

SOCIAL INTERACTION

Key Theories and Concepts.

Introduction

- Will examine:
 - ✓ Structure of social interaction
 - ✓ Sociology of emotions
 - ✓ Mode of social interaction
 - ✓ Verbal and nonverbal communication
 - ✓ Theories of social interaction

The Structure of Social Interaction

- **Social interaction:** Involves people communicating face to face or via computer and acting and reacting in relation to other people
 - Is structured around statuses, roles, and norms



The Structure of Social Interaction

- **Status:** Refers to a recognized social position an individual can occupy (each person occupies many statuses)
- Are two types of status:
 - **Achieved status:** Is a voluntary status
 - **Ascribed status:** Is an involuntary status
- **Status set:** Entire ensemble of statuses occupied by an individual
- **Master status:** A person's overriding public identity, and the status that is most influential in shaping that person's life at a given time



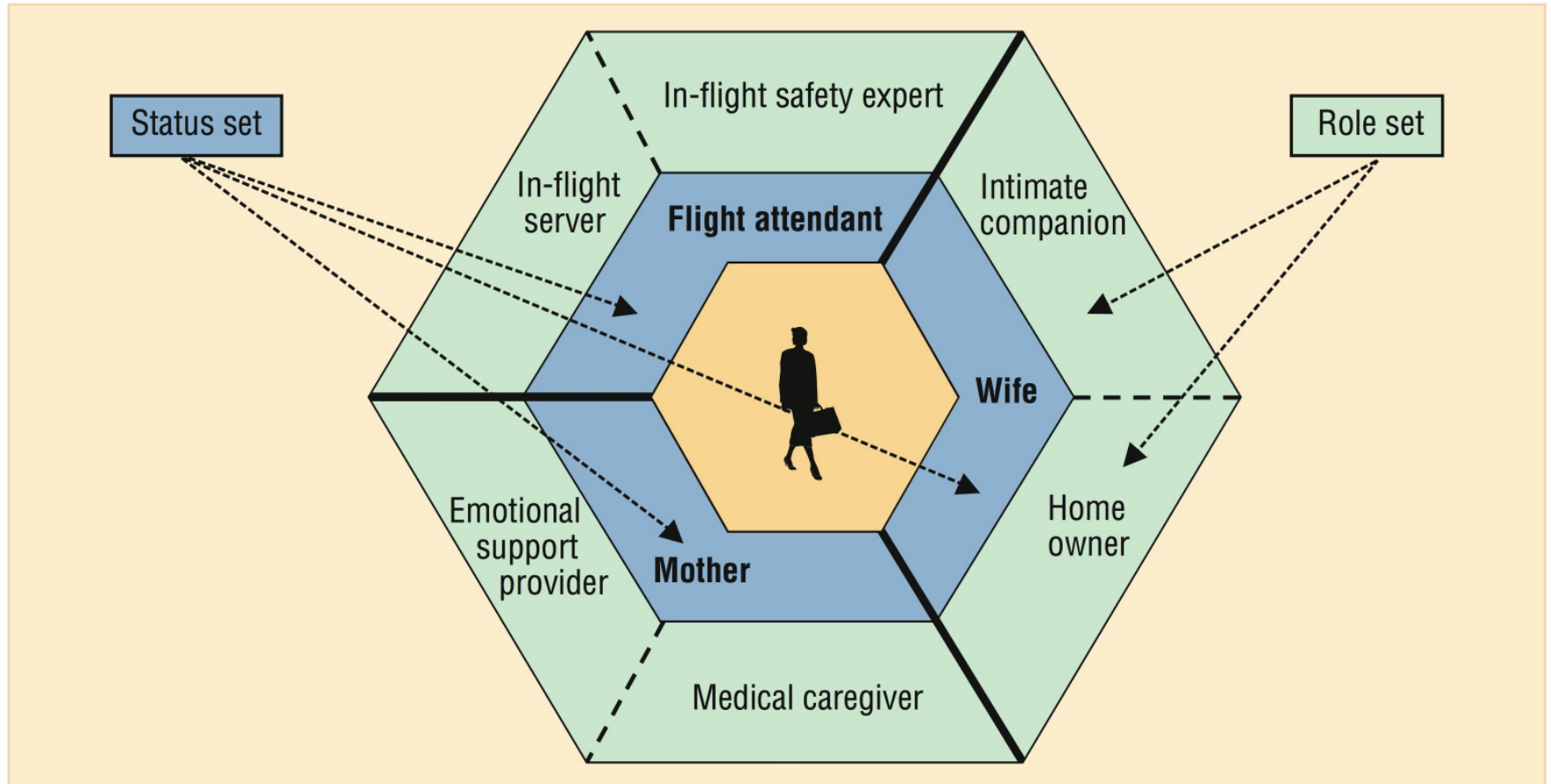
The Structure of Social Interaction

- Social interaction requires **roles**, or sets of expected behaviours
- Whereas people *occupy* statuses, they *perform* roles
- Expectations define the role
- Entire cluster of roles attached to a single status is called a **role set**

The Structure of Social Interaction

- Social interaction requires **norms**, or generally accepted ways of doing things
- Norms may be prescriptive or proscriptive
 - *Prescriptive* norms: Suggest what a person is expected to do while performing a particular role
 - *Proscriptive* norms: Suggest what a person is expected *not* to do while performing a particular role
- Norms often change over time
 - At one point in time, some norms are universal
 - At other times, norms may differ from situation to situation and from role to role

Role Sets & Status Sets

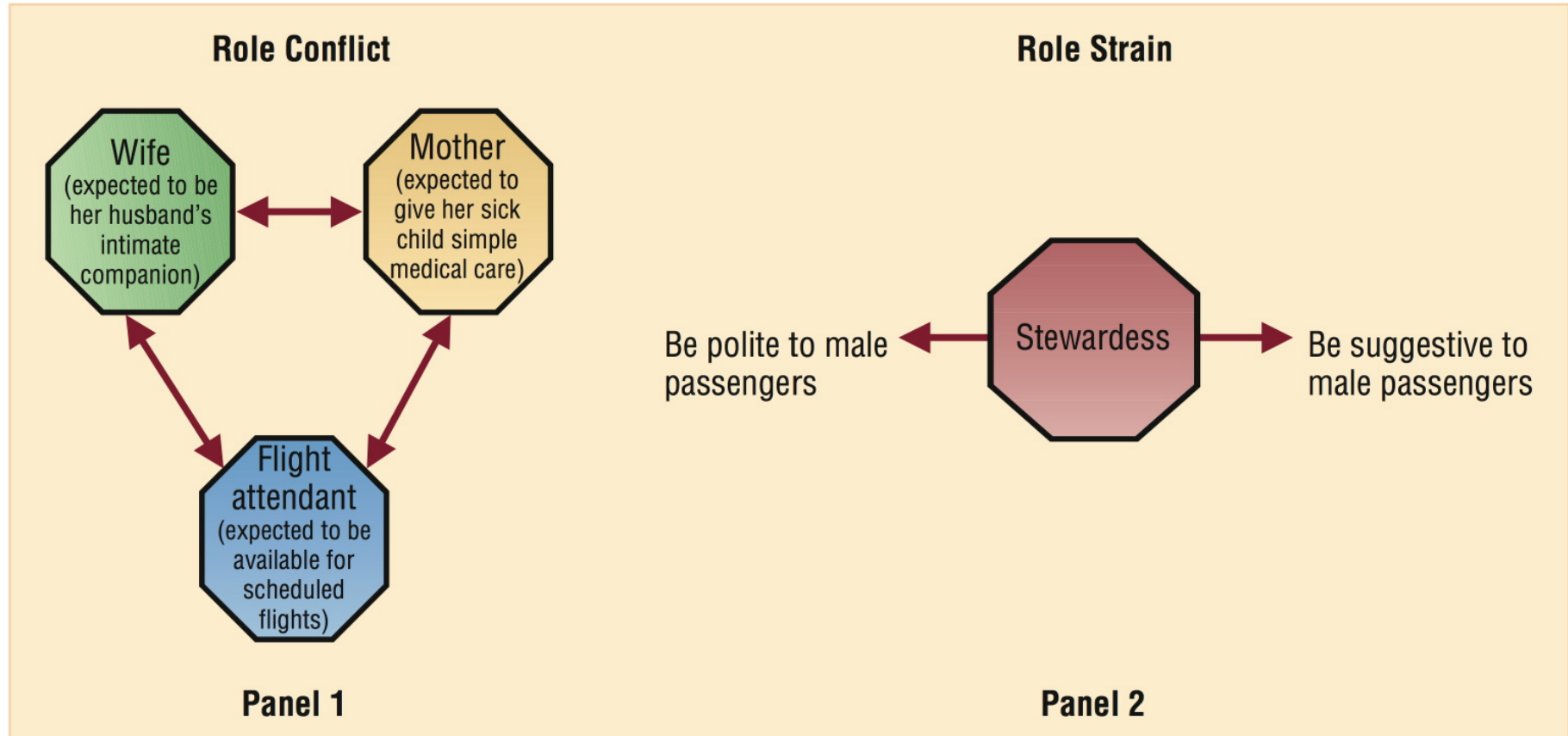




Role Conflict and Role Strain

- **Role conflict:** Occurs when two or more statuses held at the same time place contradictory role demands on a person
- **Role strain:** Occurs when incompatible role demands are placed on a person in a single status

Role Conflict and Role Strain





What Shapes Social Interaction?

- Norms, roles, and statuses are building blocks of all face-to-face communication
- Whenever people communicate face to face, these building blocks structure their interaction
- Norms, roles, and statuses require a sort of “social cement” to prevent them from falling apart and to turn them into a durable social structure
- How social structure is maintained is most fundamental sociological question that can be asked



The Sociology of Emotions

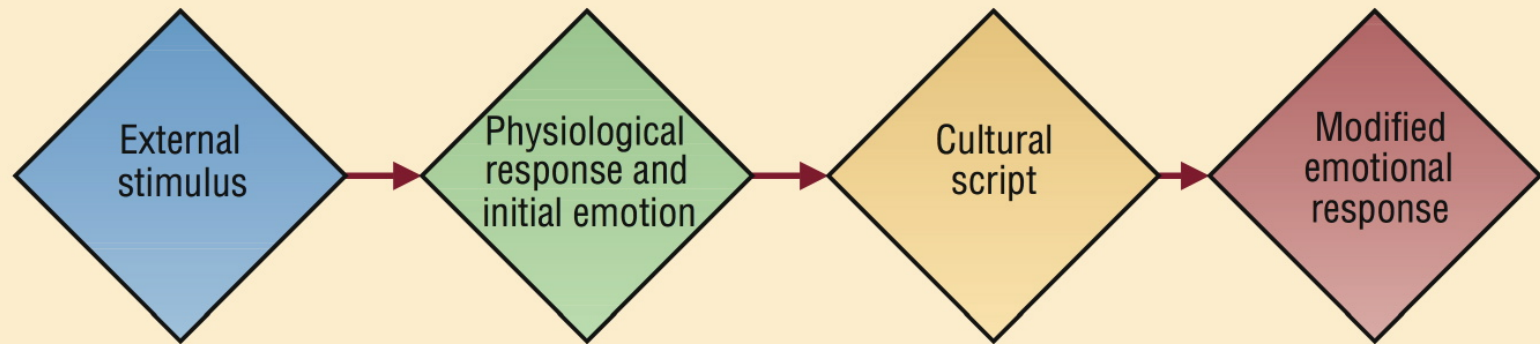
- Findings of Provine (2000) study that eavesdropped on 1200 conversations of two-person groups (dyads) laughing in public places, such as shopping malls:
 - In general, speakers laugh more often than listeners do
 - Women laugh more than men in everyday conversations
 - When speaker is a woman and listener is a man, women laugh more than twice as often as men
 - Even when a man speaks and a woman listens, the woman is more likely to laugh than the man
- Demonstrated that in social situations where people of different statuses interact, laughter is unevenly distributed across the status hierarchy



Emotion Management and Emotion Labour

- Emotions pervade all social interaction
 - Rather than being spontaneous and uncontrollable reactions to external stimuli, emotions are *learned* culturally designated emotional responses
- **Emotion management:** Involves people obeying “feeling rules” and responding appropriately to situations in which they find themselves
- **Emotion labour:** Is emotion management that many people do as part of their job and for which they are paid
 - Examples: Teachers, sales clerks, nurses, and flight attendants (must be experts in emotion labour)

How We Get Emotional



For example, a grizzly bear attacks.

Your pulse rate increases, etc.; you experience fear.

You have learned that lying still and playing dead increases the chance that the grizzly bear will lose interest in you.

Still fearful, you act according to the cultural script, which gives you hope.



Emotions in Historical Perspective

- Feeling rules take different forms under different social conditions, which vary historically
- Grief, anger, and disgust are neither universal nor constant but have histories and deep sociological underpinnings in statuses, roles, and norms

Modes of Social Interaction

Interaction as Competition and Exchange

- Derber (1979) study recorded 1500 conversations in family homes, workplaces, restaurants, classrooms, dormitories, and therapy groups
- Concluded that North Americans usually try to turn conversations toward themselves and usually do so in ways that go unnoticed
- Typical conversation is a covert competition for attention


Exchange Theory and Rational Choice Theory

- Idea that social interaction involves trade in attention and other valued resources is central insight of **exchange theory**
 - Exchange theorists argue all social relations involve literal give-and-take of valued resources, such as attention, pleasure, approval, prestige, information, and money
- **Rational choice theory** ⇨ Focuses on way interacting people weigh benefits and costs of interaction
 - Suggests interacting people always try to maximize benefits and minimize costs
- ⇨ However, fails to explain altruistic acts, heroic acts, and decisions to remain in largely empty or abusive relationships



Interaction as Symbolic

- Symbolic interactionists regard people as active, creative, and self-reflective
- According to Herbert Blumer (1969), symbolic interactionism is based on three principles:
 1. “Human beings act toward things on the basis of the meaning which these things have for them”
 2. “The meaning of a thing” emerges from the process of social interaction”
 3. “The use of meanings by the actors occurs through a process of interpretation”



Dramaturgical Analysis: Role-Playing

- **Dramaturgical analysis** (first developed by Goffman [1959]) views social interaction as a sort of play in which people present themselves so that they appear in best possible light
- Argues there is no single self, but rather an ensemble of roles people play in various social contexts
- Role-playing occurs in both “front stage” (public) settings and “back stage” settings
- If role is stressful, people will engage in **role distancing** ⇨ Give impression of just “going through motions” while lacking serious commitment to a role



Ethnomethodology

- Is study of methods that ordinary people use - often unconsciously - to make sense of what others do and say
- Stresses that everyday interactions could not occur without pre-existing shared norms and understandings
- Example: Awareness that “How are you?” is a greeting, and not a question (Garfinkel [1966] experiment)
- ⇒ Demonstrates that social interaction requires tacit agreement between actors about what is normal and expected



Verbal and Nonverbal Communication: The Social Context of Language

- Understanding of social and cultural context is necessary for making sense of language because same words can mean different things in different settings
 - Gives rise to need for learning nuances of meaning in different cultural and social contexts
 - ⇒ Nuances of meaning reflected in nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions, gestures, and body language (including personal space)
- Is cross-cultural variation in nonverbal cues ⇒ Creates potential for misunderstandings

Facial Expressions, Gestures, and Body Language



- Social interaction typically involves complex mix verbal and nonverbal messages
- The face alone is capable of more than 1000 distinct expressions reflecting whole range of human emotion
- Was once thought facial expression of six emotions were similar across cultures
- But are no universally recognized set of facial expressions that reflects basic human emotions ⇒ Are no gestures or body postures that mean same thing in all societies and all cultures
- In all societies people communicate by manipulating the space that separates them from others; e.g., four space zones that surround us (intimate, personal, social, public)



Body Language



Status Cues

- Nonverbal communication also takes place by means of **status cues** ⇒ Visual indicators of other people's social position
 - Can help people define social situation but also can quickly degenerate into **stereotypes** ⇒ Rigid views of how members of various groups act, regardless of whether individual group members really behave that way
 - ⇒ Stereotypes create social barriers that impair interaction or prevent it altogether
- Face-to-face interaction not always straightforward and unproblematic



Status Cues

- Skin colour
- Age
- Sex
- Companions
- Clothing
- Jewellery
- Objects carried
- Movement



Power and Conflict Theories of Social Interaction

- Emphasize that when people interact, their statuses often are hierarchically arranged with people on top enjoying more power than those on bottom
- In face-to-face communication, degree of inequality strongly affects character of social interaction between parties
- Effects of distribution of power reflected in male-female interaction where men - socialized to be aggressive and competitive - often dominate conversations



Types of Interaction

- Are three types of social interaction:
 1. Domination \Rightarrow Occurs when nearly all power is concentrated in hands of people of similar status, whereas people of different status enjoy almost no power (fear is dominant emotion in systems of interaction based on domination)
 2. Cooperation \Rightarrow Occurs when power is relatively equally distributed among people of different status (dominant emotion here is trust)
 3. Competition \Rightarrow Occurs when power is unequally distributed, but degree of inequality is less than in systems of domination (envy is important emotion here)



Main Modes of Interaction

Mode of Cooperation

Mode of Interaction	Domination	Competition	Cooperation
Level of inequality	High	Medium	Low
Characteristic emotion	Fear	Envy	Trust
Efficiency	Low	Medium	High



Theories of Social Interaction

Theory	People maintain social relationships by . . .	Main Theorist(s)	Example(s)
Exchange theory	Exchanging valued resources and punishments	Homans, Blau	Interaction persists if I pay attention to you and you pay attention to me, or if I commit an act of violence against you and you retaliate.
Rational choice theory	Maximizing gains and minimizing losses	Coleman, Hechter	I weigh the costs and benefits of interacting with you. You do the same with me. If our calculations allow us to strike a deal that satisfies both of us, interaction persists.



Theories of Social Interaction

Symbolic
interactionism

Interpreting,
negotiating, and
modifying norms,
roles, and statuses

Blumer,
Denzin

I interpret your cry for help in light of what I have learned about the virtue of sacrifice for others, and so I help you even though I don't benefit from my action and in fact put myself at risk.

Dramaturgical
analysis

Impression
management

Goffman

When we interact as student and professor, it is as if we are acting in a play. We play roles defined by each other's expectations, and we use props, gestures, and set lines to cast ourselves in the best possible light.



Theories of Social Interaction

Ethno-
methodology

Conforming to
preexisting norms

Garfinkel

When you say “Come here,” I don’t need to ask how many centimetres in front of you I should stand because norms preceding our interaction define how close I should stand.

Conflict
theory

Complying with
status hierarchies

Bourdieu,
Collins

We are in love; a roughly equal distribution of power between us encourages us to experience trust and act cooperatively. We want jobs in a corporation; an unequal distribution of power in the corporate hierarchy influences us to experience envy and act competitively. We are slaves; a grossly unequal distribution of power on the plantation causes us to experience fear and work inefficiently.

From Small Processes To Big Structures



- Building blocks of social life (i.e., norms, roles, and statuses) form microstructures within which face-to-face interaction takes place
- Sustained microlevel interaction often gives rise to higher-level structures—mesostructures, such as networks, groups, and organizations
 - These intermediate-level structures can form macrolevel structures known as *institutions*
- Society fits together like set of nested Russian dolls, with face-to-face interaction constituting smallest doll in the set



Conclusion

- Social interaction involves people communicating face to face, acting and reacting in relation to each other
- Character of every social interaction depends on statuses, norms, and roles
- Humour, fear, anger, grief, disgust, love, jealousy, and other emotions colour social interactions
- Nonverbal means of communication, including facial expressions, gestures, body language, and status cues, are as important as language in social interaction
- People interact mainly out of fear, envy, or trust
- Sociological theories are useful in helping us understand various aspects of social interaction