

CHAPTER 5:

SOCIAL INTERACTION



Photo by Mary Rosenberg 2003

Schoolgirls hamming it up as they enter school in Venezuela. What else is *really* going on in these moments?

In Chapter 1, the two main sociological perspectives were identified: *functionalist* and *conflict*. Although these two perspectives differ in their view of society and approach to research, both examine society at the **macro level**. In other words, both **functionalist and conflict perspectives examine the large-scale processes of society: culture, institutions, and massive social arrangements.**

But there is a third perspective in sociology that examines *face to face interaction of individuals in everyday life* – the Interactionist perspective. This is a study of human communication at the **micro level**. This area of study overlaps with psychology; in fact, many who study face-to-face interaction are often called, “social-psychologists;” they belong to a *merged* discipline.

This *micro* level gets less attention in sociology because sociologists generally agree that face-to-face human interaction is largely determined by what happens in the culture (the *macro* level). That is, institutions and culture determine what we think and say and do to such a great extent that face-to-face interaction in any given society is seen as mostly an *outcome of the macro influences* that surround us. Therefore, some sociologists suggest, our time might be better spent focusing on macro factors because the macro is where the action is, and it is the prime territory of sociology.

But the micro level is very interesting in its own right. After all, we live our lives out in this face-to-face interaction. For most people the larger cultural macro world seems just an abstraction. This is especially true of citizens of very individualistic nations like our own. And the future sociologists among my readers will need to be prepared for whatever path they prefer. So...let's check this micro level out.

HUMAN INTERACTION = SYMBOLIC INTERACTION

How is interaction among humans different than with animals? Animals communicate with each other through interactive sounds, subtle gestures and physical behaviors much as we humans do, so we must look closely at the process to see what makes us unique.

The major difference seems to lie in *the level of symbolism we use*. Humans attach *meaning* to symbols during interaction; the most common are words, body language, body art and gestures. But *almost anything* can be used a symbol: a hat, a diploma, a tie, a badge, a pause in conversation, a tattoo, a wink, a whisper, an open door, a kiss.

Every day, every human in every culture on Earth exchanges a vast array of face-to-face symbols with other humans. Each symbol transmits a *meaning* in every social situation, and social situations often change from moment to moment. It's a lot to process in a very short time during a conversation – especially in *group* interaction - and we are doing it all on the fly and in real time. Plus, we're adding our own symbols to that scene.

When we humans visit other cultures, we feel disoriented because we are experiencing what is usually called *culture shock* but might also be defined as *symbol shock*; we are, at least at first, less able to accurately determine what is being communicated. It makes travel to foreign nations an extremely challenging yet mind-expanding experience.

What are the *meanings* of the symbols we use during interaction? This is what Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman called *the definition of the situation*. This is *always* the question in every human interactive exchange.

Each of the symbols we use has several potential meanings. A hat could be a simple stocking cap, which could be seen as a symbol of informal practicality. But there is also the cowboy hat which reveals a very particular type of identity to all who view it. It is almost purely costume in our modern lives; it puts a definite spin on the identities of the wearers. A simple kiss may mean "hello," or "goodbye," or "I love you," or (for mobsters) "you'll soon be dead, fool." It is the *intended meaning* of that counts during interaction.



Photos by Gary Payne, Above: Argentina 2025 Below: Nicaragua 2024

When *everybody* is wearing the same basic hat in face to face interaction...*it has to mean something*. In this rural area of central Argentina it means, “we’re all into Day of the Gaucho,” a symbolic ritual that celebrates brave and honest men, as here at this rodeo where it looked for the moment like the bucking horse might run through the crowd. Yet in the capitol city, Buenos Aires, it might be seen more as a symbol of “amped-up machismo.”



Here in Nicaragua, the elegance of the dress, the synchronized dancing, and the momentary group pose has to *mean* something. In this case, it was a demonstration of pride in their homeland, on New Year’s Day.

Sociologist George Herbert Mead claimed that people do not actually respond to each other *directly*, but only to each other's unique symbols exchanged during interaction.[1] That an amazing insight. And a little creepy...that you can't see the real me ...because you're too busy interpreting my symbols. Mead was deep!

Animals, on the other hand, *probably* cannot express their symbols in so many ways. For example, crows in the Midwest make the same simple 3-beat shriek to indicate the presence of danger, whereas humans choose from a huge selection of complex language options and gestures for a "danger" warning.

Animal communication also appears to be tied to what is immediately present in the environment around them. *As far as we can tell*, animals do not appear to be able to communicate *abstract* concepts such as, "the Universe," or "justice," or "the future."



Photo by Mary Rosenberg, 2017

The family I am seated with here in the nation of Oman are wearing a variety of symbols that reveal a multi-generational change is taking place. The elder woman in the center is the grandmother of the child and the mother of her daughter wearing the red head covering. The black mask the grandmother wears not only identifies her tribal background but is also a symbol of her obedience to the patriarchal religious ideas that placed her in a limited status from birth.

The daughter *symbolically* refuses to cover her face and is in college, a privilege the grandmother never had. The granddaughter is wearing Western clothing, a symbol of her even greater emancipation which would have been unimaginable in Oman until recently. I am breaking norms here, as my shorts and saltwater-dried hair are inappropriate symbols for entering this elder's Islamic home. But in this case the grandmother insisted and even allowed my wife Mary to take this picture of her sitting next to me.

OBEYING AUTHORITY FIGURES

Another major difference between human interaction and the interaction of animals is how **the human process of interaction is led remotely by *distant* authority figures**. At the *macro* level, distant nation-state authority figures very few of us ever meet act as controlling agents, guiding our *micro* realm of individual interaction towards *macro* goals.

As we grow up, we normally learn how to act based on watching others around us. And the most likely actors to influence our behavior are those with authority over us. It begins with our parents, then with teachers, employers, police officers, etc. We take orders from people who are living in other time zones: corporate executive officers, military supervisors, the Internal Revenue Service and religious figures.

We either willingly obey or are forced to follow rules set by *entire chains* of authority. No other animal does this. *Macro* influences seep into our *micro* level world as cultural institutions grant authority to their deputies with whom we interact in our daily lives.

Almost all of us follow these rules automatically, without seriously challenging them, because of our socialization and/or because resistance seems futile. Automatic rule following becomes a nearly universal habit by adulthood in modern industrial societies.



Gary Payne, 2009

This policeman in Panama City is guarding his nation's capital in a non-threatening way. He is expected to keep order while not intimidating the crowds of foreign tourists. He is mounted on a bicycle without a weapon while he maintains friendly conversation with passing citizens. It is a stark contrast to coercion. This reduces the likelihood of unnecessary confrontation and violence. His friendly smile only disappeared when I raised my camera.

STANLEY MILGRAM'S EXPERIMENTS ON OBEDIENCE TO AUTHORITY FIGURES

Just how much of our free will or conscience we may have handed away to authority by adulthood was studied by social-psychologist Stanley Milgram in his famous experiments on obedience to authority.

Professor Milgram *fraudulently* asked several naive Yale University students under his supervision to administer very painful electric shocks to people who gave wrong answers in a word-matching exercise. The students were told by Milgram that the shock technique was an experiment to see if the threat of extreme pain from electric shocks increased learning ability.

That was an intentional lie. The true experiment (that students were not informed of) was the level of students' own willingness to hurt people on the orders of an authority figure, Professor Milgram himself. The receiver of the electrical shocks was a professional actor who did not actually receive any shocks but knew when to scream as if in pain because a light came on when the phony "shock" button was pressed by the Yale students.

Why does this matter?

Automatic obedience to orders of authority figures was famously responsible for what happened in Hitler's Germany, at My Lai in Vietnam, and in other gloomy chapters in the history of humanity. But the students in the original test did not make that connection, as nearly 100% of them obediently gave electrical shocks all the way to the highest levels without stopping in Milgram's first experiment.

Dismayed at the willingness of his students to follow inhumane orders, Milgram continued to make the experiment appear even more brutal, in order to find a point at which students would finally question his authority and *refuse* to hurt people. Yet the bulk of students (both men and women) continued shocking based only on his orders.

Milgram concluded that most people allow themselves to become virtual tools at the service of authority figures. His experiment has been replicated many times by various social psychologists. There is no doubt that authority is an extremely powerful symbol in any human interaction, at least within our culture.

The only hopeful research finding in these experiments was that a small number of students did refuse to continue the experiments at some point and *a very few refused to give any shocks at all*. The key to planetary survival in a world with dozens of ethnocentric nations bristling with weaponry may lie in *why* those few individuals had the courage or mental discipline to refuse an inhumane order by an authority figure.

Milgram's research demonstrated how little free will humans really have. But it was never completely absent either; the people who gave the shocks were clearly disturbed by the experience. Human nature is not evil; people often risk their lives to save strangers in house fires and car accidents. The courage to object to authority's inhumane orders exists in a few of us and may spread to others in a culture designed to encourage it.

TABLE 5.2: MILGRAM'S SHOCKING EXPERIMENTS [2]

Below is a typical sample transcript of the interaction in Milgram's experiment. The social psychologist conducting the experiment is the Authority. The student hired at minimum wage to do the shocking is the Shocker. The actor hired to accept the (phony) shocks and scream for wrong answers is the Receiver, strapped down, invisible in a nearby room.

Receiver [screaming after having been shocked]: Let me out of here! You have no right to keep me here, let me out, my heart is bothering me!

Shocker: You see? He's hollering. Hear that? Gee, I don't know.

Authority: The experiment requires...

Shocker: I know it does sir, but I mean he doesn't know what he's getting in for...he's up to 195 volts! *[gives another shock]*

Receiver: Ohhh! I refuse to answer any more! Get-me-out-of-here!

Authority: Continue. The next word is "green."

Shocker: Green, grass, hat, ink, apple.

Receiver: *[will not answer, is silent]*

Authority: Go on with the procedure.

Shocker: Three hundred and fifteen volts *[gives shock]*.

Receiver: Ohhhh!!! Ohhhh.

Shocker: The answer is "ink." Next one...

Receiver: I absolutely refuse to answer!

Shocker: You got to. You get a shock if you don't answer.

Authority: Please continue, continue please. [no sound from receiver, even the screams stop]

Shocker: Something's happened to that man in there. You better check on him, sir.

Authority: Continue. Go on, please.

Shocker: You accept all responsibility?

Authority: The responsibility is mine. [Shocker continues giving stronger shocks to silent receiver]

SOCIOLOGIST ERVING GOFFMAN'S "DRAMATURGY"

In Chapter four, Mead's concept of "role taking" was used to explain how children - through their imagination - slip temporarily into the personalities and roles of others to be able to see themselves as others see them. This enables children a view of themselves *from the outside in*, which shapes their self-image.

But as children become more sophisticated young adults, they begin to embroider a little on the image that they were given by the others around them. They seek to promote the aspects of their identities that their peers find most positive. This promotion continues for life. Canadian Sociologist Erving **Goffman called this the "*presentation of self*" by which individuals learn to improve their image with "impression management."**

The most popular sociological approach to studying the presentation of self was also developed by Goffman. He called it **Dramaturgy – a method of analyzing social interaction as if the participants were actors on a stage.** Goffman based his method on George Herbert Mead's suggestion that we respond only to each other's symbols in interaction rather than directly to each other.

TABLE 5.1: THE SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONIST PERSPECTIVE*

Originators: Weber, Cooley, Mead and Goffman

Society's Image: Our individual concept of society - and our part in it - is continually being re-created during face-to-face symbolic interaction. All human communication transmits *symbolic meanings* that define what each social situation is really about.

Explanation for the Social Order: The orderliness we see in life is continually being *negotiated* from situation to situation in social gatherings. Participants with higher social status tend to determine the particulars of communication and the outcomes.

Basic Research Question: What is the *real meaning* of any given human interaction? Or, technically stated: "What is *the definition* of the situation?" Social-psychologists study human beings as they interact with others in their social environment. Research techniques often used are: participant observation, interviewing, and interaction analysis.

View of Social Change: Change is *continual*. The "social construction of reality" created in each episode of human interaction is a non-stop process that evolves over time. However, this human interaction (micro) is limited by the surrounding cultural norms (the powerful, ever present, influences of the macro).

Weakness: This perspective has been criticized for overstating the subjective (micro) influences in a society. Critics of the Symbolic Interactionist perspective have also charged that it is difficult to mesh with big-picture (macro) concepts that have been the traditional sociological focus of interest.

**Thanks to CLC sociologist Scott Foster for organizing this excellent summary.*

In Dramaturgy, we study the whole collection of symbols presented by people as their 'self.' This includes their "props" – a doctor's stethoscope, a policeman's uniform, a wedding ring, or a student's cap and gown at college graduation ceremonies. But also more subtle props: tone of voice, accents, smiles, frowns, shrugs and giggles, etc.

Goffman's Dramaturgy also recognizes a major distinction between **frontstage behavior – our most public behavior** and **backstage behavior – our most private behavior**. Consider the waiter at a fine restaurant and bar. *Frontstage* with his customers, he may seem all smiles, tolerant of their drunken stupor, oblivious to their fickle choices and special requests, eager to please in every way, friendly beyond the call of duty. This is typical *public* behavior, *frontstage* all the way.

But *backstage*, in the kitchen with other waiters and cooks, he may be cursing the same customers, nibbling food off their plates, blowing off steam as he joins in the camaraderie of familiar people he works with everyday. Here his somewhat more *private* self can be

revealed somewhat. But *further backstage*, at home, he may complain to his wife about the shortcomings of his fellow workers as well as the customers. *Even further backstage*, he may later complain to his brother about his wife's reluctance to listen to his complaints about his workplace.

In a single day, this waiter, like most of us, plays many roles in many different contexts, for personal benefit. As the tolerant waiter, he gets better tips. As the kitchen comrade he bonds with his workplace friends, while later in his husband and brother roles he gets to blow off steam. To get this concept to sink in... you, the reader, might ask yourself how many different roles did you perform in the last 24 hours?



Photo by Gary Payne 2005

This snake charmer in the town square of Marrakech, Morocco definitely fits in Goffman's Frontstage mode. His strategy is to interest passers by - like me - in these deadly cobras, and then charge us for wrapping the snakes around our bodies for a thrill. In my case he succeeded. His symbolic dress and behavior were a finely tuned act, pretending to ignore me until I approached him. Click on this website's Instructor Profile link to see a photo of the outcome (I lived).

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

Reading this chapter so far, it may have become apparent that *what human interaction amounts to is the continuous creation of social realities*. We are all in constant negotiation of our own identities, who we think others really are, and what the situation we are in at any given moment actually means. We walk daily through a parade of ever-changing symbolic images of ourselves and others.

It's even possible for us to ignore the difference between our rather flimsy and socially-created notions of reality vs. the real-world reality that we did NOT create. So then, let us here make a distinction, just as an example:

Planet Earth is *real*; we did not create it. But national boundaries, for example, are merely *social constructions of reality*.

The first statement is easy to agree with, but the second statement takes a second to agree with, right? It is a bit confusing, because *we all act* as if national boundaries are as real as the planet itself. These boundaries were in existence before we were born. Thus, the boundaries *seem* totally real and rather permanent to us.

But the boundaries of our nation - the very existence of our nation - *seem* real to us because, in human interaction, we have been socialized to think that national boundaries and the existence of our nation are settled issues. Our parents were socialized that way too, as were their parents. It is the same in every nation, of course, so national boundaries are a great example of social constructions of reality.

But think about it. Many of these boundaries were drawn without the permission - or even the knowledge - of the original populations that once lived there and were ignored or later killed. In fact, most American Indian communities in the enormous area known as the "Louisiana Purchase" did not even know the French had arbitrarily claimed their land, much less sold it later to another new entity called the USA. Furthermore, national boundaries often change; they disappear when empires collapse. And they are complicated legally by treaties and trade agreements with other nations. In short, this social construction of reality known as a national boundary is a very arbitrary item. Nevertheless, if most everyone in a dominant culture treats a boundary as real, it soon *seems* as real as planet Earth itself.

Sociologist W.I. Thomas (1863-1947) studied the way in which humans socially construct reality, and made the following claim, which became the **Thomas Theorem** - "**If people define a situation as real, the situation becomes real in its consequences.**" And, in society after society, more than a wee bit of nonsense has been portrayed as real. Yet once those beliefs are set across a generation or two, they are powerful, and hard to erase from public perception.

No matter how flimsy I try to portray national boundaries to you in this book, in the end, you will still find me paying taxes to the governments inside it. That is because – as W.I.Thomas suggested – not paying taxes will have real *consequences*. And one of the consequences is that people who will not pay taxes to the nation may find themselves in a *very real* prison cell.



Gary Payne, Guyana 2008

This enormous Anglican Church in Georgetown, Guyana is claimed to be the tallest *wooden* structure in existence. It was built during slavery by the wealthy British plantation owners. *The sheer size* of institutional structures: churches, statues, capitol buildings and monuments- supports the social construction of reality by creating an imposing and awe-inspiring presence that adds to the legitimacy of the institution's officials.

So then, the concept of the USA is a social construction of reality because it was constructed by humans. The state you live in is a social construction of reality. Our personalities and our identities and our beliefs are social constructions of reality. However, the planet Earth, the Sun, the stars and concepts like “time” and “space” exist on their own, independent of human consciousness. Got it?

Oh...but now this issue moves into new territory! Although planet Earth truly exists on its own and is not a social construction of reality...how do we humans relate to it? Like everything else, we have *an image in our minds* about what Earth is like, how and why it exists, and what it means to us. We really don't *know* the Earth itself; most of us don't travel around it much at all. But we do hold *an image* of it. And this image is subject to a ton of cultural and religious interpretation.

So, then, *absolutely nothing* in our world completely escapes cultural interpretation. Everything - whether real or social construction - is seen through a social filter of some kind. There is a very strong tendency for the filtering to be influenced by cultural institutions that benefit from the acceptance of certain interpretations.

Once those interpretations are accepted by the vast majority of citizens in society, there will often be institutional pressure to deny alternative interpretations, even if they are correct. Therefore, **sociologists reverse the famous line, “seeing is believing.” Our research shows that the opposite is closer to the truth: “believing is seeing!”**

That is why we need science to help us grasp the actual reality. Check out the difference in history’s two most popular ways of knowing what is true in Figure 5.3 below. It is the difference between evidence vs. assumption, testing and evidence vs. faith.

TABLE 5.3: EPISTEMOLOGY: METHODS OF LEARNING WHAT IS TRUE

| Comparison: | Modern Science | vs. Fundamental Religion |
|-----------------------------------|---|--|
| <u>Chief Method of Study:</u> | Experimental Design. | Interpreting sacred documents and subjective witnessing. |
| <u>Basis of Conclusions:</u> | Verifiable, observable evidence; replication. | Faith. Sacred documents are <i>assumed</i> to be accurate. |
| <u>Nature of Conclusions:</u> | Tentative. | Absolute. |
| <u>Attitude towards Errors:</u> | Errors are expected and must be corrected. | Errors are often denied or ignored. |
| <u>Attitude towards Skeptics:</u> | Recognized as vital to check accuracy. | Considered incorrect, possibly evil or even punishable. |
| <u>Access to Leadership:</u> | Relatively open. | Highly controlled. |

We live now at an uneasy time of rapid historical transition in which individuals are pulled in many directions by adherents of various cultural interpretations of what is true and real.

Everyone alive today was raised in - and still lives in - a social world dominated by *non-logical* thinking rather than science. In this traditional social world, untested “knowledge” is absorbed from sources which are often *non-logical*: political and religious figures, parents, friends, advertisements, celebrities, podcasts and non-stop social media.

We tend to seek the comfort that non-logical information sources promise and the convenience of not having to challenge popular misinformation. We conform. After all, objective truth can seem cold and even disturbing. Unconsciously, some of us might prefer not to know what is true on certain issues.

Discovering objective truths while surrounded by these influences is nearly impossible. The scientific method could be used to cut through cultural myths and barriers but we have not been socialized to use it in our everyday lives.

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|--------------|-----------|-------------------------|--------------|------------|-------------------------|
| Colorado | 5,211.21 | \$7.27 | Oklahoma | 34,664.00 | \$19.14 |
| Idaho | 17,013.00 | 24.85 | Oregon | 1,020.00 | 15.43 |
| Kansas | 1,684.50 | 33.45 | South Dakota | 120,445.00 | 16.53 |
| Montana | 11,034.00 | 9.86 | Washington | 4,879.00 | 41.37 |
| Nebraska | 5,641.00 | 36.65 | Wisconsin | 1,069.00 | 17.00 |
| North Dakota | 22,610.70 | 9.93 | Wyoming | 865.00 | 20.64 |

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|--|---|---|--|---|---|

WALTER L. FISHER,
Secretary of the Interior.

ROBERT G. VALENTINE,
Commissioner of Indian Affairs.

U.S. Department of the Interior advertisement, 1911

There was no attempt in this classic 1911 poster to hide the fact that American Indian perceptions of national boundaries were irrelevant. The dominant culture completely ignored the original inhabitants' sense of reality.

THE POWER OF BELIEF

One of the efforts scientists have undertaken to show how our sense of reality can be manipulated by cultural interpretation and suggestion has to do with research on **the placebo effect**. A common example of a placebo is a sugar or wheat flour pill that has no significant effect on human biology. However, if a placebo is described to everyday people as a potent tranquilizer, sleeping aid, or stimulant by a trusted medical authority, a strange phenomenon occurs. People unaware that the placebo is merely an inert substance often come to believe that it actually helps them sleep, or stay awake, or whatever the trusted authority suggested it would do.

Belief in the authority's interpretation of the pill becomes belief in the pill, and a compelling perceptual reality is often created out of a complete falsehood.

The placebo effect carries over into all manner of phony suggestions, from car engine additives to wrinkle creams to centuries of religious mythology. People tend to report agreement with whatever was suggested by trusted or dominating figures as the expected effect. The successful myths of any culture could be explained as a similar effect, for these cultural suggestions and interpretations often become applications of the Thomas Theorem mentioned earlier in this chapter.

Furthermore, the cultural beliefs that endure for any length of time in any society tend to benefit certain groups that play a dominant role in their design. That is, powerful groups often construct - or at least *tweak* - the myths to promote their interests. An entertaining example of this latter point is the present-day myth of Santa Claus, which has been re-created over centuries in several nations in various ways.

One of the earliest common Santa myths was of a "Scary Santa" that crept down the chimney to kidnap children (who refused to obey their parents) and take them away in his bag, never to be seen again. It was obviously promoted by parents to control rebellious children.

But in 19th century USA, Harper's Magazine and Coca-Cola promoted a new image of a jolly gift-giving Santa (dressed in the corporate Coca-Cola colors of red and white) that vastly increased their corporate profits.

The rosy-cheeked corporate-driven Santa story has expanded now across a century. Countless additional corporations have since used such advertising to shape our concept of Christmas and other holidays into what some have called an orgy of mindless consumer-driven materialism like no other in the history of the planet.

I'll end this chapter with the most pleasing symbols I've ever seen in my home state of Minnesota, captured at the Annual Mille Lacs Band Reservation Powwow in August. The Ojibwe symbolism is stunningly beautiful and meaningful. This ritual is used to celebrate the Band's culture and encourage their youth to continue their peacefully proud traditions.



The Mille Lacs Band were among the Ojibwe originators of the Jingle Dress that imparts a special sound and visual effect during their dancing. It is just one of dozens of symbols on display in this authentic ceremony. Their youth will gradually connect the dots of meaning between these symbols as they take over this celebration in the years ahead. The general public is invited to these gatherings and even treated to a free feast. A few hours spent among these activities and original citizens is a lesson in the value of cultural diversity. I thank them for the opportunities. Their history is as spectacularly interesting as they are.

REFERENCES

[1] Mead, George Herbert. 1934. *Mind, Self and Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

[2] Milgram, Stanley. 1965. *Obedience*. New York University Film Library.