**SOC 3120 Social Psychology**

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**Lecture 14.2: Emotions, Constraint and Social Interaction**

While our discussion of the formation of conduct thus far has emphasized the cognitive aspects of social interaction, the emotional dimension is equally important. Definitions of situations specify the emotional tone to be maintained (e.g. at a wedding). Roles typically have an affective component, such that mothers are expected to be warm and caring, while accountants are typically seen as emotionally “flat.” Departures from emotional expectations frequently call for aligning actions - people have to explain why they are silly when they are supposed to be serious, or to apologize for emotional outbursts.

Emotions are thus pervasive features of social interaction. However, we have to ask how emotions operate. The emotion of grief shows how a S.I. analysis of emotions can be developed.

In North American culture, grief is a normal emotion created when a loved one dies. The feelings of sadness are well-known, beginning shortly after the experience of bereavement, intensifying, and (hopefully) gradually diminishing with the passage of time. How do we explain the emotion of grief? Since we can’t simply say it’s human nature, one approach would be to say that people experience grief because their culture says they’re supposed to. Having been properly socialized, people spontaneously have these sensations and call them grief when someone close to them dies. While appealing in its inclusion of culture, this explanation has some problems. It doesn’t explain the physical sensations themselves, nor why people experience different levels of grief (e.g. some sad, some relieved at death of spouse; grief for parents varying according to age/ social distance). Thus, a simple cultural explanation does not suffice.

S.I. may help improve a cultural explanation. For example, it suggests that death represents not only the loss of a member of society, but, for those close to the deceased, the loss of a part of the self. When people who have been close to us die, we lose the supports for our own self-conceptions that those people provided. We lose part of our identity, part of what had buttressed our self-esteem. Naturally, that loss is greater for some than for others (e.g. “close” vs. “independent” spouses; adult, independent children vs. those still at home, etc.)

Lyn Lofland suggests that the level of significance of the other is defined by 7 “threads of connectedness” by which people are attached to one another:

-the roles we play

-the help we receive

-the wider network of others made available

-the selves we create and sustain

-the comforting myths they allow us

-the reality they validate for us

-the futures they make possible

She argues that where these linkages are spread widely among a large number of people, the loss of any single other may have relatively little impact. However, where a few others command the greatest share of our attention, each other person is likely to be of very great significance, and thus the loss of that other is likely to result in more intense grief.

As Lofland points out, the extent to which people feel a sense of loss may depend on their typical definitions of the situation of death. In the past, death rates were much higher, first experiences of death tended to occur earlier in life, and people more commonly experienced the death of children. Under such conditions, death itself was more routine, and so the loss attendant on any individual’s death may have been less. However, in contemporary society, where death may be a more shaking event simply because it is so unfamiliar. With the greater emphasis on the individual in modern life and the greater opportunity for solitude and privacy - which may encourage the elaboration of grief and restrict the opportunities for its expression, the emotional impact of death and the sense of loss that accompanies it may be greater than in the past.

Whatever variations there may be, loss remains. Metaphorically this tears a hole in the selves of those left behind. This is where the linkage between social experience and physical sensation occurs. Generally, physical sensations are created when human acts are blocked (e.g. hunger being intensified by the realization that there is no food in the house). It is the same with grief. The loss of a significant other, by disorganizing our social worlds and conceptions of self, creates many obstacles to ordinary, routine conduct. At every turn, we are confronted with habitual actions that cannot be completed as before because a significant other is not present (e.g. dinner with family). The sensations, such as depression and anger, we associate with grief are normal and spontaneous responses to the fact that the loss blocks our everyday actions.

What society makes of these responses is another matter. All such individual experiences occur in a cultural context of pre-established meanings, and these are subject to social interpretation. We must therefore examine the labels that culture makes available for such sensations, and how social interaction makes use of these labels to influence further the sensations and their meanings.

It seems silly to say that individual feelings associated with the loss of a loved one have to be culturally labeled as grief before they can be experienced as such. However, other cultures, for example Tahitans, discuss the feelings associated with the loss of a loved one in terms of illness. Their cultural definitions lead them to downplay feelings of individual loss, so they label their feelings differently.

Culture thus provides us with a vocabulary of emotions - a set of terms that apply to and describe the sensations that are the products of various situations. There are cultural similarities and differences in this regard. The underlying physical sensations associated with emotion are real, important, and provoked to some extent by similar situations across various cultures. While cultures may differ widely in their definitions as to whom is a significant other, the death of such an important person will likely provoke feelings of sadness and depression. This is so because the underlying processes of self and the construction of acts are the same across cultures. Yet, as we have seen above, all cultures do not label the resulting feelings in the same way.

The existence of cultural vocabularies of emotion is a clue that people have expectations about who will have what emotional experiences under certain circumstances. In North American society, woman whose husband dies is supposed to grieve, she is referred to and acted toward with that expectation, and others’ actions are oriented toward seeing that her grief finds appropriate expression and support.

Cultural labels and resulting social action gives rise to at least 2 forms of emotion work. First, part of our emotional experience is constrained by the presentation of self and the situation of mourning. Even when people do not spontaneously feel the grief they are supposed to feel, they may manage their self-presentations to appear that they are grieving to meet ritual expectations (“surface acting”). People are also constrained by the actions of others and by the situation in which they find themselves (e.g. a woman who had a terrible husband she is relieved to see gone may be surrounded by others who are genuinely upset, and this may make it hard for her to express her real feelings: it would not fit the situation and would lower her appearance in the eyes of others).

The second form of emotion work entails efforts to create, and not merely act, the very emotions that are culturally prescribed when they are not spontaneously felt. We may act so well as to fool ourselves (e.g. at funerals, we may find ourselves drawn into the solemnity of the occasion. By first assuming and getting into the mindset of the sad, we then actually become sad).

Many social situations seem arranged as regulators of emotion. At weddings and funerals, for example, the spontaneous and genuine emotions of some are managed and kept within bounds as they interact with others. Others may act so as to create the appropriate actual emotions. In both cases, emotions are not simply individual responses to events, nor are they antithetical to organized, rational social life. Instead, emotions are integral parts of social life, and like all other forms of behavior, they are not matters of unconscious responses to stimuli, but of socially constructed meanings.

Special occasions such as those above illustrate the importance of what Arlie Hochschild calls feeling rules: shared conceptions of which feelings are appropriate to a situation, and to what degree. However, these rules apply beyond such examples. Candace Clark, for example, demonstrates that display of the emotion sympathy is subject to social expectations (e.g. people who have suffered a personal misfortune are entitled to sympathy, but there are limits. One should not try to claim too much sympathy, or make unwarranted claims). Those who are asked for sympathy re likewise mindful of such rules, and not likely to be sympathetic to those who “cry wolf.”

The management of emotions is a task that confronts people in their occupations as well as in their associations with friends and family members. Arlie Hochschild, for example, noted the considerable amount of emotional labor required in much service work, such as in her study of flight attendants and bill collectors (e.g. being nicer than nice vs. nastier than nasty). Such employees must learn to put on a face that often betrays their true underlying feelings, and this ability is one of the commodities they sell to their employers.

Whatever the specific situation or social context, the experiencing, display and regulation of emotions is a key aspect of social life. People are guided in their actions not merely by cognition that focuses on definitions of situations, role-making and role-taking, but also on emotional responses to situations, others, and themselves.

**Constraint and Social Interaction:**

To complete our analysis of the formation of conduct, we finally must look at the nature and consequences of constraint in social life. S.I. has often been accused of painting too fluid a picture of the social world, of overemphasizing the freedom of individuals or groups to resist or overcome the influence of society and culture. Critics argue that S.I. overlooks the many ways in which conduct is constrained.

S.I. takes the view that there is both freedom and constraint in social life. People are not merely cultural robots, but thinking, acting creatures who use the intelligence they have gained as members of society to solve the problems that confront them. Nonetheless, there are real limits to what humans can do to solve problems and to act in ways of their own choosing.

Constraint is everywhere in social life. People must form definitions of situations and interpret others’ conduct in order to construct their acts, but are typically limited in the definitions they can consider and in the interpretations they can make. They are constrained by limits to their knowledge of others and their purposes, by the power that others hold over them, by obligations to roles or individuals, and by others’ responses to their acts. Thus, one is not always free to define a situation as one sees fit, as one frequently runs up against others, their definitions and their purposes. We will now consider several ways in which our actions - and their formation - are constrained.

**Altercasting:**

Aligning actions focus our attention on what Goffman called the presentation of self: the things we do in order to enhance or protect our self-conceptions and status in the eyes of others. But the presentation of self is only one side of the process of role-taking and role-making. The roles made by participants in any situation typically “fit” into those made by another: they are two sides of the same coin. Lawyers and clients, mechanics and motorists, each fit their respective lines of conduct to one another, imaginatively taking one another’s roles and making their own roles accordingly. In studying the presentation of self we only study one side of this: the efforts by an individual to make a role and put forth a self that others will regard favorably. Now we must consider the other side: the effects of the first person’s acts on the others’ *capacity* to make a role and preserve a valued conception of self. This process, whereby one person’s acts constrain and limit what the other can do and be has been termed *altercasting*. This calls attention to how one person may be cast into the role preferred by the altercaster (e.g. putting someone on the defensive, as in politics, where simply making someone respond to an attack makes the issue one for legitimate discussion; asking questions clothed in false dichotomies; attacking someone as a “big baby”).

In altercasting, people are constrained to act in certain ways - to make roles of a particular kind - because they are treated *as if* they were making particular roles. The minute the other responds to this role - even defensively - s/he seems to accept the issue: that what is charged is worth talking about and thus might actually be true.

Altercasting relies on a key feature of all social interaction: the imputation of roles to individuals, and action toward them on the basis of such imputation, powerfully constrains their conduct (e.g. a superior treating someone as more of a friend or ally than either is accustomed to thinking - in order to elicit information on other employees; treating a superior with sympathy to increase one’s status and subtly put the other down). This is sometimes consciously done, or something the victim is aware of; other times it is not.

What makes altercasting work? In the employer/employee example, one explanation is that the subordinate simply perceives an advantage in responding reciprocally to the boss’ behavior. Another is that the employee is responding to a general norm of reciprocity (Gouldner). This is a belief that one ought to help those who have been helpful, or at least avoid doing them harm.

But a more fundamental explanation can be found at a cognitive level. The altercaster is defining the situation in a particular way, treating it as an occasion when formalities can be put aside and people treat each other as equals. In doing so, the employer influences the objects that are present and toward which conduct will occur - “friendly social interaction” and “friendship.” Once the situation has been so defined, it requires considerable effort by the subordinate to define the situation differently and indicate different objects - to call attention to the formal relationship between the two, for example. To change the interactional object from “friendly social interaction” to “boss chats up wary employee” for example, requires self-conscious effort and some risk given the power differential. The employee is not only induced to act in the role of a friend by the considerable press of implication in the situation, but also by the boss’ control of resources that can reward or punish the desired role performance.

The effects of altercasting are not limited to immediate situations. The repeated altercasting of one person by others in a particular way will affect their self-concept. In many families, for example, one individual is often treated as the scapegoat for everything that goes wrong. In time, the child will very likely develop a self-concept that reflects such treatment.

Altercasting and presentation of self are two sides of the same coin. Both involve efforts to define situations by establishing identities and roles. Presentation of self focuses on people’s attempts to define situations in desirable ways by showing themselves in a favorable light to others. Altercasting reminds us that what one does in a situation places limits on the roles and self-presentations of others. The effects of these are not limited to manipulation, scheming, or negative consequences for self-concepts. Both may be employed for benign as well as malevolent purposes. Teachers may encourage lagging students and improve their performance, for example, through a combination of altercasting and self-presentation.

**Power:**

Sociologists generally define power as the capacity of one person to achieve purposes without the consent or against the resistance of others. As such, altercasting is a means of exercising power and control over resources: the successful altercaster is able to induce others to make a particular role without their realizing it or being able to resist doing so. Yet altercasting is not the only means by which people pursue their goals.

The exercise of power depends, in part, on the control by one party of resources - goods, tools, knowledge, money - that are valuable to and desired by others. When people interact, they pursue individual as well as collective ends; they cooperate in the pursuit of common goals, but they also sometimes compete for scarce resources or engage in conflict over which actions to take (e.g. co-workers work together, but also walk over each other to get ahead). In such contexts, it is unlikely that all will be equal in their control of important resources, nor will they be equal in authority - the right to this control (e.g. bosses and employees). Totally aside from these formal distinctions, there are also informal inequalities based on seniority, in-group/ out-group distinctions, and independent control hierarchies in different departments (e.g. I.T.)

The exercise of power involves the same processes of defining the situation, role taking and role-making as more cooperative forms of social interaction. The more powerful person must role-take, estimating what resources the other commands in order to predict how s/he will respond to their effort to use power. That person must also role-make, forging a performance that will convince others that here is someone to reckon with. Conversely, the weaker person must also role take and role make, discerning whether the other’s power is real or just hot air, responding in ways that do not yield more than necessary.

Accurate role taking is itself a resource of power. To the extent that one can accurately gauge the reaction of others to what you plan, one can calculate and perform the act - and allocate resources - to one’s best advantage (e.g. anticipating others’ resistance accurately). This gives a person more leverage over another (“knowledge is power”).

Yet, this is not the whole story. The possession of power and authority to some extent lessens the need to role take with accuracy. The person who exercises authority can generally get away with less accurate role taking than subordinates (e.g. parents and kids).

This link between role-taking and authority, however, should not obscure the basic fact that some degree of role-taking is always involved in social interaction (e.g. in disciplining a child for forbidden behavior, one discerns whether this was accidental or defiantly undertaken and gauges one’s response accordingly).

One of the less obvious ways people exercise power is through their control of the physical setting in which interaction occurs. Role-making and role-taking occur in delimited social environments full of physical and social objects - all of which are human creations and have meanings. People act in and toward such physical settings and their objects to some extent on the basis of habit, on the basis of conditioned responses rather than self-consciously. Some people are thus put at ease by the soft colors and Muzak in a doctor’s office, feel awe in a cathedral, or impelled to feel somber by the furnishings, dress, casket, etc. in a funeral home. To the extent that people do respond habitually to certain settings and physical conditions, it follows that whoever has the power to control the physical elements of a situation also has considerable power to control how people in that situation will act (e.g. this underlies the widespread use of canned music and controlled lighting in the workplace, and similar practices).

Although it is no doubt true that some degree of control over conduct can be achieved through such manipulation of stimuli, more important are efforts to control definitions of situations by physical means relying on people’s interpretations of physical settings (e.g. illegal abortion clinics presenting the setting and themselves in a professional, medical manner, with typical doctors’ waiting rooms, dress, equipment, etc, to contradict expectations of sleazy, back-alley operations and assuage clients’ fears).

**Awareness Contexts:**

Thus far we have assumed that people present themselves genuinely and role-take with reasonable accuracy. For numerous routine situations it is quite reasonable to assume that there is no deception and that role-taking is generally accurate. Many situations in everyday life, however, are characterized by ignorance, suspicion or pretense, and not by openness (e.g. moles in the civil service). How does social interaction work under such conditions?

Glaser and Strauss approached this topic through the concept of the *awareness context*. Developed in their study of the interaction between dying patients, their families, doctors and hospital staff, this refers to the total combination of what each person knows about the identity of the other, and about his/her own identity in the eyes of others. Thus, in an *open* awareness context, each participant knows the others’ true identities - the roles they intend to make in a situation - and his or her identity in their eyes. In a *closed* awareness context, one party is ignorant of either the others’ identities or his or her situated social identity (e.g. dying patients not knowing this, and not being told). In *pretense* contexts, interactants are aware of one another’s identities, but pretend not to be (e.g. married couples where both are having an affair - and know it - but act like nothing is going on). In *suspicion* contexts, participants suspect that one another’s identities are not what they appear to be (e.g. friends suspecting disloyalty).

Description and analysis of awareness contexts are essential to a full understanding of how people interact and of the outcomes of their interaction (e.g. lack of awareness is what enables fraud schemes to work). In general, when the awareness context is not open, considerable energies are devoted to either open it up or to keep it closed (e.g. doctors and nurses may talk to a dying patient as if they were going to live; patients who suspect the worst may go to great lengths to discover their real prognosis).

Suspicion and pretense awareness contexts represent occasions in which a great deal of interaction is focused on the definition of the situation. Although much is focused on the reality status of others, it is more basically the definition of the situation that is at issue (e.g. it is not that the other is a con artist instead of a friend, but that the situation is that of a con, and one’s behavior should follow accordingly).

Awareness contexts constrain interaction. What people know, don’t know, suspect or pretend with respect to one another constrains how they will interact. Ignorance, suspicion and pretense shape definitions of situations and set the conditions within which role making and role taking occur.

**Conventional and Interpersonal Roles:**

The final consideration requires a distinction between two fundamentally different kinds of roles. Shibutani pointed out that, on one hand, people interact on the basis of standardized, known, and labeled positions in various situations (i.e. *conventional roles* such as mothers, employees, etc). Much of our sense of the structure of routine interactions in everyday life stems from our capacity to identify one another as acting from the standpoint of such roles. On the other hand, people also act as unique human beings (e.g. one is not merely a mother, but “my mother”). When people engage in repeated interaction with one another, networks of interpersonal relationships develop where people have a sense of a mutual position that reflects individual peculiarities and their history of contact. That is, they come to define and make *interpersonal roles*. Good friends, for example, have a sense of the structure of their encounter as a whole that is informed by the interpersonal role of their friendship rather than by a particular conventional role.

In some situations, people simultaneously make conventional and interpersonal roles. Parents and children respond to one another on the basis of fairly standardized expectations of how parents and children behave, but also on the basis of a unique shared history. The same goes for the various players in office politics: interaction on the basis of conventional roles, as well as built-up, unofficial designations, such as friends, enemies, lovers, slackers, brown-nosers, etc.)

This overlay of conventional and interpersonal roles is responsible for some of the complexity of social life. People simultaneously typify one another’s acts on the basis of the two sets of roles, and must decide which should be the controlling typification (e.g. is my boss treating me nice as an employee, or does he want something personal?) While sociologists often frequently refer to this as role strain that people try to avoid, it should not be supposed that they always attempt to do so. Such situations provide the basis for many things that, although painful for some, also adds spice to life (e.g. office politics; love triangles).

Each type of role is constraining, but in a different way. Conventional roles constrain us not only because they pose a set of obligations we must meet but also because they shape our view of social reality. They are the source of our most basic images of social structure and our place within it (e.g. gender roles can even override other roles, almost as the very essence of the person). Interpersonal roles also constrain. Like conventional roles, they provide us with rights and obligations, but to individuals rather than to abstract conceptions of what we should or must do. They point to our sense of social structure as composed of not just the formally labeled roles of a group or society, but of the unique ways, over time, in which we come to see ourselves in relation to particular others in that structure.