**Symbolic Interactionism**

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**/352/**Symbolic interactionism (SI) is a durable and distinctive sociological perspective, which stresses the importance of the meanings people give to their activities. Humans make meaning by using symbols to interpret one another’s actions, and act on the basis of these interpretations. In contrast to deterministic explanations of human conduct—psychological, biological, and social-structural—SI is premised on the idea that adequate understanding requires close examination of the processes of communicative interaction operating in natural (non-experimental) social settings. This article examines SI’s origins, elaborates its theoretical and methodological implications, examines its relationship to other approaches, assesses its critics, and describes recent developments in the field.

**Origins and Development**

SI has a complex genealogy. Herbert Blumer (1937) coined the term ‘symbolic interaction’ to refer to the incorporation of pragmatist understandings of human conduct into sociological investigations, in particular those being undertaken by staff and graduate students at the University of Chicago. Blumer drew on the works of William James and John Dewey, and, above all, Chicago philosopher and social psychologist George Herbert Mead. Other important contributors to the perspective include Charles Horton Cooley whose concepts of ‘the looking-glass self’ and ‘sympathetic introspection’ became key analytical resources. Georg Simmel’s studies of forms of sociation were central to the theoretical development of the Chicago tradition.

Blumer, through both his published works and his supervision of generations of graduate students at Chicago (and then, after 1952, at the University of California, Berkeley), articulated the defining features of the SI approach to social investigation. It was not until the 1960s, however, that SI became recognised more broadly as a distinctive sociological school, partly through the publication of Blumer’s (1969) collected papers. Empirical applications of Blumer’s ideas were undertaken by members of the ‘Second Chicago School’ (Fine 1995), who owed much to the writing and teaching of Blumer’s Chicago colleague Everett C. Hughes (1971). Studies by Howard S. Becker (1963), Erving Goffman (1959; 1961), and Anselm L. Strauss (1959; Glaser and Strauss 1965) provide key examples of the application of the perspective.

Blumer’s account of SI is based on three ‘premises’ that define its scope and mark out its distinctive analytical stance: (i) people act towards things based on their meanings; (ii) these meanings arise in social interaction; (iii) conveying and changing meanings demands that people define and interpret situations.

The first premise is a rejection of the idea that ‘things’ have fixed and immutable meanings intrinsic to them. What an object ‘means’ depends on the uses to which it can be put. Thus, for instance, a brick can be part of a built structure, a weight to hold something down, or even a weapon, and its sense derives from which of these functions it is serving at the time. This approach to meaning is derived from Dewey’s (1896) critique of the stimulus-response model of human behaviour, in which he demonstrated that all ‘stimuli’ could also be understood as ‘responses’, and vice-versa, depending on the context of understanding.

Meaning is not, however, an individual phenomenon, but rather arises in social interaction with others, according to Blumer’s second premise. Becker’s (1963) account of learning to enjoy smoking marijuana provides a useful example of this. New users must *learn* smoking techniques, how to recognise the drug’s physiological effects, and how to enjoy these effects, through the cues and guidance of more experienced users. Being able to have ‘the same’ experience on the drug depends on social interaction between novice and experienced users.

Blumer’s third premise (that people must define and interpret situations) is derived from Mead’s (1934) distinction between gestures and acts. While animals can gesture at one another, as when a dog growls and raises its hackles at another, this behaviour is not *symbolic*. Humans, on the other hand, use symbols (especially language) to take one another’s points of view, to see things as others would see them. People therefore elicit the ‘meaning’ of behaviour by working out *why* someone is doing what they are doing, what it means to them, and responding on the basis of these attributions. These reciprocal attributions and actions *comprise* the interpreted situation.

**/353/Theoretical and Methodological Implications**

Blumer’s premises lead to distinctive understandings of human actors, of society, and of how these can be studied. The human agent is a reflexive self, shaping and shaped by social situations, and society is construed in associational terms, as a complex network of interactions. These implications necessitate the rejection of many of the now-conventional aspects of social theory and methodology.

Causal analyses of human actions and explanations based on structural determinism must be abandoned. Action is not ‘caused’, as it is always based on the actor’s interpretation of his or her situation: the situation cannot *on its own* make the actor do anything. This can be demonstrated empirically: the ‘same’ phenomenon will elicit radically different responses from different people (or may elicit no response at all from others), and the ‘same’ behaviour can be elicited by all manner of different influences. A decrease in interest rates, for example, might encourage some people to spend their savings and take out loans, thereby stimulating the economy. It could also, however, have the opposite effect on others: people could quite rationally increase their levels of saving in the hopes that economic volatility could lead to more significant price falls later on.

Blumer’s (1956) key statement on mainstream sociological methodology was an attack on a leading form of causal modelling, *variable analysis*. Variable analysis is the (frequently statistical) attempt to explain social organization by demonstrating relationships between different abstract concepts, for example, between the level of unemployment and the rate of crime. Measuring the two, and correlating the results, might result in the finding that an increase in one ‘goes with’ an increase in the other, and public policy recommendations for reducing crime could follow. Blumer identifies three problems with this popular approach. Firstly, ‘generic’ variables are ill-defined and unclear. What counts as ‘social cohesion’, for instance, depends on the methods of study and topic of enquiry of particular pieces of research: cohesion in a family unit, for instance, could be measured by the family members’ levels of agreement on certain important issues, while cohesion in a neighbourhood could be measured by how many of his or her neighbours’ names each person living in the neighbourhood knows. Both measure *something*, but whether this is the same thing for all respondents is unclear. Secondly, variables may have little connection to the setting being investigated: they may simply be imported into studies as matters of theoretical interest. Many sociological studies, for instance, are simply examinations of the distributions of and inter-relationships between age, gender, ethnicity, class, and so on, in novel settings, rather than examinations of the actual relevances of parties to those settings. Variables, here, do not emerge from settings but are imposed upon them. Thirdly, the relationship between variables—the mechanisms whereby unemployment produces lower crime rates, for instance—remain unexplored, and no amount of additional ‘intervening’ variables can eliminate this absence of knowledge about what exactly causes what. No one can say clearly how variables *work*.

Following the pragmatists, therefore, SI adopted a policy of *radical empiricism*, evident in a suspicion of abstract and premature theorising, and a privileging of investigations of the real world as the best means of answering sociological questions. Theory became a tool at the service of research rather than the other way round, and concerns about cumulativity were collapsed into comparative and formal sociological tropes (Becker 2010). As Hughes (1951: 320) argued:

The comparative student of man’s work learns about doctors by studying plumbers; and about prostitutes by studying psychiatrists … all kinds of work belong in the same series, regardless of their places in prestige or ethical ratings. In order to learn, however, one must find a frame of reference applicable to all cases without regard to such ratings… Both the physician and the plumber do practice esoteric techniques for the benefit of people in distress. The psychiatrist and the prostitute must both take care not to become too personally involved with clients who come to them with rather intimate problems.

Although symbolic interactionists use a variety of investigative techniques (indeed, one group, the Iowa School, used primarily quantitative, questionnaire-based methods), there is a preference for gathering and examining qualitative data. This derives from the earlier investigations of the ‘first’ Chicago School, dominated by Robert Ezra Park’s (Bulmer 1984: 97) injunction to ‘go and get the seat of your pants dirty in real research’.

The best way to ‘get the seat of your pants dirty’ is by undertaking *fieldwork*, sometimes called ‘participant observation’ or the ethnographic study of natural settings. Becker and Geer (1957) argued that, in contrast to interviews, the other dominant method of qualitative data collection, fieldwork allows researchers to more fully immerse themselves in the situations they are investigating, and thus better understand the meanings and roles of participants. Because it typically takes place over a longer period of time, fieldwork also allows researchers to follow meanings as they change and develop in the course of their use.

The classic statement of these emphases is by Glaser and Strauss (1967: 1):

Most writing on sociological method has been concerned with how accurate facts can be obtained and how theory can thereby be more rigorously tested. In this book we address ourselves to the equally important enterprise of *how the discovery of theory from data—systematically obtained and analysed in social research—can be furthered*. We believe that the discovery of theory from data—which we call *grounded theory*—is a major task confronting sociology today, for, as we shall try to show, such a theory fits empirical situations, and is understandable to sociologists and laymen alike. Most important, it works—provides us with relevant predictions, explanations, interpretations and applications.

**Relationship to Ethnomethodology and Mainstream Sociology**

SI’s closest sociological relative is ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967). Both are suspicious of premature theorising and seek to minimise any theoretical framework to no more than is required to facilitate studies (Blumer 1969; **/354/**Sharrock and Anderson 1982). Both favour qualitative methods, in particular ethnographies (Becker and Geer 1957; Garfinkel 2002: 248). Both reject the idea that there can be an ‘objective’ description of social interaction: for ethnomethodologists the meaning of any action is reflexively tied to its context, with action, sense, and situation mutually elaborating one another *in situ* (Garfinkel 1967: 3–4).

There are, however, also significant differences. These come to a head in the relationships between each perspective and mainstream sociology: practitioners of SI argue that theirs is a *better way of doing sociology*, while ethnomethodologists understand their work to be *an alternative to it*. The former have argued that their perspective addresses glaring errors in conventional sociological approaches to research (Blumer 1956). The latter argue that their approach constitutes an ‘asymmetrical’ and ‘alternate’ sociology *tout court*, in which nothing is sacred, and even the most fundamental sociological concepts must be ‘respecified’ (Garfinkel 2002: 114–20).

Mainstream sociological work has itself, over the last twenty years or so, increasingly engaged with themes central to the SI tradition. This has typically been unattributed, however, and the perspective itself is often misrepresented both in textbooks and in teaching. As Maines (2001: *xv*) points out, ‘sociologists over the years have learned a way of talking about themselves and their discipline … that has compartmentalized interactionist work and relegated it to the margins of scholarly consideration while simultaneously and unknowingly becoming more interactionist in their work’. We shall now turn to the mainstream response to SI.

**Criticisms**

The conventional sociological view of SI is that it neglects considerations of both power and social structure. It is regarded as a perspective holding an unduly optimistic vision of the open society that is blind to the workings of various forms of institutionalized constraint and inequality. These criticisms miss the subtlety of some of the key statements in SI. Rather than neglecting the workings of power, SI studies show how power is manifested in everyday situations; rather than neglecting social structure, SI investigates social structure in *statu nascendi* as Simmel used to put it.

Research on deviance is perhaps the best-known area of interactionist work, particularly following the enormous success of Becker’s (1963) *Outsiders*. Such work has led to a greater appreciation of the perspective of the deviant, the marginalised, the stigmatised, and from time to time such studies have contributed to political and institutional reforms. Yet the focus on the responses—both individual and collective—of those who are ‘labelled’ in various ways has all too often served to obscure the primary, and arguably more fundamental, concern of interactionist studies with the *authoritative* processes through which individuals are rendered subordinate through legally sanctioned and institutionally established procedures.

This approach can be understood to develop Durkheim’s (1984) ideas about the cultural variability of laws and norms. Whereas Durkheim saw ‘crime’ in terms of those acts that offend the basic values or ‘collective sentiments’ of a society or group, SI seeks to avoid the reification of ‘society’ intrinsic to this kind of formulation. Its focus, instead, is on how actual rules are established, enforced, challenged and broken, often in situations where cultural consensus cannot be assumed:

… laws and rules represent no group’s values nor values of any portion of a society. Instead they are artefacts of compromise between the values of mutually opposed, but very strongly organized, associations (Lemert 1972: 57).

SI does not neglect power relations, but argues that they are the product of interaction rather than supra-individual ‘structural’ forces. Becker made this essential point clearly, starting with the Durkheimian theme that ‘*social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance*’ (Becker 1963: 9, emphasis in original), then making explicit the sociological corollary that ‘deviance is *not* a quality of the act that the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an “offender”’ (Becker 1963: 9, emphasis in original).

This position fully recognises that there are patterns to such applications of rules. Becker (1963: 17–18) goes on to state:

Who can, in fact, force others to accept their rules and what are the causes of their success? This is, of course, a question of political and economic power … Rules are made for young people by their elders … Men make the rules for women in our society … Negroes find themselves subject to rules made for them by whites. The foreign-born and those otherwise ethnically peculiar often have their rules made for them by the Protestant Anglo-Saxon minority. The middle class makes rules the lower class must obey—in the schools, the courts, and elsewhere … Differences in the ability to make rules and apply them to other people are essentially power differentials (either legal or extralegal). Those groups whose social position gives them weapons and power are best able to enforce their rules. Distinctions of age, sex, ethnicity, and class are all related to differences in power, which accounts for differences in the degree to which groups so distinguished can make rules for others.

The point is not that there are patterns of inequality and domination in society, a point with which symbolic interactionists would not disagree. Rather, the issue at hand is *through what mechanisms* are those patterns produced and reproduced. Here work such as Cicourel’s (1968) examination of how police officers define the actions of black youths as ‘threatening’ while treating the ‘same’ actions are ‘high spirits’ when undertaken by their white counterparts is important. The discovery of a pattern of inequality animates studies of *how that pattern is generated* rather than representing the conclusion of a sociological investigation.

**Developments**

SI was always a tradition more varied than Blumer’s guiding statements suggested. Not all symbolic interactionists subscribed to Blumer’s views. An early division was identified between the Iowa School and the Chicago School of SI, the **/355/**former emphasizing structure and conventional social scientific precepts, the latter stressing process and negotiation and preferring qualitative methods. The Iowa group used self-report measures such as the Twenty Statements Test and favoured an approach that did not place SI in opposition to standard scientific conceptions. Its leading proponents, including Manford Kuhn and Carl Couch, accepted more of the ‘facts of social structure’ (Stryker 1980:1) than the Chicago-oriented group. While the Chicago version of SI has predominated there were disputes around the precise character of Mead’s legacy. In particular, it was contended that Blumer’s advocacy of qualitative methods at the expense of conventional social scientific procedures could not be legitimated by Mead’s views. The dominance of the Chicagoan version of SI led some commentary to elide the notions of Chicago sociology, ethnographic research and SI. Against this, it is important to remember that SI was not the only theoretical stream in Chicago’s famed sociology department.

More recently SI addressed debates originating from cultural studies and postmodern and poststructuralist trends about how culture can be most adequately represented. Again, generalizing somewhat, there are differences between those who favour some form of realism, with an emphasis on fieldwork traditions of cultural description, and those who seek to pursue constructionist arguments to the point where questions about inscription – the deskwork ethnographers do to produce to their ethnographic analyses – precede all others. On both sides the question of representation, the sense that readers make of the texts that mediate culture to an audience, becomes salient (Van Maanen 2011).

The development of the SI spawned a rich and diverse range of studies connected by an analytic commitment to articulate people’s ordinary experience of the world. It long stood as a productive alternative to functionalist and structural sociologies. Interactionist ideas have significantly impacted upon a number of established sociological fields, such as crime and deviance, education, health and illness, organizations and work (see Atkinson and Housley 2003; Fine 1993; and Reynolds and Herman-Kinney 2003 for reviews).

SI has illuminated public issues. Interaction is central to understanding how some social condition comes to be defined as a social problem. This is an often contested matter where groups advancing competing claims (Spector and Kitsuse 1977) about the characteristics of the problem use a range of resources – material, symbolic and political – to persuade publics and legislators of the legitimacy of their definitions (Holstein and Miller 2003). Here Goffman’s (1974) frame metaphor has proved enormously influential in analyses of how issues and problems are defined as such.

SI played a major part in opening up new fields, notably the sociology of emotion (Hochschild 1983) and the sociology of public places (Lofland 1998). People’s experienced emotions are intimately connected to situated interaction. Emotions are not simply biological and psychological phenomena; they are socially organized by ‘feeling rules’ enacted in contexts of everyday interaction. Similarly, the investigation of public places has shown that conduct there is far from a-social. Goffman’s (1983) work on the ‘interaction order’ demonstrated how public places are delicately ordered by local rules that regulate territoriality, civil inattention, forms of regard for the other, the expression of information about the self, and the like.

W. I Thomas’s famed apothegm that if people define things as real, they are real in their consequences, justified the close study of subjectivities and catalysed a series of interactionist-inspired studies of ordinary action. Goffman’s (1974) frame analysis offered a systematic and admittedly formalistic answer to the fundamental practical problem, ‘what is it that is going on here?’

Ethnographic research addressed the same question more discursively and with attention to the empirical details of situated symbolism and the emergent meanings arising in natural social settings. Directly or indirectly, ethnographic studies have drawn upon the SI tradition, seeking new ways to uncover and represent the ‘actor’s point of view’ – the experience of people as they go about their daily lives. New standards of the intensiveness and extensiveness of ethnographic investigations have been set, clearly marking out such work from jibes about ‘tenured journalism’ (Fine 1993). Observation of people’s activities over extended periods of time is one feature of interactionist-inspired ethnographies of Black American inner-city street life – Anderson (1990) was the result of 14 years’ research. Anderson’s (1999) subsequent book also drew on that fieldwork and another four years of ethnographic research in poor and well-to-do neighbourhoods. Duneier’s (1999) ethnography of street vendors was based on more than three years’ fieldwork. Duneier’s study was also notable for his close collaboration with his key informant and a noted photojournalist, its pioneering audio recording of street encounters, the quasi-legalistic standards of evidence and proof applied to analytic inferences drawn, and the sharing of the financial proceeds of the book with the research participants. Similarly, Alice Goffman’s (2014) study of young Black parolees was based on six years of immersive fieldwork. Studies such as these exemplify the sustained commitment of ethnographers to depict accurately the viewpoints of research participants and to entertain seriously inconvenient facts.

Over the past quarter of a century SI has proved a tradition remarkably open to postmodern and post-structuralist critiques and developments in the social sciences and humanities, including cultural studies (Becker and McCall, 1990). Several aspects of these intellectual shifts are incorporated into SI by Denzin’s (2001) ‘interpretive interactionism’, which explores new ways of making people’s problematic experience available to the reader by artistic and social scientific methods. The examination of people’s reflections about these problematic experiences (‘epiphanies’) was also pursued by autoethnography, a method where the ethnographer explores their own personal experience (see Ellis et al. 2011 for a review of controversies about the method). Autoethnography has proved especially effective in conveying the personal and cultural meanings encountered in challenging situations, such as facing life-threatening illnesses (Frank 1991) or learning to become a competition-standard boxer (Wacquant 2004).

Appraisals of SI’s future (Fine 1993; Maines 2001) have noted its distinguished past but, prudently, have been ambivalent about its future. The SI tradition has expanded, diversified and become internationalized. There is an important sense in which it has become mainstream and is no longer **/356/**a ‘loyal opposition’. As Atkinson and Housley (2003) put it, ‘we are all interactionists now’. Well, perhaps. SI’s abiding appeal is likely to continue to be its resolutely empirical approach to the social organization of people’s experiences.

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