**SOC 3120 Social Psychology**

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**Lecture 12: The Self and Social Order**

A variety of cultural and social factors restrict the nature and development of the self. The identities people can assume in specific situations are only partly open to their choosing. Likewise, one is not entirely free to choose the others with whom one will interact. Moreover, people are pulled in different directions by conflicting expectations, are subject to the community influences, and the special nature of modern life. Today we will consider such ways that culture and society constrain the self.

**Ascription and Achievement:**

Sociologists have long distinguished between two opposing ways that people come to enact various roles:

(1) *Ascription*: This is where a person is assigned a role by others on the basis of biological considerations such as age or sex, or birth into a particular family (identified, for example, by ethnicity or religion). Role taking and role making is influenced by the specific ideas that people have about proper, normal and expected conduct for such individuals. The person is viewed as having a set of characteristics or dispositions by virtue of having been born into a family that sees itself, and is seen by others as having certain characteristics.

Gender, for example, is a particularly significant basis for ascription because it is so pervasive. In most situations, making a role requires the person not only to act from the perspective of the role, but also to do so in a way others will regard as appropriate for his or her gender (e.g. assertive female journalists, lawyers or politicians may more readily be perceived as “pushy” than males). Gender expectations are so powerful because they are inculcated from the earliest stages of socialization, and are frequently taken for granted.

(2) *Achievement*: Some roles are voluntarily assumed, not dependent on birth, but on the attainment of a specific set of qualifications (e.g. occupational and educational roles). Yet even achieved roles are not equally open to all. While there may be no legal restrictions on lower class or racial minority individuals seeking high status positions (e.g. executives, CEO’s, judges, etc.), instrumental things like higher education may be financially beyond the person’s reach, there may be barriers of prejudice or even being able to consider such a future for oneself as realistic in a stratified society.

Given our discussion of these two factors, it is clear that a person’s situated or biographical identity is in many ways not within his or her control. In the U.S. and Canada, the role of people of African descent is often strongly influenced by racial stereotypes. In many circumstances people react differently to men and women, even though gender may be unrelated to what’s going on. In such examples, an ascribed characteristic that is not germane to an activity is used as the basis for establishing situated identity (e.g. in some cultural contexts, assuming that all Filipino women are maids). Even when someone making such an assumption learns otherwise, the interaction that takes place is still likely to be influenced by preconceived ideas about race.

Even a role that a person has achieved the right to enact by acquiring the appropriate qualifications - such as an occupational role - subsequently constrains and shapes the self. Becoming a psychiatrist, for example, often means that one foregoes the opportunity to become an archaeologist, since one has invested so much time and money in preparing for one occupation that changing roles is almost precluded. Not only that, but to pursue an occupation is not only to develop a conception of oneself as, say, an academic, but to be regarded as such by others in an entangled web of social relationships, and to have a significant part of one’s self-esteem wrapped up in it. In extreme cases, this is shown in the example of professional athletes who, when glorified by others, may become almost totally defined by their successful role to the detriment of others (i.e. becoming diminished as persons by their very achievements as athletes).

**Limitations on the Choice of Others:**

Just as social life constrains the development of self by providing self-definitional roles, it also limits the person’s choice of others with whom to interact - and his or her ability to define their appraisals as unimportant. These stem in part from ascription. We don’t choose our parents, our gender, our race or original socioeconomic status. Neither do we choose the web of social relationships into which we are born. In some cultural groups gender relations are strictly separated by patriarchal customs and rules. Similarly, many born White in the U.S. rarely ever interact with African Americans.

Moreover, as individuals in modern society move through a succession of age roles, they encounter a series of others they often don’t choose, but who interact with each other because of their social position (e.g. extended family, employers, teachers). While this may sometimes involve chosen interactions, these may often be on the basis of chance or the decisions of others over whom they have little or no influence.

The ongoing social order that confronts the individual at birth is thus in many ways an unyielding reality to which the person must adjust (e.g. what is considered normal for one’s gender, having to start school at 6, “streaming” certain groups into menial jobs, etc.). A variety of attitudes exist in the social world into which the individual is born, and these shape the formation of the self. While only real because others form their conduct on the basis of learned beliefs, from the standpoint of the person confronting it for the first time, this world is real. It is there as an objective, factual set of conditions that must be taken into account in his or her conduct.

In order to comprehensively account for the development of the self, therefore, we must know the person’s location in the social order. We must know the world of objects and the social arrangements of the family and community into which the person is born. We must know the beliefs and values found in family and community, the education and occupation attained - all of which are strongly influenced by the person’s social position (e.g. gender, race and class).

How does this “obdurate” world influence self-conceptions? Both consciously and unconsciously people arrange their presentations of self in various situations to manifest the qualities and characteristics valued in their social world. The avoidance of low situated self-esteem, or the development of positive self-esteem, sets the terms by which self-presentations are managed, since it is by manifesting valued qualities that the person is able to favorably imagine his or her appearance in the eyes of the other.

The impact of the social order on this process is considerable. Desirable qualities and characteristics are personified by others with whom the person is constrained to interact, and the valued attributes of others are themselves a factual, objective part of the world as far as the child is concerned. The adjustment of conduct is always to a specific set of others and to particular standards of evaluation, and these are a pre-existing part of the world. Only later may one realize that these standards are human creations, not absolutes, and that a variety of other people in society hold different views.

**Conflicting Selves:**

Some of the most important constraints are encountered once the child leaves the confines of family. In a complex society dividing the labor of socialization between various agents and agencies, what parents may expect does not necessarily coincide with the views of teachers and peers (e.g. emphasizing street savvy vs. refinement). Such conflicts between selves are not uncommon in an ethnically, racially and religiously heterogeneous society. Ideal conceptions of the person are not the same for Christians, Jews and other religious faiths, for example, and thus may involve inevitable conflicts between home and school. This may not only impose limitations on the development of the self, but a major task for impression management as well. It may be necessary to play up one’s ethnic or religious identity at home, but to conceal particularly ethnic qualities of manner, dialect or belief on the job or when dealing with members of the wider society. Sometimes this perceived necessity of being a different person leads to a bifurcation of social worlds and of the self (e.g. living a “double life”).

The self is thus shaped by ideal conceptions of what the person ought to be, and these vary by gender, ethnic origin, religion, region, social class, and other factors. Many of these definitions of the ideal person are not only linked to group memberships but also depend to some extent on “us and them” contrasts between groups (e.g. to be Muslim, for example, is not merely to live up to a set of images as to what Muslims ought to be like as defined by Muslims, but to avoid certain patterns of belief or behavior presumed to characterize non-Muslims).

Not all such influences come from the contrast between familial and other standards. Within the family itself, the child may not be able to meet parental expectations, these may be unreasonable or unclear, and the child may be left to flounder in uncertainty and anxiety.

Whether the influences come from within or outside the family, there are occasions in which the individual is confronted with images that cannot be emulated in conduct. Sometimes no presentation of self can be arranged that will adjust to the expectations of others (e.g. others’ race or class biases can be particularly difficult to overcome, particularly if one is marked by patterns of speech or dress that clearly marks you as different). In such cases, the person may form an image of what is desired and present self accordingly, but to no avail, for negative appraisals occur anyway.

What strategies are available when self-presentation make no difference? To some extent one may assert that such negative appraisals have nothing to do with one’s conduct and are thus irrelevant. A child whose teachers persist in appraising him as stupid can cease to take their judgements seriously (as did Churchill). Indeed, s/he may even invert their images and make a virtue out of a vice. The child who has come to see him/herself as artistically creative may withdraw from emotional attachment to others if they see this creativity as unimportant or undesirable.

Limits do exist, however, on one’s ability to define others as significant or insignificant as s/he chooses. Parents and teachers must generally be endured, even if their appraisals are painful. Similarly, an employee may see his or her boss’ standards as wrong and beneath contempt, but it is still the boss who calls the shots at work and writes the paycheque.

Moreover, even though withdrawing recognition of others not significant to the self is a way of protecting it, such a strategy is not without cost to the person. Negative appraisals may still raise doubts where none existed before, and continued interaction with people holding such views - which is often unavoidable - may be a constant reminder of the low esteem in which one is held (e.g. co-workers who belittle one as a “slacker,” “rate-buster,” or “brown-noser,” and who may have some input on one’s advancement on the job).

Withdrawing recognition of others is also costly because, in time, it may lead to a shrinking circle of others with whom the person customarily associates, and with respect to whose judgements the self is continually reaffirmed. Eventually the person may be left with only a small circle of confirming others in whose company a positive self-conception may be maintained - or in the extreme the person may retreat to a private fantasy world where imaginary others always give positive appraisals.

Finally, there are limitations on the choices of stories that we may narrate about ourselves in various social settings. Culture provides guidance in the kind of narratives we can acceptably relate (e.g. the American narrative of the “self-made” individual who worked hard to achieve success makes the most sense in a culture rooted in Weber’s Protestant ethic”). While the self may be, in part, a narrative constructed in the stories we tell (about this social object), we may be better able to, say, invent wild stories about our life stories at high School reunions than during job interviews.

**Community and the Generalized Other:**

Finally, self is constrained because people are members of groups, organizations and communities, all of which confront them with a generalized other whose demands must be taken into account. Although problems arise when we attempt to apply the concept of the generalized other to heterogeneous modern societies, it may still be operative at the level of community.

The classic sociological conception of community is of a territorially based social unit, such as a town or neighborhood, that thoroughly embraces the lives of its members - who resemble each other in many respects. The impact of such communities on members is powerful, for it commands the loyalty of the individual and its claims are hard to resist. It is the source of a powerful generalized other that is constantly present as a common standard by which the person can gauge his or her conduct.

This “classic” community provides the social soil in which the person flourishes and to which s/he is bound. As a social unit with a shared set of values, it clearly provides the person with a sense of place, with standards for emulation, and with a set of real others who will reward or punish in these terms. Simultaneously, it is a confining world, for it doesn’t easily permit persons to change their places, and it exacts a great deal of conformity in return for personal security.

In such a community the generalized other *is* the community, and it provides clear psychological horizons for its members. The person is surrounded from birth by familiar and similar others who stand in known, unchanging relationships. Everyday life consists of a familiar round of activities with them, and the life cycle is clearly defined.

The generalized other in such communities makes it possible for people to have well-developed social identities, but it constrains personal identities. People use a shared set of expectations, sentiments, norms and values to examine themselves and achieve a sense of continuity and integration. People link the successive “Me’s” they experience as they interact with each other, treating each experience of self as related to past and future expectations. The shared expectations of the group provide an underlying sense of purpose, along with a way to make sense of the successes and failures of everyday life. The community provides a perspective from which the self can be integrated in terms of the roles and values of the group as a whole (e.g. the 1950's).

But a community that provides so well for social identity makes the construction of personal identity a difficult task. Because there is a widely shared perspective from which to objectify the self, the person has difficulty finding either reasons or ways to define it in different terms. Because the community has a place for the individual and the power to keep him or her there, s/he has difficulty resisting or escaping, and personal identities are more difficult to construct.

The generalized other seems to be a conception well-suited to the classic community with its widely shared set of values, beliefs and expectations. But in more modern, complex societies, there are often fundamental disagreements about such matters. Moreover, inequalities based on class, ethnicity, religion, race, and gender produce not a single culture, but many - such that it is almost impossible to think of society as a whole as a social unit from whose perspective the individual could develop a coherent view of self.

Is it possible to speak of a generalized other at all in modern societies? Such societies have a highly specialized division of labour, contain many competing and conflicting social groups, and create inequalities of income, wealth and power. Hence, the person has knowledge of only a few of the roles the society offers, and little basis for role taking with those whose roles are unfamiliar. Moreover, in such societies people are in many ways unlike each other, as are their perspectives (e.g. middle-class WASP’s may have very different outlooks than lower class, immigrants of a different racial and religious background, and this is true of many other social divisions). Sure people are alike in some respects - as even the most complex and stratified society has a core of culture that all its members share - but generally the effect of all these differences is to create many ways in which people are different from one another.

In complex societies there seem to be many generalized others whose perspectives the person must take into account in everyday life. Each social group, organization or collectivity has its own generalized other, and the person to some extent changes generalized others as s/he moves from one social context to another.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to think there is no more inclusive generalized other in contemporary societies - one that ties the members together and counteracts many of the divergent social forces that separate one community from another. Contemporary people still conceive of themselves as citizens and members of society without regard to the particularities of community. They also share certain very broad ethical principles. To the extent that people are able to conceive of themselves in such a way, they can be said to participate in a common culture that transcends communities and provides a more general “generalized other.”

**The Person in Modern Society:**

The diversity and complexity of modern life have shaped new kinds of people and a new kind of relationship between a person and society. In order to understand this, we must look at the modern community and how individuals define themselves in relation thereto.

Unlike the classic communities of the past, which were largely self-sufficient entities or societies unto themselves (e.g. in the Middle Ages), modern societies contain a great many interdependent communities - few of which are economically self-sufficient. Even small towns and urban ethnic neighborhoods, while likely to be important to their members, are neither self-sufficient nor self-reproductive. They may work outside the neighborhood and frequently interact with strangers. Moreover, globalization is broadening the level of this interdependence all the time.

Hence, while the contemporary community provides a psychological world and a place of identification for its members, it isn’t the same kind of enclosing and secure world as the community of the past. The individual is more keenly aware of the existence of a society whose political and economic significance transcends that of the local community, and the surrounding society is itself a tempting field of opportunities - for both exploration and identification. One’s home town isn’t the only option.

Another major difference from the past has to do with the basis on which people form communities and thus identify with each other. Modern communities are not simply based on territory, but on identification with others on any number of grounds (e.g. shared religious belief, styles and fashions, music, class, an interest in sports, participating in a social movement, race, occupations, etc.)Because there are now so many ways that people may be differentiated from one another, there are also many particular ways for them to feel a likeness with certain others.

The kind of community that develops from a sense of identification with similar others is a rather narrowly defined community often based on quite abstract criteria (e.g. otherwise very dissimilar individuals ignoring this in light of common religious, political ideologies or self-help experiences). Such communities are likely to be dispersed rather than compact, and members may not encounter one another on a day to day basis - relying again on regular meetings or other forms of distance networking.

Modern communities rely as much on a person’s imagination as they do on mundane social life. Contacts with fellow community members may be infrequent, and the sense of community must be sustained by the self-conscious imagining of the nature and scope of the community (although this is less so for communities with an existing organizational structure, such as professional organizations and meetings).

Many observers assert that modern society has drastically transformed the self. Where classic community flourishes the self is a stable object with a strong sense of social identity grounded in the group. People do not spend much time personally securing or maintaining their identities because they take them for granted. However, where communities have to be constructed by finding some basis on which to identify with others, the nature of the person is transformed as much as the nature of the community. The creation and maintenance of personal identity requires more self-consciousness: people must decide or discover who they are in order to know what to do. They can, within certain limits, choose who they are, but they are also faced with some degree of doubt as to the choices to make (e.g. “what do you want to be when you grow up?”) Such choices may lead to regrets, and there may be a strong temptation to identify with no community - to make community and social identity subordinate to a personal identity that places the person ahead of any community.

Ralph Turner has argued that modern people are becoming more inclined to look within themselves and to define as the “real self” those impulses and inclinations they feel are genuinely and spontaneously theirs rather than the external dictates of society. In the language of personal and social identity, those who identify strongly with a community tend to feel comfortable with themselves when their impulses and actions live up to the standards of the community. However, those who don’t have a community based social identity, who feel confined by community or torn between the demands of several communities, may feel that the only authentic expression of themselves is in a personal identity that permits a considerable degree of autonomy. When they feel they are doing what they want to do, and thus pursuing a personal identity, they feel true to themselves.

Social identity in modern society is much more likely to be based on a more or less self-conscious selection of a community as its main support. Whatever its basis, it performs some of the same functions as the community of the past: a set of similar others who can support or be perceived as supporting the person’s definitions of self. Even if widely dispersed, it provides for a sense of continuity and integration, linking various situated identities to the social identity it provides.

People construct social identity through these modern forms of community in a variety of ways. Some try to go back to the ways of the past (e.g. the Amish), and the outside world is important mainly for the “negative” contrast it provides. Yet even when seeking to root social identity exclusively in one community, one need not attempt to construct a classic community. Some participants in social movements, for example, have lives that are exclusively centered in the movement - and every act must have meaning in relation to the movement and its goals.

Most people today have a more tenuous relationship to a community (or communities) with which they identify. One may identify with a community such as a sports league or profession, but not so exclusively that everything you do must somehow be linked to it. Most people find limited forms of community in professions, neighborhoods, social movements etc. They may identify mildly with several communities rather than exclusively with one. They may also move from one to another over time, or stand on the margins of two or more unable to identify with, nor ignore either. And the person may be unable to find any community to identify with.

Where identification with a community is less than total, personal identity is a more salient component of the self. Community identification produces social identity, but the coherence and continuity of the person must also be found in the goals, ambitions, dreams and projects that define personal identity. Thus people must make plans, assert themselves, keep their eyes fixed on a clear image of what they want to be, and, in general, self-consciously construct themselves as autonomous persons. Some will carry this to the extreme, but most will seek to strike some kind of balance between personal and social identity.

The modern person is thus in many ways a more self-conscious being than the resident of a traditional community. The self is not just the product of fixed community that surrounds it from birth and assigns it a place, but something that must be found, constructed, or cultivated. The person must find or make a community, as well as supplement social identity with personal identity.