

Does the symbolic  
interactionism explain  
anything sociology  
essay



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Symbolic interactionism is a major theoretical perspective in sociology regarding intrasocial human behaviour. While Hubert Blumer coined the term in 1937, its conception traces back to the nineteenth century; notably, in the American philosopher and sociologist George Mead [from “ The Chicago School”] through to the pioneering Erving Goffman (Farganis, 2008). Although never formally categorized as a symbolic interactionist, Goffman hugely shaped the perspective as one of its main practitioners (Marshall, 1998). Symbolic interactionism primarily concerns small-scale human interactions, from Mead’s inception to Goffman’s subsequent transformations. The principal issue is whether the system explains human phenomena – from an individual scale of human psychology to the broad, macroscopic scale of societies – and its questionable success in doing so, or indeed in explaining other phenomena.

Fundamentally, the concept of symbolic interactionism is bipartite: ‘ interaction’ and ‘ symbolic’ (Carter, 2011). The former is the interaction between individual people and these relationships’ operative mechanisms. The latter refers to both the generation and interpretation of people’s social signals; from their facial expressions down to their choice of attire (2011). As a theory, the perspective examined the meanings and familiarities between human interaction at a micro-sociological level – and in a very interpretative manner; ‘ the development of the self within the social realm’ (Mead, 1934). According to Mead, human experience could not be relegated to individual psychology alone, but analyzes experience from “ the standpoint of communication as essential to the social order” (1934; 401). The ideas were antithetical to that of Descartes’ famous “ cogito ergo sum” (1641), in which

the 'self' was seen as 'distinct' and its existence was 'indubitably' true — independent from the body and Goffman's idea of the 'social realm'.

Symbolic interactionism was thus an implicit reaction against a classical conception of man as individually responsible and essentially noble; the new sociology placed human beings in an inherently social context. Mead, and his continuation from Goffman, characterizes the 'self' in two parts: the 'I' and the 'Me' (1934). The 'I' was "the response of an individual to the attitude of others, whilst the 'me' was organized set of attitudes of others that the individual assumed" (2001). Symbolic interactionism sought to explain how human beings and the self-understood interactions between one another and its negotiation of the world around them. In Salerno's mind, Goffman perceived "the individual as nothing more than a cog responsible for the maintenance of the social world by playing his or her part" (2004, 184). Goffman is not discounting the importance of the individual; for him, 'society' was the micro-level interactions between humans, and most importantly, could not exist without them. Essentially Goffman characterises society as a macroscopic emergent property of microscopic interactions. This is literally true insofar as there is no independent 'soul' or 'spirit' to society except simply the aggregate of its members'; nevertheless, this lack of large-scale theory exposes symbolic interactionism as fundamentally unambitious in explaining that elusive concept, 'society', as opposed to simply a large agglomeration of connected individuals.

The question of symbolic interactionism's explanatory power remains unanswered. The next portion of this essay shall focus specifically on *The Presentation of Everyday Life* (1959); *Asylum* (1961); *The Interaction Ritual*

(1967); *Forms of Talk* (1981) and will dissect Goffman's explanation of society.

The idea of 'face work' (1967) was crucial to understanding the complexities of symbolic interactionism in day-to-day cultural settings. It provided an in-depth description and a new insight into the "presentation of self in everyday life" (Carter; 2011). Goffman principally exploited the concept of "dramaturgical metaphor", in which human actions are contextualized in time, place and audience (Goffman, 1967) and used a theatrical metaphor to extend this theory, emphasizing the view that interaction between people was a literal "performance", moulded by the "audience" and surroundings. For Goffman, day-to-day life was "impression management" (1967). Harking back to Goffman's earlier work, the existence of these performances did not wane with ill mental health - on the contrary - illustrated in *Asylum* (1961). Everyday social life was a "game", involving strategic interactions and moves. Robert Carter's example of a teacher/pupil relationship in the classroom illustrates that Goffman's symbolic interactionism provides detailed insight into everyday life and explains the meanings behind even mundane scenarios: the teacher uses the strategic interaction of "walking around, looking at (the pupils) because otherwise I don't know" whether the pupils are concentrating (2011). The significant social interactivity of teaching - as opposed to manual labour, say - strengthens this example. However, teaching's relatively strict formality and explicit hierarchy is a particularly codified example of social interaction, unlike informal socializing and its unspoken rules; indeed, the 'symbols', whether they be the school bell or the teacher's register, have very clearly prescribed roles, and

consequently symbolic interactionism's claim that individuals prescribe meaning to their world's objects loses its profundity of individual semiotic creation when that meaning is given, even forced, on them.

For Goffman, all social interactions revolved around the concept of a ' front' and ' back' region (1959). Continuing the theatrical metaphor, he posited a divergence of the front self from the back self. The front acts as a vehicle for self-promotion and to " define the situation for those who observe" (1959; 22), in the same vein as an actor builds a facsimile of another person's social role. The ' back' region is effectually where ones identity can reveal all the hidden and private traits, unavailable to view by society (2008; 372). The " game" of life, a process whereby the self was at odds with their audience - reciprocally " giving off" false evidence and trying to uncover the truth (1969) - reflects an a common psycho-social dichotomy of ' inner' and ' outer' worlds, but Goffman fails to adequately explain the dialogue between the two. He explores the game by expanding its breath by introducing " teams" (1959) extending his work to group dynamics; individuals bonded by reciprocal dependency and accomplishments rely firmly on cooperation and the maintenance of a group appearance (1959; 79); success lies unequivocally in unanimous action and demeanor; disagreements and digression are only seen in the " back". Divisions between the team and its viewers was described as an " audience segregation" (1959; 137) allowing teams to manipulate their " front" to the demands of unique audiences. Thus, ideological altercations do not damage the ' team' per se - more importantly, they continue ' impression management', maintaining a constant collective face out of many competing individual interests.

The front-back bifurcation, nonetheless, is highly dependent on situation.

Using the example of real actors rather than metaphor, back-stage for the actor is still his “ front”. Another example:

A teacher who retires from his frontstage performance in class to the backstage of the teacher’s room, is, from another perspective, still frontstage, since he does not recount his blunders in class to his colleagues. From this perspective, indeed, the situation in class is backstage.

(Anthrobase)

Specifically, the audience dictates behavior; fellow colleagues, in the realm of ‘ back-stage’ turn into another audience against which to shield when personal embarrassment is mentioned. Indeed, were the metaphor consistently and somewhat cynically applied, human beings are always disguising true feeling, and thus it is impossible for an external observer to actually access the ‘ back-stage’. Goffman purports that some public actions are distinct from “ audience segregation”, while still performance: they are ‘ ritual’. ‘ Ritual’ means playing oneself (1967; 32). For Robert Carter, “ ritual” and “ game” are not mutually exclusive to the individual psyche, often generating real tension:

“ Life as a game implies that you’ve actually seen it as a game; and once you see something as a game, you can no longer perform it ritually because you’ve understood that it is a game.” (2011)

In essence, it makes the distinction between “ gives” and “ give off” signs – game playing versus ritual, respectively.

Overall, while he was not formally a symbolic-interactionist, Goffman's work clearly shows the hallmarks of casting social interaction as a subtle web of symbols, and inner and outer being. He provides some limited explanation for the importance of meaning to asking, "what is social?" Previous works by Weber, although considering meaning essential to the question, never formulated a cogent argument as to why it was so. On the other hand, Goffman's dramaturgical approach saw "meaning as such i. e., the object of thought, arises in experience through the individual stimulating himself to take the attitude of the other in his reactions toward the object" (Wallace and Wolf, 202). In this respect, his works have succeeded where Weber's fell short. Admittedly, the criticisms of symbolic interactionism are relevant later on; to insinuate that Goffman's work explains nothing can be considered as cynic's "front" [!]

Nevertheless, despite its merits, Goffman's works on the 'self' overlook its fundamental flaws in application. In *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman asserts the view that all individuals play the 'game', hiding true intentions within the guise of the "front". If true, then humans are inherently Machiavellian beings posing behind dishonest masks, precluding the potential for altruism and solidarity. Goffman is implicitly denying the very social conditions of being human. His supporters counter with the view that characterising 'role-playing' as immoral or dishonest is naïve:

"What distinguishes the honest from dishonest performers, is not the need for rehearsals and performance, but rather: a) whether the performers are socially authorized to play the roles and b) the attitude of the performers toward their own roles" (Meyrowitz in Riggins, 1990; 70)

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It is true that a performance does not infer dishonesty per se; however, the inability to distinguish an actor's true "honest from dishonest" performance seems to nullify Goffman's response to this issue; admittedly, this is predicated on a particularly ends-driven pseudo-consequentialism, that only an individual's end actions matter, rather than his internal psychological processes producing those.

Goffman's work in *Asylum* (1961) - specifically on *The Moral Career of the Mental Patient* (1959) - attempted to dissect the nature of marginalized individuals in society, isolated from general society. His study sought to uncover how the incarcerated - and practitioners - created meaning during their interactions and how their presentation and construction of self was formed. Like *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*, the *Asylum* followed Goffman's "game" and "ritual" concepts, although the situational environments were significantly different: to start, asylums were "total institutions" (1961) in which people were cut off from wider society and restrictively subordinated under their handlers. Moreover, the struggle for identity in a closed and draconian "total institution" sees the "mortification of self" (Goffman; 1959). Incarcerating 'mental' patients implied an unacceptably incompetent 'front', and the inability to observe "standard properties on the outside" (Giddens 1987; 130). It is thus clear that for asylums to function as reforming institutes, it had to "threaten a whole complex of practices whereby actors are able to demonstrate both to others and to themselves their competence as agents" [sic.] (1987; 129). For Goffman, 'mental' patients went through three self-explanatory stages: prepatient, inpatient and ex-patient (1959). Robert Carter purports that



asylums often entailed a surprising reciprocal relationship in vulnerability: as patients are stripped of rights and free will and relegated to “enforced infantilism” (Giddens, 1987) and effectively lose their identity, so too do the asylum and psychiatrists, in imposing their own definition of “what a patient is” (2011), suffer a vulnerability. During his stay at the asylum, appropriately adopting a “front” as a pseudo-employee, Goffman sought to modify the populist theories surrounding mental institutions of “curing” illness. Goffman wanted to expose and understand the gap between the work that the staff do – and what they say are trying to do (Weinstein, 1982; 268). In many ways, his studies provided key tools to the field of social care; according to Weinstein, his work has been cited in legal cases predicated on the care of mental patient, as well as applications in health policy (1982; 267). However, although Goffman intended to provide meaning for human interactions in the asylum – as well as in everyday life – his work was still criticised.

Critics of symbolic interactionism often attack Goffman’s micro-sociological approach as fundamentally flawed in prescribing a grand theory of society. The perspective is seen to be “overly impressionistic” (Hawaii; 1) in its research methodology as well as being wholly unsystematic to the point of chaos (Psathas 1980; 53) Its highly subjective and qualitative methods, and the interpretative nature of the dramaturgical approach, mean that its application is limited to small-scale interactions. Any macroscopic extension highlights the shortcomings of Goffman’s work; his theorems are often limited to specific and present moments and entail “relatively little developments of concepts which can be used transsituationally” (Psathas, 1980; 54). Effectively, it lacked “cross-cultural” analysis and universality (Comp, 3)

and ergo could not adequately describe the massed ' hoi polloi'. Moreover, given the limitations in Goffman's approach across regional boundaries, any historical comparative analysis was, and still is, impossible.

However, Richard L. Lanigan states that Goffman's work in *Forms of Talk* do not necessarily relegate his holdings to that of solely micro-sociology.

Goffman's work on a radio audience gives a " holistic collective entity that at the very least is preconceived to be an aggregate displaying group typicalities in society" (Riggins, 1990; 122). Nevertheless, Lanigan's support of Goffman does not invalidate the point that Goffman's dramaturgical was " inadequate for achieving a social science of social actions" due to his lack of rigorous method and empirically " interactional phenomena" (Psathas, 1996; 11). However, Goffman's work in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* can stretch to macro-sociological readings. In Barnhart's model, the contextualizing of Goffman's writings with " other thinkers (opens) a beneficial link between micro- and macro structures of society becomes visible". (n/a ; 5). Linking Goffman to Durkheim, Barnhart's critique suggests that his work has significance at both micro and macro levels of society, namely in the concept of spontaneity. As Goffman sees its relevance to the aspect of a " true" and uncontrived performance of the spontaneous actor, Durkheim entertains the idea of the macro-sociological model of spontaneity (1984; 313). The concept linked both scopes of sociology and reaffirmed the notion of " truth" in contemporary social organizations (Barnhart, n/a; 5). It therefore rebutted the claim that Goffman's work lacks macroscopic application and cannot explain large-scale phenomena. However, attempts by Goffman supporters eventually trail off. According to Giddens, " Goffman

managed a strict separation between his work and that of sociologists interested in the macro-structural properties of social systems"; to compound, " he resolutely refused" to do so (Giddens 1987; 131).

Criticism of Goffman does not end there: Riggins contends that Goffman's writing often descends into a " stylistic merger of scholarly monograph with the novel or with journalistic accounts" (1990; 65). Not only was Goffman's work as a macro-sociologist completely void, his critics went on to attack even his writings on micro-sociology stating that his works were descriptive rather than prescriptive. John Lofland suggesting that Goffman was " more concerned with labeling, defining, and characterizing types of behaviors (sic), roles, events, and rules than with showing logical connection among the types" (Riggins, 66). Works such as *The Presentation of self in Everyday Life* often espouse ideas that are somewhat innate to the workings of modern society; to suggest that some men conceal lust for underage girls or suppress their desire to release bodily fluids in a social setting is fundamentally intuitive. They seek to preserve their status in society but not openly admit to be a pedophile or churlish, respectively; they have made the trade-off in the psychological effort of self-control and the social benefits of not admitting such inadmissible desires. If Goffman's opponents seem overly zealous, even his advocates, such as Randall Collins, admit that he fails to " push on through to full possession of the theoretical territories he has reconnoitered" (1980; 206). His work's descriptive nature leaves little room for explanatory theory; by failing to explain the true mechanisms of social interaction, he fails in evaluation and analysis.

Goffman's symbolic interactionism and the dramaturgical approach are sociologically inadequate. Its micro-sociological approach limits itself to small intimate groups and lacks cross-cultural universality, and even in its own sphere is insufficient; while exploring previously uncharted scholarly realms, such as in asylums, Goffman's work tends to open up the "surface of immediate relevance" (Collins, 1980: 175) but "presented countless observations and few integrated theories" (Meyrowitz in Riggins, 1990; 65). Symbolic interactionism is useful in characterising meaning and superficial behaviour, but fails to rigorously justify itself in phenomenologically-grounded investigations, relegating itself to being thoroughly interesting rather than thoroughly theoretical (Riggins; 1990, 65). Goffman failed to construct an overarching paradigm for human beings and their civilization, instead content with a mass of disjointed bits; thus he remains more a footnote of description than a titan of theory.