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Symbolic Interactionism

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Symbolic interactionism is a major humanistic research tradition that highlights the need for an intimate familiarity with the empirical world. Drawing upon PRAGMATISM, and having affinities with POSTMODERNISM, it shuns abstract and totalizing truths in favor of local, grounded, everyday observations. The term was coined by Herbert Blumer in 1937 and brings a major commitment to QUALITATIVE RESEARCH. It [p. 1105 ↓] is closely allied to George Herbert Mead's theory of the self and to the research tradition of the Chicago sociologists (especially Blumer, Park, and Hughes). Commentators have suggested a number of stages in its development, ranging from the gradual establishment of the canon between 1890 and the later 1930s on through other phases to a more recent one of diversity and new theory that has strong affinities to postmodern inquiry.

Most symbolic interactionist sociologies, their differences notwithstanding, are infused with three interweaving themes, each with methodological implications. The first suggests that what marks human beings off from all other animals is their elaborate symbol-producing capacity, which enables them to produce histories, stories, cultures, and intricate webs of communication. It is these that interactionists investigate; and because these meanings are never fixed and immutable but always shifting, emergent, and ambiguous, conventional research tools of interviews or questionnaires may not be the most appropriate way of study. Rather, an intensive engagement with the lived empirical world is called for.

This points to a second theme: that of change, flux, emergence, and process. Lives, situations, even societies are always and everywhere evolving, adjusting, becoming. This constant process makes interactionists focus on research strategies to gain access to acquiring a sense of self, of developing a biography, of adjusting to others, of organizing a sense of time, of negotiating order, of constructing civilizations. It is a very active view of the social world in which human beings are constantly going about their business, piecing together joint lines of activity and constituting society through these interactions.

This suggests a third major theme: interaction. The focus of all interactionist work is with neither the individual nor the society per se; rather, its concern is with the joint acts through which lives are organized and societies assembled. It is concerned with

“collective behavior.” Its most basic concept is that the self implies that the idea of “the other” is always present in a life: We can never be alone with a “self.” But all of its core ideas and concepts highlight this social other, which always impinges upon the individual: The very notion of “the individual,” indeed, is constructed through the other. At root, interactionism is concerned with “how people do things together” (Becker, 1986).

Unlike many other social theories, which can soar to the theoretical heavens, symbolic interactionists stay grounded on earth. Interactionist theory can guide the study of anything and everything social, although what will be discovered is always a matter of empirical investigation. But in principle, interactionists may inspect and explore any aspect of the social world.

Some strands of interactionism (often identified as the Iowa school and linked to measurement such as the Twenty Statements Test) have tried to make the theory more rigorously operational. Others claim it to be a different kind of science (such as Anselm Strauss and the grounded theory methodology) and seek to make it more rigorous while sustaining its distinctive commitments. Still others (often associated with Norman Denzin and postmodernism) often see the theory as needing to take a much more political and critical stand.

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See also

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