Reading Synopses Example

I. Biography:
Erving Goffman was born in Alberta, Canada on June 11, 1922 and died in 1982 at the peak of his fame and career. He earned his B.A. at the university of Toronto in 1945 and then enrolled at the University of Chicago where he received his M.A. in 1949 and then his Ph.D. in 1953. He taught at the University of California, Berkeley until 1969 when he accepted a position at the University of Pennsylvania where he taught until his death. Unfortunately, I could not find references to his religious or class background while growing up, nor could I find anything regarding his parent’s occupation.

II. Social/Historical Location:

A. Events

1) The 1960’s Counter-Cultural Movement

Erving Goffman developed his theory roughly between the years of 1950-1970. The sixties with its youthful generation challenging the basic and taken for granted norms seems to have influenced Goffman’s theory since he was interested in determining what the norms of society were and how they were upheld. For example, he was fascinated by how we hold conversations between one another without necessarily taking the time to interpret every detail of the conversation.

2) Symbolic and Functionalist Sociological Theories

Another significant influence that could be considered social was the dominance of symbolic interactionist and functionalist theory during the 1950’s when Goffman was trained and began building his theory. Durkheim’s notion of an underlying order to society based on collective acceptance of norms seems particularly influential given the fact that Goffman was
interested in how we rely on the ability of others to correctly interpret our words when we speak with one another. Thus, when I ask a friend that I see on the street “how are you feeling” I am relying on the fact that that friend and I share a collective notion of what that phrase means.

III. Research Questions/Problem Statements

Goffman was interested in:

1. How is social order maintained?
2. How do people participate in roles?
3. What are the norms of society and how are they upheld?

IV. Terms & Concepts

1. Norms - A standard form of behavior.
2. Roles - The parts played during the course of social interaction.
3. The Self - The inner being that is a social product of the interactions with others.
4. Interaction Consciousness - Uneasiness brought about by dominate persons or uneasy pauses in conversation.
5. Other Consciousness - Uneasiness caused by persons whose obvious affectation draws attention to themselves.
6. Theater - An analogy comparing social interaction (life) to the theater.
7. Functional necessity - The idea that ceremonies are a necessity in the maintenance of social order.
8. Deference - Activity by which an individuals' appreciation is conveyed to another.
9. Demeanor - The behavior that an individual partakes in order to convey a certain image to others.

V. Dichotomies, Trichotomies, etc.

1. Obligations vs. Expectations - Both are rules of conduct however obligations are direct and establish how the individual is morally constrained to conduct themselves while expectations are indirect and establish how others are morally bound to act toward the individual.

2. Symmetrical vs. Asymmetrical - A symmetrical rule is one which leads an individual to have obligations or expectations regarding others that these others have in regards to them. An asymmetrical rule is one that leads others to treat and be treated by an individual differently from the way s/he is treated by them.
3. Substance vs. Ceremony Rules - A substance rule is one which guides conduct in regard to matters felt to have significance in their own right while ceremonial rules guide conduct in matters felt to have secondary or no significance.

4. Deference vs. Demeanor - Deference are those activities by which an individuals’ appreciation is conveyed to another while demeanor is the behavior that an individual partakes in in order to convey a certain image to others.

**VI. Theory**

Goffman sought to answer the question of how social order is maintained. He felt that both rituals and norms were vital in its maintenance because they tied people together by giving them something in common.

Goffman felt that the self was a product of these shared norms and rituals and thus was a social construction based on interaction with others. He further believed that this social interaction was a kind of performance with its own guiding rules because people are expected to maintain a consistent social face as well as help others shape theirs.

Thus, each person partakes of various roles such as a student, president of a club, teacher, etc. in order to maintain this social face. Goffman then likens life to a theatrical production in that we assume various roles in order to control the reality that other people see, in order that they will perceive us in a certain manner.

Goffman felt that these roles were necessary because they provided a clear and recognizable social reality. Goffman believed that by disrupting this public order, one could identify the underlying taken for granted norms and how they were upheld in order to determine their importance in maintaining the social order. I agree with Goffman’s view of roles, specifically, that we each undertake various roles in order to construct our own sphere of reality.

It is not difficult to see this when we question why we do the things we do. For example, we
may assume the role of the “superior” when we wish to remind others that they are to be subordinate. Thus, we oftentimes use these roles to raise our status, power, and freedom.

I also agree with Goffman in his view that mores and rituals play an important part in the maintenance of social order. These mores and rituals tie individuals together by promoting a common interest (raising for the flag salute) as well as set boundaries for appropriate action which help keep the individuals of society from disrupting the social order through inappropriate actions.

I also agree with Goffman that a large part of the self is developed through the interaction with others. This is reminiscent of Cooley’s “looking glass self” in which a person perceives them in a certain manner and places judgements on the individual due to these perceptions. The individual then reacts to the perceptions of others by altering the self.