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CHAPTER SUMMARY

1. *What is social interaction?*

Social action is shaped by several social forces that go beyond the intentions and desires of individuals. First, all interactions are ordered by socially defined expectations about how people should act in a given situation. Second, social behavior is ordered by the characteristics that people bring to an interaction. Third, interpersonal connections--networks--also shape social behavior. Finally, social interactions occur within a much broader social structural context, which also affects their direction and outcome. In examining social forces, sociologists employ two basic approaches, microsociology and macrosociology. *Microsociology* examines small-scale, everyday patterns of behavior and face-to-face interactions. *Macrosociology* examines large-scale social arrangements, focusing on their structure and their long-term effects. Some topics, such as the webs of relationships called networks, are examined from an approach that lies between these two.

Social interaction is the process of people orienting themselves to others and acting in response to each other's behavior. The fact that this process is social means that more than one person is involved; the fact that it is interaction means that all parties are influencing one another. People interact with others in order to accomplish some goal; their behavior in such interactions is always directed toward specific other people. Power differences may affect social interaction, particularly in competitive or coercive situations. Social interaction is influenced very strongly by social structure and culture.

2. *How do processes of defining the situation affect social interaction?*

Social interaction always occurs in some setting, but the meaning of that setting must be defined by the participants. The shared knowledge that we have internalized provides us with a sound basis for people knowing what is expected of us and helps us to make sense of a particular situation. The sociologist W. I. Thomas said that if people "define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." This observation, which became known as the Thomas theorem, says that once we define a situation, that definition determines not only our actions but also the consequences of our actions.

Many social situations that we experience are at least somewhat ambiguous. Hence we often test our actions and modify them on the basis of the feedback we receive in our struggle to produce a more precise collective definition of what is going on. The *negotiated order* approach suggests that shared expectations impose limits on interactions, but these limits are not immutable. There is room for improvisation and negotiation. However, negotiations often create new rules that in turn impose constraints on future interactions.

3. What are the four sociological views on interaction processes?

When two people are engaged in face-to-face conversation, they are involved in social interaction. In their interactions with others, people influence one another's attitudes, feelings, and behavior. How do people create a shared social world through these social interactions? Sociologists have developed four perspectives on this question.

First, *symbolic interactionism* suggests that people achieve interaction by using symbols to convey common meanings attributed to events or objects. According to George Herbert Mead and his followers, the meaning of social reality is constructed through symbolic interaction. The meaning of a *symbolic gesture* extends beyond the act itself. The same gesture or phrase can have different meanings in different social contexts. One important part of social interaction is *role-taking*: we often put ourselves in the place of those with whom we interact, and thus come to know their feelings and intentions more clearly. The role-taking process allows us to anticipate other people's response to a contemplated action: sometimes we choose not to act in a certain way because in anticipating the response of other participants, we decide that this response is not desired. According to Mead and other symbolic interactionists, we play out roles in our mind before we speak, as we imagine how others are likely to respond.

Second, in the *dramaturgical approach* of Erving Goffman, life is viewed as a theatrical performance with "actors" following "scripts" (or roles) on various "stages." According to Goffman, this "performance" is a process of managing the impressions that one hopes to make on others. Different behavior occurs in different regions of social space, as people try to create impressions that are appropriate for one occasion or another. The goal of the dramaturgical approach is to reveal the images that people create as they present a carefully constructed "self" to others in social interaction. Third, *ethnomethodology* exposes the taken-for-granted routine assumptions that allow people to create order in everyday activities. Ethnomethodology is an attempt to understand how people make sense of their social interactions. Harold Garfinkel reveals the assumptions governing routine behavior by devising experiments that intentionally violate these assumptions. At moments when the expected social world seems to break down, we can appreciate the unstated, often unnoticed, rules that ordinarily hold it together.

Fourth, *social exchange* theorists such as Blau and Homans see social interactions as rational calculations of mutually beneficial transactions: "You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours." Social exchange theory is a form of rational choice theory, which holds that people weigh the anticipated gains and losses before choosing a course of behavior. However, the rational choice model does not adequately explain such apparently irrational behavior as love. Homans and others draw on the school of psychology known as *behaviorism* to explain the emotional and habitual aspects of social interaction. According to this perspective, people tend to repeat behavior for which they have been rewarded in the past and to avoid behavior for which they have been punished. The combination of rational choice and operant conditioning helps to shape many patterns of social interaction.

4. *What are networks, and why are they important for understanding social interaction and social structure?*

Most people have many different kinds of relationships with many different people. The people whom we know and interact with regularly also interact among themselves to some extent. This web of social relationships among people who are linked together (directly or indirectly) through their various communications and dealings is called a *network*. Without much effort, you can draw pictures of the networks to which you belong. Our linkages and connections, the networks in which we participate, influence our opportunities.

Sociologists have developed several useful conceptual tools to examine social networks. The units involved in these networks are usually individual people, and are known as *nodes*. Nodes also can be collective actors such as groups and organizations. The *ties* connecting these nodes can also vary from network to network. Ties can vary in content (such as degree of friendship and frequency of interaction), strength (stronger ties involve more frequent contact), reciprocity (the degree to which people list each other as important), and symmetry (the equivalence of nodes in such characteristics as age, education, and sex).

How do networks as a whole differ from one another? They may vary in terms of *size*, the number of nodes in a network. They may vary in *density*, the ratio of actual ties to all possible ties (or whether all possible connections are "filled"). They may vary in *reachability*, the number of direct ties through which a person must pass to reach any other node in the network. They may vary in *range*, a given person's absolute number of ties with others in the network. They may vary in *centrality*, the proportion of all possible links a person actually has made.

Social power also plays a role in networks. Power is not an attribute of an individual, but of a social relationship. Because most social relationships in a network involve the exchange of valued items, differences in power among those in a network depend on the degree to which some of those persons control valued resources. Control of valued resources depends largely on where a person is located in the network.

5. *What are the elements of social structure?*

A *social status* is any position in the social structure that determines where a person fits into the organized whole of a group, organization, or society. Most social statuses contain varying levels of power as well as of rights, responsibilities, and interests. Everyone occupies several different statuses at any given time; a *status set* reflects the full array of these positions.

Sociologists are interested in how people move into social statuses. *Ascribed statuses*, such as being male or female, are assigned to people without any effort on their part. *Achieved status* is a position that one attains through personal effort (such as an occupation). These two statuses are frequently linked because what people achieve is shaped partly by their ascribed characteristics. A *master status* is a particular status (either ascribed or achieved) that determines many of a person's other statuses and shapes his or her identity throughout life. A *salient status* is a social position that dominates in a particular social context.

Every status carries a socially prescribed *role*--a set of expected behaviors, obligations, and privileges. People learn how to play their roles by watching and interacting with others in a process known as *socialization*. Roles are not straitjackets, however. Individuals are free to interpret the roles they play, and to give them their own personal styles. Roles also change over time.

Roles exist in relation to each other. A single status may involve several roles, known as a *role set*. People occasionally have difficulty in meeting the obligations of a role set. *Role strain* occurs when the obligations of a role associated with a single status are too demanding for an individual's resources. *Role conflict*, on the other hand, occurs when as a result of competing or incompatible demands and roles stemming from two different social statuses. When role strain or role conflict

becomes so great that people leave one or more of their social statuses, *role exit* occurs: this is the process of disengaging from a role that was central to one's identity, redefining relationships with former role-set partners, ceasing to think of oneself in the former role, and reestablishing an identity in a new role.

The number of people occupying different statuses in a population is another critical element of social structure that influences social interaction. The overall composition of a population creates opportunities for, and places limits on, the formation of social relationships. Societies differ in their degree of heterogeneity and inequality. *Heterogeneity* reflects how the population is distributed among such categories as sex, race, religion, and ethnicity. *Inequality* reflects how people are ranked by wealth, income, or power. A high degree of heterogeneity may promote intergroup relations, such as intermarriages. When more people are spread more evenly among a variety of categories, more opportunities exist for contact with people from different categories. Such contact may develop into social relationships. The degree of inequality in a population also affects social relations among people of different social classes.

A *society* is an autonomous group of people who inhabit a common territory, have a common culture, and are linked to one another through routinized social interactions and interdependent statuses and roles. Many sociologists have considered what integrates a society. Some believe that *functional integration* among social institutions is important. A *social institution* includes the behavior patterns and status/role relationships that fulfill certain basic societal needs. Social institutions serve several functions: reproducing new members and teaching them the customs and beliefs shared by those who live in their world (the role of the family), mobilizing scarce resources to produce the goods and services that people want (economic institutions), protecting people from external threats (political institutions), teaching people about certain statuses and roles (educational institutions), motivating people to perform their roles by giving life meaning and purpose (religious institutions), and acquiring and communicating new knowledge and using knowledge to obtain raw materials and transform them into usable goods (the institutions of science and technology). Some sociologists believe that functional integration occurs when all these institutions are doing their jobs. Others believe that societies never function smoothly because conflict is an inherent feature in societies. Sociologists generally agree, however, that institutions serve as important centers of change within societies. Both the shape of social institutions and the relationships between them have changed over time. More important, social institutions are a major source of continuity and stability in societies.