Social Interaction & Performance: Crash Course Sociology #15

Crash Course: Sociology
https://youtube.com/watch?v=UUukBV82P9A
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/UUukBV82P9A

You're daydreaming in class when the teacher calls on you and asks you a question. You don't know the answer, so you look desperately around the room for help. Finally, one of your classmates whispers it to you. So you say the answer, and the moment of terror is over. You go back to daydreaming, the teacher goes back to teaching, and everyone's happy. A lot of stuff just happened there. Stuff that raises many questions. Like, why are you worried about giving the right answer? Why are you worried about answering the question at all? And why does your classmate help you out, when it could get them in trouble? If you want the right answers to these questions, we need to talk about social interaction. And we also need to talk about reality. Because, according to some sociological theories, the reality of your social world – in your classroom and beyond – is basically a huge, life-long stage play.

[Theme Music]

Social interaction is simply the process by which people act and react in relation to others. Whenever people converse, or yell, or fight, or play sports, that's social interaction. And any place you find social interaction, you're going to find social structure.

Social structure consists of the relationships among people and groups. And this structure gives direction to, and sets limits on, our behavior. Because our relationships establish certain expectations of everyone involved, depending on the social setting.

This is really obvious in a classroom: The teacher teaches and the students learn, because that's the expectation for that relationship, in that setting. But if you run into a teacher, say, at the mall, you both behave differently – and probably awkwardly – because the expectations for your interaction in that social setting have changed. Now, this still doesn't tell us why these relationships work the way they do.

But it does tell us where to look. If our interactions are a matter of expectations, then we need to understand how those expectations are set, and for that we need to talk about social status. Status is a position that a person occupies in a society or social group.

It's part of their identity, and it defines their relationships with other people. So, the status of "teacher" defines how a teacher should relate to their students. But statuses aren't just professions: gender, race, and sexual orientation are all social statuses, as are being a father, or a child, or a citizen. And all the statuses held by a single person make up that person's status set. That status set can tell us a lot about a person, because statuses exist in a hierarchy, with some statuses being more valued than others. So if I tell you that someone is a white middle aged male CEO, then you can make some pretty reasonable guesses about his education, wealth, and the power he holds in society.

And you've probably noticed that there are different kinds of statuses; for example "white," "middle-aged," and "male" are pretty different from the status of "CEO." The first three are all ascribed statuses. Ascribed statuses are those in which a person has no choice; they're either assigned at birth or assigned involuntarily later in life. Race, for instance, is an ascribed status assigned at birth, while the ascribed status of "middle-aged" happens at a point later in life. CEO, on the other hand, is an achieved status – it's earned, accomplished, or obtained with at least some effort on the person's part. Professions, then, are achieved statuses. So is being a student, or a parent.

Beyond this difference, there's also the fact that some statuses are more important than others. A master status is the status others are most likely to use to identify you. This can be achieved, like "professor," or ascribed, like "cancer patient." And as that example shows you, a master status doesn't need to be positive or desirable.

In fact, it doesn't even need to be important to the person who holds it. It just needs to be important to other people, who use the status as their primary way of locating that person in the social hierarchy. Also, statuses tend to clump together in certain ways.

Most CEOs are college educated, for example, but they aren't always. And a mismatch or contradiction between statuses is called a status inconsistency. When we talk about PhD students working as baristas, we're really bringing it up in that way, because there's a status inconsistency between PhD and barista.

At least in the industrialized world, service workers aren't "supposed" to be highly educated. Now that's all very interesting, you might say, but we still haven't said that much about social interaction. And you're right: status gets us started, but if we want to get into how people behave, then we need to talk about roles.

If status is a social position, then roles are the sets of behaviors, obligations, and privileges that go with that status. So a person holds a status, but they perform a role. Keep that word in mind: Perform.

Now, since a person can have multiple statuses, they can have multiple roles too. But a single status often has multiple roles that go with it. For example, a teacher's role in the classroom is to teach and lead students. But in the faculty lounge, the status of teacher has another role; acting as a colleague to other teachers, or as an employee to the principal – roles that require a whole different bunch of behaviors than those found in the classroom. But all of the roles attached to the single status of "teacher" make up that status' role set. All statuses have role sets.

And various role sets can sometimes demand contradictory behaviors of the person who holds that set. When the roles attached to different statuses create clashing demands, that's known as role conflict. Parents who work, for instance, often need to decide between the demands of their jobs and the demands of their families, which can lead to role conflict.

And even the roles within a single status can create contradiction, in what we call role strain. A student who has responsibilities for class, but also for basketball, and orchestra, and the yearbook committee, experiences role strain as they try to balance the competing obligations of these roles, all within the context of their status as a student. Now sometimes, whether it's because of conflict, strain, or other reasons, people just disengage from a certain role, in a process called role exit.

This can be voluntary, like quitting your job, or involuntary, like getting dumped. In either case, it's rarely as simple as just walking out the door, because roles are a part of who we are. So exiting a role can be traumatic, especially without preparation, or if the exit isn't by choice.

Now, we've been talking about roles as though they're prescriptive, or that they totally determine our behavior. But they don't! Roles are guidelines, expectations that we have for ourselves and that others place on us. We may or may not internalize those expectations, but even if we do, our behavior still isn't completely controlled. But why do statuses come bundled with roles in the first place? Why can't I just not perform my role?

The answer is complicated, but part of it is that, well, reality itself is socially constructed. I mean, there's nothing in the laws of physics that says that some people are teachers, and that those people get to ask questions, and students have to answer them. But that

doesn't mean these statuses aren't real and don't have real roles attached to them.

One good way of thinking about this is known as the Thomas Theorem, developed by early 20th century American sociologists William Thomas and Dorothy Thomas. It states, "If people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." In other words, statuses and roles matter, because we say they do. The perception creates the reality.

So the reason you can't just not perform your role is that, even if you don't think it matters, everyone else does think it matters! So the student who refuses to answer a question gets in trouble, while the teacher who refuses to teach and just hangs out drinking wine with their feet up on their desk gets fired. If you have the status of a teacher, people expect, even demand, that you do the things teachers are expected to do.

How you feel about your status doesn't really enter into it. And we know who's a teacher and who's a student based on our background assumptions, our experiences, and the socialization that teaches us about norms in various situations. So, this is how your reality becomes socially constructed – you, and everyone around you, uses assumptions and experiences to define what's real.

By interacting with the people around you, and expecting certain behaviors in the context of roles, you actually create the social reality that shapes those interactions that you're having. The fact that this happens in interaction is really important, because your social reality is not just about you. It's about everyone you're interacting with, and their expectations, too.

It's about maintaining a performance. And this idea of performance is really central to a sociological understanding of how people interact. It's the key to what's known as the dramaturgical analysis of social interaction.

This approach, pioneered by Canadian-American sociologist Erving Goffman, understands social interaction as if it were a play performed on stage for an audience. By Goffman's thinking, people literally perform roles for each other, and the point of social interaction is always – at least partly – to maintain a successful interaction that's in line with expectations. That is, to satisfy the audience.

In order to do this, people need to carefully control the information others receive about them, in a process called impression management. Like, if you're out on a first date, you're not gonna talk about how your last relationship ended, because you don't want to create a bad impression. But impression management isn't merely a matter of what you say and don't say.

It's also a matter of what you wear and what you do. That is to say, it's a matter of what Goffman referred to as props and nonverbal communication. Props, as you know, are just objects that performers use to help them make a certain impression: So if you want to look professional, you wear a suit. If you want to look studious, make sure you're reading a book. And the setting can be a prop too: Being the one standing at the front of the classroom is like 50% of what it takes to look like a teacher. And nonverbal communication includes body language – like standing up straight in order to look respectable, and maintaining or averting eye contact – as well as gestures, like waving hello to your friend.

Together, props and nonverbal communication are both examples of what Goffman called sign vehicles: things we use to help convey impressions to people we interact with. Those vehicles are important aspects of the performance, but really the most fundamental distinction is the one between what's part of the performance and what isn't – in other words, what the audience sees, and what they don't. Goffman called this frontstage and backstage.

Frontstage is where the audience is and where the performance happens, while backstage is where the performer can drop the performance and prepare. Often the things we do backstage would totally ruin the performance we're trying to maintain frontstage. A teacher cursing floridly while grading papers would be considered backstage: important preparation for teaching is happening, but if any of her students – that is, the audience – saw her, it would totally ruin the performance, because it defies expectations of how teachers are supposed to act.

And not all performances are one-person shows. The students, for instance, are all on what Goffman calls a team; they're all working together to give a performance collectively for the teacher. This doesn't mean they're all friends, or that they even like each other. It just means that they all need to work together to pull it off the show of being a good, attentive class. This is why your classmate whispers the answer to you: They're helping you maintain the class's performance of attentiveness by acting as a teammate. And the teacher goes on teaching.

It's important to understand that, in Goffman's analysis, the performances that everyone does all the time aren't necessarily adversarial: The students perform for the teacher, and the teacher performs for the students, but everyone involved wants the performance to go smoothly. You may not ever win an Oscar. But according to dramaturgical analysis, your social interactions are where your statuses, roles, and all of the expectations that they entail, come together for you to give, literally, the performance of your life. And that performance is the stuff of social reality.

Today we learned about social interaction. We talked about statuses, how you come to have them, and how they can conflict. Then we talked about how statuses impact your behavior by determining what roles you have. We explored why those roles matter by talking about the socially constructed nature of reality. Finally, we learned about the theory of dramaturgical analysis and how we can understand social interaction as in terms of theatrical performance.

Crash Course Sociology is filmed in the Dr. Cheryl C. Kinney Studio in Missoula, MT, and it's made with the help of all of these nice people.

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