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Symbolic Interactionism at the end of the Century

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[p. 217 ↓]

Chapter 17: Symbolic Interactionism at the end of the Century

The turn of a new century has traditionally been a time of stock-taking. In terms of sociological theory there can be little doubt that the start of the twentieth century was dominated by important European thinkers, while at its conclusion American thinkers more than hold their own. The first and most distinctively American sociological theory was symbolic interactionism, a perspective on social life that is now more than sixty years old (Blumer, 1937). Symbolic interactionism is clearly linked to American intellectual traditions and, many would argue, to the American belief in the power of individual agency in the face of social structure.

Historically, symbolic interactionism emerged out of the American philosophical tradition of pragmatism, an approach elaborated in the late nineteenth century by Charles Peirce, William James and John Dewey. These thinkers challenged the mechanistic world-view and dualistic assumptions of classical rationalism, the dominant philosophy of their time (Shalin, 1991). Unlike the rationalists, they saw reality as dynamic, individuals as active knowers, meanings as linked to social action and perspectives, and knowledge as an instrumental force that enables people to solve problems and rearrange the world (Denzin, 1996a; Joas, 1996; Shalin, 1986; Thayer, 1981).

Pragmatist philosophy entered into sociology most directly through the writings and teachings of George Herbert Mead (1863–1931), who sought to translate pragmatism into a theory and method for the social sciences. In doing so, Mead drew not only on the ideas of the pragmatist founders, Charles Peirce and William James, but also on the psychological insights of Wilhelm Wundt, the sociological observations of Charles Horton Cooley and James Mark Baldwin, and the evolutionary theory of Charles Darwin. Mead derived his greatest inspiration, however, from the philosophical works of John Dewey (1922, 1925), his colleague at the University of Chicago. Building upon Dewey's seminal ideas, Mead developed a profoundly sociological account of human

consciousness, selfhood and behavior—an account he conveyed in a series of social psychology lectures that became the basis for his best-known book, *Mind, Self, and Society* (1934).

The most important disseminator of Mead's ideas was his student Herbert Blumer, a former professional football player who later became a sociologist at Chicago and the University of California at Berkeley. Blumer championed the merits and applicability of Mead's theories for sociological analysis. Eventually Blumer compiled some of his own writings into a book entitled *Symbolic Interactionism* (1969b), which became recognized as the major explication of the symbolic interactionist perspective.

Along with one of his colleagues, Everett Hughes, Blumer had a major influence on a cohort of graduate students he taught at the University of Chicago in the 1940s and early 1950s. This cohort, which included such notable scholars as Howard Becker, Erving Goffman, Joseph Gusfield, Helena Lopata, Gregory Stone, Anselm Strauss and Ralph Turner, further developed the symbolic interactionist perspective [p. 218 ↓] and became known as the Second Chicago School (Fine, 1995).

The Guiding Premises of Symbolic Interactionism

Like the advocates of other sociological theories, symbolic interactionists regularly debate with one another about core beliefs, theoretical interpretations and methodological techniques. Yet, while having these areas of disagreement, they share several common assumptions. Central to their perspective are the following three premises articulated by Blumer:

The first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings those things have for them ... The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive

process used by the person in dealing with the things he [or she] encounters. (1969b: 2)

Although Blumer's three premises serve as the cornerstones of the interactionist perspective, other implicit assumptions inform and guide this perspective, providing it with its philosophical foundations:

Major Areas of Contribution

Theories gain renown through what their practitioners accomplish. The continuing growth and success of the interactionist approach depends upon the power of its lines of research. In the following survey, we consider some of the more significant lines of research engaged in by interactionists, highlighting the contributions they have made to six major areas of sociological concern: self and identity theory; emotions and emotion work; social coordination; social constructionism; culture and art; and macro-analysis.

Self and Identity Theory

Analysis of the self has always been central to interactionist sociology. The writings of Blumer (1962), Cooley ([1902] 1964), Mead (1934) and other founders of interactionism highlight the social nature of the self. As noted by these theorists, the self emerges, develops and is sustained through processes of social interaction. It is not present at birth nor is it an inevitable consequence of a person's biological development. Rather, an individual must learn who he or she is through interacting with others. Through these interactions a person comes to believe that he or she has a distinct and meaningful self. Put another way, an individual's 'self develops out of his or her social relationships. Most importantly, this recognition that the self is [p. 220 ↓] fundamentally social represents a core insight of interactionism.

In analysing the self and its implications, interactionists focus on three themes: the genesis and development of the self, the self-concept and the presentation of self.

The Genesis and Development of the Self

As noted earlier, George Herbert Mead developed a ground-breaking theoretical account of how the self arises from communication, interaction and role-taking. Yet, while paying homage to Mead, interactionists have identified gaps in his theory and offered refinements into the processes through which individuals develop selves. For instance, Norbert Wiley (1979) has formulated a theory of infant selfhood that offers a more detailed picture of the emergence of the self in a child's first year—a period that roughly equates to what Mead called the preparatory stage of self-development. Other interactionists such as Gregory Stone (1981) and William Corsaro (1985) have revised and extended Mead's ideas regarding the play stage of self-development, illustrating how playing at fantasy roles and dramas is as important to a child's self-development as playing at the visible roles that Mead highlighted. This type of play enables children not only to enhance their role-taking abilities, but also to learn communication strategies which help them to coordinate their actions with others, enlarge their behavioral repertoires and realize desired selves.

Interactionists have also clarified Mead's ideas about how individuals pass through the stages of self-development. Norman Denzin (1977) notes that Mead did not think people automatically pass from the play to game stages and, thus, did not specify the age sequence of these stages. Instead, Mead implied that 'some persons may never progress to the generalized other phase of taking the other's attitude' (Denzin, 1977: 81). Based on ethnographic research, Denzin proposes that children's movement from one stage of self-development to the next is shaped by their social context, with the most important factor being the patterns of interaction to which they are exposed. Children's self-development, then, is not tied directly to their chronological age but rather is linked to their *interactional* age.

The Self-Concept

While generally agreeing on how the self emerges and develops, interactionists part company on the relative weight of the 'self versus the 'situation' in shaping action.

Interactionists who place greater emphasis on the self focus on the salience of the self-concept. They ask: how do we conceive of ourselves and how does this change over time? In addressing these questions, they rely on diverse methodologies, including in-depth interviews, open-ended questionnaires and survey research. Methodologically they are less 'interpretive' and 'qualitative' than their counterparts who emphasize situations. Indeed, self theorists such as Sheldon Stryker (1980) and Morris Rosenberg (1981) are scorned by some interactionists who contend that they reify the social reality of the self in their efforts to quantify that reality. Stryker and Rosenberg, who are sometimes referred to as 'structural symbolic interactionists', recognize the fluid and mutable nature of the self-concept, but they assume that the process through which it changes can be measured and predicted.

In contrast, Viktor Gecas (1982), Ralph Turner (1976) and Louis Zurcher (1977) highlight the fluidity and malleability of self-concepts, even while admitting that these concepts have spatial, institutional and temporal stability. These researchers do not propose predictive hypotheses of the social forces that lead people to conceive of themselves in different ways. Rather, they focus on the symbolic meaning of selves and their shifting social moorings. According to Turner and Zurcher, broad changes in American culture have produced significant alterations in where people anchor their most fundamental images of self. In the 1950s and 1960s, Americans tended to have fairly stable and consistent conceptions of self that were anchored in the social institutions to which they belonged, such as family, workplace, church or school. More recently Americans have developed a 'mutable' sense of self, anchored more in impulses than institutions and flexibly adaptive to the demands of a rapidly changing society.

The Presentation of Self

Another branch of interactionism downplays the self in favor of the situation. The sociology of Erving Goffman, which implies there is no deeply held 'real' self, only a set of masks and situated performances, serves as the prototype of this approach. In his dramaturgical theory of social life, Goffman claimed that everyday interactions could be better understood if we thought of people as actors on a stage. As actors they play at roles and manipulate props, settings, clothing and symbols to achieve advantageous

outcomes, notably smooth interactions which lead to valued selves. As Goffman noted in his most famous work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), people have ideas about who they are, ideas they present to others. They are concerned about the images that others form of them. Only by influencing others' images can [p. 221 ↓] individuals predict or control how these others will respond to them. This process of tailoring their performances to different audiences is fundamental to social interaction. Goffman described it as *impression management*- the process by which individuals manipulate how others see and define a situation, generating expressive cues which lead others to behave in accordance with their plans.

Goffman's insights into self-presentation have had considerable impact on symbolic interactionists. Inspired by Goffman, theorists have examined everyday interaction and found masks (Strauss, 1959), performances (Messinger et al., 1962), appearances (Stone, 1970) and rhetorical strategies (Hewitt and Stokes, 1975; Scott and Lyman, 1968). In recent years, interactionists have applied and extended Goffman's ideas in elaborating the dynamics of *identity work* (Sandstrom, 1990, 1998; Snow and Anderson, 1987), or the techniques actors use to create and sustain identities. These researchers illustrate how strategies such as distancing, embracement, insulation and fictive story telling are used to offset stigma and preserve cherished selves.

Problems and Potential Directions in Self Theory

Self theory continues to be a central focus of interactionists, but it is the subject of vitriolic methodological and theoretical debates. While there are many sources of these debates, they are exacerbated by interactionism's failure to develop a standardized terminology about what the constructs of 'self', 'self-concept' and 'identity' mean. Despite the efforts of interactionists to define and distinguish the meanings of these constructs (Gecas, 1982; Rosenberg, 1979; Stone, 1970), the terms are used in confusing and contradictory ways.

Self theory should draw on insights from studies of the emotions, which demonstrate that the self is not simply a cognitive phenomenon. In addition, the theory could

better address the growing interest of interactionists in organizational sociology. As Fine (1993) emphasizes, selves are lodged in and shaped by the organizations and institutions in which they are embedded—including the family, school and workplace. Goffman (1961b) recognized this point in his analysis of ‘total institutions’, but it has not been adequately incorporated into self theory. Like the rest of symbolic interaction, self theory will move away from being a purely social psychological perspective as it addresses the domains of macro-sociology.

Emotions and Emotion Work

Until about twenty-five years ago the study of emotions had been left to psychologists and was unconnected to social forces or organization. It was through the analyses of symbolic interactionists that emotions entered sociological discourse (Gordon, 1981; Shott, 1979). Interactionists understand emotions as embodied phenomena, connected to how human beings experience their physical and social reality. Emotions inform and mediate experience; as a form of cognitive evaluation, an aspect of affect control, and a resource individuals draw upon to coordinate their actions with others (Hochschild, 1983). Interactionists treat emotions as ‘lived experience’, as ‘cognitive constructions’ linked to meaning and identity, and as a form of labor integral to self-presentation and joint action. While these approaches are distinct, attempts have been made to synthesize them (Cahill and Eggleston, 1994; Johnson, 1992; Scheff, 1983, Thoits, 1989).

Emotional Experience

Some interactionists stress how emotions are felt by human beings as bodily experiences – experiences that are not only filtered through social demands, but also affect one's existence and self-understandings. As Denzin (1983) proposes, emotion is *self-feeling*- affecting a lived body and given meaning by a reflexive actor. Emotion represents a window into the self, grounded in felt experience, simultaneously connecting it to community. Others highlight how the experiences of time (Flaherty, 1987) and nature (Fine, 1998a; Weigert, 1991) are shaped by self-feelings, such as

anxiety, fear, boredom, and exhilaration. In a related vein, interactionists who examine the lived experience of illness accentuate how *feelings* of 'disease', and not merely the social definitions given to the sick, evoke new self-understandings and, in many cases, transformations of identity (Charmaz, 1991; Karp, 1996; Sandstrom, 1996, 1998).

To appreciate the social psychological implications of emotion, a group of interactionists rely on 'systematic sociological introspection', a method to explore and describe their own emotions and lived experiences (Ellis, 1991). For example, Ellis (1995) crafted a poignant 'auto-ethnography' which described her partner's illness and death and its impact on her self-feelings. Similarly, Frank (1991) wrote an evocative account of the challenging emotions and self-changes he experienced as he faced cancer. Both Ellis' and Frank's analyses are designed to elicit a felt understanding in their readers, moving them to deeper awareness of the [p. 222 ↓] nature and ramifications of lived, emotional experience.

Affect Control

A second interactionist approach to emotion is affect control theory (Heise, 1979; Smith-Lovin and Heise, 1988). This theory combines cognitive social psychology with identity theory, emphasizing the shared nature of meaning for identity. Affect control theorists propose that meanings can be measured through three dimensions: *evaluation* (good/bad), *potency* (powerful/powerless) and *activity* (active/inactive). Measurements of meaning (EPA profiles) are gleaned from asking subjects to rate identities and objects on a semantic differential scale.

Affect control theorists examine people's attitudes or 'fundamental sentiments' toward specific identities and behaviors and how people feel about changes in their identity or the identities of others (Smith-Lovin, 1990). These scholars argue that people construct interpretations of events to confirm the meanings they give to self and others, minimizing their need to readjust their feelings or behaviors. They also propose that emotions signal the degree to which events confirm or disconfirm meanings and identities. Emotional responses arise out of situational definitions and the recognized social identities of the definers. People feel distress, discomfort, or other negative

sentiments when their interaction partners do not allow them to confirm their own identities through interaction (Smith-Lovin, 1990).

Ultimately, the affect control model construes the dynamics of emotion as primarily cognitive, emerging out of social definitions, rather than produced directly from experience. To measure these definitions, affect control theorists utilize quantitative methodology. Through adopting this approach, these theorists seek to link interactionist ideas about identity and emotion to experimental social psychology.

Emotion Work

A third interactionist approach to emotions emphasizes how people manage and display their feelings in ongoing identity work. This approach draws heavily on Goffman's dramaturgical theory. From a dramaturgical viewpoint, emotions are strategic methods for managing identities and negotiating relationships. Through socialization people learn what emotions are appropriate to feel in a given situation and how to express them. As Hochschild (1983) notes, individuals develop skills in 'surface acting' (management of emotional displays) and 'deep acting' (management of feelings from which expressive displays follow). They also discover that emotion work is an integral aspect of identity negotiation. To announce and realize desired identities, social actors must manage sentiments in accord with appropriate feeling rules.

The emotion work that people do is shaped by the social definitions provided by the groups to which they belong (Kleinman, 1996; Thoits, 1996). Through interaction individuals learn unwritten guidelines that apply to feeling display. More crucially, they learn to manage their emotions in light of these guidelines. In doing so they proactively control their bodily sensations and emotional experiences. They respond to their emotions as *social objects*- objects they can shape and manipulate not only to meet others' expectations but also to influence and direct others' responses. Emotions, then, become a vital channel of communication through which individuals convey and negotiate definitions of self, others and situations.

Social Coordination

One of the more ambitious research programs within interactionism, the search for universal principles of coordinated action, has been developed by Carl Couch and his students (Couch, 1989,1992; Couch et al., 1986; Katovich and Couch, 1992). Since the early 1970s these researchers have addressed the processes and conditions through which people coordinate their conduct and create social order. Based on laboratory and field studies, Couch and his associates have found several features crucial for establishing relationships and developing social order. First, interactants must recognize that others are present and serve as an audience. Second, interactants must attend and respond to each other's actions. Third, interactants must create congruent identities that demonstrate they participate in the same social situation. Finally, interactants must create a shared focus and objective. In establishing a social relationship, parties create a shared past and a projected future (Katovich and Couch, 1992; Maines et al., 1983). A social relationship develops traditions and an 'idioculture' (Fine, 1979). The existence of shared pasts allows people to adjust their responses to each other quickly and without self-consciousness. Research finds that this coordination of responses is remarkably subtle, producing temporal symmetry in micro-interaction, as individuals respond instantaneously to each other's words and deeds (Gregory, 1983).

Aligning Actions

While Couch and his followers have searched for generic principles of social coordination, others [p. 223 ↓] have focused on the strategies people use to align their actions in everyday interaction. When speaking of 'aligning actions' (Stokes and Hewitt, 1976), interactionists refer to verbal communications that produce shared reality. These include such linguistic strategies as accounts (Scott and Lyman, 1968) and disclaimers (Hewitt and Stokes, 1975). Interactionists are guided by Mills' (1940) notion of 'vocabularies of motive', Goffman's (1961a) concept of 'remedial work', and Burke's (1969) rhetorical dramaturgy. Vocabularies of motive, reflected in accounts and disclaimers, are techniques through which people manage the impressions of others and thereby facilitate ongoing interaction. In their daily rounds, individuals become

enmeshed in various mistakes or wayward acts and need readymade exits to sustain their reputations (Gross and Stone, 1964). By proposing an account after the fact or a prior disclaimer, people deflect or neutralize the negative implications for their identities. They demonstrate that they appreciate the perspectives of others and the moral legitimacy of those perspectives.

Constructions of Deviance and Social Problems

Since its origins, symbolic interactionism has been linked to the study of deviance and social problems. In fact, interactionism emerged out of sociologists' desires to effect social and political reforms in Chicago during the early twentieth century (Fisher and Strauss, 1978). Much interactionist research addresses troubling social and political issues, informed by labeling theory and the 'construction of social problems' perspective.

Labeling Theory

Unlike other sociological approaches, symbolic interactionism does not seek to explain why certain social actors engage in deviance. Instead, it focuses on questions such as: How is deviance produced by the creation and application of rules? Who makes these rules? How, when and why do they apply or enforce them? Why are some people more likely than others to be recognized and labeled as rule-breakers? How do their actions, interactions and self-concepts change after becoming labeled deviant?

Guided by these questions, interactionists concentrate on the processes through which deviant identities are created and sustained. In doing so they are informed by the tenets of 'labeling theory' (Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1951). Labeling theory suggests that rule-makers and enforcers are at least as involved in the creation of deviance as the purported deviant. By passing powerful legislation (such as drug laws) and then applying this legislation to targeted groups, rule-makers actively participate in the

production of deviance. They also ‘dramatize the evils’ associated with specific acts or attributes, increasing the likelihood of particular actors to become labeled as deviant.

A key premise of labeling theory is that the processes set in motion by the act of labeling confirm and strengthen a deviant identity. If others define a person as deviant, other identities fade into the background. Deviance becomes a master status, overriding others and defining the person. This commonly leads to ‘secondary deviance’, or deviance that results from the labeling process. For example, if individuals become defined as criminal they are apt to be stigmatized and rejected by friends, relatives and employers. In turn, they must look to other criminals for moral support and financial assistance. Once involved with these criminals, they are even more likely to form a self-image as deviant and to engage in additional rule-breaking behavior, fulfilling others’ negative expectations. Ironically, then, the consequence of labeling an individual as deviant is to create a deviant behavior pattern and career.

The Construction of Social Problems

While labeling theory describes the creation of deviance, an important extension of this theory – social constructionism—considers the creation of social problems (Schneider, 1985; Spector and Kitsuse, 1977). Drawing on this theory, interactionists examine the institutional formulation of social problems. They ask: Why are some patterns of behavior defined as ‘problematic’ while others, equally threatening, are ‘normalized’? Why do particular issues become regarded as social problems, while others are ignored? Who has the power to make their definitions stick? Why, for example, is it legal to consume alcohol but illegal to use drugs? Why does social concern about the use of certain drugs ebb and flow across time?

The constructionist approach is the dominant contemporary interactionist orientation within social problems theory. This approach permits interactionists to analyse dynamic historical processes affecting society, such as the ‘medicalization of deviance’ (Conrad and Schneider, 1980). It also allows them to consider how people draw upon various metaphorical images and rhetorical strategies to define certain phenomena as social problems and to build consensus that action needs to be taken to constrain the behaviors of others (Best, 1990; Fine, 1998b). [p. 224 ↓] Yet, while constructionism

offers advantages, it is characterized by internal divisions and disputes. Some constructionist theorists emphasize that all meaning (and, therefore, the existence of any 'objective' social problem) is questionable (Woolgar and Pawluch, 1985). Such a claim implies that sociological knowledge is as constructed as the rhetoric or ideology of any social group. This view, referred to as *strong constructionism*, is disputed by those who accept the existence of objective conditions, while focusing on the social processes through which these conditions enter public debate (Best, 1993). This alternative approach is referred to as *contextual constructionism* or *cautious naturalism*. Those who embrace it presume that sociologists can, to some extent, be 'honest brokers'. These theorists consider how cultural conditions (Fine and Christoforides, 1991), structural realities (Hilgartner and Bosk, 1988), and the role of moral entrepreneurs (Pfohl, 1977) combine to determine which problems enter public debate and which are defined as requiring a societal response.

Culture and Art

Because it emphasizes the importance of meaning, symbolic interactionism has always been conducive to the study of symbolic productions such as culture and art. In fact, Blumer's first empirical investigation was a study of the movies, produced under the auspices of the Payne Fund (Blumer, 1933). Film represents a reality that is quintessentially a form of symbolic interaction. Blumer's later work on fashion (1969a) reflects the same recognition of the social organization of the symbolic world.

While Blumer's studies blazed the path for interactionist investigations of culture and art, the most renowned analyses are those of Howard Becker, culminating in his book *Art Worlds* (1982). Becker proposed that segments of the 'art world' could be viewed as social worlds. He focused on both structural and interactional characteristics of the art world that led to the production of art, concluding that in order to organize their behavior, artists (like others) rely upon 'conventions', or standardized modes of doing things. These conventions are not immutable or unbreakable, but artists who violate them face significant consequences. 'Deviant' artists need support networks to make their convention-breaking decisions artistically significant.

Within the sociology of art, the predominant approach is the 'production of culture' perspective, which contends that the art world should be analysed like any industry that produces a product. This perspective involves two related views, each of which examines the production of culture. The first is structural in orientation, focusing on organizational constraints in the production of culture (Hirsch, 1972; Peterson, 1979). The second view is more traditionally interactionist, analysing how culture is produced on the interactional, relational and interpersonal level (Faulkner, 1983). The most significant weakness of the 'production of culture' approach has been its reluctance to examine aesthetics. This weakness is rooted in the relativist assumption that one cannot distinguish cultural productions in terms of aesthetic value. But aesthetics do matter to producers and clients. The issue is not efficiency, but the sensory qualities of the outcomes. In conducting research on restaurants and trade school cooking programs, Fine (1985, 1996) discovered that students and workers are socialized into aesthetic appreciation, and that their desire to create aesthetically satisfying objects is shaped by the structural conditions of their work.

In contributing to the sociology of culture, symbolic interactionists must further explore and refine the connection between the two components of their name, addressing issues such as how symbols are a function of interaction and how interaction is a consequence of symbolic display. At the same time, scholars must make the meaning and aesthetics of cultural objects central to the analysis of culture.

Macro Analysis: Organizations and Collective Action

The most common criticism leveled against symbolic interactionism is that it is a micro-sociological perspective, lacking interest in structure without recognition of organizational and institutional power (Hall, 1987; Maines, 1988). This criticism has always been misleading. Even Blumer, chided for his 'astructural bias', wrote extensively about industrialization, power conflicts, race relations and collective action (Blumer, 1954, 1955).

In examining social organization, interactionists have focused on the level of mesostructure. This emphasis resulted from an influential survey article, 'Social Organization and Social Structure in Symbolic Interactionist Thought', by David Maines (1977) in the *Annual Review of Sociology*. Maines highlighted the interactionist concern with structure, institutions and organizations, emphasizing that interactionists *do* have concepts, such as negotiated order, constraint, collective action and commitment to organizations that allow them to analyse large-scale social units. Following Maines, other interactionists emphasized how constructs such as [p. 225 ↓] network (Faulkner, 1983; Fine and Kleinman, 1983), power (Hall, 1997), organizational culture (Fine, 1984), symbolic meaning (Manning, 1992) and frame alignment (Snow et al., 1986) provide symbolic interactionism with tools to engage in macro-level analysis.

In addition to directing greater research attention to organizations, interactionists have become increasingly interested in studying collective action and social movement organizations. For instance, David Snow (1979) and his colleagues (Snow et al., 1981, 1986) have demonstrated how social movements are organized as a consequence of the 'frames' and frame alignment processes that shape the outlooks and behavioral choices of participants. Snow contends that members of social movements are continually searching for frameworks of meaning that enable them to answer the question, 'What is going on here?' Some frames legitimate violent protest (the frame of oppression), whereas other frames (the frame of moral justice) diminish the probability of violence. Leaders within social movements commonly set a guiding tone for group definitions and actions. In some cases leaders have an official role but often they 'emerge' as movements face new challenges and problematic situations.

In an effort to extend Snow's frame alignment model, Robert Benford and Scott Hunt (1992) examine how movement actors utilize interrelated dramaturgical techniques—scripting, staging, performing and interpreting—to construct and communicate their conceptions of power. Through identifying and elaborating these techniques, Benford and Hunt offer illuminating insights into how power and power relations are defined, redefined and articulated by social movement participants. Benford and Hunt also demonstrate how an interactionist approach inspires a different genre of research questions regarding social movements, such as: How are the dramaturgical techniques used by a movement related to its effectiveness? How and when do various techniques mobilize support, neutralize antagonists and reshape power relations?

Despite the notable contributions that interactionists have made in the study of social organization, they must extend their perspective to make it more applicable to the analysis of political and economic structures. While having this limit, interactionism can illuminate how organizational fields and socioeconomic systems are structured through symbolic negotiation and, thus, are similar to smaller-scale negotiations. Even large-scale systems are ultimately anchored in the symbols that people utilize and the interactions they engage in as they cope with local realities.

Emerging Voices in Symbolic Interactionism

Feminism

Like other sociological paradigms, symbolic interactionism has only hesitantly taken a 'feminist turn'. Recently, however, interactionists have become aware of concerns they share with feminist theorists. For instance, both interactionists and feminists conceive of gender as a set of social meanings, identities, relationships and practices through which sex differences are made salient (Laslett and Brenner, 1989; Thorne, 1993). Moreover, both feminists and interactionists explore how gender is constructed, enacted and reproduced through cultural beliefs, social arrangements and interpersonal relationships.

In addressing these concerns, some feminist researchers rely heavily upon interactionist ideas. For instance, Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987) utilize interactionist (as well as ethnomethodological) insights to explicate how people 'do gender' through their routine practices and interactions. This approach illustrates how gender is performed and reproduced, individually and institutionally, through micro-level relations. It also suggests that the process of doing gender is characterized by indeterminacy that allows people to engage in agentive action.

Yet, while extending sociological analysis of gender, West and Zimmerman's approach has been criticized for its 'overly discursive bias' and its lack of attention to power. Chafetz (1999: 147) contends that this approach has failed to result in adequate theorizing of 'the contents of the two genders' (that is why some behaviors are defined

as 'appropriate' to a given sex in a given context). Similarly other variants of feminist interactionism, although more sensitive to gender inequality, have assumed male power and neglected analysis of its sources. To their credit, these variants have highlighted processes through which male power connects to interaction and to the negotiation of gender identities and ideologies (Thorne, 1993).

In general, feminist interactionists have directed less attention to issues of power than other feminist scholars, particularly those guided by critical/radical theoretical perspectives. Nevertheless, feminist interactionists do not lack interest in the analysis of power. When studying cross-gender conversations, for example, they concentrate on issues of power, observing how men exercise and maintain conversational advantage through interruptions (West, 1984), topic changes (West and Garcia, [p. 226 ↓] 1988), and language style (Arlis, 1991). Moreover, feminist interactionists have studied the 'sexual politics' that characterize family relationships (DeVault, 1991; Hochschild and Machung, 1989), organizational life (Hochschild, 1983) and a wide range of face-to-face communications (Henley, 1977). In addition to this, they have drawn upon and extended Goffman's (1979) incisive analyses of how people conceptualize gender, 'mark' gender differences publicly, and read gender displays as embodiments of the 'essential nature' of men and women (West, 1996).

While these contributions have influenced feminist theory, they have had less influence on interactionism itself. Still, one area where feminist interactionism has had a significant voice is in studies of the management of emotion. Based on research conducted in a variety of sites, including airlines (Hochschild, 1983), alternative health care clinics (Kleinman, 1996) and appearance associations (Martin, 2000), feminist-oriented interactionists offer revealing insights into how organizations manufacture sentiments and regulate emotional display. At the same time, these scholars illustrate how organizations require women to engage in unrecognized or devalued forms of emotional labor, perpetuating their subordination and reproducing gender inequality.

While sharing some areas of *rapprochement*, feminist and interactionists also disagree. A key source of tension is feminism's commitment to emancipatory research and social practice. Feminists often feel disenchanting with the less 'radical' epistemological and political stances characterizing interactionism as a whole. Unlike many of their colleagues, feminist interactionists do not merely regard research and theory as

avenues for understanding social reality. Instead, they see research and theory as liberating social practices that ought to contribute to the elimination of gender inequality and oppression.

Critical Interactionism

It is problematic for interactionists to stake any claim to a domain called ‘critical interactionism’. As much as interactionists might claim ‘critical ethnography’, the radical scholars who write it do not identify with symbolic interactionism (Burawoy et al., 1991). Instead, they align themselves with Marxist approaches that assume ‘the central reason for bothering to do social theory and research is to contribute in some way to the realization of ... emancipatory projects’ (Wright, 1993: 40).

Yet, in spite of the critiques Marxist scholars have directed toward them, interactionists have certainly contributed to analyses of concerns such as inequality (Schwalbe et al., 1999), ideology (Fine and Sandstrom, 1993), and agency and consciousness—topics connected to political economy. Perhaps the analyses that best fit under the rubric of ‘critical’ interactionism are those offered by Michael Schwalbe, particularly in *The Psychosocial Consequences of Natural and Alienated Labor* (1986). Schwalbe explores and synthesizes Marx's and Mead's theories of materialism in examining the dynamics of the labor process, consciousness and aesthetic experience. Guided by interest in the social processes through which inequality is reproduced, Schwalbe formulates an analytic approach that is firmly grounded in both interactionist studies of micro-politics and the emancipatory agenda of Marxism.

Surprisingly, given the interest in inequality that is shared among critical ethnographers, few symbolic interactionists have taken up Schwalbe's lead in theorizing dimensions of political economy. Topics that critical scholars consider central to the study of political economy, such as ideology or ‘the State’, have been neglected by interactionists. By contrast, proponents of the ‘critical studies’ paradigm have not overlooked key components of ideology such as moral commitment, practical action and emotion, also attended to by interactionists (Selinger, 1976).

A potential contribution of symbolic interactionism to 'critical studies' lies in the development of 'critical' or 'emancipatory' dramaturgy. In formulating the concept of 'frame', Goffman (1974: 10) turned his attention from the interaction strategies that individuals use in everyday life to a concern with 'how definitions of situations are built up in accordance with principles of organization which govern events—at least social ones—and our involvement in them'. As noted, interactionists investigating social movements have used this framework in understanding how movement issues are politically constructed and given meanings that lead to the mobilization of movements.

The strength of frame analysis in the assessment of social movements lies in its view of humans as active agents who redefine and transform the obdurate structures and conditions in which they live. Still, despite the insights offered by such analysis, one might ask if dramaturgy or other variants of symbolic interactionism will ever be truly emancipatory. Can – or should—there be an 'emancipatory interactionism' whose analysis leads toward the transformation of capitalist political economies? If so, what would such an analysis look like? T.R. Young's work *The Drama of Social Life* (1990) provides a glimpse of the possibilities of [p. 227 ↓] an emancipatory dramaturgy, locating the performance strategies of people within the broader context of political economy. According to Young, 'capitalism has improved the means of production to the extent that the central problem is how to realize profit from those with discretionary income' (1990: 197). In part, this has been accomplished by a growing emphasis on appearances and the accoutrements needed in maintaining them. In evaluating this 'culture of appearances', critical-emancipatory dramaturgy has three key goals. First, it strives to offer theoretical insights into the sources of oppression and the mechanisms that maintain them, penetrating impressions 'given' and locating the interests of those producing them. Second, it seeks to stimulate praxis by offering theoretical insights oriented towards collective interests and collective action. Third, it attempts to identify fraudulent forms of politics and the actors behind these politics.

Ultimately, because of its radical goals, critical dramaturgy seems likely to have a minor impact on interactionism. Nevertheless, critical dramaturgy has successfully encouraged some interactionists to examine topics they had largely neglected. While this may not enhance 'human emancipation', it could benefit sociological theory.

Postmodernism

Over the past decade, the most significant challenges to mainstream interactionism have been posed by postmodern theorists. These analysts have emphasized that postmodernism is not a way of thinking (Lemert, 1997). Instead, it is a multidimensional term that describes the condition in which people find themselves in advanced capitalist countries. This condition is characterized by the rise of a consumption and media-oriented society, the growth of information technologies and culture industries, the commodification of images, the pluralization of social worlds, the decentering of selves and the crumbling of previously dominant modernist values. Above all, the postmodern condition is characterized by rapid social transformations that evoke a sense that the world has fundamentally changed.

'Postmodern interactionists' seek to make sense of this unique historical and social situation (Denzin, 1996b). In doing so they utilize an 'interpretive interactionist' approach informed by post-structuralist, feminist, neo-Marxist and cultural studies. They thereby distance themselves from traditional interactionism and its modernist theories and research projects. According to postmodern interactionists, the theories and projects of modernist interactionism should be rejected because they 'play directly into the hands of those who would politically manage the postmodern' (Denzin, 1996b: 349).

While challenging the intellectual agenda of mainstream interactionism, postmodern interactionists do share some of its central assumptions and emphases. For instance, they share interactionism's (and pragmatism's) suspicion of positivism and scientism, emphasizing that all social science is value-laden because it is shaped by the cultural and structural locations of the individuals who produce it (Gergen, 1991). In addition to this, postmodernists embrace interactionism's emphasis on interpretative scholarship and accentuate the contributions this form of scholarship has made to social theory. They also make language and information technology central to the social actors and dynamics they study (Maines, 1996).

Postmodern interactionists extend the interactionist perspective in several interesting ways. First, they introduce intriguing concepts for rethinking interpretive work, such as multivocality, hyperreality, systems of discourse, the dying of the social, epiphanies

and the saturated self. Secondly, postmodern interactionists highlight how writing is intrinsic to method (Maines, 1996). Writing is not something analysts do after collecting data, but rather it is constitutive of data and textual representations. In making this point, postmodern interactionists remind their mainstream colleagues to be keenly aware of the importance of metaphors, tropes and audiences. Through heeding this advice, they will not only become better writers, but also better knowers (Ellis and Bochner, 1996). Thirdly, postmodern interactionists have offered trenchant analyses of the changing nature of the self in 'late capitalist' societies. Gergen (1991) observes that the pace of life and communications is overwhelming people, leaving them with selves 'under siege'. He proposes that people are reaching a point of 'social saturation' with far-reaching implications for how they experience the self. Gergen's core argument is that identities have become fragmented and incoherent in postmodern societies. Under postmodern conditions, the concept of the self becomes uncertain and 'the fully saturated self becomes no self at all' (Gergen, 1991: 7). People face a daunting challenge in 'constructing and maintaining an integrated self because the social structures necessary to anchor the self have themselves become unstable and ephemeral' (Karp, 1996: 186).

While postmodern theory offers promising insights to interactionism, it is regarded as an irredeemably flawed enterprise by critics who embrace more traditional interactionist concepts [p. 228 ↓] and approaches (Maines, 1996; Snow and Morrill, 1995). According to these critics, the failings of postmodern interactionism include an unscientific orientation, a faulty epistemology, a flawed historiography, an inadequate theory of aesthetics and an overly political and moralistic agenda. Some critics also assert that postmodern interactionism is irrelevant for interactionist sociology because it essentially reiterates the longstanding views of traditional interactionism (Maines, 1996).

In responding to these critiques, postmodern interactionists, led by Norman Denzin (1996b,c), have urged their mainstream colleagues to return to the spirit of the early pragmatists, embracing their anti-realist and anti-reductionist understandings, their openness to innovation and their concern with fostering progressive social reforms. By taking this step interactionists could forge a *rapprochement* between the ideas of pragmatism and postmodernism, resulting in a 'prophetic post-pragmatism' that would merge interactionist theory with radical democratic practice (Denzin, 1996b).

The (Fractious) Future of Symbolic Interactionism

Perhaps postmodernists are correct: there is no center. Certainly this chapter has suggested that interactionism is a diverse enterprise. At the least, it appears that the contributions that symbolic interactionist theory have made to the discipline of sociology are consequential. Sociology would not be what it is today without the challenges and insights offered by generations of interactionist scholars. In the study of the self, interaction, culture, gender, emotion, organization, social movements and public problems, interactionist research has had significant reverberations. Of course, interactionism is not the only interpretivist sociology; instead, it is one perspective in dialogue with others. Is it the most valuable perspective? Clearly no single answer exists for this question. Even within the body of interactionism answers would vary widely. This is how it should be.

Will interactionism abide? Surely the issues that the perspective has raised will continue to feature prominently in sociological thought during this next century. Perhaps in a hundred years the label of interactionism will also remain notable in sociology—but perhaps not. Regardless, during its first sixty years, symbolic interactionism has clearly extended the discipline of sociology and addressed many of the most important social scientific questions of the twentieth century.

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