expect that individual to confront us and stare into our eyes. As a matter of fact, we would be quite upset if the person did so.

Social interaction within a given society has certain shared meanings across situations. For instance, our reaction would be the same regardless of *which* elevator we rode in *which* building. Sociologist Erving Goffman (1963b) described these shared meanings in his observation about two pedestrians approaching each other on a public sidewalk. He noted that each will tend to look at the other just long enough to acknowledge the other's presence. By the time they are about eight feet away from each other, both individuals will tend to look downward. Goffman referred to this behavior as *civil inattention*—the ways in which an individual shows an awareness that another is present without making this person the object of particular attention. The fact that people engage in civil inattention demonstrates that interaction does have a pattern, or *interaction order*, which regulates the form and processes (but not the content) of social interaction.

Does everyone interpret social interaction rituals in the same way? No. Race/ethnicity, gender, and social class play a part in the meanings we give to our interactions with others, including chance encounters on elevators or the street. Our perceptions about the meaning of a situation vary widely based on the statuses we occupy and our unique personal experiences. For example, sociologist Carol Brooks Gardner (1989) found that women frequently do not perceive street encounters to be "routine" rituals. They fear for their personal safety and try to avoid comments and propositions that are sexual in nature when they walk down the street. African Americans may also feel uncomfortable in street encounters. A middle-class African American college student described his experiences walking home at night from a campus job:

> So, even if you wanted to, it's difficult just to live a life where you don't come into conflict with others. . . . Every day that you live as a black person you're reminded how you're perceived in society. You walk the streets at night; white people cross the streets. I've seen white couples and individuals dart in front of cars to not be on the same side of the street. Just the other day, I was walking down the street, and this white female with a child, I saw her pass a young white male about 20 yards ahead. When she saw me, she quickly dragged the child and herself across the busy street. . . . [When I pass,] white men tighten their grip on their women. I've seen people turn around and seem like they're going to take blows from me. . . . So, every day you realize [you're black]. Even though you're not doing anything wrong; you're just existing. You're just a person. But you're a black person perceived in an unblack world. (qtd. in Feagin, 1991: 111–112)

As this passage indicates, social encounters have different meanings for men and women, whites and people of color, and individuals from different social classes. Members of the dominant classes regard the poor, unemployed, and working class as less worthy of attention, frequently subjecting them to subtle yet systematic "attention deprivation" (Derber, 1983). The same can certainly be said about how members of the dominant classes "interact" with the homeless.

## The Social Construction of Reality

If we interpret other people's actions so subjectively, can we have a shared social reality? Some symbolic interaction theorists believe that there is very little shared reality beyond that which is socially created. Symbolic interactionists refer to this as the ***social construction of reality*—the process by which our perception of reality is largely shaped by the subjective meaning that we give to an experience** (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). This meaning strongly influences what we "see" and how we respond to situations.

When you watch a football game, do you "see" the same game as everyone else? The answer is no, according to researchers who asked Princeton and Dartmouth students to watch a film of a recent game between their two schools. The students were instructed to watch for infractions of the rules by each team. Although both groups saw the same film, the Princeton students saw twice as many rule infractions involving the Dartmouth team as the Dartmouth students saw. The researchers noted that one version of what transpired at the game was just as "real" to one person as another (entirely different) version was to another person (Hastorf and Cantril, 1954). When we see what we want or expect to see, we are engaged in the social construction of reality.

As discussed previously, our perceptions and behavior are influenced by how we initially define situations: We act on reality as we see it. Sociologists describe this process as the *definition of the situation*, meaning that we analyze a social context in which we find ourselves, determine what is in our best interest, and adjust our attitudes and actions accordingly. This can result in a ***self-fulfilling prophecy*—a false belief or prediction that produces behavior that makes the originally false belief come true** (Merton, 1968). An example would be a person who has been told repeatedly that she or he is not a good student; eventually, this person might come to believe it to be true, stop studying, and receive failing grades.

People may define a given situation in very different ways, a tendency demonstrated by the sociologist Jac-

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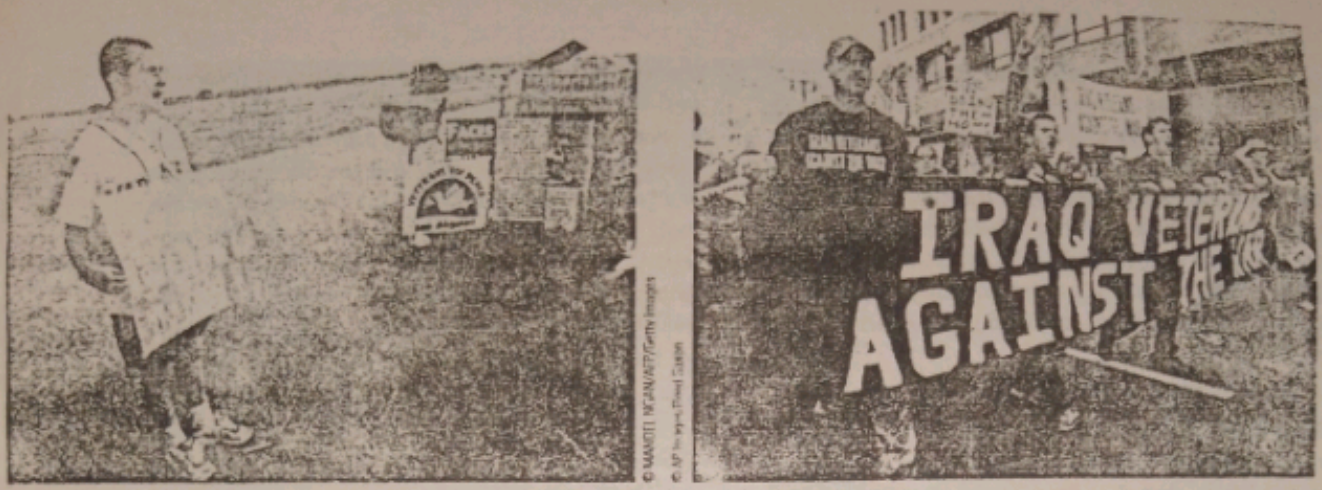


People can have sharply contrasting perceptions of the same reality.

queline Wiseman (1970) in her study of "Pacific City's" skid row. She wanted to know how people who live or work on skid row (a run-down area found in all cities) felt about it. Wiseman found that homeless persons living on skid row evaluated it very differently from the social workers who dealt with them there. On the one hand, many of the social workers "saw" skid row as a smelly, depressing area filled with men who were "down-and-out," alcoholic, and often physically and mentally ill. On the other hand, the men who lived on skid row did not see it in such a negative light. They experienced some degree of satisfaction with their "bottle clubs [and a] remarkably indomitable and creative spirit"—at least initially (Wiseman, 1970: 18). As this study shows, we define situations from our own frame of reference, based on the statuses that we occupy and the roles that we play.

Dominant-group members with prestigious statuses may have the ability to establish how other people define "reality" (Berger and Luckmann, 1967: 109). Some sociologists have suggested that dominant groups, particularly higher-income white males in powerful economic and political statuses, perpetuate their own world view through ideologies that are frequently seen as "social reality." For example, the sociologist Dorothy E. Smith (1999) points out that the term "Standard North American Family" (meaning a heterosexual two-parent family) is an ideological code promulgated by the dominant group to identify how people's family life *should* be arranged. According to Smith (1999), this code plays a powerful role in determining how people in organizations such as the government and schools believe that a family should be. Likewise, the sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (1998) argues that "reality" may be viewed differently by African American women and other historically oppressed groups when compared to the perspectives of dominant-group members. However, according to Collins (1998), mainstream, dominant-group members sometimes fail to realize how much they could learn about "reality" from "outsiders." As these theorists state, social reality and social structure are often hotly debated issues in contemporary societies.

## Ethnomethodology

How do we know how to interact in a given situation? What rules do we follow? Ethnomethodologists are interested in the answers to these questions. ***Ethnomethodology* is the study of the commonsense knowledge that people use to understand the situations in which they find themselves** (Heritage, 1984: 4). Sociologist Harold Garfinkel (1967) initiated this approach and coined the term: *ethno* for "people" or "folk" and *methodology* for "a system of methods." Garfinkel was critical of mainstream sociology for not recognizing the ongoing ways in which people create reality and produce their own world. Consequently, ethnomethodologists examine existing patterns of conventional

**social construction of reality** the process by which our perception of reality is shaped largely by the subjective meaning that we give to an experience.

**self-fulfilling prophecy** the situation in which a false belief or prediction produces behavior that makes the originally false belief come true.

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behavior in order to uncover people's background expectancies—that is, their shared interpretation of objects and events—as well as their resulting actions. According to ethnomethodologists, interaction is based on assumptions of shared expectancies. For example, when you are talking with someone, what expectations do you have that you will take turns? Based on your background expectancies, would you be surprised if the other person talked for an hour and never gave you a chance to speak?

To uncover people's background expectancies, ethnomethodologists frequently break "rules" or act as though they do not understand some basic rule of social life so that they can observe other people's responses. In a series of *breaching experiments*, Garfinkel assigned different activities to his students to see how breaking the unspoken rules of behavior created confusion.

The ethnomethodological approach contributes to our knowledge of social interaction by making us aware of subconscious social realities in our daily lives. However, a number of sociologists regard ethnomethodology as a frivolous approach to studying human behavior because it does not examine the impact of macrolevel social institutions—such as the economy and education—on people's expectancies. Women's studies scholars suggest that ethnomethodologists fail to do what they claim to do: look at how social realities are created. Rather, they take ascribed statuses (such as race, class, gender, and age) as "givens," not as *socially created* realities. For example, in the experiments that Garfinkel assigned to his students, he did not account for how gender affected their experiences. When Garfinkel asked students to reduce the distance between themselves and a nonrelative to the point that "their noses were almost touching," he ignored the fact that gender was as important to the encounter as was the proximity of the two persons. Scholars have recently emphasized that our expectations about reality are strongly influenced by our assumptions relating to gender, race, and social class (see Bologh, 1992).

## Dramaturgical Analysis

Erving Goffman suggested that day-to-day interactions have much in common with being on stage or in a dramatic production. ***Dramaturgical analysis*** **is the study of social interaction that compares everyday life to a theatrical presentation.** Members of our "audience" judge our performance and are aware that we may slip and reveal our true character (Goffman, 1959, 1963a). Consequently, most of us attempt to play our role as well as possible and to control the impressions we give to others. ***Impression management (presentation of self)*** **refers to people's efforts to present themselves to others in ways that are most favorable to their own interests or image.**

For example, suppose that a professor has returned graded exams to your class. Will you discuss the exam and your grade with others in the class? If you are like most people, you probably play your student role differently depending on whom you are talking to and what grade you received on the exam. Your "presentation" may vary depending on the grade earned by the other person (your "audience"). In one study, students who all received high grades ("Ace–Ace encounters") willingly talked with one another about their grades and sometimes engaged in a little bragging about how they had "aced" the test. However, encounters between students who had received high grades and those who had received low or failing grades ("Ace–Bomber encounters") were uncomfortable. The Aces felt as if they had to minimize their own grade. Consequently, they tended to attribute their success to "luck" and were quick to offer the Bombers words of encouragement. On the other hand, the Bombers believed that they had to praise the Aces and hide their own feelings of frustration and disappointment. Students who received low or failing grades ("Bomber–Bomber encounters") were more comfortable when they talked with one another because they could share their negative emotions. They often indulged in self-pity and relied on face-saving excuses (such as an illness or an unfair exam) for their poor performances (Albas and Albas, 1988).

In Goffman's terminology, *face-saving behavior* refers to the strategies we use to rescue our performance when we experience a potential or actual loss of face. When the Bombers made excuses for their low scores, they were engaged in face-saving; the Aces attempted to help them save face by asserting that the test was unfair or that it was only a small part of the final grade. Why would the Aces and Bombers both participate in face-saving behavior? In most social interactions, all role players have an interest in keeping the "play" going so that they can maintain their overall definition of the situation in which they perform their roles.

Goffman noted that people consciously participate in *studied nonobservance*, a face-saving technique in which one role player ignores the flaws in another's performance to avoid embarrassment for everyone involved. Most of us remember times when we have failed in our role and know that it is likely to happen again; thus, we may be more forgiving of the role failures of others.

Social interaction, like a theater, has a front stage and a back stage. The *front stage* is the area where a player performs a specific role before an audience. The *back stage* is the area where a player is not required