4 THE SOCIAL PERSON

The self is something which has a development; it is not initially there, at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process.

— *George Herbert Mead*

THE SOCIAL CHARACTER OF HUMANITY

The press occasionally reports stories about 'jungle children' who are discovered after allegedly having spent many years in a forest or similar wilderness, isolated from culture and human society. According to such stories – Kipling's novel about Mowgli, *The Jungle Book*, is the most famous one (and one of the few which does not claim authenticity) – these children have been raised by animals, usually monkeys, and are therefore unable to communicate with humans. Normally, 'jungle children' are said to reveal a pattern of acting similar to animal behaviour; they growl, they are terrified of humans and they lack human language, table manners and other capabilities which render the rest of us culturally competent. In all probability, stories of this kind are myths, but they can nevertheless be useful as illustrations of a crucial anthropological insight, namely the fact that human beings are social products. As Carrithers puts it, 'from infancy humans are directed to other human beings as the significant feature of their environment' (1992, p. 57).

What we think of as our human character is not inborn; it must be acquired through learning. The truly human in us, as anthropology sees it, is primarily created through our engagement with the social and cultural world; it is neither exclusively individual nor natural. All behaviour has a social origin; how we dress (for that matter, the mere fact that we dress), how we communicate through language, gestures and facial expressions, what we eat and how we eat – all of these capabilities, so self-evident that we tend to think of them as natural, are acquired. Of course, humans are also biological creatures with certain unquestionably innate needs (such as those for nourishment and sleep), but there are always socially created ways of satisfying these needs. It is a biological fact that humans need food to grow and to survive; on the other hand, the food is always prepared and eaten in a culturally determined way, and food habits vary. Ways of cooking, seasoning and mixtures of ingredients which may seem natural to me may

seem disgusting to you; and – a topic of great interest to anthropologists – food taboos are nearly ubiquitous but differ from society to society. High-caste Hindus are not supposed to eat meat at all; rule-abiding Jews and Muslims do not eat pork; many Europeans refuse to eat horse meat, and so on. It is also a biological fact that hair grows on our heads, but our ways of relating to this fact are socially and culturally shaped. Whether we let it grow, cut it, shave it, dye it, curl it, straighten it, wash it or comb it depends on the social conventions considered valid in our society.

In order for humans to exist at all, they depend on a number of shared social conventions or implicit rules for behaviour. For example, there is general agreement in Britain that one speaks English and not Japanese, that one buys a ticket upon entering a bus, that one does not wander naked around shopping centres, that one rings the bell before entering one's neighbour's house and so on. Most social conventions of this kind are taken for granted and are therefore frequently perceived as natural. In this way, we may learn something about ourselves by studying other societies, where entirely different conventions are taken for granted. These studies remind us that a wealth of facts about ourselves, considered more or less innate or natural, are actually socially created.

NATURE AND SOCIETY

Figure 4.1 depicts some important dimensions of human existence. The bottom left field presents humanity as a biological species. Typical characteristics of *homo sapiens sapiens* seen through this lens, through its shared

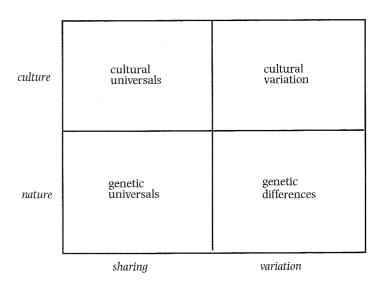|	sharing	variation
culture	cultural universals	cultural variation
nature	genetic universals	genetic differences

Figure 4.1 Four dimensions of human existence

biological features, could be its digestive system, its average height and body weight, its reproductive apparatus and its brain volume. Inborn aptitudes common to all humanity, such as the capability for language acquisition, also belong here. Anthropologists and others deeply influenced by biology and, in particular, Darwin's theory of natural selection, argue that the list of inborn traits and potentials is much longer (Tooby and Cosmides 1992), and so do structuralists. The general trend in twentieth-century social and cultural anthropology has nevertheless been to emphasise 'nurture' over 'nature', to stress the enormous variations generated, under differing circumstances, by our shared inborn apparatus.

The bottom right field depicts differences between humans which can be accounted for biologically. Until the 1930s or 1940s, it was commonly held that there are important genetic differences between human populations, that is 'racial differences', which account for some cultural variation. However, it has been shown that only a tiny proportion of the genetic variation in the world is related to what is conventionally thought of as racial variations (Cavalli-Sforza et al. 1994). To begin with, all humans have about 99.8 per cent of their genes in common. Of the remaining 0.2 per cent, 85 per cent can be found within any ethnic group, and 'racial' differences account for only 9 per cent of 0.2 per cent, which is 0.012 per cent difference in genetic material. Finally, quite a bit of this 'racial' variation is unrelated to physical appearance. For example, many human groups when adult lack the enzyme lactase, which is necessary for digesting milk. Following this criterion, North Europeans must be classified together with Arabs and some West African peoples such as the Fulani, while South Europeans belong with most Africans and East Asians. The classification of humanity into races, based on physical appearance, is arbitrary and scientifically uninteresting. The study of race thus belongs to the anthropology of power and ideology, not to the area of cultural variation. It should be added that biologically oriented anthropologists, many of them nowadays flying the banner 'evolutionary psychology' (Barkow et al. 1992), tend to be more struck by the similarities than by the differences between human groups. Darwinist social science is, in other words, not tantamount to racist social science.

The top left field of Figure 4.1 refers to the shared cultivated, social dimensions of humanity, that is, the shared characteristics developed by humans through their lives in society; whereas the top right field represents cultural variation. Put together, these dimensions form the core of anthropological research. By demonstrating variations between the human qualities created in different societies, anthropology has often tried to show that there are large areas of human existence which biology cannot account for fully, since the inborn genetic variation between human groups is unable to account for the enormous cultural variation in the world (Harris 1979) – on the other hand, it should be kept in mind that the latter variation may conceal uniformity at a deeper level (Brown 1991). There are evident biological limits concerning human potential: for instance, there is probably

no society which has taught its members how to fly or to live eternally, or which has dispensed with the need for food and drink. In addition, there are ecological limitations to human potential. Anthropology generally does not see it as its task to account for these limitations, but rather focuses on the social and cultural dimensions, trying to elucidate variations as well as uniformities between discrete forms of human life. The relationship between anthropology and biological accounts of humanity is nevertheless the subject of debate. Some biologists-cum-anthropologists, the sociobiologists, hold that important aspects of human life ultimately have a genetic origin. Others, including most anthropologists, would rather argue that dimensions of existence which seem inborn, such as the differences between the genders, or even aggression and other emotions commonly seen as genetically determined, must be understood as social and cultural products. Evidence for this normally comprises a convincing account of a people where aggression is seemingly absent (as in Howell 1989) or, more generally, where the emotions displayed are apparently radically different from the emotions familiar from the anthropologist's own society (Rosaldo 1984).

If we regard humanity in general, we may explore both similarities and differences between humans. Most biologists focus on the similarities. In the study of humans as cultural beings, the situation is more complicated. Certainly, anthropology necessarily deals with something all humans have

Gregory Bateson (1904–80) was the son of a famous English geneticist, and originally studied to be a biologist. Instead he became an anthropologist (after meeting Alfred Haddon on a train from London to Cambridge), but kept his interest in biology throughout his life. Bateson's first anthropological monograph, *Naven* (1958 [1936]), was an unorthodox book about a ritual where the Iatmul men of New Guinea pretend, through role play, to be homosexual. Later, Bateson wrote mostly shorter papers on a very wide range of topics, but everything he wrote was characterised by a wish to understand process, communication, and the relationship between ideas and their contexts. Through the 'double-bind theory' of schizophrenia, Bateson exerts great influence on contemporary psychology; he carried out research on the communication of dolphins and inmates at mental hospitals, and he was one of the founders of cybernetics. His influence in anthropology has been considerable at the levels of theory and epistemology (theory of knowledge). His main epistemological work, a highly original attempt at a synthesis of humanistic and natural science thought, is *Mind and Nature* (1979). Many of Bateson's most important articles are collected in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1972), and a number of short texts also appear in the posthumously published *A Sacred Unity* (1991).

in common, since we have already established that all humans are cultural creatures and relate to social conventions. On the other hand, many anthropologists have also been concerned with accounting for individual variations and with the uniqueness of particular societies.

Concerning the thorny concept of culture, this always refers to something shared, but there are two ways in which it is so. First, culture may refer to something universally shared – a shared quality of all humans is the fact of their culturedness (top left square of Figure 4.1). Second, culture is also used in the meaning of *a* culture (which is thus distinct from other cultures, a word which can be conjugated in the plural; top right square of Figure 4.1). Seen in this perspective, culture is a marker of difference between groups (who are differently cultured, so to speak), and not a marker of human universals. Both of these meanings of culture are commonly used – and sometimes confused.

LANGUAGE

'Language', the author William Burroughs famously said, 'is a virus from outer space.' Biologists have argued that although Burroughs is probably wrong, several components of the human speech faculty are related to other evolutionary features which humanity shares with other species. Chimpanzees who have been taught the meaning of a limited number of words seem to form abstract concepts representing classes of phenomena such as 'car' and not merely terms for specific objects (Lieberman 1994).

Notwithstanding similarities with biologically related species, notably the great apes, verbal language is often seen as the main discriminating mark of humanity. No other species uses meaningful sounds in nearly as many ways as humans, and no other species is actually able to speak. In human societies, objects are named and classified, human acts are named, and abstract entities such as spirits and gods are named. The symbolic meaning and verbal form of each phenomenon are conventionalised and perpetuated throughout the speech community, and the interrelationship between concepts and symbols makes up a particular cultural universe within which people think and act. This makes language a cultural universal. In linguistics and evolutionary theory, an important controversy concerns the possible evolutionary basis of language. Darwinian linguist Steven Pinker has powerfully argued that language must have been adaptive in proto-human society (Pinker 1993; see also Dunbar 1999), while the world's most famous linguist, Noam Chomsky, regards this view as pure speculation – he sees the issue as a 'mystery' rather than a 'puzzle'. Whatever the case may be, language is universal, but at the same time people in different parts of the world obviously speak different languages, and in this sense language (in the meaning of *a* language), like culture, can be seen as a concept which describes differences rather than similarities between groups of humans.

However, just as most of the genetic variation in the world can be found within any single group, there is much linguistic and cultural variation within groups as well. Earlier anthropologists, tending to stress the uniformity and integration of traditional societies, have frequently been criticised for overstating the cultural and linguistic uniformity within groups, suggesting that all members of a people share the same basic repertoire of knowledge and world-view and are equally linguistically competent. It has nevertheless been well documented that there are important differences in cultural repertoire, skills and indeed world-views within even small groups, even if they also share important cultural characteristics, such as a mother tongue.

CULTURE AND ECOLOGY

It is no longer commonplace among professional anthropologists to regard some peoples are 'closer to nature' than others by virtue of their simple technology. It is a dogma in modern social and cultural anthropology that culture is the fundamental human diacritic, shared by all humans, and that it would be nonsense to claim that some peoples 'have more culture' than others. Humans in all societies are equally cultured, although in different ways.

On the other hand, a view which is far from uncommon in modern societies amounts to the idea that people with a simple technology have an intuitive understanding of the processes of nature because they live 'closer to nature' than we do, whereas we moderns, for our part, have 'removed ourselves from nature' by placing a thick layer of alienating filters – computers, concrete buildings, highways and books – between ourselves and nature. Let us consider an example.

The Mbuti pygmies of the Ituri forest in what is today north-eastern Congo are hunters and gatherers with a simple technology and a social differentiation based on gender, age and personal qualities (Turnbull 1979 [1961], 1983). They carry out hunting in two different ways: individually, with bow and arrow, and collectively, with nets. Women and children gather edible things, which are abundant. In their own view, any shortage of food is due to laziness.

The Mbuti live in groups numbering about 20 persons and have a classificatory kinship system, which means that the same kinship terms are used to denote individuals who are differently (or not at all) biologically related. Rank is determined according to gender, age and personal authority, and the transition between life-stages is marked by elaborate rites of passage. Weddings are also important rituals and divorce is discouraged. Although non-marital sex occurs, it is negatively sanctioned. Flirtation is subjected to strict rules.

Both men and women appropriate a wide variety of skills necessary for survival. The majority of these are culturally specific; they are not shared by

the neighbouring Bantu-speaking peoples, most of whom are agricultural-ists. Hunting techniques, the preparation of poison for arrows and techniques for honey-gathering are among the most important male skills. Women have specialised knowledge about the plants in the forest and their uses: which are edible, which have healing qualities and which can be used in basket-weaving. All men are initiated into a secret cult, the *molimo* cult, which gives them privileged access to higher powers. At important rites, the molimo trumpet is blown and ritual songs are performed. In short, the lives of the Mbuti are culturally ordered from beginning to end. In this sense, there is no reason to assume that they are 'closer to nature' than people in industrial societies are.

On the other hand, it is clear that the alterations they make to their natural environment are much less significant than those inflicted by people with a different mode of subsistence, be they agriculturalists or industrial peoples. Their population grows very slowly, and they do not alter the fundamental processes of the environment permanently.

From a different perspective, it is also tempting to conclude that the Mbuti are closer to nature than, say, agricultural peoples or people living in Paris. Their religion is characterised by a deep reverence for the forest: after all, they subsist on what the forest 'gives' them, and they worship the spirits of the forest. Among agriculturalists, Claude Meillassoux has written (1967), there is instead a tendency to perceive nature as an enemy. Meillassoux, drawing on Turnbull's ethnography, argues that the Mbuti perceive nature as a *subject* – they harvest its products and see it essentially as a friend – while the neighbouring farmers regard it as an *object* – as something they contin-uously modify and cultivate, and which they have to protect against natural phenomena such as weeds and baboons.

On the other hand, it must be stressed that the Mbuti, like Bantus or Frenchmen, take great pains to turn their offspring into something different from animals or members of another tribe: the children are to be transformed from their initial, unmoulded state to follow the proper way; they are to become real Mbutis, neither more nor less.

TWO NATURES AND TWO APPROACHES

Anthropology has two main kinds of concepts about nature: external nature, or the ecosystem, and inner nature, or human nature. Both of these concepts represent the opposite of culture. What is cultural is always something other than nature, and culture always implies a transformation, and sometimes a denial, of that which is natural. Lévi-Strauss's axiom that all human societies distinguish between culture and nature is accepted by many anthropologists (but challenged by others, see the contributions to Descola and Pálsson 1996). Our non-humanised surroundings may sometimes appear as a major threat to human projects: they may threaten to destroy our crops, kill our

The Senses

Karl Marx once wrote that the five senses were the product not of nature, but of all of world history up to the present. Although Marx did not develop this thought further, he thus foreshadowed a set of problems which have often been overlooked by anthropologists: how does the use of the senses differ cross-culturally, and which methodological problems arise from this variation?

A certain visual bias is evident in many – perhaps most – ethnographic writings. Descriptions of field settings usually concentrate on spatial organisation, buildings, plants and generally what meets the eye. Sounds, tastes and smells are conspicuously absent.

Mary Louise Pratt (1986) notes that smells are virtually absent from ethnographic accounts, but there are societies where smell is of paramount importance in ordering the world. Constance Classen (1993) notes that the Ongee of the Andaman Islands live in a world ordered by smell, and links the 'olfactory decline of the West' with the growth of scientific rationalism. Whereas a rose was associated with smell in antiquity and in medieval times, by the eighteenth century its main purpose had become 'to divert the eye and thereby divert the mind' (Classen 1993, p. 27). Paul Stoller makes similar points in *The Taste of Ethnographic Things* (1989), which nevertheless indicates that the senses have been subject to a lot of scattered attention, but little systematic treatment, in anthropology.

In *Sound and Sentiment*, Steven Feld (1982) describes a people in New Guinea, the Kaluli, for whom sound and music are central cos-mological categories. The Kaluli classify birds not only according to their appearance, but also according to their song. Indeed, Feld shows how sounds function as a symbolic system of meaning in Kaluli society. Song and music, thus, are considered highly important among the Kaluli. Speaking more generally, Walter Ong (1969) argues that oral societies, unlike literate ones, tend not to 'picture' the world and thus do not, in a strict sense, have a 'world-view', but rather 'cast up actuality in comprehensive auditory terms, such as voice and harmony'. Classen, comparing three oral societies, the Tzotzil of Mexico, the Ongee of the Andaman Islands and the Desana of Colombia, finds that they all have distinct ways of making sense of the world: 'the Tzotzil order the cosmos by heat, the Ongee by smell, and the Desana by colour' (Classen 1993, p. 122). In other words, the visual/aural dichotomy is too simple, but at least it points out the importance of studying the social use of the senses – and to reflect critically on ethnography's over-reliance on sight and visual metaphors (Salmond 1982).

livestock and so on. Every cultural project seems to imply a transformation of both external and human nature.

At the same time, culture is intrinsically connected with nature. Many peoples hold that nature furnishes the raw materials culture is based on, and that there is a strong relationship of mutual interdependence between the two. Nature also seems to be stronger and more permanent in character than cultural products, which by comparison appear as fragile, vulnerable and temporary. If one succeeds in presenting a particular social order as 'natural', one has indeed legitimated it.

Nature is often perceived as threatening and difficult to control, yet it is always necessary as the provider of raw materials for cultural products. At the same time it is ambiguous: it is simultaneously a source of legitimation and an opponent. In *After Nature*, Marilyn Strathern (1992) describes a system of kinship and descent which is exceptional in that it gives individuals the option to replace 'natural' reproduction with (cultural) technologically controlled reproduction (test tubes, insemination, surrogate mothers, etc.). One palpable cultural result is a change in popular conceptions of what is cultural and what is natural. Strathern's book deals with kinship in the English middle class at the end of the twentieth century.

There are two principal ways of approaching the nature–culture relationship. On the one hand, one may study how nature and the nature–culture relationship is conceptualised in different societies; on the other, one may investigate how nature (the environment or inborn characteristics of humans) affects society and culture. Nature thus exists both as cultural representations of nature and as something outside culture and society, yet influencing the ways in which humans live. As a biological species, we take part in ecosystems and modify them; as cultural beings, we develop concepts about our environment and place ourselves outside it.

INTERACTION AND ACTORS

Above all, social life consists of action, or interaction: if people ceased to interact, society would no longer exist. It may be useful for our purpose to distinguish the concept of action from the related concept of behaviour: behaviour refers to observable events involving humans or animals, whereas action (or agency), the way the concept is used here, implies that actors can reflect on what they do. It calls attention to the intentional (willed, reflexive) aspect of human existence. As far as we know, no other species apart from humanity is able to reflect upon its behaviour intentionally. Marx referred to this fact when, in *Capital*, he compares a human master-builder with a bee (Marx 1906 [1867–94]). The beehive may be more perfectly fashioned and more functional than the house constructed by the builder (at least if he happens to be mediocre), but there is a qualitative difference: the human builder has an image of the house in his conscious-

ness before starting on his work, and we have no reason to suppose that the bee starts from a similar image. It acts directly on pre-programmed 'instincts', and human actors do not.

The notion of agency thus implies that people know that they act, even if they do not necessarily know the consequences of their acts. In other words, it is always possible to do something different from what one is doing at the moment. This indeterminacy in agency makes it difficult to predict human agency; indeed, many social scientists hold that it is in principle impossible.

In anthropology and sociology, an acting person is frequently spoken of as an actor (or agent). This term can also include collective actors and is therefore more encompassing than words like 'person', 'individual' and so on. The state, for example, may be an actor. Further, *corporations* frequently appear as actors in anthropological studies. A corporation is a collective of humans which appears as an acting unit in one or several regards. In many societies, political parties and trade unions are typical actors; in others, kin groups make up corporations (see Chapters 5, 7 and 11). The concept of the corporation must be distinguished from that of the *category*: a category of persons who have something in common at the level of classification without ever functioning as an acting unit.

The concept of agency, or action, can usually be replaced by the concept of interaction. Conceptualising whatever people are up to as interaction calls attention to the reciprocal character of agency, and most acts are not only directed towards other agents, but shaped by the relationship. The smallest entity studied by social anthropologists is not an individual, but a relationship between two (Leach 1967). In other words, the mutual relationship between two persons may be seen as the smallest building-block of society.

STATUSES AND ROLES

Common words in social science jargon, such as social convention, interaction, corporations and categories are highly abstract comparative concepts. They are useful in cross-cultural comparison, but they only very rarely form part of the native (or emic) vocabulary. This also holds true for an additional, useful group of concepts which have been developed to describe the various kinds of social relationships engaged in by humans. First, all members of society have certain rights and duties in relation to other members, and there are hardly two individuals who have exactly the same rights and duties. Second, each person has many different rights and duties in relation to different persons and different situations. In order to distinguish analytically between these aspects of social processes, it is customary to speak of social statuses.

A status is a socially defined aspect of a person which defines a social relationship and entails certain rights and duties in relation to others. Each person may have a great number of statuses, such as uncle, dentist, neighbour, customer, friend, and so on. The social person is composed of,

and defined by, the sum of these statuses. There are also social expectations connected with each status, which contribute to its maintenance through time. The relative importance of each status for the actor varies greatly. Membership of an ethnic or religious group, for example, may be so important to the actor that it affects his or her field of agency in nearly every respect. Other statuses, such as that of grandson in a society where kinship is relatively unimportant, have less importance for the individual – they define the person in a smaller number of situations and are marginal to his or her self-perception.

It can be instructive to distinguish between *ascribed* and *achieved* statuses. Ascribed statuses cannot be opted out of; a seven-year-old boy cannot choose not to be, say, a second-grade pupil, a son and a child. Achieved statuses, on the contrary, are acquired by the actor. In modern societies, one's profession is usually considered an achieved status, but in many societies it is clearly ascribed (not chosen). A central notion in classic anthropology and sociology is the view that modern societies are qualitatively different from traditional societies in that many of the social statuses are achieved in the former, whereas most statuses are ascribed in the latter. Tönnies's (1963 [1889]) famous distinction between '*Gemeinschaft*' (community) and '*Gesellschaft*' (society), as well as Maine's distinction between contract and status societies, relates to this kind of duality. Later research has shown this kind of distinction to be simplistic, but it may still be useful as an analytical starting-point.

A term which is closely related to the concept of status is the concept of role, and the two words are sometimes used as synonyms. In anthropology, however, the role is generally defined – following Linton (1936) – as the dynamic aspect of the status, that is, a person's actual behaviour within the limitations set by the status definition. A typical status in a modern society may be 'bus driver'; the role of the bus driver will then be defined by what one actually does as a bus driver.

Being the incumbent of a particular social status directs one's actions in specified ways. A princess, for instance, is expected not to drink beer late at night at seedy joints. A shaman among the Inuit is expected to establish contact with supernatural powers when necessary; a wife in the Trobriand Islands is expected to be sexually monogamous; a worker in a German factory is expected to register for work before 8 a.m. every weekday. When one breaks the rules and expectations connected with the role enactment of a status, other members of society may react by imposing sanctions or different forms of punishment.

SWITCHING BETWEEN ROLES

Thanks to status differentiation and the regular implementation of sanctions, social life has a certain degree of regularity and predictability. However, this predictability is far from total. If it were, social scientists would be outstanding

prophets. The social status and its dynamic counterpart, the role, delineate some of the possible scope for the actor, by giving him or her certain rights and duties connected to expectations and possible sanctions. However, the social status of a person never defines his or her entire field of agency. This is partly due to the fact that a status rarely entails exact, detailed rules concerning how to behave in every situation, and also to the fact that the role is never identical with the status. One is, in other words, forced to improvise – for example, there are many, widely different ways of enacting the father role in every society, although the social definition of the status 'father' also entails certain expectations. Every status, however, is ambiguous in the sense that actors have to interpret it before enacting it.

In his major micro-sociological and existentialist work, *Being and Nothingness* (*L'Être et le néant*), the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1957 [1943]) meticulously describes how actors reflect upon, define and enact statuses in frequently contrived and highly self-conscious ways. One of his most famous examples is the waiter at a Parisian cafe, who cautiously and professionally tries to exude 'waiterness'. By virtue of his gaze, his gestures and his elegant way of balancing a full tray of drinks while he swings, in a seemingly nonchalant way, through the kitchen doors, he gives a clear expression of being a waiter. However, if he were to maintain this role at home with his wife, she would presumably file for a divorce within a few weeks.

In his philosophical descriptions of role enactment, Sartre brings up a topic which has since been pursued by many sociologists and anthropologists. They have focused on the ability of actors to manipulate their statuses and thereby liberate themselves – not from the statuses as such, but from the apparent coercion certain statuses seem to imply. Actors may thus regard their status from a distance; they decide, within limits, which expression they give to it, in order to give their co-actors a certain impression of who they are. Through the study of role enactment, we may thus study aspects of the relationship between freedom and coercion in social life.

One of the most influential elaborations on role enactment and role distance extant in the literature is arguably Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1978 [1959]). The author shows, drawing on a wide variety of examples, how people determinedly use their more or less ascribed statuses and social relationships to pursue their own ends. In his descriptions of social processes, Goffman uses expressions from the theatre. He talks of actors, roles and performances, and distinguishes between the frontstage and the backstage. His point in doing so is that there are situations we master well and feel relatively secure in, as when the (literal) actors, in their backstage dressing-rooms, can 'truly be themselves', make jokes, display their true emotions and feel free of the strict requirements of their roles on stage. In the frontstage area, on the contrary, impression management becomes important: the actor has to be self-consciously aware of the impression he or she makes on others, and tries to shape it in the desired ways. In this kind of situation, as in a formal interview or another

kind of situation where one feels slightly uncomfortable for lack of complete mastery of the role, one will contrive to appear in a specific way through what Goffman calls impression management.

The notion of impression management has been taken up by Fredrik Barth in his study of the social organisation of the crew of a trawler off western Norway (Barth 1966). The boat has a captain, a crew of five to eight fishermen, and a 'netboss'. All of them have a variety of statuses, but in the boat their professional statuses are by far the most important. Each category of actors has specified tasks. The captain's job is to steer the boat and to supervise the others. The 'netboss' is expected to find schools of fish and to order the fishermen to drop the net when he 'feels' that there are large amounts of fish down below. The fishermen, for their part, carry out all the manual work.

With this simple status distribution as his point of departure, Barth describes the role play on the ship. He shows how certain aspects of the statuses are overcommunicated; that is, the actors place great emphasis on presenting these aspects in their impression management. The captain acts as a sturdy man with immense experience and a sound sense of judgement. The fishermen frequently gather on deck, watch the ocean and talk quietly together to display their willingness to do a good job. The netboss, who plays the 'trickster' role, gives the impression of being endowed with great intuitive powers of partly mystical origins; he watches the weather for signs which are invisible to others, wanders restlessly about 'sniffing' for fish, and so on. In this situation, through deliberate overcommunication of certain role aspects, all the actors do their best to present themselves as fully competent carriers of their status.

Are we, then, identical with the roles we 'play'? Does social life largely consist of conscious impression management and, ultimately, manipulation? It may be tempting to criticise Goffman and his followers for giving the impression that human life consists of a series of attempts to outsmart and see through the strategies of others, where no act seems authentic or sincere. This kind of criticism, even if it may have some relevance, is largely misplaced. Goffman's main point is the fact that there are social conventions defining everything we do as social creatures. Even to express the most powerful and sincere emotions, one has to follow specific, culturally defined rules prescribing how to express such emotions. Even the most spontaneous of acts must be channelled through a socially defined mode of expression if it is to be comprehensible.

Furthermore, even when one would like to violate the conventions of society there are a limited number of ways of doing so. Generally, criticism of social conventions is fairly common in modern societies. The conventions may then be described as 'straitjackets' or as a 'prison' preventing the true self from emerging. In the 1960s and 1970s a large number of young people in many West European and North American societies rejected what they saw as 'empty routines' in order to live in a more 'natural, authentic' way.

They let their hair grow, had extra-marital sex with several partners, rejected cultural practices which led to environmental deterioration, and so on. Since then, it has been claimed by critics of these movements that two general social scientific lessons could be drawn from them. First, new social conventions were developed surprisingly rapidly by the long-haired rebels. For example, it was difficult to be accepted in the group unless one obeyed a certain dress code. Second, it has been argued that it turned out that people had little or nothing left in life when they had abandoned all 'empty routines'. In other words, people seemed to depend on social rituals, conventions and routines to relate to, even if they disliked them.

POWER AND SOCIAL LIFE

A common criticism of role theory is its alleged lack of ability to deal with power relationships in society. For it is clear that social conventions, role expectations and the very distribution of roles and statuses in society contribute to systematic differences in power. Some actors are able to exert considerable power over others; some have very limited control of their own lives, let alone other people's. This dimension of social life is only dealt with indirectly in the work of Goffman and other role theorists.

Power is an elusive and difficult concept. The philosopher Bertrand Russell once said that power is to the social sciences what energy is to physics: it is one of a handful of extremely central concepts, but it is impossible to define it accurately. Russell is still right to the extent that no definition of power exists which is universally agreed upon. Yet there are obvious and clearly very significant differences between societies regarding power relationships, both in the public and the private spheres.

It can be useful to distinguish between two principal ways of conceptualising power. More generally, society as such may be conceptualised in two chief ways, which are discussed later as the actor perspective and the systemic perspective, respectively (see especially Chapter 6). Society may be envisaged either as the product of intentional, willed agency, or as the totality of institutional structures which condition all agency. If we see power from the actor perspective (Max Weber's view), it may be defined as an aspect of a social relationship, namely the ability to make someone do something they would otherwise not have done. If we look at power from a systemic perspective (as Marx did), it instead becomes crucial to show how power differences embedded in the fabric of society are, in fact, constitutive of those very social relationships. One cannot simply choose not to have a powerless status. On the other hand, one can certainly improve one's relative position, so it could be said that, although they must be kept apart for analytical purposes, both perspectives are useful, and most contemporary anthropologists switch between them in their analyses.

THE SELF

Another criticism which has been levelled against role theory is represented in the view that the self is an integrated whole and that it is artificial to 'chop it up' into separated roles. This may be the case – at least many modern individuals may feel that they are 'integrated persons' – but different social relationships nevertheless require of us that we develop specialised behaviour tailored to fit different situations. Few persons, presumably, behave identically when they are with their grandmother, their professor and their friends, respectively. Since the social person is constituted through his or her social relationships, and since these relations vary in their content, one must necessarily vary one's behaviour somewhat, through some degree of impression management, when confronted with different persons.

Usually this flexibility in social life does not lead to major problems for the individual actor, but quite often one meets conflicting expectations from different persons – which may present a problem when they arise simultaneously. Which status ought one to choose when one is forced to choose between two, mutually exclusive statuses? Most adolescents in contemporary Western societies have presumably experienced this kind of awkward situation when they have unexpectedly met their friends while out with their parents.

Role theory, as exemplified above in Goffman's work, can be a powerful tool for describing social relationships, and its usefulness will be shown further later. We should nevertheless keep in mind that statuses and roles are theoretical abstractions from the ongoing process of social life, and are as such etic terms. Comparative research has indicated that all human groups have a concept of the self or the person (Geertz 1983; Mauss 1985 [1938]; Fitzgerald 1993), but this concept varies in important ways. In European societies, the self is usually conceived of as undivided (as in the word 'individual'), integrated and sovereign – as an independent agent. In many non-Western societies, however, the self may be seen rather as the sum total of the social relationships of the individual. Indeed, as Strathern (1992) has argued in a comparison between the English and Melanesian kinship systems, the typical Melanesian view of the self is, sociologically speaking, the more correct one. In highland societies in New Guinea, a human being is not perceived as a fully fledged person until he or she has acquired the basic categories of local culture. Personhood, in other words, is acquired gradually from birth onwards as the child becomes increasingly familiar with the shared customs and knowledge of society. In many central African societies we may discern a similar notion, since children who die do not turn into proper ancestral spirits: as their cultural competence is limited, and as they have yet to forge a wide array of social relationships, their personhood is still only partial. Further – to return to Melanesia – a person is not considered

dead until all debts are paid and the inheritance has been distributed. Only when all of the social relationships engaged in by the deceased have been formally ended can he or she be considered properly dead. Strathern concludes that Melanesians conceive of persons pretty much as social scientists do, as the sum of their social relationships – unlike the English, who tend to see persons as isolated entities.

The Latin term '*persona*', Mauss notes in his celebrated essay on selfhood (1985), originally meant 'mask'. He attempts to show that the idea of the 'self' as something distinct from the 'masks' or roles that people took on appeared in Europe only after the spread of Christianity. Among the Zuñi (Pueblo) Indians, he writes, only a limited number of first names existed in each clan, and each incumbent of a particular name was expected to play a specified role in the 'cast-list' of the clan. They were not, in other words, seen as autonomous individuals, but saw themselves as predestined to 'act out ... the prefigured totality of the clan' (Mauss 1985, p. 5).

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SELF

It should at this point be added that the anthropological emphasis on everything public and social does not necessarily mean that nothing private and 'inner' exists. Many writers distinguish between the public and private self; the latter being the 'I' as it sees itself from the inside, which is not, of course, available for direct observation by an anthropologist. As Lienhardt (1987) has noted, several African peoples talk of identity in a way that is closely related to this distinction of ours. Using the metaphor of the tortoise, they distinguish between the public persona (the tortoise displaying its head and limbs) and the private persona (the tortoise withdrawn in its shell). Although the two levels of personhood are certainly related, it is difficult to reduce one to the other.

If the tools provided by role analysis are universally applicable – can be useful in the study of any society – they provide a mere starting-point if the goal is an understanding of differences as well as similarities between social and cultural systems. It has often been argued by anthropologists that some peoples lack a concept of the private persona (or, as we might put it, of personal identity). At the very least, it is certain that the relationship between private and public aspects of personhood varies greatly between societies. Even in the comparatively culturally homogeneous Western European and North American societies, there are important variations. Many Europeans are shocked at the ease with which North Americans may speak about their private lives to strangers. If we move further afield, the differences become more profound. In Indian society, Dumont (1980 [1968]) has argued, the individual is entirely subordinated to the collectivity and sees him- or herself not as an independent agent, but as a part of an organic whole.

Personal names may give a clue as to the concept of personhood prevailing in a society. Among the Cuna of Central America, Alford notes (1988), children do not acquire a proper first name until they are about ten years of age. Geertz (1973) has described naming in Java as an extremely bewildering and complex affair to the outsider, where each person has seven different names pertinent in different situations. Compare this to the informality of North American society, where even complete strangers may address each other with a diminutive of their first, or Christian, name (Bill, Bob, Jim, Tommy, etc.). This kind of cultural difference, which may be significant, may not be evident from mere role analysis, but role analysis can help us in posing the relevant questions about cultural constructions of the self, since it helps in structuring observations of social life which may at first glance seem random and purely improvisational.

Brian Morris (1994) has suggested a threefold distinction between different aspects of personhood. First, a person can be identified as a human being, as 'embodied, conscious and as a social being with language and moral agency' (Morris 1994, p. 11). This kind of notion, he remarks, seems to be universal. Second, the person can be described as a cultural category. This kind of categorisation can be both more and less inclusive than the first. On the one hand, some societies will in many contexts exclude strangers, children and slaves from the rights associated with full personhood; on the other, non-human entities such as ancestral spirits and features of the physical environment may be included. Third, Morris discusses the human person as a self, the 'I as opposed to others', the construal of which exhibits vast cultural variations. Individuals proper, in Dumont's terminology (which I choose to follow here), see the origins of their agency as located within the ego, while many societies hold that the causes of human agency may be social, religious or suprahuman.

THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF THE BODY

The culturally specific has been emphasised in this review of personhood in a comparative perspective. Universalist alternatives, which focus on personality elements that are shared pan-culturally, include psychoanalytic views (like Obeyesekere 1981), evolutionary psychology (Brown 1991) and some phenomenological approaches, particularly those inspired by the work of the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. His influential *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty 1962 [1945]) points towards an alternative conceptualisation of personhood, as it focuses on the *embodied* self. 'The body', writes Thomas Csordas (1999, p. 172), 'has always been with us in cultural and social anthropology, but it has not always been a problem.' In this, he means that bodily practices have been described in ethnography since the beginning – circumcision, clothing, penis sheaths, toilet training, etc. – but that little attention was granted the human body as a sociocultural entity

until the 1970s, an important exception being the work of Mary Douglas on impurity and classification (1966, 1970). Much of the research on the body that has been carried out since then can be classified as medical anthropology (e.g. Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987) or political anthropology (e.g. Bourdieu 1977), where cultural variations and power relations, respectively, are analysed in the context of the body partly as agent, partly as 'passive lump of clay ... upon which society imposes its codes' (Csordas 1999, pp. 178–9). Another fertile field of research concerns the relationship between the body, notions of personhood and technological change. Jeanette Edwards and others (Edwards et al. 1993; see also Strathern 1992) have discussed how the Western idea of personhood will change as new reproductive technologies change the formerly given relationship between parents and child. Others have similarly investigated how information technology (such as the Internet) contributes to a redefinition of personhood in contemporary Western societies. From a different, but complementary point of view, Donna Haraway (1991) has argued that increasing technological control and scientific discourse about (especially female) bodies require counter-reactions stressing that bodies are not 'natural' but defined subjectively, from the inside. In this way, an ideological feature of modern Western societies, namely individualism, is reformulated, this time in the context of a body politic. The recent growth of anthropological interest in the body can at least partly be seen as a reflection of a widespread concern with bodily issues in the anthropologists' own societies (from cosmetic surgery to surrogacy), and it therefore seems appropriate that a great deal of the contemporary research efforts linking the body with issues of personhood are ethnographically located to those societies.

This chapter has described social life in quite abstract and general terms, largely at the level of interpersonal interaction. The study of the enactment of roles shows how people are free to choose their actions within a socially and culturally defined framework which is by and large given. In the next chapter, we move on to some of the conditions under which people choose their actions; in other words, the main emphasis will be placed on the level of society rather than the level of the person.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Anthony P. Cohen: *Self Consciousness*. London: Routledge 1994.
Thomas K. Fitzgerald: *Metaphors of Identity. A Culture–Communication Dialogue*. New York: SUNY Press 1993.
Erving Goffman: *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Harmondsworth: Penguin 1978 [1959].
Richard Jenkins: *Social Identity*. London: Routledge 1996.
Brian Morris: *Anthropology of the Self*. London: Pluto Press 1994.