Chapter 5
Societal Roles

I. Anecdote: "It's a woman's job"

In a recent class discussion about gender roles/stereotypes, a 21-year-old Romanian student had a lot to say about an incident that had recently occurred to him.

"I don't know why I said what I did," Gheorghe said while he looked down and shook his head slightly. "Maybe it is just the way I'm used to being in my country. Anyway, my mouth worked before my brain," he said as he shifted in his chair and looked up at his classmates. "So here it goes. I was working in the cafeteria. I was the only man on that shift. Everything was fine, until the sweeping and mopping came up. I would never do that in my country, so I told one of my coworkers, a female, that I would not sweep or mop. She asked me why."

Gheorghe took a deep breath before he continued. He looked sheepishly toward his female classmates. "I said, 'It's a woman's job.' That was my big, big mistake. But that is the truth in my country. Within two minutes, all the staff learned what I had said."

He smiled as he tapped a pencil on his desk. He grinned at the class. "Now, every time I go in to work, my first job is to sweep and mop. I hope I didn't make another enemy with this story."

Discussion of Key Issues

What is accepted and expected behavior in one culture may very well be considered inappropriate or offensive in another. Likewise, specific roles and the concomitant expectations and behaviors associated with these roles often differ across cultures. Social role enactment may be determined by cultural practices, by law, and/or by the general norms of society. Religious beliefs can significantly impact how one views the workings of the world. People who come from a belief system that emphasizes fatalism and the essential powerlessness of the individual to alter events are much more prone to accept events as they occur and to de-emphasize individual attempts to alter the course of events. Likewise, certain religious systems stress the workings of the supernatural on an individual's health. As such, when confronted with illness, people who believe in such systems are as likely to turn to traditional folk healers as they are to Western-trained medical personnel.

Cultural cues about societal roles are not always obvious to those unfamiliar with a given society. Hindu women traditionally show that they are married by wearing a red powder on part of their hair and a red dot on the forehead. North American, Scandinavian, and French women traditionally wear a wedding band on the fourth finger of the left hand, while Spanish and Italian women wear a wedding band on the fourth finger of the right hand.

The accepted societal roles allotted to different members of various cultures vary greatly. In many cultures, older citizens are highly respected, even venerated. Especially for women, this is the time they attain a measure of respect and even freedom. Marriage, work, child rearing, aging, familial responsibilities, and intergenerational relationships are among some of the major areas of cross-cultural differences.

Chapter 5 considers social roles and expectations cross-culturally. Some of the topics covered include family roles, religious beliefs, medical practices, and women's roles.

Questions for Thought

- What are social roles?

- How are social roles affected by differing situational contexts?

- How do age and gender impact social roles?

II. Theory: What Research Tells Us

Defining Societal Roles

Culture resides in individuals; it is their identities, their beliefs, their roles, the relationships, and customs that make up the kaleidoscope of culture. Inherent in cultures is social structure, or the system of formal rules, social roles, and behavioral norms that constitutes an essential aspect of social organization. Within this larger social structure, social roles comprise one general class, which in turn is subdivided into many, less general subclasses. The specific subclasses of social roles and the specific composition of different kinds of social role vary considerably across cultures and may do so even within cultures.

Basically defined, a social role represents the cultural expectations of how people in a social position are expected to behave. All individuals enact a mixture of social roles within their culture. Some of the roles are *ascribed roles.* These are roles that derive from biological facts such as gender and/or age and from culturally determined factors such as birth. Only women, for instance, can be mothers; however, prohibiting pregnant women from working is determined by a cultural belief that pregnant women do not belong in the workplace. Other social roles are *achieved roles.* These are roles that a person attains through education, marriage, training, hard work, and so on. For instance, a person becomes a lawyer by going to law school and passing the bar examination, and a person becomes successful in business (like Bill Gates) by developing something society wants, needs, and uses. **(See Activity A—Who Is It?)**

Within every culture, people enact both ascribed and achieved social roles. Individuals perform a specified set of behaviors and occupy specific positions based on these roles, which are often culturally determined. Cultural norms govern the behaviors of a particular role. To some extent, these behaviors are exhibited by any person occupying that role, regardless of who he or she is or of his or her personal characteristics. In any culture, a teacher is someone who imparts knowledge and/or wisdom to others. How the teacher imparts this knowledge and how the role of teacher is regarded is often culture-specific. Teachers are viewed as strong authority figures in some cultures but as facilitators in others. Teaching methods vary from those that allow for and encourage active student participation to those emphasizing rote learning and memorization. Much of accepted teacher methodology is traceable to cultural preferences and beliefs regarding the social role of the teacher.

Role expectations refer to the demands of a role in a specific situation. For instance, a culture that demands modesty from women may require them to veil themselves in public or may expect them to keep their eyes lowered in conversation. Social roles, the cultural norms influencing these roles, and role expectations are arbitrary. Cross-cultural and historical differences reveal that what is considered "normal" or "accepted" is learned (Block, 1978; Boudreau, Sennott, & Wilson, 1986; O'Kelly, 1980). Culturally determined or ascribed roles often undergo change. The growing number of women at higher levels in the business world in North America is an example of this. Likewise, the definition of the role of "father" has changed in many countries to encourage fathers to play more nurturing roles in the upbringing of their children than has traditionally been the case. **(See Activity B—Male or Female?)**

Social roles are learned as a part of the enculturation process children are exposed to in becoming functioning members of their culture. These roles are learned through family, through institutions (e.g., school or church), and through peer groups. In some cultures, religion has been the determining factor in deciding which roles a person can perform; for example, in India, religious beliefs have led Muslims but not Hindus into professions connected with meat, such as the tanning of leather and shoemaking. The learning of social roles is both formal and informal. Some roles require formal and lengthy training such as educational degrees, apprenticeships, or on-the-job experience. Other role behavior is learned informally through interactions with and observations of others—family members, peer groups, and other members of one's culture. In Japan,

women are encouraged to project a childlike image. Cartoon figures such as Hello Kitty and other cutesy characters decorate women's handbags, scarves, and jackets and even toasters.

To a great extent, people interact with each other on the basis of their social roles. Communicative interactions are directed by the role expectations associated with different social roles, the contexts of the interactions, and the definitions or interpretations the speakers ascribe to social roles. Since people's self-identity consists of a combination of social roles, different social situations will elicit different categories of a person's social roles (Boudreau, 1986). **(See Activity C—Mind Bender)**

Social identities

Interwoven with social roles is a person's social identity, which is determined in large part by the social roles he or she occupies. Personalities and behaviors are shaped by the identities individuals hold in different situations, as different social roles carry with them different sets of expected behaviors. Every individual plays many roles successively or simultaneously both within a culture and over the course of a lifetime. **(See Activity D—Being a Friend Means . . .)**

For each role people enact, they have differing conceptions of self-identity. For instance, a man who performs the roles of father, husband, son, neighbor, graduate student, and instructor will associate different traits and abilities with each role. As the circumstances of people's lives change, so do their roles and their social identities. For example, as individuals mature, they come to know and experience their identity through the roles they assume in work, marriage, and/or parenthood. These roles and social identities are significantly different from those they occupied as children or teenagers and will change again as people retire, are widowed, and/or become empty nesters.

We can categorize five basic groups of social roles (Hayes & Orrell, 1993).

- *Age and gender groups* (e.g., child, teenager, man, woman, retiree)

- *Household and family groups* (e.g., wife, aunt, son, grandmother)

- *Status groups* (e.g., manager vs. employee, senator vs. constituent, supervisor vs. worker, professor vs. student)

- *Occupational groups* (e.g., doctor, nurse, car mechanic, teacher, minister, secretary, politician, businessperson)

- *Shared interest groups* (e.g., Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, country club, health club, Rotary Club, bowling league, bridge club, softball team)

These five groups illustrate how the essential types of social roles are found across cultures; what differs cross-culturally is the expectations and norms associated with the roles in each category. In addition, while we can categorize social roles into these five groups, these roles are by no means mutually exclusive. It is essential to remember that each social role is part of an interconnected web of social relationships within a society and that these roles and relationships are not static. As people's lives and situations change, their social roles and relationships change, too. **(See Activity E—Who Am I?)**

In addition to being associated with culturally determined behaviors, social roles are associated with sets of culturally determined expectations. In every culture, individuals will exhibit variations in role performance; to an extent, people are free to interpret or enact their roles as they see fit within the cultural, political, and social limits imposed on them. Overall, however, members of a culture will generally perform within the culture's expected parameters of behavior. Individual deviations outside the expected parameters are often accounted for within a culture by the identification of these deviations with unaccepted but culturally recognized sets of behaviors "outside" the norm. These different behaviors often form the expected parameters of cultural subgroups within the main cultural group.

For each of the many social roles people hold, they have a somewhat different self-concept of themselves. In a person's role as father, for instance, he may regard himself as provider, disciplinarian, and caregiver. In his role as son, he may regard himself as child, oldest sibling, and dependent from his parents' point of view. In the same man's role as manager, he may regard himself as authority and as responsible and powerful. As people think of themselves in different roles, different traits and abilities are emphasized. In addition, an individual's persona is determined in part by the cultural and social stereotypes of the roles he or she enacts.

While many types of social roles are found across cultures, the cultural expectations of the role behaviors differ widely. To illustrate, in North

America, repercussions for public servants accused and found guilty of corruption are serious; corruption among civil servants, while admittedly present, is considered morally wrong, unacceptable, and punishable. In other cultures, such as the Korean culture, corruption among civil servants is recognized as having unfortunate social consequences, yet it is not viewed as morally wrong (Szalay, 1981). The difference in the perception or interpretation of the concept of corruption lies in differing role expectations for civil servants. In North America, civil servants are expected to perform their roles impartially without receiving outside rewards or gifts. Civil servants in Korea, who have myriad obligations to the various members of their in-groups, expect gifts as part of getting their job done; role expectations are such that in-group obligations take precedence over any abstract duty to the society as a whole.

In North American and most European cultures, employees' efforts and hard work are important in the maintaining and advancement of one's position. Promotion is generally based on how effective and responsible an employee is. Overall, employees strive to "get ahead." In some cultures, however, working hard and getting ahead are secondary to maintaining good relationships with one's boss or superior. Personal relations are more important than the work itself; how strong these relations are will influence how quickly an individual is promoted and rewarded. In some cultures, an employee is regarded as an integral member of a company's group of workers. Relationships and teamwork are emphasized. Success is shared by all, and guilt is diffused when something goes wrong. At the same time, social roles and professional roles are not separate and distinct. Workers are expected to spend a great deal of time socializing with others from their workplace after work and even on weekends.

Different expectations of role behavior carry over into conceptions of politeness. Manners toward the members of one's in-group versus those outside this network often vary considerably. In Arab cultures, for instance, remarkably polite manners and extensive courtesies are shown to members of one's in-group, while Arabs often exhibit rude, offensive, or hostile behavior toward outsiders. What North Americans view as common courtesy toward strangers, for instance, the Arabs view as unnecessary and superfluous behavior toward members of out-groups.

Role conflict

When people move from one culture to another, they often find their identities in conflict as a result of *role conflict.* The social role or roles they occupy in one culture may differ and even be incompatible with the ones they occupy in the new culture. For example, immigrants who are doctors, teachers, or professionals of other types may have to assume the role of student to study English on their arrival in the United States. They can not practice their respected professions until adequate English language proficiency is demonstrated and until any U.S. exams in their respective fields are successfully completed. When positions in their fields of expertise are unavailable to them for one reason or another, they are forced to drive taxis, work as busboys or dishwashers, clean houses and offices, or perform other menial tasks to make a living.

New and different role expectations may also conflict with a person's norms or beliefs. It is often difficult for Western women to accept the restrictions that are placed on women's freedoms in many Moslem countries. In the fall of 2001, a controversy erupted over an order dating from the Gulf War that American servicewomen in Saudi Arabia cover themselves with long head scarves and black robes, or *abbayas,* when off base. After Lt. Col. Martha McSally, the highest-ranking female fighter pilot in the Air Force, filed a lawsuit that branded the dress code unconstitutional and charged that it improperly forced American women to conform to others' religious and social customs, the order was lifted in January 2002. The lifting of this ban in turn sparked sharp criticism from Saudi officials and clergy, who declared that all women in their country were subject to the same laws. The question arises, where does one draw the line between cultural insensitivity and respect for another's cultural norms and beliefs?

People's social identities depend on their social roles. When the status of any of these roles changes, it upsets the balance in the web of social roles surrounding each individual. Such an imbalance often leads to culture shock and/or self-esteem issues. For instance, take a well-respected reporter who decides to leave her home country and study intensive English in a program in the United States. Due to her low level of English proficiency, she finds herself placed in beginner language classes. Suddenly she finds herself no longer occupying her social-occupational role of "reporter," which entails a belief in herself as a strong and effective writer, a good communicator, and a competent manipulator of written words. In ad-

dition, there is a concomitant loss of status; now she is a student and not a professional. Because people assess themselves in comparison to others, when an individual's role or roles change, these comparisons must also change. Since maintaining self-esteem is essential to preserving social identity, change or conflict in social roles can lead to a decrease in self-esteem (Meyers, 1999). **(See Activity F—Critical Incidents)**

Social interaction

Communication plays an integral role in a culture's social system. How people communicate is in many ways dependent on the roles different speakers are enacting in communicative situations. Understanding a culture's system, whether intuitively or explicitly, allows members of that culture to make accurate predictions about people's roles and their expected behaviors. An integral part of language and social roles involves knowing the rules of discourse and social interaction.

When role conflicts occur between members of different cultures, the accuracy of an individual's prediction of another's behavior decreases because the expectations and assumptions about the behaviors of the other speaker are no longer shared. In some cultures, for instance, people who perform services for others are not thanked; in others, such thanking is a normal courtesy. An American bellhop, taxi driver, or cashier expects a thank-you when a service is concluded. An East Asian Indian would regard such thanks as superfluous, if not insulting, because one does not expect or give thanks for those performing their jobs (Apte, 1977).

Status

Cultures have hierarchical divisions of status in terms of social class or ethnicity. There are generally clear distinctions between individuals who are rich and individuals who are poor, as well as between those who are white and those who are not. Japan is an example of a culture characterized as a vertical society, or *tate shakai,* where there is a distinct ranking of someone above or below someone else. This is particularly evident in Japanese business dealings, where status dictates not only what is said and how it is said but also what tactics can be used. Lewis (1999) notes that within their own societal web, the Japanese know unequivocally the manner they should use to address a superior, an inferior, or an equal within their class hierarchy.

There are also societies with horizontal divisions of inclusion and exclusion, in terms of different tribes or classes of people. In Africa, for in-