who doubts that you are a respectable character provided you have an umbrella...? And what respectable man when you overtake him on the way and speak to him will refuse to hold a conversation with you, provided you have an umbrella? No one. The respectable man sees you have an umbrella and concludes that you do not intend to rob him, and with justice, for robbers never carry umbrellas. (1934[1862]: 397)

Borrow noted, then, that umbrella was read as a sign that he was a trustworthy human being. In today’s society many artefacts (like children and dogs as we have discussed above) have this kind of signifying property too. Glasses, jewellery, walking sticks, back packs and watches are not just ‘functional’. They can all be used to signal information and to assert individual or group identity. Cigarettes and smoking equipment also provide identity clues. Such objects do not only have a sign value in themselves, but also can be manipulated in various ways to send out extra messages. In Hollywood film noir for example, the cigarette could be smoked in various ways. Peter Lorre’s style suggested nervousness. He was always stubbing out his cigarettes and taking short drags. Bogart and Bacall, by contrast, tended to signal coolness and eroticism with long plumes of smoke and shared matches.

**Gesture and posture**

The use of the body in interaction is also a potent source of visual data. Humans use ‘body language’ consciously or unconsciously to convey information to others about things as diverse as emotion, social status, openness to interaction and sexual arousal. There is a vast and diverse literature in this field but, although human gesture and expression is very much visual data, much of this research can be only of limited use in the context of this book. There are several reasons for this.

**BOX 6.11 USE OF ACCESSORIES EXERCISE**

This exercise does not have an originating hypothesis, but will test your skill as an observer and your decoding ability as a competent member of society. As usual, situate yourself in a public space. We prefer coffee shops. Observe the use of accessories by people around you. How many expressive uses are you able to detect (e.g. the item is used to convey information by the actor)? How many of these uses are unconventional in that they require an item to be used in a way that was not intended? How are accessories used by waiting people rather than those in conversations? What kinds of opportunities arise for people to display their accessories to others?

1. It is often difficult to hook up observations on the use of the body to mainstream social theory. Much research is rooted in psychological and biological rather than social and cultural theory. The point of a study might be to draw analogies with the behaviours of animals or to hunt for psychological universals in the expression of emotion or to ask which kinds of gestures will help influence and persuade people. Such research is essentially in a different paradigm from the qualitative social science and cultural studies orientation of this book. A popular and entertaining example of such work is zoologist Desmond Morris’ (1977) *Manwatching*, which interprets human behaviours (e.g. grooming, expressions) via analogies with our primate cousins.

2. Cutting edge research on body language often involves the use of expensive equipment (e.g. video, brain electroencephalograms, etc.) and technical languages for transcribing movement and, possibly, its links to mental and physiological states. Birdwhistell’s studies on kinesics (movement) exemplifies work in this tradition which is closest in orientation to mainstream social science. Other research uses conversation analytic techniques to look at the association between gesture and speech, noting how gestures assist people in mutual orientation and communication (e.g. Goodwin, 1986). Conducting research in these sorts of areas requires specific training that is beyond the scope of this text.

3. Many studies and books on gesture often add up to little more than endless lists of types of gesture or their social function: e.g. as ‘reinforcing’, ‘encouraging’, ‘illustrating’, ‘isolating’, etc. An alternative approach, such as that of Norton (1983) is to identify styles of body movement and gesture. Norton locates ‘dramatic’, ‘dominant’, ‘animated’, ‘relaxed’, ‘attentive’, ‘open’, ‘friendly’, ‘contentious’ and ‘impression leaving styles’, each of which has its own kind of body language. Still other studies look to identify and document standardized sequences of movement in episodes like greeting and courtship. A related trend in the literature is to note cultural variations in gesture meanings or gesturing styles. David Efron (1972), for example, noted that East European Yiddish-speaking Jews gestured in ways which reflected the logical structure of a conversation. Southern Italians, by contrast, tended to perform concrete illustrative gestures which were ‘pantomimic’ of the action being talked about. Such work seems to be content to document differences rather than explain them. It draws attention to the importance of gesture in everyday interaction, its forms and variations, but tends to be descriptive in orientation. By contrast our concern in this book (and we hope that of our readers) is to connect analysis of the body and gesture to mainstream social and cultural theory.

4. As the work of Simmel, Goffman, etc. attests, much of the most interesting theory is on the role of gaze and eye contact in contemporary
social life. Such work is difficult to conduct, because of the unobservability of the gaze. Using expensive equipment and/or laboratory research one can explore some issues related to the gaze, but often not under naturalistic conditions. For example, walking round with a video camera strapped to your head to record gazes will not encourage people to gaze at you in a normal way!! So for a routine visual inquiry, we often have to restrict ourselves to the more observable motions of the body.

Having expressed these reservations there is still a vast store of information that could be used for visual research. Here we are restricted to a few examples of the kinds of themes that can be used to inform research by taking the gestures and movements of the body as indicators of social process. Many of these impinge on issues of territoriality discussed earlier. Some of the most interesting studies have looked at status differences in the uses of the body (LaFrance and Mayo, 1978). Findings from these include the following.

- Higher-status people are freer to touch than lower-status people.
- When a subordinate initiates a conversation they tend to be further away from the other party than when a superior initiates a conversation.
- Higher-status people also tend to sprawl when they sit and to adopt asymmetrical positions. Subordinates, by contrast, will tend to occupy less space and sit upright, in a symmetrical posture. (This is shown in the photograph (Figure 6.2) of a student consulting a professor.)
- High-status people gaze at the other when they are talking, but tend to look away when they are being talked to.

Whilst conducted in another academic tradition, such results provide remarkably strong support for Bourdieu’s assertions about the importance of embodied habitus as a mode of domination. According to Bourdieu, posture and a sense of being at ease are characteristic of the dominant classes. These embodied attributes are ones of which we are largely unaware and which subordinate classes can rarely earn, unlike, say, textbook forms of cultural capital. Studies of posture, such as the one described in Box 6.12, provide one way of exploring Bourdieu’s theory.

Gender differences in posture have also been frequently noted. Zdenek Klein’s (1984) study of sitting postures in males and females provides a representative example of a project with a well-thought-out sociological method, but a typically disappointing biological spin to the analysis. Klein recorded sitting postures in public transportation in Prague outside of rush hour. In each case postures were coded 30 seconds after the bus or tram left the station. In such public settings the sitters were unlikely to know each other or engage in conversation. Postures were recorded in 600 men and 600 women, with a second coder being used to establish the reliability of the coding. For males the preferred posture was one with knees and ankles kept apart. For females, postures with close contact of the knees were more prevalent (see Figure 6.3). Klein is able to discount the explanation that this was due to modesty, by showing that there was no association between the type of clothing worn by the woman (skirt or trousers) and posture adopted. Older women were more likely than younger women to adopt a ‘masculine’ posture. Men’s positions were not influenced by mode of transport, but women were more likely to adopt a ‘masculine’ posture when in a tram than a train. Klein believes this reflects seating patterns. Train seats faced one another, giving rise to situations of mutual visibility. Tram seats, like bus seats, all faced the same direction, making visual contact difficult.

Whilst this methodology for exploring gender, posture and seating is exemplary, like so much of this type of literature Klein’s interpretation of the data is sociobiological and hence less satisfactory from the viewpoint
BOX 6.12 STATUS AND POSTURE PROJECT

Ask several members of staff in your department if you can sit in their office during consultation hours with students, but don’t tell them why you wish to be there. In this interactional setting academics are high status and students low status. Devise a coding sheet which captures aspects of ‘space-eating’ and ‘slouching’ behaviours (e.g. ‘feet on desk’, ‘poor posture’, ‘arms behind head’) as well as ‘space-minimizing’ behaviours (e.g. arms folded, ‘sitting upright’). Sit in a quiet corner where it is difficult for the parties to observe you, and code behaviours of academics and students. Do your results confirm the theory? By comparing results within your sample, what kinds of status attributes seem to have the largest impact on postures of both academics and students (gender, age, academic rank/numbers of years as a student, dress, accent)? What can you conclude from your visual data about the major sources of interpersonal status in academic settings?

Note: In theory you could also conduct this study in other places like doctors’ surgeries, police stations, offices. In practice gaining access may be difficult, but if you have an entree it might provide a rewarding research site.

FIGURE 6.3 Types of leg posture in females and males. These photographs were taken at various locations at the University of Queensland and Brisbane city centre. Photos (a) and (b) show examples of what Klein considers to be typical female and male leg postures respectively. Photo (c) depicts four people seated on a bench. They are all exhibiting conventional postures. Can you identify the gender of each person? Photos (d) and (e) suggest that we may be observing changes from the patterns Klein identified. In (d), which contains only females, the posture of the person on the right might be thought of as more ‘masculine’. In contrast to (e) which shows two males at a bus stop, the figure on the left has adopted a strongly feminine posture with both knees and ankles touching.
Klein's study was conducted in the early 1980s. Gender norms have changed considerably since that time. If they are the determining factor, it is possible that there will be less difference between the sexes than Klein detected. If biology is a key factor, then one might expect to find results very similar to Klein's. Try to replicate Klein's study on public transport in your own town. Do your results match his? How, if at all, do they differ? Do you detect differences between participants in terms of variables like age and race? What, if anything, are you able to conclude about the power of gender norms versus biology as an explanation?

of mainstream sociology and cultural studies. Drawing on data derived from primates he suggests that the male seating posture is one that allows for immediate motion (for defence or flight) and tends to 'increase the contour of masculine stature' (Klein, 1984: 128). Women's posture is a kind of 'female courtship behaviour' which 'presents the individual's more attractive somatic characteristics' (i.e., legs?) to the opposite sex. Klein sees support for this argument in the fact that older women and women in the non-eye contact trains were less likely to adopt a 'female' posture. From a sociological perspective one might be able to offer alternative explanations that focus on men's tendency to dominate space and their socialization into culturally specific postural norms. A woman sitting with her legs apart, whatever she is wearing, is likely to be perceived as loose and may be subject to sexual harassment. Looked at from this viewpoint, posture is an indicator of gendered norms, habitus and power structures rather than biological imperatives.

Touch is another kind of gesture that is observable in public settings and is used to signal information between people. Heslin (1974), providing yet another of those innumerable typologies that characterize the field, suggests there are many types of touch ranging from the professional touch of the doctor, through the polite touch (e.g., kiss, handshake), the friendship touch (e.g., hugs at airport meetings), and on to intimate and sexual touching. To this list we should add forms of touch that dramatize power such as physical or sexual abuse or the arresting hand of the police officer (Synnott, 1993). In all societies touching is subject to norms. In some cultures touching is seen as an invasion of the self. There are also taboos due to the anxiety caused by the potentially sexual interpretation of human touching (see Richmond, McCroskey and Payne, 1991: 241ff). For this reason many people feel embarrassed when touched by a stranger, or have to apologize if they accidentally touch someone. Norms are also often place specific. Sexual touching, for example, is more acceptable in a private setting than in a public one.

As Simmel and others have noted, the modern city has brought people into proximity. This has caused a problem not only for the use of vision and the gaze (qua civil inattention as discussed earlier) but also, on occasion, for touch. Subway trains present a particular problem in that they require people to be pushed up close against one another, violating the customary norms against contact with strangers. Edward Hall remarks that subway riders have 'defensive devices' which take the intimacy out of contact in such public spaces. He writes:
Studies have documented cross-cultural and gender variation in touching. It has been widely held that women are more ‘touch oriented’ than men. Is this still the case? Arguably we are living in an era where traditional gender roles are breaking down. All those sensitive new-age guys should have fewer inhibitions than their fathers. Moreover, questions have to be asked as to whether the ‘postmodern city’ is as replete with repressive norms as its modernist counterpart. This question forms the basis of the project.

Select a public location such as a coffee shop (again?!) or mall (ditto!). Code instances of touching that you observe according to the parties involved, using a simple coding sheet (e.g. woman touches child, man touches woman). You may also be able to include additional variables like age and race, but our main focus here is on gender. Remember to make an estimate of the relative populations of men and women so that your estimates take account of the gender balance at your locale. Do men touch less than women? Are young men more likely to touch than older men? What other patterns can you identify? What do your results suggest about the touching norms in our society?

Note: This project can be made even more interesting if converted into a comparative study by identifying functionally-equivalent locations with different populations. For example, we might expect a trendy inner city coffee shop frequented by executives to differ from a roadside ‘greasy spoon’ frequented by truckers and bikies. A gay bar might differ from a straight bar. A mall in an ‘ethnic’ area might differ from a mall in a ‘white’ area. This sort of comparative dimension might allow you to make inferences about the strength of orthodoxy touching norms in various communities.

The basic tactic is to be as immobile as possible and, when, part of the trunk or extremities touches another person, withdraw if possible. If this is not possible, the muscles in the affected areas are kept tense. (1966: 112)

Greetings and farewells

These are the last bodily activity that we will explore in this chapter. Goffman (1971) argued that such activities are a central kind of supportive interchange in everyday social interaction. Consequently a great deal of effort goes into ensuring they are done correctly. Kendon and Ferber...