**SOC 3120 Social Psychology**

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**Lecture 13: The Definition of the Situation:**

Today we will begin to look at Chapter 4: Defining Reality and Accounting for Behavior. The general premise behind much of the material in this chapter is that we can't explain people's behavior merely as the result of social or cultural constraints. Instead, we have to look at them as they act and interact in specific settings and contexts. In these, they form their individual and social acts on the basis of their definitions of the situations. This chapter elaborates the basic processes at play here.

**The Definition of the Situation:**

While we have briefly discussed the definition of the situation already, we now get down to some of the complexities involved in the use and application of this important concept (e.g. how do people define situations? What happens when people cannot define a situation? What about when they can't agree?)

To begin, the word "situation" is not used by interactionists in some of the common sense ways that most people do (e.g. as unusual predicaments from which people try to remove themselves). However, they do refer to situations in terms of spatial and temporal boundaries (i.e. locating activity temporally in relation to other activity, and as occurring in a particular location where we are aware of each other’s presence and interact). A good example would be a graduation: it is an activity occurring at the end of a long series of other activities, at a particular time, for a certain duration, and in a particular place.

When people talk about the situations in which their activities occur, they do not necessarily measure time and space in a purely physical fashion. Rather, they define these from their social perspectives as actual or potential participants. They look at situations from the vantage point of shared ideas about the meaning of events as they occur in time (e.g. parties often take place after a particularly intense period of hard work, like after exams, or when some occasion is being marked). Similarly, place is defined in social terms, such as parties being associated with a place one drinks and mingles; or arguments becoming associated with certain locations, such as one's in-laws. It is not geography, but rather the roles, acts, and objects found in a place that make it a particular situation.

The temporal aspect of life, which Mead termed "emergence," thus relates to the manner in which people define and experience their own and others' activities through time. The present - here and now - is experienced in terms of both past and future. What is happening at this moment is understood in relation to what has already occurred and what is expected (or hoped) will occur later. The "present" is specious, for our consciousness is always moving through time, always focused on what has occurred (or on one's prior acts), or on some imagined future event or act (e.g. going to a hockey game, anticipating lineups, seating, reconstructing the game in terms of past defeats, victories, actions, known players, etc).

Time is important in human conduct because meaning is an emergent property of objects and is never absolutely fixed or established. A hockey game that was hoped to be the harbinger of great things to come is a disappointment to the fans when the team loses (e.g. the opening Olympic game by Canada against Sweden a few years back). When the team eventually turns this loss around and goes on to win Olympic gold, this produces elation. However, at no point is the meaning of "hockey game" fixed, even though the situation has the same name throughout. Rather, meaning is altered with the passage of time. The meaning of the present is shaped by what is expected for the future; as events do or do not occur as expected, a past is created and the meaning of the present is transformed.

Situations and participants are also located in social space. Each human situation is located within the specific context of some other social unit (e.g. "basic training" is located within the military, "funerals" are held by families). Just as the situation has a place in a larger social context, it provides a place for the individual participants in it. Their place, of course, is provided by their roles (e.g. Sargeant and recruit; mourners and the bereaved family).

Both kinds of location are relative and not absolute. People maintain a cognitive grasp of "where" they are relative to the situation and to the larger social context in which that situation exists. Such a cognitive map is given by one's sense of its arrangements of roles and their associated perspectives in relation to one's own. This depends on the fact that we routinely imagine situations as elements or fixtures of groups, organizations and social units (e.g. a "class" is usually held within a university relative to a variety of other situations in a college student's day).

Under some conditions, the relative social and temporal locations of participants in a situation, as well as the larger social context in which it is embedded, can be drastically and swiftly transformed (e.g. a student making a bizarre comment in a classroom can radically change what is going on, and what other people are doing. Instead of a routine class, the situation is transformed into a situation of struggling - covertly and overtly - with the accommodation/labeling of mental illness). The situation is transported from one conceptual domain to another - from one framework of social space and time to another - even while the participants remain in one physical space.

What then is a definition of a situation? The crucial fact is that it is cognitive - it is our idea of our location in social time and space that constrains the way we act. When we have a definition of a situation, we cognitively configure acts, objects, and others in a way that makes sense to us as a basis for acting (e.g. a going away party means that there will be family, friends and well-wishers who will express best wishes, hopes for the future, and hopes that the person in question will keep in touch; a bridal shower means something entirely different). Our definition of the situation consists of what we "know" about what will happen and who will make it happen.

Definitions of situations thus exist in the minds of the individuals who participate in them. Definitions are rooted in the basis of individuals' "knowledge" of the situation, role-making and role-taking in terms of its sensed role structure, acting toward familiar and expected objects, and cooperating in the performance of social acts. Definitions are shared by participants in the sense that each person acts on the basis of a definition that more or less resembles the definition held by others (e.g. members of a jazz band).

There are limits, however, in the extent to which participants can fully share the definition of a situation. Members of a band may be practicing together, and share a sense of their role structure and joint activities. However, the guitarist, as self-appointed leader of the group, may think that things are going well, while the drummer may be restless, bored, or resent the guitarist's bossing the others around. At one level they share a definition of the situation enabling them to construct acts that fit in with the expectations of others in the situation. Each person can employ his or her definition of the situation and its role structure to make sense of the acts of others. At another level, however, they do not share a definition. Band members, acting on the definition that the guitarist is "bossing them around" may sit through the session without saying anything, but consider whether to continue working with him in the future. The guitarist, acting on the "knowledge" that everything is going his way, takes their silence as an indication that everything is going well. Clearly, definitions can be somewhat incongruous and still serve as the basis for interaction - at least in the short term.

Definitions of situations imply roles and identities. Therefore, incongruous definitions of situations imply misidentifications of self and others in relation to the definition of the situation (e.g. unrequited romantic feelings may eventually be discovered between friends). Such incongruous definitions of the situation may persist fro some time before they are discovered. Mutual awareness of roles, identities, and purposes is not fully open, and when it is not, there are severe constraints on social interaction.

**Routine and Problematic Situations:**

The largest part of our everyday conduct occurs within routine situations, however - those with relatively congruent definitions such as having dinner, doing our work, etc. These are routine situations because they are familiar. We can easily name them, anticipate the objects they will contain, know what roles people will assume and who will assume them, and expect activities that strongly resemble those which we have engaged in on previous such occasions.

Everyday life consists largely of a series of routine situations, and many actions in them are quite habitual (e.g. having dinner each day). Many such situations are so thoroughly routine that we appear to be creatures of habit, or actors enacting a script, rather than self-conscious humans making our roles. In this sense, definitions of situations seem to provide not only general guidelines of what to expect and what to do, but also even our lines and bodily movements (e.g."How are you?” “Fine").

One could go further and argue that culture is what ultimately provides our definitions of situations. During the course of socialization, we learn a large number of definitions, along with rules for applying them to the concrete situations we encounter. Thus, from this perspective, every circumstance is seemingly anticipated by culture and we can meet it - provided we have been appropriately socialized and apply the correct definition of the situation.

But matters are not this simple. While it's true that we learn in advance the definitions of many situations, we don't learn all possible definitions, nor does each episode of interaction merely require us to apply a pre-established definition. The cumulative experiences of individuals provide them with many resources with which they can more or less easily construct their conduct. However, they are also continually confronted with unexpected and novel events. Every concrete situation is at least a little bit different from what we expect it to be (e.g. graduation). Moreover, openness to new situations and new meanings is an inherent characteristic of human conduct. We do not learn a fixed and closed set of meanings or definitions of situations, but an open system in which interpretation, although it may sometimes be minimal, is always present to some degree - and always potentially of great significance (e.g. the analogy of learning a language). We may learn many seemingly fixed and pre-established meanings, but also to create new meanings, to consider the possibility that our interpretations of a situation might be wrong, and to face the unexpected events that constantly intrude into human affairs.

Thus, no situation is so routine that habit alone suffices to guide conduct. Even in routine situations people misunderstand each other, fail to get jokes, behave in unpredictable ways, disagree, seek conflicting goals, compete, and in innumerable other ways introduce novelty. At this point, it becomes necessary to replace habit with self-conscious control of conduct.

But most of the unexpected events of everyday life are still problematic within the boundaries of the defined situation. Indeed, what is problematic is always viewed in contrast with what is not. Partygoers can only understand a person's open criticism of the host's cooking in relation to our taken for granted expectations of behavior at a party. While others may think of this behavior as rude and the host feel insulted, it will not as a rule make the definition of the situation itself untenable. That remains the non-problematic background against which the problematic event is viewed.

However, some situations are themselves problematic or become so. Situations that were defined in one way can be redefined; situations that were defined can become undefined; and situations that were defined congruently can become defined less congruently. Weddings can degenerate into family feuds; Valentines's day can turn some intimate dinners into grounds for argument, etc. People can behave in thoroughly unexpected ways, as when drinking, taking drugs, or suffering from mental illness. People’s feelings towards each other change over time at different rates. When such disruptions occur, at least some participants will be baffled until they can reconstruct their definition of the situation and their place in it.

Routine and problematic situations represent two end-points on a continuum. They are really ideal types, for no situation is either fully routine or completely problematic. Actual situations fall at various points between these extremes.

**Role Making and Role Taking in Routine Situations:**

Role taking - the process where one person adopts the perspective of another in order to coordinate a role performance with another - implies a question: how does one person adopt the role of another? How does one know what that perspective is?

We must begin with the attitudes people bring with them to situations. Individuals approach routine situations with the assumption that they will be routine - that objects, acts and others will be much as they usually are and that nothing unusual will take place. Peter McHugh suggests that people bring 3 fundamental assumptions to routine situations:

1. That the conceptions they have of the situation are valid;

2. That others in the situation share their conceptions of it;

3. That so long as these conceptions allow meaningful conduct to take place, there is no need to question them.

(E.g. assuming that one's class is to be taught in a certain room will govern interpretation of what's going on until one discovers that another class is being taught).

We must be careful when referring to the "assumptions" that participants make in entering and acting in routine situations, as this sounds far too self-conscious for what we are talking about. Really we are talking about attitudes, ways in which people are prepared to act towards those situations which are rarely verbalized. Indeed, people do not often tell themselves (or others) what they think is going on in a situation - unless there is a problem.

According to McHugh, people organize meaning in a thematic way as they role make and role take in situations. Entering a specific sociology course, for example, a student assigns meaning to acts, objects and people by linking them to the central theme "sociology course." This provides the basis for interpreting the meaning of situational acts and events, serving to document the theme. This also reinforces the student's sense of the role arrangements of the situation (professor-student).

As interaction proceeds in a routine situation, people attempt to fit together various acts and objects as they attempt to fit together their individual lines of conduct. What took place a moment ago is presumed to have a bearing on what is now occurring, or is about to occur. The outline I frequently put at the beginning of my overheads is (I hope) considered the framework for my subsequent comments and discussion, and each of my statements interpreted as if it should fall under one of the headings. So long as this interpretation can continue in relation to the central theme, the definition of the situation will remain unproblematic. Over time, this organizing theme will be elaborated - this is not just a course, but a boring one, one in which I drift off on interesting tangents, etc. Similarly, as an object, I become either a good or bad lecturer, or helpful or unhelpful to students seeking help.

Problematic events do occur in defined situations, for people act in unexpected or seemingly nonsensical ways (e.g. Profs bragging about grandchildren can only be interpreted so far as relevant to what's going on). The more that situational objects and events are problematic in that they can't be fitted to its theme, the more strenuously and self-consciously people search for patterns of meaning. Such authorship of the definition of the situation cannot be stressed too much. We do not simply respond to objectively present objects and events, we actually create the meanings on the basis of which we act. We create objects in the environment by acting toward them. Objects do merely exist (things do). Objects, in many ways, exist by virtue of people's defining efforts and intentions (though we can't push this too far - for reality resists our definitions in many ways). But in a great many situations of everyday life, the definitions

on the basis of which people act create reality.

One of the most common ways we experience this fact is the self-fulfilling prophecy. If people act on the basis of a given definition of the situation, there is some likelihood that their actions will bring about the conditions that confirm the definition on which they acted (even if circumstances were not originally as they thought them to be). A good example is paranoia. If people react to others on the mistaken assumption that these people don't like them, are talking about them, etc., sooner or later they will become a "notorious character," actually treated with disdain. They will then find evidence that they were "right" all along. Acting on the basis of their definition of the situation, people help to make it a reality.

**The Cognitive Bases of Role Making and Role Taking:**

Continuing with the task of defining the situation in more detail, we must pay particular attention to the kinds of "knowledge" people use in making and taking roles. S.I. emphasizes the cognitive foundations of human conduct, treating behavior as dependent on the content of individual minds as they confront and act within a given situation. There are at least 2 main reasons for stressing that what people know and what they do are interdependent:

1. People must have grounds for deciding between possible alternative acts in order to control their conduct in interaction with each other (e.g. whether someone encountered is likely to be friendly or hostile);

2. Emphasizing the useful knowledge that people rely on implies that even in routine situations, people must be alert to alternative possibilities for their and others' acts. Since few situations are so fixed that one simply follows a script, one must, at least some of the time, be able to use knowledge to write one's lines as the action progresses.

This emphasis on cognition doesn't mean that emotions are unimportant in defining situations. An understanding of the appropriate emotional tone that people are apt to have at various events is important in defining situations (e.g. weddings and funerals). But role taking itself is both a cognitive and emotional process. Often in grasping the perspective of another we attempt to grasp how they feel: role taking often generates empathy.

In order to specify how knowledge informs the processes of taking and making roles, we have to analyze it in some detail. Here, the phenomenological tradition makes an important contribution. Its basic premise is that the members of society share a common stock of knowledge, which is not a random assortment of facts and ideas, but a very structured body of knowledge and procedures for using it. It is not "true" in a scientific sense, but in a practical sense: it helps people effectively decide what to do and to interpret what others are doing.

**Typification:**

Perhaps the most crucial form of knowledge is what Alfred Schutz called "typifications." People know what to expect of one another in particular situations because they "know" that various "types" of people behave in "typical" ways under particular circumstances (e.g. professors in a classroom; doctors in an examination; ministers in a church). Typifications of these individuals consist of a set of expectations and assumptions about what professors, doctors or ministers usually, ordinarily, generally or typically do. So long as their conduct falls within this typification, others can make sense of it, and the identity and definition of the situation goes unchallenged.

A typification is basically an image or a picture that people maintain with respect to a particular role, situation, person or object that organizes or catalogues knowledge of it (e.g. students on the first day may consider an older individual to be the prof., but if s/he sits down with them, will soon realize that this person is a "mature student"). Typification proceeds on the basis of visible and auditory cues. While, at one level, we respond to one another's words and deeds ("discourse"), which serve as the bases for typification and affect the course of interaction, it is also the case that we observe and respond to "appearance" - manners of dress, physical appearance, and demeanor. These further shape the course of interaction by providing us with typifying cues.

Very little about people is actually visible to observers. Physical appearance and a few overt words and deeds constitute all that is directly accessible to others. Thoughts and motivations are hidden, and most situations provide an opportunity for people to display few of their talents. There are vast blank spaces in the selves people present to one another. Yet appearances, acts and words serve effectively as cues on the basis of which to establish the identity of the person and typify his or her acts (e.g. who the doctor is in a medical office). This links the typification to a vast array of knowledge about physicians in order for us to base our conduct toward them, and to interpret their conduct toward us.

Appearance is important not only for initial typification of another, but also for maintaining and refining the typification as interaction proceeds. We may, for example, draw upon appearance, tone of voice, etc. to further typify the doctor as cold or warm, self-confident or uncertain, interested or distracted, about to deliver good news or bad.

Thus, people act in given situations on the basis of typifications. They are able to predict the conduct of others because they identify them as types of people who are likely to behave in ways similar to others of their type. The very process of role taking depends on this ability to typify. People are able to grasp others' attitudes towards themselves only because they can typify their own acts from the others' point of view. For if people regard the conduct of others as typical of certain roles, groups or categories of people, they are also aware that they are typified by others - that whatever they do themselves shapes their situated social identity.

Hence, role taking is a process where people are attuned to the typifications others are using to interpret their behavior. Similarly, role making is a process in which the individual seeks to devise conduct that will induce others to make desired typifications (e.g. it's better to be seen as an interesting rather than a boring conversationalist).

However, it's only partly right to say that people seek favorable typifications through their presentations of self. There are many circumstances in which people contemplate acts that they know or feel will lead to their retypification in undesirable terms. Yet they perform these acts anyway, perhaps because the loss from a possible negative retypification is less than the probable gains (e.g. Enimem's assertion - among others - that "there's no such thing as bad attention"). Moreover, the person's control over conduct is often imperfect, so that many acts don't have the benefit of prior reflection about the possible responses of others (e.g. mistakes, accidents, things one later regrets). Hence, controlling the typifications others form of us is a common focus of our role making efforts in everyday life.

**Probability:**

What people "know" about the world is also organized by probability. People carry with them a store of knowledge about the likelihood of various events, and periodically refer to this knowledge as they try to make sense of the activities of others, or to anticipate how others will see their own acts (e.g. cops wondering if whether making arrests in a hostile crowd will jeopardize their safety).

Such assessments of probability are often secondary to the establishment of typifications. People use typifications to define situations, their roles and identities, and then invoke probability to fill in any additional room for interpretation (e.g. once police identify an angry crowd and its leader, they still may be uncertain what to do, and must bring probability assessments into the picture to weigh alternative actions).

**Cognitive Theories and Inferential Heuristics:**

Typifications refer to how people impose interpretations on environmental stimuli and use the resulting categorizations to select, interpret, and store information about how to act in situations. A related field in psychology similarly talks of inferential heuristics that people use in situations of uncertainty. These are rules that enable people to probabilistically use typifications, even though these (as stereotypes) may result in errors.

For example, there are the heuristics of representativeness (e.g. is a person seen as very “shy and withdrawn” more likely to be a librarian or a lawyer). Another is consistency (e.g. used to interpret past, present, and future information about a person in terms of a trait, such as sexual orientation, that would likely be interpreted differently had that not been put out there). Then there is the rule of economy (e.g. that information in the future can be organized under the same stereotype as in the past). Each of these kinds of interpretive rules can be useful and speed along interaction without too much effort. All the same, they may also be subject to error and often be unfair to the people involved, so care in their use is in order.

**Causality:**

Our stock of knowledge also includes propositions about causality. We generally assume an event has a cause, and that sometimes in order to act effectively we must first establish its cause (e.g. why is one's wife sullen and in tears?)

The causal propositions brought to bear vary considerably from one society or community to another (e.g. mental illness was once seen as caused by demonic forces, now is regarded in scientific and medical terms such as "chemical imbalances").

Whatever the source of our propositions about causality - or their truth - these serve as ways of making sense of conduct and what to do in the face of a problematic event. Routine conduct requires little explanation and typifications operate in the background. When conduct departs from the routine, causality - along with typifications and probability - come much more explicitly to the forefront.

**Means and Ends:**

Much of the knowledge that people rely on in everyday life takes the form of recipes - regular procedures people follow in order to secure their ends. Knowledge of relationships between means and ends is essential to people's capacity to negotiate their everyday affairs and to interact with one another (e.g. working, getting a paycheque, depositing it in the bank, and paying one's mortgage are good examples of mean-ends knowledge regularly employed by house owners).

Recipe knowledge has a double function. First, it is the basis for individuals' abilities to act toward various objects in their world and secure their goals (e.g. a person who works harder, makes extra/more frequent payments will pay off their mortgage faster with less interest). Of course, while role making in defined situations, we make use of a great many techniques, some habitually, some more self-consciously considered and selected. Second, recipe knowledge is significant for providing a frame through which the conduct of others can be interpreted and predicted. Role taking is made possible to a great extent because people are able to treat one another's conduct as means taken in pursuit of ends. Much behavior undertaken by professionals, for example, is not questioned as "s/he must have a reason for doing that."

**Normative Standards:**

Another standard against which people measure their own and others' conduct involves their knowledge of normative requirements or preferences. As people interact, taking and making roles on the basis of what they know about typicality, probability, causality and means and ends, they judge their own and others' acts in terms of what they feel to be morally appropriate or necessary. Some negative judgements may be very deep, resulting in intense feelings of guilt or outrage (e.g. murder); many others may simply involve a mild conception of others not "knowing what the rules are."

This viewpoint departs from the usual sociological view where powerful, internalized norms are held to regulate most conduct. Ordinarily people focus their attention on social objects rather than social norms. They are concerned with their goals, with finding and using the right recipe for pursuing and attaining them, and with making sense of others' activities so that they can participate in social acts with them. Hence, issues of typicality, probability, causality and the use of proper means usually arise before people begin considering the normative status of acts.

Norms generally enter into consciousness under problematic and unusual circumstances (e.g. when conduct is questioned). When someone acts in a manner that others find strange, unexpected or untoward, it is likely that a social norm or rule will be invoked at some point. Another circumstance is when there is some uncertainty about the course of action to be pursued, or about whether a contemplated act will be regarded by others as acceptable.

This approach to social norms makes them a less significant aspect of social life than they are ordinarily thought to be. Instead of the major criterion employed to regulate conduct, social norms are merely one of several forms of knowledge that people employ in their everyday conduct.

**Substantive Congruency:**

Finally, the definition of the situation itself is a form of "knowledge" that we routinely employ when we attempt to discern whether others' acts seem to be based on the same definition we hold. "Substantive congruency" refers to a condition in which various participants in a situation can regard each other’s acts as sensible in terms of their own understanding of what is going on, what objects are present, and who the actors are. It is thus a test people apply to one another in the process of making and taking roles. One can say to oneself: "what does the situation look like from the other person's point of view?" Here the focus is on the nature of reality itself, particularly on the question of how a view of reality imputed to another squares with one's own view (e.g. how to interpret a first "date" after a long friendship). While two people may interact for some time with incongruent definitions of the situation, eventually the situation becomes clear one way or the other (e.g. one may want to remain just friends, the other may feel let down). On such occasions, role taking takes the form of a reality test, and role making may well then focus on making definitions of the situation more congruent.

Each of the above forms of knowledge - or ways of knowing - come into play at various points as roles are taken and made in social situations. Lacking instincts of any consequence and faced with a complex social world, humans must simply know a great deal in order to interact with one another. Considering the vast store of knowledge people must draw on as they act, it is a wonder that human conduct is coordinated at all. Given the sometimes tenuous relationship between outward appearance and inner intentions, and the potential complexity of interaction, the possibilities for misunderstanding and misinterpretation are considerable.

S.I. have developed a number of concepts that attempt to cope with this complexity and speak to people's efforts to give some order and continuity to the fluidity and precarious nature of social interaction. Taken together, these all deal with various forms of aligning actions: the ways humans attempt to maintain alignment or consistency among their individual and social acts, important cultural objects, and their own conceptions of themselves. We will discuss these in the next class.