

Role Theory

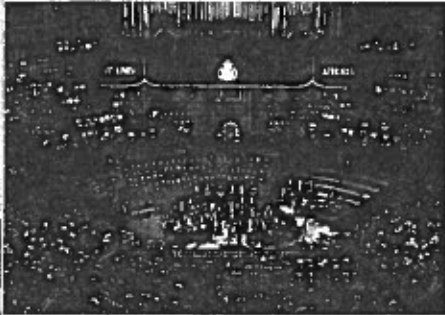
Before You Read

Brainstorm the different roles you play in society (for example, student, child) and the influences on your behaviour in each of these roles.

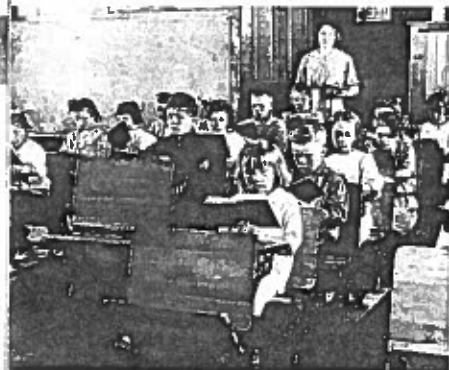
In Chapter 3, you learned about the micro- and macro-approaches to sociology. In this chapter, you will use microsociological theories to help explain the give-and-take relationship between the individual and society. You also know that microsociology focuses on the individual's behaviour in society. To add to this understanding, symbolic interactionists such as Erving Goffman set out to understand individual behaviour in relation to social roles people willingly and unwillingly play in society.

social role:

expectations attached to particular social positions



↑ FIGURE 6-9 William Shakespeare wrote, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players." Why might sociologists believe this to be true?



↑ FIGURE 6-10 Teachers are expected to understand their role in the classroom and to act accordingly. What role does the student play in this situation? How have the roles of students and teachers changed since this photo was taken?

Social Roles

Social roles have expectations that are attached to particular social positions. According to Erving Goffman, *all* human behaviour is acted. He claimed that people manipulate their appearance in order to present a specific kind of self, depending on the audience. For example, some positions in society are very clear, such as the role of a teacher. Most of us can describe, with certain accuracy, the rights and duties associated with this position. Teachers deal with students, parents, colleagues, and administrators, each of whom has different expectations for the teacher. The teacher consolidates all of these expectations and acts accordingly. In a sense, the teacher plays the same role consistently, but the scene may change, which may require a slight change in the teacher's approach or behaviour. The same can be said about the student's role or the parent's role.

Sometimes we are able to play the role willingly and, at other times, we do so reluctantly. The most common role that we are taught from birth is how to behave according to our gender.

❓ How can your role as student help influence your social identity long after you leave the formal school setting?

Gender Roles

Gender is one of many identities an individual is expected to enact throughout his or her lifetime. What we believe about gender is internalized from a young age through the primary agent of socialization—the family—and is based on accepted norms of masculine and feminine behaviour as developed by family and society, and portrayed in the media.

Gender socialization occurs as the child ages. Initially, very young children are not able to distinguish the differences between masculine and feminine roles. That's why it is not uncommon to see preschoolers playing with members of the opposite sex or with toys not associated with his or her particular gender (for example, a girl playing with trucks and a boy playing with dolls). It isn't until they begin to mature that school-aged children develop an understanding about the differences between the sexes. As children grow, they continuously re-examine and make adjustments to their attitude toward both sexes. They eventually come to appreciate the company of the opposite or same sex and may seek out intimate relationships as a result.

Gender roles are not the same today as they were in the first half of the twentieth century. Economic and cultural globalization has had a significant impact on redefining gender roles. Factors such as greater educational opportunities for women, dual-earner families, and access to contraceptives have all shifted traditional roles. The ideal of the man as the breadwinner is also changing, which is having an impact on the expectations of men. For these reasons, sociologists are careful to distinguish between *gender roles* and *gender behaviors*. At one time mothers stayed home with their children while fathers worked long hours, each taking on a particular role that was expressed with particular behaviours. For example, the housewife may have deferred all important financial decisions to her husband. Today, many spouses see their contributions to the household as equal. More women than ever before are in the workforce and are equal partners in earning power. It is also becoming more common for fathers to be full-time caregivers of their children.

Examining Gender Identity in Children

In the 1977 classic study by Peter J. Burke and Judy Tully entitled "The Measurement of Role/Identity," the two researchers studied a group of middle-school children in an attempt to discover what the group had to say about gender identity. Burke and Tully asked the children to complete the following statement: "Usually [boys/girls] are" Then they selected items that sufficiently described the differences between boys and girls. Examples such as *weak* versus *strong* and *emotional* versus *not emotional* were used to describe females and males. The study found that children with cross-sex identities (boys who thought of themselves in ways similar to the way most girls thought of themselves and vice versa) were more likely to have low self-esteem.

? Why do children respond to gender roles? How might a parent's positive reinforcement for a girl playing with a doll cause the child to want to continue to receive praise? Does this reinforce the idea that playing with dolls is something that is proper?

Dating and Courtship in the Digital Age

Along with other social trends, mate selection undergoes noticeable changes from one generation to another. These trends tell us a great deal about gender values for that particular generation. For example, during the Victorian era young ladies, under the watchful eyes of **chaperones**, accepted "invitations" by eligible gentlemen. In some parts of the world, parents have played an instrumental role in the dating and courtship process, from choosing prospective mates to arranging contracts with the suitor's family. In Canada, free-choice mate selection is the most common method, although some cultures maintain some element of parental involvement. Recently, an interesting phenomenon has been growing in many societies around the world: digital dating.



↑ FIGURE 6-11 Social roles determine identity. Will this woman's gender affect the role she plays in this instance?



↑ FIGURE 6-12 How do same-sex couples challenge the idea of traditional gender roles?

chaperone:

an older or married woman who accompanies or supervises a young unmarried woman on social occasions



↑ FIGURE 6-13 The digital age offers many new ways to find love.

homophily:
the tendency to associate with those who are similar to us

More to Know...

You can read more about courtship and marriage from an anthropological perspective in Chapter 4.

Skills Focus

Write a hypothesis for an investigation of the influence of technology in courtship and relationships. List the primary and secondary sources you would use to test this hypothesis and explain your reason for using each source.

The Influence of Technology on Traditional Courtship

Choosing a mate based on similar characteristics is known as **homophily** and has long been a part of mate selection. People gravitate toward those who are similar to them, particularly in terms of core values and education. The availability of online dating has made it possible to track factors that lead to the selection of a mate and reveals that homophily is quite prevalent. In particular, people look for a mate whose level of education is similar to their own. The Internet allows one to broaden this search to include the entire online world to find the “perfect” partner.

A fascinating trend is emerging among young singles in traditional cultures such as that of India: where once arranged marriages were the norm, they are much less common today. This change has been developing rapidly over the last two decades, and the pivotal force behind the change has been technology.

Today, many young couples share their experiences of love online and swear by its effectiveness. A study out of the University of Washington showed that young East Indians involved in arranged relationships were using cell phones as a way of getting to know each other better. This is quite different from the traditional method of meeting your spouse for 20 minutes and getting married a short time later.

The use of email and social networking sites, such as Facebook, has also changed the landscape of dating and courting. Today, many prospective mates can be found on sites dedicated specifically to finding suitable cultural matches. Often, parents create profiles for their adult children in an attempt to find the perfect match.

Many sociologists see this as a natural shift and a response to the changing lifestyles of young singles today. Fewer people are getting married in their early 20s, and more are choosing lifestyles and careers that involve travel away from the places where they grew up. For these reasons, many young adults are less likely to participate in traditional social networks close to home, where they would traditionally meet a mate, and are turning to alternative technology-based methods of meeting people. The prevalence of technology in our daily lives has also created a shift in social attitudes to online dating. It is quickly becoming an acceptable practice, especially among women.

REFLECT AND RESPOND

1. Are there still some roles that are/should remain gender specific (for example, combat roles in the military)? Provide evidence for and against this idea.
2. How has technology changed the dating process in the last 20 years? Is it a positive change? Interview or survey people from different generations to hear their stories about dating when they were younger. Alternatively, compare how dating is depicted on television shows from the 1960s to the present.
3. In your opinion, how will multiculturalism and the large influx of new immigrants from around the globe change the notion of gender in Canadian society in the next 10 to 20 years?

Identity and Discrimination

Before You Read

Identify yourself with all the labels that people place on you by looking at you (for example, *student, athlete, shy, artistic*). Then in a separate list, add the labels that cannot be seen. What does this say about you?

discrimination:

the act of treating groups or individuals unfairly based on their race, gender, or other common characteristic; can be overt or systemic

stereotype:

an exaggerated view or judgment made about a group or class of people

racism:

erroneous judgment, assumptions, opinions, or actions toward a person or group, based on the belief that one race is superior to another

sexism:

attitudes or behaviours based on predetermined ideas of sexual roles that discriminate against others because of their sex

classism:

systemic or personal actions that discriminate against persons according to their socio-economic level, which leads to human needs being unmet

prejudice:

an individual judgment about or active hostility toward another social group

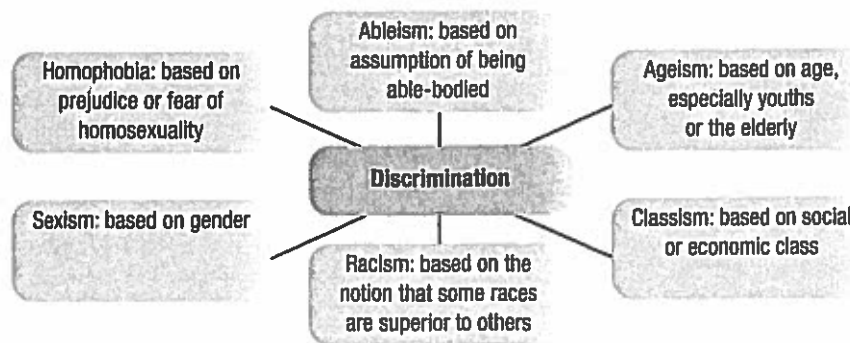
Society and its institutions, such as the government and law enforcement, are responsible for ensuring everyone's rights regardless of age, sex, race, or sexual orientation. In Canada, our rights and freedoms are written into the laws that govern our society. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms demands that the government treat all individuals, and, by extension, the groups to which they belong, equitably and fairly. In Canada, men and women enjoy the following fundamental freedoms equally:

- freedom of conscience and religion
- freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communication
- freedom of peaceful assembly
- freedom of association

Stereotypes, Prejudice, and Discrimination

Despite the Charter, **discrimination** of all types exists in Canada as it does in less equalitarian societies around the world. Most forms of discrimination begin with stereotypes, which seem to endure from one generation to the next. A **stereotype** is an exaggerated view or judgment made about a group or class of people.

For example, assuming certain tasks can be accomplished only by men because women lack the physical strength is a gender stereotype. Likewise, assuming that all members of a racial group are likely to excel at a specific task is an example of a racial stereotype. Stereotypes tend to highlight a specific behaviour observed, in limited and infrequent form, about one group by another. Stereotypes may seem harmless enough; after all, they are merely exaggerated opinions. However, they may extend beyond opinion and form the basis for more severe beliefs such as **racism**, **sexism**, or **classism**. Stereotypes may turn into **prejudice**. Figure 6-15 outlines some examples of discrimination.



↑ FIGURE 6-15 Discrimination comes in many forms. Identify an example for each type shown.

Prejudice is an individual judgment about or active hostility toward another social group. Prejudice is not illegal, but it is unethical. Moreover, the effects of prejudice on the victim are serious. Often times, the victim of prejudice feels isolated and fearful. The victim inevitably suffers a loss of self-esteem and likely refrains from engaging in social situations in which he or she feels threatened or judged. When the victims of prejudice are children, they may also experience a decline in academic achievement and become emotionally withdrawn. Finally, people acting on their prejudice can lead to discrimination.

Discrimination is the act of treating groups or individuals unfairly based on their race, gender, or other common characteristic. The chart below explains two forms of discrimination: overt and systemic.

VOICES
 Our lives begin to end
 the day we become silent
 about things that matter.
 Martin Luther King Jr.

Overt Discrimination	Systemic Discrimination
<p>Intentional actions that are taken against an individual or group because of some distinguishing characteristic they possess.</p> <p><i>For example, an employer refuses to hire a woman for a traditionally male job even though she is more qualified and better suited to the position.</i></p>	<p>Subtle and unintentional discrimination against a person or group where the consequences or outcome are not fully understood by those taking action.</p> <p><i>For example, a physically disabled job candidate may not be able to accept a job because the building is not wheelchair-friendly.</i></p>

It's a Colourful World

It is hard to believe that such a basic product as crayons could highlight the extent of subtle prejudice in our society. While the iconic colours have remained, three times in the company's history Crayola has found itself in the position of having to change the name for some of its crayons. In 1958, "Prussian Blue" was changed to "Midnight Blue," and in 1962, "Flesh" was changed to "Peach." The 1962 change came off the heels of the civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King, Jr., in the United States at the time. Finally in 1999, with mounting pressure from Aboriginal groups, Crayola changed the name "Indian Red" to "Chestnut." In each case, the names were changed to reflect a new generation of consumers who were more culturally aware and diverse.

? Why might *flesh* as a colour have been changed to *peach*? What assumptions had been made by Crayola before the name change?

Upstanders

When faced with any form of discrimination, it is important to act rather than ignore. An **upstander** is one who stands up for what he or she believes in and responds to something when it happens. Being an upstander is not always an easy task. A student acknowledged, "One time, a handicapped student fell in the middle of the hallway and couldn't get up. I didn't do anything about it because no one else was stopping to help." History has many examples of both upstanders and bystanders, but if we want a society where all are included, we all need to work toward that goal.



FIGURE 6-16 Ira Bleiweiss is an upstander who is trying to teach others about tolerance by taking out billboards around Houston urging the message of peace.

upstander:
 a person who takes action, particularly when the easiest or most acceptable course is to do nothing, when he or she believes something is right

Defining New Ways to Discriminate in a Post-9/11 World

Arguably, one of the most important events in American and Western history was 9/11. It has been said that the coordinated attacks by al-Qaeda extremists on the World Trade Center in New York and other strategic locations in the United States on September 11, 2001, changed the world forever. This event certainly changed the way many have come to view Islam and Muslims, as many experienced racism, prejudice, and discrimination. It is also responsible for popularizing a form of discrimination known as **Islamophobia**, which is racism that leads to prejudice against and fear of Islamic beliefs and Muslims. Since 9/11, peaceful, law-abiding Muslims have come under attack by those fearful and suspicious of their culture and religious beliefs. Terry Jones, a Florida preacher, made headlines in 2010 for his outspoken opinion on Muslims. He planned to make September 11 “International Burn a Qur’an Day,” where everyone was asked to set fire to the Qur’an—Islam’s book of religious teachings. Although he eventually backed down, Jones demonstrated the dangerous power of Islamophobia. Making generalizations does not benefit anybody.

Islamophobia:

racism that leads to prejudice against and fear of Islamic beliefs and Muslims

VOICES

America and Islam are not exclusive and need not be in competition. Instead, they overlap, and share common principles of justice and progress, tolerance, and the dignity of all human beings.

Barack Obama

? Why might people be reluctant to respond to Islamophobic comments or actions?

The Discrimination Against Obese People by Doctors

Overweight people have been the target of scrutiny for a number of years. Many people believe that these people lack willpower and thus overeat and don’t exercise. While these beliefs may be applicable in some cases, they are certainly not true of all people who deal with a weight problem.

In one American study, 620 doctors were asked to describe obese patients. They used terms such as *awkward*, *unattractive*, and *ugly*. They also described them as unlikely to comply with treatment, which influenced the way they treated these patients.

Another study showed that the higher a patient’s body mass, the less respect a doctor had for the patient. Less respect from a doctor for a patient leads to less time spent with the patient and less information offered by the doctor. This leads to a cycle where the patient does not get the help needed to manage his or her weight due to obesity.

Given the attitudes of doctors toward obese patients, it is not surprising that others in society have a negative feeling toward the obese.

REFLECT AND RESPOND

1. What do you think the consequences would be if the Charter did not exist?
2. Why is it difficult to act as an upstander? What can be done to encourage others to help those in need?
3. “Obesity is the same as race—an inheritable trait over which individuals have no control.” Explain why you agree or disagree with this statement.
4. How might a sociologist help gauge public opinion about obese people in other fields besides medicine?

What Causes Prejudice and Discrimination?

Sociologists look for answers to the troubling question of what causes prejudice and discrimination in the process of socialization and conformity to group behaviour. There are also a number of valuable theories that aim to explain the unfortunate origins of discrimination.

Learned Theory

Prejudice and discriminatory behaviour are not innate to our species. They are learned behaviours that individuals acquire through socialization. Children learn by observing their parents and often imitate the behaviours they see. Many of the behaviours parents demonstrate are meant to help their children function and get along in society as they age. Unfortunately, not all lessons learned at home are positive. In some cases, prejudicial views are passed along from parent to child. Often, children carry those views with them until the rebellious adolescent years when some will abandon the ideas and beliefs of their parents in favour of ideas and beliefs shared by peers.

The family is not the only agent of socialization carrying potentially negative ideas that can lead to intolerance. The media are also responsible for portraying both positive and negative views of race, gender, and sexual orientation. Images in media have been known to spread stereotypes. For instance, advertising has steadily depicted white people in key roles, with minorities included only as tokens—where one minority is included to represent all.

Our language is also riddled with inappropriate terminology. For example, we have only recently begun to use the term *firefighter* in place of *fireman* and *mail carrier* in place of *mailman*. The antiquated terms taught entire generations of children to make certain assumptions about gender roles and career choices. It is through these means—family and media—that some might have learned and retained prejudice and discrimination.

Competition Theory

Canada was initially inhabited by Aboriginal peoples and then by immigrants. Although it advocates the policy of multiculturalism, prejudices exist against visible, non-white immigrants within the country. According to the competition theory, the key reason some people come to distrust immigrants is economic competition. This idea should remind you of Marxist notions of competition between groups for economic power that you learned about in Chapter 3. The same holds true here. Whenever an economic crisis is felt by society, some people assume, incorrectly, that immigration policies and immigrants are responsible. The unemployed may come to believe that newcomers have taken their jobs, creating a sense of competition between groups. Others still believe that any large influx of new Canadians places undue strains on our social and health services and contributes to the social and economic hardships of the country. Combined, these unfounded assumptions may lead some to hold deep resentment toward immigrants and may account for certain prejudice and discrimination in society.

Before You Read

Discuss with a partner how understanding the causes of discrimination could affect society. Why do you think discrimination and prejudice exist at all?



↑ FIGURE 6-17 What do new family sitcoms such as *Modern Family* teach their audiences about tolerance and acceptance?

scapegoat:

a specific person or group of people who become the target of hatred or blame for the hardships of others



↑ **FIGURE 6-20** Nazi propaganda posters against Jews carried powerful messages. What sociological reasons might explain why many did not challenge the propaganda?

Frustration–Aggression Theory

Sometimes the shortcomings an individual experiences in his or her financial status provide a reason to resent groups in society that may appear to have greater access to wealth and prosperity. For those in low-income situations, unable to get ahead financially, the frustration is unmistakable. This frustration is often displaced and turned into outward aggression toward the rival(s) who an individual feels is responsible for holding him or her back in life. People in this situation will act on their frustration by lashing out against those who represent “others.” Perhaps one of the most sinister outcomes of this theory is the creation of a **scapegoat**. Scapegoats are a specific group of people who become the target of hatred and blame for the majority class in society. Perhaps one of the most infamous examples is that of the treatment of people of Jewish descent in Nazi Germany (see Figure 6-20), which led to the Holocaust and the extermination of six million people of Jewish descent. The Nazis also scapegoated other groups including the disabled, Jehovah’s Witness, and homosexuals. Genocide is a concept defined in the 20th century to acknowledge the systemic murder of people based on a deliberate and systematic destruction, in whole or in part, of an ethnic, racial, religious, or national group.

Ignorance Theory

Lack of personal and social experience can cause people to make incorrect assumptions about a specific class or group in society. When we refuse to learn about a group, we remain unaware of how and why they function as they do. Without adequate knowledge, we may view the group’s behaviour and customs as strange or odd. These beliefs may become the basis for later discrimination toward the group. According to the *ignorance theory*, it is the fear of unfamiliar cultural practices that guides discriminatory behaviour. You might say that those inflicting the discrimination are making value judgments based on their own culture. It is also easier to unite against a common enemy. When one group targets another to blame the other for something, the focus is taken away from the first group and any faults they might have. It is easier to focus on someone else’s faults than to change your own behaviour(s). In this way, ethnocentrism is a leading cause of discrimination. Ethnocentrism is the practice of evaluating other cultures based on the customs and behaviours of one’s own culture, which is considered superior to others’. Often the judgments made about other cultures may be negative and derogatory.

REFLECT AND RESPOND

1. For each of the four theories, create a short case study that incorporates the key components of the theory with an instance of discrimination.
2. Explain where the role of upstander would make a difference in each of your case studies.
3. Explain which theory gives the best explanation for the Holocaust, and explain your reasoning.