

What is symbolic
interactionism
sociology essay



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The increased interest to the problem of communication in sociology of the 20 century actualized, in particular, importance of understanding each other at differing positions, defining own views to the opposite. Gradually in the sociology was formed an integrationists branch, that studied the integrity of the human " I" and his personal self-determination in microsocial environment.

The term " symbolic" means that there is an emphasis on the sense which individuals put in their actions when they come into interactions with each other, and in this theory the society is considered from the standpoint of behavior of individuals involved in the interaction. In other words, society can only be explained by considering the principles of human behavior, because only here can be found a significant symbol that defines the act of behavior. Defining of a meaningful symbol takes place in the human consciousness, which is filled with meaning and knowledge from the outside world.

General Principles

Symbolic interactionism focuses on the analysis of the symbolic aspects of social interactions. The basic principle of interactionism is that an individual perceives (estimates) behave in accordance with attitudes of other people, that is, a person is for himself the one, whom he presents to others in the social world. Symbolic interactionists are united by not a rigorous theory, but a common vision of social process, defined as a process of development and changing social values, a constant definition and redefinition of situations, the interaction of their participants. In the process of this redefinition is

changing the objective (from the view points of interacting individuals) of the medium of social activities, because the world, according to interactionists, has a completely social origin. Different groups develop different worlds, which change in the process of changing the values in the course of social interaction.

Symbolic interactionism is based on three basic premises:

- First that people react to the environment based on those values - symbols, that they have in the environment.
- Second, these values (means of connection of events and characters) are the product of the social everyday interpersonal relations - interactions.
- And finally, the socio-cultural values are subject to change as a result of individual perception within such interactions. (West, 2010)

That is why "I" and "others" form a unified whole, like society, which is the sum of the behaviors of its constituent members, but which imposes social restrictions on individual behavior. Although theoretically it is possible to separate "I" from the society, interactionism comes from the fact that the first understanding is connected with an equally deep understanding of the second - in terms of their interdependent relationship.

Representatives of symbolic interactionism emphasizes that people are social creatures. However, unlike ants, bees, termites and other insects leading a public life, people almost do not have the innate models of behaviors, that connect them with each other. If we have essentially no inherent nature of the mechanisms of social behavior, how can society

be? Representatives of symbolic interactionism find the answer in the ability of people to communicate through symbols. (West, 2010)

In the theory of symbolic interactionism a sign is any element of the medium, which is another element in this environment. The signs are of two types: firstly, it is natural signs (such as discoloration of leaves), which represent something else (like the arrival of autumn); second are artificial signs, elements that were created (such as a flag) to represent something else in the social world, for example, patriotism and duty. These artificial signs are only effective if people agree on their meaning, so that they are “interactive”: two or more people must agree to continue to react to this sign in relatively constant manner.

It is also necessary to distinguish signals from symbols: signals are artificial marks, providing a predictable reaction (such as traffic signals); and symbols are artificial marks that have no definite reactions (a flag). Thus, the signals are used for regulatory policy of normative behavior in the society, and symbols are used to facilitate communicative behavior.

Historical development of the Theory

As a broad theory, symbolic interactionism appeared in the 20-s of XX century, in the Chicago school, its founder was an American sociologist George Mead.

George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) is an American sociologist and social psychologist, who is considered a true founder of symbolic interactionism. Mead was known in his lifetime as a gifted lecturer, and

author of numerous articles, publication and republication of his lectures and articles, as well as the fundamental work "Mind, Self and Society" (1934) brought him international fame. He has developed a theory that explains the essence of the individual's perception of other individuals, and developed the concept of "generalized other" that is to some extent complementary to the theory of "specular I".

In accordance with the concept of "I", Mead believed that the emergence of human self as a holistic mental phenomena, in essence, is nothing else but social process inside the individual, in which he first pointed by "I - conscious" and "I-like-object". Further, Mead suggested that through the assimilation of culture (as a complex set of characters that share common values for all members of society,) the person is able to predict the behavior of another person and how this other person is predicting own behavior.

According to Mead, "I"-as-object is something that people can call their own. In this area, James identifies four components and arranges them in order of importance: the spiritual self, material self, social self and physical self.

Another American philosopher and psychologist, who first began to develop a responsive self-concept was William James (1842-1910). James has made the first and very profound concept of personal "I", considered in the context of self-knowledge, and he conjectured that the dual nature of the integral "I", with many of his statements concerning the descriptive, and emotional evaluation of categorical "I", anticipated the later developments of the idea of "I"-concept. (Meltzer 1975)

As for other concepts of symbolic interactionism, we can name an American sociologist and social psychologist Herbert Blumer, who was a representative of the Chicago school of interactionism, referring to the second generation of symbolic interactionism, founded by J. Mead. He further developed the original framework of symbolic interactionism. Blumer was the first who interested in the problem of mass society. According to Blumer Symbolic interactionism rests on three basic premises:

- People are more likely to act according to the values that they attach to objects and events, rather than just react to external stimuli, such as social forces. Symbolic interactionism suggests determinism of values.
- Values are not just fixed and formulated in advance, but more often are created and change in interactive situations.
- Values are the result of interpretations that took place in interactive contexts. (Nelson 1998)

Significant attention in his works Blumer paid to collective behavior of people. Basis of collective behavior are common values, expectations, which are separated by a group of individuals. However, it often can be observed a spontaneous collective behavior, like overflowing passion, panic, etc. This behavior occurs in violation of established values, habitual forms of existence. Blumer distinguishes those forms of spontaneous behavior (such as Pounding, Collective excitation, Social Infection), which under certain conditions can lead to new forms of group and institutional behavior:

- Acting crowd (a spontaneously formed group, without common values and expectations, there is no recognized leadership)

- Expressive crowd (emotional groups – carnivals, ritual dance)

- Mass crowd (spontaneous collective grouping of people who are excited with some event)

- Public (spontaneous collective group, but in public individuals interact with each other, demonstrate the rational, critical action). (Nelson 1998)

Although Mead has first formulated his ideas in 1930, symbolic interactionism has become an important part of the study equations of mass communication only in 1970, 1980. Since Meade made emphasis on interpersonal interaction and not interested in media, it is not surprising that theorists of mass communication rather slow realized the relevance of his ideas in their research.

Symbolic interactionism as the direction is not uniform, as it is possible to distinguish at least two schools. The first is the so-called “ Chicago School” led by one of the prominent scientists Cove J., Mead H., Bloomer. This school continues to socio-psychological tradition of Mead in the most orthodox way. It is opposed to the another “ Iowa school” of symbolic interaction-mechanism, headed by M. Kuhn – professor at the University of Iowa. This school is trying to modify several individual Mead’s concepts in the spirit of neo-positivism. The main difference between these schools are in methodological issues, primarily in the definition of concepts and relationships to various methods of socio-psycho-logical investigation.

Among other representatives of the theory we can name Becker and Strauss – members of the Chicago School of symbolic interactionism, who were interested in the procedural aspects of interaction. Kuhn and Partridge are representatives of Iowa schools, and were more interested in “stable” symbolic structures. To this generation also belongs K. Burke and Goffman, who explained social life as the realization of the metaphor of drama by analyzing the interaction in such terms as “actor”, “mask”, “scene”, “script” and so on. Moreover, Burke used the term “theater”, almost literally, while Hoffman was using “theater” and “drama” as metaphors of society while preserving its spirit, but developing its own conceptual line.

The modern theory of symbolic interactionism, as a direct expression of concepts of J. Mead, has practically the same advantages, shortcomings and contradictions of the J. Mead concept. On the one hand, it is important to point interactionists effort to isolate “the specific human” traits in human behavior, the view on the individual as a social phenomenon, to find a socio-psychological mechanisms of identity formation in interaction with others in society, to stress active creative personal traits of the individual.

However, the subjective idealist position of interactionists lead to the fact that all the social connections they see only in interpersonal communication, and while the analysis of communication they ignore the contents and the substantive work of individuals, not seeing that “the process of formation of the personality includes not only the exchange of views, but more importantly, the exchange of activities.” (Reynolds 1993)

theory importance and Application

The advantage of this approach is that it introduces “ people” in the field of sociological research. It directs attention to the activities of individuals in their daily lives and sees that people are not robots, mechanically carrying out the requirements of social rules and institutional norms, but leading the public life of beings with the ability to feel and think. In the interaction they operate with symbols and values which enable them to evaluate and interpret situations of social life, assess the advantages and disadvantages of certain actions and then choose one of them. Thus, representatives of symbolic interactionism suggest the image of man as an individual, actively forming his behavior, rather than passively reacting to external environment and structural constraints.

However, the approach of symbolic interactionism has its weaknesses. In everyday life people do not have complete freedom in forming and changing their actions. Although representatives of symbolic interactionism recognize that many human actions are guided by the established systems of symbols and meanings, including culture and social system. Critics argue that the theory of social interaction based on the symbols makes an excessive emphasis on short-term situations and exaggerates attention to transient, episodic and temporary”. (Reynolds 1993)

Thus, the theory is applied to describe and analyze human behavior, as through the process of socialization people can more or less consciously interpret stimuli and expected responses.

Conclusion

From the perspective of interactionists, human society is composed of individuals with personal “ I”, who themselves form norms and values. Individual action is a construction, not just a commission, as it is carried by the individual using the estimation and interpretation of the situation in the social environment. Personal “ I am” can serve as a person’s target for his actions. Formation of values is presented as a set of actions in which the individual sees the object, gives it value, and decides to act on this matter. Interpretation of the actions of another is a definition of the value of certain actions of others. From the perspective of interactionists, an object is not just external stimulus, but something that distinguishes man from the outside world, giving him certain value.

This theory explains how individuals interact with the environment and how behave in the process of socialization.