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The Individual
in a Social World

What is Monday, and where did it come from? How do you experience Monday? What Monday may mean in one culture, such as the first day of the workweek, may mean something entirely different in other cultures or not exist at all. It is Cathy's least favorite day of the week and has been for quite some time. In some pop music, Monday is often associated with being blue, rainy or stormy, lonely, manic, or sleepy! Maybe she was deeply influenced by all those songs that dissed Mondays.

In many societies, people learn how to organize their activities and interactions around the notions of hours, days, weeks, months, years, and seconds. Clocks, calendars, and schedules are all culturally defined objects that help people in particular cultures to "keep time" and be "on time" (Flaherty 1999). Most, if not all, of us take for granted these categories of time (and names of days and months, thanks to the ancient Romans and Greeks!) and accept the fact that they structure our day-to-day and weekly activities and interactions. Of course, some of us see ourselves as people who are "on time" and don't keep people waiting, while some of us are "always" late. And sometimes we are "fashionably late," at least for certain occasions.

Our notions of time are related to our daily habits, including when we have to get up; when we eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner; and when we are expected to sleep and for how long (at least for school and many jobs). How many hours do you think you should be sleeping during the night (for those who don't work at night)? Did you think 8 hours? Eight straight hours seems to be a commonly held notion of the "right" amount of sleep for good health and good performance. Some reports show that nearly one third of all working adults get 6 or fewer hours of sleep at night. And some occupations are more prone to sleep deprivation than others.

But this idea that we should have 8 straight hours of sleep is actually a relatively new idea, dating back to the invention of the light bulb in the late 1800s (Isaacson 2015). Indeed, historian Roger Ekirch (2001, 2006) found consistent descriptions of a segmented sleep schedule in preindustrial works of literature, including diaries and instruction manuals. Before the Industrial Revolution, it was common for people to sleep for a few hours, stay up for another few hours, and then sleep for several

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more hours. The period of awakened consciousness between these two phases of sleep at night allowed for self-reflection, getting a jump on the day's activity, chatting with neighbors, and making love, and was not interpreted as middle-of-the-night insomnia. Some neuroscience research supports this idea, showing that when there is no artificial light, people often wake up in the middle of the night, reflecting a sign of normal brain functioning (Wehr 1992). The invention of electric lights seems to have led to many cultures' adoption of later bedtimes, the continuous 8-hour sleep idea, and fewer overall hours of sleep or rest.

In addition, different cultures sleep in various ways. For example, David Randall (2012) noted that napping at your desk in China and India is common. Very short naps (which can include deep sleep) seem to improve our cognitive performance, depending on such factors as duration (Milner and Cote 2009). Randall (2012) notes that the gradual acceptance that sequential sleep hours are not required for good health or good job performance has led some companies, such as Google, to allow employees to take naps at work.

Obviously sleep is essential, but the way we think about what is "good sleep" and whether we are "good sleepers" changes and varies over time and place (Ekirch 2001, 2006). These various taken-for-granted categories and conceptions of time across cultures compel us to ask two fundamental questions: (1) How do individuals socially construct their worlds? (2) In those social worlds, how do individuals acquire a sense of self?

To answer these questions, here and in Chapter 4, we draw upon one of the major prominent theoretical perspectives in sociological social psychology, the symbolic interactionist perspective. The beauty of **theoretical perspectives** in general, as we shall see in this book, is that they provide a lens through which we may see our social world. Specifically, theoretical perspectives in sociological social psychology are a set of assumptions about social behavior that provides a particular point of view. These assumptions are neither true nor false. They are either more or less useful to us in furthering our understanding of the social world in which we live. We hope, as social scientists, that our perspectives are useful to us in doing three things: (1) directing us to useful and interesting questions that, if answered, help us know more about our social world than we did before; (2) providing us with guidelines and strategies for approaching and examining social life—that is, providing effective ways of studying our social world; and (3) telling us what concepts and processes are important and helpful in describing and explaining social phenomena. The knowledge that we gain by drawing upon these theoretical perspectives guides us in developing solutions to social problems and issues of inequality.

In this chapter, we will address the first two questions stated previously—two central questions that scholars who draw upon the symbolic interactionist perspective strive to answer. We will learn about the **symbolic interactionist perspective** by seeing how symbolic interactionists study social life and what important concepts and processes they use to inform and increase our knowledge about how we navigate through day-to-day interaction with each other.

How Do Individuals Socially Construct Their Worlds?

What distinguishes humans from other animals, if anything? How do we recognize and name things around us? How do we learn to name ourselves, and how

do we acquire and negotiate aspects of ourselves in day-to-day interaction? In this first section, we explore how humans develop "mind" and how minded behavior distinguishes humans from other animals. As we shall see, mind is not an entity but rather a process.

Is There a Distinguishing Difference Between Humans and Other Animals?

George Herbert Mead (1863–1931), an American philosopher and social psychologist at the University of Chicago in the early 1900s, is one of the renowned scholars associated with the symbolic interactionist perspective. One of Mead's key questions during his time was this: Is there a distinguishing difference between humans and other animals?

Mead addressed this and many other questions in the early part of the 1900s—a time when a prominent perspective of human behavior—behaviorism—was central in psychology. One key premise of this psychological approach is the idea of the stimulus–response process. A stimulus is anything in the person's environment that provokes an action or response. Stimuli could be anything from types of foods, money, threats in the environment, or particular words. Behaviorism suggests that much of our behavior is learned as a result of gratification or punishment associated with particular stimuli. During Mead's time, there was an extreme form of behaviorism that viewed human consciousness as something that could not be studied. Rather social scientists were called upon to study only observable behaviors and their connection to observable stimuli. Mead believed differently. He believed that the stimulus–response process was not an adequate account of human conduct.

One reason for Mead's opposing view is that he was heavily influenced by pragmatism, an American philosophical tradition developed during the early decades of the 20th century. Pragmatists, such as Charles Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, were concerned with the process of thinking and how it influences the actions of individuals. Pragmatism views thought as a process that allows humans to adjust, adapt, and achieve goals in their environment. In his work, *Mind, Self, and Society* (a compilation of his lectures by his graduate students), Mead (1934) argues that there is something missing between a stimulus in the environment and an individual's response to that stimulus. He does acknowledge that much of human behavior is indeed simply a reaction to a stimulus either in the environment or to our own physiology. For example, we may see a friend eating an ice cream sundae on a hot summer day and salivate and then proceed to buy one immediately! We may see a mountain lion on our hiking trail, start to panic, and go in the other direction. And surely we can think of many times when we are driving and then realize that we have not been paying attention at all to the traffic lights and street signs, but fortunately we have been driving correctly! We are often on autopilot. There are times, however, when we do more than simply react. This missing piece helps us answer what may be unique about humans.

For Mead the unique feature of humans is **mind**. Mind is not a thing or an entity but rather is the process of manipulating symbols (Mead 1934; Meltzer 2003). "[Mind] is really a verb, not a noun" (Strauss 1978:xiv)—it is a process of using what Mead referred to as significant symbols. A **symbol** is an abstract representation of something that may or may not exist in tangible form. Organizations use symbols all the time to represent themselves. For example, the apple symbol

(with a bite out of it so that a small logo would still look like an apple and not a cherry, as noted by creator Rob Janoff) representing the Apple logo is an easily recognized brand logo in the world, as are the Olympic rings. The golden arches represent McDonald's, and Mickey Mouse ears signify Disney. The American Medical Association (AMA) symbol features the single snake of the Staff of Asclepius (the Greek god of healing). *American Medical News* (amednews.com) states that the AMA has used several versions of the serpent and the staff logo over the years but now, since 2005, has adopted a new, more stylized design in order to make a statement about the transformation of the AMA as "inviting and unifying, and most importantly, signals a new energy and vitality of the organization." (The logo also changed colors from teal to purple to change its symbol for a new AMA, as the color purple signifies the nobility of medicine's standards and ethics.) Organizations try to convey quite a lot with their symbols (see Glynn 2002).

Words are also symbols. The word *desk* is a symbolic representation of a class of objects that are constructed of hard substances and designed to serve certain purposes, such as a workspace. And the word *embarrassment* represents something intangible—a feeling with which we are all familiar (often perhaps too familiar!)—or something we cannot touch. Inherent in the idea of symbols is the fact that for something to be a symbol, it has to have meaning that is shared among others. If you are in a movie theater and someone yells fire!, this word has the same effect on you as it has for everyone else in the theater who knows English. The vocalization of this word calls up the same thing in you as it does in others (Mead 1934). So symbols are **shared meanings**. Will your reaction to someone yelling fire be the same as others in the theater? Fundamentally, yes, in the sense that all of you in the theater will try to evacuate the building, but there will be some variation in terms of feelings of panic and consideration of others when trying to exit. Overall, however, all will have a similar goal as a result of the shared meaning of this spoken symbol.

The beauty of symbols is that we can use them to transcend the concrete to have experiences not rooted in time or space. These abstractions allow us to remember, fantasize, plan, as well as have vicarious experiences that others tell us about. When we fantasize, for example, we are manipulating symbolic images. Think of all the times you have played out a conversation in your head with someone else either before or after it has occurred. It could be in regard to going on a job interview, asking someone out on a date, or trying to settle an argument with someone dear to you. We spend quite a bit of time rehearsing or planning these conversations, and we can do so because we can manipulate symbols in our heads. Also, vicarious experiences (e.g., hearing a friend's story about her trip to South America) provide us the opportunity to learn by observing, listening to, and conversing with other people. The process of manipulating symbols is important because it gives us the ability not to have to experience everything ourselves to comprehend what someone else is experiencing. It is the key element for transmitting culture (i.e., the ways of doing things).

Mind, then, allows us to be free of our immediate situation. We can rehearse potential courses of action, inhibit our impulses to assess consequences of our actions, or bring in anticipated futures and our remembered pasts into our current contemplation. We can solve complex problems (Weigert and Gecas 2003).

Although symbols have shared meanings for some collective group of people, we know that sometimes a particular symbol will elicit one meaning for one group

of people and a totally different meaning for another group of people. For example, snails in France are a delicacy yet considered a pest in Korea (Kim, Park, and Park 2000). Jodi O'Brien (2006), in her book, *The Production of Reality*, provides a beautiful example of how objects may have various meanings to different groups of people:

> In rural Central American villages, religious festivals are an important part of the local culture. A documentary film crew was around to record one of these events in another country. The film shows brightly colored decorations, music, dancing, and a variety of delicious and special foods made for the festival. The special treats are clearly a highlight for everyone, especially the children, who crowd around the stands. In the middle of one crowd of children waiting for a treat is a very large stone bowl. A large stone pillar rises out of the center of the bowl. The pillar seems alive. It is completely covered by shiny black beetles crawling around and over each other. The person in charge takes a tortilla, spreads some sauce on the inside, grabs a handful of live beetles, and fills the burrito with them, quickly folding the tortilla so that the beetles cannot escape. Playfully pushing the beetles back into the tortilla between bites, a gleeful child eats the burrito with relish. Would you be willing to try a beetle burrito? Is a strip of burnt cow muscle (also known as a steak) inherently any more desirable than a beetle burrito? (O'Brien 2006:2)

In this example the same stimulus, live beetles, elicits different subjective interpretations and, as a result, different responses. Importantly, the way a person responds to a stimulus depends on how a person *interprets* the stimulus. Our reactions depend on how we define the situation. If a person just now came up to you and kissed you on the cheek, what would be your reaction? It could be wonderful, or it could be disgusting! And some of us may wince at the idea of getting our noses pierced; others will think it is awesome. What is interesting, then, is not the actual stimulus but the meanings that individuals and groups assign to the stimulus. It is the process of assigning meaning that determines how people will act. When former senator Hillary Clinton became teary-eyed at a presidential campaign rally in 2008, was she seen as weak, manipulative, strong, or compassionate? In 2016, former secretary of state Hillary Clinton ran again for president. If she had become teary-eyed again, would she have been seen as weak, manipulative, or compassionate against Donald Trump? The answer depends on *who* is interpreting the act, *when,* and in *what context* (which involves social cognition processes as discussed in Chapter 5).

We typically, then, do not respond directly to our physical environment, but instead, most of our responses to others stem from our interpretation of stimuli or cues around us. These cues could be such things as gestures, physiological features, or adornments (e.g., clothing and jewelry) of others. When we interpret and then respond based on that interpretation, we are said to engage in "minded behavior" (Mead 1934; Meltzer 2003). When we consider alternatives and then adjust our responses, this activity is "mind." Mind is the activity that makes it possible for us to engage in deliberate conduct. Mind is social.

For Mead and symbolic interactionists in general, then, *humans are symbol-using creatures who interpret their world.* Interpretation involves the process of

thinking. Our interpretation of things and cues in the environment is affected by our own thought processes (i.e., our own perceptions, biases, and views of the world) (Blumer 1969). In the beetle burrito story, for example, many people who grew up in the United States would not be willing to try this "delicacy" like the children in rural Central American villages! Not surprisingly, then, in response to behaviorists, Mead (1934) argued that although an activity such as thinking is unobservable, it is still behavior. When confronted with stimuli, humans often do not simply see them and respond but rather actively seek and select certain cues, based on past experiences, anticipated futures, interests, and needs. Therefore, they are "doing" something (Couch 1989; Meltzer 2003).

In addition, animals, such as primates, are capable of using symbols (see Hewitt 2003 for a discussion of the difference between natural signs that animals learn and symbols that humans can manipulate). Gorillas, for example, are quite capable of learning a certain set of symbols used in American Sign Language (e.g., see Koko and the Gorilla Foundation). Humans, however, are **complex symbol users** relative to other animals in that they create religions, philosophies, cities, and medical treatments, to name a few. Humans can create symbols that stand for other symbols.

Also, we, as humans, can think about our pasts and futures in a much more complex fashion (Couch 1989). Cathy sometimes thinks about her cats—and surely they do "think" and respond to her vocalizations (well sometimes anyway!). And if she begins to open a can of cat food, that sound represents to them that food is coming. They have learned this meaning of this particular sound over time. They also can let her know when it is time to eat by incessant pawing at her face in the morning. As well, when she pets them, they purr. And dogs can learn to "sit" (unlike cats most of the time because perhaps they simply do not have the inclination to follow your commands!). But dogs cannot teach each other the meaning of the command sit to their friends, even though they are individually capable of learning this command (Hewitt 2003). They also cannot fantasize about what they may be doing in 5 years. They are unable to produce a symbol at will if the thing or event they signify is not present. Humans, however, can talk about a dog that is not present, and in so doing, use this symbol even though the referent is not present. Other animals, then, are limited in the meanings they can share with us.

How Do We Learn Symbols?

Herbert Blumer (1969), one of Mead's students, wrote the book *Symbolic Interactionism*, which provides the foundation of this theoretical perspective. He articulated three basic assumptions. The first assumption states that *humans act toward a "thing" (e.g., an event, a sign, a behavior, a tradition, a material object) on the basis of the meaning they assign to the thing.* For example, the way that one approaches a computer varies for different people based on the meaning of that object. For some, it is used for word processing; for others, it provides an opportunity to create computer programs; and yet still, others use it for online trading of stocks and bonds, and for others it is just a hard object. How we relate to computers depends on the meanings we have learned from the kinds of experiences we have had with computers. Think about grass: Grass is not the same thing for cats and cows (Meltzer 2003). Also, do you know what the word *triskaidekaphobia* means? This word refers to a fear of the number 13. Notice how some buildings do not have floor number 13, and airplanes do not have row 13. Some say this

fear comes from the belief that because Judas may have been the 13th apostle, the number 13 is cursed.

Another example is "the bottle" in the film *The Gods Must Be Crazy* (Uys 1980), released in 1980. It follows the story of Xi, the leader of a small group of Bushmen in the Kalahari Desert whose tribe has no knowledge or experience beyond their own local world. One day an empty Coke bottle is tossed out of a plane flying overhead by the pilot and falls to earth unbroken. Xi finds the bottle—this unusual hard object—and brings it back to the group. Of course, this object is considered an empty Coke bottle and a piece of trash by the pilot (today it is often viewed as an object to be recycled). For the Bushmen, however, who had never seen this object before, the bottle acquired many different meanings created through interaction. For example, it was seen as a tool for curing snakeskin, a musical instrument to make tones by blowing into the object, and a useful thing for making decorations on cloth. But there was only *one* Coke bottle, and as a result, people began to fight over it, and later in the film, it was even used as a dangerous weapon to bonk one another on the head. In fact, later in the story, Xi calls it "the evil thing." This example shows that our interpretation of a thing, event, or situation affects our response toward it, not the object itself.

The second assumption is that *meanings of "things" are socially derived*. That is, the meanings of objects, events, and behaviors are created through social interaction among individuals and groups of individuals (Blumer 1969). Meanings, therefore, are not in objects themselves. Rather, through interaction with others, people learn to conceptualize a person, place, or thing and attach meaning to it. Clearly, this occurred in the Coke bottle example. This process is known as **naming** (O'Brien 2006). To name something is to know it. We name things and then respond according to the implications carried by the name. Is your own spit something, for example, you would swallow once it is out of your body? Probably not. Typically, many of us have an aversion to bodily fluids that have left the body, like spit. The word *spit* elicits an evaluative response (e.g., ick!), and then a course of action is followed, such as avoiding the spit. We have learned to assign meaning to the fluid and respond to the meaning, not the object itself (O'Brien 2006:67). Through naming, we learn symbols. We have learned names for all kinds of animals, flowers, and religions as well as the days of the week and the meanings of these things we have named will vary across time and place. In the beginning of the chapter, we discussed Monday. We learn to categorize all the days of the week in our culture and what constitutes a weekend. (Notably, Britain was the first country to create "standard time" in the mid-1800s where time was set throughout a region to one standard time. Why? Railways! The railways could not function well with inconsistencies of local mean time and so forced a uniform time on the country. The railroads in the United States and Canada instituted standard time in time zones in 1883.)

This process of naming involves the process of categorization (Hewitt 2003). We create and use categories to group things in a way that makes them related to one another and gives them order, like a mental filing system (O'Brien 2006). Once something is named, we also learn from others how to react toward it—what to do and what not to do with it.

Importantly, we need others to help us learn those symbols; we cannot learn them on our own. For example, Helen Keller, who became deaf and blind during infancy, could not have learned symbols without her teacher, Anne Sullivan. Learning language (set of symbols) is an interactional process. The first word that

Helen learned was *water*, finger spelled in her hand. How did she learn that this cool, wet something pouring over her hand was named water? Anne had to get Helen to recognize that she and Helen were attending to this cool, wet something together, at that same time (called **joint attention**). Once Helen was aware that they had a **shared focus** on the object (the cool, wet something), Helen could then learn to name this object by Anne's finger spelling *water* in her hand (Couch 1989). Keller described the experience of learning her first symbol at the age of 7 in this way:

> We [Anne Sullivan—her teacher] walked down the path to the well-house, attracted by the fragrance of the honeysuckle with which it was covered. Someone was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream rushed over one hand she spelled into another the word W A T E R, first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motion of her fingers. Suddenly, I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew that W A T E R meant the wonderful cool something flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul; gave it light, hope, joy, set it free!! There were barriers still, it is true, but barriers that could in time be swept away. (Keller and Macy 1903)

We take this naming process for granted, but when there are barriers to this process, such as in Helen Keller's case, it is very difficult. Helen Keller overcame those barriers with the help of her teacher and later graduated from Radcliffe College in 1904. Notably, however, some children such as severely autistic kids have trouble focusing on an object with another person at the same time—that is, they have difficulty in joint attention with another person. This, in turn, affects their language acquisition and expression in interaction and has lasting effects throughout adulthood (Couch 1989; Mead 1934). Mind (i.e., the process of manipulating symbols) comes about only through interaction (Blumer 1969; Mead 1934; Meltzer 2003).

Words are symbols that denote the meaning of something else and are conveyed through writing, speaking, and signing. Words assign meaning to our experiences. Make a list of as many emotions as you can. Then read your list out loud to others. They should be able to understand them, such as the words *grief*, *happiness*, *embarrassment*, *jealousy*, *pity*, *sadness*, etc. Now select a word that is well understood by others around you. Attempt to communicate this emotion to someone next to you through direct physical contact. Do not use words. Select other emotions. Which ones can you successfully convey without words, and which ones need words for others to understand? It may be possible to convey anger or fright through touch, but how, for example, would you convey bitterness, jealousy, melancholy, or envy? Many emotions on your list convey a much wider range of emotion than you could communicate effectively without using words (O'Brien 2006). There are as many emotions as there are words to describe them, and as we shall see in the emotions chapter (Chapter 7), there are some different labels for distinct emotions across different cultures.

In addition, the meanings of words are not benign—they are often associated with additional ideas and experiences. For example, being left-handed used to be defined in Western cultures as not simply having more dexterity in the left hand than in the right but also as clumsy, tactless, awkward, and maladroit, while being

right-handed was defined as being helpful, skillful, and reliable, in addition to using the right hand more easily than the left (see these associations in a wide range of languages). For example, many children as late as the 1960s were not allowed to write with their left hands in school in the United States. Indeed, the right side has been considered the good side in many practices and beliefs of many cultures (e.g., in Roman and Greek traditions, Jewish and Christian traditions). And consider these common expressions: "He's your right-hand man." "You have two left feet!" "That comment was out of left field."

Another example that meanings of words are not benign is seen in a story noted in Malcolm X's (1969) autobiography. A fellow prison inmate of Malcolm X showed him a dictionary of different meanings associated with terms *black* and *white*: black—opposite of white, dark-complexioned, without light, dark, dirty, evil, wicked, sad, dismal and sullen; white—having the color of pure snow or milk, pure, innocent, having a light-colored skin, and Caucasian. And what do we say people have when we think they are courageous or have guts? "They have balls!" But why not say, "They have ovaries!"

The second assumption that meanings of things are socially derived also implies that meanings of things are not fixed. Rather, they change through the course of interaction and over time. Through social interaction, meanings of things are negotiated—new meanings arise, old meanings are reaffirmed or change. How has our view of smoking cigarettes and marijuana changed over the past 70 years? How about adoption of children or our perceptions of divorce? In the scene mentioned previously with the Bushmen in the Kalahari Desert example, the empty glass Coke bottle was first assigned positive meanings through interaction as a useful tool and a musical instrument, but its meaning changed over time to the evil thing that created conflict. After all, the gods sent only one of them.

Finally, the third assumption of symbolic interaction is that *meanings of things are "handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the thing [s]he encounters"* (Blumer 1969:2). This means that the use of the meanings of things by an individual occurs through a process of interpretation (as mentioned earlier). In this process, the individual first indicates to himself the meaning of the thing, and then he "selects, checks, suspends, regroups, and transforms meanings in the light of the situation in which he is placed" (Blumer 1969:5). This means that the individual uses the meanings she has for things to guide and direct the action taken in the situation.

For example, the meaning we attribute to a particular odor depends on our interpretation of that odor in a particular context. If we "sense" an odor as foul smelling due to body sweat and we are in a gym or a locker room, for example, we typically find this acceptable because we associate body sweat with locker rooms. If we sense this same odor on someone on a first date, we may not be so forgiving and chalk it up to our date's lack of hygiene. This does not bode well for a second date in the future. You may love the smell of fresh-baked chocolate chip cookies because it reminds you of happy memories—for example, being young and after school coming home to fresh-baked cookies. This associative relationship between the odor of fresh-baked cookies and its source generates an interpretation of the odor—a loving sensation of that odor! Sensory judgments are associated with cultural values, and evaluative interpretation of odors depend on how we have learned to make sense of the odor within particular contexts (Waskul and Vannini 2008; see also Vannini, Waskul, and Gottschalk, 2013).

Summary

The symbolic interactionist perspective is a social constructionist argument, suggesting that individuals actively shape their reality through social interaction (Berger and Luckmann 1966). The beliefs we adopt about things around us create our own reality. In addition, it is important to understand people's interpretation of "things" in order to understand why they behave the way they do. Behavior is, in part, based on the definition of the situation. Whether people are interacting face-to-face or having an imagined dialogue in their heads, much of human behavior is directed toward understanding how to respond to others in specific contexts (Blumer 1969).

In quest of a clearer understanding of human behavior in social contexts, a key component of the research in symbolic interaction focuses on the development, maintenance, and negotiation of the self and identities in interaction (the topic of Chapter 4). To prepare for our discussion of identities, we will first examine how the social self emerges. The same kind of categorical thinking and knowledge is applied to the self as it is to the things external to the person (Hewitt 2003).

How Does the Social Self Emerge?

Do you remember what your parents said were your first words when you were a toddler? The first thing that children typically name is some object in the environment such as a ball, a cat, or a person, such as dada. It is never their own proper name, *me*, or *myself*. Why? Because during the period when they first learn significant symbols, children are not capable of seeing themselves as an object, separate from other objects—a requirement for the development of the social self. That is too complicated initially. Selfhood, in this case, is the awareness that one is separate from all other things and people. It is a process by which we see ourselves "from the outside"—that is, from other people's point of view.

How Do I "Know" Myself?

If every time you tell a joke no one laughs, will you think you are funny? Are you funny? If you want to be the next winner of *The Voice* because you feel that you are a talented singer but no one thinks you can sing, will you see yourself as a good singer? Or perhaps you are not a good singer, but others around you encourage you despite your lack of talent. Cathy has recently been listening to ukulele players at a local bar or restaurant at open mike night. Most of the musicians are talented ukulele players and decent singers. But one young man, although a solid ukulele player, simply does not sing well at all. But every time he sings several songs, the crowd applauds loudly. No one is going to tell him that he sings poorly. Needless to say, he must think he is a good singer indeed!

A sociologist who influenced Mead's work, Cooley (1902), suggested that a necessary way to know yourself is to see yourself in action and watch how other people react to your behavior. You see in their reactions the meaning of your behavior. You learn to take the perspective of others toward yourself. As you interact with others—particularly significant others who are close to you such as parents, caregivers, and siblings—you begin to see yourself from the viewpoint of others. Indeed, family members are often the child's most significant others (Cooley 1902; Erickson 2003). This process is called the **looking-glass self**: The reactions of others serve as

mirrors in which people see and evaluate themselves, just as they see and evaluate other objects in their social environment. In Cooley's (1902) view, we imagine how our behavior appears to others, we imagine how others evaluate our behavior, and we feel pride or shame about others' evaluations of us. Based on our interpretation of others' reactions, we develop feelings and ideas about ourselves. Importantly, for a social self to emerge, it needs a mirror (other people) that reflects its image.

There are several important points thus far to note. First, *self-conception is a social process and arises in social interaction.* What makes us human depends on and is only achieved through interaction with others. For Cooley (1902), primary groups such as family, peers, and sometimes other groups such as religious groups are most important for the initial development of the self. Second, *self-conception is based on how we think others see us*, not on how they actually see us. In fact, we may be inaccurate about how we think others see us and misjudge others' percep-tions, but we can only imagine ourselves as we imagine how others see us. We are sure you can think of a friend who seems totally clueless or is totally off the mark about how somebody else actually views him or her. Regardless, these inaccurate views influence a person's self-view.

Perceptions of how we think others see us are referred to as **reflected apprais-als**, perceptions of how others actually see us are called **actual appraisals**, and perceptions of self are called **self-appraisals**. Empirical evidence shows that there is a moderate correlation between reflected appraisals and self-appraisals more so than between actual and self-appraisals (Felson 1985). Reflected appraisals are most impor-tant in the development of the self-concept when there are no clear criteria or objec-tive feedback as a basis for self-views. For example, perceptions of one's own physical attractiveness or popularity are more likely to be influenced by how you think others view you (i.e., by reflected appraisals) than perception of oneself as a math student (grades and teacher evaluations provide tangible feedback) or as an athlete (perfor-mance and evaluations by coaches). As we shall see, reflected appraisals are important when we examine the development of racial identities in the next chapter.

Third, our *self-conception, although fairly stable, is also mutable—it can change over time.* How? New relationships (such as a romantic partner or mentor), new achievements (such as mastering a new sport), and new experiences (such as going into the Peace Corps) can change the way you view yourself. Also events, such as aging, illness, or social relocation, throughout one's life may reconstruct the self (Weigert and Gecas 2003). The genesis of an individual's self, then, continues throughout his or her lifetime. Karp, Holmstrom, and Gray (1998), for example, examine how college students' views of themselves change over time as they tran-sition from the high school years through the college years. It is an important time period because individuals are going out on their own for the first time, leaving home. It is a time where many students leave their old-town identities behind to some extent and have a chance to reinvent themselves over time. College provides an opportunity to develop and enact new aspects of the self often consistent with the person they wish to become. How has the college experience or a new work experience changed your self-conception, if at all, so far?

How Do We Learn to Take the Perspective of Others?

Can you remember yourself as an infant? What are your first memories of your-self, and how old were you? Most likely, you are not able to remember any of your

experiences before the age of 2 and, as mentioned previously, your first words were not *me* or *myself.* This is because you were not aware of being separate from others before this age. Therefore, you do not have any "thing" or "self" to hang your memories onto because it had not emerged by this time. This is not to say that you were not human before the age of 2 but rather your sense of the social self had not fully emerged.

Like Cooley, Mead (1934) recognized that you can acquire a sense of self only in interaction with others. Babies do not naturally develop into human adults without interaction (Couch 1989). Unfortunately, there are cases of extreme isolation of children where these children never completely developed because of the detrimental effects of long-term social isolation. For example, in one case a child, Anna, spent the first six months of her life in a children's home and then lived with her mother and grandfather in an abusive situation for 5.5 years. Anna was kept in an attic-like room, receiving very little attention and interaction, and survived on milk for 4 years. When she was found at age 6, she had little strength, could not speak, and had little affect (e.g., little expression of emotion, and did not smile or laugh). She received treatment and, over time, was able to attain the skills comparable to a 2.5-year-old mental level, before she died of a blood disorder at the age of 10 (Davis 1947).

In another famous case, in 1970 a 13-year-old girl, Genie, was discovered in California. She had been in isolation since the age of 2 by an abusive father and a mother who was also abused. Genie had been locked in a room, tied to a potty chair most of the time, and was rarely spoken to by anyone. She survived on baby food and cereal. When she was found, she could not speak or stand upright. She scored only as well as a 1-year-old on intelligence tests. Genie underwent intensive training at a children's hospital that continued with foster parents and scientists. Genie was able to learn some signs and acquire some speech, but it was very limited. Today, she lives in a residential home for adults and does not speak or sign. The story is more complicated than this, but suffice it to say, this extreme lack of interaction and human touch has devastating effects on the development of language and, in turn, on the emergence of self.

The self arises in interaction, and this emergence is dependent upon close contact. The longer the isolation, the more difficult it is to overcome the effects. Neurologists, for example, find that interactions with others (i.e., the sight, touch, smell, and intense involvement through language and eye contact) affect the number and sophistication of neuron links within the brain that, in turn, are the key to creativity and intelligence later in life (for an interesting discussion of the importance of maternal contact for associated behavioral and responses to stress in rat offspring, see Weaver et al. 2004, "Epigenetic Programming by Maternal Behavior"). In addition, the number of words an infant hears each day is one of the key predictors of competence and intelligence, along with emotional encouragement (Hart and Risley 1995). Human infants are very interested in people and their behaviors, and social interaction is key to activating children's ability to learn (Meltzoff et al. 2009). In addition to the experience of severe physical, emotional, and social neglect, Anna and Genie, no doubt, heard very few words as young children.

Most children, thankfully, do acquire a social self, and Mead provided more detail than Cooley about how this happens. Do infants blush? Do they get embarrassed? Do they feel shame or guilt? No, they do not. Why? What is necessary in order to feel embarrassment or guilt? To answer these questions,

we take a look at Mead's stage approach—a contingency model in the sense that individuals must pass through one stage before going on to the next stage. Importantly, the key to his stages is the process of learning to role-take. **Role-taking** involves learning to adopt the perspective of others by imagining being in their position—that is, seeing yourself from another's perspective. We do this all the time as seen by the conversations we have in our heads. We anticipate another's response to our behavior, and then plan how we will respond to them. Infants, then, do not blush or feel embarrassment or guilt because they do not have a social self yet—they cannot take the perspective of another person at this point (Shott 1979). (We will discuss role-taking emotions, such as embarrassment and guilt, in Chapter 7.)

Before individuals can role-take, they must have learned to manipulate symbols (i.e., acquire the process of mind). During the first stage, the **preparatory stage**, children imitate behavior and gestures. At this point, they do not have a sense of self separate from others (i.e., the self is not yet an object), but they do begin to learn to use symbols as discussed previously. This ability to use symbols is necessary before moving into the **play stage**. In this stage, children learn to take the role of particular others. They pretend to take on the roles of particular people, either real or imagined, such as teacher, firefighter, mom, dad, baby, Supergirl, or Batman—that is, as Mead (1934) suggests, they play at being something like a mom or superhero. They try out different roles, one at a time, and learn the appearance and behaviors associated with each role (Stone 1981). In doing so, they try to enact the behaviors of that role, such as pretending to give communion in the role of priest. Or they may tie a towel around their shoulders in the form of a cape to become a superhero. For several years, Cathy's daughter, Ainura, pretended to be "Purple Power Supergirl" (with cape and accessories). She, too, remembers fondly her Superman cape, and of course being a captain of a submarine. (Of course, as we know from Edna in the *Incredibles* film, capes are no longer fashionable for superheroes.)

In the play stage, children also learn that a number of possible roles exist, yet they do not realize that roles are intertwined with other roles. For example, they do not understand that their father is also an uncle, a brother, a son, and a musician or that the mail carrier is also a mother and a softball player. Their play involves only a single role relationship like hide-and-seek. In this game, you only need to know who is *it* and who *is not it*. In general, children in this stage view their relationships from a "me" point of view as they relate to one other person. There is Mom and me, Dad and me, my sister and me, etc. Finally, kids in this stage have a difficult time keeping complex rules of games in their heads. Have you ever watched 3- and 4-year-olds play soccer? They have a really difficult time knowing which way to run, whom to kick the ball to, and even where their "team's" goal is located! Often they play in teams of three players to keep it simple, and even then it is often chaos but fun chaos nevertheless!

In the final stage, the **game stage**, children learn more complex role-taking abilities. Now they can imagine the roles of several people reacting toward them *at the same time*. They can imagine the viewpoints of several others at the same time. Mead (1934) provides the example of baseball, wherein in order to play, you have to keep in mind several different roles at once. Baseball, as well as many other games and activities like playing out relationships among characters on favorite TV shows, requires cooperation and coordinated action because the players have to assume the role of all the players at once. In

addition, during the game stage, children are capable of learning the rules of complex games as a result of this complex role-taking. As well, they begin to understand that some roles are related to other roles and that the same person can be in many relationships at the same time. They also learn that there are categories for types of relationships in general, such as the father–daughter relationship, and that other people have these relationships too besides themselves. Cathy remembers discovering that her great aunt Edna was actually her dad's aunt. In effect, she learned a new category and relationship—the great aunt category and the great aunt–great niece relationship (Cathy was quite scared of her growing up until she was in her late teens!).

The final part of the game stage is the ability to role-take the perspective of the larger community, referred to as the **generalized other**. Here, children learn the expectations of social groups to which they belong (such as teams, neighborhoods, church groups) and eventually more abstract groups as well such as "society-at-large." Children begin to care about what *they* think and how *they* would view them if they engaged in a particular behavior. *They* refers to those groups that people belong to but also refers to a community of strangers that they do not know. For Mead, the generalized other serves as a form of self-control and ensures cooperation from society's members. The community exercises control over the conduct of individuals because we care what others think, even others that we do not know. Society gets in our heads—and here is the link between self and society. Self-criticism is really social criticism. And the experience of sympathy is possible only when we have learned to role-take; likewise, feelings of guilt, shame, and pride upon role-taking skills (Shott 1979). Little toddlers do not care what strangers think—that is, why they can have tantrums right in the middle of a store and roll around on the ground! They do not care, but most adults do care what strangers think. If adults did not care, interaction in public places would look very different. Adults have internalized the communal norms and values (the generalized other), which affects their behavior. Of course, children approaching 8 or 9, and then even more so in middle school, begin to really care what others think, particularly their peers (see Adler and Adler 1998). The generalized other is seeping in and continues as children grow.

Although Mead focused heavily on the socialized side of the self, he also claimed that there is a spontaneous and impulsive side of the self. He argued that the self is composed of two aspects: the **Me** and the **I**. The Me, based on the view of significant others and the generalized other, is a set of attitudes toward the self. It is the socialized side of the self—the part that takes into consideration the views of others and society. "What would they think of me!?" The I is the spontaneous, active, and sometimes impulsive side of the self. Have you ever said to yourself, "I can't believe I just did that!" The I and the Me have an internal dialogue with one another. For example, Cathy was at a church service a number of years ago sitting in one of the back rows, and a few church members were performing a short skit up near the alter. For some reason, unbeknownst to her, she laughed out loud at a line said by one of the performers. Unfortunately, she was the only one who laughed at this time, in an otherwise silent room of people. Everyone in the church turned around and looked at her. Me, the socialized side of herself, could reflect on what she (the I) had just done. The I and the Me allow for self-reflexivity— her Me looked back upon herself and reflected on what her I had just done. Poor her!

What Other Processes Are Involved in the Emergence of the Social Self?

The emergence of the self does not simply involve the reflected appraisals process. It is more complex, as noted by Cooley (1902; Weigert and Gecas 2003) and symbolic interactionists today. Although how we think others see us is important, we are also **active agents** in the development of our selves. We actively seek to understand and affirm who we think we are. For example, as we shall see in the next chapter, as boys and girls learn about their gender, they actively seek out what it means to be a boy or a girl (Cahill 1989).

In addition, **social comparison processes** are at play in the emergence and continued development of our social selves. Leon Festinger (1954:117), a central figure in social comparison processes, stated, "There exists, in the human organism, a drive to evaluate his opinions and abilities." Often, people draw upon social comparisons with others when they evaluate themselves in terms of their own abilities and opinions. **Social comparisons** are defined as "the process of thinking about information about one or more other people in relation to the self" (Wood 1996:520–21). According to the theory, people learn about and assess themselves through comparisons with other people, particularly when they cannot rely on objective measures in their self-evaluations. So, for example, an aspiring actress may try to assess her acting abilities by comparing her own abilities to those of other aspiring actresses around her.

Festinger's (1954) original theory focused on comparison of one's opinions and abilities. People also make social comparisons to evaluate their own emotions, personality traits, and self-concepts (Suls and Wheeler 2000). Two important questions that more recent social comparison theorists ask are the following: (1) What motivates us to make social comparisons with others besides self-evaluation? (2) What are some types of comparisons that people make?

Besides self-evaluation (the central motive in Festinger's [1954] theory), other motives for making social comparisons are to create a positive view of the self (i.e., self-enhance), to build self-esteem, and to improve oneself (Hogg 2000; Tajfel and Turner 1986; Wood 1989). Specifically, some research shows that individuals make **downward comparisons**, where they compare themselves to less fortunate others, for self-enhancement and self-esteem motivations. For example, a student may compare her SAT scores to students with lower scores to increase her self-esteem. In contrast, sometimes individuals make **upward comparisons**, where they compare themselves to someone deemed socially better in some way, for self-improvement. For example, an aspiring singer compares himself to professional singers as a way to motivate himself to improve his skills.

A relatively new development in social comparison theory is the differentiation between realistic and constructive social comparisons (Goethals and Klein 2000). **Realistic social comparisons** as self-evaluations are based on "actual information about social reality" (Goethals, Messick, and Allison 1991:154). That is, people compare themselves to real others (e.g., family members, friends, peers, coworkers) to evaluate themselves. In contrast, **constructive social comparisons** as self-evaluations are based on "'in-the-head' social comparisons based on guess, conjecture, and rationalization" about social reality (Goethals et al. 1991:154). In this case, individuals may ignore social reality and instead fabricate, make up, manufacture, and construct persons for comparison. For example, Wood, Kallgren, and Preisler (1985), in a study of social comparisons

made by cancer patients, found that, at times, cancer patients invented comparison targets—that is, they compared themselves to cancer patients that they imagined as less fortunate to make themselves feel better about their situation. Sometimes people may use realistic social comparisons when they are seeking objective self-appraisal (e.g., to gauge class rank when deciding what colleges to apply to) and use constructive social comparisons for self-serving purposes (e.g., to maintain self-esteem; Goethals et al. 1991). There may be times, however, when people want an objective evaluation but use constructive evaluations to make that evaluation. This may be most likely when they do not have the real comparison data they need or when that information is too costly to obtain (Goethals and Klein 2000).

Finally, scholars study the association between downward and upward social comparisons and health outcomes such as anxiety and depressive symptoms, negative self-evaluations, and positive self-esteem (Steers, Wickham, and Acitelli 2014; Tesser, Millar, and Moore 2000). One study examined how a sample of college students may use social comparisons on Facebook, such as comparing the number of likes or comments other people have posted on their updates to those of their peers (Steers et al. 2014). People could also use others' updates to compare themselves to a friend's failing grade, acceptance into a prestigious college, new and exciting relationship, or received award. They found that students who spent a great deal of time on Facebook (including just viewing) were more likely to compare themselves to others and, in turn, experienced more depressive symptoms. Spending more time on Facebook on a daily basis may allow for more opportunity to make social comparisons to peers. Often people's status updates are positive, showing only an idealized view of the self and their experiences or activities. When people view these status updates, this may increase their negative feelings.

In addition to social comparisons, we can also come to know ourselves from our own accomplishments of our efforts. When we can master something or make something happen, referred to as **self-efficacy**, we feel a sense of control, and this, in turn, affects how we see ourselves (Gecas and Schwalbe 1983). Imagine a child who just learned to walk or built a large tower of blocks—it feels good! Of course, she still looks for others' positive responses and evaluations of her newly acquired skills. For example, after a child masters something like rolling a ball to another person, she waits for her audience to give her high praise for that glorious feat. People have different opportunities to acquire mastery depending on their circumstances—for example, some occupations allow for more flexibility in developing new abilities than other occupations (e.g., a trauma surgeon versus a coffee barista).

Once the self is formed, it is possible to resist others' evaluations because they conflict with our prior self-conception. We can also selectively choose with whom we hang out in order to manage conflicting evaluations from others. This strategy for the development and protection of the self is called **selective association**. Some gay and lesbian Christians, for example, actively select their audiences that they associate with in order to protect themselves from negative evaluations, either from conservative Christians or from non-Christian gay men and lesbians who feel negatively toward Christianity. (Also, see O'Brien [2004] for a discussion of how gay and lesbian individuals negotiate the conflict between Christianity and homosexuality.)

Finally, there is an extensive literature that examines **cross-cultural differences** in the conception of the self. Much of the research on the self has

developed from and been applied to a Western notion of the self—that is, a self that is perceived as autonomous, independent, and bounded. This notion, however, is challenged by some cross-cultural research. For example, Luriia (1974), in a study of peasants in a remote area of Uzbekistan in the early 1930s, found that when the people were asked to describe themselves, they often provided events that had occurred in their lives, descriptions of their neighbors, and evaluations of the groups to which they belonged instead of a list of attributes or dispositions. Tellingly, they spoke about their evaluations of their groups in terms of "we" rather than "I."

In addition, Markus and Kitayama (1991) suggest that people in Asian cultures, such as in Japan, and those in Western cultures, such as in the United States, may hold different views of the self, others, and the interdependence of the two. An American view, for example, stresses, "the attending to the self, the appreciation of one's differences from others, and the importance of asserting the self" (Markus and Kitayama 1991:224). The Japanese, in contrast, emphasize, "attending to and fitting in with others and the importance of harmonious interdependence between them" (Markus and Kitayama 1991:224). The so-called Western view, referred to as the **independent self**, perceives the individual as independent, self-contained, and autonomous—one who comprises a unique set of traits, abilities, motives, and values as well as behaves primarily as a result of these internal attributes. People construe themselves as individuals whose behavior is made meaningful mainly by reference to one's own thoughts, feelings, and actions rather than by reference to the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others. This view is seeing the self as an autonomous, independent person. Others around us are important but primarily because they are sources that can verify and confirm our sense of self (i.e., reflected appraisals).

In contrast, the **interdependent self**, claimed to be exemplified in Asian, African, and Latin American cultures as well as in some southern European cultures, is characteristic of seeing oneself as part of ongoing social relationships. The emphasis is not on being distinctive from others but rather on how to fit in with other people and be connected in particular contexts, to fulfill and create obligations in relationships, and to become part of various interpersonal relationships in different social contexts. The self, then, is very context-dependent. The focus is not on the "inner self" but the relationships of the person to other actors (Esyun, Shumpei, and Creighton 1985; Markus and Kitayama 1991). Other actors are assigned much more importance and will carry more weight when one decides one's own behavior in social contexts.

These two construals of the self are illustrated with the following sayings. "In America, 'the squeaky wheel gets the grease.' In Japan, 'the nail that stands out gets pounded down'" (Markus and Kitayama 1991:224). Another illustration is found in a comparison between an American company and a Japanese supermarket. "A small Texas corporation seeking to elevate productivity told its employees to look in the mirror and say 'I am beautiful' 100 times before going into work each day. Employees of a Japanese supermarket that was recently opened in New Jersey were instructed to begin the day by holding hands and telling each other that 'he' or 'she is beautiful'" (Markus and Kitayama 1991:224). These cultural differences in how the self is construed are also seen in the meaning of words in different languages. For example, the word *wa* in Japanese means the harmonious ebb and flow of interpersonal relations; it is said that it is important not to disturb the *wa*. And according to Esyun and colleagues (1985), in Japan

selfness is confirmed only through personal relationships and is seen as a fluid concept that can change through time and across situations according to these relationships.

In American culture, too, there are subcultures in which the theme of interdependence is central to how the self is construed (Markus and Kitayama 1991). For example, Quakers value and promote interdependence, as do many small towns or rural communities. And women may be more likely than men on average to lean toward the interdependent self, depending on their social group memberships. As we shall see in later chapters, these construals of the self sometimes have consequences for cognitive processes and behavior in social situations.

A fairly recent cross-cultural study compared the emotions experienced by a sample of college students in Japan and in the United States as they thought about a variety of daily life situations they have experienced (e.g., good interactions with family members, participation in a sports activity, class got canceled, took an exam, late for an appointment, argument with a friend, and skipped class) (Kitayama, Mesquita, and Karasawa 2006). The authors found that the American students experienced an individually oriented emotion, pride, more strongly in positive situations than the Japanese students, while the Japanese students felt more strongly with friendly feelings. American students also felt more strongly the individually oriented emotion, anger, in negative situations than the Japanese students. This study provides some evidence that cross-cultural differences in the conception of the self seem to also affect the intensity of reported emotions in positive and negative situations. Individuals with independent selves may experience more intensely individually oriented emotions such as anger, pride, and frustration, while individuals with interdependent selves may experience more intensely relationship-oriented emotions such as friendly feelings and sympathy. In Chapter 7, on emotions, we will discuss in detail how culture affects the experience and expression of emotions.

How Do We Present Our Selves to Others in Interaction?

What do professional wrestlers, presidents, and prostitutes all have in common? Erving Goffman (1959), a sociologist who was heavily influenced by social anthropologists, provides us with a particular answer. They all are like actors on the stage in a theater, attempting to manage particular impressions of themselves that they present to their audiences (another person or a group of people). All three categories, then, consist of people who work, both consciously and unconsciously, at their presentations of selves to others in face-to-face interaction (and in the media). Professional wrestlers manage their performances with great precision, and so do politicians and prostitutes. All are concerned, for example, about their dress and appearance, their use of body language, tone of voice, and their choice of words.

In fact, Goffman (1959) views all of us as impression managers who often use carefully calculated tactics designed to make a particular impression on others. For example, when we go for a job interview or on a first date, we are particularly concerned about how we come across to others. We often try to present a socially acceptable image to others, and in many situations, this entails being seen as likable and competent. Intentional use of tactics to manipulate the impression others form of us is called **impression management** (see also Chapter 5 on

social cognition and the notion of emotion management in Chapter 7). When we use techniques of impression management, we are trying to influence the definition of the situation by attempting to control the information about ourselves that others have of us. Impression management involves the impressions given (i.e., the impressions we believe that we are giving) and the impressions given off (i.e., the impressions that others in the interaction have of us). Social interaction, then, is viewed as a kind of drama where we are, in a sense, giving a performance in front of an audience (another person such as a dating partner or potential coworkers at a job interview).

In order for the performance to occur, the actor prepares her **appearance** or her personal front (Goffman 1959). This may involve choice of clothes, grooming, habits like chewing gum, personal possessions displayed, accent, vocabulary, body movements, adornments, gestures, posture, and facial expressions, to name a few (remember the example regarding odor earlier in this chapter?). Through our appearance, we indicate the kind of person we are. Of course, appearance also includes, age, size, gender, and indicators of race and ethnicity, for example. The performer also may manipulate the **setting** in which the interaction is to take place. For example, if an actor is planning a party, he works on the scenery and props, such as decorations, food or drinks, and selection of music that will be used by his audience at the party to convey a particular impression and mood. Think of a dentist's office. What are the props and scenery used to convey competence? Finally, the performance involves the **manner/demeanor** adopted by the actor such as one of deference, assertiveness, politeness, or aggressiveness. All three elements are used to create the desired image and definition of the situation. Goffman suggests that in performances actors tend to present idealized versions of themselves and underplay those aspects of self that appear incompatible with that version.

Besides manipulating appearance, setting, and demeanor, people may also use **ingratiation tactics** to give off a particular impression—that is, use tactics to get someone to like them. For example, they may pretend to share the other person's views on issues even though they privately disagree. Or they may use flattery in order to enter into the good graces of their audience. Finally, they may exaggerate their own admirable qualities or, in contrast, "play dumb." For example, Orenstein (2000) found that many girls believed that boys like it when they act helpless. Cathy remembers her mother always telling her to let the boy win when she played games or sports. She happened to be pretty good at pool because she had a pool table in the basement, and her dad and she would often play after dinner. When she invited her first "boyfriend," Steve, over, of course, they played pool. Following her mom's sage advice, she let him win—over and over again. Weeks passed, and one day Steve and Cathy went over to her friend Terry's house who had a pool table. They played teams: Steve and Cathy against Terry and her boyfriend. Cathy completely forgot about letting Steve win, and instead, she played pool as she usually did. Needless to say, Steve was dumbfounded. She was caught in her own performance. The good news was that Steve couldn't have cared less that she could beat him in pool!

In the previously given example, Cathy felt very embarrassed because her whole performance had been disrupted! Goffman (1959) identified the fragile nature of performances and the embarrassment or shame actors feel when their performances are disrupted. He noted that it takes very little to throw off a

performance, such as the young teenager who acts "cool" and then trips. Goffman said that actors **lose face** when they fail to give off the desired impression. When performances are thrown off or interrupted, we try to **save face** (Goffman 1969). For example, we may give accounts of why the performance is thrown off. For example, Cathy told Steve that her mom told her to let him win! Blame Mom! Goffman stated that we may use **defensive practices** such as apologies or excuses, as in the previously given example. As well, the audience often can help the actor out by using **protective practices**. For example, they may ignore the performance altogether (e.g., by not mentioning that one's pants zipper is unzipped during a lecture) or use some kind of tact in the situation to let the actor off the hook. They may also simply forgive the actor for her transgressions. The audience's support for an actor's performance is somewhat self-serving because helping others to save face also makes interaction easier to maintain for the actor and the audience. If we, as the audience, help others to save face, they are more likely to help us when we need support in interaction.

Many performances and their preparation require regions, or places set off in some degree by barriers of perception. The front region, or *front stage*, is where the actors present their performance for the intended audience, such as a living room for a party, a sanctuary of a church for a wedding, or a seating area of a restaurant for dining. In contrast, the back region, or *back stage*, is where the actors prepare, rehearse, and rehash performances. This stage is off-limits to the audience, such as a kitchen of a restaurant, or boardrooms of a corporation. Some spaces can be both front and back stages but at different times, such as a living room for a party. You can see the wonderful putting on and taking off of character as you watch waitpersons go through the kitchen doors of a restaurant. Sometimes back stages are exposed, such as when political or religious scandals are revealed to the audiences.

Much of our interaction with others does have some element of performance. For example, think of the performance of self that takes place in job interviews. We are very conscious of what impressions we give off to others, particularly in situations where we do not know the audience well yet want to make a good impression.

Segue: The Symbolic Interaction Approach and Identity Processes

Symbolic interactionists recognize the importance of learning symbols—language and other means of communication through interaction with others. In this interaction, we engage in the process of naming. In doing so, we approach our world as a set of categories of things. We learn what sorts of things are similar to each other such as flowers, animals, foods, holidays, days or months, and rituals. Importantly, we learn to refer to ourselves in terms of these categories, giving us a social self.

In the next chapter, we continue to draw upon the symbolic interactionist perspective to explore how people categorize themselves and others based on all types of characteristics such as race, ethnicity, age, social class, as well as physical appearance and types of qualities such as being fat, lazy, good-natured, and tenacious. Specifically, we address two more fundamental questions of symbolic interaction: (1) How do individuals socially construct their own identities? (2) And, in turn, how do these identities affect social interaction?

Suggested Readings

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