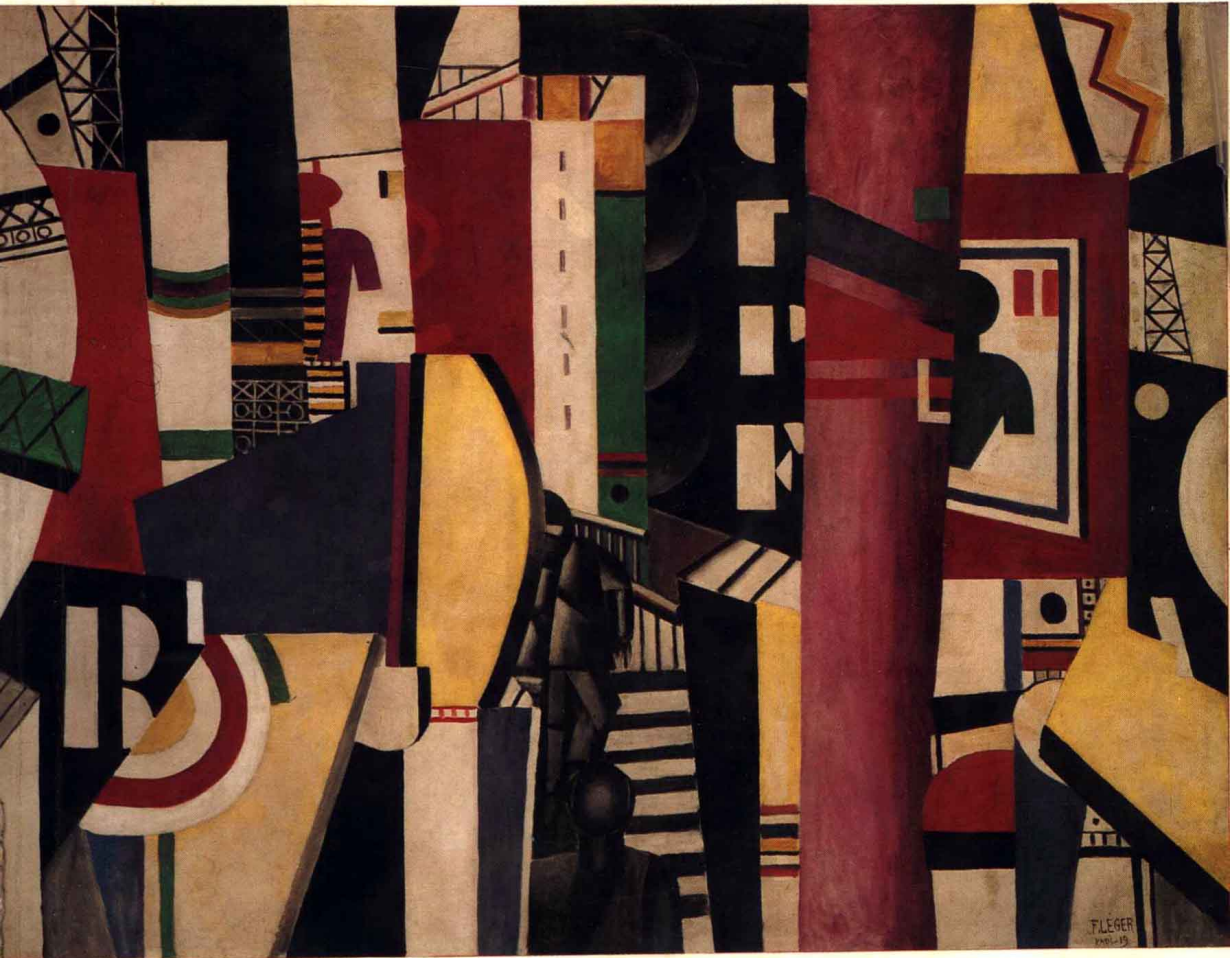


# Sociology in Everyday Life

*second edition*



David A. Karp · William C. Yoels

Second Edition

# Sociology *in* Everyday Life

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# Preface

**D**uring the course of our teaching careers we have become increasingly dissatisfied with the focus of most introductory-level textbooks. Nearly exclusively, they are structured around macrosociological, institutional issues. If everyday interaction is treated at all, it is usually dealt with as a subheading in chapters on socialization, culture, or small-group study.

This is a serious omission for two reasons. First, the study of social interaction has always been a central concern of the sociological enterprise. Second, as we have come to learn very well, students taking introductory sociology courses are intent on learning something immediately applicable to their everyday lives. We have written *Sociology in Everyday Life* for those instructors who want to ground their treatment of traditional introductory topics in the stuff of daily life. This edition contains a new chapter on "Health and Illness" that reflects our own current research involvement in areas related to medical sociology. We have also revised and updated all the previous chapters. Finally, we have slightly altered the previous title to *Sociology in Everyday Life*, which we think better communicates the relevance of sociology for understanding our ongoing social experiences.

A key assumption underlying this book is that sociology's value lies in its ability to provide fresh insights into events and situations that students might ordinarily take for granted. In each chapter we show that there are underlying patterns to everyday life. These patterns become "obvious" only when we begin to look very hard at everyday phenomena and then apply sociological concepts to them. While our focus is fundamentally on processes of interaction, we are careful to indicate the mutually transformative connections between social structures and everyday face-to-face encounters.

To accomplish our goals, the book has been divided into three main parts. Part One, consisting of three chapters, introduces key concepts in sociology (culture, socialization, roles, power, self, and the like) as well as the theoretical perspective that is maintained throughout the book. Most of our analysis of everyday life is derived from the symbolic interaction perspective, though the studies we refer to were done from a variety of sociological viewpoints. The first three chapters, like all those in the book, are filled with examples that are resonant with the daily experiences of college students. Part Two centers on the construction and maintenance of order in social life. This section includes chapters on urban life and relations among strangers, the construction of intimacies, the distribution and use of power in daily life, everyday life within bureaucracies, and the experience of illness. Part Three speaks to questions of deviance and change in everyday life. It includes chapters on deviance, aging, and contemporary social movements, including the search for self.

We have constructed the book so that the topics parallel those discussed in most introduction to sociology courses. Instructors will find that it can be used flexibly, in conjunction with other core texts or as the central book in the introductory course, along with a number of shorter texts.

• • •

Several people have provided us with their help, insight, and criticism as this book has evolved into the current edition. Charlie Derber, John Donovan, and Darleen Karp will no doubt see versions of their ideas on the following pages. Peter Hall of the University of Missouri, Jack Kamerman of Kean College, Del Samson of Montana State University, John Stimson of William Paterson College, and Louis Zurcher of the University of Texas carefully and most professionally reviewed earlier versions of the book. Their sophisticated knowledge of symbolic interaction and their sensitivity to the subtleties of everyday life helped us in expanding and clarifying our thoughts. Our long association with the late Gregory P. Stone of the

University of Minnesota also had an important influence on the development of the ideas in this book. Eunice Doherty, Roberta Nerenberg, and Shirley Urban typed several drafts of this manuscript with their usual skill, patience, and good humor. They also read our work with discerning eyes and alerted us to a number of points requiring clarification.

December 1992

David A. Karp  
William C. Yoels

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# Development of the Perspective

**T**he focus of this book is on everyday life. Our work is based on the belief that a key measure of sociology's value and vitality is its ability to provide insight into the underlying structure of day-to-day life. Certainly, sociology should provide you with a way to understand how society as a whole is organized and ordered. At the same time, a sociological way of looking at things should be immediately applicable to your everyday life. We propose to show that there is an order and predictability to everyday life which becomes visible once you begin to look very hard at behaviors and situations you might otherwise take for granted. Sociological analysis has the power to let you see everyday behaviors and situations in a new way. Talking, using space, waiting, relating to members of the opposite sex, choosing clothing, presenting images of yourself to others, touching, behaving in classrooms, and meeting strangers are all behaviors which happen in culturally predictable ways.

The first part of this book, consisting of three chapters, is designed to accomplish three broad goals: (1) to introduce the study of everyday life as a legitimate concern in the study of sociology; (2) to provide you with knowledge of some of sociology's key concepts;

and (3) to lay out the theoretical perspective that is most helpful in analyzing everyday events.

While close observation is required in order to comprehend how daily life is organized, you also need some tools to help you know what to do with your observations. Concepts and the theories built from them provide a blueprint for identifying underlying patterns in social life. In the first three chapters you will learn how such standard sociological concepts as culture, norms, values, roles, status, power, socialization, self, impression management, and interaction both direct the analysis of daily life and provide insight into its management.

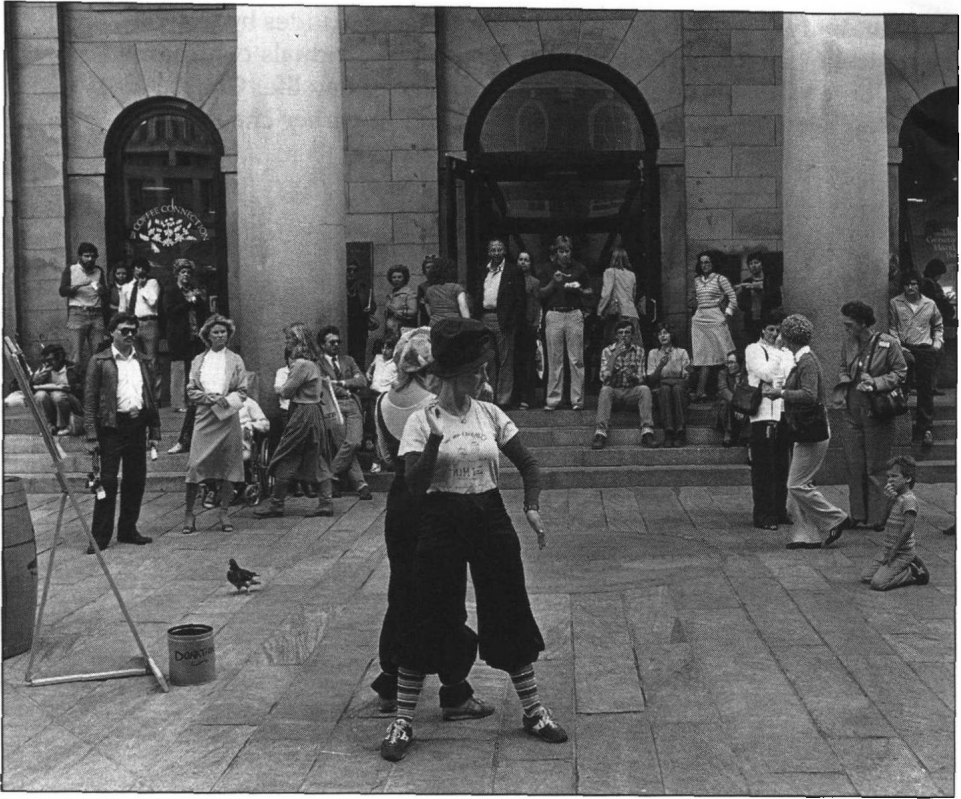
In these chapters we also elaborate on a theoretical perspective in sociology called *symbolic interaction*. We will employ this theoretical view throughout the text as we investigate the various contexts of everyday life.

Chapter 1 presents a rationale for the study of everyday behavior. The notion that clear cultural expectations underlie daily activity is illustrated with examples of regularities in the use of time, space, and gesture. Beyond this, we emphasize how people's interpretations and definitions of social situations direct their behaviors. The questions of how individuals give meaning to various social situations are central to the perspective of symbolic interaction. An additional concern in Chapter 1 is to show the significance of everyday behavior in studying how society itself is ordered. By the time you finish the first chapter you will possess several helpful ideas for looking at daily life in new ways.

Social life would be impossible without people's ability to define situations in shared ways. Chapter 2 elaborates on the important notion that human beings are symbol-using animals who collectively give meaning to the objects, events, and situations that make up their lives. We consider in detail the human capacity to symbolize, the socialization processes through which "selves" emerge, and the crucial importance of role-taking in human communications. The ability to engage in symbolic communication, we argue, not only makes social order possible, it also constitutes a continual source of nonconformity in social life. Chapter 2 can give you a deeper understanding of the symbolic interaction perspective and a better ability to use it yourself.

Chapter 3 shows how the assessment of meaning in interaction depends on information about others. Here we describe the kinds of information used to evaluate the people you physically encounter. We explain how such master attributes as sex, age, and race affect everyday relations and describe how people interpret each other's

clothing, body type, and gestures. The chapter concludes by describing a view of interaction which stresses how individuals control information and foster impressions of self in everyday life. Chapter 3 builds on some of the key principles learned in earlier chapters.



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## CHAPTER OUTLINE

- ▶ Cultural Expectations and Everyday Interactions
- ▶ Social Conventions as Guides for Social Order
- ▶ Beyond Social Conventions: The Interpretation of Everyday Life
- ▶ The Individual-Society Relationship
- ▶ The Sociology of Everyday Life
- ▶ Conclusion

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# Culture and the Organization of Everyday Life

# 1

A story is told about a man who became a fixture on the streets of Edinburgh, Scotland. He would stop people on Princes Street, a main thoroughfare, and ask them whether they were sane. "If any replied Yes, he would retort—ah, but can you *prove* it? And, if they could not, he proceeded triumphantly to show them that *he* at any rate could prove his sanity, by producing his own certificate of discharge from a mental hospital" (Gellner, 1975:431). This little anecdote raises significant questions about how we show that we are sane and the criteria we use in deciding whether others are insane. Even those who claim expertise in these matters—psychiatrists and other mental health professionals—have been unable to agree on any set of definitions of mental illness or insanity (Brown, 1987).

At the root of this difficulty is the fact that people's behaviors can only be seen as appropriate or inappropriate in terms of the societies and situations in which they take place. In the Jalé tribe of New Guinea, for example, people waiting for a meal, preparing the oven, tending the fire, or just standing around would carefully appraise the victim destined to be the main course: "A healthy, muscular body is praised with ravenous exclamation, but a lesser grade body is also

applauded" (Koch, 1974:198). In certain Eskimo tribes, a woman might wash her hair to make it smooth, rub tallow into it, grease her face with blubber, and scrape herself clean with a knife, "to be polite" (Reusch, 1951:87). At the turn of the century, the Arunta tribe of Australia considered the size of a girl's breasts a community concern:

To promote the growth of the breasts of a girl, the men assemble in the men's camp where they all join in...an exhortation to the breasts to grow...At daylight one of them goes out and calls her to a spot close to the men's camp to which she comes accompanied by her mother. Here her body is rubbed all over with fat by her mother's brothers who then paint a series of straight lines of red ochre down her back and also down the center of her chest and stomach. A wide circle is painted around each nipple (Spencer and Gillin, 1899:459-460).

Odd behaviors? Surely people in American society who engage in cannibalism, think rubbing fat on the face will make them more appealing, or have their breasts painted in public in hopes of increasing their measurements would shortly find themselves undergoing psychiatric examination. But members of the societies where these behaviors were practiced would be considered strange and possibly insane for *not* engaging in them.

### CULTURAL EXPECTATIONS AND EVERYDAY INTERACTIONS

As Americans, we are born into an exceedingly complex **culture**. By culture we mean the totality, including knowledge, beliefs, customs, and morals, shared by members of a society. Our culture becomes so familiar to us at an early age that we tend to take it for granted. We normally do not question what we do and why we do it. Everyday life appears to be a reality which rarely requires explanation. It simply exists. The social world confronts us as an ordered and intelligible fact. We generally know which behaviors are proper and which would be improper in a given situation. Indeed, social life would be chaotic if we had to question at length the meaning of every behavior before we engaged in it. When we pull up beside a car at a red light, we know we should not stare at the occupants. When we meet a person for the first time, we do not need to ask ourselves how long we ought to shake hands. We do not expect new acquaintances to reveal their life problems to us. We would be likely to fear a stranger who boarded a nearly empty bus or train and deliberately sat next to us.

There are, in short, an extraordinary number of **cultural expecta-**



tions which we learn virtually from birth and which lend order and organization to our daily interactions with others. Such "background expectancies" constitute the fundamental rules in accordance with which persons normally act. These rules, sometimes difficult to specify, reflect our mutually held assumptions about proper and conventional behavior.

The central goal of this book is to analyze **everyday interactions** or communications from a sociological point of view. This first chapter provides a rationale for the study of routine social encounters in which everyone participates. The authors will also begin to outline the theoretical perspective we consider to be most valuable in exploring how transactions with others are accomplished. This is the **symbolic interaction perspective** (see Becker and McCall, 1990; Reynolds, 1990), which centers attention on how individuals interpret and give meanings to the daily interactions that make up their **social worlds**.

To begin our presentation of this perspective, we will first consider the numerous social conventions which serve as guides for human behaviors and the maintenance of social order. Beyond that, they also serve as the basis on which everyday interactions are analyzed and interpreted by individuals. They therefore have a bearing on both the power of society to influence individuals' behaviors and the power of individuals to change or manipulate society.

## SOCIAL CONVENTIONS AS GUIDES FOR SOCIAL ORDER

There are thousands of cultural expectations which guide the minute details of our everyday interactions with others. These expectations are expressed as social conventions, or **norms**, which make up the rules for acceptable behaviors. Several volumes would be needed to describe all the norms in American society, ranging from proper table manners to the enormously complex regularities of verbal discourse. Together these norms make our daily encounters reasonably predictable, so we know what is expected of us and what to expect of others. Conventions such as those governing use of space, time, and posture or gesture also provide indications of the relative power, prestige, and status among the individuals taking part in interactions.

The authors of this book maintain that social life would be utterly unmanageable if there were no broadly shared consensus about how members of the society ought to conduct themselves in the myriad situations encountered in daily life. Social conventions or shared