

3.3 Symbolic Interactionism

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1	Basic principles of symbolic interactionism	81
2	Theories of agency and action	82
3	Root assumptions	82
4	Race and gender	83
5	Epistemological and conceptual assumptions	83
6	Origins: Cooley, James, Mead, Dewey, Blumer	83
7	Varieties of interactionist thought	84
8	Recent developments: the narrative turn	85
9	Experience and its representations	85
10	Assessing interpretations	85
11	Disputes over truth	86
12	Conclusion	86

Symbolic interactionism is that unique American sociological and social psychological perspective that traces its roots to the early American pragmatists, James, Dewey, Peirce and Mead. It has been called the loyal opposition in American sociology, the most sociological of social psychologies. Only recently has this perspective entered the discourses of the other social sciences, including anthropology, psychology and science studies, where the works of Mead have been joined with the theories of Wittgenstein, Vygotsky and Bakhtin (1989). Harré, for example, places 'symbolic interactions' at the heart of psychology, showing how selves, attitudes, motives, genders and emotions are 'discursive productions, attributes of conversations rather than mental entities' (Harré 1992: 526).

Other social scientists are adopting an interactionist informed approach to the study of lives, identities and social relationships (see Dunn 1998; Holstein and Gubrium 2000; Musolf 1998; Wiley 1994). A relatively new journal, *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, publishes work

that connects the symbolic interactionist tradition with science studies, cultural psychology and the Soviet tradition represented by the works of Vygotsky and others. The journal *Symbolic Interaction* and the research annual *Studies in Symbolic Interaction* routinely publish work by symbolic interactionists, and members of the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction. Interactionism has had a tortured history in American sociology (see Fine 1993). Many times its death has been announced, and its practitioners maligned, but the perspective refuses to die. Today it is alive and well, thriving in its journals and at its annual meetings and symposia.

1 BASIC PRINCIPLES OF SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

The term *symbolic* in the phrase symbolic interaction refers to the underlying linguistic foundations of human group life, just as the word *interaction* refers to the fact that people do not act toward one another, but interact with each

other. By using the term interaction symbolic interactionists commit themselves to the study and analysis of the developmental course of action that occurs when two or more persons (or agents) with agency (reflexivity) join their individual lines of action together into joint action.

2 THEORIES OF AGENCY AND ACTION

The concepts of action and agency are central to interactionist theories of the self and the interaction process. Action references experiences that are reflexively meaningful to the person. Agency describes the locus of action, whether in the person, in language, or in some other structure or process. At issue is the place of an autonomous, reflexive individual in the construction of meaningful action. That is, do persons, as agents, create their own experience? Or, is experience created by a larger entity, or agent? Are agency, meaning and intention in the actor, in the experience, or in the social structure? Do persons, as Karl Marx argued, make history, but not under conditions of their own making? If history goes on behind people's backs, then structures, not persons as agents, make history. If this is the case, then the real object of interactionist enquiry is not the person, or a single individual. Rather, external systems and discursive practices create particular subjectivities, and particular subjective experiences for the individual. Interactionists reject this interpretation, arguing that experience, structure and subjectivity are dialogical processes.

Following Giddens's theory of structuration, and his concept of the duality of structure, it can be argued that 'the structured properties of social systems are simultaneously the *medium and outcome of social acts*' (Giddens 1981: 19; emphasis in original). Further, 'all social action consists of social practices, situated in time-space, and organized in a skilled and knowledgeable fashion by human agents' (1981: 19). Thus does Giddens's interactionist model overcome the false opposition between action, agency, meaning and structure. Giddens's formulation is consistent with symbolic interactionist assumptions. Every individual is a practical social agent, but human agents are constrained by structural rules, by material resources, and by the structural processes connected to class, gender, race, ethnicity, nation and community.

3 ROOT ASSUMPTIONS

In its canonical form symbolic interactionism rests on the following root assumptions (see Blumer 1981).

- 1 'Human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them' (Blumer 1969: 2).
- 2 The meanings of things arise out of the process of social interaction.
- 3 Meanings are modified through an interpretive process which involves self-reflective individuals symbolically interacting with one another (Blumer 1969: 2).
- 4 Human beings create the worlds of experience in which they live.
- 5 'The meanings of these worlds come from interaction, and they are shaped by the self-reflections persons bring to their situations.'
- 6 Such self-interaction is 'interwoven with social interaction and influences that social interaction' (Blumer 1981: 53).
- 7 Joint acts, their formation, dissolution, conflict and merger constitute what Blumer calls the 'social life of a human society'. A society consists of the joint or social acts 'which are formed and carried out by [its] members' (Blumer 1981: 153).
- 8 A complex interpretive process shapes the meanings things have for human beings. This process is anchored in the cultural world, in the 'circuit of culture' (du Gay et al. 1997: 3) where meanings are defined by the mass media, including advertising, cinema and television, and identities are represented in terms of salient cultural categories.

The basic task of the mass media is to make the second-hand world we all live in appear to be natural and invisible. Barthes (1957/1972: 11) elaborates, noting that the media dress up reality, giving it a sense of naturalness, so that 'Nature and History [are] confused at every turn.' The prime goals of the mass media complex are to create audience members who: (1) become consumers of the products advertised in the media; while (2) engaging in consumption practices that conform to the norms of possessive individualism endorsed by the capitalist political system; and (3) adhering to a public opinion that is supportive of the strategic policies of the state (Smythe 1994: 285). The audience is primarily a commodity that the

information technologies produce (Smythe 1994: 268). A final goal of the media is clear: to do everything it can to make consumers as audience members think they are not commodities.

Herein lies the importance of cultural narratives and stories that reinforce the epiphanal nature of human existence under late twentieth-century capitalism. These stories give members the illusion of a soul, of structural freedom and free will. Thus do the circuits of culture (production, distribution, representation) implement this system of commodification.

4 RACE AND GENDER

All human experience is racially gendered; that is, filtered through the socially constructed categories of male and female. This system privileges whiteness over blackness. It reproduces negative racial and ethnic stereotypes about dark-skinned persons. It regulates interracial, inter-ethnic sexual relationships. The gendered categories (male and female) of the racial self are enacted in daily ritual performances, in the conversations between males and females, and in media representations (see 3.10).

These gender categories are performative, established in and through the interaction process. This process of performing gender produces a gendered social order. In these performances there are no originals against which a particular gendered performance can be judged. Butler argues that each person constitutes through their interactional performances a situated version of a heterosexual, or non-heterosexual identity. Every performance is a masquerade, a copy of the real thing, an imitation of an imitation. Butler elaborates, 'If heterosexuality is an impossible imitation of itself, an imitation that performatively constitutes itself as the original, then the imitative parody of "heterosexuality" ... is always and only an imitation of an imitation, a copy of a copy, for which there is no original' (1993: 644).

5 EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND CONCEPTUAL ASSUMPTIONS

The symbolic interactionist perspective may be clarified by outlining the empirical and theoretical practices interactionists value and do not value.

- 1 Interpretative (and symbolic) interactionists do not think general theories are useful.
- 2 Interactionists reject totalizing, grand theories of the social; interactionists, like many post-structural (Foucault) and post-modern (Lyotard) theorists, believe in writing local narratives about how people do things together.
- 3 Interactionists do not like theories that objectify and quantify human experience. They prefer to write texts that remain close to the actual experiences of the people they are writing about.
- 4 Interactionists do not like theories that are imported from other disciplines, like the natural sciences or economics (for example, chaos or rational choice theories).
- 5 Interactionists do not like theories that ignore history, but they are not historical determinists. They believe that persons, not inexorable forces, make history, but they understand that the histories that individuals make may not always be of their own making.
- 6 Interactionists do not like theories that ignore the biographies and lived experiences of interacting individuals.
- 7 Interactionists do not believe in asking 'why' questions. They ask, instead, 'how' questions. How, for example, is a given strip of experience structured, lived and given meaning?

These are the things that interactionists do not like to do. This means they are often criticized for not doing what other people think they should do, like doing macro-studies of power structures, or not having clearly defined concepts and terms, or being overly cognitive, or having emergent theories, or being ahistorical and astrultural (see Musolf 1998). Too often these criticisms reflect either a failure to understand what the interactionist agenda is, or the fact that the critics have not read what interactionists have written.

6 ORIGINS: COOLEY, JAMES, MEAD, DEWEY, BLUMER

I now turn to a brief discussion of the origins of this perspective in American social theory (see also Musolf 1998: 20-92; also Holstein and Gubrium 2000: 17-37; Wiley 1994). Interactionists are cultural romantics. Often tragic and ironic, their vision of self and society stands in a direct line

with the Left romanticism of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Karl Marx and William James. From the beginning, interactionists have been haunted by a Janus-faced spectre. On the one hand, the founding theorists argued for the interpretative, subjective study of human experience. On the other hand, they sought to build an objective science of human conduct, a science that would conform to criteria borrowed from the natural sciences.

Pragmatism, as a theory of knowing, truth, science and meaning, is central to the interactionist heritage. For Mead, James, Peirce and Dewey, truth is defined in terms of its consequences for action. What is true is what works. Pragmatism became a form of cultural criticism for Dewey and James. Dewey's pragmatism celebrated critical intelligence, implemented through the scientific method, as the proper mode of scientific enquiry. This pragmatic tradition, in its several forms, continues to the present day (see Denzin 1992: 131; Strauss 1993b). It remains one of the most viable interpretative philosophical positions now operating in the human disciplines.

Cooley contended that the self of the person arises out of experiences in primary groups, especially the family. Modern societies are shaped by the media. Governmentally regulated competition is the best mechanism for maintaining the democratic values of a society like the United States.

James argued that the state of consciousness, or stream of consciousness, is all that the field of psychology needed to posit. The self, in its principal form of knower or subject (the 'I'), is at the centre of the person's state of consciousness. In experience the 'I' interacts with the 'me', or the self as object. For James the person has as many selves as he or she has social relationships.

Mead turns Cooley and James on their heads. For him the self is not mentalistic. Self and mind are social and cognitive processes, lodged in the ongoing social world. Self is a social object which lies in the field of experience. It is structured by the principle of sociality, or the taking of the attitude of the other in a social situation. The self can be scientifically studied, like an object in the physical sciences. Rejecting introspection because it is not scientific, he argued for a view of the self and society which joins these two terms in a reciprocal process of interaction. His key term was 'the act', which replaces James's concept of stream of experience.

Blumer (1969) turns Mead into a sociologist. Offering a view of society that derives from

Mead's picture of the social act, he introduced the concepts of joint action and acting unit to describe the interactions that extend from dyads to complex institutions. His self is an interpretative process, and his society (after Park and Thomas) is one built on the play of power, interest, group position, collective action and social protest. He applied Mead and Park to the study of fashion, film, racial prejudice, collective behaviour and the industrialization process.

With Mead, and Blumer's extension of Mead, the interaction tradition decisively moves away from the interpretative and phenomenological suggestions of Cooley and James. It enters a confused phase, as noted above, which attempts, though unsuccessfully, to become naturalistic, subjective and scientific. (In 1974 in *Frame Analysis* Goffman attempted to reclaim and then refute the neglected James and phenomenological tradition; see 2.2.)

7 VARIETIES OF INTERACTIONIST THOUGHT

Symbolic interactionism comes in multiple varieties. These include: pragmatic, feminist, phenomenological and constructionist varieties. Diversity is not just theoretical. At the methodological level, interactionists employ a variety of interpretative, qualitative approaches, including autoethnographies, narratives of the self, structural, articulative, semiotic and practical ethnographies, grounded theory, the biographical, life history method, performance and feminist ethnographies, more traditional interviewing and participant observation practices, creative interviewing, the interpretative practices hinted at by Blumer, conversation analysis, ethnographic and laboratory searches for generic principles of social life, and historical studies of civilizational processes.

Substantively, interactionists have made major contributions to many areas of social science. An incomplete list would include the fields of deviance, social problems, collective behaviour, medical sociology, the emotions, the arts, social organization, race relations and industrialization, childhood socialization, fashion, film, the mass media, family violence and small groups. In short, there are many styles and versions of symbolic interactionism and these variations are displayed across the fields of sociology and social psychology.

8 RECENT DEVELOPMENTS: THE NARRATIVE TURN

Contemporary symbolic interactionists emphasize the reflexive, gendered, situated nature of human experience. They examine the place of language and multiple meanings in interactional contexts (see Holstein and Gubrium 2000). This reflexive, or narrative concern is also evidenced in other points of view, from phenomenology (see 3.1), to hermeneutics (see 3.5), semiotics, psychoanalysis (see 5.20), feminism (see 3.10), narratology (see 5.11), cultural, discursive and dialogical psychology (see 5.19), interpretive sociology and cultural studies (see 3.9).

This narrative turn moves in two directions at the same time. First, symbolic interactionists (and other theorists) formulate and offer various narrative versions, or stories about how the social world operates. This form of narrative is usually called a theory, for example Freud's theory of psychosexual development (see 5.20). On this, Charles Lemert reminds us that sociology is an act of the imagination, that the various sociologies are 'stories people tell about what they have figured out about their experiences in social life' (Lemert 1997: 14). This is how interactionism is best understood: various stories about the social world, stories people tell themselves about their lives and the worlds they live in, stories that may or may not work.

Second, symbolic interactionists study narratives and systems of discourse, suggesting that these structures give coherence and meaning to everyday life. (A system of *discourse* is a way of representing the world.) Systems of discourse both summarize and produce knowledge about the world (Foucault 1980: 27). These discursive systems are seldom just true or false. In the world of human affairs truth and facts are constructed in different ways. Their meanings are embedded in competing discourses. As such they are connected to struggles over power, or regimes of truth; that is, to who has the power to determine what is true and what is not true (Hall 1996c: 205).

9 EXPERIENCE AND ITS REPRESENTATIONS

It is not possible to study experience directly, so symbolic interactionists study how narratives, connected to systems of discourse (interviews,

stories, rituals, myths), represents 'experience. These representational practices are narrative constructions. The meanings and forms of everyday experience are always given in narrative representations. These representations are texts that are performed, stories told to others. Bruner is explicit on this point: representations must 'be performed to be experienced' (1984: 7). Hence symbolic interactionists study performed texts, rituals, stories told, songs sung, novels read, dramas performed. Paraphrasing Bruner (1984: 7), experience is a performance, and reality is a social construction.

The politics of representation is basic to the study of experience. How a thing is represented involves a struggle over power and meaning. While social scientists have traditionally privileged experience itself, it is now understood that no life, no experience can be lived outside of some system of representation (Hall 1996d: 473). Indeed, 'there is no escaping ... the politics of representation' (Hall 1996d: 473; see 5.22).

Symbolic interactionists are constantly constructing interpretations about the world. All accounts, 'however carefully tested and supported are, in the end, authored' (Hall, 1996a: 14). Interactionist explanations reflect the point of view of the author. They do not carry the guarantee of truth and objectivity. For example, feminist scholars have repeatedly argued (rightly we believe) that the methods and aims of positivistic social psychology are gender-biased, that they reflect patriarchal beliefs and practices (see 3.10). In addition, the traditional experimental methods of social psychological enquiry reproduce these biases.

10 ASSESSING INTERPRETATIONS

The narrative turn and the feminist critique lead interactionists to be very tentative in terms of the arguments and positions they put forward. It is now understood that there is no final, or authorized version of the truth. Still, there are criteria of assessment that should be used. Interactionists are 'committed to providing systematic, rigorous, coherent, comprehensive, conceptually clear, well-evidenced accounts, which make their underlying theoretical structure and value assumptions clear to readers ... [still] we cannot deny the ultimately interpretative character of the social science enterprise' (Hall 1996a: 14).

Interpretive interactionists (see Denzin 2000) seek an existential, interpretive social science that offers a blueprint for cultural criticism. This criticism is grounded in the specific worlds made visible in the research process. It understands that all enquiry is theory- and value-laden. There can be no objective account of a culture and its ways. The ethnographic, the aesthetic and the political can never be neatly separated. Qualitative enquiry, like art, is always political.

A critical, civic, literary form of qualitative enquiry is one that should meet four criteria. It must evidence a mastery of literary craftsmanship, the art of good writing. It should present a well-plotted, compelling, but minimalist narrative. This narrative will be based on realistic, natural conversation, with a focus on memorable, recognizable characters. These characters will be located in well-described, 'unforgettable scenes' (Ford 1998: 1112). Second, the work should present clearly identifiable cultural and political issues, including injustices based on the structures and meanings of race, class, gender and sexual orientation. Third, the work should articulate a politics of hope. It should criticize how things are and imagine how they could be different. Finally, it will do these things through direct and indirect symbolic and rhetorical means. Writers who do these things are fully immersed in the oppressions and injustices of their time. They direct their ethnographic energies to higher, utopian, morally sacred goals.

The truth of these new texts is determined pragmatically, by their truth effects, by the critical, moral discourse they produce, by the 'empathy they generate, the exchange of experience they enable, and the social bonds they mediate' (Jackson 1998: 180). The power of these texts is not a question of whether 'they mirror the world as it "really" is' (Jackson 1998: 180). The world is always already constructed through narrative texts. Korten (1979) is firm on this point. There is no mirror of nature. The world as it is known is constructed through acts of representation and interpretation.

Finally, this performative ethnography searches for new ways to locate and represent the gendered, sacred self in its ethical relationships to nature. An exploration of other forms of writing is sought, including personal diaries, nature writing and performance texts anchored in the natural world.

11 DISPUTES OVER TRUTH

There are many in the interactionist community who reject the narrative turn (as outlined above) and what it implies for interpretive work. These critics base their arguments on six beliefs:

- 1 The new writing is not scientific, therefore it cannot be part of the ethnographic project.
- 2 The new writers are moralists; moral judgments are not part of science.
- 3 The new writers have a faulty epistemology; they do not believe in disinterested observers who study a reality that is independent of human action.
- 4 The new writing uses fiction; this is not science, it is art.
- 5 The new writers do not study lived experience which is the true province of ethnography. Hence, the new writers are not participant observers
- 6 The new writers are postmodernists, and this is irrational, because postmodernism is fatalistic, nativistic, radical, absurd and nihilistic.

These six beliefs constitute complex discursive systems; separate literatures are attached to each. Taken together, they represent a formidable, yet dubious critique of the new interactionist project. They make it clear that there are no problems with the old ways of doing research. Indeed, the new ways create more problems than they solve. These beliefs serve to place the new work outside science, perhaps in the humanities, or the arts. Some would ban these persons from academia altogether. Others would merely exclude them from certain theory groups, that is from symbolic interactionism.

12 CONCLUSION

To summarize, symbolic interactionism offers a generic theory of action, meaning, motives, emotion, gender, the person and social structure. This theory has relevance for all of the human disciplines, from psychology, to sociology, history, anthropology and political science. Thus do interactionists study the intersections of interaction, biography and social structure in particular historical moments.