidden complexes, elements of psychological organization, and psychological processes are used to account for behavior without any need of considering social interaction. One jumps from such causative factors to the behavior they are supposed to produce. Social interaction becomes a mere forum through which sociological or psychological determinants move to bring about given forms of human behavior. I may add that this ignoring of social interaction is not corrected by speaking of an interaction of societal elements (as when a sociologist speaks of an interaction of social roles or an interaction between the components of a social system) or an interaction of psychological elements (as when a psychologist speaks of an interaction between the attitudes held by different people). Social interaction is an interaction between actors and not between factors imputed to them.

Symbolic interactionism does not merely give a ceremonious nod to social interaction. It recognizes social interaction to be of vital importance in its own right. This importance lies in the fact that social interaction is a process that forms human conduct instead of being merely a means or a setting for the expression or release of human conduct. Put simply, human beings in interacting with one another have to take account of what each other is doing or is about to do; they are forced to direct their own conduct or handle their situations in terms of what they take into account. Thus, the activities of others enter as positive factors in the formation of their own conduct; in the face of the actions of others one may abandon an intention or purpose, revise it, check or suspend it, intensify it, or replace it. The actions of others enter to set what one plans to do, may oppose or prevent such plans, may require a revision of such plans, and may demand a very different set of such plans. One has to fit one’s own line of activity in some manner to the actions of others. The actions of others have to be taken into account and cannot be regarded as merely an arena for the expression of what one is disposed to do or sets out to do.

We are indebted to George Herbert Mead for the most analysis of social interaction—an analysis that squares with the realistic account just given. Mead identifies two forms or levels of social interaction in human society. He refers to them respectively as “the conversation of gestures” and “the use of significant symbols”; I shall term them respectively “non-symbolic interaction” and “symbolic interaction.” Non-symbolic interaction takes place when one responds directly to the action of another without interpreting that action; symbolic interaction involves interpretation of the action. Non-symbolic interaction is most readily apparent in reflex responses, as in the case of a boxer who automatically raises his arm to parry a blow. However, if the boxer were reflectively to identify the forthcoming blow from his opponent as a feint designed to trap him, he would be engaging in symbolic interaction. In this case, he would endeavor to ascertain the meaning of the blow—that is, what the blow signifies as to his opponent’s plan. In their association human beings engage plentifully in non-symbolic interaction as they respond immediately and unreflectively to each other’s bodily movements, expressions, and tones of voice, but their characteristic mode of interaction is on the symbolic level, as they seek to understand the meaning of each other’s action.

Mead’s analysis of symbolic interaction is highly important. He sees it as a presentation of gestures and a response to the meaning of those gestures. A gesture is any part or aspect of an ongoing action that signifies the larger act of which it is a part—for example, the shaking of a fist as an indication of a possible attack, or the declaration of war by a nation as an indication of a posture and line of action of that nation. Such things as requests, orders, commands, cues, and declarations are gestures that convey to the person who recognizes them an idea of the intention and plan of forthcoming action of the individual who presents them. The person who responds organizes his response on the basis of what the gestures mean to him; the person who presents the gestures advances them as indications or signs of what he is planning to do as well as of what he wants the respondent to do or understand. Thus, the gesture has meaning for both the person who makes it and for the
person to whom it is directed. When the gesture has the same meaning for both, the two parties understand each other. From this brief account it can be seen that the meaning of the gesture flows out along three lines (Mead’s triadic nature of meaning): It signifies what the person to whom it is directed is to do; it signifies what the person who is making the gesture plans to do; and it signifies the joint action that is to arise by the articulation of the acts of both. Thus, for illustration, a robber’s command to his victim to put up his hands is (a) an indication of what the victim is to do; (b) an indication of what the robber plans to do, that is, relieve the victim of his money; and (c) an indication of the joint act being formed, in this case a holdup. If there is confusion or misunderstanding along any one of these three lines of meaning, communication is ineffective, interaction is impeded, and the formation of joint action is blocked.

One additional feature should be added to round out Mead’s analysis of symbolic interaction, namely, that the parties to such interaction must necessarily take each other’s roles. To indicate to another what he is to do, one has to make the indication from the standpoint of that other; to order the victim to put up his hands the robber has to see this response in terms of the victim making it. Correspondingly, the victim has to see the command from the standpoint of the robber who gives the command; he has to grasp the intention and forthcoming action of the robber. Such mutual role-taking is the sine qua non of communication and effective symbolic interaction.

The central place and importance of symbolic interaction in human group life and conduct should be apparent. A human society or group consists of people in association. Such association exists necessarily in the form of people acting toward one another and thus engaging in social interaction. Such interaction in human society is characteristically and predominantly on the symbolic level; as individuals acting individually, collectively, or as agents of some organization encounter one another they are necessarily required to take account of the actions of one another as they form their own action. They do this by a dual process of indicating to others how to act and of interpreting the indications made by others. Human group life is a vast process of such defining to others what to do and of interpreting their definitions; through this process people come to fit their activities to one another and to form their own individual conduct. Both such joint activity and individual conduct are formed in and through this ongoing process; they are not mere expressions or products of what people bring to their interaction or of conditions that are antecedent to their interaction. The failure to accommodate to this vital point constitutes the fundamental deficiency of schemes that seek to account for human society in terms of social organization or psychological factors, or of any combination of the two. By virtue of symbolic interaction, human group life is necessarily a formative process and not a mere arena for the expression of pre-existing factors.

NATURE OF OBJECTS. The position of symbolic interactionism is that the “worlds” that exist for human beings and for their groups are composed of “objects” and that these objects are the product of symbolic interaction. An object is anything that can be indicated, anything that is pointed to or referred to—a cloud, a book, a legislature, a banker, a religious doctrine, a ghost, and so forth. For purposes of convenience one can classify objects in three categories: (a) physical objects, such as chairs, trees, or bicycles; (b) social objects, such as students, priests, a president, a mother, or a friend; and (c) abstract objects, such as moral principles, philosophical doctrines, or ideas such as justice, exploitation, or compassion. I repeat that an object is anything that can be indicated or referred to. The nature of an object—of any and every object—consists of the meaning that it has for the person for whom it is an object. This meaning sets the way in which he sees the object, the way in which he is prepared to act toward it, and the way in which he is ready to talk about it. An object may have a different meaning for different individuals: a tree will be a different object to a botanist, a lumberman, a poet, and a home gardener; the President of the United States can be a very different object to a devoted member of his political party than to a member of the opposition; the members of an ethnic group may be seen as a different kind of object by members of other groups. The meaning of objects for a person arises fundamentally out of the way they
are defined to him by others with whom he interacts. Thus, we come to learn through the indications of others that a chair is a chair, that doctors are a certain kind of professional, that the United States Constitution is a given kind of legal document, and so forth. Out of a process of mutual indications common objects emerge—objects that have the same meaning for a given set of people and are seen in the same manner by them.

Several noteworthy consequences follow from the foregoing discussion of objects. First, it gives us a different picture of the environment or milieu of human beings. From their standpoint the environment consists only of the objects that the given human beings recognize and know. The nature of this environment is set by the meaning that the objects composing it have for those human beings. Individuals, also groups, occupying or living in the same spatial location may have, accordingly, very different environments; as we say, people may be living side by side yet be living in different worlds. Indeed, the term “world” is more suitable than the word “environment” to designate the setting, the surroundings, and the texture of things that confront them. It is the world of their objects with which people have to deal and toward which they develop their actions. It follows that in order to understand the action of people it is necessary to identify their world of objects—an important point that will be elaborated later.

Second, objects (in the sense of their meaning) must be seen as social creations—as being formed in and arising out of the process of definition and interpretation as this process takes place in the action of people. The meaning of anything and everything has to be formed, learned, and transmitted through a process of indication—a process that is necessarily a social process. Human group life on the level of symbolic interaction is a vast process in which people are forming, sustaining, and transforming the objects of their world as they come to give meaning to objects. Objects have no fixed status except as their meaning is sustained through indications and definitions that people make of the objects. Nothing is more apparent than that objects in all categories can undergo change in their meaning. A star in the sky is a very different object to a modern astrophysicist than it was to a shepherder of biblical times; marriage was a different object to later Romans than to earlier Romans; the president of a nation who fails to act successfully through critical times may become a very different object to the citizens of his land. In short, from the standpoint of symbolic interactionism human group life is a process in which objects are being created, affirmed, transformed, and cast aside. The life and action of people necessarily change in line with the changes taking place in their world of objects.

The human being as an acting organism. Symbolic interactionism recognizes that human beings must have a makeup that fits the nature of social interaction. The human being is seen as an organism that not only responds to others on the non-symbolic level but as one that makes indications to others and interprets their indications. He can do this, as Mead has shown so emphatically, only by virtue of possessing a “self.” Nothing esoteric is meant by this expression. It means merely that a human being can be an object of his own action. Thus, he can recognize himself, for instance, as being a man, young in age, a student, in debt, trying to become a doctor, coming from an undistinguished family and so forth. In all such instances he is an object to himself; and he acts toward himself and guides himself in his actions toward others on the basis of the kind of object he is to himself. This notion of oneself as an object fits into the earlier discussion of objects. Like other objects, the self-object emerges from the process of social interaction in which other people are defining a person to himself. Mead has traced the way in which this occurs in his discussion of role-taking. He points out that in order to become an object to himself a person has to see himself from the outside. One can do this only by placing himself in the position of others and viewing himself or acting toward himself from that position. The roles the person takes range from that of discrete individuals (the “play stage”), through that of discrete organized groups (the “game stage”) to that of the abstract community (the “generalized other”). In taking such roles the person is in a position to address or approach himself—as in the case of a young girl who in “playing mother” talks to herself as her mother would do, or in the case of a young
priest who sees himself through the eyes of the priesthood. We form our objects of ourselves through such a process of role-taking. It follows that we see ourselves through the way in which others see or define us—or, more precisely, we see ourselves by taking one of the three types of roles of others that have been mentioned. That one forms an object of himself through the ways in which others define one to himself is recognized fairly well in the literature today, so despite its great significance I shall not comment on it further.

There is an even more important matter that stems from the fact that the human being has a self, namely that this enables him to interact with himself. This interaction is not in the form of interaction between two or more parts of a psychological system, as between needs, or between emotions, or between ideas, or between the id and the ego in the Freudian scheme. Instead, the interaction is social—a form of communication, with the person addressing himself as a person and responding thereto. We can clearly recognize such interaction in ourselves as each of us notes that he is angry with himself, or that he has to spur himself on in his tasks, or that he reminds himself to do this or that, or that he is talking to himself in working out some plan of action. As such instances suggest, self-interaction exists fundamentally as a process of making indications to oneself. This process is in play continuously during one’s waking life, as one notes and considers one or another matter, or observes this or that happening. Indeed, for the human being to be conscious or aware of anything is equivalent to his indicating the thing to himself—he is identifying it as a given kind of object and considering its relevance or importance to his line of action. One’s waking life consists of a series of such indications that the person is making to himself, indications that he uses to direct his action.

We have, then, a picture of the human being as an organism that interacts with itself through a social process of making indications to oneself. This is a radically different view of the human being from that which dominates contemporary social and psychological science. The dominant prevailing view sees the human being as a complex organism whose behavior is a response to factors playing on the organization of the organism. Schools of thought in the social and psychological sciences differ enormously in which of such factors they regard as significant, as is shown in such a diverse array as stimuli, organic drives, need-dispositions, conscious motives, unconscious motives, emotions, attitudes, ideas, cultural prescriptions, norms, values, status demands, social roles, reference group affiliations, and institutional pressures. Schools of thought differ also in how they view the organization of the human being, whether as a kind of biological organization, a kind of psychological organization, or a kind of imported societal organization incorporated from the social structure of one’s group. Nevertheless, these schools of thought are alike in seeing the human being as a responding organism, with its behavior being a product of the factors playing on its organization or an expression of the interplay of parts of its organization. Under this widely shared view the human being is “social” only in the sense of either being a member of social species, or of responding to others (social stimuli), or of having incorporated within it the organization of his group.

The view of the human being held in symbolic interactionism is fundamentally different. The human being is seen as “social” in a much more profound sense—in the sense of an organism that engages in social interaction with itself by making indications to itself and responding to such indications. By virtue of engaging in self-interaction the human being stands in a markedly different relation to his environment than is presupposed by the widespread conventional view described above. Instead of being merely an organism that responds to the play of factors on or through it, the human being is seen as an organism that has to deal with what it notes. It meets what it so notes by engaging in a process of self-indication in which it makes an object of what it notes, gives it a meaning, and uses the meaning as the basis for directing its action. Its behavior with regard to what it notes is not a response called forth by the presentation of what it notes but instead is an action that arises out of the interpretation made through the process of self-indication. In this sense, the human being who is engaging in self-interaction is not a mere responding organism but an acting organism—an organism that has to mold a line
of action on the basis of what it takes into account instead of merely releasing a response to the play of some factor on its organization.

**Nature of Human Action.** The capacity of the human being to make indications to himself gives a distinctive character to human action. It means that the human individual confronts a world that he must interpret in order to act instead of an environment to which he responds because of his organization. He has to cope with the situations in which he is called on to act, ascertaining the meaning of the actions of others and mapping out his own line of action in the light of such interpretation. He has to construct and guide his action instead of merely releasing it in response to factors playing on him or operating through him. He may do a miserable job in constructing his action, but he has to construct it.

This view of the human being directing his action by making indications to himself stands sharply in contrast to the view of human action that dominates current psychological and social science. This dominant view, as already implied, ascribes human action to an initiating factor or a combination of such factors. Action is traced back to such matters as motives, attitudes, need-dispositions, unconscious complexes, stimuli configurations, status demands, role requirements, and situational demands. To link the action to one or more of such initiating agents is regarded as fulfilling the scientific task. Yet, such an approach ignores and makes no place for the process of self-interaction through which the individual handles his world and constructs his action. The door is closed to the vital process of interpretation in which the individual notes and assesses what is presented to him and through which he maps out lines of overt behavior prior to their execution.

Fundamentally, action on the part of a human being consists of taking account of various things that he notes and forging a line of conduct on the basis of how he interprets them. The things taken into account cover such matters as his wishes and wants, his objectives, the available means for their achievement, the actions and anticipated actions of others, his image of himself, and the likely result of a given line of action. His conduct is formed and guided through such a process of indication and interpretation. In this process, given lines of action may be started or stopped, they may be abandoned or postponed, they may be confined to mere planning or to an inner life of reverie, or if initiated, they may be transformed. My purpose is not to analyze this process but to call attention to its presence and operation in the formation of human action. We must recognize that the activity of human beings consists of meeting a flow of situations in which they have to act and that their action is built on the basis of what they note, how they assess and interpret what they note, and what kind of projected lines of action they map out. This process is not caught by ascribing action to some kind of factor (for example, motives, need-dispositions, role requirements, social expectations, or social rules) that is thought to initiate the action and propel it to its conclusion; such a factor, or some expression of it, is a matter the human actor takes into account in mapping his line of action. The initiating factor does not embrace or explain how it and other matters are taken into account in the situation that calls for action. One has to get inside of the defining process of the actor in order to understand his action.

This view of human action applies equally well to joint or collective action in which numbers of individuals are implicated. Joint or collective action constitutes the domain of sociological concern, as exemplified in the behavior of groups, institutions, organizations, and social classes. Such instances of societal behavior, whatever they may be, consist of individuals fitting their lines of action to one another. It is both proper and possible to view and study such behavior in its joint or collective character instead of in its individual components. Such joint behavior does not lose its character of being constructed through an interpretative process in meeting the situations in which the collectivity is called on to act. Whether the collectivity be an army engaged in a campaign, a corporation seeking to expand its operations, or a nation trying to correct an unfavorable balance of trade, it needs to construct its action through an interpretation of what is happening in its area of operation. The interpretative process takes place by participants making indications to one another, not merely each to himself. Joint or collective action is an outcome of such a process of interpretative interaction.
INTERLINKAGE OF ACTION. As stated earlier, human group life consists of, and exists in, the fitting of lines of action to each other by the members of the group. Such articulation of lines of action gives rise to and constitutes “joint action”—a societal organization of conduct of different acts of diverse participants. A joint action, while made up of diverse component acts that enter into its formation, is different from any one of them and from their mere aggregation. The joint action has a distinctive character in its own right, a character that lies in the articulation or linkage as apart from what may be articulated or linked. Thus, the joint action may be identified as such and may be spoken of and handled without having to break it down into the separate acts that comprise it. This is what we do when we speak of such things as marriage, a trading transaction, war, a parliamentary discussion, or a church service. Similarly, we can speak of the collectivity that engages in joint action without having to identify the individual members of that collectivity, as we do in speaking of a family, a business corporation, a church, a university, or a nation. It is evident that the domain of the social scientist is constituted precisely by the study of joint action and of the collectivities that engage in joint action.

In dealing with collectivities and with joint action one can easily be trapped in an erroneous position by failing to recognize that the joint action of the collectivity is an interlinkage of the separate acts of the participants. This failure leads one to overlook the fact that a joint action always has to undergo a process of formation; even though it may be a well-established and repetitive form of social action, each instance of it has to be formed anew. Further, this career of formation through which it comes into being necessarily takes place through the dual process of designation and interpretation that was discussed above. The participants still have to guide their respective acts by forming and using meanings.

With these remarks as a background I wish to make three observations on the implications of the interlinkage that constitutes joint action. I wish to consider first those instances of joint action that are repetitive and stable. The preponderant portion of social action in a human society, particularly in a settled society, exists in the form of recurrent patterns of joint action. In most situations in which people act toward one another they have in advance a firm understanding of how to act and of how other people will act. They share common and pre-established meanings of what is expected in the action of the participants, and accordingly each participant is able to guide his own behavior by such meanings. Instances of repetitive and pre-established forms of joint action are so frequent and common that it is easy to understand why scholars have viewed them as the essence or natural form of human group life. Such a view is especially apparent in the concepts of “culture” and “social order” that are so dominant in social science literature. Most sociological schemes rest on the belief that a human society exists in the form of an established order of living, with that order resolvable into adherence to sets of rules, norms, values, and sanctions that specify to people how they are to act in their different situations.

Several comments are in order with regard to this neat scheme. First, it is just not true that the full expanse of life in a human society, in any human society, is but an expression of pre-established forms of joint action. New situations are constantly arising within the scope of group life that are problematic and for which existing rules are inadequate. I have never heard of any society that was free of problems nor any society in which members did not have to engage in discussion to work out ways of action. Such areas of unprescribed conduct are just as natural, indigenous, and recurrent in human group life as are those areas covered by pre-established and faithfully followed prescriptions of joint action. Second, we have to recognize that even in the case of pre-established and repetitive joint action each instance of such joint action has to be formed anew. The participants still have to build up their lines of action and fit them to one another through the dual process of designation and interpretation. They do this in the case of repetitive joint action, of course, by using the same recurrent and constant meanings. If we recognize this, we are forced to realize that the play and fate of meanings are what is important, not the joint action in its established form. Repetitive and stable joint action is just as much a result of an interpretative process as is a
new form of joint action that is being developed for the first time. This is not an idle or pedantic point; the meanings that underlie established and recurrent joint action are themselves subject to pressure as well as to reinforcement, to incipient dissatisfaction as well as to indifference; they may be challenged as well as affirmed, allowed to slip along without concern as well as subjected to infusions of new vigor. Behind the facade of the objectively perceived joint action the set of meanings that sustains that joint action has a life that the social scientists can ill afford to ignore. A gratuitous acceptance of the concepts of norms, values, social rules, and the like should not blind the social scientist to the fact that any one of them is subtended by a process of social interaction—a process that is necessary not only for their change but equally well for their retention in a fixed form. It is the social process in group life that creates and upholds the rules, not the rules that create and uphold group life.

The second observation on the interlinkage that constitutes joint action refers to the extended connection of actions that make up so much of human group life. We are familiar with these large complex networks of action involving an interlinkage and interdependency of diverse actions of diverse people—as in the division of labor extending from the growing of grain by the farmer to an eventual sale of bread in a store, or in the elaborate chain extending from the arrest of a suspect to his eventual release from a penitentiary. These networks with their regularized participation of diverse people by diverse action at diverse points yields a picture of institutions that have been appropriately a major concern of sociologists. They also give substance to the idea that human group life has the character of a system. In seeing such a large complex of diversified activities, all hanging together in a regularized operation, and in seeing the complementary organization of participants in well-knit interdependent relationships, it is easy to understand why so many scholars view such networks or institutions as self-operating entities, following their own dynamics and not requiring that attention be given to the participants within the network. Most of the sociological analyses of institutions and social organization adhere to this view. Such adherence, in my judgment, is a serious mistake. One should recognize what is true, namely, that the diverse array of participants occupying different points in the network engage in their actions at those points on the basis of using given sets of meanings. A network or an institution does not function automatically because of some inner dynamics or system requirements; it functions because people at different points do something, and what they do is a result of how they define the situation in which they are called on to act. A limited appreciation of this point is reflected today in some of the work on decision-making, but on the whole the point is grossly ignored. It is necessary to recognize that the sets of meanings that lead participants to act as they do at their stationed points in the network have their own setting in a localized process of social interaction—and that these meanings are formed, sustained, weakened, strengthened, or transformed, as the case may be, through a socially defining process. Both the functioning and the fate of institutions are set by this process of interpretation as it takes place among the diverse sets of participants.

A third important observation needs to be made, namely, that any instance of joint action, whether newly formed or long established, has necessarily arisen out of a background of previous actions of the participants. A new kind of joint action never comes into existence apart from such a background. The participants involved in the formation of the new joint action always bring to that formation the world of objects, the sets of meanings, and the schemes of interpretation that they already possess. Thus, the new form of joint action always emerges out of and is connected with a context of previous joint action. It cannot be understood apart from that context; one has to bring into one’s consideration this linkage with preceding forms of joint action. One is on treacherous and empirically invalid grounds if he thinks that any given form of joint action can be sliced off from its historical linkage, as if its makeup and character arose out of the air through spontaneous generation instead of growing out of what went before. In the face of radically different and stressful
situations people may be led to develop new forms of joint action that are markedly different from those in which they have previously engaged, yet even in such cases there is always some connection and continuity with what went on before. One cannot understand the new form without incorporating knowledge of this continuity into one’s analysis of the new form. Joint action not only represents a horizontal linkage, so to speak, of the activities of the participants, but also a vertical linkage with previous joint action.

**Summary remarks.** The general perspective of symbolic interactionism should be clear from our brief sketch of its root images. This approach sees a human society as people engaged in living. Such living is a process of ongoing activity in which participants are developing lines of action in the multitudinous situations they encounter. They are caught up in a vast process of interaction in which they have to fit their developing actions to one another. This process of interaction consists in making indications to others of what to do and in interpreting the indications as made by others. They live in worlds of objects and are guided in their orientation and action by the meaning of these objects. Their objects, including objects of themselves, are formed, sustained, weakened, and transformed in their interaction with one another. This general process should be seen, of course, in the differentiated character which it necessarily has by virtue of the fact that people cluster in different groups, belong to different associations, and occupy different positions. They accordingly approach each other differently, live in different worlds, and guide themselves by different sets of meanings. Nevertheless, whether one is dealing with a family, a boy’s gang, an industrial corporation, or a political party, one must see the activities of the collectivity as being formed through a process of designation and interpretation.

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**Erving Goffman (1922–1982): A Biographical Sketch**

Erving Goffman was born in Mannville, Alberta, Canada, in 1922. He graduated with a B.A. from the University of Toronto in 1945. He than attended the University of Chicago, where he received his master’s degree in 1949 and his Ph.D. in 1953. After completing his doctorate, Goffman spent the next three years as a visiting scientist at the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) in Bethesda, Maryland. During that period he conducted fieldwork at St. Elizabeth’s Hospital in Washington, D.C., a federal mental institution with more than seven thousand patients in its charge. His research here led to one of the landmark books in sociology, *Asylums* (1961). Following his stint at the NIMH, Goffman took a position in the sociology department at the University of California, Berkeley, where he remained until 1968. He then left for the University of Pennsylvania, where he assumed an endowed chair, the Benjamin Franklin Professor of Anthropology and Psychology. He served on the
University of Pennsylvania faculty until his untimely death in 1982, at the age of sixty.

Goffman produced a number of works that have made their way into the canon of contemporary sociology. In addition to *Asylums*, his more notable books include *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), *Encounters* (1961), *Behavior in Public Places* (1963), *Stigma* (1965), *Interaction Ritual* (1967), *Strategic Interaction* (1969), *Frame Analysis* (1974), and *Gender Advertisements* (1979). His contributions to the discipline notwithstanding, Goffman maintained a reputation as an iconoclast; never content to be conventional, he chartered a rebellious intellectual course (Collins 1986; Lemert 1997). His unique, if not visionary, position within the profession was developed in several ways. For starters, Goffman refused to situate his perspective within a specific theoretical tradition, although that did not stop others from trying to do so. Indeed, while he is often considered a symbolic interactionist (and for good reason), Goffman himself found the label wanting. Denying an allegiance to that tradition or even to the more general label of “theorist,” he was more prone to refer to himself as simply an “empiricist” or a “social psychologist” (Lemert 1997:xxi). In some respects, Goffman’s self-description may be the more accurate, for his work drew from a number of distinct approaches that he fashioned together in forming his own novel account of everyday life.

Goffman’s writing style also fueled his iconoclasm. Writing with the flair of a literary stylist, his was not the dry prose all too common among scientists. Instead of adopting the standard practice of situating one’s analyses within a particular intellectual lineage or reigning contemporary debates, Goffman was busy inventing his own terminology, as he set out to “raise questions that no one else had ever asked and to look at data that no one had ever examined before” (Collins 1986:110). As a result, Goffman was at the forefront of important movements within sociology, for instance, doing ethnomethodology before the ethnomethodologists and exploring the central role of language in social life (the “linguistic turn”) well ahead of most of his sociological brethren.

That Goffman stood with one foot in sociology and the other out can be read in his posthumously published article “The Interaction Order” (1983). Commenting on the state of the discipline, he remarked:

We have not been given the credence and weight that economists lately have acquired, but we can almost match them when it comes to the failure of rigorously calculated predictions. Certainly our systematic theories are every bit as vacuous as theirs: we manage to ignore almost as many critical variables as they do. We do not have the esprit that anthropologists have, but our subject matter at least has not been obliterated by the spread of the world economy. So we have an undiminished opportunity to overlook the relevant facts with our very own eyes. We can’t get graduate students who score as high as those who go into Psychology, and at its best the training the latter gets seems more professional and more thorough than what we provide. So we haven’t managed to produce in our students the high level of trained incompetence that psychologists have achieved in theirs, although, God knows, we’re working on it. . . .

From the perspective of the physical and natural sciences, human life is only a small irregular scab on the face of nature, not particularly amenable to deep systematic analysis. And so it is . . . I’m not one to think that so far our claims can be based on magnificent accomplishment. Indeed I’ve heard it said that we should be glad to trade what we’ve so far produced for a few really good conceptual distinctions and a cold beer. But there’s nothing in the world we
should trade for what we do have: the bent to sustain in regard to all elements of social life a
spirit of unfettered, unsponsored inquiry, and the wisdom not to look elsewhere but ourselves
and our discipline for this mandate. That is our inheritance and that so far is what we have to
bequeath. (1983:2, 17)

Such were the words Goffman had written in 1982 for his address to the American
Sociological Association. The occasion was his election to the office of president.
However, he was unable to deliver his speech, too ill to attend the conference. He died
from cancer shortly thereafter. But perhaps that is how it should have been, for the
maverick had entered the mainstream.

INTELLECTUAL INFLUENCES AND CORE IDEAS

In this section and those that follow, we largely confine our discussion to Goffman’s
erlier works, for arguably they have had the most significant impact on the disci-
pline. As we noted previously, Goffman resisted the typical tendency to position his
work in one or another theoretical camps. For that matter, his citations and footnotes
seemingly were designed to obscure the identities of those whose ideas he drew from,
whether it was to champion or challenge their approaches (Collins 1986:108). Not
surprisingly, this complicates efforts to trace connections to those whom Goffman
is most indebted. Despite these obstacles, we nevertheless can identify a number of
theorists whose work played a central role in the development of his dramaturgical
perspective.

Symbolic Interactionism: George Herbert Mead
and William I. Thomas

Notwithstanding his avoidance of the interactionist label, one figure who had an
important impact on Goffman’s work was George Herbert Mead, whose insights into
the interconnectedness between the self and social experiences helped lay the founda-
tion for symbolic interaction.

Mead envisioned the self as consisting of two principal “phases”: the “I” and the
“me.” As the organized set of attitudes of others, the “me” is involved in thinking or
reflexive role-taking during which individuals engage in an internal conversation. In
this internal conversation, individuals “take the attitude of the other” whose imagined
responses shape the course of one’s conduct. As we project the possible implications of
courses of action and attempt to elicit the desired responses from others, we in a sense
split off from our self. In doing so, we become an “object” to ourselves by taking the
attitudes of others toward our self. For Mead, then, the self exists as self-consciousness,
that is, the capacity to be both subject and object to one’s self.

Seeing ourselves as an object, or against the attitudes of others, is the phase of the
self that Mead termed the “me.” This phase represents a more or less stable sense of
who we are that is created, sustained, and modified through our interaction with others.
Thus, the individual self is essentially a social construct that is rooted in our percep-
tions of how others will interpret and respond to our behaviors. However, that we see
ourselves and respond to our own conduct as others would is not the only way in which
the self is a reflection of social interaction. According to Mead, “[w]e divide ourselves
up in all sorts of different selves with reference to our acquaintances. . . . There are all
sorts of different selves answering to all sorts of different social creations” (1934:142).
In other words, it is interaction and the context within which it takes place that determines who we are, the “part” of the self that appears. We all have, in a sense, multiple personalities, as assuming the attitudes of a particular other often shapes our behavior. The self you experience as a sibling is different from the one you experience as a co-worker or student.

The notion that we see ourselves as an object, as others see us, forms the basis for one of Goffman’s central concepts: **impression management**. Impression management refers to the verbal and nonverbal practices we employ in an attempt to present an acceptable image of our self to others. Much of Goffman’s work is dedicated to describing the subtle ways in which we carry out such performances; for instance, concealing information about ourselves that is incompatible with the image we are trying to project, or ensuring “audience segregation” so that those for whom we play one of our parts will not be present for our performance of a different, potentially incompatible, role. It is this controlling of what we do and don’t say and do, and how we do and don’t say and do it, that speaks to taking the attitude of the other. For if our attempts to project an image of our self were not in some measure guided by the imagined responses of others to our actions, then we would be unable to coordinate our behavior with others and engage in relatively predictable and smoothly functioning interaction.

Yet, it is in the “some measure” clause that Goffman makes one of his breaks with the traditional symbolic interaction of Mead and Blumer. While he by no means denies that individuals see themselves as others see them, he is far less interested in exploring the internal conversations that individuals engage in as they map out their conduct. Instead, Goffman’s genius lies in exploring how social arrangements themselves and the actual, physical copresence of individuals—the “interaction order”—shapes the organization of the self. Commenting on Mead’s approach, Goffman remarks:

The Meadian notion that the individual takes toward himself the attitude others take toward him seems very much an oversimplification. Rather the individual must rely on others to complete the picture of him of which he himself is allowed to paint only certain parts. Each individual is responsible for the demeanor image of himself and the deference image of others, so that for a complete man to be expressed, individuals must hold hands in a chain of ceremony, each giving deferentially with proper demeanor to the one on the right what will be received deferentially from the one on the left. While it may be true that the individual has a unique self all his own, evidence of this possession is thoroughly a product of joint ceremonial labor . . . (1967:84, 85)

While Mead contends that the central elements of social interaction are rooted in one’s imagination, Goffman looks to the “scene” within which individuals orient their actions to one another. For Goffman, then, the essence of the self is found not in the interior, cognitive deliberations of the individual, but rather in interaction itself. In the end, both the dynamics of social encounters and the image of one’s self are dependent on the willingness of others to “go along” with the particular impression that an individual is seeking to present.

The implications of these remarks extend beyond an attempt to capture the underpinnings of social interaction, to exposing the very nature of the self. But before addressing this latter issue, let us first turn to another concept central to Goffman’s
work. Closely connected to Goffman’s notion of impression management is the definition of the situation, a concept derived from another early contributor to the Chicago School of symbolic interaction, William I. Thomas (1863–1947). Like many of the early interactionists, Thomas developed his perspective in part out of a critique of psychological behaviorism. His notion of the definition of the situation countered the view that individuals respond to stimuli on the basis of conditioned or instinctual reflexes. Instead, Thomas argued, in one of the most oft-cited concepts in sociology, that “preliminary to any self-determined act of behavior there is always a stage of examination and deliberation which we may call the definition of the situation” (1923:41). Thus, an individual’s behavior or reaction to a situation is not automatic, but rather it is constructed on the basis of the meanings that are attributed to the situation. In turn, those interested in understanding individuals and their behaviors must attend to the subjective meanings that they attach to their actions.

There are two additional aspects to Thomas’s notion that are noteworthy. First, Thomas points out that a person “is always born into a group of people among whom all the general types of situation which may arise have already been defined and corresponding rules of conduct developed, and where he has not the slightest chance of making his definitions and following his wishes without interference” (1923:42). More often than not, then, individuals do not create definitions of the situations so much as they select among preexisting definitions when determining the meaning of an event or encounter. Second, Thomas, in a phrase that would become one of the most famous in sociology, noted the link between meaning and action: “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (1928:571–72). In other words, behavior is fundamentally shaped by, or a consequence of, the definition of the situation assigned by an individual. Much like Mead, then, Thomas contended that we act on the basis of the meanings we ascribe to the situations or stimuli that we confront. Moreover, Thomas’s dictum suggests that reality itself is created through the definition of the situation, for it lays the foundation on which individuals will interpret others’ actions and their own. In short, individuals create reality as they define it. Thus, if you define a class as boring, then it will be, and your efforts will be different than if you had defined it as interesting.

So, how does Goffman’s work connect with Thomas’s insights? First, Goffman concurs that the act of defining the situation establishes the basis on which an encounter unfolds. He notes that

> When an individual enters the presence of others, they commonly seek to acquire information about him or to bring into play information about him already possessed. . . . Information about the individual helps to define the situation, enabling others to know in advance what he will expect of them and what they may expect of him. Informed in this way, the others will know how best to act in order to call forth a desired response from him. (1959:1)

In defining the situation, actors are then able to practice the arts of impression management more effectively, which, as we discussed previously, is a central ingredient of social interaction. For knowing which “self” a person is obliged to present and how to present—knowing what to say and how to say it, what to do and how to do it—is largely determined by defining what is going on in a situation. Knowing that you are, for the purposes of a given encounter, a student, a worker, or a friend, and whether you should present yourself as studious, compliant, or caring, requires
knowing first what the situation itself demands of the actors. Goffman points to the relationship between the definition of the situation and impression management when he remarks:

Regardless of the particular objective which the individual has in mind and of his motive for having this objective, it will be in his interests to control the conduct of others, especially their responsive treatment of him. This control is achieved largely by influencing the definition of the situation which the others come to formulate, and he can influence this definition by expressing himself in such a way as to give them the kind of impression that will lead them to act voluntarily in accordance with his own plans. (1959:3, 4)

While arguing that the definition of the situation plays a central role in interaction, particularly as it affects our attempts to manage impressions, Goffman nevertheless parts with Thomas's original understanding of the concept in important ways. In reference to Thomas's dictum that “if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences,” Goffman contends:

This statement is true as it reads but false as it is taken. Defining situations as real certainly has consequences, but these may contribute very marginally to the events in question; in some cases only a slight embarrassment flits across the scene in mild concern for those who tried to define the situation wrongly. . . . Presumably, a “definition of the situation” is almost always to be found, but those who are in the situation ordinarily do not create this definition, even though their society often can be said to do so; ordinarily, all they do is to assess correctly what the situation ought to be for them and then act accordingly. (1974:1)

Goffman’s point is that definitions are less a matter of an individual’s efforts to assign meaning to a situation or to the subjective processes of “examination and deliberation” as Thomas maintains. Instead, definitions are largely a matter of convention that are given or built into situations themselves. Moreover, the definition of the situation also carries with it a “moral character” that structures the interaction between the participants in an encounter. As a structural (i.e., collectivist) component of encounters, definitions both constrain and enable actors to present themselves in particular ways. It is in his study of the structural and, more specifically, moral and ritual dimension of interaction that Goffman most clearly parts with the symbolic interactionists and takes up the charge of social anthropologists.

Social Anthropology: Émile Durkheim, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, and W. Lloyd Warner

While he was earning his degree at the University of Chicago, one of Goffman’s major influences was the anthropologist W. Lloyd Warner (1898–1970) (Collins 1986:109). For his part, Warner studied with the noted British social anthropologist A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881–1955), who, in turn, was largely responsible for introducing the work of Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) into British anthropology during the early decades of the twentieth century. While an extensive review of the works and legacy of these three figures is beyond the scope of this volume, we outline here the commonalities that span their approaches and their implications for Goffman’s own approach to the study of social life.
It is Durkheim’s classic study of tribal religions, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912/1965), that arguably had the most impact on Goffman’s unique view of social interaction. In this work, Durkheim sought to uncover the origins of religion and, in doing so, to demonstrate the inevitable presence of religion in all societies, including allegedly secular, modern ones. According to Durkheim, the worshipping of gods is, in fact, a worshipping of society itself. For while religious individuals experience and commune with a power greater than themselves, an external force that inspires awe and demands respect, this greater power is in fact society. The sacrifices we make in the name of gods, the feelings of dependence on their wisdom and mercy, the willingness to submit to their commands, are nothing other than our offerings of allegiance to the society of which we are a part and through which our individual nature and fate is determined. It is not a supernatural deity that we depend on for our well being and from which we draw our strength, but rather society and the benefits of civilization it provides.

If “the idea of society is the soul of religion” (Durkheim 1912/1965:466), then religious rituals do more than pay tribute to or placate the gods. Indeed, the importance of such rituals for Durkheim lies in their capacity to bind participants to a common experience. By unifying participants’ focus through a shared practice, rituals reaffirm a society’s collective conscience (the totality of beliefs and sentiments commonly held in a society) and thus play a central role in preserving social solidarity. Thus, in a very real sense the continued existence of any society requires that its members periodically reunite in ritual ceremonies in order to rekindle their adherence to the collective conscience and their commitment to upholding the moral order. In this way, not only are communions, baptisms, and bar mitzvahs religious rituals, but so too are college graduations, family reunions, annual professional meetings, July Fourth celebrations, and saying the Pledge of Allegiance at the start of the school day. Each marks an occasion during which time participants “reaffirm in common their common sentiments” and strengthen their ties to the community (ibid.:475).

That such secular ceremonies serve “religious” purposes raises an interesting question: what is sacred in a society, and how is this trait recognized? Neither objects nor animals are intrinsically sacred, yet every culture assigns to one or the other extraordinary qualities that set them apart from the everyday world of profane things. Above all else, such extraordinary qualities grant a moral authority to that which is deemed sacred. To those things that are sacred, that possess a moral authority or power, we yield unquestioningly our own interests and desires. And because, as Durkheim maintains, our interests are unlimited and we alone are incapable of restraining our passions and desires, we must obey something “bigger” than ourselves, lest life be “nasty, brutish, and short.” Given that sacred objects and beings allegedly possess the power to make our lives possible and contented, it is no wonder that we celebrate them through ritual practices and ceremonies. For their part, rituals are designed to protect what is sacred and, in doing so, protect us.

Both Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown confined their studies of rituals and their role in sustaining the stability of group life to “simple,” traditional societies, primarily Australian aboriginal communities. However, Durkheim noted that as societies became larger and increasingly complex, what was imbued with sacred qualities changed as well. Inhabitants of small, traditional societies are tied together by “mechanical solidarity” or feelings of likeness or “oneness” that come with each member participating in the same round of activities and following the same system of beliefs. Indeed, the survival of such societies is dependent on each of its members engaging in a variety of tasks that contribute to the maintenance of the group. As a result, the collective
conscience is marked by shared beliefs and sentiments that encompass the individual’s entire existence, and what is sacred above all else is the group.

Modern, complex societies, by contrast, are bonded together by “organic solidarity” or interdependence that comes from its members performing specialized functions that, taken together, form a stable, cohesive whole. What is shared in societies such as our own are not similarities, but rather differences. Modern societies are populated by individuals who hold different occupations, who maintain different religious and political beliefs, and who affirm different ethnic and racial identities. And if specialization and cultivating individual differences marks modern societies, then that which is sacred must take on a different character, for likeness and “oneness” can no longer ensure the stability and survival of the society. The one thing we do share in modern societies, paradoxically, is our individuality. Thus, it is the individual who is deemed sacred, for he alone provides the common basis on which social solidarity can be maintained. Worshipping the group is replaced by the “cult of personality.”

That the individual is sacred in modern societies can be seen in the plethora of laws that have been established to protect and to deny the “inalienable rights” of the individual. From the right to vote, the right to hold property, and the right to privacy, to incarceration and the denial of freedoms as a favored mode of punishment, the legal system is, in a sense, the church of the individual, while judges are its priests. For that matter, setting aside the veiled racism and sexism that underlies much of the backlash against affirmative action, those who are opposed to this policy could be seen as defending the sacredness of the individual who in their eyes has been profaned at the expense of group-based claims. Yet, it is not to the formal rule of law that Goffman sets his sights. Instead, it is to the interaction rituals that pervade everyday encounters, the ceremonial chain of “hello’s” and “excuse me’s,” that he turns his perceptive eye. For it is through such perfunctory, conventionalized acts that the individual affirms the sacred status of others while receiving his due in kind.

Goffman’s interest in exploring the rituals that structure social life in modern societies stems in part from the influence of W. Lloyd Warner, with whom he studied while earning his graduate degree at the University of Chicago. In his “Yankee City” series (1941–1959), Warner creatively adapted the anthropological study of tribal societies to the study of class and ethnic stratification in urban society. Conducted in a Massachusetts town, Warner’s community studies examined the ritual practices that shape modern status systems and the inequalities they sustain. For instance, he argued that secular, patriotic ceremonies served not only to revivify group solidarity, as Durkheim maintained. In addition, such rituals reinforce class domination; “they suppress feelings of class conflict and dissension by emphasizing group unity, while implicitly conferring legitimacy on the class [WASPs in ‘Yankee City’] that leads the rituals and exemplifies the culture expressed in them” (Collins 1994:217).

Goffman followed Warner’s lead in applying the insights and methods of anthropology to urban society; however, he largely abandoned, at least overtly, his mentor’s emphasis on stratification and turned to a Durkheimian-inspired, functionalist interpretation of the ritual practices that guide interaction (Collins 1986:109). Defining interaction rituals as “acts through whose symbolic component the actor shows how worthy he is of respect or how worthy he feels others are of it” (Goffman 1967:19), Goffman illuminated the significance of seemingly insignificant acts. Of particular import are a person’s demeanor (conduct, dress) and the deference (honor, dignity, respect) it symbolically accords to others.
Consider the ritual act of wearing a suit for a job interview. Even if the employees do not wear suits at work, if you show up in more casual business attire for your interview you may ruin your chances of getting the job. Your failure to be hired in this case may have little to do with your abilities to fulfill the requirements of the position. More critical is the fact that your demeanor paid insufficient deference to the interviewer and the company. A strip of cloth tied in a knot under one’s throat speaks volumes about one’s character! By suggesting that the interviewer is unworthy of your donning “sacred” clothes, you likewise demonstrate a lack of commitment to or knowledge of basic rules of interaction, the most important of which is to allow others to tactfully present themselves as “gods.” Reminiscent of Durkheim’s “cult of personality,” Goffman remarked on the connections between demeanor, displays of deference, and the self:

The self is in part a ceremonial thing, a sacred object which must be treated with proper ritual care and in turn must be presented in a proper light to others. As a means through which this self is established, the individual acts with proper demeanor while in contact with others and is treated by others with deference. . . . The implication is that in one sense this secular world is not so irreligious as we may think. Many gods have been done away with, but the individual himself stubbornly remains a deity of considerable importance. . . . Perhaps the individual is so viable a god because he can actually understand the ceremonial significance of the way he is treated, and quite on his own can respond dramatically to what is proffered him. In contacts between such deities there is no need for middlemen; each of these gods is able to serve as his own priest. (1967:91, 95)

Dramaturgy: A Synthesis

With his Durkheimian focus on rituals leaving him in, but not of, the symbolic interactionist tradition, Goffman developed his dramaturgical approach to the study of social life. Inspired in part by the literary critic and theorist Kenneth Burke (1897–1993), who viewed language as a symbolically enacted drama, Goffman analyzed interaction through analogy with the theater. For his part, Burke constructed a philosophy of rhetoric—“dramatism”—that sought to uncover the motives for action symbolically revealed in the formal structure underlying all instances of speech and writing. Goffman, however, claiming that “life itself is a dramatically enacted thing” (1959:72), turned his attention to the symbolic dimensions of social encounters in his effort to explore the nature of the self and its relation to the broader moral code that shapes interaction performances.

To this end, Goffman introduced a vocabulary normally associated with the world of the theater: front, backstage, setting, audience, performance, and perhaps most provocatively, performer and character, are all part of his repertoire of terms used to examine the often unspoken and taken-for-granted subtleties that structure the interaction order. Consider, for instance, Goffman’s notion of the front, which he labels as that part of the individual’s performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance. Front, then, is the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance. (1959:22)

Moreover, fronts tend to become “institutionalized” as performances conducted in similar settings and by similar actors give rise to “stereotyped expectations” that
transcend and shape any particular presentation. Thus, "when an actor takes on an established social role, usually he finds that a particular front has already been established for it" (1959:27). As "facts in their own right," fronts, then, are typically selected, not created, by performers.

Goffman divides the front into two parts: the setting and the personal front. The setting consists of the scenery and props that make up the physical space where a performance is conducted. A professor needs a classroom and a lifeguard needs a swimming pool if they are to perform their roles. Presenting oneself as a high-powered executive, for instance, requires a spacious office, not a cubicle, adorned with expensive furniture, works of art, and a majestic view. It is much harder to convince an audience that you are an important "mover and shaker" if your office overlooks the dumpster in the back alley and the cushions on your furniture have tape or stains on them. The personal front, on the other hand, refers to those items of "expressive equipment" that the audience identifies with the performer himself. These items consist of "insignia of office or rank; clothing; sex, age, and racial characteristics; size and looks; posture; speech patterns; facial expressions; bodily gestures; and the like" (1959:24). Such things provide the resources that allow (or prevent) a person to carry himself and appear before others in a particular light. Certainly, audiences attribute traits, fairly or unfairly, to performers on the basis of their age, sex, race, and looks, and performers are often aware of this fact. For instance, all too often audiences equate intelligence with looks and personality traits with sex. Thus, males are seen as "naturally" aggressive and in turn have license to present themselves as such, while women are considered "naturally" passive and often face negative repercussions if they do not conform to gendered expectations.

The front is contrasted with the backstage, the region of the performance normally unobserved by, and restricted from, members of the audience. Backstage is where the impression fostered by a performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course . . . [where] illusions and impressions are openly constructed. . . . Here costumes and other parts of the personal front may be adjusted and scrutinized for flaws. . . . Here the performer can relax; he can drop his front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character. (1959:112)

Restaurants illustrate well the distinction between the front and backstage and their facilitation of performances. While managing his impression in the front region as a courteous, deft, and hygienic server, a waiter often can be found in the backstage of the kitchen cursing a customer, sneezing atop someone's meal, or assembling an assortment of previously tabled bread into a basket for the next diners.⁴ Of course, the front and backstage are not solely the province of business establishments. Our homes are likewise divided up into distinct regions, the separation of which takes on particular import with the arrival of guests.

In addition to shedding light on how space functions in managing performances and impressions, the front and backstage also call attention to an issue that we alluded to earlier: the nature of the self. Implied in the passage above, Goffman draws a

⁴In one episode of Seinfeld, Jerry finds himself standing at the urinal next to the chef of a restaurant. After relieving himself, the chef heads back to the kitchen without first washing his hands. Upon his return to his table, Jerry watches as the chef energetically kneads the dough for a "special" pizza he is preparing for Jerry and his guest: the chef's daughter.
Photo 5.3  Preparing for Guests. In anticipation of their arrival, we ceremoniously prepare the red carpet for our sacred guests—emptying trash cans, vacuuming the carpet, mopping the floors.
SOURCE: Scott Appelrouth; used with permission.

Photo 5.4  The Dinner Party. During the festive ritual, however, all the stress and glamorous, less labor that went into its preparation is momentarily forgotten as hosts and guests alike revel in the celebration of their solidarity.
SOURCE: © Royalty-Free/Corbis; used with permission.

Photo 5.5  The Cleanup. But afterward, it’s back to more disheartening scut work.
SOURCE: Scott Appelrouth; used with permission.
distinction between the self as performer and as character, and in doing so he comes to a radical, antipsychological conclusion. As a character, the self is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited. (1959:253)

In other words, the self is in reality an image, a managed impression, that is fabricated in concert with others during an encounter. While we typically see one’s performed self as “something housed within the body of possessor . . . in the psychobiology of the personality” (1959:252), in actuality the self is imputed by others such that it “does not derive from its possessor but from the whole scene of his action. . . . [This] imputation—this self—is a product of a scene that comes off, and is not a cause of it” (ibid.). Goffman sums up his notion of self as character thusly:

In analyzing the self . . . we are drawn from its possessor, from the person who will profit or lose most by it, for he and his body merely provide the peg on which something of collaborative manufacture will be hung for a time. And the means for producing and maintaining selves do not reside inside the peg; in fact these means are often bolted down in social establishments. (1959:253)

However, when we turn to the self as performer, Goffman offers a different view, one that suggests that the individual does indeed possess a self that is uniquely his own. For while we are presenting a contrived image to an audience in the front, in the backstage we can relax, forgo speaking our lines, and step out of character. But if we step out of character, to what do we step in? Here the self is not a fabrication, but rather as a performer “a fabricator of impressions . . . [who] has a capacity to learn, this being exercised in the task of training for a part” (1959:252, 253). The self as performer is more in keeping with our conventional understanding of selfhood, which maintains that behind whatever part may be played or impression cast, there lies a thinking, feeling “person,” a core being that is really who we are. Yet, in the end, perhaps this self is really nothing more than an idea, a comforting myth. For if the front you present to audiences is what they know of you, and if you develop your sense of self through interaction with others, then is your self not an image realized in performances? Truth, in reality, is a fiction.

Goffman’s Theoretical Orientation

Goffman’s theoretical orientation is particularly difficult to decipher. Not only is his overall approach multidimensional in the sense that it speaks to the different quadrants of our action/order framework, but in many instances the substance of specific concepts ranges across the presuppositions that inform them (see Figure 5.2). With that said, we begin our outline of Goffman’s orientation by taking up first the issue of action, in which, far from positing a single motivating force, he asserts that when in the presence of others,
Sometimes the individual will act in a thoroughly calculating manner, expressing himself in a given way solely in order to give the kind of impression to others that is likely to evoke from them a specific response he is concerned to obtain. Sometimes the individual will be calculating in his activity but be relatively unaware that this is the case. Sometimes he will intentionally and consciously express himself in a particular way but chiefly because the tradition of his group or social status requires this kind of expression and not because of any particular response...that is likely to be evoked from those impressed by his expressions. Sometimes the traditions of an individual’s role will lead him to give a well-designed impression of a particular kind and yet he may be neither consciously nor unconsciously disposed to create such an impression. (1959:6)

Here we clearly see that impression management, the fundamental dynamic underlying interaction, is carried out according to any number of motives. Thus, we can be motivated by rational, calculating self-interest, the nonrational commitment to tradition or status requirements, or even by purposes of which we are not consciously aware. (The multidimensionality of impression management is reflected in Figure 5.2 through its placement in two quadrants of our action/order framework.) This “having it both ways” approach can be unsatisfying if not frustrating, at least to the extent that the conditions are not specified under which we should expect rational or nonrational factors to be most salient. On the other hand, Goffman’s explicit inclusion of both

5Like his equivocal view on the nature of the self, his position on the issue of action says everything and thus arguably says nothing.
forms of motivating factors offers a more realistic portrayal of action. After all, behavior is rarely, if ever, motivated by a single consideration. This claim is all the more credible if we are interested in describing behavior in general and not a solitary slice of conduct.

To further illustrate Goffman’s theoretical orientation, consider the following question: what is to prevent an individual from deceiving his audience into thinking that he is someone he is in fact not? Given that as sacred gods we have the moral “right” to present an image of our self and expect its acceptance without intrusive or violating questions from the audience, we have the freedom to be anything we want. Or do we? While it is true that we have license to portray who we “are” to our own advantage, this holds only so long as we abide by the moral rules of interaction. Foremost among these standards is that we are who we claim to be. Because the audience is left to infer traits to the individual on the basis of impressions, they have little choice but to accept a performance on faith. Thus, impressions are “treated as claims and promises that have implicitly been made, and claims and promises tend to have a moral character” (1959:249). This, too, accounts in part for the destructive nature of lies, for they breach the fundamental trust on which relationships are based. This may also account for the legal challenges that often arise when law-enforcement agents pose as someone they are not to (en)trap a suspected criminal. And finally, notwithstanding the heinousness of the crime, perhaps this also accounts for the shock and feelings of betrayal that come with learning that your pillar-of-the-community, apple-pie-eating neighbor is in actuality a serial murderer.

This connection between impression management and the moral standards to which it is subject is captured in Goffman’s notion of the merchant of morality. Here we see his dialectic understanding not only of rational and nonrational motivating forces, but also of the individualist and collectivist dimensions of social order.

In their capacity as performers, individuals will be concerned with maintaining the impression that they are living up to the many standards by which they and their products are judged. Because these standards are so numerous and so pervasive, the individuals who are performers dwell more than we might think in a moral world. But, qua performers, individuals are concerned not with the moral issue of realizing these standards, but with the amoral issue of engineering a convincing impression that these standards are realized. Our activity, then, is largely concerned with moral matters, but as performers we do not have a moral concern with them. As performers we are merchants of morality . . . [T]he very obligation and profitability of appearing always in a steady moral light, of being a socialized character, forces one to be the sort of person who is practiced in the ways of the stage. (1959:251)

We present ourselves as well-demeaned persons in part because it is in our best interest to do so (a rationalist motivation), but in doing so, we announce our adherence to the moral standards that ritually organize social encounters. The notion that individuals are “merchants of morality” suggests that they are calculating in their attempts to “engineer” profits that may be earned from a properly enacted performance (merchant). However, actors are in an important sense compelled by the force of moral obligations (morality) to live up to the standards of propriety by which they will be judged. Yet, in the end, the social order is produced and reproduced not so much through the individual’s

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6An individual who knowingly presents a false impression runs the risk not only of losing face during the interaction but also of having his face destroyed. Once he is found guilty of being an imposter, mindful audiences may never again be willing to submit on his behalf to the moral vulnerability that is required of all interactions, leaving the individual in need of finding new ones (1959:62).
interaction with others, but rather through the moral rules around which interaction is itself organized (a collectivist approach to order). Like impression management, the multidimensionality of this concept is reflected in Figure 5.2 through its placement in two quadrants of our theoretical framework.

Figure 5.2 depicts a number of concepts central to Goffman’s perspective in addition to those just discussed. (Again, several appear in more than one quadrant to reflect their multidimensional character.) Because we addressed the others in the previous section, we direct your attention to those earlier comments as you develop your understanding of Goffman’s theoretical orientation. Yet from the figure it is clear that, despite his multidimensional approach, Goffman does not consider concepts that would be positioned in the rational/collective quadrant of our model. Here we might find an emphasis on such matters as political institutions, legal institutions, or economic systems. Instead, most of Goffman’s central concepts are used to examine how individuals navigate their everyday life. Thus, we end this section with a question: what impact, if any, does the omission of these aspects of society have on Goffman’s ability to construct a theory of interaction that accurately portrays social life?

Readings

In the following selections Goffman pursues three central themes. Taken from *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, the first excerpts represent his most sustained use of theatrical metaphors as he advances his dramaturgical approach to impression management and its centrality to self and society. In the second selection, from “The Nature of Deference and Demeanor,” Goffman’s indebtedness to Durkheimian social anthropology is more pronounced as he sheds light on the ceremonial dimensions of interaction and the sacredness that envelops the individual. We end with an excerpt from *Asylums*, Goffman’s study of total institutions, wherein he examines the ways in which social establishments produce the self.

Introduction to *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*

In this modern classic, Goffman develops his dramaturgical approach to social life and the self. It is in this work that Goffman introduces many of the central concepts discussed in the preceding sections: impression management, definition of the situation, front and backstage, and performer and character. In a sense, his book is an analysis of the familiar saying “actions speak louder than words,” but after reading Goffman you will never be able to adjust the volume again.

He begins by distinguishing between two types of “sign-vehicles”—expressions one gives and expressions one gives off—that are used by actors and audiences as means for both managing impressions and defining the situation. The former refers to “verbal symbols or their substitutes which [the individual] uses admittedly and solely to convey the information that he and the others are known to attach to these symbols.” The latter “involves a wide range of action that others can treat as symptomatic of the
actor, the expectation being that the action was performed for reasons other than the information conveyed in this way” (1959:2). With this distinction, Goffman sets the backdrop for his analysis of the subtle techniques that actors and audiences strategically, if not manipulatively, employ as they go about the business of dramatically staging acceptable images of self. Yet, for all the deceit and feigning that may accompany a presentation, all participants in the encounter are obligated to abide by the moral rules that establish just what “acceptable” means. Here, participants in an interaction will establish a “working consensus” or surface agreement regarding the definition of the situation in which, in an effort to avoid conflict, embarrassment, or the discrediting of self-performances, each “is expected to suppress his immediate heartfelt feelings, conveying a view of the situation which he feels the others will be able to find at least temporarily acceptable” (1959:9). For often we find that in order to present a viable image of one’s self, the definition of the situation compels us to tell “white lies.” This explains our tactful refusals of invitations for interaction from people that we do not like: “Sorry, I’d love to come to your party but my cousin is visiting from out of town.” You can only hope that on the night of the party no one sees you without your “cousin.”

Or, better yet, perhaps you can convince a friend to join your “team” for the evening and play the part of your favorite relative as you show them a night on the town.

The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (1959)

Erving Goffman

INTRODUCTION

When an individual enters the presence of others, they commonly seek to acquire information about him or to bring into play information about him already possessed. They will be interested in his general socio-economic status, his conception of self, his attitude toward them, his competence, his trustworthiness, etc. Although some of this information seems to be sought almost as an end in itself, there are usually quite practical reasons for acquiring it. Information about the individual helps to define the situation, enabling others to know in advance what he will expect of them and what they may expect of him. Informed in these ways, the others will know how best to act in order to call forth a desired response from him.

For those present, many sources of information become accessible and many carriers (or “sign-vehicles”) become available for conveying this information. If unacquainted with the individual, observers can glean clues from his conduct and appearance which allow them to apply their previous experience with individuals roughly similar to the one before them or, more important, to apply untested stereotypes to him. They can also assume from past experience that only individuals of a particular kind are likely to be found in a given social setting. They can rely on what the individual says about himself or on documentary evidence he provides as to who and what he is. If they know, or know of, the individual by virtue of experience prior to the interaction, they can rely on assumptions as to the persistence and generality of psychological traits as a means of predicting his present and future behavior.

However, during the period in which the individual is in the immediate presence of the

SOURCE: From The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life by Erving Goffman. Copyright © 1959 by Erving Goffman; used by permission of Doubleday, a division of Random House, Inc.
others, few events may occur which directly provide the others with the conclusive information they will need if they are to direct wisely their own activity. Many crucial facts lie beyond the time and place of interaction or lie concealed within it. For example, the “true” or “real” attitudes, beliefs, and emotions of the individual can be ascertained only indirectly, through his avowals or through what appears to be involuntary expressive behavior. Similarly, if the individual offers the others a product or service, they will often find that during the interaction there will be no time and place immediately available for eating the pudding that the proof can be found in. They will be forced to accept some events as conventional or natural signs of something not directly available to the senses. In Ichheiser’s terms,¹ the individual will have to act so that he intentionally or unintentionally expresses himself, and the others will in turn have to be impressed in some way by him.

The expressiveness of the individual (and therefore his capacity to give impressions) appears to involve two radically different kinds of sign activity: the expression that he gives, and the expression that he gives off. The first involves verbal symbols or their substitutes which he uses admittedly and solely to convey the information that he and the others are known to attach to these symbols. This is communication in the traditional and narrow sense. The second involves a wide range of action that others can treat as symptomatic of the actor, the expectation being that the action was performed for reasons other than the information conveyed in this way. As we shall have to see, this distinction has an only initial validity. The individual does of course intentionally convey misinformation by means of both of these types of communication, the first involving deceit, the second feigning.

Taking communication in both its narrow and broad sense, one finds that when the individual is in the immediate presence of others, his activity will have a promissory character. The others are likely to find that they must accept the individual on faith, offering him a just return while he is present before them in exchange for something whose true value will not be established until after he has left their presence. (Of course, the others also live by inference in their dealings with the physical world, but it is only in the world of social interaction that the objects about which they make inferences will purposely facilitate and hinder this inferential process.) The security that they justifiably feel in making inferences about the individual will vary, of course, depending on such factors as the amount of information they already possess about him, but no amount of such past evidence can entirely obviate the necessity of acting on the basis of inferences. As William I. Thomas suggested:

> It is also highly important for us to realize that we do not as a matter of fact lead our lives, make our decisions, and reach our goals in everyday life either statistically or scientifically. We live by inference. I am, let us say, your guest. You do not know, you cannot determine scientifically, that I will not steal your money or your spoons. But inferentially I will not, and inferentially you have me as a guest.²

Let us now turn from the others to the point of view of the individual who presents himself before them. He may wish them to think highly of him, or to think that he thinks highly of them, or to perceive how in fact he feels toward them, or to obtain no clear-cut impression; he may wish to ensure sufficient harmony so that the interaction can be sustained, or to defraud, get rid of, confuse, mislead, antagonize, or insult them. Regardless of the particular objective which the individual has in mind and of his motive for having this objective, it will be in his interests to control the conduct of the others, especially their responsive treatment of him. This control is achieved largely by influencing the definition of the situation which the others come to formulate, and he can influence this


definition by expressing himself in such a way as to give them the kind of impression that will lead them to act voluntarily in accordance with his own plan. Thus, when an individual appears in the presence of others, there will usually be some reason for him to mobilize his activity so that it will convey an impression to others which it is in his interests to convey. Since a girl’s dormitory mates will glean evidence of her popularity from the calls she receives on the phone, we can suspect that some girls will arrange for calls to be made, and Willard Waller’s finding can be anticipated:

It has been reported by many observers that a girl who is called to the telephone in the dormitories will often allow herself to be called several times, in order to give all the other girls ample opportunity to hear her paged.iii

Of the two kinds of communication—expressions given and expressions given off—this report will be primarily concerned with the latter, with the more theatrical and contextual kind, the non-verbal, presumably unintentional kind, whether this communication be purposely engineered or not. As an example of what we must try to examine, I would like to cite at length a novelistic incident in which Preedy, a vacationing Englishman, makes his first appearance on the beach of his summer hotel in Spain:

But in any case he took care to avoid catching anyone’s eye. First of all, 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 lighten his face (Kindly Preedy), looked round 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, and then resumed carelessly his nonchalant survey of space.

But it was time to institute a little parade, the parade of the Ideal Preedy. By devious handlings he gave any who wanted to look a chance to see the title of his book—a Spanish translation of Homer, classic thus, but not daring, cosmopolitan too—and then gathered together his beach-wrap and bag into a neat sand-resistant pile (Methodical and Sensible Preedy), rose slowly to stretch at ease his huge frame (Big-Cat Preedy), and tossed aside his sandals (Carefree Preedy, after all).

The marriage of Preedy and the sea! There were alternative rituals. The first involved the stroll that turns into a run and a dive straight into the water, thereafter smoothing into a strong splashless crawl towards the horizon. But of course not really to the horizon. Quite suddenly he would turn on to his back and thrash great white splashes with his legs, somehow thus showing that he could have swum further had he wanted to, and then would stand up a quarter out of water for all to see who it was.

The alternative course was simpler, it avoided the cold-water shock and it avoided the risk of appearing too high-spirited. The point was to appear to be so used to the sea, the Mediterranean, and this particular beach, that one might as well be in the sea as out of it. It involved a slow stroll down and into the edge of the water—not even noticing his toes were wet, land and water all the same to him!—with his eyes up at the sky gravely surveying portents, invisible to others, of the weather (Local Fisherman Preedy).iv

The novelist means us to see that Preedy is improperly concerned with the extensive impressions he feels his sheer bodily action is giving off to those around him. We can malign Preedy further by assuming that he has acted merely in order to give a particular impression, that this is a false impression, and that the others present receive either no impression at all, or, worse still, the impression that Preedy is affectedly trying to cause them to receive this particular impression. But the important point for us here is that the kind of impression Preedy thinks he is making is in fact the kind of impression that others correctly and incorrectly glean from someone in their midst.

I have said that when an individual appears before others his actions will influence the

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definition of the situation which they come to have. Sometimes the individual will act in a thoroughly calculating manner, expressing himself in a given way solely in order to give the kind of impression to others that is likely to evoke from them a specific response he is concerned to obtain. Sometimes the individual will be calculating in his activity but be relatively unaware that this is the case. Sometimes he will intentionally and consciously express himself in a particular way, but chiefly because the traditions of his group or social status require this kind of expression and not because of any particular response (other than vague acceptance or approval) that is likely to be evoked from those impressed by the expression. Sometimes the traditions of an individual’s role will lead him to give a well-designed impression of a particular kind and yet he may be neither consciously nor unconsciously disposed to create such an impression. The others, in their turn, may be suitably impressed by the individual’s efforts to convey something, or may misunderstand the situation and come to conclusions that are warranted neither by the individual’s intent nor by the facts. In any case, in so far as the others act as if the individual had conveyed a particular impression, we may take a functional or pragmatic view and say that the individual has “effectively” projected a given definition of the situation and “effectively” fostered the understanding that a given state of affairs obtains.

There is one aspect of the others’ response that bears special comment here. Knowing that the individual is likely to present himself in a light that is favorable to him, the others may divide what they witness into two parts; a part that is relatively easy for the individual to manipulate at will, being chiefly his verbal assertions, and a part in regard to which he seems to have little concern or control, being chiefly derived from the expressions he gives off. The others may then use what are considered to be the ungovernable aspects of his expressive behavior as a check upon the validity of what is conveyed by the governable aspects. In this a fundamental asymmetry is demonstrated in the communication process, the individual presumably being aware of only one stream of his communication, the witnesses of this stream and one other. For example, in Shetland Isle one crofter’s wife, in serving native dishes to a visitor from the mainland of Britain, would listen with a polite smile to his polite claims of liking what he was eating; at the same time she would take note of the rapidity with which the visitor lifted his fork or spoon to his mouth, the eagerness with which he passed food into his mouth, and the gusto expressed in chewing the food, using these signs as a check on the stated feelings of the eater. The same woman, in order to discover what one acquaintance (A) “actually” thought of another acquaintance (B), would wait until B was in the presence of A but engaged in conversation with still another person (C). She would then covertly examine the facial expressions of A as he regarded B in conversation with C. Not being in conversation with B, and not being directly observed by him, A would sometimes relax usual constraints and tactful deceptions, and freely express what he was “actually” feeling about B. This Shetlander, in short, would observe the unobserved observer.

Now given the fact that others are likely to check up on the more controllable aspects of behavior by means of the less controllable, one can expect that sometimes the individual will try to exploit this very possibility, guiding the impression he makes through behavior felt to be reliably informing. For example, in gaining admission to a tight social circle, the participant observer may not only wear an accepting look while listening to an informant, but may also be careful to wear the same look when observing the informant talking to others; observers of the observer will then not as easily discover where he actually stands. A specific illustration may be cited from Shetland Isle. When a neighbor dropped in to have a cup of tea, he would ordinarily wear at least a hint of an expectant warm smile as he passed through the door into the cottage. Since lack of physical obstructions outside the cottage and lack of light within it usually made it possible to observe the visitor unobserved as he approached the house, islanders sometimes took pleasure in watching the visitor drop whatever expression he was manifesting and replace it with a sociable one just before reaching the door. However, some visitors, in appreciating that this examination was occurring, would blindly adopt a social face a long
distance from the house, thus ensuring the projection of a constant image.

This kind of control upon the part of the individual reinstates the symmetry of the communication process, and sets the stage for a kind of information game—a potentially infinite cycle of concealment, discovery, false revelation, and rediscovery. It should be added that since the others are likely to be relatively unsuspicious of the presumably unguided aspect of the individual’s conduct, he can gain much by controlling it. The others of course may sense that the individual is manipulating the presumably spontaneous aspects of his behavior, and seek in this very act of manipulation some shading of conduct that the individual has not managed to control. This again provides a check upon the individual’s behavior, this time his presumably uncalculated behavior, thus re-establishing the asymmetry of the communication process. Here I would like only to add the suggestion that the arts of piercing an individual’s effort at calculated unintentionality seem better developed than our capacity to manipulate our own behavior, so that regardless of how many steps have occurred in the information game, the witness is likely to have the advantage over the actor, and the initial asymmetry of the communication process is likely to be retained.

When we allow that the individual projects a definition of the situation when he appears before others, we must also see that the others, however passive their role may seem to be, will themselves effectively project a definition of the situation by virtue of their response to the individual and by virtue of any lines of action they initiate to him. Ordinarily the definitions of the situation projected by the several different participants are sufficiently attuned to one another so that open contradiction will not occur. I do not mean that there will be the kind of consensus that arises when each individual present candidly expresses what he really feels and honestly agrees with the expressed feelings of the others present. This kind of harmony is an optimistic ideal and in any case not necessary for the smooth working of society. Rather, each participant is expected to suppress his immediate heartfelt feelings, conveying a view of the situation which he feels the others will be able to find at least temporarily acceptable. The maintenance of this surface of agreement, this veneer of consensus, is facilitated by each participant concealing his own wants behind statements which assert values to which everyone present feels obliged to give lip service. Further, there is usually a kind of division of definitional labor. Each participant is allowed to establish the tentative official ruling regarding matters which are vital to him but not immediately important to others, e.g., the rationalizations and justifications by which he accounts for his past activity. In exchange for this courtesy he remains silent or non-committal on matters important to others but not immediately important to him. We have then a kind of interactional *modus vivendi.* Together the participants contribute to a single over-all definition of the situation which involves so much a real agreement as to what exists but rather a real agreement as to whose claims concerning what issues will be temporarily honored. Real agreement will also exist concerning the desirability of avoiding an open conflict of definitions of the situation. I will refer to this level of agreement as a “working consensus.” It is to be understood that the working consensus established in one interaction setting will be quite different in content from the working consensus established in a different type of setting. Thus, between two friends at lunch, a reciprocal show of affection, respect, and concern for the other is maintained. In service occupations, on the other hand, the specialist often maintains an image of disinterested involvement in the problem of the client, while the client responds with a show of respect for the competence and integrity of the specialist. Regardless of such differences in content, however, the general form of these working arrangements is the same.

In noting the tendency for a participant to accept the definitional claims made by the others present, we can appreciate the crucial importance of the information that the individual *initially* possesses or acquires concerning his fellow participants, for it is on the basis of this initial information that the individual starts to define the situation and starts to build up lines of responsive action. The individual’s initial projection commits him to what he is proposing to be and requires him to drop all pretenses of being other things. As the interaction among the participants
progresses, additions and modifications in this initial informational state will of course occur, but it is essential that these later developments be related without contradiction to, and even built up from, the initial positions taken by the several participants. It would seem that an individual can more easily make a choice as to what line of treatment to demand from and extend to the others present at the beginning of an encounter than he can alter the line of treatment that is being pursued once the interaction is underway.

In everyday life, of course, there is a clear understanding that first impressions are important. Thus, the work adjustment of those in service occupations will often hinge upon a capacity to seize and hold the initiative in the service relation, a capacity that will require subtle aggressiveness on the part of the server when he is of lower socio-economic status than his client. W. F. Whyte suggests the waitress as an example:

The first point that stands out is that the waitress who bears up under pressure does not simply respond to her customers. She acts with some skill to control their behavior. The first question to ask when we look at the customer relationship is, “Does the waitress get the jump on the customer, or does the customer get the jump on the waitress?” The skilled waitress realizes the crucial nature of this question.

The skilled waitress tackles the customer with confidence and without hesitation. For example, she may find that a new customer has seated himself before she could clear off the dirty dishes and change the cloth. He is now leaning on the table studying the menu. She greets him, says, “May I change the cover, please?” and, without waiting for an answer, takes his menu away from him so that he moves back from the table, and she goes about her work. The relationship is handled politely but firmly, and there is never any question as to who is in charge.

When the interaction that is initiated by “first impressions” is itself merely the initial interaction in an extended series of interactions involving the same participants, we speak of “getting off on the right foot” and feel that it is crucial that we do so. Thus, one learns that some teachers take the following view:

You can’t ever let them get the upper hand on you or you’re through. So I start out tough. The first day I get a new class in, I let them know who’s boss. . . . You’ve got to start off tough, then you can ease up as you go along. If you start out easy-going, when you try to get tough, they’ll just look at you and laugh.

Similarly, attendants in mental institutions may feel that if the new patient is sharply put in his place the first day on the ward and made to see who is boss, much future difficulty will be prevented.

Given the fact that the individual effectively projects a definition of the situation when he enters the presence of others, we can assume that events may occur within the interaction which contradict, discredit, or otherwise throw doubt upon this projection. When these disruptive events occur, the interaction itself may come to a confused and embarrassed halt. Some of the assumptions upon which the responses of the participants had been predicated become untenable, and the participants find themselves lodged in an interaction for which the situation has been wrongly defined and is now no longer defined. At such moments the individual whose presentation has been discredited may feel ashamed while the others present may feel hostile, and all the participants may come to feel ill at ease, nonplussed, out of countenance, embarrassed, experiencing the kind of anomé that is generated when the minute social system of face-to-face interaction breaks down.

In stressing the fact that the initial definition of the situation projected by an individual tends to provide a plan for the co-operative activity that follows—in stressing this action point of view—we must not overlook the crucial fact

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that any projected definition of the situation also has a distinctive moral character. It is this moral character of projections that will chiefly concern us in this report. Society is organized on the principle that any individual who possesses certain social characteristics has a moral right to expect that others will value and treat him in an appropriate way. Connected with this principle is a second, namely that an individual who implicitly or explicitly signifies that he has certain social characteristics ought in fact to be what he claims he is. In consequence, when an individual projects a definition of the situation and thereby makes an implicit or explicit claim to be a person of a particular kind, he automatically exerts a moral demand upon the others, obliging them to value and treat him in the manner that persons of his kind have a right to expect. He also implicitly forgoes all claims to be things he does not appear to be and hence forgoes the treatment that would be appropriate for such individuals. The others find, then, that the individual has informed them as to what is and as to what they ought to see as the “is.”

One cannot judge the importance of definitional disruptions by the frequency with which they occur, for apparently they would occur more frequently were not constant precautions taken. We find that preventive practices are constantly employed to avoid these embarrassments and that corrective practices are constantly employed to compensate for discrediting occurrences that have not been successfully avoided. When the individual employs these strategies and tactics to protect his own projections, we may refer to them as “defensive practices”; when a participant employs them to save the definition of the situation projected by another, we speak of “protective practices” or “tact.” Together, defensive and protective practices comprise the techniques employed to safeguard the impression fostered by an individual during his presence before others. It should be added that while we may be ready to see that no fostered impression would survive if defensive practices were not employed, we are less ready perhaps to see that few impressions could survive if those who received the impression did not exert tact in their reception of it.

In addition to the fact that precautions are taken to prevent disruption of projected definitions, we may also note that an intense interest in these disruptions comes to play a significant role in the social life of the group. Practical jokes and social games are played in which embarrassments which are to be taken un-seriously are purposely engineered. Fantasies are created in which devastating exposures occur. Anecdotes from the past—real, embroidered, or fictitious—are told and retold, detailing disruptions which occurred, almost occurred, or occurred and were admirably resolved. There seems to be no grouping which does not have a ready supply of these games, reveries, and cautionary tales, to be used as a source of humor, a catharsis for anxieties, and a sanction for inducing individuals to be modest in their claims and reasonable in their projected expectations. The individual may tell himself through dreams of getting into impossible positions. Families tell of the time a guest got his dates mixed and arrived when neither the house nor anyone in it was ready for him. Journalists tell of times when an all-too-meaningful misprint occurred, and the paper’s assumption of objectivity or decorum was humorously discredited. Public servants tell of times a client ridiculously misunderstood form instructions, giving answers which implied an unanticipated and bizarre definition of the situation. Seamen, whose home away from home is rigorously he-man, tell stories of coming back home and inadvertently asking mother to “pass the fucking butter.”

To summarize, then, I assume that when an individual appears before others he will have many motives for trying to control the impression they receive of the situation. This report is concerned with some of the common techniques that persons employ to sustain such impressions and with some of the common contingencies associated with the employment of these techniques. The specific content of any activity presented by the individual participant, or the role it plays in the interdependent activities of an ongoing social system, will not be at issue; I shall be concerned only with the participant’s dramaturgical problems of presenting the activity before others. The issues dealt with by stagecraft and stage management are sometimes trivial but they are quite general; they seem to occur...
everywhere in social life, providing a clear-cut dimension for formal sociological analysis.

It will be convenient to end this introduction with some definitions that are implied in what has gone before and required for what is to follow. For the purpose of this report, interaction (that is, face-to-face interaction) may be roughly defined as the reciprocal influence of individuals upon one another’s actions when in one another’s immediate physical presence. An interaction may be defined as all the interaction which occurs throughout any one occasion when a given set of individuals are in one another’s continuous presence; the term “an encounter” would do as well. A “performance” may be defined as all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants. Taking a particular participant and his performance as a basic point of reference, we may refer to those who contribute the other performances as the audience, observers, or co-participants. The pre-established pattern of action which is unfolded during a performance and which may be presented or played through on other occasions may be called a “part” or “routine.” These situational terms can easily be related to conventional structural ones. When an individual or performer plays the same part to the same audience on different occasions, a social relationship is likely to arise. Defining social role as the enactment of rights and duties attached to a given status, we can say that a social role will involve one or more parts and that each of these different parts may be presented by the performer on a series of occasions to the same kinds of audience or to an audience of the same persons.

PERFORMANCES

Belief in the Part One Is Playing

When an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them. They are asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess, that the task he performs will have the consequences that are implicitly claimed for it, and that, in general, matters are what they appear to be. In line with this, there is the popular view that the individual offers his performance and puts on his show “for the benefit of other people.” It will be convenient to begin a consideration of performances by turning the question around and looking at the individual’s own belief in the impression of reality that he attempts to engender in those among whom he finds himself.

At one extreme, one finds that the performer can be fully taken in by his own act; he can be sincerely convinced that the impression of reality which he stages is the real reality. When his audience is also convinced in this way about the show he puts on—and this seems to be the typical case—then for the moment at least, only the sociologist or the socially disgruntled will have any doubts about the “realness” of what is presented.

At the other extreme, we find that the performer may not be taken in at all by his own routine. This possibility is understandable, since no one is in quite as good an observational position to see through the act as the person who puts it on. Coupled with this, the performer may be moved to guide the conviction of his audience only as a means to other ends, having no ultimate concern in the conception that they have of him or of the situation. When the individual has no belief in his own act and no ultimate concern with the beliefs of his audience, we may call him cynical, reserving the term “sincere” for individuals who believe in the impression fostered by their own performance. It should be understood that the cynic, with all his professional disinvolvement, may obtain unprofessional pleasures from his masquerade, experiencing a kind of gleeful spiritual aggression from the fact that he can toy at will with something his audience must take seriously.vii

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viiPerhaps the real crime of the confidence man is not that he takes money from his victims but that he robs all of us of the belief that middle-class manners and appearance can be sustained only by middle-class people. A disabused professional can be cynically hostile to the service relation his clients expect him to extend to them, the confidence man is in a position to hold the whole “legit” world in this contempt.
It is not assumed, of course, that all cynical performers are interested in deluding their audiences for purposes of what is called “self-interest” or private gain. A cynical individual may delude his audience for what he considers to be their own good, or for the good of the community, etc. . . . We know that in service occupations practitioners who may otherwise be sincere are sometimes forced to delude their customers because their customers show such a heartfelt demand for it. Doctors who are led into giving placebos, filling station attendants who resignedly check and recheck tire pressures for anxious women motorists, shoe clerks who sell a shoe that fits but tell the customer it is the size she wants to hear—these are cynical performers whose audiences will not allow them to be sincere. Similarly, it seems that sympathetic patients in mental wards will sometimes feign bizarre symptoms so that student nurses will not be subjected to a disappointingly sane performance. So also, when inferiors extend their most lavish reception for visiting superiors, the selfish desire to win favor may not be the chief motive; the inferior may be tactfully attempting to put the superior at ease by simulating the kind of world the superior is thought to take for granted.

I have suggested two extremes: an individual may be taken in by his own act or be cynical about it. These extremes are something a little more than just the ends of a continuum. Each provides the individual with a position which has its own particular securities and defenses, so there will be a tendency for those who have traveled close to one of these poles to complete the voyage. Starting with lack of inward belief in one’s role, the individual may follow the natural movement described by Park:

It is probably no mere historical accident that the word person, in its first meaning, is a mask. It is rather a recognition of the fact that everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role. . . . It is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves.  

In a sense, and in so far as this mask represents the conception we have formed of ourselves—the role we are striving to live up to—this mask is our truer self, the self we would like to be. In the end, our conception of our role becomes second nature and an integral part of our personality. We come into the world as individuals, achieve character, and become persons.  

. . . While we can expect to find natural movement back and forth between cynicism and sincerity, still we must not rule out the kind of transitional point that can be sustained on the strength of a little self-illusion. We find that the individual may attempt to induce the audience to judge him and the situation in a particular way, and he may seek this judgment as an ultimate end in itself, and yet he may not completely believe that he deserves the valuation of self which he asks for or that the impression of reality which he fosters is valid. . . .

Front  

I have been using the term “performance” to refer to all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers. It will be convenient to label as “front” that part of the individual’s performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance. Front, then, is the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance. For preliminary purposes, it will be convenient to distinguish and label what seem to be the standard parts of front.

First, there is the “setting,” involving furniture, décor, physical layout, and other background items which supply the scenery and stage props for the spate of human action played out before, within, or upon it. A setting tends to stay put, geographically speaking, so that those who would use a particular setting as part of their performance cannot begin their act until

\[^{\text{viii}}\text{Robert Ezra Park, Race and Culture (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1950), p. 249.}\]

\[^{\text{ix}}\text{Ibid., p. 250.}\]
they have brought themselves to the appropriate place and must terminate their performance when they leave it. It is only in exceptional circumstances that the setting follows along with the performers; we see this in the funeral cortège, the civic parade, and the dreamlike processions that kings and queens are made of. In the main, these exceptions seem to offer some kind of extra protection for performers who are, or who have momentarily become, highly sacred. These worthies are to be distinguished, of course, from quite profane performers of the peddler class who move their place of work between performances, often being forced to do so. In the matter of having one fixed place for one’s setting, a ruler may be too sacred, a peddler too profane.

If we take the term “setting” to refer to the scenic parts of expressive equipment, one may take the term “personal front” to refer to the other items of expressive equipment, the items that we most intimately identify with the performer himself and that we naturally expect will follow the performer wherever he goes. As part of personal front we may include: insignia of office or rank; clothing; sex, age, and racial characteristics; size and looks; posture; speech patterns; facial expressions; bodily gestures; and the like. Some of these vehicles for conveying signs, such as racial characteristics, are relatively fixed and over a span of time do not vary for the individual from one situation to another. On the other hand, some of these sign vehicles are relatively mobile or transitory, such as facial expression, and can vary during a performance from one moment to the next.

It is sometimes convenient to divide the stimuli which make up personal front into “appearance” and “manner,” according to the function performed by the information that these stimuli convey. “Appearance” may be taken to refer to those stimuli which function at the time to tell us of the performer’s social statuses. These stimuli also tell us of the individual’s temporary ritual state, that is, whether he is engaging in formal social activity, work, or informal recreation, whether or not he is celebrating a new phase in the season cycle or in his life-cycle. “Manner” may be taken to refer to those stimuli which function at the time to warn us of the interaction role the performer will expect to play in the oncoming situation. Thus a haughty, aggressive manner may give the impression that the performer expects to be the one who will initiate the verbal interaction and direct its course. A meek, apologetic manner may give the impression that the performer expects to follow the lead of others, or at least that he can be led to do so.

In order to explore more fully the relations among the several parts of social front, it will be convenient to consider here a significant characteristic of the information conveyed by front, namely, its abstractness and generality.

However specialized and unique a routine is, its social front, with certain exceptions will tend to claim facts that can be equally claimed and asserted of other, somewhat different routines. For example many service occupations offer their clients a performance that is illuminated with dramatic expressions of cleanliness, modernity, competence, and integrity. While in fact these abstract standards have a different significance in different occupational performances the observer is encouraged to stress the abstract similarities. For the observer this is a wonderful, though sometime disastrous, convenience. Instead of having to maintain a different pattern of expectation and responsive treatment for each slightly different performer and performance he can place the situation in a broad category around which it is easy for him to mobilize his past experience and stereo-typical thinking. Observers then need only be familiar with a small and hence manageable vocabulary of fronts, and know how to respond to them, in order to orient themselves in a wide variety of situations.

In addition to the fact that different routines may employ the same front, it is to be noted that a given social front tends to become institutionalized in terms of the abstract stereotyped expectations to which it gives rise, and tends to take on a meaning and stability apart from the specific tasks which happen at the time to be performed in its name. The front becomes a “collective representation” and a fact in its own right.

When an actor takes on an established social role, usually he finds that a particular front has already been established for it. Whether his acquisition of the role was primarily motivated
by a desire to perform the given task or by a desire to maintain the corresponding front, the actor will find that he must do both.

Further, if the individual takes on a task that is not only new to him but also unestablished in the society, or if he attempts to change the light in which his task is viewed, he is likely to find that there are already several well-established fronts among which he must choose. Thus, when a task is given a new front we seldom find that the front it is given is itself new. . . .

**Reality and Contrivance**

In our own Anglo-American culture there seems to be two common-sense models according to which we formulate our conceptions of behavior: the real, sincere, or honest performance; and the false one that thorough fabricators assemble for us, whether meant to be taken unseriously, as in the work of stage actors, or seriously, as in the work of confidence men. We tend to see real performances as something not purposely put together at all, being an unintentional product of the individual’s unconscious response to the facts in his situation. And contrived performances we tend to see as something painstakingly pasted together, one false item on another, since there is no reality to which the items of behavior could be a direct response. It will be necessary to see now that these dichotomous conceptions are by way of being the ideology of honest performers, providing strength to the show they put on, but a poor analysis of it.

First, let it be said that there are many individuals who sincerely believe that the definition of the situation they habitually project is the real reality. In this report I do not mean to question their proportion in the population but rather the structural relation of their sincerity to the performances they offer. If a performance is to come off, the witnesses by and large must be able to believe that the performers are sincere. This is the structural place of sincerity in the drama of events. Performers may be sincere—or be insincere but sincerely convinced of their own sincerity—but this kind of affection for one’s part is not necessary for its convincing performance. There are not many French cooks who are really Russian spies, and perhaps there are not many women who play the part of wife to one man and mistress to another but these duplicities do occur, often being sustained successfully for long periods of time. This suggests that while persons usually are what they appear to be, such appearances could still have been managed. There is, then, a statistical relation between appearances and reality, not an intrinsic or necessary one. In fact, given the unanticipated threats that play upon a performance, and given the need . . . to maintain solidarity with one’s fellow performers and some distance from the witnesses, we find that a rigid incapacity to depart from one’s inward view of reality may at times endanger one’s performance. Some performances are carried off successfully with complete dishonesty, others with complete honesty; but for performances in general neither of these extremes is essential and neither, perhaps, is dramaturgically advisable.

The implication here is that an honest, sincere, serious performance is less firmly connected with the solid world than one might first assume. And this implication will be strengthened if we look again at the distance usually placed between quite honest performances and quite contrived ones. In this connection take, for example, the remarkable phenomenon of stage acting. It does take deep skill, long training, and psychological capacity to become a good stage actor. But this fact should not blind us to another one: that almost anyone can quickly learn a script well enough to give a charitable audience some sense of realness in what is being contrived before them. And it seems this is so because ordinary social intercourse is itself put together as a scene is put together, by the exchange of dramatically inflated actions, counteractions, and terminating replies. Scripts even in the hands of unpracticed players can come to life because life itself is a dramatically enacted thing. All the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn’t are not easy to specify. . . .

When the individual does move into a new position in society and obtains a new part to perform, he is not likely to be told in full detail how to conduct himself, nor will the facts of his new situation press sufficiently on him from the start to determine his conduct without his further giving thought to it. Ordinarily he will be
given only a few cues, hints, and stage directions, and it will be assumed that he already has in his repertoire a large number of bits and pieces of performances that will be required in the new setting. The individual will already have a fair idea of what modesty, deference, or righteous indignation looks like, and can make a pass at playing these bits when necessary. He may even be able to play out the part of a hypnotic subject or commit a "compulsive" crime on the basis of models for these activities that he is already familiar with.

A theatrical performance or a staged confidence game requires a thorough scripting of the spoken content of the routine; but the vast part involving "expression given off" is often determined by meager stage directions. It is expected that the performer of illusions will already know a good deal about how to manage his voice, his face, and his body, although he—as well as any person who directs him—may find it difficult indeed to provide a detailed verbal statement of this kind of knowledge. And in this, of course, we approach the situation of the straightforward man in the street. Socialization may not so much involve a learning of the many specific details of a single concrete part—often there could not be enough time or energy for this. What does seem to be required of the individual is that he learn enough pieces of expression to be able to "fill in" and manage, more or less, any part that he is likely to be given. The legitimate performances of everyday life are not "acted" or "put on" in the sense that the performer knows in advance just what he is going to do, and does this solely because of the effect it is likely to have. The expressions it is felt he is giving off will be especially "inaccessible" to him. But as in the case of less legitimate performers, the incapacity of the ordinary individual to formulate in advance the movements of his eyes and body does not mean that he will not express himself through these devices in a way that is dramatized and performed in his repertoire of actions. In short, we all act better than we know how.

When we observe a young American middle-class girl playing dumb for the benefit of her boy friend, we are ready to point to items of guile and contrivance in her behavior. But like herself and her boy friend, we accept as an unperformed fact that this performer is a young American middle-class girl. But surely here we neglect the greater part of the performance. It is commonplace to say that different social groupings express in different ways such attributes as age, sex, territory, and class status, and that in each case these bare attributes are elaborated by means of a distinctive complex cultural configuration of proper ways of conducting oneself. To be a given kind of person, then, is not merely to possess the required attributes, but also to sustain the standards of conduct and appearance that one's social grouping attaches thereto. The unthinking ease with which performers consistently carry off such standard-maintaining routines does not deny that a performance has occurred, merely that the participants have been aware of it.

A status, a position, a social place is not a material thing, to be possessed and then displayed; it is a pattern of appropriate conduct, coherent, embellished, and well articulated. Performed with ease or clumsiness, awareness or not, guile or good faith, it is none the less something that must be enacted and portrayed, something that must be realized.

**Conclusion**

The Role of Expression Is Conveying Impressions of Self

Underlying all social interaction there seems to be a fundamental dialectic. When one individual enters the presence of others, he will want to discover the facts of the situation. Were he to possess this information, he could know, and make allowances for, what will come to happen and he could give the others present as much of their due as is consistent with his enlightened self-interest. To uncover fully the factual nature of the situation, it would be necessary for the individual to know all the relevant social data about the others. It would also be necessary for the individual to know the actual outcome or end product of the activity of the others during the interaction, as well as their innermost feelings concerning him. Full information of this order is rarely available; in its absence, the individual tends to employ substitutes—cues, tests, hints, expressive
gestures, status symbols, etc.—as predictive devices. In short, since the reality that the individual is concerned with is unperceivable at the moment, appearances must be relied upon in its stead. And, paradoxically, the more the individual is concerned with the reality that is not available to perception, the more must he concentrate his attention on appearances.

The individual tends to treat the others present on the basis of the impression they give now about the past and the future. It is here that communicative acts are translated into moral ones. The impressions that the others give tend to be treated as claims and promises they have implicitly made, and claims and promises tend to have a moral character. In his mind the individual says: "I am using these impressions of you as a way of checking up on you and your activity, and you ought not to lead me astray." The peculiar thing about this is that the individual tends to take this stand even though he expects the others to be unconscious of many of their expressive behaviors and even though he may expect to exploit the others on the basis of the information he gleans about them. Since the sources of impression used by the observing individual involve a multitude of standards pertaining to politeness and decorum, pertaining both to social intercourse and task-performance, we can appreciate afresh how daily life is enmeshed in moral lines of discrimination.

Let us shift now to the point of view of the others. If they are to be gentlemanly, and play the individual's game, they will give little conscious heed to the fact that impressions are being formed about them but rather act without guile or contrivance, enabling the individual to receive valid impressions about them and their efforts. And if they happen to give thought to the fact that they are being observed, they will not allow this to influence them unduly, content in the belief that the individual will obtain a correct impression and give them their due because of it. Should they be concerned with influencing the treatment that the individual gives them, and this is properly to be expected, then a gentlemanly means will be available to them. They need only guide their action in the present so that its future consequences will be the kind that would lead a just individual to treat them now in a way they want to be treated; once this is done, they have only to rely on the perceptiveness and justness of the individual who observes them.

Sometimes those who are observed do, of course, employ these proper means of influencing the way in which the observer treats them. But there is another way, a shorter and more efficient way, in which the observed can influence the observer. Instead of allowing an impression of their activity to arise as an incidental by-product of their activity, they can reorient their frame of reference and devote their efforts to the creation of desired impressions. Instead of attempting to achieve certain ends by acceptable means, they can attempt to achieve the impression that they are achieving certain ends by acceptable means. It is always possible to manipulate the impression the observer uses as a substitute for reality because a sign for the presence of a thing, not being that thing, can be employed in the absence of it. The observer's need to rely on representations of things itself creates the possibility of misrepresentation.

There are many sets of persons who feel they could not stay in business, whatever their business, if they limited themselves to the gentlemanly means of influencing the individual who observes them. At some point or other in the round of their activity they feel it is necessary to band together and directly manipulate the impression that they give. The observed become a performing team and the observers become the audience. Actions which appear to be done on objects become gestures addressed to the audience. The round of activity becomes dramatized.

We come now to the basic dialectic. In their capacity as performers, individuals will be concerned with maintaining the impression that they are living up to the many standards by which they and their products are judged. Because these standards are so numerous and so pervasive, the individuals who are performers dwell more than we might think in a moral world. But, qua performers, individuals are concerned not with the moral issue of realizing these standards, but with the amoral issue of engineering a convincing impression that these standards are being realized. Our activity, then, is largely concerned with moral matters, but as performers we do not have a moral concern with them. As performers we are merchants of morality. Our day is given over to intimate contact
with the goods we display and our minds are filled with intimate understandings of them; but it may well be that the more attention we give to these goods, then the more distant we feel from them and from those who are believing enough to buy them. To use a different imagery, the very obligation and profitability of appearing always in a steady moral light, of being a socialized character, forces one to be the sort of person who is practiced in the ways of the stage.

Staging and the Self

The general notion that we make a presentation of ourselves to others is hardly novel; what ought to be stressed in conclusion is that the very structure of the self can be seen in terms of how we arrange for such performances in our Anglo-American society.

In this report, the individual was divided by implication into two basic parts: he was viewed as a *performer*, a harried fabricator of impressions involved in the all-too-human task of staging a performance; he was viewed as a *character*, a figure, typically a fine one, whose spirit, strength, and other sterling qualities the performance was designed to evoke. The attributes of a performer and the attributes of a character are of a different order, quite basically so, yet both sets have their meaning in terms of the show that must go on.

First, character. In our society the character one performs and one’s self are somewhat equated, and this self-as-character is usually seen as something housed within the body of its possessor, especially the upper parts thereof, being a nodule, somehow, in the psychobiology of personality. I suggest that this view is an implied part of what we are all trying to present, but provides, just because of this, a bad analysis of the presentation. In this report the performed self was seen as some kind of image, usually creditable, which the individual on stage and in character effectively attempts to induce others to hold in regard to him. While this image is entertained *concerning* the individual, so that a self is imputed to him, this self itself does not derive from its possessor, but from the whole scene of his action, being generated by that attribute of local events which renders them interpretable by witnesses. A correctly staged and performed scene leads the audience to impute a self to a performed character, but this imputation—this self—is a *product* of a scene that comes off, and is not a *cause* of it. The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited.

In analyzing the self then we are drawn from its possessor, from the person who will profit or lose most by it, for he and his body merely provide the peg on which something of collaborative manufacture will be hung for a time. And the means for producing and maintaining selves do not reside inside the peg; in fact these means are often bolted down in social establishments. There will be a back region with its tools for shaping the body, and a front region with its fixed props. There will be a team of persons whose activity on stage in conjunction with available props will constitute the scene from which the performed character’s self will emerge, and another team, the audience, whose interpretive activity will be necessary for this emergence. The self is a product of all of these arrangements, and in all of its parts bears the marks of this genesis.

The whole machinery of self-production is cumbersome, of course, and sometimes breaks down, exposing its separate components: back region control; team collusion; audience tact; and so forth. But, well oiled, impressions will flow from it fast enough to put us in the grips of one of our types of reality—the performance will come off and the firm self accorded each performed character will appear to emanate intrinsically from its performer.

Let us turn now from the individual as character performed to the individual as performer. He has a capacity to learn, this being exercised in the task of training for a part. He is given to having fantasies and dreams, some that pleasurably unfold a triumphant performance, others full of anxiety and dread that nervously deal with vital discrediting in a public front region. He often manifests a gregarious desire for team-mates and audiences, a tactful considerateness for their concerns; and he has a capacity for deeply felt shame, leading him to minimize the chances he takes of exposure.
These attributes of the individual *qua* performer are not merely a depicted effect of particular performances; they are psychobiological in nature, and yet they seem to arise out of intimate interaction with the contingencies of staging performances.

And now a final comment. In developing the conceptual framework employed in this report, some language of the stage was used. I spoke of performers and audiences; of routines and parts; of performances coming off or falling flat; of cues, stage settings and backstage; of dramaturgical needs, dramaturgical skills, and dramaturgical strategies. Now it should be admitted that this attempt to press a mere analogy so far was in part a rhetoric and a maneuver.

The claim that all the world’s a stage is sufficiently commonplace for readers to be familiar with its limitations and tolerant of its presentation, knowing that at any time they will easily be able to demonstrate to themselves that it is not to be taken too seriously. An action staged in a theater is a relatively contrived illusion and an admitted one; unlike ordinary life, nothing real or actual can happen to the performed characters—although at another level of course something real and actual can happen to the reputation of performers *qua* professionals whose everyday job is to put on theatrical performances.

And so here the language and mask of the stage will be dropped. Scaffolds, after all, are to build other things with, and should be erected with an eye to taking them down. This report is not concerned with aspects of theater that creep into everyday life. It is concerned with the structure of social encounters—the structure of those entities in social life that come into being whenever persons enter one another’s immediate physical presence. The key factor in this structure is the maintenance of a single definition of the situation, this definition having to be expressed, and this expression sustained in the face of a multitude of potential disruptions.

A character staged in a theater is not in some ways real, nor does it have the same kind of real consequences as does the thoroughly contrived character performed by a confidence man; but the *successful* staging of either of these types of false figures involves use of *real* techniques—the same techniques by which everyday persons sustain their real social situations. Those who conduct face to face interaction on a theater’s stage must meet the key requirement of real situations; they must expressively sustain a definition of the situation: but this they do in circumstances that have facilitated their developing an apt terminology for the interactional tasks that all of us share.

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**Introduction to “The Nature of Deference and Demeanor”**

Goffman’s focus in this work is on the ritual dimensions of social interaction. Evincing the influence of Durkheim, he explores the role of ceremonial shows of deference and demeanor in shaping the structure of encounters and in symbolically affirming the sacred status of all those present. Thus, the ritual code of behavior not only structures well-demeaned displays of deference, it also forms the basis for the production of the self.

The ceremonial rules to which Goffman speaks in this selection are more commonly described as manners or rules of etiquette. In his hands, however, the perfunctory acts through which politeness is expressed are seen in an entirely new light. The greetings and salutations we offer others, the disclosure or concealment of personal information, the tactful “nonobservance” we display in response to another’s gaffe, the closing or granting of physical space we afford others, and countless other acts, if carried out properly, all serve as ceremonial indulgences that mark an individual as a well-demeaned person and thus deserving of the deference only others can provide him. We rely on such
“avoidance” and “presentational” rituals to steer our way through the potentially hazardous conditions that always lurk beneath the surface of an encounter. For much of interaction is guided by an attempt to avoid embarrassment and the discrediting of one another’s self as an object worthy of receiving deference. In a way, interaction is like driving a car. In both, the object is to get where you want to be without having an accident.

The Nature of Deference and Demeanor (1956)

Erving Goffman

Under the influence of Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown, some students of modern society have learned to look for the symbolic meaning of any given social practice and for the contribution of the practice to the integrity and solidarity of the group that employs it. However, in directing their attention away from the individual to the group, these students seem to have neglected a theme that is presented in Durkheim’s chapter on the soul. There he suggests that the individual’s personality can be seen as one apportionment of the collective mana, and that (as he implies in later chapters), the rites performed to representations of the social collectivity will sometimes be performed to the individual himself.

In this paper I want to explore some of the senses in which the person in our urban secular world is allotted a kind of sacredness that is displayed and confirmed by symbolic acts. An attempt will be made to build a conceptual scaffold by stretching and twisting some common anthropological terms. This will be used to support two concepts which I think are central to this area: deference and demeanor. Through these reformulations I will try to show that a version of Durkheim’s social psychology can be effective in modern dress.

Data for the paper are drawn chiefly from a brief observational study of mental patients in a modern research hospital. I use these data on the assumption that a logical place to learn about personal properties is among persons who have been locked up for spectacularly failing to maintain them. Their infractions of propriety occur in the confines of a ward, but the rules broken are quite general ones, leading us outward from the ward to a general study of our Anglo-American society.

INTRODUCTION

A rule of conduct may be defined as a guide for action, recommended not because it is pleasant, cheap, or effective, but because it is suitable or just... Attachment to rules leads to a constancy and patterning of behavior; while this is not the only source of regularity in human affairs it is certainly an important one. Of course, approved guides to conduct tend to be covertly broken, side-stepped, or followed for unapproved reasons, but these alternatives merely add to the occasions in which rules constrain at least the surface of conduct.

Rules of conduct impinge upon the individual in two general ways: directly, as obligations, establishing how he is morally constrained to conduct himself; indirectly, as expectations,


establishing how others are morally bound to act in regard to him. A nurse, for example, has an obligation to follow medical orders in regard to her patients; she has the expectation, on the other hand, that her patients will pliantly co-operate in allowing her to perform these actions upon them. This pliancy, in turn, can be seen as an obligation of the patients in regard to their nurse, and points up the interpersonal, actor-recipient character of many rules: what is one man’s obligation will often be another’s expectation. . . .

When an individual becomes involved in the maintenance of a rule, he tends also to become committed to a particular image of self. In the case of his obligations, he becomes to himself and others the sort of person who follows this particular rule, the sort of person who would naturally be expected to do so. In the case of his expectations, he becomes dependent upon the assumption that others will properly perform such of their obligations as affect him, for their treatment of him will express a conception of him. In establishing himself as the sort of person who treats others in a particular way and is treated by them in a particular way, he must make sure that it will be possible for him to act and be this kind of person. For example, with certain psychiatrists there seems to be a point where the obligation of giving psychotherapy to patients, their patients, is transformed into something they must do if they are to retain the image they have come to have of themselves. The effect of this transformation can be seen in the squirming some of them may do in the early phases of their careers when they may find themselves employed to do research, or administer a ward, or give therapy to those who would rather be left alone.

In general then, when a rule of conduct is broken we find that two individuals run the risk of becoming discredited: one with an obligation, who should have governed himself by the rule; the other with an expectation, who should have been treated in a particular way because of this governance. Both actor and recipient are threatened.

An act that is subject to a rule of conduct is, then, a communication, for it represents a way in which selves are confirmed—both the self for which the rule is an obligation and the self for which it is an expectation. An act that is subject to rules of conduct but does not conform to them is also a communication—often even more so—for infractions make news and often in such a way as to disconfirm the selves of the participants. Thus rules of conduct transform both action and inaction into expression, and whether the individual abides by the rules or breaks them, something significant is likely to be communicated. For example, in the wards under study, each research psychiatrist tended to expect his patients to come regularly for their therapeutic hours. When patients fulfilled this obligation, they showed that they appreciated their need for treatment and that their psychiatrist was the sort of person who could establish a “good relation” with patients. When a patient declined to attend his therapeutic hour, others on the ward tended to feel that he was “too sick” to know what was good for him, and that perhaps his psychiatrist was not the sort of person who was good at establishing relationships. Whether patients did or did not attend their hours, something of importance about them and their psychiatrist tended to be communicated to the staff and to other patients on the ward. . . .

In dealing with rules of conduct it is convenient to distinguish two classes, symmetrical and asymmetrical. A symmetrical rule is one which leads an individual to have obligations or expectations regarding others that these others have in regard to him. For example, in the two hospital wards, as in most other places in our society, there was an understanding that each individual was not to steal from any other individual, regardless of their respective statuses, and that each individual could similarly expect not to be stolen from by anyone. What we call common courtesies and rules of public order tend to be symmetrical, as are such biblical admonitions as the rule about not coveting one’s neighbor’s wife. An asymmetrical rule is one that leads others to treat and be treated by an individual differently from the way he treats and is treated by them. For example, doctors give medical orders to nurses, but nurses do not give medical orders to doctors. Similarly, in some hospitals in America nurses stand up when a doctor enters the room, but doctors do not ordinarily stand up when a nurse enters the room.

Students of society have distinguished in several ways among types of rules, as for example, between formal and informal rules; for this paper, however, the important distinction
is that between substance and ceremony. A substantive rule is one which guides conduct in regard to matters felt to have significance in their own right, apart from what the infraction or maintenance of the rule expresses about the selves of the persons involved. Thus, when an individual refrains from stealing from others, he upholds a substantive rule which primarily serves to protect the property of these others and only incidentally functions to protect the image they have of themselves as persons with proprietary rights. The expressive implications of substantive rules are officially considered to be secondary; this appearance must be maintained, even though in some special situations everyone may sense that the participants were primarily concerned with expression.

A ceremonial rule is one which guides conduct in matters felt to have secondary or even no significance in their own right, having their primary importance—officially anyway—as a conventionalized means of communication by which the individual expresses his character or conveys his appreciation of the other participants in the situation. This usage departs from the everyday one, where “ceremony” tends to imply a highly specified, extended sequence of symbolic action performed by august actors on solemn occasions when religious sentiments are likely to be invoked.

The acts or events, that is, the sign-vehicles or tokens which carry ceremonial messages, are remarkably various in character. They may be linguistic, as when an individual makes a statement of praise or depreciation regarding self or other, and does so in a particular language and intonation; gestural, as when the physical bearing of an individual conveys insolence or obsequiousness; spatial, as when an individual precedes another through the door, or sits on his right instead of his left; task-embedded, as when an individual accepts a task graciously and performs it in the presence of others with aplomb and dexterity; part of the communication structure, as when an individual speaks more frequently than the others, or receives more attentiveness than they do. The important point is that ceremonial activity, like substantive activity, is an analytical element referring to a component or function of action, not to concrete empirical action itself. While some activity that has a ceremonial component does not seem to have an appreciable substantive one, we find that all activity that is primarily substantive in significance will nevertheless carry some ceremonial meaning, provided that its performance is perceived in some way by others. The manner in which the activity is performed, or the momentary interruptions that are allowed so as to exchange minor niceties, will infuse the instrumentally-oriented situation with ceremonial significance.

Ceremonial activity seems to contain certain basic components. As suggested, a main object of this paper will be to delineate two of these components, deference and demeanor, and to clarify the distinction between them.

**DEFERENCE**

By deference I shall refer to that component of activity which functions as a symbolic means by which appreciation is regularly conveyed to a recipient of this recipient, or of something of which this recipient is taken as a symbol, extension, or agent. These marks of devotion represent ways in which an actor celebrates and confirms his relation to a recipient. In some cases, both actor and recipient may not really be individuals at all, as when two ships greet each other with four short whistle blasts when passing. In some

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*While the substantive value of ceremonial acts is felt to be quite secondary it may yet be quite appreciable. Wedding gifts in American society provide an example. It is even possible to say in some cases that if a sentiment of a given kind is to be conveyed ceremonially it will be necessary to employ a sign-vehicle which has a given amount of substantive value. Thus in the American lower-middle class, it is understood that a small investment in an engagement ring, as such investments go, may mean that the man places a small value on his fiancee as these things go, even though no one may believe that women and rings are commensurate things. In those cases where it becomes too clear that the substantive value of a ceremonial act is the only concern of the participants, as when a girl or an official receives a substantial gift from someone not interested in proper relations, then the community may respond with a feeling that their symbol system has been abused.*
cases, the actor is an individual but the recipient is some object or idol, as when a sailor salutes the quarterdeck upon boarding ship, or when a Catholic genuflects to the altar. I shall only be concerned, however, with the kind of deference that occurs when both actor and recipient are individuals, whether or not they are acting on behalf of something other than themselves. Such ceremonial activity is perhaps seen most clearly in the little salutations, compliments, and apologies which punctuate social intercourse, and may be referred to as “status rituals” or “interpersonal rituals.” I use the term “ritual” because this activity, however informal and secular, represents a way in which the individual must guard and design the symbolic implications of his acts while in the immediate presence of an object that has a special value for him...

The individual may desire, earn, and deserve deference, but by and large he is not allowed to give it to himself, being forced to seek it from others. In seeking it from others, he finds he has added reason for seeking them out, and in turn society is given added assurance that its members will enter into interaction and relationships with one another. If the individual could give himself the deference he desired there might be a tendency for society to disintegrate into islands inhabited by solitary cultish men, each in continuous worship at his own shrine.

The appreciation carried by an act of deference implies that the actor possesses a sentiment of regard for the recipient, often involving a general evaluation of the recipient. Regard is something the individual constantly has for others, and knows enough about to feign on occasion; yet in having regard for someone, the individual is unable to specify in detail what in fact he has in mind.

Those who render deference to an individual may feel, of course, that they are doing this merely because he is an instance of a category, or a representative of something, and that they are giving him his due not because of what they think of him “personally” but in spite of it. Some organizations, such as the military, explicitly stress this sort of rationale for according deference, leading to an impersonal bestowal of something that is specifically directed toward the person. By easily showing a regard that he does not have, the actor can feel that he is preserving a kind of inner autonomy, holding off the ceremonial order by the very act of upholding it. And of course in scrupulously observing the proper forms he may find that he is free to insinuate all kinds of disregard by carefully modifying intonation, pronunciation, pacing, and so forth...

In addition to a sentiment of regard, acts of deference typically contain a kind of promise, expressing in truncated form the actor’s avowal and pledge to treat the recipient in a particular way in the on-coming activity. The pledge affirms that the expectations and obligations of the recipient, both substantive and ceremonial, will be allowed and supported by the actor. Actors thus promise to maintain the conception of self that the recipient has built up from the rules he is involved in. (Perhaps the prototype here is the public act of allegiance by which a subject officially acknowledges his subservience in certain matters to his lord.) Deferential pledges are frequently conveyed through spoken terms of address involving status-identifiers, as when a nurse responds to a rebuke in the operating room with the phrase, “yes, Doctor,” signifying by term of address and tone of voice that the criticism has been understood and that, however unpalatable, it has not caused her to rebel. When a putative recipient fails to receive anticipated acts of deference, or when an actor makes clear that he is giving homage with bad grace, the recipient may feel that the state of affairs which he has been taking for granted has become unstable, and that an insubordinate effort may be made by the actor to reallocate tasks, relations, and power. To elicit an established act of deference, even if the actor must first be reminded of his obligations and warned about the consequence of discourtesy, is evidence that if rebellion comes it will come slyly; to be pointedly refused an expected act of deference is often a way of being told that open insurrection has begun.

A further complication must be mentioned. A particular act of deference is something an actor, acting in a given capacity, owes a recipient, acting in a given capacity. But these two individuals are likely to be related to one another through more than one pair of capacities, and these additional relationships are likely to receive ceremonial expression too. Hence the same act of deference may show signs of different kinds of regard, as when a doctor by a paternal gesture shows
authority over a nurse in her capacity as subordinate technician but affection for her as a young female who is dependent on him in his capacity as a supportive older male. Similarly, an attendant in cheerfully addressing a doctor as “doc” may sometimes show respect for the medical role and yet male-solidarity with the person who fills it. Throughout this paper we must therefore keep in mind that a spate of deferential behavior is not a single note expressing a single relationship between two individuals active in a single pair of capacities, but rather a medley of voices answering to the fact that actor and recipient are in many different relations to one another, no one of which can usually be given exclusive and continuous determinacy of ceremonial conduct.

Deference can take many forms, of which I shall consider only two broad groupings, avoidance rituals and presentational rituals.

Avoidance rituals, as a term, may be employed to refer to those forms of deference which lead the actor to keep at a distance from the recipient and not violate what Simmel has called the “ideal sphere” that lies around the recipient:

Although differing in size in various directions and differing according to the person with whom one entertains relations, this sphere cannot be penetrated, unless the personality value of the individual is thereby destroyed. A sphere of this sort is placed around man by his honor. Language poignantly designates an insult to one’s honor as “coming to close;” the radius of this sphere marks, as it were, the distance whose trespassing by another person insults one’s honor.

. . . Here, it should be said, is one of the important differences between social classes in our society: not only are some of the tokens different through which consideration for the privacy of others is expressed, but also, apparently, the higher the class the more extensive and elaborate are the taboos against contact. For example, in a study of a Shetlandic community the writer found that as one moves from middle-class urban centers in Britain to the rural lower-class islands, the distance between chairs at table decreases, so that in the outermost Shetland Islands actual bodily contact during meals and similar social occasions is not considered an invasion of separateness and no effort need be made to excuse it. And yet, whatever the rank of the participants in an action, the actor is likely to feel that the recipient has some warranted expectation of inviolability.

There appear to be some typical relations between ceremonial distance and other kinds of sociological distance. Between status equals we may expect to find interaction guided by symmetrical familiarity. Between superordinate and subordinate we may expect to find asymmetrical relations, the superordinate having the right to exercise certain familiarities which the subordinate is not allowed to reciprocate. Thus, in the research hospital, doctors tended to call nurses by their first names, while nurses responded with “polite” or “formal” address. Similarly, in American business organizations the boss may thoughtfully ask the elevator man how his children are, but this entrance into another’s life may be blocked to the elevator man, who can appreciate the concern but not return it. Perhaps the clearest form of this is found in the psychiatrist-patient relations, where the psychiatrist has a right to touch on aspects of the patient’s life that the patient might not even allow himself to touch upon, while of course this privilege is not reciprocated. . . . Patients, especially mental ones, may not even have the right to question their doctor about his opinion of their own case; for one thing, this would bring them into too intimate a contact with an area of knowledge in which doctors invest their special apartness from the lay public which they serve. . . .

In general, it would seem, one avoids a person of high status out of deference to him and avoids a person of lower status than one’s own out of a self-protective concern. Perhaps the social distance sometimes carefully maintained between equals may entail both kinds of avoidance on both their parts. In any case, the similarity in the two kinds of avoidance is not deep. . . . In addition, the distances an actor keeps out of deference to others decline when he rises in status, but the self-protective one’s increase.

Avoidance rituals have been suggested as one main type of deference. A second type, termed presentational rituals, encompasses acts through

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which the individual makes specific attestations to recipients concerning how he regards them and how he will treat them in the on-coming interaction. Rules regarding these ritual practices involve specific prescriptions, not specific proscriptions; while avoidance rituals specify what is not to be done, presentational rituals specify what is to be done. Some illustrations may be taken from social life on Ward A as maintained by the group consisting of patients, attendants, and nurses. These presentational rituals will not, I think, be much different from those found in many other organizations in our society.

When members of the ward passed by each other, salutations would ordinarily be exchanged, the length of the salutation depending on the period that had elapsed since the salutation and the period that seemed likely before the next. At table, when someone left for the weekend, a farewell involving a pause in on-going activity and a brief exchange of words would be involved. In any case, there was the understanding that when members of the ward were in a physical position to enter into eye-to-eye contact of some kind, this contact would be effected. It seemed that anything less would not have shown proper respect for the state of relations that existed among the members of the ward.

Associated with salutations were practices regarding the “noticing” of any change in appearance, status, or repute, as if these changes represented a commitment on the part of the changed individual which had to be underwritten by the group. New clothes, new hairdos, occasions of being “dressed up” would call forth a round of compliments, whatever the group felt about the improvement. Similarly, any effort on the part of a patient to make something in the occupational therapy room or to perform in other ways was likely to be commended by others. Staff members who participated in the hospital amateur theatricals were complimented, and when one of the nurses was to be married, pictures of her fiancé and his family were viewed by all and approved. In these ways a member of the ward tended to be saved from the embarrassment of presenting himself to others as someone who had risen in value, while receiving a response as someone who had declined, or remained the same.

Two main types of deference have been illustrated: presentational rituals through which the actor concretely depicts his appreciation of the recipient; and avoidance rituals, taking the form of proscriptions, interdictions, and taboos, which imply acts the actor must refrain from doing lest he violate the right of the recipient to keep him at a distance. We are familiar with this distinction from Durkheim’s classification of ritual into positive and negative rites.

In suggesting that there are things that must be said and done to a recipient, and things that must not be said and done, it should be plain that there is an inherent opposition and conflict between these two forms of deference. To ask after an individual’s health, his family’s well-being, or the state of his affairs, is to present him with a sign of sympathetic concern; but in a certain way to make this presentation is to invade the individual’s personal reserve, as will be made clear if an actor of wrong status asks him these questions, or if a recent event has made such a question painful to answer. As Durkheim suggested, “The human personality is a sacred thing; one dare not violate it nor infringe its bounds, while at the same time the greatest good is in communion with others.”

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1Durkheim, The Elementary Forms, p. 299.

“The sacred object inspires us, if not with fear, at least with respect that keeps us at a distance; at the same time it is an object of love and aspiration that we are drawn towards. Here then, is a dual sentiment which seems to be self-contradictory but does not for all that cease to be real. “The human personality presents a notable example of this apparent duality which we have just distinguished. On the one hand, it inspires us with a religious respect that keeps us at some distance. Any encroachment upon the legitimate sphere of action of our fellow beings we regard as sacrilege. It is, as it were, sacrosanct and thus set apart. But at the same time human personality is the outstanding object of our sympathy, and we endeavour to develop it.”
...As an implication of this dilemma, we must see that social intercourse involves a constant dialectic between presentational rituals and avoidance rituals. A peculiar tension must be maintained, for those opposing requirements of conduct must somehow be held apart from one another and yet realized together in the same interaction: the gestures which carry an actor to a recipient must also signify that things will not be carried too far.

Demeanor

It was suggested that the ceremonial component of concrete behavior has at least two basic elements, deference and demeanor. Deference, defined as the appreciation an individual shows of another to that other, whether through avoidance rituals or presentational rituals, has been discussed and demeanor may now be considered.

By demeanor I shall refer to that element of the individual’s ceremonial behavior typically conveyed through deportment, dress, and bearing, which serves to express to those in his immediate presence that he is a person of certain desirable or undesirable qualities. In our society, the “well” or “properly” demeaned individual displays such attributes as: discretion and sincerity; modesty in claims regarding self; sportsmanship; command of speech and physical movements; self-control over his emotions, his appetites, and his desires; poise under pressure; and so forth.

When we attempt to analyze the qualities conveyed through demeanor, certain themes become apparent. The well-demeaned individual possesses the attributes popularly associated with “character training” or “socialization,” these being implanted when a neophyte of any kind is housebroken. Rightly or wrongly, others tend to use such qualities diagnostically, as evidence of what the actor is generally like at other times and as a performer of other activities. In addition, the properly demeaned individual is someone who has closed off many avenues of perception and penetration that others might take to him, and is therefore unlikely to be contaminated by them. Most importantly, perhaps, good demeanor is what is required of an actor if he is to be transformed into someone who can be relied upon to maintain himself as an interactant, poised for communication, and to act so that others do not endanger themselves by presenting themselves as interactants to him.

It should be noted once again that demeanor involves attributes derived from interpretations others make of the way in which the individual handles himself during social intercourse. The individual cannot establish these attributes for his own by verbally avowing that he possesses them, though sometimes he may rashly try to do this. (He can, however, contrive to conduct himself in such a way that others, through their interpretation of his conduct, will impute the kinds of attributes to him he would like others to see in him.) In general, then, through demeanor the individual creates an image of himself, but properly speaking this is not an image that is meant for his own eyes. Of course this should not prevent us from seeing that the individual who acts with good demeanor may do so because he places an appreciable value upon himself, and that he who fails to demean himself properly may be accused of having “no self-respect” or of holding himself too cheaply in his own eyes. . . .

Rules of demeanor, like rules of deference, can be symmetrical or asymmetrical. Between social equals, symmetrical rules of demeanor seem often to be prescribed. Between unequals many variations can be found. For example, at staff meetings on the psychiatric units of the hospital, medical doctors had the privilege of swearing, changing the topic of conversation, and sitting in undignified positions; attendants, on the other hand, had the right to attend staff meetings and to ask questions during them (in line with the milieu-therapy orientation of these research units) but were implicitly expected to conduct themselves with greater circumspection than was required of doctors. (This was pointed out by a perceptive occupational therapist who claimed she was always reminded that a mild young female psychiatrist was really an M.D. by the fact that this psychiatrist exercised these prerogatives of informal demeanor.) The extreme here perhaps is the master-servant relation as seen in cases where valets and maids are required to perform in a dignified manner services of an undignified kind. Similarly, doctors had the right to saunter into the nurses’ station, lounge on the station’s dispensing counter, and engage in joking...
with the nurses; other ranks participated in this informal interaction with doctors, but only after doctors had initiated it.

DEFERENCE AND DEMEANOR

Deference and demeanor are analytical terms; empirically there is much overlapping of the activities to which they refer. An act through which the individual gives or withholds deference to others typically provides means by which he expresses the fact that he is a well or badly demeaned individual. Some aspects of this overlapping may be cited. First, in performing a given act of presentational deference, as in offering a guest a chair, the actor finds himself doing something that can be done with smoothness and aplomb, expressing self-control and poise, or with clumsiness and uncertainty, expressing an irresolute character. This is, as it were, an incidental and adventitious connection between deference and demeanor. It may be illustrated from recent material on doctor-patient relationships, where it is suggested that one complaint a doctor may have against some of his patients is that they do not bathe before coming for an examination; while bathing is a way of paying deference to the doctor it is at the same time a way for the patient to present himself as a clean, well demeaned person. A further illustration is found in acts such as loud talking, shouting, or singing, for these acts encroach upon the right of others to be let alone, while at the same time they illustrate a badly demeaned lack of control over one’s feelings.

A second connection between deference and demeanor turns upon the fact that a willingness to give others their deferential due is one of the qualities which the individual owes it to others to express through his conduct, just as a willingness to conduct oneself with good demeanor is in general a way of showing deference to those present.

In spite of these connections between deference and demeanor, the analytical relation between them is one of “complementarity,” not identity. The image the individual owes to others to maintain of himself is not the same type of image these others are obliged to maintain of him. Deference images tend to point to the wider society outside the interaction, to the place the individual has achieved in the hierarchy of this society. Demeanor images tend to point to qualities which any social position gives its incumbents a chance to display during interaction, for these qualities pertain more to the way in which the individual handles his position than to the rank and place of that position relative to those possessed by others.

Further, the image of himself the individual owes it to others to maintain through his conduct is a kind of justification and compensation for the image of him that others are obliged to express through their deference to him. Each of the two images in fact may act as a guarantee and check upon the other. In an interchange that can be found in many cultures, the individual defers to guests to show how welcome they are and how highly he regards them; they in turn decline the offering at least once, showing through their demeanor that they are not presumptuous, immodest, or over-eager to receive favor. Similarly, a man starts to rise for a lady, showing respect for her sex; she interrupts and halts his gesture, showing she is not greedy of her rights in this capacity but is ready to define the situation as one between equals. In general, then, by treating others deferentially one gives them an opportunity to handle the indulgence with good demeanor. Through this differentiation in symbolizing function the world tends to be bathed in better images than anyone deserves, for it is practical to signify great appreciation of others by offering them deferential indulgences, knowing that some of these indulgences will be declined as an expression of good demeanor.

There are still other complementary relations between deference and demeanor. If an individual feels he ought to show proper demeanor in order to warrant deferential treatment, then he must be in a position to do so. He must, for example, be able to conceal from others aspects of himself which would make him unworthy in their eyes, and to conceal himself from them when he is in an indignified state, whether of dress, mind, posture, or action. The avoidance rituals which others perform in regard to him give him room to maneuver, enabling him to present only a self that is worthy of deference; at the same time, this avoidance makes it easier
for them to assure themselves that the deference they have to show him is warranted.

To show the difference between deference and demeanor, I have pointed out the complementary relation between them, but even this kind of relatedness can be overstressed. The failure of an individual to show proper deference to others does not necessarily free them from the obligation to act with good demeanor in his presence, however disgruntled they may be at having to do this. Similarly, the failure of an individual to conduct himself with proper demeanor does not always relieve those in his presence from treating him with proper deference. It is by separating deference and demeanor that we can appreciate many things about ceremonial life, such as that a group may be noted for excellence in one of these areas while having a bad reputation in the other.

We are to see, then, that there are many occasions when it would be improper for an individual to convey about himself what others are ready to convey about him to him, since each of these two images is a warrant and justification for the other, and not a mirror image of it. The Meadian notion that the individual takes toward himself the attitude others take to him seems very much an oversimplification. Rather the individual must rely on others to complete the picture of him of which he himself is allowed to paint only certain parts. Each individual is responsible for the demeanor image of himself and the deference image of others, so that for a complete man to be expressed, individuals must hold hands in a chain of ceremony, each giving deferentially with proper demeanor to the one on the right what will be received deferentially from the one on the left. While it may be true that the individual has a unique self all his own, evidence of this possession is thoroughly a product of joint ceremonial labor, the part expressed through the individual’s demeanor being no more significant than the part conveyed by others through their deferential behavior toward him.

CONCLUSIONS

The rules of conduct which bind the actor and the recipient together are the bindings of society. But many of the acts which are guided by these rules occur infrequently or take a long time for their consummation. Opportunities to affirm the moral order and the society could therefore be rare. It is here that ceremonial rules play their social function, for many of the acts which are guided by these rules last but a brief moment, involve no substantive outlay, and can be performed in every social interaction. Whatever the activity and however profanely instrumental, it can afford many opportunities for minor ceremonies as long as other persons are present. Through these observances, guided by ceremonial obligations and expectations, a constant flow of indulgences is spread through society, with others who are present constantly reminding the individual that he must keep himself together as a well demeaned person and affirm the sacred quality of these others. The gestures which we sometimes call empty are perhaps in fact the fullest things of all.

It is therefore important to see that the self is in part a ceremonial thing, a sacred object which must be treated with proper ritual care and in turn must be presented in a proper light to others. As a means through which this self is established, the individual acts with proper demeanor while in contact with others and is treated by others with deference. It is just as important to see that if the individual is to play this kind of sacred game, then the field must be suited to it. The environment must ensure that the individual will not pay too high a price for acting with good demeanor and that deference will be accorded him. Deference and demeanor practices must be institutionalized so that the individual will be able to project a viable, sacred self and stay in the game on a proper ritual basis.

An environment, then, in terms of the ceremonial component of activity, is a place where it is easy or difficult to play the ritual game of having a self. Where ceremonial practices are thoroughly institutionalized, as they were on Ward A, it would appear easy to be a person. Where these practices are not established, as to a degree they were not in Ward B, it would appear difficult to be a person. Why one ward comes to be a place in which it is easy to have a self and another ward comes to be a place where this is difficult depends in part on the type of patient that is recruited and the type of regime the staff attempts to maintain.
One of the bases upon which mental hospitals throughout the world segregate their patients is degree of easily apparent “mental illness.” By and large this means that patients are graded according to the degree to which they violate ceremonial rules of social intercourse. There are very good practical reasons for sorting patients into different wards in this way, and in fact that institution is backward where no one bothers to do so. This grading very often means, however, that individuals who are desperately uncivil in some areas of behavior are placed in the intimate company of those who are desperately uncivil in others. Thus, individuals who are the least ready to project a sustainable self are lodged in a milieu where it is practically impossible to do so.

It is in this context that we can reconsider some interesting aspects of the effect of coercion and constraint upon the individual. If an individual is to act with proper demeanor and show proper deference, then it will be necessary for him to have areas of self-determination. He must have an expendable supply of the small indulgences which his society employs in its idiom of regard—such as cigarettes to give, chairs to proffer, food to provide, and so forth. He must have freedom of bodily movement so that it will be possible for him to assume a stance that conveys appropriate respect for others and appropriate demeanor on his own part; a patient strapped to a bed may find it impractical not to befoul himself, let alone to stand in the presence of a lady. He must have a supply of appropriate clean clothing if he is to make the sort of appearance that is expected of a well demeaned person. To look seemly may require a tie, a belt, shoe laces, a mirror, and razor blades—all of which the authorities may deem unwise to give him. He must have access to the eating utensils which his society defines as appropriate ones for use, and may find that meat cannot be circumspectly eaten with a cardboard spoon. And finally, without too much cost to himself he must be able to decline certain kinds of work, now sometimes classified as “industrial therapy,” which his social group considers *infra dignitatem*.

When the individual is subject to extreme constraint he is automatically forced from the circle of the proper. The sign vehicles or physical tokens through which the customary ceremonies are performed are unavailable to him. Others may show ceremonial regard for him, but it becomes impossible for him to reciprocate the show or to act in such a way as to make himself worthy of receiving it. The only ceremonial statements that are possible for him are improper ones.

The history of the care of mental cases is the history of constraining devices: constraining gloves, camisoles, floor and seat chains, handcuffs, “biter’s mask,” wet-packs, supervised toileting, hosing down, institutional clothing, forkless and knifeless eating, and so forth. The use of these devices provides significant data on the ways in which the ceremonial grounds of selfhood can be taken away. By implication we can obtain information from this history about the conditions that must be satisfied if individuals are to have selves. . . .

Throughout this paper I have assumed we can learn about ceremony by studying a contemporary secular situation—that of the individual who has declined to employ the ceremonial idiom of his group in an acceptable manner and has been hospitalized. In a crosscultural view it is convenient to see this as a product of our complex division of labor which brings patients together instead of leaving each in his local circle. Further, this division of labor also brings together those who have the task of caring for these patients.

We are thus led to the special dilemma of the hospital worker: as a member of the wider society he ought to take action against mental patients, who have transgressed the rules of ceremonial order; but his occupational role obliges him to care for and protect these very people. When “milieu therapy” is stressed, these obligations further require him to convey warmth in response to hostility; relatedness in response to alienation. . . .

In summary, then, modern society brings transgressors of the ceremonial order to a single place, along with some ordinary members of society who make their living there. These dwell in a place of unholy acts and unholy understandings, yet some of them retain allegiance to the ceremonial order outside the hospital setting. Somehow ceremonial people must work out mechanisms and techniques for living without certain kinds of ceremony.

In this paper I have suggested that Durkheimian notions about primitive religion can be translated into concepts of deference and demeanor, and that these concepts help us to grasp
some aspects of urban secular living. The implication is that in one sense this secular world is not so irreligious as we might think. Many gods have been done away with, but the individual himself stubbornly remains as a deity of considerable importance. He walks with some dignity and is the recipient of many little offerings. He is jealous of the worship due him, yet, approached in the right spirit, he is ready to forgive those who may have offended him. Because of their status relative to his, some persons will find him contaminating while others will find they contaminate him, in either case finding that they must treat him with ritual care. Perhaps the individual is so viable a god because he can actually understand the ceremonial significance of the way he is treated, and quite on his own can respond dramatically to what is proffered him. In contacts between such deities there is no need for middlemen; each of these gods is able to serve as his own priest.

Symbolic Interactionism and Dramaturgy

Introduction to Asylums

In Asylums, Goffman again takes up the issue of the social sources of this self. However, in this study he reports on daily life as it transpires in mental hospitals and prisons. Yet his aim is not solely to understand how these specific establishments shape the self, but also to explore how such places shed light on the nature of the self as it is experienced in more ordinary, civilian settings.

Mental hospitals, prisons, monasteries, convents, the military, and boarding schools all have one thing in common: they are all total institutions. Total institutions are places of “residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life” (1961:xiii). It is here where “under one roof and according to one rational plan, all spheres of individuals’ lives—sleeping, eating, playing, and working—are regulated” (Branaman 1997:lv). To one degree or another, inhabitants of such facilities are stripped of the freedoms and resources to manage their self-presentation that are normally provided by social arrangements. As a result, they are subjected to mortifications of self, processes of “killing off” the multiple selves possessed prior to one’s entrance into the total institution and replacing them with one totalizing identity over which the person exercises little, if any, control. Here is the life of the prison inmate or military recruit: shaven head, dressed in institutional clothing, substitution of a number or insult for one’s name, dispossessed of personal property, endless degradation, and complete loss of privacy over intimate information and matters of personal hygiene. All work together to construct a self radically different from the one that entered the establishment.

To counteract this profanation of self, inhabitants of total institutions engage in the types of practices we all do when we sense that our sacredness is threatened, only here they appear more extreme. Thus, when patients in a mental institution repeatedly bang a chair against the floor or smear their feces on the wall of the ward, their “recalcitrance” is less a symptom of their psychosis and more a sign of the conditions under which they are forced to live. Such actions serve the function of preserving one’s self-autonomy, as do our calling in sick to work or devising (unconvincing) excuses for missing an exam in order to recuperate from a “festive” weekend, or the sarcastic enthusiasm we display in response to our boss’s directives. The failure to cooperate with institutional demands that is expressed in each case is a “normal” attempt to preserve control over one’s self. Each represents a secondary adjustment or a way “of taking leave of a place without moving from it” (1961:308). Secondary adjustments, then, are “ways in which the individual stands apart from the role and the self that were taken for granted for him by
of the barriers ordinarily separating these three spheres of life. First, all aspects of life are conducted in the same place and under the same single authority. Second, each phase of the member's daily activity is carried on in the immediate company of a large batch of others, all of whom are treated alike and required to do the same thing together. Third, all phases of the day's activities are tightly scheduled, with one activity leading at a prearranged time into the

next, the whole sequence of activities being imposed from above by a system of explicit formal rulings and a body of officials. Finally, the various enforced activities are brought together into a single rational plan purportedly designed to fulfill the official aims of the institution.

Individually, these features are found in places other than total institutions. For example, our large commercial, industrial, and educational establishments are increasingly providing cafeterias and free-time recreation for their members; use of these extended facilities remains voluntary in many particulars, however, and special care is taken to see that the ordinary line of authority does not extend to them. Similarly, housewives or farm families may have all their major spheres of life within the same fenced-in area, but these persons are not collectively regimented and do not march through the day’s activities in the immediate company of a batch of similar others.

The handling of many human needs by the bureaucratic organization of whole blocks of people—whether or not this is a necessary or effective means of social organization in the circumstances—is the key fact of total institutions. From this follow certain important implications. When persons are moved in blocks, they can be supervised by personnel whose chief activity is not guidance or periodic inspection (as in many employer-employee relations) but rather surveillance—a seeing to it that everyone does what he has been clearly told is required of him, under conditions where one person’s infraction is likely to stand out in relief against the visible, constantly examined compliance of the others. Which comes first, the large blocks of managed people, or the small supervisory staff, is not here at issue; the point is that each is made for the other.

In total institutions there is a basic split between a large managed group, conveniently called inmates, and a small supervisory staff. Inmates typically live in the institution and have restricted contact with the world outside the walls; staff often operate on an eight-hour day and are socially integrated into the outside world. Each grouping tends to conceive of the other in terms of narrow hostile stereotypes, staff often seeing inmates as bitter, secretive, and untrustworthy, while inmates often see staff as condescending, highhanded, and mean. Staff tends to feel superior and righteous; inmates tend, in some ways at least, to feel inferior, weak, blameworthy, and guilty.

Social mobility between the two strata is grossly restricted; social distance is typically great and often formally prescribed. Even talk across the boundaries may be conducted in a special tone of voice. . . . Just as talk across the boundary is restricted, so, too, is the passage of information, especially information about the staff’s plans for inmates. Characteristically, the inmate is excluded from knowledge of the decisions taken regarding his fate. Whether the official grounds are military, as in concealing travel destination from enlisted men, or medical, as in concealing diagnosis, plan of treatment, and approximate length of stay from tuberculosis patients, such exclusion gives staff a special basis of distance from and control over inmates. . . .

The total institution is a social hybrid, part residential community, part formal organization; therein lies its special sociological interest. There are other reasons for being interested in these establishments, too. In our society, they are the forcing houses for changing persons; each is a natural experiment on what can be done to the self.

II

The recruit comes into the establishment with a conception of himself made possible by certain stable social arrangements in his home world. Upon entrance, he is immediately stripped of the support provided by these arrangements. In the accurate language of some of our oldest total institutions, he begins a series of abasements, degradations, humiliations, and profanations of self. His self is systematically, if often unintentionally, mortified. He begins some radical shifts in his moral career, a career composed of the progressive changes that occur in the beliefs that he has concerning himself and significant others. The processes by which a person’s self is mortified are fairly standard in total institutions; analysis of these processes can help us to see the arrangements that ordinary establishments

must guarantee if members are to preserve their civilian selves.

The barrier that total institutions place between the inmate and the wider world marks the first curtailment of self. In civil life, the sequential scheduling of the individual’s roles, both in the life cycle and in the repeated daily round, ensures that no one role he plays will block his performance and ties in another. In total institutions, in contrast, membership automatically disrupts role scheduling, since the inmate’s separation from the wider world lasts around the clock and may continue for years. Role dispossession therefore occurs. In many total institutions the privilege of having visitors or of visiting away from the establishment is completely withheld at first, ensuring a deep initial break with past roles and an appreciation of role dispossession. A report on cadet life in a military academy provides an illustration:

This clean break with the past must be achieved in a relatively short period. For two months, therefore, the swab is not allowed to leave the base or to engage in social intercourse with non-cadets. This complete isolation helps to produce a unified group of swabs, rather than a heterogeneous collection of persons of high and low status. Uniforms are issued on the first day, and discussions of wealth and family background are taboo. Although the pay of the cadet is very low, he is not permitted to receive money from home. The role of the cadet must supersede other roles the individual has been accustomed to play. There are few clues left which will reveal social status in the outside world.ii

I might add that when entrance is voluntary, the recruit has already partially withdrawn from his home world; what is cleanly severed by the institution is something that had already started to decay. . . .

The inmate, then, finds certain roles are lost to him by virtue of the barrier that separates him from the outside world. The process of entrance typically brings other kinds of loss and mortification as well. We very generally find staff employing what are called admission procedures, such as taking a life history, photographing, weighing, fingerprinting, assigning numbers, searching, listing personal possessions for storage, undressing, bathing, disinfecting, haircutting, issuing institutional clothing, instructing as to rules, and assigning to quarters. Admission procedures might better be called “trimming” or “programming” because in thus being squared away the new arrival allows himself to be shaped and coded into an object that can be fed into the administrative machinery of the establishment, to be worked on smoothly by routine operations. Many of these procedures depend upon attributes such as weight or fingerprints that the individual possesses merely because he is a member of the largest and most abstract of social categories, that of human being. Action taken on the basis of such attributes necessarily ignores most of his previous bases of self-identification. . . .

The admission procedure can be characterized as a leaving off and a taking on, with the midpoint marked by physical nakedness. Leaving off of course entails a dispossession of property, important because persons invest self feelings in their possessions. Perhaps the most significant of these possessions is not physical at all, one’s full name; whatever one is thereafter called, loss of one’s name can be a great curtailment of the self.

Once the inmate is stripped of his possessions, at least some replacements must be made by the establishment, but these take the form of standard issue, uniform in character and uniformly distributed. These substitute possessions are clearly marked as really belonging to the institution and in some cases are recalled at regular intervals to be, as it were, disinfected of identifications. With objects that can be used up—for example, pencils—the inmate may be required to return the remnants before obtaining a reissue. Failure to provide inmates with individual lockers and periodic searches and confiscations of accumulated personal property reinforce property dispossession. Religious orders have appreciated the implications for self of such separation from belongings. Inmates may be required to change their cells once a year so as not to become attached to them. . . .

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One set of the individual’s possessions has a special relation to self. The individual ordinarily expects to exert some control over the guise in which he appears before others. For this he needs cosmetic and clothing supplies, tools for applying, arranging, and repairing them, and an accessible, secure place to store these supplies and tools—in short, the individual will need an “identity kit” for the management of his personal front. He will also need access to decoration specialists such as barbers and clothiers.

On admission to a total institution, however, the individual is likely to be stripped of his usual appearance and of the equipment and services by which he maintains it, thus suffering a personal defacement. Clothing, combs, needle and thread, cosmetics, towels, soap, shaving sets, bathing facilities—all these may be taken away or denied him, although some may be kept in inaccessible storage, to be returned if and when he leaves. In the words of St. Benedict’s Holy Rule:

Then forthwith he shall, there in the oratory, be divested of his own garments with which he is clothed and be clad in those of the monastery. Those garments of which he is divested shall be placed in the wardrobe, there to be kept, so that if, perchance, he should ever be persuaded by the devil to leave the monastery (which God forbid), he may be stripped of the monastic habit and cast forth.

... At admission, loss of identity equipment can prevent the individual from presenting his usual image of himself to others. After admission, the image of himself he presents is attacked in another way. Given the expressive idiom of a particular civil society, certain movements, postures, and stances will convey lowly images of the individual and be avoided as demeaning. Any regulation, command, or task that forces the individual to adopt these movements or postures may mortify his self. In total institutions, such physical indignities abound. In prisons, inmates may be required to stand at attention whenever an officer enters the compound. In religious institutions, there are such classic gestures of penance as the kissing of feet, and the posture recommended to an erring monk that he

... lie prostrate at the door of the oratory in silence; and thus, with his face to the ground and his body prone, let him cast himself at the feet of all as they go forth from the oratory.

In some penal institutions we find the humiliation of bending over to receive a birching.

Just as the individual can be required to hold his body in a humiliating pose, so he may have to provide humiliating verbal responses. An important instance of this is the forced deference pattern of total institutions; inmates are often required to punctuate their social interaction with staff by verbal acts of deference, such as saying “sir.” Another instance is the necessity to beg, importune, or humbly ask for little things such as a light for a cigarette, a drink of water, or permission to use the telephone.

Corresponding to the indignities of speech and action required of the inmate are the indignities of treatment others accord him. The standard examples here are verbal or gestural profanations: staff or fellow inmates call the individual obscene names, curse him, point out his negative attributes, tease him, or talk about him or his fellow inmates as if he were not present.

Whatever the form or the source of these various indignities, the individual has to engage in activity whose symbolic implications are incompatible with his conception of self. A more diffuse example of this kind of mortification occurs when the individual is required to undertake a daily round of life that he considers alien to him—to take on a disidentifying role. In prisons, denial of heterosexual opportunities can induce fear of losing one’s masculinity. In military establishments, the patently useless make-work forced on fatigue details can make men feel their time and effort are worthless. In religious institutions

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*The Holy Rule of Saint Benedict*, Ch. 58.

*The Holy Rule of Saint Benedict*, Ch. 44.
there are special arrangements to ensure that all inmates take a turn performing the more menial aspects of the servant role. An extreme is the concentration-camp practice requiring prisoners to administer whippings to other prisoners.

There is another form of mortification in total institutions; beginning with admission a kind of contaminative exposure occurs. On the outside, the individual can hold objects of self-feeling—such as his body, his immediate actions, his thoughts, and some of his possessions—clear of contact with alien and contaminating things. But in total institutions these territories of the self are violated; the boundary that the individual places between his being and the environment is invaded and the embodiments of self profaned.

There is, first, a violation of one’s informational preserve regarding self. During admission, facts about the inmate’s social statuses and past behavior—especially discreditable facts—are collected and recorded in a dossier available to staff. Later, in so far as the establishment officially expects to alter the self-regulating inner tendencies of the inmate, there may be group or individual confession—psychiatric, political, military, or religious, according to the type of institution. On these occasions the inmate has to expose facts and feelings about self to new kinds of audiences.

New audiences not only learn discreditable facts about oneself that are ordinarily concealed but are also in a position to perceive some of these facts directly. Prisoners and mental patients cannot prevent their visitors from seeing them in humiliating circumstances. Another example is the shoulder patch of ethnic identification worn by concentration-camp inmates. Medical and security examinations often expose the inmate physically, sometimes to persons of both sexes; a similar exposure follows from collective sleeping arrangements and door-less toilets. An extreme here, perhaps, is the situation of a self-destructive mental patient who is stripped naked for what is felt to be his own protection and placed in a constantly lit seclusion room, into whose Judas window any person passing on the ward can peer. In general, of course, the inmate is never fully alone; he is always within sight and often earshot of someone, if only his fellow inmates. Prison cages with bars for walls fully realize such exposure.

Perhaps the most obvious type of contaminative exposure is the directly physical kind—the besmearing and defiling of the body or of other objects closely identified with the self. Sometimes this involves a breakdown of the usual environmental arrangements for insulating oneself from one’s own source of contamination, as in having to empty one’s own slops or having to subject one’s evacuation to regimentation.... A very common form of physical contamination is reflected in complaints about unclean food, messy quarters, soiled towels, shoes and clothing impregnated with previous users’ sweat, toilets without seats, and dirty bath facilities.... Finally, in some total institutions the inmate is obliged to take oral or intravenous medications, whether desired or not, and to eat his food, however unpalatable. When an inmate refuses to eat, there may be forcible contamination of his innards by “forced feeding.”

I have suggested that the inmate undergoes mortification of the self by contaminative exposure of a physical kind, but this must be amplified: when the agency of contamination is another human being, the inmate is in addition contaminated by forced interpersonal contact and, in consequence, a forced social relationship. (Similarly, when the inmate loses control over who observes him in his predicament or knows about his past, he is being contaminated by a forced relationship to these people—for it is through such perception and knowledge that relations are expressed.)

**THE MORAL CAREER OF THE MENTAL PATIENT**

I

In general... mental hospitals systematically provide for circulation about each patient the kind of information that the patient is likely to try to hide. And in various degrees of detail this information is used daily to puncture his claims. At the admission and diagnostic conferences, he will be asked questions to which he must give wrong answers in order to maintain
his self-respect, and then the true answer may be
shot back at him. An attendant whom he tells a
version of his past and his reason for being in
the hospital may smile disbelievingly, or say,
“That’s not the way I heard it,” in line with the
practical psychiatry of bringing the patient
down to reality. When he accosts a physician or
nurse on the ward and presents his claims for
more privileges or for discharge, this may be
counteracted by a question which he cannot answer
truthfully without calling up a time in his past
when he acted disgracefully. When he gives his
view of his situation during group psychother-
apy, the therapist, taking the role of interrogator,
may attempt to disabuse him of his face-saving
interpretations and encourage an interpretation
suggesting that it is he himself who is to blame
and who must change. When he claims to staff
or fellow patients that he is well and has never
been really sick, someone may give him graphic
details of how, only one month ago, he was
prancing around like a girl, or claiming that he
was God, or declining to talk or eat, or putting
gum in his hair.

Each time the staff deflates the patient’s
claims, his sense of what a person ought to be
and the rules of peer-group social intercourse
press him to reconstruct his stories; and each
time he does this, the custodial and psychiatric
interests of the staff may lead them to discredit
these tales again. . .

Learning to live under conditions of immi-
nent exposure and wide fluctuation in regard,
with little control over the granting or withhold-
ing of this regard, is an important step in the
socialization of the patient, a step that tells
something important about what it is like to be
an inmate in a mental hospital. Having one’s
past mistakes and present progress under con-
stant moral review seems to make for a special
adaptation consisting of a less than moral atti-
dude to ego ideals. One’s shortcomings and suc-
cesses become too central and fluctuating an
issue in life to allow the usual commitment of
concern for other persons’ views of them. It is
not very practicable to try to sustain solid claims
about oneself. The inmate tends to learn that
degradations and reconstructions of the self
need not be given too much weight, at the same
time learning that staff and inmates are ready to
view an inflation or deflation of a self with some
indifference. He learns that a defensible picture
of self can be seen as something outside oneself
that can be constructed, lost, and rebuilt, all with
great speed and some equanimity. He learns
about the viability of taking up a standpoint—
and hence a self—that is outside the one which
the hospital can give and take away from him.

The setting, then, seems to engender a kind
of cosmopolitan sophistication, a kind of civic
apathy. In this unserious yet oddly exaggerated
moral context, building up a self or having it
destroyed becomes something of a shameless
game, and learning to view this process as a
game seems to make for some demoralization,
the game being such a fundamental one. In the
hospital, then, the inmate can learn that the self
is not a fortress, but rather a small open city; he
can become weary of having to show pleasure
when held by troops of his own, and weary of
having to show displeasure when held by the
enemy. Once he learns what it is like to be
declared by society as not having a viable self,
this threatening definition—the threat that helps
attach people to the self society accords them—
is weakened. The patient seems to gain a new
plateau when he learns that he can survive while
acting in a way that society sees as destructive
of him.

[An] . . . illustration of this moral loosen-
ing and moral fatigue might be given. . . . On
the worst ward level, discreditings seem to
occur the most frequently, in part because of
lack of facilities, in part through the mockery
and sarcasm that seem to be the occupational
norm of social control for the attendants and
nurses who administer these places. At the same
time, the paucity of equipment and rights means
that not much self can be built up. The patient
finds himself constantly topped, therefore, but
with very little distance to fall. A kind of jaunty
gallows humor seems to develop in some
of these wards, with considerable freedom to
stand up to the staff and return insult for insult.
While these patients can be punished, they
cannot, for example, be easily slighted, for they
are accorded as a matter of course few of the
niceties that people must enjoy before they can
suffer subtle abuse. Like prostitutes in connec-
tion with sex, inmates on these wards have very
little reputation or rights to lose and can therefore take certain liberties. As the person moves up the ward system, he can manage more and more to avoid incidents which discredit his claim to be a human being, and acquire more and more of the varied ingredients of self-respect; yet when eventually he does get toppled—and he does—there is a much farther distance to fall. For instance, the privileged patient lives in a world wider than the ward, containing recreation workers who, on request, can dole out cake, cards, table-tennis balls, tickets to the movies, and writing materials. But in the absence of the social control of payment which is typically exerted by a recipient on the outside, the patient runs the risk that even a warmhearted functionary may, on occasion, tell him to wait until she has finished an informal chat, or teasingly ask why he wants what he has asked for, or respond with a dead pause and a cold look of appraisal.

Moving up and down the ward system means, then, not only a shift in self-constructive equipment, a shift in reflected status, but also a change in the calculus of risks. Appreciation of risks to his self-conception is part of everyone's moral experience, but an appreciation that a given risk level is itself merely a social arrangement is a rarer kind of experience, and one that seems to help to disenchant the person who undergoes it.

Each moral career, and behind this, each self, occurs within the confines of an institutional system, whether a social establishment such as a mental hospital or a complex of personal and professional relationships. The self, then, can be seen as something that resides in the arrangements prevailing in a social system for its members. The self in this sense is not a property of the person to whom it is attributed, but dwells rather in the pattern of social control that is exerted in connection with the person by himself and those around him. This special kind of institutional arrangement does not so much support the self as constitute it.

In the usual cycle of adult socialization one expects to find alienation and mortification followed by a new set of beliefs about the world and a new way of conceiving of selves. In the case of the mental-hospital patient, this rebirth does sometimes occur, taking the form of a strong belief in the psychiatric perspective, or, briefly at least, a devotion to the social cause of better treatment for mental patients. The moral career of the mental patient has unique interest, however; it can illustrate the possibility that in casting off the raiments of the old self—or in having this cover torn away—the person need not seek a new robe and a new audience before which to cower. Instead he can learn, at least for a time, to practise before all groups the amoral arts of shamelessness.

**THE UNDERLIFE OF A PUBLIC INSTITUTION**

In every social establishment, there are official expectations as to what the participant owes the establishment. Even in cases where there is no specific task, as in some night-watchman jobs, the organization will require some presence of mind, some awareness of the current situation, and some readiness for unanticipated events; as long as an establishment demands that its participants not sleep on the job, it asks them to be awake to certain matters. And where sleeping is part of the expectation, as in a home or a hotel, then there will be limits on where and when the sleeping is to occur, with whom, and with what bed manners. And behind these claims on the individual, be they great or small, the managers of every establishment will have a widely embracing implicit conception of what the individual’s character must be for these claims on him to be appropriate.

Whenever we look at a social establishment, we find a counter to this first theme: we find that participants decline in some way to accept the official view of what they should be putting into and getting out of the organization and, behind this, of what sort of self and world they are to accept for themselves. Where enthusiasm is expected, there will be apathy; where loyalty, there will be disaffection; where attendance, absenteeism; where robustness, some kind of illness; where deeds are to be done, varieties of
inactivity. We find a multitude of homely little histories, each in its way a movement of liberty. Whenever worlds are laid on, underlives develop.

II

The study of underlife in restrictive total institutions has some special interest. When existence is cut to the bone, we can learn what people do to flesh out their lives. Stashes, means of transportation, free places, territories, supplies for economic and social exchange—these apparently are some of the minimal requirements for building up a life. Ordinarily these arrangements are taken for granted as part of one’s primary adjustment; seeing them twisted out of official existence through bargains, wit, force, and cunning, we can see their significance anew. The study of total institutions also suggests that formal organizations have standard places of vulnerability, such as supply rooms, sick bays, kitchens, or scenes of highly technical labor. These are the damp corners where secondary adjustments breed and start to infest the establishment.

The mental hospital represents a peculiar instance of those establishments in which underlife is likely to proliferate. Mental patients are persons who caused the kind of trouble on the outside that led someone physically, if not socially, close to them to take psychiatric action against them. Often this trouble was associated with the “prepatient” having indulged in situational improprieties of some kind, conduct out of place in the setting. It is just such misconduct that conveys a moral rejection of the communities, establishments, and relationships that have a claim to one’s attachment.

Stigmatization as mentally ill and involuntary hospitalization are the means by which we answer these offenses against propriety. The individual’s persistence in manifesting symptoms after entering the hospital, and his tendency to develop additional symptoms during his initial response to the hospital, can now no longer serve him well as expressions of disaffection. From the patient’s point of view, to decline to exchange a word with the staff or with his fellow patients may be ample evidence of rejecting the institution’s view of what and who he is; yet higher management may construe this alienative expression as just the sort of symptomatology the institution was established to deal with and as the best kind of evidence that the patient properly belongs where he now finds himself. In short, mental hospitalization outmaneuvers the patient, tending to rob him of the common expressions through which people hold off the embrace of organizations—insolence, silence, sotto voce remarks, uncooperativeness, malicious destruction of interior decorations, and so forth; these signs of disaffiliation are now read as signs of their maker’s proper affiliation. Under these conditions all adjustments are primary.

Furthermore, there is a vicious-circle process at work. Persons who are lodged on “bad” wards find that very little equipment of any kind is given them—clothes may be taken from them each night, recreational materials may be withheld, and only heavy wooden chairs and benches provided for furniture. Acts of hostility against the institution have to rely on limited, ill-designed devices, such as banging a chair against the floor or striking a sheet of newspaper sharply so as to make an annoying explosive sound. And the more inadequate this equipment is to convey rejection of the hospital, the more the act appears as a psychotic symptom, and the more likely it is that management feels justified in assigning the patient to a bad ward. When a patient finds himself in seclusion, naked and without visible means of expression, he may have to rely on tearing up his mattress, if he can, or writing with feces on the wall—actions management takes to be in keeping with the kind of person who warrants seclusion.

We can also see this circular process at work in the small, illicit, talisman-like possessions that inmates use as symbolic devices for separating themselves from the position they are supposed to be in. What I think is a typical example may be cited from prison literature:

Prison clothing is anonymous. One’s possessions are limited to toothbrush, comb, upper or lower cot, half the space upon a narrow table, a razor. As in jail, the urge to collect possessions is carried to preposterous extents. Rocks, string, knives—anything
made by man and forbidden in man’s institution—anything,—a red comb, a different kind of toothbrush, a belt—these things are assiduously gathered, jealously hidden or triumphantly displayed.7

But when a patient, whose clothes are taken from him each night, fills his pockets with bits of string and rolled up paper, and when he fights to keep these possessions in spite of the consequent inconvenience to those who must regularly go through his pockets, he is usually seen as engaging in symptomatic behavior befitting a very sick patient, not as someone who is attempting to stand apart from the place accorded him.

Official psychiatric doctrine tends to define alienative acts as psychotic ones—this view being reinforced by the circular processes that lead the patient to exhibit alienation in a more and more bizarre form—but the hospital cannot be run according to this doctrine. The hospital cannot decline to demand from its members exactly what other organizations must insist on; psychiatric doctrine is supple enough to do this, but institutions are not. Given the standards of the institution’s environing society, there have to be at least the minimum routines connected with feeding, washing, dressing, bedding the patients, and protecting them from physical harm. Given these routines, there have to be inducements and exhortations to get patients to follow them. Demands must be made, and disappointment is shown when a patient does not live up to what is expected of him. Interest in seeing psychiatric “movement” or “improvement” after an initial stay on the wards leads the staff to encourage “proper” conduct and to express disappointment when a patient backslides into “psychosis.” The patient is thus re-established as someone whom others are depending on, someone who ought to know enough to act correctly. Some improprieties, especially ones like muteness and apathy that do not obstruct and even ease ward routines, may continue to be perceived naturalistically as symptoms, but on the whole the hospital operates semi-officially on the assumption that the patient ought to act in a manageable way and be respectful of psychiatry, and that he who does will be rewarded by improvement in life conditions and he who doesn’t will be punished by a reduction of amenities. Within this semi-official reinstatement of ordinary organizational practices, the patient finds that many of the traditional ways of taking leave of a place without moving from it have retained their validity; secondary adjustments are therefore possible.

III

Of the many different kinds of secondary adjustment, some are of particular interest because they bring into the clear the general theme of involvement and disaffection, characteristic of all these practices.

One of these special types of secondary adjustment is “removal activities” (or “kicks”), namely, undertakings that provide something for the individual to lose himself in, temporarily blotting out all sense of the environment which, and in which, he must abide. In total institutions a useful exemplary case is provided by Robert Stroud, the “Birdman,” who, from watching birds out his cell window, through a spectacular career of finagling and make-do, fabricated a laboratory and became a leading ornithological contributor to medical literature, all from within prison. Language courses in prisoner-of-war camps and art courses in prisons can provide the same release.

Central Hospital provided several of these escape worlds for inmates.8 One, for example, was sports. Some of the baseball players and a few tennis players seemed to become so caught

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7Cantine and Rainer, op. cit., p. 78. Compare the things that small boys stash in their pockets; some of these items also seem to provide a wedge between the boy and the domestic establishment.

8Behind informal social typing and informal group formation in prisons there is often to be seen a removal activity. Caldwell, op. cit., pp. 651–53, provides some interesting examples of prisoners on such kicks: those involved in securing and using drugs; those focused on leatherwork for sale; and “Spartans,” those involved in the glorification of their bodies, the prison locker room apparently serving as a muscle beach; the homosexuals; the gamblers, etc. The point about these activities is that each is world-building for the person caught up in it, thereby displacing the prison.
up in their sport, and in the daily record of their efforts in competition, that at least for the summer months this became their overriding interest. In the case of baseball this was further strengthened by the fact that, within the hospital, parole patients could follow national baseball as readily as could many persons on the outside. For some young patients, who never failed to go, when allowed, to a dance held in their service or in the recreation building, it was possible to live for the chance of meeting someone “interesting” or remeeting someone interesting who had already been met—in much the same way that college students are able to survive their studies by looking forward to the new “dates” that may be found in extracurricular activities. The “marriage moratorium” in Central Hospital, effectively freeing a patient from his marital obligations to a non-patient, enhanced this removal activity. For a handful of patients, the semi-annual theatrical production was an extremely effective removal activity: tryouts, rehearsals, costuming, scenery-making, staging, writing and rewriting, performing—all these seemed as successful as on the outside in building a world apart for the participants. The “marriage moratorium” in Central Hospital, effectively freeing a patient from his marital obligations to a non-patient, enhanced this removal activity. For a handful of patients, the semi-annual theatrical production was an extremely effective removal activity: tryouts, rehearsals, costuming, scenery-making, staging, writing and rewriting, performing—all these seemed as successful as on the outside in building a world apart for the participants. Another kick, important to some patients—and a worrisome concern for the hospital chaplains—was the enthusiastic espousal of religion. Still another, for a few patients, was gambling.

Portable ways of getting away were much favored in Central Hospital, paper-back murder mysteries, cards, and even jigsaw puzzles being carried around on one’s person. Not only could leave be taken of the ward and grounds be taken leave of through these means, but if one had to wait for an hour or so upon an official, or the serving of a meal, or the opening of the recreation building, the self-implication of this subordination could be dealt with by immediately bringing forth one’s own world-making equipment. . . .

IV

If a function of secondary adjustments is to place a barrier between the individual and the social unit in which he is supposed to be participating, we should expect some secondary adjustments to be empty of intrinsic gain and to function solely to express unauthorized distance—a self-preserving “rejection of one’s rejectors.”vii This seems to happen with the very common forms of ritual insubordination, for example, griping or bitching, where this behavior is not realistically expected to bring about change. Through direct insolence that does not meet with immediate correction, or remarks passed half out of hearing of authority, or gestures performed behind the back of authority, subordinates express some detachment from the place officially accorded them. . . . Some of these ways of openly but safely taking a stand outside the authorized one are beautiful, especially when carried out collectively. Again, prisons provide ready examples:

. . . When the sky pilot got up in the pulpit to give us our weekly pep talk each Sunday he would always make some feeble joke which we always laughed at as loud and as long as possible, although he must have known that we were sending him up. He still used to make some mildly funny remark and every time he did the whole church would be filled with rawcous [sic] laughter, even though only half the audience had heard what had been said.viii

. . . Beyond irony, however, there is an even more subtle and telling kind of ritual insubordination. There is a special stance that can be taken to alien authority; it combines stiffness, dignity, and coolness in a particular mixture that conveys insufficient insolence to call forth immediate punishment and yet expresses that one is entirely one’s own man. Since this communication is made through the way in which the body and face are held, it can be constantly conveyed wherever the inmate finds himself. Illustrations can be found in prison society:

“Rightness” implies bravery, fearlessness, loyalty to peers, avoidance of exploitation, adamant refusal to concede the superiority of the official


value system, and repudiation of the notion that the inmate is of a lower order. It consists principally in the reassertion of one’s basic integrity, dignity, and worth in an essentially degrading situation, and the exhibition of these personal qualities regardless of any show of force by the official system. 

Similarly, in Central Hospital, in the “tough” punishment wards of maximum security, where inmates had very little more to lose, fine examples could be found of patients not going out of their way to make trouble but by their very posture conveying unconcern and mild contempt for all levels of the staff, combined with utter self-possession.

It would be easy to account for the development of secondary adjustments by assuming that the individual possessed an array of needs, native or cultivated, and that when lodged in a milieu that denied these needs the individual simply responded by developing makeshift means of satisfaction. I think this explanation fails to do justice to the importance of these undercover adaptations for the structure of the self.

The practice of reserving something of oneself from the clutch of an institution is very visible in mental hospitals and prisons but can be found in more benign and less totalistic institutions, too. I want to argue that this recalcitrance is not an incidental mechanism of defense but rather an essential constituent of the self.

Sociologists have always had a vested interest in pointing to the ways in which the individual is formed by groups, identifies with groups, and withers away unless he obtains emotional support from groups. But when we closely observe what goes on in a social role, a spate of sociable interaction, a social establishment—or in any other unit of social organization—embracement of the unit is not all that we see. We always find the individual employing methods to keep some distance, some elbow room, between himself and that with which others assume he should be identified. No doubt a state-type mental hospital provides an overly lush soil for the growth of these secondary adjustments, but in fact, like weeds, they spring up in any kind of social organization. If we find, then, that in all situations actually studied the participant has erected defenses against his social bondedness, why should we base our conception of the self upon how the individual would act were conditions “just right”?

The simplest sociological view of the individual and his self is that he is to himself what his place in an organization defines him to be. When pressed, a sociologist modifies this model by granting certain complications: the self may be not yet formed or may exhibit conflicting dedications. Perhaps we should further complicate the construct by elevating these qualifications to a central place, initially defining the individual, for sociological purposes, as a stance-taking entity, a something that takes up a position somewhere between identification with an organization and opposition to it, and is ready at the slightest pressure to regain its balance by shifting its involvement in either direction. It is thus against something that the self can emerge. . . .

Without something to belong to, we have no stable self, and yet total commitment and attachment to any social unit implies a kind of selflessness. Our sense of being a person can come from being drawn into a wider social unit; our sense of selfhood can arise through the little ways in which we resist the pull. Our status is backed by the solid buildings of the world, while our sense of personal identity often resides in the cracks.

ARLIE RUSSELL HOCHSCHILD (1940– ): A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Born and raised in a Maryland suburb, Arlie Russell’s interest in “emotion management” was kindled at the age of twelve when her parents joined the U.S. Foreign Service. As her family hosted parties for foreign diplomats, she became precociously attuned to the subtleties of emotional displays and the importance of controlling, if not manipulating, them. This led her to question early on whether the “self” we present to others is a reality or fiction, as she found herself wondering, “Had I passed the peanuts to a person . . . or to an actor?” (1983:ix). The insightfulness of her innocent childhood musings has been confirmed, as today Hochschild has earned an international audience as a leading social psychologist.

Hochschild completed her M.A. and Ph.D. at the University of California, Berkeley. While a student she became increasingly attuned to the struggles women faced as they attempted to straddle two worlds: the “male” world of professional life and the “female” world of caregiver. Moreover, her studies led her to the conclusion that sociology was a patently male discipline whose points of reference, theories, and methods were derived from men’s experiences. This realization would, along with her fleeting childhood encounters with diplomats, inspire her to develop a branch of sociology that addressed not only the experiences of men but also the experiences of women; that informed the public not through “objective,” statistical facts but through stories of everyday life told by those living it; and that sought to explore not only what people think but also how people feel: the sociology of emotions.

During the past thirty years, Hochschild has written five books, coedited another, and has published more than fifty scholarly articles, book chapters, and reviews. Her academic works have been translated into ten languages. The American Sociological Association has twice recognized her contributions to the discipline by presenting her with both a Lifetime Achievement Award and the Award for Public Understanding of Sociology. Hochschild has also contributed significantly as a public intellectual. She established the Center for Working Families at the University of California, Berkeley, for which she currently serves as the director, and her expertise on the impact of government policy and business/employee relations on the family has led her into the political arena as well. She has presented her work to the State of California’s Child Development Policy Advisory Committee and, on the national level, to the Democratic Leadership Council, the National Council on Family Relations, and the White House’s Domestic Policy Council. She also advised former vice president Al Gore on the development of work-family policies. Hochschild currently teaches at the University of California, Berkeley.

INTELLECTUAL INFLUENCES AND CORE IDEAS

In developing her theory of emotions, Hochschild draws from two distinct approaches. The first, which she labels the “organismic model,” focuses on how emotions are rooted
in an individual’s biological or psychological makeup. The second, the “interactional model,” stresses the role of social processes in shaping self-consciousness. As you will shortly see, Hochschild fashions a third approach, “emotion-management perspective,” by weaving together the insights of these two approaches, and in doing so she significantly expands the terrain of symbolic interactionism (Hochschild, 2003).

The Organismic Model

The organismic model is derived primarily from the writings of Charles Darwin (1809–1882), Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), and William James (1842–1910). For instance, Darwin argues that emotive “gestures” are vestiges of humankind’s earlier, direct experiences. Thus, baring one’s teeth in an expression of rage is a vestige of the instinctual act of biting used by primitive humans to attack, or defend themselves against, another. Similarly, our expression of love is a holdover from what was once a direct act of sexual intercourse. For Darwin, then, emotive gestures—that is, emotional expressions—are largely universal, as we all can be traced to the same ancestral gene pool. Biology, not social factors, is said to shape emotions, which, in turn, accounts for why there allegedly is little cross-cultural variation in emotive experience. Here, emotions are instinctual or automatic responses to a stimulus that produces physiological changes in our bodies. Our conscious awareness of such changes or the meanings we attribute to them are considered extrinsic to the emotions themselves. For example, from this perspective the emotion we call fear is fundamentally a biologically driven response marked by an increased heart rate, heightened adrenaline levels, and a constriction of muscles.

For his part, Freud connects emotions to instinctual drives, namely Eros (love or creation) and Thanatos (death or destruction). When our ability to directly satisfy the demands of these two psychobiological instincts is hindered, we experience anxiety, the single most powerful emotion. Yet, civilization itself is predicated on the individual repressing or sublimating these basic drives. Anxiety is thus inescapably part of the human condition, tied as it is to the necessary denial of instinctual gratification.8 In our attempt to avoid or minimize unpleasant or painful psychological distress, we develop defense mechanisms through which we unconsciously repress and redefine the real source of our anxiety. While shielding the ego by displacing unwanted thoughts and feelings, such mechanisms, however, can lead to inappropriate or neurotic behavior. For the psychoanalyst, then, an individual’s misfitted emotional expressions and behaviors (for instance, laughing at a funeral or feeling depressed at one’s wedding) are held to be a reflection of unconscious or involuntary psychic processes.

Freud also assigns an important “signal function” to anxiety, a function that would become central to Hochschild’s theory of emotions. Here, Freud asserts that the experience of anxiety serves to alert the individual to impending dangers emanating either from the immediate environment or from inside the individual’s own psychic state. For instance, anxiety is likely to increase when we find ourselves in a potentially embarrassing situation or when we feel as though we are emotionally “flooded out” from a particularly intense situation and unable to control our behaviors. However, what Freud reserves primarily for anxiety, Hochschild extends to all emotions, arguing that the entire range of emotive experiences—from joy to sadness, pride to shame—serve as signals through which we fit our prior expectations to our present situation. Envy, for

8For additional comments on Freud’s theory, see our discussion of his influence on critical theory in Chapter 3.
example, is the name for the “signal” we receive when our expectations regarding what we think we deserve are not met while another person has what it is we desire.

The Interactional Model

The “interactional model” is expressed in the work of a number of figures including John Dewey (1859–1952), George Herbert Mead, Hans Gerth (1908–1978) and C. Wright Mills (1916–1962), Herbert Blumer, and Erving Goffman. These theorists all share a conception of the individual as an active, conscious participant in the production and reproduction of social life—a view that provides a critical point of departure for Hochschild’s own emotion-management perspective. Moreover, although they pursued different lines of inquiry, each called attention to the relationship between thinking (a social act rooted in taking the attitude of others toward our own conduct) and feeling. Here, emotive experiences thus are not tied to biologically driven responses or to the unconscious workings of the psyche. Emotions are viewed, instead, as intimately connected to our conscious perceptions and interpretations of the situations in which we are involved. In other words, the act of assigning meaning to an emotion is intrinsic to—not an aftereffect of—the emotive experience itself. Importantly, the active production of emotions is itself a social process, as the interpretation and labeling of feeling is based both on our reaction to the imagined responses of others as well as on our awareness of the normative expectations that infuse a given situation. Thus, we are sad at funerals not only because of the loss of a loved one, but also because we are supposed to be sad. Similarly, we feel a sense of pride in our accomplishments in part because we reflect back on the obstacles confronted along the path to our successes and realize that we deserve to feel proud.

The model of the actor and her relation to the broader society posed by the interactional perspective is instructive on several fronts. Emphasizing the social dimensions of self-consciousness provides a vantage point for linking emotive experiences to cognitive awareness and recognizing the connections between self- and social-control mechanisms. From this perspective, emotions can be understood as something other than irrational, displaced, or instinctual physiological responses to events. Moreover, recognizing that an individual’s “private” emotions are produced and shaped within a public context opens the door for examining how broader social structures can impinge on emotive experiences: for instance, how the institutionalization of class and gender relations shapes both the inner experience and outer expression of emotions, an issue that Hochschild addresses in the readings that follow.

Goffman and Impression Management

Above all, it is Erving Goffman who had the greatest impact on Hochschild’s conceptualization of emotions. Although Goffman did not explore explicitly the full range of emotions, his notion of impression management is central to Hochschild’s own emotion management model. As we discussed earlier in connection to Goffman’s dramaturgical perspective, impression management refers to the technique of controlling one’s behavior in order to present an acceptable image of one’s self to others. But, according to Hochschild, Goffman’s singular focus on outward expressions, or “surface acting,” leads to a blind spot in his analysis. The notion that individuals have inner feelings that, like outward appearances, must be actively managed as they plot their course of projected impressions is scarcely entertained by Goffman. This assumption, however, is fundamental to Hochschild’s own model. Indeed, Goffman’s ambivalent position on the nature of self (whether it is primarily an imputed “dramatic effect”
arising from a scene, or whether a “psychobiological” organism stands behind the mask donned for the performance) makes it difficult to determine how inner feelings might be managed or shaped.

While Goffman did not make the study of emotions a cornerstone to his approach, he did devote attention to embarrassment and its role in sustaining both the informal rules that govern social encounters and the self-identity of the actors involved (1967). In his analysis, we can glimpse the blind spot that Hochschild sought to rectify. Goffman defines embarrassment as a feeling that arises when one or more actors in an encounter are unable to fulfill the expectations required to project an acceptable self-image to others. Certainly no one has fully escaped the feeling of embarrassment (or “flustering”) that signals an interaction gone awry. Goffman’s description will no doubt ring familiar:

[A] completely flustered individual is one who cannot for the time being mobilize his muscular and intellectual resources for the task at hand, although he would like to; he cannot volunteer a response to those around him that will allow them to sustain the conversation smoothly. He and his flustered actions block the line of activity the others have been pursuing. He is present with them, but he is not “in play.” The others may be forced to stop and turn their attention to the impediment; the topic of conversation is neglected, and energies are directed to the task of re-establishing the flustered individual, of studiously ignoring him, or of withdrawing from his presence . . . [F]lustering threatens the encounter itself by disrupting the smooth transmission and reception by which encounters are sustained. (1967:100–02)

Here, embarrassment is studied less as an inner emotional state and more for what it contributes to the flow of interaction. The point is not that Goffman ignores the play and power of emotions, but rather, that his situationalism leads him to view emotions as something “done” to the actor; embarrassment happens to him. Thus, essential features of emotions are not to be found in the mind or body of the individual as the organismic and emotion-management models contend, but rather, in their ramifications for the encounter and the actor’s attempt to maintain a viable presentation of self. As Goffman puts it:

By showing embarrassment . . . [the individual’s] role in the current interaction may be sacrificed, and even the encounter itself, but he demonstrates that, while he cannot present a sustainable and coherent self on this occasion, he is at least disturbed by the fact and may prove worthy another time. To this extent, embarrassment is not an irrational impulse breaking through socially prescribed behavior but part of the orderly behavior itself. (1967:111)

Hochschild’s Emotion-Management Model

Having presented in broad strokes the models from which Hochschild draws, we turn now to a brief overview of her own emotion-management perspective. To begin, Hochschild (1983), borrowing from Darwin, defines emotion as a “biologically-given sense,” much like hearing, sight, and smell, that communicates information about the world around us. Thus, emotions are fundamentally connected to biological processes. Unlike our other senses, however, emotions are directly tied to behavior; they are experienced as the body physiologically readies itself to engage in action. In addition to providing an orientation toward action, emotions also possess a cognitive component in the form of a “signal function.” In this way, emotions spring from our attempts to reconcile our prior expectations with the actuality of events.
Yet, emotions are not biological or psychological givens that are immune to social and cultural influences, a picture that is painted by the organismic model. Emotions are actively produced and managed by individuals in the context of interaction: they are not simply experienced, they are created. In an important sense, we “do” emotions in the form of emotion work. This refers to efforts to alter (i.e., manage) the intensity or type of feelings one is experiencing. Emotion work can involve conscious attempts to either evoke or shape particular feelings as well as attempts to suppress them. Here we see both Hochschild’s indebtedness to, and extension of, Goffman’s dramaturgical perspective. For while Goffman’s notion of impression management emphasizes surface acting—the outward behavioral and verbal expressions we “put on” in order to convincingly play a role—Hochschild’s emotion management focuses on “deep acting”—our inner efforts to produce not the appearance of feeling but, rather, a “real feeling that has been self-induced” (1983:35). Thus, after a stressful day we try to be happy at our friend’s birthday party. Similarly, we often must work to suppress the nervousness or anxiety we experience during a job interview or on a first date.

Directly related to the notion of emotion work is emotional labor, in which one’s deep acting is sold for a wage. Thus, inner feelings are managed in order to produce an outward display as part of one’s job. For example, in her research on flight attendants, Hochschild found that manufacturing feelings of caring and cheerfulness while suppressing anger or boredom was a common feature of the job. Of course, emotional labor does not pertain only to flight attendants. Rather, Hochschild points out that it is required by an array of jobs that share three characteristics: (1) face-to-face or voice-to-voice interaction with the public, (2) employees are directed to produce specified emotional states in clients, and (3) through training and supervision, employers are able to exercise control over the emotional activities of workers (1983:147). From this description, it’s easy to see that emotional labor is a pervasive feature in a service economy such as ours in the United States. Waiters and waitresses, front desk attendants in hotels, and just about anyone who works in a retail store are all subject to the supervised control of their own emotions, as a major component of their job is to produce a sense of satisfaction or self-importance in their customers. Likewise, police officers engage in emotional labor in their dealings with the public. Trained to keep their emotions in check under dangerous and threatening conditions—and subject to a range of penalties if they fail to do so—police officers are also instructed in techniques designed to produce specified emotional states in suspects and witnesses. Indeed, emotional labor is essential to performing the often-used “good cop/bad cop” routine and eliciting the required emotions, such as fear or trust, from those they are questioning.

Emotional labor, however, often exacts a high cost from the worker. Following the work of Gerth and Mills (and through them, the work of Karl Marx and Max Weber), Hochschild draws a parallel between the alienation experienced by the factory worker and that experienced by those employed in service industries. While the factory worker’s body is bought and controlled by his employer, it is the service worker’s feelings that are subject to the dictates of another, although in different ways, both are detached or alienated from something that is vital to their self. As Hochschild describes it:

Those who perform emotional labor in the course of giving service are like those who perform physical labor in the course of making things: both are subject to the demands of mass production. But when the product—the thing to be engineered, mass-produced, and subjected to speed-up and slow-down—is a smile, a mood, a feeling, or a relationship, it comes to belong more to the organization and less to the self. (1983:198)
When our natural capacity to engage in emotion work is sold for a wage and bought to serve the profit motive, our feelings become engineered to further corporate and organizational interests. “Transmuted” from a private act controlled by the individual herself to one that is publicly administered by a supervisor and codified in training manuals and company policies, emotion work becomes rationalized to better serve instrumental purposes. However, the commercial reshaping of emotions, or commodification of feelings, is not experienced alike by all. As you will read in the selections that follow, gender and class differences leave women and middle-class workers more susceptible to the commodification of their emotive experiences.

**Hochschild’s Theoretical Orientation**

In the preceding discussion, we introduced several concepts that suggest the contours of Hochschild’s theoretical orientation. Given the theoretical wells from which she draws and the influence of Goffman’s work in particular, it is not surprising that Hochschild has developed a multidimensional approach to the study of emotion that spans the four quadrants of our framework (see Figure 5.3). Consider first the twin concepts of emotion work and deep acting that, in speaking to the actor’s inner experiences, are rooted in individualist and nonrational presuppositions. Here, Hochschild focuses on the efforts of individuals to actively shape their real feelings in the course of interacting with others. Thus, we may find ourselves trying to get excited about a concert we’ve been invited to or trying to suppress our feelings of disappointment over
not getting a promotion. Together these two concepts emphasize the role that individuals play in creating their emotive experiences.

In contrast, surface acting refers to the individual’s managing of her outward appearance in order to present a convincing image of one’s self. The emphasis is less on

Photo 5.8  Flight Attendant
SOURCE: © Royalty-Free/Corbis; used with permission.

Figure 5.3  Hochschild’s Multidimensional Approach to Emotions

Deep acting  
Emotion work  
Feeling rules

INDIVIDUAL  

Surface acting  
Emotional labor  
Commodification of feeling  

RATIONAL  

NONRATIONAL  

Emotion management
emotions, per se, and more on the actor’s interest in maintaining an acceptable impression, which may involve faking feelings. For instance, we may pretend to thoroughly enjoy another’s company, when in actuality we are more interested in having him help us with our work. Thus, a more strategic or calculating motive often forms the backdrop of surface acting. This rationalist dimension of action is carried one step further with the notion of emotional labor, where an employee tries to evoke or suppress real emotions not because she wants to, but because she is paid to. While the feelings experienced may be real, they are nevertheless manufactured for “artificial” rational purposes, namely, to keep one’s job.

Closely related to emotional labor is the concept of the commodification of feelings, a concept that points to the collectivist and rational dimension of emotive experience. In this case, the instrumental, strategic stance toward emotions is adopted and executed through corporate design. It is not the interests of the individual that are being served here, but rather, those of the company. Like a car or a pair of shoes, emotions are bought and sold under the logic of the profit motive and the impersonal market forces it infuses. The notion of the commodification of feelings thus turns our attention to the institutional or structural pressures that shape the individual’s experience of emotions.

Hochschild’s multidimensional approach is rounded out by her notion of feeling rules, which captures the collectivist, nonrational dimension of emotions. Feeling rules are the shared, social (collectivist) conventions that determine what we should feel in a given situation, how intensely we should feel it, and how long we should feel. They form the taken-for-granted backdrop (nonrational) according to which we manage our emotions and assess the emotive expressions of others. Feeling rules account for the social patterning of emotive experiences and in doing so establish the “standards used in emotional conversation to determine what is rightly owed and owing in the currency of feeling” (1983:18). It is on the basis of feeling rules, and the sense of emotional entitlement or obligation they establish, that we guide our private emotion work (ibid.:56). For just as there are social expectations that set the boundaries of acceptable behavior, so, too, there are rules that set limits to our feelings. In extreme cases, feeling rules may even have the power of life and death over the individual. Consider a court trial where the defendant is found guilty of a crime in part because he expressed the “wrong amount” of grief, thus providing a clue to his guilt.

Readings

In the selections that follow, you will first find Hochschild explicating her general approach to emotions. Next, she goes on to discuss the everyday implications of her perspective, in particular how emotive experiences are connected to gender identity and the unequal distribution of resources, power, and authority along gendered lines.

Introduction to “Working on Feeling”

In her essay “Working on Feeling,” Hochschild outlines her emotion management model. Here you will encounter many of the key concepts discussed in the previous
section. After laying out the theoretical lineage of her perspective, Hochschild moves to a discussion of two of her central ideas: emotion work and feeling rules. In doing so, Hochschild evinces her multidimensional model of emotive experiences by exploring the links between our awareness of our feelings and the social rules that shape our personal efforts to manage them. Moreover, feeling rules are themselves embedded in a broader structural context. Most significant, Hochschild here claims, are existing class relations, which subject middle-class workers more than others to the commodification of feelings. For it is the middle-class job that is more likely to entail personal interaction with the public, the requirement to produce specific feeling-states in others, and the surveillance of their emotional labor by superiors.


Arlie Russell Hochschild

Why is the emotive experience of normal adults in daily life as orderly as it is? Why, generally speaking, do people feel gay at parties, sad at funerals, happy at weddings? This question leads us to examine not conventions of appearance or outward comportment, but conventions of feeling. Conventions of feeling become surprising only when we imagine, by contrast, what totally unpatterned, unpredictable emotive life might actually be like at parties, funerals, weddings, and in all of normal adult life. Indeed, when novelists set out to create poignant scenes they evoke the full weight of a feeling rule. In Lie Down in Darkness, for example, William Styron describes a confused and desperately unhappy bride on the “happy” day of her wedding:

When she spoke the vows her lips parted not like all the brides he’d ever seen—exposing their clean, scrubbed teeth in a little eager puff of rapture—but rather with a kind of wry and somber resignation. It had been a brief shadow of a mood, just a flicker, but enough for him to tell her “I will” had seemed less an avowal than a confession, like the tired words of some sad, errant nun. Not any of her put-on gaiety could disguise this.

Against the chaotic flow of feeling that emerges from real relationships are more abiding (though also changeable) rules of feeling. In a culture of freely chosen love matches, the bride should feel like saying “I will” with an “eager puff of rapture.”

But what, then, is a feeling or emotion? I define “emotion” as bodily cooperation with an image, a thought, a memory—a cooperation of which the individual is usually aware. I will use the terms “emotion” and “feeling” interchangeably, although the term “emotion” denotes a state of being overcome that “feeling” does not. The term “emotion management” I use synonymously with “emotion work” and “deep acting.”

What happens to these emotions? Erving Goffman suggests both the surprise to be explained and part of the explanation: “We find that participants will hold in check certain psychological states and attitudes, for after

SOURCE: From The Commercialization of Intimate Life: Notes from Home and Work by Hochschild, A., reprinted with permission from University of California Press via Copyright Clearance Center.

'Styron 1951, p. 291.
all, the very general rule that one enter into the prevailing mood in the encounter carries the understanding that contradictory feelings will be in abeyance. . . . So generally, in fact, does one suppress unsuitable affect, that we need to look at offenses to this rule to be reminded of its usual operation.”

The key—and curiously bureaucratic—word here is “unsuitable.” In light of the passage from William Styron above, we could also add “disturbing” or even, in the emotional sense, “dangerous.” “So why is she at the altar at all? And why in this way?” we ask. And, from the viewpoint of the guests and surely the groom, what is wrong with how—beneath the put-on gaiety—she is really feeling? This very line of questioning suggests that we have in mind a right way for her to feel. How are we to understand such a thing?

We can take two possible approaches. One is to study the situation that would seem to cause her to feel as she does. The other is to study secondary acts performed upon the ongoing nonreflective stream of primary emotive experience, that is, how she is or isn’t trying to alter her state of feeling. The first approach focuses on how social factors affect what people feel, the second on how social factors affect what people think and do about what they feel or sense they are going to feel (i.e., acts of assessment and management). Those who take the first approach might regard those who take the second as being “overly cognitive,” while those who take the second approach see the “stimulate primary emotions” people as simplistic. But we need both approaches, and indeed the second, taken here, relies on some understanding of the first.

If we take as our object of focus what it is people think or do about feelings, several questions emerge. What is an emotion? How responsive is emotion to deliberate attempts to suppress or evoke it? What are the links among social structure, ideology, feeling rules, and emotion management? To begin with, are there feeling rules? How do we know about them? How are these rules used as baselines in social exchanges? What in the nature of word and child-rearing might account for different ways adults of varying social classes and ethnic or religious cultures manage their feelings?

**TWO ACCOUNTS OF EMOTION AND FEELING**

So what do we assume is true about emotion? There is the *organismic* account and there is the *interactive* account. They differ in what they imply about our capacity to manage emotion, and thus in what they imply about the importance of rules about managing it. According to the organismic view, the paramount questions concern the relation of emotion to biologically given *instinct* or *impulse*. In large part, biological factors account for the questions the organismic theorist poses. The early writings of Sigmund Freud, Charles Darwin, and, in some though not all respects, William James fit this model. The concept “emotion” refers mainly to strips of experience in which there is no conflict between one and another aspect of self: the individual “floods out,” is “overcome.” The image that comes to mind is that of a sudden, automatic reflex syndrome—Darwin’s instant snarl expression, Freud’s tension discharge at a given breaking point of tension overload, James and Lange’s notion of an instantaneous unmediated visceral reaction to a perceived stimulus, the perception of which is also unmediated by social influences.

In this first model, social factors enter in only in regard to how emotions are stimulated and expressed (and even here Darwin took the universalist position). Social factors are not seen as an influence on how emotions are actively suppressed or evoked. Indeed, emotion is seen as fixed and universal, much like a knee-jerk reaction or a sneeze. In this view, one could as easily manage an emotion as one could manage a knee jerk or a sneeze. If the organismic theorist were to be presented with the concept of feeling rules, he or she would be hard put to elucidate what these rules impinge on, or what capacity of the self could be called on to try to obey a feeling rule. Recent attempts to link an organismic notion of emotion to social structure, such as Randall Collins’s wonderfully bold

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attempt, suffer from the problems that were implicit in the organismic account to begin with. Collins, like Darwin, on whom he draws, sees emotions as capacities (or susceptibilities) within a person, to be automatically triggered, as Collins develops it, by one or another group in control of the ritual apparatus that does the triggering.iii A wholly different avenue of social control, that of feeling rules, is bypassed because the individual’s capacity to try to—or try not to—feel that to which the rule applies is not suggested by the organismic model with which Collins begins.

In the interactive account, social influences permeate emotion more insistently, more effectively, and at more junctures. In large part, socio-psychological factors account for the questions the interactive theorist poses. The writings of Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills, Erving Goffman, Richard Lazarus, James Averill, Stanley Schachter, Jerome Singer, Thomas Kemper, Judith Katz, and aspects of late Freudian and neo-Freudian thought fit this model. To invoke the Freudian vocabulary, the image here is not that of a runaway id, but of an ego and superego, acting in union, shaping and nagging the id, however ineffectively, temporarily, or consciously. Emotion is sometimes posited as a psychobiological means of adaptation—an analogue to other adaptive mechanisms, such as shivering when cold or perspiring when hot. But emotion differs from these other adaptive mechanisms, in that thinking, perceiving, and imagining—themselves subject to social influence—enter in.

As in the first model, social factors affect how emotions are elicited and expressed. But here we also notice how social factors guide the ways we label, interpret, and manage emotion. These actions reflect back, in turn, on that which is labeled, interpreted, and managed. They are, finally, intrinsic to what we call emotion. Emotion, in this second school of thought, is seen as more deeply social. Lazarus’s work in particular lends empirical weight to the interactive model. It shows how normal adults, like the university students on whom he conducted experiments, can control their emotions. Their capacity is far greater than what we expect from a small child, an insane adult, or an animal, from all of which Freud and Darwin drew inspiration. But since we’re trying to understand the emotional experience of normal adults, we would do well to explore the model that fits them best—the interactive account.

If emotions and feelings can to some degree be managed, how might we get a conceptual grasp of the managing act from a social perspective? The interactive account of emotion leads us into a conceptual arena “between” the Goffmanian focus on consciously designed appearances, on the one hand, and the Freudian focus on unconscious intrapsychic events, on the other. The focus of A. H. Mead and Herbert Blumer on conscious, active, and responsive gestures might have been most fruitful had not their focus on deeds and thought almost entirely obscured the importance of feeling. The self as emotion manager is an idea that borrows from both sides—Goffman and Freud—but squares completely with neither. Here I sketch only the basic borrowings and departures—and these begin with Goffman.

Erving Goffman Goffman catches an important irony: moment to moment, the individual is actively, consciously negotiating a personal and apparently unique course of action, but in the long run all the action often seems like passive acquiescence to some unconscious social convention. But the conserving of convention is not a passive business. We can extend and deepen Goffman’s approach by showing how people not only try to conform outwardly, but do so inwardly as well. “When they issue uniforms, they issue skins,” Goffman says. And, we can add, “two inches of flesh.”vi But how can we understand these two inches of flesh? . . .

Goffman proposed an intermediate level of conceptual elaboration, between social structure and personality. He focused one by one on situations, episodes, encounters. The emergent encounters he evoked were not only nearly divorced from social structure and from personality; he even seems to intend his situationism as an analytic substitute for these concepts. Structure, he seems to say, can be not only transposed but

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iiiCollins 1975, p. 59.
reduced “in and down,” while personality can be reduced “up and out” to the here-now, gone-then interactional moment. The resulting perspective removes the determinisms of institution and personality. It illuminates the room there is between them to slide around.

But each episode—a card game, a party, a greeting on the street—takes on the character of a government. It exacts from us certain “taxes” in the form of appearances we “pay” for the sake of sustaining the encounter. We are repaid in the currency of safety from disrepute.

This model of the situation qua minigovernment illuminates something. But, to study how and why “participants . . . hold in check certain psychological states,” we are forced out of the here-now, gone-then situationism and back, in part at least, to the social structure and personality model. We are led to appreciate the importance of Goffman’s work, as it seems he didn’t, as the critical set of conceptual connecting tissues by which structure and personality, real in their own right, are more precisely joined. For if we are to understand the origin and causes of change in feeling rules—this underside of ideology—we are forced back out of a study of the immediate situations in which they show up, to a study of such things as the changing relations between classes, sexes, races, and nations, in order to see why they’re changing . . .

The characters in Goffman’s books actively manage outer impressions, but they do not actively manage inner feelings. The very topic, sociology of emotion, presupposes a human capacity for, if not the actual habit of, reflecting on and shaping inner feelings, a habit itself distributed variously across time, age, class, and locale. This variation would quickly drop from sight were we to adopt an exclusive focus on the actor’s attentiveness to behavioral facade and assume a uniform passivity vis-à-vis feelings . . .

Sigmund Freud The need to replace Goffman’s “black-box psychology” with some theory of self, in the full sense of the term, might seem to lead to Freudian or neo-Freudian theory. Yet, here, as with Goffman, only some aspects of the Freudian model seem useful to my understanding of conscious, deliberate efforts to suppress or evoke feeling.

Freud dealt with emotions, of course, but for him they were always secondary to drive. He proposed a general theory of sexual and aggressive drives. Anxiety, as a derivative of aggressive and sexual drives, was of paramount importance, while a wide range of other emotions, including joy, jealousy, and depression, were given relatively little attention. He developed, and many others have since elaborated, the concept of ego defense as a generally unconscious, involuntarily means of avoiding painful or unpleasant affect. The notion of “inappropriate affect” is then used to point to aspects of the individual’s ego functioning, not the social rules according to which a feeling is or is not deemed appropriate to a situation.

The emotion-management perspective is indebted to Freud for the general notion of what resources individuals of different sorts possess for accomplishing the task of emotion work and for the notion of unconscious involuntary emotion management. The emotion-management perspective differs from the Freudian model in its focus on the full range of emotions and feelings and its focus on conscious and deliberate efforts to shape feeling.

How do we understand inappropriate emotion? . . . To the psychiatrist, which circumstances warrant which degree and type of feeling seems relatively unproblematic. A doctor intuitively knows what inappropriate affect is; one should be happy at occupational success. The main problem is not so much to discern the rich variety of kinds of misfit of feeling to situation as to cure the patient of whatever interferes with feeling that “right” feeling. From the emotion-management perspective, on the other hand, the warranting function of circumstances is a real problem. How does the psychiatrist decide what the patient should feel? The way he decides may well be the same for a psychiatrist as for a salesclerk or school disciplinarian. For in a sense, we all act as lay psychiatrists using unexamined means of arriving at a determination about just which circumstances warrant that much feeling of that sort.

\(^{Goffman\ 1961,\ \text{p.} 23.}\)
What the psychiatrist, the salesclerk, and the school disciplinarian share is a habit of comparing situation (e.g., high opportunity, associated with an accomplishment at work) with role (e.g., hopes, aspirations, expectations typical of, and expected from, those enacting the role). Social factors alter how we expect a person to play—or shall we say encounter—a role. If, for example, the patient were a “sober, technically minded and active” woman, and if the observer (rightly or wrongly) assumed or expected her to value family and personal ties over worldly success, ambivalence at the prospect of advance might seem perfectly appropriate. Lack of enthusiasm would have a warrant of that social sort. Again, if the patient were an antinuclear activist and his discovery had implications for nuclear energy, that would alter his hopes and aspirations and might warrant dismay. Or if an immigrant is, by virtue of enormous family sacrifice, sent off to succeed in America, his or her enthusiasm might be infused with a sense of indebtedness to those left back home.

We assess the “appropriateness” of a feeling by making a comparison between feeling and situation, not by examining the feeling in the abstract. This comparison lends the assessor a “socially normal” yardstick—with which to factor out the personal meaning systems that may lead a worker to distort his view of “the” situation and feel inappropriately with regard to it. The psychiatrist holds constant the socially normal yardstick and focuses on what we have just factored out. The student of emotion management holds constant what is factored out and studies variations in socially normal yardsticks.

In sum, the emotion-management perspective fosters attention on how people try to feel, not, as for Goffman, on how people try to appear to feel. It leads us to attend to how people consciously feel and not, as for Freud, to how people feel unconsciously. The interactive account of emotion points to alternate theoretical junctures—between consciousness of feeling and consciousness of feeling rules, between feeling rules and emotion work, between feeling rules and social structure.

By “emotion work” I refer to the act of trying to change in degree or quality an emotion or feeling. To “work on” an emotion or feeling is, for our purposes, the same as “to manage” an emotion or to do “deep acting.” Note that “emotion work” refers to the effort—the act of trying—and not to the outcome, which may or may not be successful. Failed acts of management still indicate what ideal formulations guide the effort, and on that account are no less interesting than emotion management that works.

The very notion of an attempt suggests an active stance vis-à-vis feeling. In my exploratory study respondents characterized their emotion work by a variety of active verb forms: “I psyched myself up . . . I squashed my anger down . . . I tried hard not to feel disappointed . . . I made myself have a good time . . . I tried to feel grateful . . . I killed the hope I had burning.” There was also the actively passive form, as in “I let myself finally feel sad.”

Emotion work differs from emotion “control” or “suppression.” The latter two terms suggest an effort merely to stifle or prevent feeling. “Emotion work” refers more broadly to the act of evoking or shaping, as well as suppressing feeling. I avoid the term “manipulate” because it suggests a shallowness I do not want to imply. We can speak, then, of two broad types of emotion work: evocation, in which the cognitive focus is on a desired feeling that is initially absent, and suppression, in which the cognitive focus is on an undesired feeling that is initially present. One respondent, going out with a priest twenty years her senior, exemplifies the problems of evocative emotion work:

Anyway, I started to try and make myself like him. I made myself focus on the way he talked, certain things he’d done in the past . . . When I was with him I did like him, but I would go home and write in my journal how much I couldn’t stand him. I kept changing my feeling and actually thought I really liked him while I was with him, but a couple of hours after he was gone, I reverted back to different feelings.”

“The illustrations of emotion work come from a content analysis of 261 protocols given to students in two classes at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1974.
Another respondent exemplifies the work not of working feeling up, but of working feeling down:

Last summer I was going with a guy often, and I began to feel very strongly about him. I knew, though, that he had just broken up with a girl a year ago because she had gotten too serious about him, so I was afraid to show any emotion. I also was afraid of being hurt, so I attempted to change my feelings. I talked myself into not caring about Mike...but I must admit it didn’t work for long. To sustain this feeling I had to almost invent bad things about him and concentrate on them or continue to tell myself he didn’t care. It was a hardening of emotions, I’d say. It took a lot of work and was unpleasant, because I had to concentrate on anything I could find that was irritating about him.

Often emotion work is aided by setting up an emotion-work system—for example, telling friends all the worst faults of the person one wanted to fall out of love with and then going to those friends for reinforcement of this view of the ex-beloved. This suggests another point: emotion work can be done by the self upon the self, by the self upon others, and by others upon oneself.

In each case the individual is conscious of a moment of “pinch,” or discrepancy, between what one does feel and what one wants to feel (which is, in turn, affected by what one thinks one ought to feel in such a situation). In response, the individual may try to eliminate the pinch by working on feeling. Both the sense of discrepancy and the response to it can vary in time. The managing act, for example, can be a five-minute stopgap measure, or it can be a decade-long effort suggested by the term “working through.”

There are various techniques of emotion work. One is cognitive: the attempt to change images, ideas, or thoughts in the service of changing the feelings associated with them. A second is bodily: the attempt to change somatic or other physical symptoms of emotion (e.g., trying to breathe slower, trying not to shake). Third, there is expressive emotion work: trying to change expressive gestures in the service of changing inner feeling (e.g., trying to smile or cry). This differs from simple display in that it is directed toward change in feeling. It differs from bodily emotion work in that the individual tries to alter or shape one or another of the classic public channels for the expression of feeling.

These three techniques are distinct theoretically, but often go together in practice. For example:

I was a star halfback in high school. Before games I didn’t feel the upsurge of adrenalin—in a word I wasn’t “psyched up.” (This was due to emotional difficulties I was experiencing and still experience—I was also an A student whose grades were dropping.) Having been in the past a fanatical, emotional, intense player, a “hitter” recognized by coaches as a very hard worker and a player with “desire,” this was very upsetting. I did everything I could to get myself “up.” I would try to be outwardly “rah rah” or get myself scared of my opponent—anything to get the adrenalin flowing. I tried to look nervous and intense before games, so at least the coaches wouldn’t catch on.... When actually I was mostly bored, or in any event, not “up.” I recall before one game wishing I was in the stands watching my cousin play for his school, rather than “out here.”

Emotion work becomes an object of awareness most often, perhaps, when the individual’s feelings do not fit the situation, that is, when the latter does not account for or legitimate feelings in the situation. A situation (such as a funeral) often carries with it a proper definition of itself (“this is a time of facing loss”). This official frame carries with it a sense of what it is fitting to feel (sadness). It is when this tripartite consistency among situation, conventional frame, and feeling is somehow ruptured, as when the bereaved feels an irrepressible desire to laugh delightedly at the thought of an inheritance, that rule and management come into focus. It is then that the more normal flow of deep convention—the more normal fusion of situation, frame, and feeling—seems like an enormous accomplishment.

The smoothly warm airline hostess, the ever-cheerful secretary, the unruffled complaint clerk, the undisgusted proctologist, the teacher who likes every student equally, and Goffman’s unflappable poker player may all have to engage in deep acting, an acting that goes well beyond
the mere ordering of display. Work to make feeling and frame consistent with situation is work in which individuals continually and privately engage. But they do so in obeisance to rules not completely of their own making.

FEELING RULES

We feel. We try to feel. We want to try to feel. The social guidelines that direct how we want to try to feel may be describable as a set of socially shared, albeit often latent (not thought about unless probed at), rules. In what way, we may ask, are these rules themselves known and how are they developed?

To begin with, let us consider several common forms of evidence for feeling rules. In common parlance, we often talk about our feelings or those of others as if rights and duties applied directly to them. For example, we speak of “having the right” to feel angry at someone. Or we say we “should feel more grateful” to a benefactor. We chide ourselves that a friend’s misfortune, a relative’s death, “should have hit us harder,” or that another’s good luck, or our own, should have inspired more joy. We know feeling rules, too, from how others react to what they infer from our emotive display. Someone may say to us, “You shouldn’t feel so guilty: it wasn’t your fault,” or “You don’t have a right to feel jealous, given our agreement.” Another may simply declare an opinion as to the fit of feeling to situation and attach authority to his opinion. Others may question or call for an account of a particular feeling in a situation, whereas they do not ask for an accounting of some other situated feeling. Claims and callings for an account can be seen as rule reminders. At other times, a person may, in addition, chide, tease, cajole, scold, shun—in a word, sanction—us for “misfeeling.” Such sanctions are a clue to the rules they are meant to enforce.

Rights and duties set out the proprieties as to the extent (one can feel “too” angry or “not angry enough”), the direction (one can feel sad when one should feel happy), and the duration of a feeling, given the situation against which it is set. These rights and duties of feeling are a clue to the depth of social convention, to one final reach of social control.

There is a distinction, in theory at least, between a feeling rule as it is known by our sense of what we can expect to feel in a given situation and a rule as it is known by our sense of what we should feel in that situation. For example, one may realistically expect (knowing oneself and one’s neighbor’s parties) to feel bored at a large New Year’s Eve party and at the same time acknowledge that it would be more fitting to feel exuberant.

In any given situation, we often invest what we expect to feel with idealization. To a remarkable extent these realizations vary socially, as is shown by a woman recalling her experiences as a “flower child”:

When I was living down south, I was involved with a group of people, friends. We used to spend most evenings after work or school together. We used to do a lot of drugs, acid, coke or just smoke dope, and we had this philosophy that we were very communal and did our best to share everything—clothes, money, food, and so on. I was involved with this one man—and thought I was “in love” with him. He in turn had told me that I was very important to him. Anyway, this one woman who was a very good friend of mine at one time and this man started having a sexual relationship, supposedly without my knowledge. I knew though and had a lot of mixed feelings about it. I thought intellectually that I had no claim to the man, and believed in fact that no one should ever try to own another person. I believed also that it was none of my business and I had no reason to worry about their relationship together, for it had nothing really to do with my friendship with either of them. I also believed in sharing. But I was horribly hurt, alone and lonely, depressed, and I couldn’t shake the depression and on top of those feelings I felt guilty for having those possessively jealous feelings. And so I would continue going out with these people every night and try to suppress my feelings. My ego was shattered. I got to the point where I couldn’t even laugh around them. So finally I confronted my friends and left for the summer and traveled with a new friend. I realized later what a heavy situation it was, and it took me a long time to get myself together and feel whole again.

Whether the convention calls for trying joyfully to possess, or trying casually not to, the individual
compares and measures experience against an expectation that is often idealized. It is left for motivation (“what I want to feel”) to mediate between feeling rule (“what I should feel”) and emotion work (“what I try to feel”). Much of the time we live with a certain dissonance between “ought” and “want,” and between “want” and “try to.” But the attempts to reduce emotive dissonance are our periodic clues to rules of feeling.

A feeling rule shares some formal properties with other sorts of rules, such as rules of etiquette, rules of bodily comportment, and those of social interaction in general. A feeling rule is like these other kinds of rules in the following ways: It delineates a zone within which one has permission to be free of worry, guilt, or shame with regard to the situated feeling. A feeling rule sets down a metaphoric floor, walls, and ceiling, there being room for motion and play within boundaries. Like other rules, feeling rules can be obeyed halfheartedly or boldly broken, the latter at varying costs. A feeling rule can be in varying proportions external or internal. Feeling rules differ curiously from other types of rules in that they do not apply to action but to what is often taken as a precursor to action. Therefore they tend to be latent and resistant to formal codification.

Feeling rules reflect patterns of social membership. Some rules may be nearly universal, such as the rule that one should not enjoy killing or witnessing the killing of a human being. Other rules are unique to particular social groups and can be used to distinguish among them as alternate governments or colonizers of individual internal events.

FRAMING RULES AND FEELING RULES: ISSUES IN IDEOLOGY

Rules for managing feeling are implicit in any ideological stance: they are the “bottom side” of ideology. Ideology has often been construed as a flatly cognitive framework, lacking implications for how we feel. Yet, drawing on Emile Durkheim, Clifford Geertz, and Erving Goffman, we can think of ideology as an interpretive framework that can be described in terms of framing rules and feeling rules. By “framing rules” I refer to the rules according to which we ascribe definitions or meanings to situations. For example, a man who just got fired can see it as a result of personal failure or heartless capitalism. According to another, one can’t. Framing and feeling rules mutually imply each other. They stand back to back.

It follows that when an individual changes an ideological stance, he or she drops old rules and assumes new ones for reacting to situations, cognitively and emotively. A sense of rights and duties applied to feelings in situations is also changed. One uses emotional sanctions differently and accepts different sanctioning from others. For example, feeling rules in American society have differed for men and women because of the assumption that their natures differ basically. The feminist movement brings with it a new set of rules for framing the work and family life of men and women: the same balance of priorities in work and family now ideally applies to men as to women. This carries with it implications for feeling. A woman can now as legitimately as a man become angry (as opposed to disappointed) over abuses at work, since her heart is supposed to be in that work and she has the right to hope for advancement as much as a man would. Or a man has the right to feel angry at the loss of custody if he has shown himself the fitter parent. Old-fashioned feelings are now as subject to new chidings and cajolings as are old-fashioned perspectives on the same array of situations.

One can defy an ideological stance not simply by maintaining an alternative frame on a situation but by maintaining an alternative set of feeling rights and obligations. One can defy an ideological stance by inappropriate affect and by refusing to perform the emotion management necessary to feel what, according to the official frame, it would seem fitting to feel. Deep acting is a form of obeisance to a given ideological stance and lax emotion management a clue to a lapsed ideology.

As some ideologies gain acceptance and others dwindle, contending sets of feeling rules rise and fall. Sets of feeling rules contend for a place in people’s minds as a governing standard with which to compare the actual lived experience of, say, the first kiss, the abortion, the wedding, the birth, the first job, the first layoff, the
divorce. What we call the changing climate of opinion partly involves a changed framing of the same sorts of events. For example, each of two mothers may feel guilty about leaving her small child at daycare while working all day. One mother, a feminist, may feel that she should not feel as guilty as she does. The second, a traditionalist, may feel that she should feel more guilty than she does.

Part of what we refer to as the psychological effects of “rapid social change,” or unrest, is a change in the relation of feeling rule to feeling and a lack of clarity about what the rule actually is, owing to conflicts and contradictions between contending rules and between rules and feelings. Feelings are taken out of their conventional frames but not set into new ones. We may, like the marginal man, say, “I don’t know how I should feel.”

It remains to note that ideologies can function, as Randall Collins rightly notes, as weapons in the conflict between contending elites and social strata. Collins suggests that elites try to gain access to the emotive life of adherents by gaining legitimate access to ritual, which for him is a form of emotive technology. Developing his view, we can add that elites, and indeed social groups in general, struggle to assert the legitimacy of their framing rules and their feeling rules. Not simply the evocation of emotion but the rules governing it become the objects of political struggle.

FEELING RULES AND SOCIAL EXCHANGE

Any gesture—a cool greeting, an appreciative laugh, the apology for an outburst—is measured against a prior sense of what is reasonably owed another, given the sort of bond involved. Against this background measure, some gestures will seem more than ample, others less. The exchange of gestures has in turn two aspects. It is an exchange of display acts—of surface acting—and an exchange of emotion work—of deep acting. In either case, rules (display rules or feeling rules), once agreed upon, establish the worth of a gesture and are thus used in social exchange to measure the worth of emotional gestures. Feeling rules thus establish the basis of worth to be ascribed to a range of gestures, including emotion work. Emotion work is a gesture in a social exchange; it has a function there and is not to be understood merely as a facet of personality.

There seem to be two ways in which feeling rules come into play in social exchange. In the first, the individual takes the “owed” feeling to heart, takes it seriously. For example, a young woman on the eve of her college graduation felt anxious and depressed but thought that she “ought to feel happy,” and that she “owed this happiness” to her parents for making her graduation possible.

To my parents and friends, graduation was a really big deal, especially for my parents, since I’m the oldest in the family. For some reason, however, I couldn’t get excited about it. I had had a good time at college and all, but I was ready to get out and I knew it. Also, we had practiced the ceremony so many times that it had lost its meaning to me. I put on an act, though, and tried to act real emotional and hug my friends and cry, but I knew inside I didn’t really feel it.

The young graduate “paid” her parents, we might say, in surface acting dissociated from her “real” definition of the situation. Going one step further, she could pay them with a gesture of deep acting—of trying to feel. A most generous gesture of all is the act of successful self-persuasion, of genuine feeling and frame change, a deep acting that jells, that works, that becomes what the emotion is, though it is nonetheless not a “natural” gift. The best gift, the gift the parents wish for, is, of course, their daughter’s real joy.

The second way feeling rules come into play in exchange is shown when the individual does not take the affective convention seriously but...
instead plays with it. For example, an airport observation: There are two airline ticket agents, one experienced, one new on the job. The new agent is faced with the task of rewriting a complex ticket (involving change of date, lower fare, and credit of the difference between the previous and present fare to be made toward an air travel card, etc.). The new ticket agent looks for the “old hand,” who is gone, while the customers in line shift postures and stare intently at the new agent. The old hand finally reappears after ten minutes, and the following conversation takes place: “I was looking for you. You’re supposed to be my instructor.” Old hand: “Gee,” with an ironic smile, “I am really sorry, I feel so bad I wasn’t here to help out” (they both laugh). The inappropriate feeling (lack of guilt, or sympathy) can be played upon in a way that says, “Don’t take my nonpayment in emotion work or display work personally. I don’t want to work here. You can understand that.” The laughter at an ironic distance from the affective convention suggests also an intimacy: we do not need these conventions to hold us together. We share our defiance of them.

**Commodification of Feeling**

In the beginning I asked how feeling rules might vary in salience across social classes. One possible approach to this question is via the connections among social exchange, commodification of feeling, and the premium, in many middle-class jobs, on the capacity to manage meanings.

Conventionalized feeling may come to assume the properties of a commodity. When deep gestures of exchange enter the market sector and are bought and sold as an aspect of labor power, feelings are commodified. When the manager gives the company his enthusiastic faith, when the airline stewardess gives her passengers her psyched-up but quasi-genuine reassuring warmth, what is sold as an aspect of labor power is deep acting. But commodification of feeling may not have equal salience for people in every social class or occupational sector. When I speak of social class, it is not strictly income, education, or occupational status that I refer to, but to something roughly correlated to these—the on-the-job task of creating and sustaining appropriate meanings. The bank manager or the IBM executive may be required to sustain a definition of self, office, and organization as “up-and-coming” or “on the go,” “caring,” or “reliable,” meanings most effectively sustained through acts upon feeling. Feeling rules are of utmost salience in jobs such as these; rule reminders and sanctions are more in play. It is not, as Erich Fromm and C. Wright Mills suggest, that the modern middle-class man “sells” his personality but that many jobs call for an appreciation of display rules, feeling rules, and a capacity for deep acting.

Working-class jobs more often call for the individual’s external behavior and the products of it—a car part assembled, a truck delivered 500 miles away, a road repaired. The creation and the sustaining of meanings go on of course, but it is not what the boss pays for. Some working- or lower-class jobs do require emotion work—the jobs of prostitute, servant, nanny, and eldercare worker, for example. Such workers are especially important as a source of insight about emotion management. Being less rewarded for their work than their superiors, they are, perhaps, more detached from, and perceptive about it. Just as we can learn more about “appropriate situation-feeling fits” by studying misfits, we can probably understand commodification of feeling better from those who more often have to ask themselves: Is this what I do feel or what I have to feel?

Why, I asked, do we feel in ways appropriate to the situation as much of the time as we do? One answer is because we try to manage what we feel in accordance with latent rules. In order to elaborate this suggestion I considered first the responsiveness of emotion to acts of management as it is treated in the organismic and interactive account of emotion.

Still, occasionally emotions come over us like an uncontrollable flood. We feel overcome with grief, anger, or joy. Insofar as emotion is, as Darwin suggests, a substitute for action, or action-mangenté, we may become enraged instead of killing, envious instead of stealing, depressed instead of dying. Or, yet again, emotion can be a prelude to action—and we become so enraged that we kill, so envious that we steal, so depressed that we die. Newspapers make a business of recording emotions of this sort. But
the other half of the human story concerns how people calm down before they kill someone, how people want something but don’t steal it, how people put the bottle of sleeping pills away and call a friend. Just how it is we hold, shape, and—to the extent we can—direct feeling is not what we read about in the newspaper. But it may be the really important news.

**Introduction to The Managed Heart**

While in the previous reading Hochschild singled out class position as a central determinate of the commodification of feelings, in this chapter from *The Managed Heart* she turns her attention to the effects of gender relations on emotion management. If members of the lower and working classes tend more to things than to people, and thus are less practiced in the skills of emotional labor, the hierarchical patterning of managing emotions is reversed when it comes to gender. In other words, while the occupations associated with the more advantaged classes (flight attendants, sales workers, teachers, lawyers, health care providers, etc.) are more likely to require the manipulation of personal feelings, it is women, the less advantaged gender, who more often find it necessary to be skilled emotion managers and are thus more susceptible to the commodification of their feelings. As you will read, Hochschild attributes these differences to the unequal distribution of money, power, authority, and status. As a result, in their private life “women make a resource out of feeling and offer it to men as a gift in return for the more material resources they lack” (1983:163). Emotion work becomes central to how to be, and what it means to be, a wife, a mother, and a woman. Meanwhile, men and women are typically called on to perform different types of emotional labor because of the gendered nature of occupations. This, too, carries with it a number of consequences that make the managing of feelings a different business for women and men.

**The Managed Heart (1983)**

*Arlie Russell Hochschild*

**Gender, Status, and Feeling**

More emotion management goes on in the families and jobs of the upper classes than in those of the lower classes. That is, in the class system, social conditions conspire to make it more prevalent at the top. In the gender system, on the other hand, the reverse is true: social conditions make it more prevalent, and prevalent in different ways, for those at the bottom—women. In what sense is this so? And why?

Both men and women do emotion work, in private life and at work. In all kinds of ways, men as well as women get into the spirit of the party, try to escape the grip of hopeless love, try to pull themselves out of depression, try to

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allow grief. But in the whole realm of emotional experience, is emotion work as important for men as it is for women? And is it important in the same ways? I believe that the answer to both questions is No. The reason, at bottom, is the fact that women in general have far less independent access to money, power, authority, or status in society. They are a subordinate social stratum, and this has four consequences.

First, lacking other resources, women make a resource out of feeling and offer it to men as a gift in return for the more material resources they lack. Thus their capacity to manage feeling and to do “relational” work is for them a more important resource. Second, emotion work is important in different ways for men and for women. This is because each gender tends to be called on to do different kinds of this work. This specialization of emotional labor in the marketplace rests on the different childhood training of the heart that is given to girls and to boys. (“What are little girls made of? Sugar and spice and everything nice. What are little boys made of? Snips and snails and puppy dog tails.”) Moreover, each specialization presents men and women with different emotional tasks. Women are more likely to be presented with the task of mastering anger and aggression in the service of “being nice.” To men, the socially assigned task of aggressing against those that break rules of various sorts creates the private task of mastering fear and vulnerability.

Third, and less noticed, the general subordination of women leaves every individual woman with a weaker “status shield” against the displaced feelings of others. The fourth consequence of the power difference between the sexes is that for each gender a different portion of the managed heart is enlisted for commercial use. Women more often react to subordination by making defensive use of sexual beauty, charm, and relational skills. For them, it is these capacities that become most vulnerable to commercial exploitation, and so it is these capacities that are most likely to be estranged from. For male workers in “male” jobs, it is more often the capacity to wield anger and make threats that is delivered over to the company, and so it is this sort of capacity that they are more likely to feel estranged from. After the great transmutation, then, men and women come to experience emotion work in different ways.

Women as Emotion Managers

Middle-class American women, tradition suggests, feel emotion more than men do. The definitions of “emotional” and “cognition” in the Random House Dictionary of the English Language reflect a deeply rooted cultural idea. Yet women are also thought to command “feminine wiles,” to have the capacity to premeditate a sigh, an outburst of tears, or a flight of joy. In general, they are thought to manage expression and feeling not only better but more often than men do. How much the conscious feelings of women and men may differ is an issue I leave aside here. However, the evidence seems clear that women do more emotion managing than men. And because the well-managed feeling has an outside resemblance to spontaneous feeling, it is possible to confuse the condition of being more “easily affected by emotion” with the action of willfully managing emotion when the occasion calls for it.

Especially in the American middle class, women tend to manage feeling more because in general they depend on men for money, and one of the various ways of repaying their debt is to do extra emotion work—especially emotion work that affirms, enhances, and celebrates the well-being and status of others. When the emotional skills that children learn and practice at home move into the marketplace, the emotional labor of women becomes more prominent because men in general have not been trained to make their emotions a resource and are therefore less likely to develop their capacity for managing feeling.

There is also a difference in the kind of emotion work that men and women tend to do. Many studies have told us that women adapt more to the needs of others and cooperate more than men do. These studies often imply the existence of gender-specific characteristics that are inevitable if not innate. But do these characteristics simply exist passively in women? Or are they signs of a social work that women do—the work of affirming, enhancing, and celebrating the well-being and status of others? I believe
that much of the time, the adaptive, cooperative woman is actively working at showing deference. This deference requires her to make an outward display of what Leslie Fiedler has called the “seriously” good girl in her and to support this effort by evoking feelings that make the “nice” display seem natural. Women who want to put their own feelings less at the service of others must still confront the idea that if they do so, they will be considered less “feminine.”

...The emotional arts that women have cultivated are analogous to the art of feigning that Lionel Trilling has noted among those whose wishes outdistance their opportunities for class advancement. As for many others of lower status, it has been in the woman’s interest to be the better actor. As the psychologists would say, the techniques of deep acting have unusually high “secondary gains.” Yet these skills have long been mislabeled “natural,” a part of woman’s “being” rather than something of her own making.

Sensitivity to nonverbal communication and to the micropolitical significance of feeling gives women something like an ethnic language, which men can speak too, but on the whole less well. It is a language women share offstage in their talk “about feelings.” This talk is not, as it is for men offstage, the score-keeping of conquistadors. It is the talk of the artful prey, the language of tips on how to make him want her, how to psyche him out, how to put him on or turn him off. Within the traditional female subculture, subordination at close quarters is understood, especially in adolescence, as a “fact of life.” Women accommodate, then, but not passively. They actively adapt feeling to a need or a purpose at hand, and they do it so that it seems to express a passive state of agreement, the chance occurrence of coinciding needs. Being becomes a way of doing. Acting is the needed art, and emotion work is the tool.

Almost everyone does the emotion work that produces what we might, broadly speaking, call deference. But women are expected to do more of it. A study by Wikler (1976) comparing male with female university professors found that students expected women professors to be warmer and more supportive than male professors; given these expectations, proportionally more women professors were perceived as cold. In another study, Broverman, Broverman, and Clarkson (1970) asked clinically trained psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers to match various characteristics with “normal adult men” and “normal adult women”; they more often associated “very tactful, very gentle, and very aware of feelings of others” with their ideas of the normal adult woman. In being adaptive, cooperative, and helpful, the woman is on a private stage behind the public stage, and as a consequence she is often seen as less good at arguing, telling jokes, and teaching than she is at expressing appreciation of these activities. She is the conversational cheerleader. She actively enhances other people—usually men, but also other women to whom she plays woman. The more she seems natural at it, the more her labor does not show as labor, the more successfully it is disguised as the absence of other, more prized qualities. As a woman she may be praised for out-enhancing the best enhancer, but as a person in comparison with comics, teachers, and argument-builders, she usually lives outside the climate of enhancement that men tend to inhabit. Men, of course, pay court to certain other men.

Fiedler (1960) suggests that girls are trained to be “seriously” good and to be ashamed of being bad whereas boys are asked to be good in formalistic ways but covertly invited to be ashamed of being “too” good. Oversocialization into “sugar-and-spice” demeanor produces feminine skills in delivering deference.

Other researchers have found men to have a more “romantic” orientation to love, women a more “realistic” orientation. That is, males may find cultural support for a passive construction of love, for seeing themselves as “falling head over heels,” or “walking on air.” According to Kephart, “the female is not pushed hither and yon by her romantic compulsions. On the contrary, she seems to have a greater measure of rational control over her romantic inclinations than the male” (1967, p. 473).

The use of feminine wiles (including flattery) is felt to be a psychopolitical style of the subordinate; it is therefore disapproved of by women who have gained a foothold in the man’s world and can afford to disparage what they do not need to use.
and women and thus also do the emotion work that keeps deference sincere. The difference between men and women is a difference in the psychological effects of having or not having power.

Racism and sexism share this general pattern, but the two systems differ in the avenues available for the translation of economic inequality into private terms. The white manager and the black factory worker leave work and go home, one to a generally white neighborhood and family and the other to a generally black neighborhood and family. But in the case of women and men, the larger economic inequality is filtered into the intimate daily exchanges between wife and husband. Unlike other subordinates, women seek primary ties with a supplier. In marriage, the principle of reciprocity applies to wider arenas of each self: there is more to choose from in how we pay and are paid, and the paying between economically unequal parties goes on morning, noon, and night. The larger inequities find intimate expression.

Wherever it goes, the bargain of wages-for-other-things travels in disguise. Marriage both bridges and obscures the gap between the resources available to men and those available to women. Because men and women do try to love one another—to cooperate in making love, making babies, and making a life together—the very closeness of the bond they accept calls for some disguise of subordination. There will be talk in the “we” mode, joint bank accounts and joint decisions, and the idea among women that they are equal in the ways that “really count.” But underlying this pattern will be different potential futures outside the marriage and the effect of that on the patterning of life. The woman may thus become especially assertive about certain secondary decisions, or especially active in certain limited domains, in order to experience a sense of equality that is missing from the overall relationship.

Women who understand their ultimate disadvantage and feel that their position cannot change may jealously guard the covertness of their traditional emotional resources, in the understandable fear that if the secret were told, their immediate situation would get worse. For to confess that their social charms are the product of secret work might make them less valuable, just as the sexual revolution has made sexual contact less “valuable” by lowering its bargaining power without promoting the advance of women into better-paying jobs. In fact, of course, when we redefine “adaptability” and “cooperativeness” as a form of shadow labor, we are pointing to a hidden cost for which some recompense is due and suggesting that a general reordering of female-male relationships is desirable.

There is one further reason why women may offer more emotion work of this sort than men: more women at all class levels do unpaid labor of a highly interpersonal sort. They nurture, manage, and befriend children. More “adaptive” and “cooperative,” they address themselves better to the needs of those who are not yet able to adapt and cooperate much themselves. Then, according to Jourard (1968), because they are seen as members of the category from which mothers come, women in general are asked to look out for psychological needs more than men are. The world turns to women for mothering, and this fact silently attaches itself to many a job description.

Women at Work

With the growth of large organizations calling for skills in personal relations, the womanly art of status enhancement and the emotion work that it requires has been made more public, more systematized, and more standardized. It is performed by largely middle-class women in largely public-contact jobs. Jobs involving emotional labor comprise over a third of all jobs.

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ivBecause women have less access to money and status than their male class peers do, they are more motivated than men to marry in order to win access to a much higher “male wage.”

vZick Rubin’s study of young men and women in love relationships (generally middle-class persons of about the same age) found that the women tended to admire their male loved ones more than they were, in turn, admired by them. The women also felt “more like” their loved ones than the men did. (See Rubin 1970; Reiss 1960.)
But they form only a quarter of all jobs that men do, and over half of all jobs that women do.

Many of the jobs that call for public contact also call for giving service to the public. Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, in *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, comment on how people tend to rank service jobs in relation to other kinds of jobs: “At the bottom end of the scale are found not factory jobs but service jobs where the individual has to perform personally for someone else. A bartender is listed below a coal miner, a taxi driver below a truck driver; we believe this occurs because their functions are felt to be more dependent on and more at the mercy of others” [my emphasis]. Because there are more women than men in service jobs (21 percent compared with 9 percent), there are “hidden injuries” of gender attached to those of class.

Once women are at work in public-contact jobs, a new pattern unfolds: they receive less basic deference. That is, although some women are still elbow-guided through doors, chauffeured in cars, and protected from rain puddles, they are not shielded from one fundamental consequence of their lower status: their feelings are accorded less weight than the feelings of men. . . .

How, then, does a woman’s lower status influence how she is treated by others? More basically, what is the prior link between status and the treatment of feeling? High-status people tend to enjoy the privilege of having their feelings noticed and considered important. The lower one’s status, the more one’s feelings are not noticed or treated as inconsequential. H. E. Dale, in *The Higher Civil Service of Great Britain*, reports the existence of a “doctrine of feelings”:

The doctrine of feelings was expounded to me many years ago by a very eminent civil servant.

. . . He explained that the importance of feelings varies in close correspondence with the importance of the person who feels. If the public interest requires that a junior clerk should be removed from his post, no regard need be paid to his feelings; if it is the case of an assistant secretary, they must be carefully considered, within reason; if it is a permanent secretary, feelings are a principal element in the situation, and only imperative public interest can override their requirements.

Working women are to working men as junior clerks are to permanent secretaries. Between executive and secretary, doctor and nurse, psychiatrist and social worker, dentist and dental assistant, a power difference is reflected as a gender difference. The “doctrine of feelings” is another double standard between the two sexes.

The feelings of the lower-status party may be discounted in two ways: by considering them rational but unimportant or by considering them irrational and hence dismissable. An article entitled “On Aggression in Politics: Are Women Judged by a Double Standard?” presented the results of a survey of female politicians. All those surveyed said they believed there was an affective double standard. As Frances Farenthold, the president of Wells College in Aurora, New York, put it: “You certainly see to it that you don’t throw any tantrums. Henry Kissinger can have his scenes—remember the way he acted in Salzburg? But for women, we’re still in the stage that if you don’t hold in your emotions, you’re pegged as emotional, unstable, and all those terms that have always been used to describe women.” These women in public life were agreed on the following points. When a man expresses anger, it is deemed “rational” or understandable anger, anger that indicates not

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*Sennett and Cobb (1973), p. 236.*

*Quoted in Goffman (1967), p. 10.*

*The code of chivalry is said to require protection of the weaker by the stronger. Yet a boss may bring flowers to his secretary or open the door for her only to make up for the fact that he gets openly angry at her more often than he does at a male equal or superior, and more often than she does at him. The flowers symbolize redress, even as they obscure the basic maldistribution of respect and its psychic cost.*

weakness of character but deeply held conviction. When women express an equivalent degree of anger, it is more likely to be interpreted as a sign of personal instability. It is believed that women are more emotional, and this very belief is used to invalidate their feelings. That is, the women’s feelings are seen not as a response to real events but as reflections of themselves as “emotional” women.

Here we discover a corollary of the “doctrine of feelings”: the lower our status, the more our manner of seeing and feeling is subject to being discredited, and the less believable it becomes. An “irrational” feeling is the twin of an invalidated perception. A person of lower status has a weaker claim to the right to define what is going on; less trust is placed in her judgments; and less respect is accorded to what she feels. Relatively speaking, it more often becomes the burden of women, as with other lower-status persons, to uphold a minority viewpoint, a discredited opinion.

Medical responses to male and female illness provide a case in point. One study of how doctors respond to the physical complaints of back pain, headache, dizziness, chest pain, and fatigue—symptoms for which a doctor must take the patient’s word—showed that among fifty-two married couples, the complaints of the husbands elicited more medical response than those of the wives. The authors conclude: “The data may bear out...that the physicians...tend to take illness more seriously in men than in women.” Another study of physician interactions with 184 male and 130 female patients concluded that “doctors were more likely to consider the psychological component of the patient’s illness important when the patient was a woman.” The female’s assertion that she was physically sick was more likely to be invalidated as something “she just imagined,” something “subjective,” not a response to anything real.

To make up for either way of weighing the feelings of the two sexes unequally, many women urge their feelings forward, trying to express them with more force, so as to get them treated with seriousness. But from there the spiral moves down. For the harder women try to oppose the “doctrine of feeling” by expressing their feelings more, the more they come to fit the image awaiting them as “emotional.” Their efforts are discounted as one more example of emotionalism. The only way to counter the doctrine of feelings is to eliminate the more fundamental tie between gender and status.

The Status Shield at Work

Given this relation between status and the treatment of feeling, it follows that persons in low-status categories—women, people of color, children—lack a status shield against poorer treatment of their feelings. This simple fact has the power to utterly transform the content of a job. The job of flight attendant, for example, is not the same job for a woman as it is for a man. A day’s accumulation of passenger abuse for a woman differs from a day’s accumulation of it for a man. Women tend to be more exposed than men to rude or surly speech, to tirades against the service, the airline, and airplanes in general. As the company’s main shock absorbers against “mishandled” passengers, their own feelings are more frequently subjected to rough treatment. In addition, a day’s exposure to people who resist authority in women is a different experience for a woman than it is for a man. Because her gender is accorded lower status, a woman’s shield against abuse is weaker, and the importance of what she herself might be feeling—when faced with blame for an airline delay, for example—is correspondingly reduced. Thus the job for a man differs in essential ways from the same job for a woman.

In this respect, it is a disadvantage to be a woman—as 85 percent of all flight attendants are. And in this case, they are not simply women in the biological sense. They are also a highly visible distillation of middle-class American

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xMore women than men go to doctors, and this might seem to explain why doctors take them less seriously. But here it is hard to tell cause from effect, for if a woman’s complaints are not taken seriously, she may have to make several visits to doctors before a remedy is found (Armitage et al. 1979).

xWallens et al. (1979), p. 143.
notions of femininity. They symbolize Woman. Insofar as the category “female” is mentally associated with having less status and authority, female flight attendants are more readily classified as “really” female than other females are. And as a result their emotional lives are even less protected by the status shield.

More than female accountants, bus drivers, or gardeners, female flight attendants mingle with people who expect them to enact two leading roles of Womanhood: the loving wife and mother (serving food, tending the needs of others) and the glamorous “career woman” (dressed to be seen, in contact with strange men, professional and controlled in manner, and literally very far from home). They do the job of symbolizing the transfer of homespun femininity into the impersonal marketplace, announcing, in effect, “I work in the public eye, but I’m still a woman at heart.”

Passengers borrow their expectations about gender biographies from home and from the wider culture and then base their demands on this borrowing. The different fictive biographies they attribute to male and female workers make sense out of what they expect to receive in the currency of caretaking and authority. One male flight attendant noted:

They always ask about my work plans. “Why are you doing this?” That’s one question we get all the time from passengers. “Are you planning to go into management?” Most guys come in expecting to do it for a year or so and see how they like it, but we keep getting asked about the management training program. I don’t know any guy that’s gone into management from here.

In contrast, a female flight attendant said:

Men ask me why I’m not married. They don’t ask the guys that. Or else passengers will say, “Oh, when you have kids, you’ll quit this job. I know you will.” And I say, “Well, no, I’m not going to have kids.” “Oh yes you will,” they say. “No I’m not;” I say, and I don’t want to get more personal than that. They may expect me to have kids because of my gender, but I’m not, no matter what they say.

If a female flight attendant is seen as a protomother, then it is natural that the work of nurturing should fall to her. As one female attendant said: “The guys bow out of it more and we pick up the slack. I mean the handling of babies, the handling of children, the coddling of the old folks. The guys don’t get involved in that quite as much.” Confirming this, one male flight attendant noted casually, “Nine times out of ten, when I go out of my way to talk, it will be to attractive gal passengers.” In this regard, females generally appreciated gay male flight attendants who, while trying deftly to sidestep the biography test, still gravitate more toward nurturing work than straight males are reputed to do.

Gender makes two jobs out of one in yet another sense. Females are asked more often than males to appreciate jokes, listen to stories, and give psychological advice. Female specialization in these offerings takes on meaning only in light of the fact that flight attendants of both sexes are required to be both deferential and authoritative; they have to be able to appreciate a joke nicely, but they must also be firm in enforcing the rules about oversized luggage. But because more deference is generally expected from a woman, she has a weaker grasp on passenger respect for her authority and a harder time enforcing rules.

In fact, passengers generally assume that men have more authority than women and that men exercise authority over women. For males in the corporate world to whom air travel is a way of life, this assumption has more than a distant relation to fact. As one flight attendant put it: “Say you’ve got a businessman sitting over there in aisle five. He’s got a wife who takes his suite to the cleaners and makes the hors d’oeuvres for his business guests. He’s got an executive secretary with horn-rimmed glasses who types 140 million words a minute and knows more about his airline ticket than he does. There’s no woman in his life over him.” This assumption of male authority allows ordinary twenty-year-old male flight attendants to be mistaken for the “managers” or “superintendents” of older female flight attendants. A uniformed male among women, passengers assume, must have authority over women. In fact, because males were excluded from this job until after a long “discrimination” suit in the mid-1960s and few were hired until the
early 1970s, most male flight attendants are younger and have less seniority than most female attendants. The assumption of male authority has two results. First, authority, like status, acts as a shield against scapegoating. Since the women workers on the plane were thought to have less authority and therefore less status, they were more susceptible to scapegoating. When the plane was late, the steaks gone, or the ice out, frustrations were vented more openly toward female workers. Females were expected to “take it” better, it being more their role to absorb an expression of displeasure and less their role to put a stop to it.

In addition, both male and female workers adapted to this fictional redistribution of authority. Both, in different ways, made it more real. Male flight attendants tended to react to passengers as if they had more authority than they really did. This made them less tolerant of abuse and firmer in handling it. They conveyed the message that as authorities they expected compliance without loud complaint. Passengers sensing this message were discouraged from pursuing complaints and stopped sooner. Female flight attendants, on the other hand, assuming that passengers would honor their authority less, used more tactful and deferential means of handling abuse. They were more deferential toward male passengers (from whom they expected less respect) than toward female passengers (whose own fund of respect was expected to be lower). And they were less successful in preventing the escalation of abuse. As one male flight attendant observed: “I think the gals tend to get more intimidated if a man is crabby at them than if a woman is.”

Some workers understood this as merely a difference of style. As one woman reflected:

The guys have a low level of tolerance and their own male way of asserting themselves with the passenger that I’m not able to use. I told a guy who had a piece of luggage in front of him that wouldn’t fit under the seat, I told him, “It won’t fit, we’ll have to do something with it.” He came back with, “Oh, but it’s been here the whole trip, I’ve had it with me all the time, blah, blah, blah.” He gave me some guff. I thought to myself, I’ll finish this later, I’ll walk away right now. I intended to come back to him. A flying partner of mine, a young man, came by this passenger, without knowing about our conversation, and said to him, “Sir, that bag is too big for your seat. We’re going to have to take it away.” “Oh, here you are,” the guy says, and he hands it over to him. . . . You don’t see the male flight attendants being physically abused or verbally abused nearly as much as we are.

The females’ supposed “higher tolerance for abuse” amounted to a combination of higher exposure to it and less ammunition—in the currency of respect—to use against it. This pattern set in motion another one: female workers often went to their male co-workers to get them to “cast a heavier glance.” As one woman who had resigned herself to this explained wearily: “I used to fight it and assert myself. Now I’m just too overworked. It’s simpler to just go get the male purser. One look at him and the troublemaker shuts up. Ultimately it comes down to the fact that I don’t have time for a big confrontation. The job is so stressful these days, you don’t go out of your way to make it more stressful. A look from a male carries more weight.” Thus the greater the respect males could command, the more they were called on to claim it.

This only increased the amount of deference that male workers felt their female co-workers owed them, and women found it harder to supervise junior males than females. One young male attendant said that certain conditions had to be met—and deference offered—before he would obey a woman’s orders: “If it’s an order without a human element to it, then I’ll balk. I think sometimes it’s a little easier for a man to be an authority figure and command respect and cooperation. I think it depends on how the gal handles herself. If she doesn’t have much confidence or if she goes the other way and gets puffed out of shape, then in that case I think she could have more trouble with the stewards than with the gals” [my emphasis]. Workers tended to agree that females took orders better than males, no matter how “puffed out of shape” the attendant in charge might be, and that women in charge had to be nicer in exercising their authority than men did.
This attitude toward status and authority inspired compensatory reactions among some female workers. One response was to adopt the crisply cheerful but no-nonsense style of a Cub Scout den mother—a model of female authority borrowed from domestic life and used here to make it acceptable for women to tell adult men what to do. In this way a woman might avoid being criticized as “bossy” or “puffed out of shape” by placing her behavior within the boundaries of the gender expectations of passengers and co-workers.

Another response to displaced anger and challenged authority was to make small tokens of respect a matter of great concern. Terms of address, for example, were seen as an indicator of status, a promise of the right to politeness which those deprived of status unfortunately lack. The term, “girl,” for example, was recognized by female workers as the moral equivalent of calling black men “boys.” Although in private and among themselves, the women flight attendants I knew usually called themselves “girls,” many were opposed to the use of the term in principle. They saw it not only as a question of social or moral importance but as a practical matter. To be addressed as a “girl” was to be subjected to more on-the-job stress. The order, “Girl, get me some cream” has a different effect than the request “Oh miss, could I please have some cream?” And if the cream has run out because the commissary didn’t provide enough, it will be the “girls” who get the direct expressions of disappointment, exasperation, and blame. Tokens of respect can be exchanged to make a bargain: “I’ll manage my unpleasant feelings for you if you’ll manage yours for me.” When outrageously rude people occasionally enter a plane, it reminds all concerned why the flimsy status shield against abuse is worth struggling over.

Schooled in emotion management at home, women have entered in disproportionate numbers those jobs that call for emotional labor outside the home. Once they enter the marketplace, a certain social logic unfolds. Because of the division of labor in the society at large, women in any particular job are assigned lower status and less authority than men. As a result, they lack a shield against the “doctrine of feelings.” Much more often than men, they become the complaint department, the ones to whom dissatisfaction is fearlessly expressed. Their own feelings tend to be treated as less important. In ways that the advertising smiles obscure, the job has different contents for women and men.

Estrangement From Sexual Identity

Regardless of gender, the job poses problems of identity. What is my work role and what is “me”? How can I do deep acting without “feeling phony” and losing self-esteem? How can I redefine the job as “illusion making” without becoming cynical?

But there are other psychological issues a flight attendant faces if she is a woman. In response to her relative lack of power and her exposure to the “doctrine of feelings,” she may seek to improve her position by making use of two traditionally “feminine” qualities—those of the supportive mother and those of the sexually desirable mate. Thus, some women are motherly; they support and enhance the well-being of others. But in being motherly, they may also act motherly and may sometimes experience themselves using the motherly act to win regard from others. In the same way, some women are sexually attractive and may act in ways that are sexually alluring. For example, one flight attendant who played the sexual queen—swaying slowly down the aisle with exquisitely understated suggestiveness—described herself as using her sexual attractiveness to secure interest and favors from male passengers. In each case, the woman is using a feminine quality for private purposes. But it is also true, for the flight attendant, that both “motherly” behavior and a “sexy” look and manner are partly an achievement of corporate engineering—a result of the company’s emphasis on the weight and (former) age requirements, grooming classes, and letters from passengers regarding the looks and demeanor of flight attendants. In its training and supervisory roles, the company may play the part of the protective duenna. But in its commercial role as an advertiser of sexy and glamorous service, it acts more like a backstage matchmaker. Some early
United Airlines ads said, “And she might even make a good wife.” The company, of course, has always maintained that it does not meddle in personal affairs.

Thus the two ways in which women traditionally try to improve their lot—by using their motherly capacity to enhance the status and well-being of others, and by using their sexual attractiveness—have come under company management. Most flight attendants I spoke with agreed that companies used and attached profit to these qualities. . .

Estrangement from aspects of oneself are, in one light, a means of defense. On the job, the acceptance of a division between the “real” self and the self in a company uniform is often a way to avoid stress, a wise realization, a saving grace. But this solution also poses serious problems. For in dividing up our sense of self, in order to save the “real” self from unwelcome intrusions, we necessarily relinquish a healthy sense of wholeness. We come to accept as normal the tension we feel between our “real” and our “on-stage” selves.

More women than men go into public-contact work and especially into work in which status enhancement is the essential social-psychological task. In some jobs, such as that of the flight attendant, women may perform this task by playing the Woman. Such women are more vulnerable, on this account, to feeling estranged from their capacity to perform and enjoy two traditional feminine roles—offering status enhancement and sexual attractiveness to others. These capacities are now under corporate as well as personal management.

Perhaps this realization accounts for the laughter at a joke I heard surreptitiously passed around the Delta Training Office, as if for an audience of insiders. It went like this: A male passenger came across a woman flight attendant seated in the galley, legs apart, elbows on knees, her chin resting in one hand and a lighted cigarette in the other—held between thumb and forefinger. “Why are you holding your cigarette like that?” the man asked. Without looking up or smiling, the woman took another puff and said, “If I had balls, I’d be driving this plane.” Inside the feminine uniform and feminine “act” was a would-be man. It was an estrangement joke, a poignant behind-the-scenes protest at a commercial logic that standardizes and trivializes the dignity of women.
Discussion Questions

1. Symbolic interactionism emphasizes the constructed and negotiated aspects of the self and social life more generally. As a result, it shifts attention from analyses of the structural/institutional features of society. How might some of the key concepts in this framework (for instance, meaning, impression management, definition of the situation, interaction rituals, front and backstage, secondary adjustments, feeling rules, emotion work) be used to explore stratification systems and the relations of domination/subordination they sustain?

2. Symbolic interactionism is an inductive theoretical perspective that examines the interpretive nature of social life. For their part, symbolic interactionists are themselves inescapably engaged in an interpretation of their observations (as all observers are). As a result, their findings are, in a sense, interpretations of interpretations. What implications might this have on producing generalizable conclusions and, with them, theory itself? For that matter, how does one empirically study the self, which, after all, is the central concept within this theoretical tradition? Similarly, how might you observe and scientifically analyze the operation of feeling rules?

3. Following Blumer’s argument, discuss how language is the fundamental basis of the self and social life.

4. Frederick Wiseman’s Titicut Follies, Ken Kesey’s One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest, and Philip Zimbardo’s Stanford Prison Experiment are classic works that explore the psychological effects of being confined within total institutions. View one of these films and discuss its implications for Goffman’s analysis of the relationship between the self and social arrangements. In what way does the film confirm and/or challenge Goffman’s perspective?

5. In general, how important do you think emotions are in shaping an individual’s (or your own) experiences and decisions? To what extent are emotions seen as a legitimate basis for action? In which domains of life (work, school, family, religion, politics, etc.) are emotive experiences encouraged or discouraged? Following Hochschild’s insights, what factors might account for the differing types and intensity of emotions that are experienced within particular domains?