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My Sociological Perspective of *How I Met Your Mother*

The show *How I Met Your Mother* follows the life of a young architect in NYC who is looking for love with the help of his four best friends. The sitcom's 25-minute episodes tell different stories about the protagonist, Ted, and the lives of his friends. Throughout the entirety of the series, the characters spend the majority of their time in an Irish Pub called “MacLaren’s”, located on the Upper West Side. The episodes generally begin and end with all five of the characters (Ted, Robin, Marshall, Barney, and Lily) sitting at their favorite booth, and having a drink. Considering how much time the five main characters spend together, they have perfected their social norms and dynamics in each personal relationship with one another.

Sociologist Harold Garfinkel coined the term ethnomethodology, which studies small details of casual interactions (Garfinkel 1967:14). Ethnomethodology specifically looks at how people use common sense to better understand the world around them. In *How I Met Your Mother*, the character consistently practices Breaching Exercises (doing the opposite of what society deems normal) in social situations. For example, when Ted first meets Robin, a girl whom he could potentially see himself with, he immediately tells her that he loves her. This happens in the piloting episode of the show (season 1:episode 1) and is a breach of first-date formalities. Verbalizing love for a woman he hardly knows violates what the general public considers to be normal.

Next, from Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology, the term Conversational Analysis was developed by authors Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson. Conversational Analysis is the study of the social organization of conversation by turn-taking, back-channel signals and the use of silence. All of the *How I Met Your Mother* characters frequently demonstrate these actions in

numerous ways. For example, in each episode, the characters frequently use turn-taking in conversation. The series frequently uses flashbacks from each of their lives to bring to life the story being told. The flashbacks periodically cut back to the bar where the other characters have a turn to respond to the story they are being told.

Next, Barney is the most eccentric and narcissistic friend in their group. Usually, when Barney says something disrespectful or exaggerated, the other characters use silence to demonstrate their disapproval. In order to repair this awkward conversation ender, Barney usually attempts to high-five or fist-bump his friends. This usually works for him, and the characters continue on as normal. With that being said, repairs do not always work. In Season 4, Episode 3, Barney makes a bad joke and attempts to move on from it through the use of a fist-bump. His repair doesn't work and no one wants to fist-bump him. Unable to handle the embarrassment, Barney keeps his arm extended in a fist-bump position throughout the entirety of the night. He continuously badgers his friends to fist-bump him but no one ever does.

Next, in Season 1, Episode 19, Ted and his friends attend an award ceremony for Robin. In this Frontroom setting, the characters are well-mannered and composed in conversation with the other award ceremony attendees. Ted, in an attempt to make Robin jealous, brings along a date. Marshall does not agree with Ted's motives behind seducing his date and communicates his thoughts through expressions and other nonverbal cues. This is a perfect example of a protective practice since Marshall wants to reduce the possibility of conflict and negative impressions.

Ted and Marshall's conversation is done silently in order to avoid an uncomfortable Frontroom setting. According to Erving Goffman, the Frontroom is where individuals take on a 'role' in order to control a public social situation (Goffman 1973:176). If Ted and Marshall had used verbal communication, they would have been 'making a scene,' causing a severe disruption

of Frontroom social formalities. Lily notices their shifting eyes, tilts of heads, and other indicators of the silent conversation, simply through what the two men were “giving-off”.

Wanting to better understand what is being ‘said,’ Lily starts up her own silent conversation with Marshall. In their conversation, their thoughts are conveyed through small bodily gestures and discrete facial expressions. Lily, Marshall, and Ted all demonstrate impression management throughout the duration of this entire scene with the use of silence. By using their own opinions to actively influence Ted's actions, the friend group works as the Generalized Other. This refers to the ability of someone to adjust their behavior in response to the gestures of others (Mead 1967: 77). Marshall and Lily help Ted from deviating away from the social expectations of society. Additionally, this exemplifies how their social group has a strong influence over each other's behavior and just how much they care about maintaining social harmony amongst the group.

Furthermore, the character's ability to meet and spend money every night in a bar demonstrates their class status. In Season 4, Episode 10, the bartender charges Marshall 7 dollars for a regular beer. If the characters average 2-3 drinks a night, that means they have a disposable income of roughly \$98-\$147 to spend on beverages alone. Additionally, in Season 4, Episode 2 the characters discuss where they want to eat for dinner. When Robin orders MacLaren's food for everyone at the table, she states that they always converse about where they want to eat but usually end up eating at MacLaren's instead. This exemplifies their excessive disposable incomes because all five of them can afford to frequently eat out in New York City.

In conclusion, the characters in *How I Met Your Mother* continuously demonstrate key components of the social self. Each of the friends contributes to the general dynamics and social normalities at play. Ted telling Robin he loved her when first meeting her exemplifies Garfinkel's

Breaching Exercise, Barney's fist-bumping episode demonstrates an example of a conversational analysis repair, Marshall helping Ted at Robins's award ceremony shows a protective strategy, and their ability to meet for drinks daily is a key indicator of their social class. From the scenes referenced above, we can see the importance of the social groups' signals in order to help each other maintain the expectations of society. All of the friends have a strong influence on one another and the dynamics at play continuously evolve over the course of the show as the five of them work together to help one another maintain social cohesion.

Reference List

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