

Symbolic interactionism and dialects theory essay sample



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Symbolic Interactionism originated with two key theorists, George Herbert Mead and Charles Horton Cooley. George Herbert Mead was a proponent of this theory and believed that the true test of any theory was that “ It was useful in solving complex social problems”

The term “ symbolic interactionism” has come into use as a label for a relatively distinctive approach to the study of human life and human conduct. The symbolic interaction perspective, also called symbolic interactionism, is a major framework of sociological theory. This perspective relies on the symbolic meaning that people develop and rely upon in the process of social interaction.

With Symbolic interactionism, reality is seen as social, developed interaction with others. Most symbolic interactionists believe a physical reality does indeed exist by an individual’s social definitions, and that social definitions do develop in part or relation to something “ real.” People thus do not respond to this reality directly, but rather to the social understanding of reality. Humans therefore exist in three realities: a physical objective reality, a social reality, and a unique reality

Both individuals and society cannot be separated far from each other for two reasons. One, being that they are both created through social interaction, and two, one cannot be understood in terms without the other. Behavior is not defined by forces from the environment such as drives, or instincts, but rather by a reflective, socially understood meaning of both the internal and external incentives that are currently presented

Herbert Blumer (1969) set out three basic premises of the perspective: * “ Humans act toward things on the basis of the meanings they ascribe to those things.” * “ The meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with others and the society.” * “ These meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he/she encounters.”

Symbolic interaction theory analyzes society by addressing the subjective meanings that people impose on objects, events, and behaviors. Subjective meanings are given primacy because it is believe that people behave based on what they believe and not just on what is objectively true. Thus, society is thought to be socially constructed through human interpretation. People interpret one another’s behavior and it is these interpretations that form the social bond. These interpretations are called the “ definition of the situation.” For example, why would young people smoke cigarettes even when all objective medical evidence points to the dangers of doing so? The answer is in the definition of the situation that people create. Studies find that teenagers are well informed about the risks of tobacco, but they also think that smoking is cool, that they themselves will be safe from harm, and that smoking projects a positive image to their peers. So, the symbolic meaning of smoking overrides that actual facts regarding smoking and risk.

Critics of this theory claim that symbolic interactionism neglects the macro level of social interpretation—the “ big picture.” In other words, symbolic interactionists may miss the larger issues of society by focusing too closely on the “ trees” rather than the “ forest”. The perspective also receives

criticism for slighting the influence of social forces and institutions on individual interactions.

Dialects Theory

Dialectical theory is a concept within communication theory. This concept could be interpreted as “ a knot of contradictions in personal relationships or an unceasing interplay between contrary or opposing tendencies.” The theory, first proposed respectively by Leslie Baxter and W. K. Rawlins in 1988, defines communication patterns between relationship partners as the result of endemic dialectical tensions. In their description of Relational Dialectics, Leslie A. Baxter and Barbara M. Montgomery simplify the concept by posing “ opposites attract”, but “ birds of a feather flock together”. Also, “ Two’s company; three’s a crowd” but “ the more the merrier.” These contradictions experienced within common folk proverbs are similar to those we experience within our relationships as individuals. When making decisions, we give voice to multiple viewpoints and desires that often contradict each other.

The Relational Dialectic is an elaboration on Mikhail Bakhtin’s idea that life is an open monologue and humans experience collisions between opposing desires and needs within relational communications. Baxter includes a list of Dialectical Tensions that reminds us that relationships are constantly changing and successful and satisfying relationships require constant attention. Although Baxter’s description of Relational Dialectics is thorough, it by no means is exact or all inclusive since we all experience different tensions in different ways.

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Relational Dialectics is the emotional and value-based version of the philosophical Dialectic. It is rooted in the dynamism of the Yin and Yang. Like the classic Yin and Yang, the balance of emotional values in a relationship is always in motion, and any value pushed to its extreme contains the seed of its opposite.

Core Concepts

There are four main concepts that form the backdrop of relational dialectics, they are: contradiction, totality, process, and praxis. Contradictions are the core concept of Relational Dialectics. It is the dynamic interplay between unified oppositions. A contradiction is formed “ whenever two tendencies or forces are interdependent yet mutually negate one another”. For example, in a relationship one can simultaneously desire intimacy and distance. Totality suggests that contradictions in a relationship are part of a unified whole and cannot be understood in isolation. In other words, the dialectics cannot be separated and are intrinsically related to each other. For example, the tension between dependence and interdependence cannot be separated from the tension between openness and privacy – both work to condition and define the other. Relational dialectics must be understood in terms of social processes.

Movement, activity, and change are functional properties. For example, instances such as an individual fluctuating between disclosure and secretiveness. In addition, the individual may move between periods of honest and open communication. Praxis is a philosophical term for the concept of ‘ practical behavior’ or sometimes ‘ the experience of practicing’.

In praxis the dialectic tensions are created and re-created through the active
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participation and interaction. In other words, the practical experience of having a relationship exposes one to the imposition of the needs and value of another. As the relationship endures ones own needs and values become apparent. Praxis focuses on the practical choices individuals make in the midst of the opposing needs and values. In turn, the choices and actions themselves create, re-create, and change the nature of the relationship and hence the dialectical tensions themselves. Research has recommended theories which further dialectical understanding in relationships, such as in the marriage, in the workplace, etc.

Dialects

According to the original relational dialectic model, there were many core tensions (opposing values) in any relationship. These were: Autonomy and Connectedness: The desire to have ties and connections with others versus the need to separate yourself as a unique individual. Example: As an athlete, wanting to feel a part of a team but also wanting to highlight your individual talents. Favoritism and Impartiality: The desire to be treated fairly and impartially versus the desire to be seen and known as "special". Example: As a professor, creating an attendance policy but making exceptions for students who participate in class and have good grades. Openness and Closedness: The desire to be open and divulge information versus the desire to be exclusive and private. Example: Chatting with your boss about your weekend, but being sure to leave out certain details. Novelty and Predictability: The desire for the relationship to be predictable versus the desire for it to be original and new.

Example: Relying on a fixed schedule for board meeting, but needing variations in the meeting itinerary to keep you interested and inspired.

Instrumentality and Affection: The desire for affection to be genuine versus the desire for affection to be motivated by benefits and perceived advantages of the relationship. Example: Being in a romantic relationship based on love and affection, but maintaining it for benefits such as financial security. Equality and Inequality: The desire to be considered as equals versus the desire to develop levels of superiority. Example: As a female in the military, wanting treatment equivalent to that received by their male coworkers, but requiring special barracks and adjusted assignments.

According to the theory, while most of us may embrace the ideals of closedness, certainty, and openness in our relationships, the communication is not a straight path towards these goals. Conflicts often produce the exact opposites.

Relationship between a couple and a community

Integration - Separation is " a class of relational dialectics that includes connection-autonomy, inclusion-seclusion, and intimacy-independence."

Some individual autonomy must be given up to connect to others. Stability - Change is " a class of relational dialectics that includes certainty-uncertainty, conventionally-uniqueness, predictability-surprise, and routine-novelty."

Things must be consistent but not mundane. There must be a balance of between the expected and unexpected in order to keep a relationship.

Expression - Nonexpression is " a class of relational dialectics that includes openness-closedness, revelation-concealment, candor-secrecy, and transparency-privacy". In a relationship, it is important to keep some things

between the two parties, while other parts of the relationship are okay to allow the public to know about.

Ethics in Relational Dialects

When communicating, we must understand that morals do not apply for all people. Sometimes lying can be entirely minor in communication, but there are often times that lying can majorly affect the perspective of those being lied to. There are several times where most people would justify a “white lie”, or a lie that causes no harm. For instance, if your mother was in the hospital, you could tell her she still looked beautiful, even if her appearance was far from it because it would make her feel better. Other actions that are only followed through based on whether they have a positive or negative outcome are called “consequential ethics”. According to Sissela Bok, “lies drag around an initial negative weight that must be factored into ethical equations”. Bok believes in the “principle of veracity” which says that truthful statements are preferable to lies in the absence of special circumstances that overcome the negative weight.