

Symbolic interactionism - blumer



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“ The essence of society lies in an ongoing process of action- not in a posited structure of relations” -Blumer, 1969,(p. 71)

Although symbolic interaction theory is often applied primarily to the micro level, the structuring of interdependent lines of behavior at the meso and macro levels also involves shared definitions developed through interaction. The overall culture of a society is the objective outcome of these shared social definitions whereby subjective meanings are created, often expressed in material artifacts of various types, and either sustained or transformed through interaction.

Symbolic Interaction-Process Versus Structure

Many of the core ideas of symbolic interaction theory are grounded in the pioneering work of George Herbert Mead, particularly his perspective regarding the close relationship between the mental processes whereby people make sense of their environment and their interaction with one another. This relationship is manifested in the patterns of collaboration among people as they seek to develop shared interpretations of the situations they face. It is also reflected in how one's self-concept develops through awareness of the perspectives of others. In addition, contemporary symbolic interaction theory draws on Charles Horton Cooley's analysis of how one's feelings about oneself (pride or shame, for example) reflect one's sensitivity to the positive or negative reactions of others, especially in primary group settings. This is consistent with his often-cited concept of the “ looking-glass self.”

Symbolic interaction theory is comparable in some ways to Georg Simmel's focus on the forms of interaction, but symbolic interaction theory goes deeper than Simmel's perspective in emphasizing the symbolic medium through which interaction takes place plus the subjective mental processes that accompany it. This focus on the subjective level may be compared to Weber's emphasis on understanding the subjective meanings of individuals' actions. But while Weber moved well beyond the level of individual actions and subjective meanings to deal with broad patterns of institutional and cultural change, many symbolic interactionists resemble Simmel in their strong micro-level focus.

Human beings relate to one another and to their environment in terms of interdependent roles they create and sustain. At the center of this process are the self-concepts or identities of the individuals involved as they interact and adjust to one another in face-to-face encounters. Human beings are thus transformed into students and teachers, friends and lovers, husbands and wives, team players and college graduates, customers and sales people, celebrities and deviants, soldiers and social workers, lawyers and police officers, members and outsiders, and so on. Social definitions are crucial even for defining the meaning and social relevance of human beings' biological characteristics, such as sex, age, and weight, for example. The socially contrived character of large-scale institutional structures may not be as obvious as in small group relationships or children's micro-level play worlds, but macro level social institutions are also socially constructed through widely shared subjective definitions that are developed and sustained through interaction. This implies that when subjective definitions

and interpretations undergo widespread change, institutional transformation may occur, which then changes the context of subsequent interactions at the micro level. The divisions between micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis are not rigid distinctions. From r various micro-level social circles, networks of social relations extend outward, thus providing an opening to meso and macro levels of the social world.

The heritage one share as members of society also includes enduring cultural products and artifacts that have been constructed or reproduced by countless other people far beyond the range of one's own limited social circles or personal knowledge. Language obviously transcends personal micro-level social settings, even though language is actually reproduced regularly in the context of face-to-face interaction as well as in mass media communication. Even one's adaptation to the objective physical reality of the natural world (like the food one eats) is mediated through the symbols used to define and interpret it. All symbolic interactionists emphasize the micro-level linkages between the subjective consciousnesses, interpersonal interaction, and identity formation, as well as the symbolic and socially constructed nature of the larger social world.

Symbolic interaction theory today differs from the pioneering " social behaviorism" emphasized by Mead in the early part of the twentieth century.

Blumer's Theorey:

Symbolic interaction theory, under the influence of Herbert Blumer, was in large part a critical reaction to macro level types of analysis, particularly as reflected in functional theory, and the strong emphasis on the notion that

people's behavior is largely determined by social structures. For symbolic interaction theorists, the strong emphasis on culturally scripted norms and institutionalized roles was misplaced. This focus seemed to leave little room for individuals to make choices or to improvise as they interpret and adjust to the specific situations they face. For symbolic interactionists social structures do not exist as an objective reality that is independent of the actions of its human participants. Instead, all aspects of the social world are negotiated, constructed, and reproduced or sometimes transformed through ongoing processes of interaction and subjective interpretation whereby people mutually shape one another's perceptions, definitions, and responses to their environment. Within this general framework, several different areas of emphasis can be identified within symbolic interaction theory. Symbolic interactionist perspective serves as a general framework for role theory, reference group theory, analyses of social perception and person perception, self theory, and dramaturgic theory.

Of the various versions of symbolic interactionism, Herbert Blumer's (1962) perspective expressed the strongest skepticism regarding macro-level theories such as functionalism. As he put it:

By and large, of course, sociologists do not study human society in terms of its acting units, instead, they are disposed to view human society in terms of structure or organization and to treat social action as an expression of such structure or organization. Thus, reliance is placed on such structural categories as social system, culture, norms, values, social stratification, status position, social roles and institutional organization.

(Blumer, pp. 188-189 in Rose, ed. 1962)

Blumer coined the term symbolic interaction and promoted Mead's strong emphasis on the interrelated processes of mutual role-taking, interaction, and subjective interpretation that occur as people adjust their actions to one another in dealing with the particular situations they face. This emphasis on the need for people to improvise their responses to their environment and to one another seems to downplay the habits and memories that individuals bring to situations that they encounter over and over. It also seems to push the cultural and institutional "framework" that might influence their interpretations into the background. Even though social organization, culture, roles, and other structural features of the social world may not determine people's behavior in a strong sense, such features may nevertheless be taken into consideration, especially in familiar situations. When people repeatedly face similar types of situations, they may employ ready-made responses with only a minimal amount of negotiation or reflection. This does not mean that social organization determines people's behavior as an external force. It does suggest, however, that patterns of interaction and interpretation are not always as fluid as Blumer seems to suggest.

People do indeed sometimes face novel situations that are unstructured and ambiguous and so will need to make a conscious effort to make sense of them as they explore with one another how to cope. In other situations, they may each have their own distinctive ideas on how to respond and so will need to negotiate their differences. But in many routine situations they already share an implicit understanding of its salient features and know how

to respond. This means that very little negotiation is required if any. Regardless of these variations, patterns of social organization, including written rules and established authority or power structures, are never automatically self-enforcing. Instead, these “ structural” factors become relevant only to the extent that people remember them and decide how to apply them. Sometimes there may be discussion and debate regarding whether or how an established rule or custom should apply. If there are large differences in power and authority, the negotiation actually may be quite minimal, as those with relatively less power realize the futility of trying to get those with greater power to see things their way.

By pushing social organization, culture, and similar concepts that transcend particular situations into the background, and by emphasizing the fluid and indeterminate nature of the immediate social world, Blumer’s approach makes it difficult to establish principles of social behavior that apply across different situations or to move from the micro to the macro level. However, other symbolic interaction theorists give more emphasis to stable structural categories than Blumer did. These structural influences do not determine behavior from the outside, as external or objective forces, however; instead, they are encoded in individuals’ subjective consciousness and shared memories and expectations. Although they may be interpreted to apply in unique ways in different situations, they are nevertheless reflected in participants’ predispositions regarding how to respond to the specific situations they face.

The contrast between Blumer’s view of the fluid and undetermined nature of the social world versus a more structural version of symbolic interaction

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theory can be illustrated through the process whereby individuals' self-concepts are developed, maintained, and changed. The relation between individuals' self-concepts or identities, their social roles, and the reactions of others can be traced back to the pioneering work of Mead and Cooley. Contemporary symbolic interactionist theory offers several different strategies for exploring how individuals' self-concepts or identities are expressed through the different roles they perform. The following section will deal in more detail with the relation between people's role performances and their identities.

Blumer's image of the fluid and negotiated character of the social world implies that identities and social roles are not fixed but instead are largely improvised in each encounter as individuals seek to align their own self-concepts and intentions with the expectations of others. In contrast to Blumer, a more structural version of symbolic interaction theory puts greater emphasis on the standardized and routine expectations and behaviors of various roles. With this alternative focus social life is viewed as having a higher level of predictability than implied in Blumer's perspective, especially in routine situations. Although behavior is not determined by social roles, with no room for individual variations, this structural version is closer to the conventional forms of sociological analysis that Blumer criticized. While roles may not be scripted in detail, there are definite guidelines and expectations that people tend to follow. People's self-concepts are multidimensional. They may reflect roles associated with various personal characteristics as well as with the social positions they occupy. These roles include, for example, those associated with gender, age, family status, occupation, race or ethnicity,

residential location, leisure time pursuits, general lifestyle preferences, and so on. Such roles are likely to be partially structured by general cultural expectations as well as by specific expectations that develop among people who interact on a regular basis. Even so, there is room for considerable improvisation in most cases as individuals express their own unique individuality and seek to satisfy their current needs and concerns.

There are three fundamental premises underlying a symbolic interactionist perspective; and it is to Blumer's great credit that these premises receive emphasis in his work. All are in fact central to Mead's arguments, even while none of them originates with Mead.

The first of these premises holds that an adequate account of human behavior must incorporate the perspective of the actor and cannot rest entirely on the perspective of the observer alone. The second of these premises asserts the priority of social interaction and the derivative, emergent nature of both self and social organization from that social process. The third argues that self, or persons' reflexive responses to themselves, serves to link larger societal processes to the social interactions of those persons.

The first and last of these premises contain between them the justification for insisting that socially formed meanings that are aspects of the subjective experience of persons are not only legitimately but are necessarily part of observers' accounts of the social behavior of human beings.

Contrary to Blumer's position would be the emergent character of social life as well as ignoring the reality in experience of the dialectical relationship of

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what Mead called the “ I” and the “ me.” However, working from Blumer’s perspective on these matters does not require that one must retreat to phenomenologies of individual minds, or forgo attempts to develop theoretical explanations of social life that have some general applicability.

If one accepts interaction as the source and substance of society, i. e., accepting the foundational character of the social process, it will surely be the acceptance of Blumer’s emphasis on the emergent character of self and social organization. This acceptance in turn implies the recognition of some degree of indeterminacy in attempts to foresee what will be from what is at any given moment of that social process. Further, such indeterminacy is principled and not merely a recognition of the incompleteness or inadequacy of present knowledge.

The central role of self in mediating the relationship of social process and social behavior, one of the basic premises of symbolic interactionist thought whose emphasis in Blumer’s work need to be emphasized.

Without invoking a concept such as self, attempts to come to grips with obvious variability of persons’ behavior in the face of apparent constancy of circumstance-biological, ecological, cultural, or social-are likely to founder similarly in a complementary way the concept of self permits dealing with that variability in specifically social terms.

Meta-theoretical Conceptions of Blumer:

The metatheoretical ideas proclaim the impossibility of general, predictive sociological theory as a consequence of the centrality of meanings and definitions in the production of human behavior. For Blumer, all social life is

actively constructed by participants in the very process of interaction itself because this “ micro-constructivist” process is taken to be descriptive of social life in general, it is also taken to be descriptive of the meanings and the interpretations applying those meanings assumed to be critical for each “ next step” in the processes of interaction. Meanings in that sense are truly emergents, subject to literally continuous reformulation on a moment-to-moment basis. If meanings are indeed central, and if meanings are constructed in and particular to the experience of individual actors, emergent from their ongoing experience, it follows for Blumer that the generality required of the predictive, theoretical concepts in terms of which theoretical arguments are couched cannot exist. Preexistent concepts cannot match the emergent interpretations of actors constructing their lines of social interaction. Given all of this, Blumer concludes, sociology can expect to be able to develop after-the-fact understandings of behaviors that have occurred, but cannot anticipate the development of general explanatory sociological theory in a predictive sense.

Methodological consequences of Blumer:

His metatheoretical argument has methodological consequences. For one thing, it implies the futility of a research enterprise that is initiated by a priori theory, or that anticipates behavioral outcomes via hypotheses arrived at deductively from such theory. For another, it suggests that research methods that fail to focus directly upon actors’ interpretations by setting up prior procedural or substantive constraints on how issues are formulated or are attacked-experimentation and survey research methods are cases in point-necessarily lack validity and the capacity to generate meaningful data.

And for yet another, it underwrites the condemnation of the application of mathematical or statistical manipulations of data in efforts to draw from those data their sociological implications, on the grounds that numerical data are necessarily bereft of the meanings that define the essential character of sociological phenomena. Thus along with denying the possibility of explanatory sociological theory, Blumer severely restricts the legitimate range of investigatory (data gathering) techniques as well as analytic methods. Apparently, in his own mind only participatory observation meets his strictures but even that method would not survive a thorough logical analysis of its fit to Blumer's methodological arguments.'

It is important to note that Blumer's ideas which are fundamental to defining symbolic interactionism do not necessarily lead to the metatheoretical and methodological ends at which he himself arrives. Actors' perspectives, the definitions of situations they call into play that are critical to the course and the content of interaction, are not unconstrained. Both the meanings those are possible to invoke in the course of defining situations, as well as the particular meanings from the range of possible meanings that are likely to be invoked, are not random events. They are, on the contrary, subject to the constraints of extant social and cultural systems. Further, there is some reasonable stability over time to the meanings attached to social objects. For practical purposes these do not change willy-nilly or from moment to moment in a way that signifies great change in behavioral outcomes. If there were no such stability, if meanings did not in general entail relative constancy from moment to moment, from day to day, even from year to

year, there is no way that social life could have the predictability that enables people to live their lives as they do.

The fact that meanings can change radically and precipitously does not argue that in general they do change radically and precipitously. This implies that one can indeed formulate general statements or theoretical propositions that go beyond the phenomenologies of single individuals, statements or propositions that are not subject to a priori rejection, whatever their fate may be at the hands of empirical evidence. To recognize that social life is constructed via definitional or interpretive processes and that there are few limits on what constructions are possible does not require one to abjure reasonably strong predictions, or to anticipate that predictions, when based on solid theoretical grounds, will lack credibility or validity. Neither does it obviate the recognition that the social process sometimes, perhaps even frequently, crystallizes and stabilizes in a manner that permits the theoretical recognition of “ selves” and “ social structures” that they themselves operate to constrain and limit the possibilities for emergence in social life, that operate to transform possibilities into probabilities.

Substantive ideas in Blumer:

In substantive terms, it is Blumer's treatment or lack thereof of social organization and social structure are both nonessential and highly problematic. For Blumer, “ society consists of the congeries of lines of individual action, the fitting together of these lines. Individual action is a matter of persons guiding their own action by interpreting the significance of things for that prospective action; group action is a matter of aligning individual action through a process of role-taking, i. e., searching out the

meaning of others' acts by ascertaining what they are doing or intend to do (Blumer 1969, p. 8).

Social organization and social structures enter action only by shaping situations and providing the symbols used in interpreting situations, "only as they enter into the process of interpretation and definition out of which joint actions are formed"; and, in any event, they are less important in modern society than in stabilized, settled societies precisely because in the former there are fewer situations calling for previously regularized and standardized actions.

Conclusion

There obviously exist a number of very different senses of what symbolic interaction is substantively and what it implies methodologically. The problem is not that these different senses exist; the problem rather lies in the artificial and unnecessary oppositions among them created by the polemics that have historically characterized the literature of symbolic interactionism-the polemics of social movements and embattled minorities, the polemics that define orthodoxies and heterodoxies in seeking to recruit adherents to the banner being waved by the pure. The fact of multiplicity of alternative viewpoints in itself is healthy: self-control, choice, freedom and various other good things spring from alternatives symbolically represented in human experience. But multiplicity of views can be unhealthy if there is no communication across differences, if either structural or cognitive barriers prevent the alternatives from in fact entering the experience of persons, for then each person becomes the prisoner of his or her preferred -perspective." One is then used by perspectives rather than using them and the

perspectives themselves are likely to ossify, to become unquestioned Truths and not potentially fallible ideas subject to logical and empirical examination and reformulation.