PART SIX

The Construction of Social Reality

CONSTRUCTING THE REALITY PAR EXCELLENCE

In the movie *Starting Over*, Jill Clayburgh, a teacher, is the target in a "dunk-the-teacher" booth at a nursery-school carnival. Clayburgh sits prim and proper, holding a parasol, lightheartedly urging the ball-throwers on. Burt Reynolds, Clayburgh's lover (with whom she has had a falling out), comes on the scene. Reynolds takes some balls, determinedly attacks the target, and Clayburgh drops into the water tank. Clayburgh stays calm and collected, until the fourth dunking at Reynolds's hands. Exasperated, she yells "Will you cut that shit out!"

A pall falls over the assembled parents and children. "She said the 'S' word!" a shocked nursery schooler cries.

"She did not!" his mother fires back, as she yanks him away to another carnival booth.

In the social realm, a notion similar to that of schemas is Erving Goffman's concept of "frames."[1] A frame is the shared definition of a situation that organizes and governs social events and our involvement in them. A frame, for example, is the understanding that we are at a play, or that "this is a sales call," or that "we are dating." Each of those definitions of social events determines what is appropriate to the moment and what is not; what is to be noticed and what ignored; what, in short, the going reality involves. When the frame is a nursery school carnival, the "S-word" is off limits.

A frame is the public surface of collective schemas. By sharing the understanding of the concepts "play," "sales," and "date," we can join in the action, enacting our parts in smooth harmony. A frame comes into being when its participants activate shared schemas for it; if someone does not share the going schema, the results can be embarrassing. Goffman gives this example, from a San Francisco gossip column, of an unshared frame:[2]

> . . . This guy is lying face down on Powell St., with traffic backed up for blocks. A Little Old Lady climbs down from a stalled cable car and begins giving him artificial respiration—whereupon he swivels his head and says: "Look lady, I don't know what game you're playing, but I'm trying to fix this cable."

We participate with ease in those social realms for which we have a frame. The newcomer or novice who has not yet mastered the schemas for a given frame, such as young children who do not yet have "good manners," has the same status as a foreign visitor or someone new to a sport. When they enter the action, everyone must accommodate to the ways they slow or undermine the business at hand.

Frames can be broken down into "scripts," the sequences of acts and responses that unfold within each frame. Take for an example the restaurant script:[3]

> Suppose I tell you that I went to a restaurant and ordered lobster and that I paid the check and left. What did I eat? Well, I didn't say anything about eating, but it must have been a lobster. Did the management get any money out of it? Of course, although I didn't say anything about management. Did the waitress give good service? What waitress?
>
> When I talk about restaurants, I bring into your mind all the knowledge you have about ordering and waitresses and menus and tipping. A restaurant script. There can be airline scripts and hotel scripts and classroom scripts.

A script codifies the schemas for a particular event; it directs attention selectively, pointing to what is relevant and ignoring the rest—a crucial factor for programming computers.* A computer program has the capacity to make endless inferences about and responses to a situation, almost all of them absurd. A script allows those inferences to be channeled along paths that make sense for a given event.

Indeed, there are scripts for every frame and a frame for any and all events in which people interact with some degree of shared understanding. Those events can range from the simple act of walking past someone coming toward you (Do you pass to the right or left? Do your eyes meet? If so, for how long? Do you speak?) to a procedure as complex as launching the space shuttle, with countless major and minor routines.

* Researchers in artificial intelligence, in striving to concoct computer programs that will allow a machine to mimic a person, study scripts in great detail.

Goffman's approach has its roots in William James's often-cited chapter on "The Perception of Reality," in his *Principles of Psychology,* in which James posed the question "Under what circumstances do we think things are real?"[4] In his answer, James pointed to the crucial role of selective attention in creating subworlds of reality, each with "its own special and separate style of existence." "Each world," James noted, "*whilst it is attended to,* is real after its own fashion; only the reality lapses with the attention."

What James meant by "world," Goffman says, was "a particular person's current world." When that world is shared, a frame is created. We step into such a world—enter a frame—whenever we adapt to one or another definition of a situation. Two examples are given by the phenomenologist Alfred Schutz:[5]

> . . . the radical change in attitude if, before a painting, we permit our visual field to be limited by what is within the frame as the passage into the pictorial world; our quandary, relaxing into laughter, if, in listening to a joke, we are for a short time ready to accept the fictitious world of the jest as a reality in relation to which the world of our daily life takes on the character of foolishness.

The world of our daily life is of course, in some sense as arbitrary a reality as any of the others we can enter into. It is endowed with a weighty sense of being *the* reality par excellence by virtue of the aggregate tonnage of our collective schemas.

The notion that social reality is the product of shared schemas is new for sociology. But that formulation is not much different from those currently in vogue; it simply offers a concept that is more in keeping with the current understanding of how the individual constructs reality.

This idea is close to that suggested by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in their classic, *The Social Construction of Reality.* Berger and Luckmann agree with William James that while there are multiple realities, "there is one that presents itself as the reality par excellence:" the reality of everyday life. They write:[6]

> The language used in everyday life continuously provides me with the necessary objectifications and posits the order within which these make sense and within which everyday life has meaning for me. I live in a place that is geographically designated; I employ tools, from can openers to sports cars, which are designated in the technical vocabulary of my society; I live within a web of human relation-

ships, from my chess club to the United States of America, which are also ordered by means of vocabulary. In this manner language marks the co-ordinates of my life in society and fills that life with meaningful objects.

If Berger and Luckmann were to dig deeper, to explore what it is that organizes language, the answer would be: schemas. Languages are schemas made audible; social acts are schemas made visible. If for "language" and its equivalents in the above passage the concept of schemas were used instead, the meaning would be unchanged. The implications, though, would be different.

The reality of everyday life, Berger and Luckmann note, is an "intersubjective world," that is, one that can be shared with others. The medium of that sharing, I suggest, is the mutual activation of commonly held schemas—a frame. It offers a reference point, a shared perspective for the business of the moment.

Frames—the rules embedded in the structure of a situation—are often hard to tease out. They are easier to spot when they are broken. In this sense, acts of social deviance—the psychotic who wanders through a department store taking items from one section and depositing them in another—is uncovering rules by shattering them.

Pirandello uses devices in his plays that do the same; he exploits the frames around a theatrical performance by pointing to them. For example, *Tonight We Improvise* begins with the houselights going dim, the audience quieting itself for the play to begin, and then nothing happening. Excited voices are heard from backstage, seemingly some sort of uproar. The play begins:[7]

> A gentleman from the orchestra: [*looks around and loudly asks*] What's happening up there?
> Another from the balcony: Sounds like a fight.
> A third from a box: Maybe it's all part of the show.

This dialogue itself, of course, is part of the show, and when it was first performed in 1930, the effect was jarring. By now such self-reflexive frame breaks are old hat. Joseph Heller uses them in his play *We Bombed in New Haven,* Genet in *The Blacks.* Books, too, can use frame breaks. *Goedel, Escher, Bach* is a self-reflexive meditation on the theme of self-reflex. John Barth's *Lost in the Fun House* has this passage in mid-novel:[8]

> The reader! You dogged unsuitable, print-oriented bastard, it's you I'm addressing, who else, from inside this monstrous fiction. You've read me this far, then? Even this far? For what discreditable motive? How is it you don't go to a movie, watch TV, stare at a wall . . .

The frame gives the context, telling us how to read what is going on. When lips meet, is it a kiss or mouth-to-mouth resuscitation? A frame provides an official main focus for attention, in accord with the business at hand: if the business is artificial resuscitation, enjoying the feel of skin on skin is out of bounds. The world offers a vast amount more than we might attend to in any given moment. The frame is highly selective; it directs attention away from all the simultaneous activities that are out of frame.

As Neisser's unnoticed woman with the white umbrella in the basketball game demonstrates, what is out of frame can easily go unperceived (at least in awareness—it may be registered in the unconscious). In order to hold an intimate conversation on a busy street, one must focus sharply on the immediate line of activity and ignore all the bustle, the other sights and sounds around. Any frame at all, in fact, defines a narrow focus where the relevant schemas direct attention, and a broad, ignored area of irrelevance.

Goffman makes the point with an extreme case, in this passage from Katherine Hulmes's *A Nun's Story:*[9]

> The first time she saw a novice faint in the chapel, she broke every rule and stared. No nun or novice so much as glanced at the white form that had keeled over from the knees, though the novice fell sideways into their midst and her Little Office shot from her hands as if thrown. . . . Then Gabrielle saw the nun in charge of the health of the community come down the aisle. The nursing nun plucked the sleeve of the nearest sister, who arose at once and helped carry the collapsed novice back down the aisle, past a hundred heads that never turned, past two hundred eyes that never swerved from the altar.

All frames, says Goffman, have such dual tracks: one flow of activity is overt and acknowledged, while a parallel track is ignored, treated as though out of frame. Anything out of frame, by definition, does not deserve attention. Since both tracks go on simultaneously, the minor track must constantly be kept out of focus. Further, the dominant track has to be picked out of the entire assemblage of activity.

Set sequences are often bounded by what Goffman (borrowing from Bateson) calls "brackets," conventions that mark the borders of a frame in time and space. They announce when and where a given framed event goes on, such as the start and finish of a session in therapy. The "disattend" track allows for the propriety of acts which are necessary asides (like a yawn). But they must be muted so as not to intrude into the frame.

These parallel tracks—in frame and out of frame—create a structure in social awareness that duplicates the division within the mind between conscious and unconscious. What is out of frame is also out of consensual awareness; in a sort of collective netherworld. As we shall see, the zone defined by the out-of-frame track can serve as a veil for disturbing social facts, creating a social blind spot.

Indeed, the social world is filled with frames that guide our awareness toward one aspect of experience and away from others. But we are so accustomed to their channeling our awareness that we rarely notice that they do so. Take, for example, the frames for work and for social roles.