



BLOCK 2

SELF AND SOCIAL REALITY

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BLOCK 2 SELF AND SOCIAL REALITY

Unit 4 Mead: Interactional Self

Unit 5 Erving Goffman: Presentation of Self

Unit 6 Luckman and Berger: Social Construction of
Reality

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UNIT 4 MEAD: INTERACTIONAL SELF*

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
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4.0 OBJECTIVES

After studying this Unit, you should be able to:

- Explain the social origin of human mind and mental processes;
- Note the role of language in the development of self;
- Grasp the stage of development of self;
- Discuss the importance of ‘significant others’ in society;
- Reflect on the concept of ‘I’ and ‘Me’ as part of self.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

One of the significant theoretical ideas that began to emerge in the beginning of the twentieth century was the understanding that individuals through their everyday activities create and maintain the larger structures of society. This came as a new insight, contrary to the previous understanding that society has its own unique origin and it is originated on its own. This understanding motivated many theorists to focus on the everyday activities of the individuals and the ways in which it creates conditions for the existence of society as a whole. Significant attention was given on the nature and the underlying principles of interaction processes and the ways in which they shape our social world in which we live. Wide range of theories emerged focusing on the micro aspects of interaction

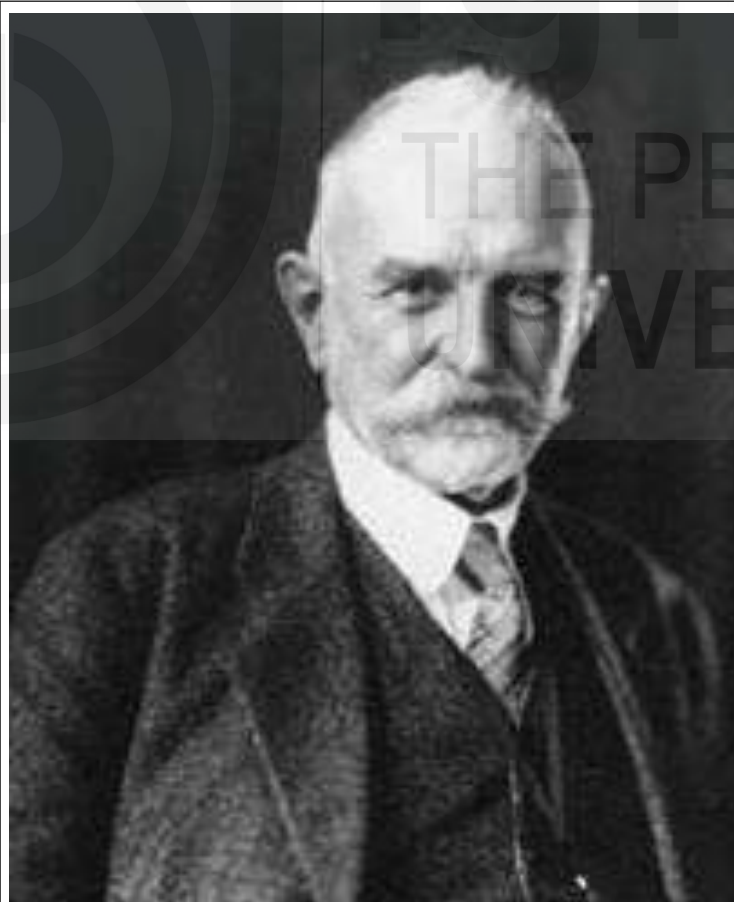
*Contributed by Dr Pravati Dalua, Assistant Professor, Kamala Nehru College, Delhi University.

process to understand the macro structure of society and of which interactionism perspective is one. Few of the key questions remained significant to these theorists such as how is society and the individuals related? How do individual acts and social structure influence each other? How do societies reproduce themselves through the acts and interactions of individuals? How does society shape people's thoughts and behaviours? Interactionism owes its origin to the scholars of American Sociology in its early years as a theoretical source of knowledge.

In section 4.2 we will discuss about the nature and development of individual self from an interactionist perspective through an examination of Mead's most influential work 'Mind self and society' (1934) published posthumously. The matters pertaining to the book was obtained by his students from a series of classroom lectures. This section has been divided into four subsections. Before we try to understand Mead's idea, let us take a look at his life and the social context.

4.2 MEAD: LIFE AND TIMES

Box 1. George Herbert Mead



(pic credit: Wikicommons)

Mead's main contribution was his attempt to show how the human self arises in the process of social interaction. He thought that spoken language played a central role in this development.

Through language the child can take the role of other persons and guide his behaviour in terms of the effect his contemplated behaviour will have upon others. Thus, Mead's psychological approach was behaviouristic.

George Herbert Mead, (1863-1931), American philosopher prominent in both social psychology and the development of Pragmatism. Mead studied at Oberlin College and Harvard University. During 1891–94 he was instructor in philosophy

and psychology at the University of Michigan. In 1894. He went to the University of Chicago, where he remained until his death. Mead never published his work. After his death his students edited four volumes from stenographic recordings and notes on his lectures and from unpublished papers: *The Philosophy of the Present* (1932); *Mind, Self, and Society* (1934); *Movements of Thought in the Nineteenth Century* (1936); and *The Philosophy of the Act* (1938).

A philosopher at the University of Chicago, George Herbert Mead (1863-1931), was most influential and is often credited to be the founding father of symbolic interactionism. He made a breakthrough in understanding the symbolic elements of human interaction and the ways in which individual selves emerge in the early years of one's childhood and gets matured while coming in contact with others in society.

4.3 IDEAS OF GEORGE HERBERT MEAD

George Herbert Mead his book *Mind, Self and Society* (1934), describes how the individual mind and self-arises out of the social process of interaction. In other words for him all our thought, experience and conduct are essentially social and arise out of interaction process. Interaction is a process of communication involving others in society and through which we experience our social world in which we live. For instance, think about a human infant the ways in which he grows up as a person having an individualised self of his/her own. In the early years of his/her childhood children would not know anything about others and their own selves but gradually by coming in contact with others they develop a sense of their own self as to who they are and how they are different from others. Thus, he observes that human self is not inborn or biologically given rather it is learnt from others in the early years of one's childhood that is mediated through a process of communication symbols as contained in the language structure. Elaborating the discussion further in this direction he brings in the phenomenon of mind and mental processes self and society emerge and sustain through interaction process. He has been thus mainly credited for his contributions to the development of biological self to a social self and his recognition of the significance of symbolic communication through language.

4.3.1 Mind and Mental Process

To Mead mind is not biological like any part of our body. It is essentially a social phenomenon that develops by coming in contact with others in society. The process through which a human child comes in contact with others is called as interaction. Mead viewed that mind implies thinking and it is not just any thinking but intelligent thinking that can solve the problems that we face in our everyday life. To him the foremost function of mind is to induce an individual towards doing something that can solve the problems that the person is facing in his life and also permit people to operate more effectively in the world. In simple words Mead argued that mind involves thought processes oriented toward problem solving.

4.3.2 Mind, Language and Role-taking

After defining the primary function of Mind, Mead turned towards the question vital to understand the nature of Mind and mental processes. How Mind arises or develops? Is Mind present among all animal species? How does a mind think and act? For Mead “Mind” is a type of behavioural response that emerges out of the processes of interaction with others. In other words without a continuous and ongoing process of social interaction, mind could not exist. The social process in which mind emerges is one of communication with gestures as contained in language. Language that we speak is nothing but conversation of gestures, symbols and this conversation of gestures is continuously happening in our society when people meet and communicate and act. It is not something that one single individual can make it possible. An individual always acts in a community. Community is only possible with the existence of others groups of people. Take the example of family, where there is the male and the female and the child which has to be cared for after his birth. Here is a process which can only go on through interactions within this group. It cannot be said that the individuals come first and the community later, for the individuals arise in the very process itself, just as much as the human body which arises out of a process of evolution.

With the development of language as a significant gesture human beings are able to act with others and transform to a thinking being. It means when we speak we also think and without thinking we cannot speak. Mead gave the German psychologist Wilhelm Wundt credit for understanding the central significance of the gestures in the process of communication and interaction. Wundt recognized gesture as a part of behaviour of one individual that makes the behaviour of another individual possible. In other words, gestures of the first person act as stimulus for the second person and call out an appropriate response. This stimulus and response behavior is common in all animal species including human beings. Consider the example of a barking dog. When a dog barks, a second dog barks or runs away. The “meaning” of the “barking gesture” is visible in the response of the other dogs in the sense that the other dog will bark or run away. But dogs do not understand the “meaning” of their gestures. They simply give a behavioral response, that is, they use symbols without what Mead refers to as “**significance.**”

Activity 1

Make a list of five gestures that are not raised at the level of self-conscious self and therefore do not qualify as significant symbols as per Mead's theory.

Mind is not simply a behavioural response or any arbitrary ways of communication or interaction. Rather “Mind arises through communication by a conversation of gestures in a social process or context of experience – not communication through mind” (Mead, 1934: 50). Conversation through gestures forms the basis of mind and mental processes at the micro level and at the macro level it serves the basis of creation, maintenance and change of society. Only

human beings are capable of making these meaningful and signified gestures, therefore, mind arises in them not among the lower animals. Mead took this basic idea from Wundt and extended it in ways that became the basis not only for the emergence of mind and self but also for the creation, maintenance, and change of society. According to Mead “Gestures become significant symbols when they implicitly arouse in the individual making them the same responses which the explicitly arouse, or are supposed to arouse, in other individuals” (Mead, 1934: 47). In other words, for a gesture to be significant it must “mean” the same thing to both organisms.

Mead’s next question was to understand how do animals who have the capacity to respond understand the meaning of a gesture? We do so through our capacity to consciously anticipate how other organisms will respond to our own symbols or gestures. This capacity of consciousness is a part of the mind and mental processes and is not present among the lower animals. The gestures of “lower animals”, Mead felt, do not call out the same response in the organism emitting a gesture and the one interpreting the gesture. For instance, the roar of the lion does not mean the same thing to the lion and its potential victim. Hence roaring gesture even though reflects use of vocal cord, is not a significant gesture according to Mead. Mind emerges in an individual because human infants, if they are to survive, must adjust and adapt to a social environment – that is, to a world of organized activity. At first, an infant is like a “lower animal” in that it responds reflexively to the gestures of others and emits gestures that do not evoke similar responses in it and those in the environment. But such a level of adjustment, Mead implied, is neither efficient nor adaptive. A baby’s cry does not indicate what he/she wants, whether food, water, warmth, or whatever accurately. But gradually the child learns to make gestures that are meaningful.

Now the question is to see how does this capacity of making significant gestures arise in the process of interaction? In which way human mind is involved in the process of making such significant gestures? According to Mead it does so through the vocal gestures and the ability of the individuals to speak and understand language. So invention of language is a significant thing to the emergence of mind and mental processes and the self in Mead’s theory. Language act as a stimulus for arousing a reaction in oneself and also in others while speaking. Therefore, “the critical importance of language in the development of human experience lies in this fact that the stimulus is one that can react upon the speaking individual as it reacts upon the other” (Mead, 1934: 69). A vocal gesture can be thought of as a word or phrase. When a vocal gesture is used the individual making the gesture responds (implicitly) in the same manner as the individual hearing it. If you are about to walk across a busy street during rush hour, I might shout out, “Don’t walk!” As I shout, I hear my own gesture the way in which you hear it, that is, I hear the same words, and I might feel myself pulling myself back, stopping my walk and stand because I hear these words. But, of course, I don’t hear them exactly as you do, because I am aware of directing them to you.

What Mead suggested as characteristic of the mind is the reflective intelligence of the human animal which can be distinguished from the intelligence of lower forms. This reflective intelligence is the essential condition, within the social process, for the development of mind (Mead, 1934: 134). The reflexivity in human beings is aroused when we speak using our vocal cords to interact with each other. Reflective intelligence means one is aware of the action and reaction of his own action by others. Consider the example of shouting again. The “turning back” of experience after listening to the big shout, allows the mind and the mental process to develop. Speaking a language allows individuals to hear their own gestures in the way that others hear them. If I shout “Boo” at you, I might not only scare you, I might scare myself too as I too have learned its meanings and internalised expected responses. In other words, vocal gestures allow one to speak to oneself when others are not even present.

Let us now discuss in what way, then, does language make mind possible? For Mead, mind involves several behavioural capacities such as the capacity to understand objects and their symbols. For instance, we have learnt that red traffic light suggest ‘stop’. And by understanding this we make our gesture of stopping near a traffic light. Similarly, we have the capacity to understand the gestures of others and act accordingly. We are also capable of suspending our own as well as ‘others’ behavioural response for a short period of time. Consider the example your father scolded you for mistake and you stopped yourself scolding your father considering his status. This shows that human beings have the capacity to judge alternative lines of conduct and visualise their consequences and select a better response. For Mead, then, ‘mind’ is behaviour, not a substance or entity. It is rather an “internal conversation of gestures” using significant symbols because an individual with mind talks to itself. A symbol does not simply stand for an object or event: it defines them in a particular way and indicates a response to them. Thus, the symbol ‘bed’ not only represents object and defines them but it also indicates a line of action that is the action of ‘sleeping’. Hence, without symbols neither communications is possible our society is not possible. Thus, any attempt to understand human behaviour must begin with a careful understanding of the symbols that individuals use during social interaction.

Mind is developed not only through the use of significant vocal gestures, but also by what Mead termed as role-taking. So having merely the capacity of reflexivity cannot ensure emergence of a matured self. Here it is worth noting that although we often employ our this capacity of reflexivity while acting but yet mostly all human beings conduct themselves in a routine, habitual, without being aware of what we say and what we do. For instance we follow many traditions, conventions without understanding those in our everyday life. We have a host of beliefs and assumptions about our life about others which are not raised at the level of (self) conscious reflection unless some problems occur in our life owing to it and that need addressing it urgently. Mind according to Mead arise out of

consciousness of one's self about others. Use of language is only possible when we become conscious of our selves. We have learnt from the above discussions that mind emerges out of social processes and creates conditions for the emergence of individual social self. Symbol and gestures as part of language helps individuals to get their matured mind as well as their social self. Thus Social life can only proceed if the meanings of symbols are largely shared and understood by the members of society. If this were not the case meaningful communication would be impossible. Think of the situation when two people meet and communicate with language that is alien to both. Thus, there has to be common symbols that can be understood by both in order to effectively communicate with each other. Common symbols provide only the means by which human interaction can be established.

In order for interaction to proceed each person involved must interpret the meanings and intentions of others. This is made possible by the existence of common symbols and is actually accomplished by a process of 'role-taking'. Role taking is the process of mentally assuming the perspective of another and responding by imaginatively placing himself in the position of the person with whom he is interacting. For example, if he observes another smiling, crying waving his hand or shaking his fist, he will put himself in that person's position in order to interpret his intention and meaning. On the basis of this interpretation that occurs in our thought process that requires the involvement of mind, he will make his response to the action of the other. Thus, if he observes someone shaking his fist, he may interpret this gesture as an indication of aggression but his interpretation will not automatically lead to a particular response. He may ignore the gesture, respond in kind, and attempt to diffuse the situation with a joke and so on. The person with whom he is interacting will then take his role, interpret his response and either continue or close the interaction on the basis of this interpretation. In this respect human interaction can be seen as a continuous process of interpretation with each taking the role of the other. Mead argues that role-taking is essential for the emergence of mind. Since mind and self both arise through a continuous process of adjustment and readjustments, hence without the ability to assume the perspective of others with whom one must deal, it is difficult to adjust to, and coordinate responses with, others. Mead argues that there is nothing mysterious or mystical about the human mind. It is a behavior like much other behaviour of ours that is acquired by human beings while adapting to its surroundings. And it is a behavioural capacity acquired in chronological stages (that we will see in the next section while discussing the stages of development of self) with each stage setting the conditions for the next.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your answer with those given at the end of the unit.

1) Complete the following sentences

a) According to Mead.....is a conversation of gestures.

b) Speaking is equivalent to the process of

c).....is essential for the emergence of Mind.

2) What is a significant symbol in Mead's theoretical formulation? Answer in five sentences.

.....
.....
.....

4.3.3 Play, Game and Generalized Other.

In addition to language Mead provided a useful model of process by which the self among human beings emerges through the example of child development. However, we can also refer it from the attitude of more primitive people out of which our civilization has arisen (Mead, 1934:166). The first stage of the development of self is called as **the preparatory stage**. In this stage the human infant merely imitate the people around them especially the family members with whom they continually interact. For example, when adults laugh and smile the child would also laugh and smile too. As they grow older, children become more adept at using symbols in the form of gestures and words that form the basis of human communication.

The play stage: at this stage, the children become more aware of social relationships. They develop skill in communicating through symbols and role taking of others occur. In other words they begin to pretend to be other people. They start to implement the "role taking". They learn things like good and bad characters, doctors, patients, and teachers and so on. At this stage children also learn for instance when it is a suitable time to ask for favours from their elders. In **The Game Stage** the children of the older age group such as 8 to 9 begin to consider several tasks are relationships simultaneously. They grasp not only their own social positions but also those of others around them. These 'others' are what, Mead called as the "**generalized other**", which means, the attitudes, viewpoints as a whole that a child takes into account in his or her behaviour. For example, the child understands which is expected to do and recognise the responsibilities of his own as well as of others in his activities. Emphasis on the existence of others in society for the development of one's own self has been significantly addressed by others great sociologists. Mead's generalized other resembles Charles Cooley's "looking glass self" theory in its expanded form.

Continuing our discussion further Mead observed that in order to play any role as a responsible member of society individuals must internalise the expectations or attitudes of others in relation to their own roles. These generalized others or the community in concrete cases can take different forms such as the family members, political parties, clubs, and corporations. In abstract cases social classes or subgroups individuals are related to each other more or less in indirect ways such as the class of poor people and the class of rich ones.

Box 4.1 C. H Cooley : The Looking Glass Self

The concept of the looking glass-self theory constitutes the cornerstone of the sociological theory of socialization. The idea is that people in our close environment serve as the “mirrors” that reflect images of ourselves. Actually, how we see ourselves does not come from who we really are, but rather from how we believe others see us. The main point is that people shape their self-concepts based on their understanding of how others perceive them. We form our self-image as the reflections of the response and evaluations of others in our society. As children we were treated in a variety of ways. If parents, relatives and other important people look at a child as smart, they will tend to raise him with certain types of expectations. As a consequence the child will eventually believe that he is a smart person. This is a process that continues when we grow up. For instance, if you believe that your closest friends look at you as some kind of superhero, you are likely to project that self-image, regardless of whether this has anything to do with reality. According to Cooley, this process has three steps. First, we imagine how we appear to another person. Sometimes this imagination is correct, but may also be wrong since it is merely based on our assumptions. Second, we imagine what judgments people make of us based on our appearance. Lastly, we imagine how the person feels about us, based on the judgments made of us. The ultimate result is that we often change our behavior based on how we feel people perceive us.

When individuals take the attitude of others then they tend to develop a self-similar to the attitude of the others who me the person is getting influenced. This is an insight that is borrowed from William James who viewed that individuals possess multiple of selves, carry the attitudes and images of them in their everyday life. We generally show a different side of ourselves to each of the different groups whom we interact with.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: Check your answer with those given at the end of the unit.

- a) The phase of self that is considered the present and the future self is known as the.....
- b) It is throughthat language and human thinking are possible.

- c) Children learn to take the attitude of others to themselves during thestage.
- d) Mead refers to the ability of the entire community into account as:.....

4.3.4 The “I” and the “Me”

One of Mead's most significant arguments presented in his book is his distinction between the “I” and the “Me.” It is also important to note that the “I” and “Me” are functional distinctions for Mead, not metaphysical ones that occur in our theological debates. He refers to them as phases of the self (Mead, 1934: 178, 200), although he more typically used the word self to refer to the “Me” (Aboulafia, 2016).

The 'me' is considered the socialised aspect of the individual. In other words it represents learned behaviors, attitudes, and expectations of others and of society that we tend to learn from our childhood days. This is sometimes referred to the attitude or images of generalized other. The 'me' is considered a phase of the self that is in the past and it can be known by reflecting on what and how things were. The 'I', therefore, can be considered the present and future phase of the self. The 'I' represents the individual's identity based on response to the 'me.' The 'me' is what prevents someone from breaking the rules or boundaries of societal expectations whereas the 'I' allows the individual to still express creativity and individualism and understand when to possibly bend and stretch the rules that govern social interactions. This part of our self thus allows human beings to go for innovation and stretch the inflexible boundaries of our tradition, customs and regulations. For instance, if you accidentally put your hand in a fire then the expression that how you feel has to come from the ‘I’ but how you choose to express your feeling has to come from the socialized part of yourself.

Activity 2

Write your own autobiography. Make a list of a series of events that represent and defines the "me" part of your present self by reading your own autobiography.

Check Your Progress 3

Note: Check your answer with those given at the end of the unit.

- a) The phase of self that is considered the present and the future self is known as the.....
- b) It is throughthat language and human thinking are possible.
- c) Children learn to take the attitude of others to themselves during thestage.

d) Mead refers to the ability of the entire community into account as:.....

4.4 LET US SUM UP

The 'self' occupies a central place in Mead's theory. In this unit we have tried to understand the social origin of human self through the process of interaction referring to his most widely read work *Mind, Self and Society* where he gives priority to society over the mind and highlights the idea that the social leads to the development of mental states. We first tried to understand the basic principles of act and the ways in which lower animals differ from human beings in terms of their mental capabilities by bring in language as significant symbol in human society. In this context we discussed the unique capacities of human beings to use and understand significant gestures in the form of language. Then we proceeded to understand how human self develops by taking roles of other in society under three stages: the preparatory stage, the play stage and the game stage. This discussion then followed by differentiating the "I" and the "me" component of self that emerge through a process of social interaction.

4.5 REFERENCES

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4.6 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) a) I
 - b) thinking
 - c) role-taking
- 2) A "significant symbol" is anything with a shared meaning to a group of people or collectivity. It may be an object, gesture, sound, color, person, event, or any other thing; its distinctiveness lies in the fact that it means the

same thing to most members of a group or collectivity. For most citizens of India, for example, the tri-colour flag is a significant symbol signifying the country; it has a shared meaning of peoplehood. Mead stated that human species are uniquely capable of using, understanding the meaning of significant symbols which are mostly expressed through language. Language, in Mead's view, is communication through significant symbols.

Check Your Progress 2

- a) I
- b) significant symbols.
- c) play stage
- d) generalized other

Check Your Progress 3

- a) False
- b) False
- c) True
- ii) a) The 'me' is considered the socialized aspect of the individual whereas the I aspect of self represents creativity and innovation. The 'me' represents learned behaviors, attitudes, and expectations of others and of society that is an outcome of one's past experiences and the I can be considered the present and future phase of the self.
- b) Play develops self by allowing individuals to take on different roles, pretend, and express expectation of others. Games help individuals to develop self by understanding and adhering to the rules of the activity in order to win the game or be successful at an activity.

UNIT 5 ERVING GOFFMAN: PRESENTATION OF SELF*

Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 Self and Everyday Life
- 5.3 Goffman: Life and Times
 - 5.3.1 Biographical Sketch
 - 5.3.2 Social and Intellectual Context
- 5.4 Dramaturgy as a Metaphor
- 5.5 The Presentation of Self
 - 5.5.1 The Performance
 - 5.5.2 Impression Management
 - 5.5.3 The Physical Setting: The Stage
- 5.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.7 References
- 5.8 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress

5.0 OBJECTIVES

After studying this Unit, you should be able to:

- Explain dramaturgy in social interaction process;
- Narrate what is front stage and back stage;
- Discuss impression management.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

In our previous unit we studied George Herbert Mead's effort to understand the individual self as an evolving entity through social interaction, primarily through the act of communication. Erving Goffman takes the theme further by exploring the interactional process in everyday life. The study of Interaction process constitutes a central topic of sociological theory. Erving Goffman is often credited as being of the most creative theorist of interaction process. As an interaction theorist, his primary interest was to understand the interaction order that involves face to face interaction amongst individuals. Process of Interaction even though is a micro process it constitutes a distinct realm of social reality and

*Contributed by Dr. Pravati Dalua, Assistant Professor, Kamala Nehru College, Delhi University.

it has its own dynamic ways of functioning. Macro phenomena such as complex systems of market, polity, religion, stratification even though cannot be explained solely in terms of micro level analysis but yet they contribute towards understanding of social realities at macro level in a significant way, as these are always transformed in unique ways by the individuals who are involved in the process of interaction. Even though macro phenomena always constrain and frame the course of our interaction but yet what appears primarily as the real world is a representation and in many ways, it is being derived from the dynamic practices of individuals as they deal with each other in various interactional situations.

In this unit we look at his primary ideas in the introductory section. But to fully understand a scholar it is important that we look at his life's journey to see how that has influenced his motivation and consequently his writing. Similarly, the intellectual climate when he is situated in also has a huge bearing on one's thought process. So, in our section 5.3 we look at these aspects. In the next sections we look at various elements of Goffman's central ideas.

5.2 SELF AND EVERYDAY LIFE

Erving Goffman's most well-known book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, published in 1959, provides a detailed description and analysis of interaction process by comparing the human world to a theatre and human beings to that of the actors in a theatrical stage. He uses the idea of drama as a metaphor through which he tries to understand how we perform different roles. Shakespeare's lines from his play *As You Like It*:

All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players;

They have their exits and their entrances;

And one man in his time plays many parts,

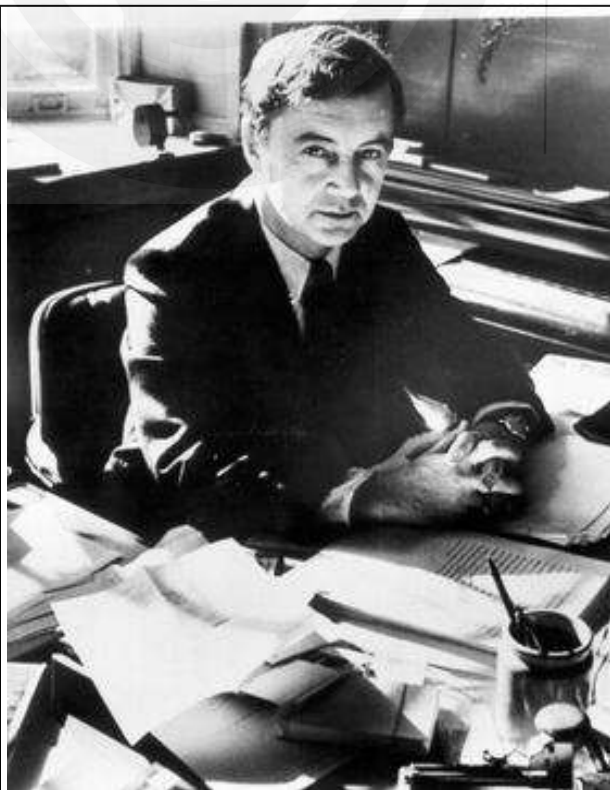
reflect Goffman's approach to understanding the self in everyday context. In order to "put their best" individuals seek to control their appearance and physical setting in which they perform along with their actual behavior and gestures. Take for instance the efforts the public speakers do to deliver a speech before their audience. They organise rehearse their presentations in advance. Similar rehearsal is also done by the musicians and athletes before their performance. According to Goffman all social occasions have dramaturgic character. Individuals always make some efforts to convey a good impression on others as individuals' general appearance and overall demeanor are highly relevant for the identity they seek to project. For example, students try to appear knowledgeable but nonchalant as they when they take part in class room discussions; lawyers strive to exude confidence as they argue their cases in court, and employees make sure they look busy when their supervisors come for inspection. He perceived the self not as a possession of the actor but rather is the outcome of dramatic interaction between actor and audience in an interaction situation. The self "is a dramatic effect arising... from a scene that is presented" (Goffman, 1959:253).

In essence, Goffman is not addressing larger structures and how they have a bearing on the self. He is also not looking at essential nature of the self but is in fact saying that the self is constantly being fashioned by the individuals depending on their audiences. The roles that are assigned to us by society are not just given but actively performed by the actors or individuals. Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, published in 1959, provides a detailed description and analysis of process and meaning in mundane interaction. Goffman, as a product of the Chicago School and writes from a symbolic interactionist perspective, emphasising a qualitative analysis of the component parts of the interactive process. His *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) laid out the dramaturgical perspective he used in subsequent studies, such as *Asylums* (1961) and *Stigma* (1964). In *Frame Analysis* (1979) and *Forms of Talk* (1981).

5.3 GOFFMAN:LIFE AND TIMES

Through a micro-sociological analysis and focus on unconventional subject matter, Goffman explores the details of individual identity, group relations, the impact of environment, and the movement and interactive meaning of information. He focused on the ways people “frame” or define social reality in the communicative process. His perspective, provides new insight into the nature of social interaction and the psychology of the individual. Before we go into details of his work let us have a look at his life, the social context, and the intellectual influences which have a bearing on his writings.

5.3.1 Biographical Sketch



(Source:
<https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?curid=8959018>)

Goffman was born in 1922 in Mannville, Alberta, Canada to Max Goffman and Anne Goffman. The Goffmans belonged to Ukrainian Jews who were part of the great flow of Jewish migration from Russia to Canada in early 20th century. Goffman did his schooling in St. Johns Technical High School in Winnipeg then later became a student at the University of Manitoba. He left his University studies to join film industry for the National Film Board of Canada established by John Grierson. Goffman met Dennis Wrong, a renowned North American sociologist during this time.

This meeting inspired him to join University of Toronto, where he graduated with a B.A. in sociology and anthropology in 1945. Afterwards, he moved on to the University of Chicago and received his M.A. and Ph.D for sociology, in 1949 and 1953 respectively. While studying at the University of Chicago, Goffman did field research in the Shetland Islands. The research done here gave Goffman the inspiration to write his first major work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. After graduation from the University of Chicago, from 1954-1957 Goffman was a research fellow at the National Institute for Mental Health in Bethesda. Participant observation done here led to his essays on mental illness and 'total institutions' which came together to form another one of his works *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. Subsequently Goffman was a professor in the sociology department at Berkeley from 1957-1968. After Berkeley, Goffman moved on to be a professor at the University of Pennsylvania until his death in 1982.

5.3.2 Social and Intellectual Context

Goffman was an influential figure for generation of people who were beginning to question and challenge the macro structures of power. The 1960s America saw growing campaigns against racial discrimination, among other issues. This was the time when Martin Luther King Jr.-- an African American pacifist and activist led movements against the right to vote, desegregation, labor rights, and other civil rights. At many universities, but most significantly at Berkeley where Goffman taught, the students challenged the traditional authority of university administration.

Many scholars and sociologists were beginning to question the all encompassing nature of structures to say that individuals in fact interpret and manipulate larger structures and symbolic structures of meanings depending on situations. Herbert Blumer, who was one of the leading advocates of symbolic interactionism, was against statistical generalisations and variables because they do not actually do anything. He was supposed to have remarked where is class ? Do you see it? He argues, it can only brought out by its actual play and interpretation by actors in actual settings. Blumer was one of the influential figures for Goffman. The symbolic integrationist school, as you might have already learned in your previous unit, was most notable for drawing attention to the micro process of interaction where communication plays a key role. Individuals act on the premise of a shared understanding of meaning within their social context. One can see in Goffman's writing a similar thinking. Goffman is often associated with symbolic interaction school of thinking for his analysis on the situational interactions between individuals. However, Gary Alan Fine and Philip Manning have said that Goffman never engaged in serious dialogue with other theorists. Though Goffman is often associated with the symbolic interaction school of sociological thought, he did not see himself as a representative of it, and so Fine and Manning

conclude that he "does not easily fit within a specific school of sociological thought" (Fine and Manning, 2003:34.). We do see how ever his references to Durkhiem for his concept of society and the rituals that reflect that conception. For Goffman the everyday rituals reflect the larger societal structures that become the context for the individual. Goffman uses a picture frame, as analogy to represent structures which is used to hold together an individual's context of what they are experiencing in their life.

5.4 THE PRESENTATION OF THE SELF

Goffman uses dramaturgy as a metaphor in understanding the interaction process. Therefore, his work is designation as "dramaturgical". Now let's pose this question to our self what do we see in a drama or theater? Think about this metaphor. We find the stage, actor, audience, a dressing room or a backstage, props in a theater. Likewise, in Goffman's theory society is viewed as a theater and a social stage upon which we enact our performances, Goffman called this dramaturgical analysis. This metaphoric understanding gives us an interesting account of the way we look at society and social interaction.

Individuals are conceived as a performer in their everyday life this may appear to us in a degree of contrivance, of artificiality but that is true to Goffman's understanding of social reality. While interacting with others we are trying to control the ways in which others perceive us, and we might slant or alter slightly our presentation of self in different contexts so that we can manage to pose ourselves positively in the eyes of others. We learn to do this at a very young age inside family at first and later on with others friends, relatives and so on. Overall, this process is called the dramaturgical presentation of self, which is a person's effort to control their impressions in the eyes of others. Even though there have been significant ambiguities regarding the interpretation of his theory (Ransome, 2010:182-85) but in a less extreme case we can understand that in Goffman's work there is a concern for cultural scripts, normative rules and the ways in which individuals manage their impressions and play their roles by manipulating their gestures, props as metaphorical tools to understand what we do and why we do as societal beings in our everyday life. His theory too has a reference to the idea of stage that involves the concern with physical space and object in the form of how stage settings are being framed in everyday interactional situations and creates an ambiance of theater. The interactions that appears to us as performances in everyday situations with this ambiance creates a sense of reality even tough not the whole of it but partly it contributes to the making of macro social realities.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your answer with those given at the end of the unit.

- 1) What is the significance of metaphors in Goffman's theoretical formulation?
Answer briefly.

.....
.....

- 2) What is dramaturgical presentation of self? Write in two lines.

.....
.....

5.4 DRAMATURGY AS A METAPHOR

Goffman's dramaturgical approach rests on the basic argument that individuals deliberately exchange their gestures that provide others with information about how to respond. Through exchange of gestures we develop a 'definition of situation' to carry out our social life in a cooperative manner. By constructing these definitions of situations individuals in their everyday life engage themselves in a series of performances. These performances are executed through gestures "to present one-self" in a particular manner as a person so as to get desirable and expected treatment

Our life, in the dramaturgical model, is visualised as a series of performances. While I am standing here, I am engaged in a performance in which I am trying to convey not only information about Goffman to you, but information about me through the confidence in which I speak on the topic, the manner in which I do so; the mastery of speaking in front of others, and so on.

The roles that the individuals play thus are the images individuals want to project and the script is the content through which we communicate to others. The roles are being performed in a way so as to make an audience, who are the observers of the performance, to believe in what is being enacted before them. These roles are not merely insignificant performances but can truly be seen as important decisions that individuals take in their everyday life. These decisions range from dressing oneself to that of display of body languages in an interactional situation. For instance, individuals do think and take important decisions as to what should one wear casual or formal, what make-up to put on if occasions of formal and social gatherings, what kind of body language to display at formal and informal gatherings. Our choices, inevitably, influence how the things we say are perceived by others. Making eye contact and smiling as we compliment someone adds vigor to what we say. Therefore, people judge and accept the compliment to be genuine and do not get distracted while complimenting. These performances revolve around certain interrelated elements. And a discussion of these interrelated elements can help us in understanding the dynamisms associated with

dramaturgical interaction that individuals perform in their everyday life. The following sections would elaborate on these key elements in the theory of dramaturgy.

Box 5.1

KEY QUOTE-Erving Goffman, the presentation of self in everyday life (1959)

This self itself does not derive from its possessor, but from the whole scene of his action, being generated by that attribute of local events which renders them interpretable by witnesses. A correctly staged and performed scene leads the audience to impute a self to a performed character, but this imputation –this self-is a product of a scene that comes off, and is not a cause of it. The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the actual crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited (Goffman,1959:223).

5.5.1 The Performance

Goffman uses the term ‘performance’ to refer to ‘all the activity of an individual which occurs before a particular set of observers and is intended to exert some influence on others. The main elements of performance in dramaturgy are the strategies of impression management. It is oriented towards the maintenance of a single definition of the situation. As he puts it: ‘the key factor [in the structure of social encounters] is the maintenance of a single definition of the situation, this definition having to be expressed, and this expression sustained in the face of a multitude of potential disruptions’ (Goffman 1959: 225).

5.5.2 Impression Management

Central to Goffman's concern is his notion of impression management. It is mostly oriented to guarding against a series of unexpected action that might arise while interacting with others. These unexpected actions can be in the form of unintended gestures, inopportune intrusions, *faux pas* or intentionally making a scene. According to Goffman, we use various mechanisms, called sign vehicles, to present ourselves to others that is free from any disruption. “When an individual projects a definition of the situation and thereby makes an implicit or explicit claim to be a person of a particular kind, he automatically exerts a moral Demand upon the others, obliging them to value and treat him in the manner that persons of his kind have a right to expect (Goffman, 1959:24).” When trying to make a good impression, it is essential to present yourself in best manner possible as the majority of peoples’ first opinions will be judged on appearance. The clothing we wear and the specific style we present tells the audience a lot about what kind of person we are. For example, you are buying a stereo, the salesperson is attempting to construct a definition of the situation that will suggest that you need to have this high end and expensive product because you

are an individual with good tastes, while you are trying to construct a definition which suggests that while you appreciate good music, you also have financial considerations but you don't want to look too cheap either. So, it becomes somewhat of a struggle between actors in different situations. Furthermore, a good sales representative will try hard to persuade you that he is not really a salesman at all who only looks for profit rather he too knows to pay his sincerity to a person who is known to him. On the other hand, you are aware of the fact that he is a salesman thus you try to avoid providing him too much information that might go against you while bargaining for a product. In managing such kind of situation, we create impressions that Goffman calls sign vehicles which includes both our language as well as our body language. We create impressions by our expressions. However, he argues the expressions we show are the elements of our expressiveness over which we have less control because individuals are constrained by societal norms and values. What front we can put on and in what context these are mostly determined by the norms of society to a large extent and we don't actually have that much choice while playing many social roles. A successful performance depends on involvement of both actor and the audience. Mystification is a technique mostly employed by the performers that entails maintenance of restricting contact between the performer and the audience. This social distance helps in probable disruptions in the performance by restricting the audience questioning the performance.

5.5.3 Physical Setting: The Stage

The physical setting, where a role is performed, in Goffman's theoretical frame is relevant to understand the ways in which impression is managed in actual situations. For example, a high level corporate executive would expect to have a well-furnished exclusive office for himself, not a small cubicle right among her subordinate officials. Therefore, dramaturgy has a concern with the settings in which people perform their roles may be seen as reflecting their attempts to control the general social definition of situation (Johnson 2008:121) Every stage has two sides, one is the actual stage where the real performance takes place before an audience and the backstage, where rehearsals and preparations take place. 'Front' is 'that part of the individual's performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance'. Back stage on the other hand refers to a where informal behavior appears. In life also, there are two regions, each with its own set of behavioral norms. For example, a couple may have a fight, where they raise their voices and call each other names. But the minute their kids come home, they change automatically into their good and normal selves and address each other pleasantly and act as if everything is normal. This, essentially, is an act that is being put on for the benefit of their kids who are their audience in this example. In private, the couple's displays of anger to each other are perfectly acceptable behavior, but in front of their children, their angry discussions are unacceptable so they often resort to the acting of loving parents. In this

comparison, the role of the kids as the audience is also important as they are pretending to accept what their parents are trying to project before them even though they happen to know that they parent fight. However, this does not mean that Goffman is assuming that life is based on a set of scripts or cultural prescriptions rather these are highly performative and dynamic in nature. These performances are always emotionally loaded.

Activity 1

Make a record of situations or circumstances where people are most likely to face the dilemma between trying to make a good impression on others versus just “being themselves”.

According to Goffman there are three things an individual usually uses to establish a social front through Setting, Appearance and Manner. Setting refers to the fixed elements of front – the physical layout of a room and associated background props. These are the most commonly used sign vehicles that are used to put an image of ourselves in front of others. These constitute our appearance, the manner in which we interact, as well as the chosen social setting. Appearance consists of those things we most closely associate with the person themselves – the things which ‘follow them around’ and consists of fixed attributes such as one’s racial background or age, as well as things like clothes and the items one chooses to carry around. Manner is the attitude to one’s setting one displays – confidence, humility, authority etc. We generally expect there to be consistency between setting, appearance and manner, but these don’t always match up. Similarly, Props acquire significant focus in dramaturgical analysis. In a play, props bring authenticity to the scene being enacted. It helps to establish a theatrical scene. On stage a student’s identity is being established by his books, school bags. Likewise, in real life, props play a major role. For example, a doctor’s stethoscope helps to determine the person’s profession. Similarly, a professor in a university might have a number of books on the subject he teaches, arranged in his office to create an impression that he has mastery over his subject. At his home, however, there may be more paintings and crafts displayed rather than books that reflect his passion for art. The physical setting at home constitute the back stage for the individual who is a professor in this example. It exists at the physical setting where we think that our proposed audience are not seeing us. The reason we act so very differently while on our front stages and back stages is very same reason we are considered to be actors and we can use the method of dramaturgical analysis in the first place. When we are on front stage, putting our acting skills to the test and trying to show our audience how well we can present ourselves. Our reputation and credibility relies on how well our performance is. We want to keep things at a constant state of stability an impression of ourselves that we think is appropriate in front of others. Within the back stages we are able to express aspects of ourselves that the particular audience may not find unacceptable.

Box 5.2

Herbert Blumer's critical evaluation of Dramaturgical Approach:

An intensive critique of Goffman's approach appears in a review, by Blumer 'of Relations in Public'. Blumer, while commending both the book and Goffman's work in general, discusses certain important weaknesses in the approach. It should be noted here that H. G. Blumer is probably the best known contemporary exponent of symbolic interactionism in its Chicago School form and this is relevant to those who equate Goffman too readily with symbolic interactionism in general and the Chicago School in particular.

The weaknesses Blumer finds stem from the narrowly constructed area of human group life that he stakes out for study. He has limited the area of face-to-face association with a corresponding exclusion of the vast sum of human activity falling outside such association. Further he confined the study of face-to-face association to the interplay of personal positioning at the cost of ignoring what the participants are doing.

The approach overlooks the actual substantive content of human encounters in its concern exclusively with the expressive forms of the encounters. The resultant image of the human condition is a partial, truncated one. Blumer also argues that without minimizing the fact that human beings in one another's presence are sensitive to how they are being regarded, it is far-fetched to assume that this form of self-awareness constitutes the major concern of individuals in handling themselves as is to say, the dramaturgical approach ignores the macrocosm within which its micro-level concerns are imbedded. (Williams 1986:350-351).

Activity 2

Think of a social situation you have participated in or know about where there are distinct "front stage" and "back stage" settings. Write a sociological analysis that defines both the concepts and examine how the two settings functions by analysing the kinds of performances that take place in each setting and the relationship between these performances.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your answer with those given at the end of the unit.

1) State whether true or false

- a) The book 'Presentation of self in everyday life' is written by E.Goffman.
- b) The actors are in their true self in their front stage performances.
- c) Dramaturgy belongs to the tradition of macro sociological theories because of its specific focus on interaction process in everyday life.

2) Answer the following questions in two sentences each.

a) What is impression management?.

.....
.....

b) What distinguishes the front stage from the back stage?

.....
.....

5.3 LET US SUM UP

Goffman in his book *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* uses the metaphor of theater in order to portray the nuances and significance of interaction in everyday life of individuals. Goffman theory of social interaction presents to us a dramaturgical model of social life having an imagery of stage, actors playing roles using various props in their everyday life situations. Here the audience consists of other individuals who observe the role-playing and react to the performances of the actor. Like in theatrical performances there too exists a setting in social interaction that consists of a front stage and a back stage. The front region is that part of the physical setting where the actors are on stage before an audience. Individuals while playing a role at this imaginary region are extra conscious of their audience and constantly monitor their behaviors vis-à-vis their audience. There is also a back region, or 'back stage,' where individuals can relax, be themselves, and the role or identity that they play when they are in front of others. Central to the book and Goffman's theory is the idea that people, as they interact together in social settings, are constantly engaged in the process of impression management. It is that technique wherein each tries to present themselves and behave in a way that saves them from embarrassment of themselves in front of others. This is primarily done by both the audience and the actor to ensure that all parties have the same definition of the situation. It means that all understand what is meant to happen in that situation, what to expect from the others involved.

5.5 REFERENCES

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5.6 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Goffman's dramaturgical model is a metaphoric analysis of everyday interaction process. Our life, in this model, is visualised as a series of performances similar to what happens in a theater when an actor carries out a performance. The roles are being performed in a way so as to make an audience, who are the observers of the performance, to believe in what is being enacted before them. The performances in interaction situations are conducted by using various prop like metaphors that are usually used in on stage performances.
- 2) The process of the dramaturgical presentation of self involves a person's efforts to control their impressions in the eyes of others.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) a) true
b) false
c) false
- 2) a) Goffman coined the term impression management to refer to our desire to manipulate others' impressions of us on the front stage. According to Goffman, we use various mechanisms to present ourselves to others through a social setting, appearance and the manner of interacting.
b) "front stage" where actions are visible to the audience and are part of the performance. On the other hand, back stage is where the individuals can be their selves and is invisible to the audience.

UNIT 6 LUCKMANN AND BERGER: SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY*

Structure

- 6.0 Objectives
- 6.1 Introduction
- 6.2 The Study of Social Reality
- 6.3 Berger and Luckmann: Life and Times
- 6.4 Social Constructions of Reality
 - 6.4.1 Externalisation
 - 6.4.2 Objectification
 - 6.4.3 Internalisation
- 6.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 6.6 References
- 6.7 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress

6.0 OBJECTIVES

After studying this Unit, you should be able to:

- Explain the theoretical underpinnings of social construction;
- Define the concept of social construction of reality and understand how the interaction process creates our lived reality;
- Grasp the ways in which ‘personal’ identity is shaped by cultural constructions.

6.1 INTRODUCTION

Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann are highly applauded social theorists who have had lasting influence on the theorisation of reality and the ways in which it is being constructed and sustained socially through the process of human interaction. In this unit we discuss Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s ideas on how social reality is constructed, through their path breaking work *The Social Construction of Reality: A treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge (1966)*. The book was declared as one of the most important sociological books of the 20th century by the International Sociological Association. The central contribution of this book is the ability to bridge the gap between subjective reality and objective

*Contributed by Dr. Pravati Dalua, Assistant Professor, Kamala Nehru College, Delhi University.

social structures. Berger and Luckmann argue that people through their interaction in social system create, over a period of time, concepts knowledge of social reality: These concepts or understanding of reality help navigate their social roles. When these roles are made available to other members of society to enter into and play out, the reciprocal interactions are said to be institutionalised and established into enduring patterns. In the process, meaning is fixed in society. Knowledge and people's conceptions (and beliefs) of what reality is become embedded in the institutional fabric of society. Reality is therefore said to be socially constructed. For example, conceptions around motherhood or role of mother may be embedded into society over a time. The fact that such a conception is socially constructed is revealed to us as ideas around motherhood also change with changing times.

In this unit we look at this social construction of reality through various conceptual elements. But before that we take a brief look at Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman's life and the influences on their work.

6.2 THE STUDY OF SOCIAL REALITY

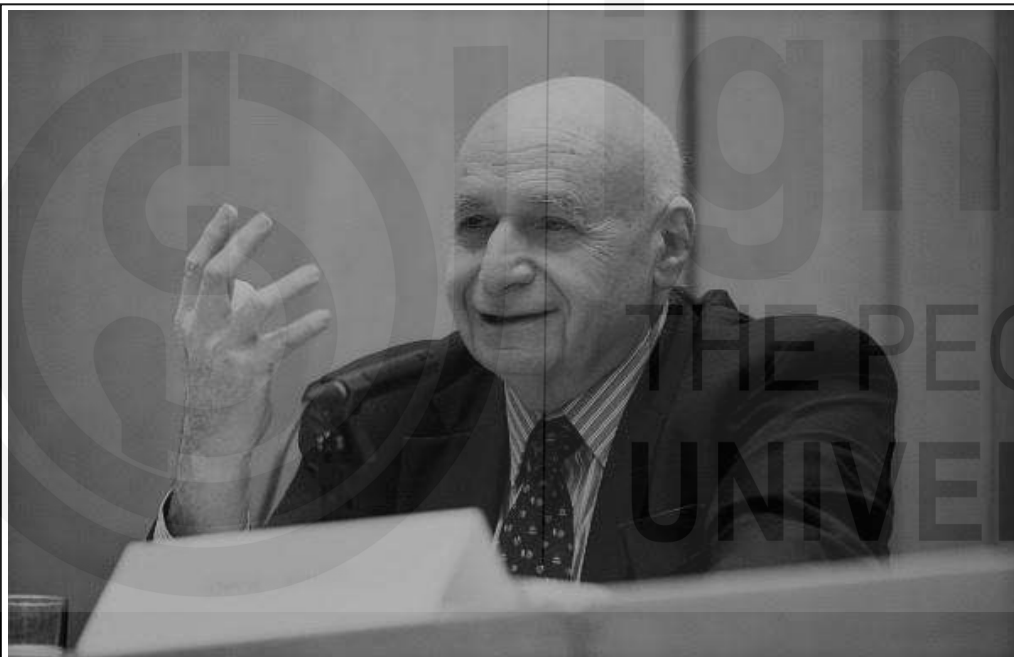
The study of social reality has been one of the primary concerns of sociological learning. The concept has been addressed in a number of ways by various scholars but however a general agreement has been that reality is different for each individual. Before proceeding further let us understand this significant concept and also its nature and character. Our reality is a complicated negotiation in everyday life. What is real depends on what is socially acceptable in the eyes of all. While we participate in the construction of reality, it's not entirely a product of our own doing only. Thus, social reality is defined as that part of social phenomena or fact that is peculiar to a particular society such as social class, religion, caste and so on and that is defined by the experiences, customs and beliefs of its societal members. Therefore, what we see as social reality is in fact a gamut of human experiences *vis a vis* their cultural content. How we were raised and what we were raised to believe affect how we present ourselves, how we perceive others, and how others perceive us. In short, our perceptions of reality are coated by our beliefs and backgrounds. Social realities thus bear a complex character because of its multiple layers of meanings and existence in different social contexts. In other words, one particular fact is interpreted and understood in a multiple way by us. Therefore, we have many societies, cultures. Social realities not only vary among different societies and cultures but also it varies across time and generations. Owing to its character as a non-monolithic entity, it always receives theoretical attention from scholars interested in the study of society.

6.3 BURGER AND LUCKMANN: LIFE AND TIMES

In this section we take brief look at how various events and life's journeys might have had a bearing on Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's life. Both were accidental sociologist who did not set out to become sociologist but nevertheless made one of the most important contributions to understanding of reality and how social reality is human construction. In the sub sections below we give you a brief biographical sketch of the scholars whose work the Social Construction of reality is the primary focus of this unit.

6.3.1 Peter Burger (1929-2017)

Peter Ludwig Berger was born in Vienna in 1929, Austria. His parents Goerge William and Jelka were Jewish converts to Christianity. After the Nazi takeover of Austria in 1938, Berger family emigrated to Palestine, then under British rule, to escape the Nazi regime and persecution of Jews. Following the German



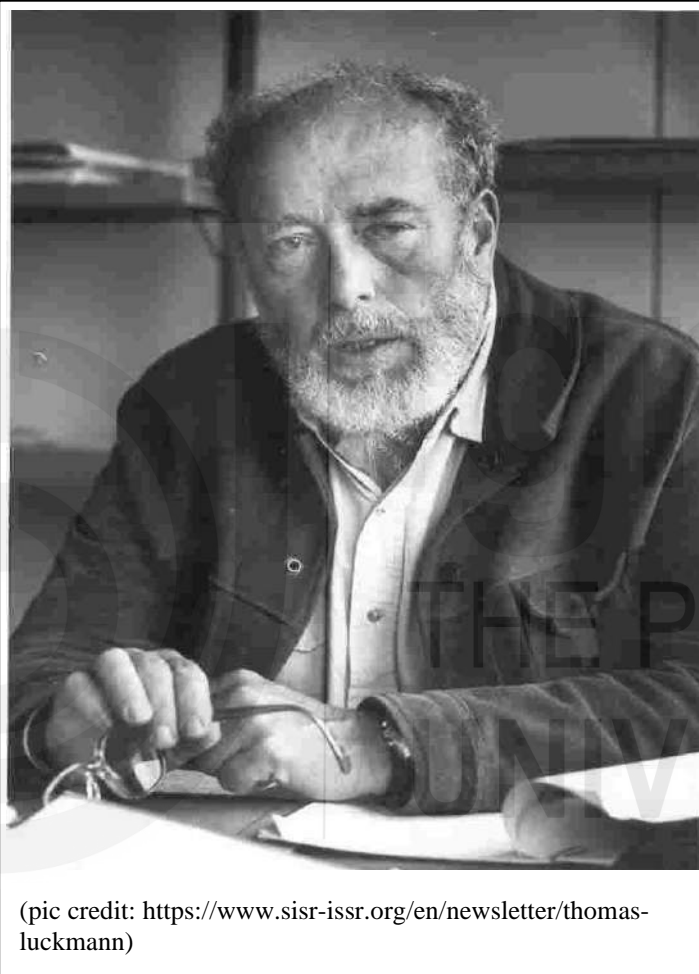
(pic credit: wikipedia)

bombings of Haifa, the family moved to Mount Caramel. Here Berger developed a lifelong interest in religion, which subsequently led him to study religion. In 1947 Berger and his family emigrated again, this time to the United States, where they settled in New York City. Berger attended Wagner College for his Bachelor of Arts and received his MA and PhD from the New School for Social Research in New York in 1954. Berger, in his memoir, *Adventures of an Accidental Sociologist: How to Explain the World Without Becoming a Bore* (2011) writes that he enrolled for Phd so that he may learn about American Society and to learn under Alfred Schütz. He was not envisioning becoming a sociologist and calls himself as an "accidental sociologist". His interest in religion led him to work at the Evangelische Akademie in Bad Boll, West Germany in 1955 and 1956, and later as an associate professor at Hartford Theological Seminary from 1958 to 1963. The next career stints were professorships at the New School for Social

Research, Rutgers University, and Boston College. Since 1981 Berger was the University Professor of Sociology and Theology at Boston University. He retired from BU in 2009. In 1985 he founded the Institute for the Study of Economic Culture, which later transformed into the Institute on Culture, Religion and World Affairs (CURA), and is now part of the Boston University. He died on June 27, 2017, in his Brookline, Massachusetts, home after a prolonged illness.

6.3.2 Thomas Luckmann (1927 – 2016)

Thomas Luckmann was born in Jesenice in 1927 when Jescnice was part of



(pic credit: <https://www.sisr-issr.org/en/newsletter/thomas-luckmann>)

kingdom of Yugoslavia. Lukmann father was an Austrian and his mother was from Ljubljana, Slovenia So Luckmann grew up in bilingual environment, speaking both Slovene and German. The German occupation of Jesenice forced the family to move to Austria in 1943. Being a resident of Austria he was granted a German citizenship and therefore was also drafted into the German Army as Luftwaffenhelfer or Hitler youth; an auxiliary unit in the army where many

youth, those born in 1926-27, were recruited. Lukmann was 17 when he was conscripted. He sustained minor injuries and was admitted a military hospital in Bavaria during the end of the WWII when United states liberated the region and Luckmann was taken as prisoner of war , he however escaped the prison after three months and eventually settled in Vienna. He studied philosophy and linguistics at the University of Vienna and Innsbruck. And like Berger was exposed to sociology when he moved to United States and studied at New School in New York.

At New School Luckmann was introduced to sociology of religion when his teacher Carl Meyer urged him to do fieldwork about churches in Germany after World War II, his work which was captivating prompted Lukmann to pursue PhD in sociology.

6.4 SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann are highly acclaimed social theorists to have lasting impression on the theorisation of reality and the ways in which it is being constructed and sustained socially through the process of human interaction. Let us now consider the example of a rich and a poor person for whom even if they stay in the same society but reality appears to both of them differently. A wealthy person who owns a pet at home and also feels proud that his care giving is the best one and it is also a right thing to do if one truly loves a pet. He is thus concerned about giving the pet branded organic food, clothes, health care treatments that costs more per week than the weekly earnings of a poor minimum-wage worker. A minimum-wage worker who serves the wealthy man in taking care of the pet might fume that this man's pet eats and lives better than he does. He might wonder and question whether this rich man has any concept of reality as to what is going on in society. For both realities are different as it is conditioned by their social background. Rich man learns from his interaction with others that spending money on one's pet is a good thing whereas the poor man from his experience and back ground learns that spending money on pets is a negative thing. Therefore, how we define everyday situations depends on our interaction experiences.

The book *The Social Construction of Reality* written in 1966 by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann is particularly important here to understand the process of reality construction by humans and human interaction. The book is remarkable on account of the fact that it provided theoretical underpinning for the phenomenological approach. Their analysis moved beyond Schutz's perspective on consciousness and Garfinkel's focus on micro individual's routine life. The social construction of reality bridges the gap between the micro individual practices with larger macro institutional structures of society. Even though the basic theoretical insights of symbolic interactionism is visible in this theory but yet it moves away from the confinements of the micro level interaction to understand the macro level cultural meaning systems as reflected in society's major institutions. They asserted that human beings create meanings that depends on the formation of individual's consciousness and world views plus their sense of psychological security. In other words, "macro-level institutional structures are sustained and reproduced through the routine practices of everyday life whereby they acquire their objective and common-sense status" (Johnson 2008:155)

However, the reality whether to be reproduced as it is or differently all this is determined by the subjective understanding of the individuals. For instance, in a highly differentiated society like ours which is constantly at the verge of change, there is a risk that these structures that appear as stable and independent of our volition may lose their obvious and factual character and reflect inconsistency and conflicting worldviews. When the major institutional structures of society fail to reinforce one another then that lead to an erosion of the subjective

understanding of the 'way the world is'. This inconsistency may lead to prevalence of disorder, chaos and anxiety in everyday life of individuals. Think about multiple experts are airing out their opinion on a particular incidence by giving multiple views. At times they all are in competition with each other as to whose definitions and concepts are going to be beneficial and become operative in social interaction. Thus, the image of reality as reality is being created with the help of human action.

In this context it would be apt to discuss the two categories of reality that Peter Berger and Luckman are refereeing about in their work. Objective reality is defined as the natural world. For example, the moon, the stars, or the ocean. These are phenomena that are basically always present and do not change. Subjective reality is socially constructed reality. For example, a role or status in society, such as a person's job title, becomes real and internalised through interaction and social definition. This is done by the process of socialisation which according to Berger and Luckman is a key concept in the process of maintaining subjective reality. People are not born members of society, they are made members of society (Berger and Luckmann 1966:149). The interaction between people is what makes this to appear as real. Subjective reality is also defined as the subjective interpretation of objective reality. For example, society has determined that the sky is blue. This gives social meaning to an objective phenomenon. Clearly, this is subjective interpretation of objective reality as the colour of sky does appear different in certain circumstances. Many of our subjective interpretations are part of everyday knowledge what we call commonsense. Therefore, in the construction of reality Berger and Luckman argue that commonsense plays a major role. Human beings in their everyday life make use of commonsensical knowledge to construct social reality. Common sense knowledge is shared intersubjective through interaction with other human beings. This becomes very clear in the structure of routine that human beings follow in the course of their daily life.

A main aspect of Berger and Luckmann's thesis thus has been the ways in which macro-level institutional structures are sustained and reproduced through the routine practices of everyday life whereby they acquire their objective and common-sense status (Johnson 2008:155). In other words, there exists a mutual relationship between human action, social institutions and subjective consciousness. To understand the mutual interdependence of social institutions and subjective consciousness Berger and Luckman devised three principal concepts: externalisation, objectification and internalisation. These three interrelated processes thus constitute central to the perspective of social construction of reality. Overall these three processes portray a reciprocal relationship between individuals and society. Individuals create society through the process of externalisation but the objective social reality that is created then shapes individual's development through internalisation and insures that their actions will continue to reproduce the external social world (Johnson 2008 :157).

Check Your Progress 1

Note: Check your answer with those given at the end of the unit.

- 1) When Berger and Luckman said that reality is socially constructed, they meant:
 - a) scientists are guided in their work by social values and interests, so they define and measure phenomena that will support their theories
 - b) people negotiate shared definitions of their situation and live according to these, often forgetting that these social worlds are not fixed and external
 - c) sociologists decide what constitutes social reality and measure only that
 - d) terms like “reality” have no deeper meaning beyond the level of discourse.
- 2) Berger and Luckman coined the term
 - a) social construction
 - b) discourse
 - c) cultural materialism.

6.4.1 Externalisation

Externalisation refers to the ongoing human activity that helps in creating and recreating material and non-material spheres of social world in a continuous basis. In other words, material and non-material culture is being produced and reproduced through human activities. Production of tools, technology and other material artifacts are examples of the material spheres of social world. Whereas the cultural conditions range from development of laws, morals, science, and various belief systems in the non-material realm of the socio-cultural world. Social structures of kinds ranging from friendships and family groups to neighborhoods, formal organisations, and large scale institutional patterns all owe their origin to the human interaction process. In the interaction process what they share is their ideas and definitions of the material, social and symbolic world and also develop stable patterns of relations that are interdependent. This process is called as the externalisation. It “emphasises the intentional and sometimes creative aspects of human beings’ actions” (Johnson 2008: 156).

In the construction of social reality as an external objective reality habits or routinely behaviors play an important part. The authors state,

“All human activity is subject to Habitualisation. Any action that is repeated frequently becomes cast into a pattern, which can then be reproduced with an economy of effort and which, ipso facto, is apprehended by its performer as that pattern. Habitualisation, further, implies that the action in question may be performed again in the future in the same manner and with the same economical effort” (Berger and Luckmann 1966:71).

In other words, everything both social and non-social done by humans can transform to a habit. The process of making coffee in the morning is a perfect example of these types of habits. The person learns the process, repeats the process, and it is done economically every time in the future. Now the further question comes in this direction as to why do they become habitualised? The authors argue that humans are inherently lazy. They are constantly trying to minimise the expenditure of thought on quotidian activities. “habitualisation carries with it the important psychological gain that choices are narrowed...this frees the individual from the burden of “all those decisions” by providing a psychological relief (Berger and Luckman 1966: 54). The main purpose for which we habitualise some of our practices is that the activity to be undertaken in these situations can then be anticipated. Thus, it helps in making our life predictable. Habitualisation is the first step in the process of institutionalisation. Institutionalisation is defined as, “a reciprocal typification of habitualised actions by types of actors” (Berger and Luckmann 1966:72). Put more simply, institutions are made up of reciprocal interaction that becomes typified based on a habitual phenomenon. These typifications of habitualised actions of individuals that built institutions are always shared ones. They are available to all the members of social groups in a specific time and space context. For example, why do we go to hospital? Unless we work there if we go then what is assumed about us? The answers to these questions are always comes from our commonsensically typified understandings. Thus, Institutions always have a historical nature (Berger and Luckmann 1966:72). Institutions cannot just appear out of thin air. They have to be constructed first by a habitual process, which then is shared by members of society. One more example can be cited in this context. The education system in the earlier times was based on family teaching family. Over time, small schools were developed with one teacher and a few students. As more time went on, and as the population increased, bigger schools were built to house more students and teachers until we see what modern schools look like today. The point is that the education system like any other social system did not just develop out of nowhere, indeed, it took interactions between social actors over a long period of time to get what we have today. Apart from the historical character of these institutional structures what is more important is that this must get the acceptability of all. This is what is referred as the process of legitimation; “Legitimation justifies the institutional order by giving a normative dignity to its practical imperatives” (Berger and Luckmann 1966:111). In other words, institutions must have an ongoing process of maintaining themselves. For example, society can be seen as maintaining itself through teaching in schools. Schools teach what is the accepted roles and rules of society, which, in turn, perpetuate the current social systems in place. The legitimate structures of social reality in the form of institutions are never constant it gets changed slowly and gets replaced with other legitimate structures.

6.4.2 Objectification

Once established the outcomes of the creative actions of individuals in the form of institutional structures becomes part and parcel of the external world. It then appears to us as if having its independent existence which we call the process of objectification. It never appears to us that it is a human creation. In other words, the external worlds of artifacts tools, technologies, art, building etc. appear before us as objective phenomena. Even though these material and non-material world is being created by we individuals but it appears to us as natural not created by us. All diverse areas of non-material culture including beliefs, values, rules, norms and customs also appears to us as external in character having an objectified reality. For instance, in working towards baccalaureate degree, students must fulfill all official requirements of the university. These rules are not made by students themselves they exist outside their subjective consciousness and being enforced by other individuals within the university. although all rules are created by human beings but they appear to us as objectified reality which people are expected to follow whether they agree with it or not. Rulemaking and rule enforcing thus form the essential features of the social reality for everyone else. Informal customs for the same matter also appear to us as objectified reality. Objectified reality is often regarded as a reified reality. Let us understand the process of reification in this context that the authors have pointed out in this context.

Activity 1

Record and analyse conversation between different people whom you meet in your daily life to see the 'social construction of women's body' as an objectified reality.

Reification as a process discusses how the social world is treated like objects. The authors state, "Reification is the apprehension of human phenomena as if they were things, that is, in non-human or supra-human terms. Another way of saying this is that reification is the apprehension of the products of human activity as if they were something other than human products – such as facts of nature, results of cosmic law, or manifestations of divine will" (Berger and Luckmann 1966:106). In other words, reification means to make something a 'thing.' A perfect example of this is the polity which has been institutionalized over a period of time. But today it is treated as a 'thing' and pass judgement like good and bad just like a good piece of candy or a bad one. For example, we treat currency or money as an object, quite forgetting that it is a human creation.

After the social world created, the social world becomes more than the external objectified reality. People internalise large parts of it in their subjective consciousness through the socialisation process. This what we call as the process of internalization. The in following paragraph let us discuss its relevance in the context of creation of social reality.

6.4.3 Internalisation

Internalisation is the third of three major processes of the theory of social construction of reality. People are socialised into their culture or sub culture and thus develop a basic understanding of “the way things are” and “the way things should be”. Over years it becomes part and parcel of our subjective consciousness and thus are eventually taken for granted and becomes part of our commonsensical understanding. We never question their existence rather try to mold our behavioural patterns as per the external world and its objectified appearance. The concept of indexical constructions is used aptly by Peter Berger and Luckman to refer to the taken for granted character of the social reality. “The entire social world.... is a set of indexicalities, which are taken for granted. They are rarely called into question” (Collins, R 1988: 277)

Despite intense socialisation efforts, however, no one internalises the total culture. There are variations in how deeply different aspects of it become internalised by different types of people in different contexts. It is internalised in different degree hence social reality appears different for different people based on the experience and interpretation of each one of them.

Signs are of critical importance in constructing reality as it provides legitimation to the social reality. The authors state, “[a] crucially important case of objectivation is signification, that is, the human production of signs. A sign may be distinguished from other objectivations by its explicit intention to serve as an index of subjective meanings” (Berger and Luckmann (1966:50). For example, the pink breast cancer ribbon not only stands for the fight against breast cancer, but it also stands for the unity of women in society. Signs can take many forms in society, but the most important thing to take away is that signs are a tool for constructing and understanding subjective reality that is shared between members of society. Language serves as a significant sign in the process of objectifying the social world. Legitimation is built by and is expressed through language. An understanding of language is therefore essential for any understanding of the reality of everyday life” (Berger and Luckmann 1966:51-52). With its particular structures of grammar and syntax it helps to create a fund of knowledge which is continuously going through an expansion and contraction with creation of different words to express new ideas from time to time. It is a reservoir of knowledge. Language bonds different social meanings and helps individuals in society understand the world around them. It plays a critical role for the creation of complex social institutions. In other words, language as a social reality accumulates knowledge and transmits it to other members of society, which in turn create a socially ordered environment. Therefore, it is a social fact which exercises control or restraint over human members, and yet remains an externalisation, and outside the individual. Thus, social reality can be apprehended by a study of language and its application to varying situations within the societal context.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your answer with those given at the end of the unit.

1) According to Berger and Luckman which of the following contains a list of the three 'moment' through which reality is constructed?

- a) Sourcing, objectifying grounding
- b) Identification, comparison attribution
- c) Externalization, objectification internalization
- d) Categorization, experience, interpretation.

2) According to Berger and Luckmann what are typifications and how are they used in everyday life?

.....
.....

3) How do Berger and Luckmann define institution?

.....
.....

4) What is reification?

.....
.....

6.5 LET US SUM UP

We have learnt from this perspective that social construction of reality is a process of meaning making that involves symbols and symbolic interactions to create our lived reality. This then guide our thinking and actions in accordance with norms and values. These Constructions become concrete overtime and we see them as objective and normal and part of our commonsense. The process of reality construction is a reciprocal process. It means that humans simultaneously shape and are shaped by the worlds they create.

However, humans do not always subscribe wholly to the social order and social reality. In such instances we find that there are various socially available procedures to bring the deviants from the overall ideology back to the common fold. Such is the role of counselors, psychiatrists, shamans, saints and others. This instance makes it clear that socialisation does not work in all cases.

This is a fascinating area of research, and we find that problems of internalising the social structure by its members more in the contemporary societies. Increasing stress on individuality or individual version of reality makes it difficult to witness coherent picture of reality. Plural societies with multiple versions of reality has thus become significant picture of the contemporary societies. However, all plural societies with plural versions of reality will continue to dominate so long as the social structure is capable of taking the strain.

You may also want to watch this video on you tube channel:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oMtudgZ-1qY&t=141s>.

6.6 REFERENCES

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6.7 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- b)
- a)

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) c)
- 2) typification refers to the fact that the bulk of life-knowledge refers not to the individual or unique qualities of things or persons, but to their typical or broad features. A stereotype is a one-sided, exaggerated and normally prejudicial view of a group which is usually associated with racism or sexism
- 3) Institutionalisation occurs whenever there is a reciprocal typification of habitualised actions by types of actors. Put differently, any such typification is an institution.
- 4) Reification as a process discusses where the social world is treated like objective reality. It is the apprehension of human phenomena as if they are things, having a non-human or supra-human quality of its own.