SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

THE BASICS

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Preface

Symbolic Interactionism is Dead, Long Live Symbolic Interactionism!

As Ken Plummer (2014) has noted, the symbolic interactionism paradigm remains one of the most endurable social theories of the twentieth century. He echoes the same optimism of Stryker (1987) who writes about the vitalization of symbolic interactionism. But not long ago, other social scientists sounded the death knell and mourned the "sad demise" and the "mysterious disappearance" of the paradigm, with others describing it as moribund and "graying" (Saxton, 1989). Yet, these declarations and acknowledgments, while pointing to the usual drill most paradigms go through on their historical paths, fail to capture in full the twists and turns, the ebbs and flows, the fortunes and misfortunes of a paradigm that has simply refused to die. In fact, in recent times, some have begun to celebrate the "glorious triumph of symbolic interactionism" (Fine, 1993). Some have described it as "the harbinger of postmodern social theory." (Plummer, 2014)

I agree with the optimists. Symbolic Interaction is a paradigm that has simply refused to give up the ghost. This fact is borne out of the growing corps of social scientists who are actively and tirelessly championing the theory with their own journals, conferences, websites and professional organization (The Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction). Plummer

(2014) has observed that other promoters of the paradigm are moving through much of the social theory in disguised "post Blumerian" forms (cf. Denzin, 1992: xiv; Fine, 1990).

This book echoes the optimism of both Plummer and Stryker. It traces the checkered history of Symbolic Interactionism from its social philosophical beginnings to its meandering ways through psychology and sociology to its postmodernist turn.

Introduction

This book is a survey of Symbolic Interaction. In thirteen short chapters, it traces the history, the social philosophical roots, the founders, "movers and shakers" and evolution of the theory. Symbolic Interactionism: The Basics takes the reader along the exciting, but a tortuous journey of the theory and explores both the meta-theoretical and mini-theoretical roots and branches of the theory. Symbolic interactionism or sociological social psychology traces its roots to the works of United States sociologists George Hebert Mead, Charles Horton Cooley, and Herbert Blumer, and a Canadian sociologist, Erving Goffman; Other influences are Harold Garfinkel's Ethnomethodology and Austrian-American Alfred Schultz's study of Phenomenology.

Symbolic Interactionism: Basics explores the philosophical sources of symbolic interactionism, including pragmatism, social behaviorism, and neo-Hegelianism. The intellectual origins of symbolic interactions can be attributed to the works of William James, George Simmel, John Dewey, Max Weber, and George Herbert Mead. Mead is believed to be the founder of the theory, although he did not publish any academic work on the paradigm. The book highlights the works of the intellectual heirs of symbolic interactionism—Herbert Blumer, Mead's former student, who was instrumental in publishing the lectures his former professor posthumously with the title Symbolic Interactionism, Erving Goffman and Robert Park.

Symbolic Interactionism (SI) places a premium on human agency and creativity. In doing so, it underscores how individuals create and recreate their social worlds through the use and manipulation of symbols in a joint interaction with co-social actors in a dynamic and infinite fashion. According to the Oxford Dictionary, "Symbolic interactionism grew out of the American philosophical tradition of pragmatism in the late 19th century, especially as elaborated by William James, John Dewey, and Charles S. Peirce." Famed founder of SI, George Herbert Mead is credited with forging a bridge between the pragmatic tradition and sociology. Other founders who cemented the SI tradition into sociology were Charles Horton Cooley and William Isaac Thomas. However, most sociologists agree that the most important exponent of SI was Herbert Blumer, who coined the perspective's label in 1937 in his book, Symbolic Interactionism.

SI serves as a counterpoise to the "grand old theories" of functionalism and conflict, proposing a balance in our understanding of social life. SI seeks to

counter the tendency of functionalist and conflict theorists that humans are mere puppets of powerful social structures and institutions, such as norms, ideologies, traditions, the economy, polity, family, media, etc. Instead, SI quite cogently contends that humans are freely acting agents, who create that which creates them. This dialectical approach provides a nuanced explanation of social life, by juxtaposing human agency and social institutions.

In 1963 Peter Berger wrote in Invitation to Sociology, "It can be said that the first wisdom of sociology is this - things are not what they seem." Everyone has a perspective, a worldview, a common sense notion of how human society operates. Yet Berger goes on to say that, "Social reality turns out to have many layers of meaning. The discovery of each new layer changes the perception of the whole." (23) The main objective of the book is to examine those various layers of meaning and reality. While doing so, it examines the structural aspects of human society and the dynamic processes that construct and shape it [society]that most often go unnoticed by the individual, yet have an enormous influence on the life chances, lifestyle, and opportunities available to people. People, in turn, make choices, take advantage of opportunities (or make opportunities) and influence changes in society. This examination will, hopefully, help you better understand the forces that shape your own life and how you shape the lives of those around you and the society in which you live. Thus, the book critically examines how people relate to, shape, and are shaped by society. The primary purpose is to explore the relationships between individuals and the larger societal structures to which they belong. These structures may be social subgroups such as family, or ethnic/ race, or they may be larger institutions such as the government or markets.

Symbolic Interaction has been criticized from multiple angles for either being too microscopic or not microscopic enough. Other critics have faulted the theory for ignoring the importance of social structures and social institutions and hence the impact of these on how society produces and reinforces social inequality and social injustice. (Stryker, 2002) Symbolic Interactionism: The Basics seeks to address these criticisms by exploring ongoing efforts by a new crop of adherents to give the paradigm the much-needed critical edge. In my opinion, Critical Constructivism provides that critical edge. In Chapter 12, I demonstrate how Critical Constructivism effectively plugs this major loophole—the lack of emphasis on social inequality.

Critical constructivism (used interchangeably with critical constructionism) combines conflict theory (which focuses on the struggle for power resources between groups) and social constructionism (which treats reality as a human creation, rather than natural or divinely inspired). Critical constructionism differs from social constructionism only in that it emphasizes the role of elite interests in the process of reality It is a theoretical framework based on the

assumption that the way social reality is constructed, perceived and presented usually reflects the interests of society's elite more than those of the mainstream, and often at the expense of those with the least power in society.

Any theory that lacks reflexivity and introspection and the urge to move with the times, atrophies and dies. To this end, I devote considerable space to the ongoing efforts by scholars in the Symbolic Interactionism field to take a sober and impassioned look at its blind spots and loopholes, as they inject a new "realism" into the discipline in order to make it increasingly holistic. I do so by seeking to tie the loose ends of the paradigm by taking a look at its strengths and validities alongside with some criticisms leveled against it. I emphasize the staying power, vitality and the interesting ways the perspective has adapted to the changing and meandering terrain of the field of sociology. I discuss the postmodern turn of Symbolic Interactionism by scholars, particularly Ken Plumer.

Scholars have debated and continue to debate what I call the enigma of society—its origin, evolution and its laws. Is society a sui generis, a self-regulating entity as Durkheim asserts or a socially constructed phenomenon? A Symbolic Interactionist approach to the topic begins with the assumption that society (the plurality and interactions of norms, social structures, and social institutions) is a human creation or social construct. This means that social subgroups as the family, ethnic/race are neither natural phenomena nor divinely created entities, but that is human-made and tied to and vary significantly across time and place. It also means that these phenomena ultimately rest on supra-individual processes of group boundary formation, segregation, and the creation of inter-group hierarchies. As well, it means that these institutions are not fixed in stone or immutable, or unchangeable; that since they are human creations, they can be uncreated, dismantled, reformed or improved.

Symbolic Interactionism: The Basics provides a lucid lesson on the processes, logic, dynamics, and complexities of the enigma we call society. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman (1966) propose a nuanced and dialectical formula by suggesting that while individuals deliberately act, their actions do not take place in a vacuum, but that human actions are circumscribed by social forces beyond their control. What this also means is that while social forces may seem all powerful, entrenched, and unalterable, they are social constructions, human creations and hence can be unconstructed/changed by the same human beings (Quist-Adade, 2012). The dialectical relationship between social institutions and human agency has long been acknowledged by Karl Marx when he made these two observations:

> "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past." (Marx, 1852, p. 7)

"Man is a product of circumstances, but man, in turn, modifies those circumstances." In short, Marx proposed that men are influenced by circumstances, but can change those same circumstances.

This book takes a decidedly critical constructivist approach and seeks to show Symbolic Interactionism can atone for its sin of neglect of social inequality, power dynamics, and social change. Critical constructionism breathes critical life into the field and firmly puts it on the pedestal of an emancipatory project. By fusing symbolic interactionism and conflict theory, Critical Constructivism not to only explicate the dialectical and complex relationship between human agency and social structure, but also unmasks the power dynamics of human interactions at both micro and macro levels. The aim is to address the deficiencies of symbolic interactionism, which either overemphasizes human agency to the point of elevating individuals to the pedestal of omnipotence as demigods and goddesses, if not God itself, while reifying and in most cases ignoring structural, institutional and systemic inequality and injustice.

Chapter One:
Society and the Social Animal

What is Society?

Sociologists define society in a variety of ways. Here a few a few: (1) Society constitutes relationships among groups: the sum of social relationships among groups of humans. (2) Society is a structured community of people: a structured community of people bound together by similar traditions, institutions, or nationality and (3) Society constitutes customs of a community: the customs of a community and the way it is organized.

Society gives us human qualities. Through ***socialization*** (the lifelong process of learning social norms and behaviors) we learn to act and become human. According to Mead (1967), society and institutions represent the organized and patterned interactions among diverse individuals, this comes from the capacity of our mind where we can take roles of others and rehearse alternative lines of activity while coordinating our activities. Society is dependent upon the capacities of the self, via evaluating oneself. Society and its institutions are maintained, yet society is constantly in flux and filled with changes.

Briefly

Sociology sees human beings as products of their social, cultural, and physical environment. As intensely social beings, humans need others to survive and flourish.

The human being is incomplete, an unfinished animal—families, friends, peers make possible ***human nature***. We do not have it at birth; we acquire it from society. Society creates a being who uses symbols; language. Out of society arises the ***self,*** the remarkable ability ***to treat themselves as objects in the environment, to see themselves, to talk to themselves, and to control themselves***. Finally, society creates the human mind. Mind is more than brain; *it is the ability to think, to manipulate in our heads the physical world we see out there.* Generalization, categorization, deliberation, contemplation, problem-solving and understanding depend on much more than biology gives us.

We are Social Animals

Sociology studies the human being as a **social being.** What do we mean by this? Thus, society must create conditions that will make solidarity and cooperation among people possible. As Young (2011) notes, human development must be seen as a process—a human process—and for the success of the process, society must foster solidarity among its inhabitants. The human process, Young explains, is important because a person can become fully human only within the structure of social relations. All forms of human expression occur within social relationships. It is therefore important to look at what kinds of relationships are possible within a society. He dismisses the concept of the solitary individual as nonsensical, because as he writes, "one cannot be a mother without a child, a teacher without a student, a merchant without a customer or a judge without an offender." (Young, p. 2011)

Indeed, no one is an island unto himself or herself, to paraphrase the English poet, John Donne. Even Robinson Crusoe, had his Man Friday! While some social scientists have tended to overemphasize selfishness and even narcissism in human relationships and even trace the tendency to aggress to our genes, it is important to stress that human society is not possible without cooperation and solidarity. While not dismissing the tendency of people to pursue their self-interest and fight each other, it is important to stress that aggression is not a biological condition, but a social construct. We learn to cooperate with fellow human beings in the same way as we learn to fight each other. Just as it takes two to tango, it takes two to fight.

Numerous lines of research have shown that human beings need others to develop, psychosomatically, i.e., cognitively, psychologically and physically. As Young notes, "studies of feral children, of orphanages, of neglected children, of maternity wards all demonstrate that infants and children need the stimulation and loving attention of others or they do not develop to their full potential." (Young, 2011, p.1) In the same way, he continues, "studies of prisons, concentration camps, of warfare and of cultural collapse all show that people can be degraded and become as animals toward each other even when they have lived in peace and in cooperative relations for most of their lives." (Young, 2011, p.1)

We are born dependent on others. We survive because of them; we learn how to survive from them; we are socialized by them. Through socialization, we take on the ways of society and become members of society. We learn to control ourselves through the rules and perspective of society, thus making society possible. Through socialization, we develop symbols, self, and mind, qualities that make us both human and to some extent, free. Either because of socialization or because of our nature, humans come to live their whole lives around others, subject to the rules that dominate all social life (Charon, 2012).

From the time we are born, we rely on others for survival. We learn how to survive from others. We end up spending all of our lives in social organizations. Babbie (1993) has maintained that human beings are into society and spend their entire lives in it, seldom leaving it. Babbie further notes that human beings live in an organized community, working and playing in multiple formal organizations and groups. Each of these social groups "has rules for us to follow; each socializes us; in many of them, it is where our lives take on meaning. Nature probably commands that we live our lives in social organization or perish, but if nature does not command it, we learn it very early." (Babbie, 1993, p.3)

We develop our humanness through a protracted process of socialization, which begins in the cradle and ends in the grave, as it were. Thus, from the day we are born until the day we die, we depend on others for our survival. We need others in much the same way as they need us. The African Ubuntu philosophical precept rightly notes that "I am because we are." The people we depend on to survive are not only our significant others— parents, siblings (if we have any), and other close relatives—but also include our neighbors and other compatriots, as well as citizens of far-flung countries. Thus, our survival depends on invisible ties and teamwork that extends beyond our homes, tribes, and countries. Indeed, our very survival is intertwined and interconnected in a web of mutuality, reciprocity, and dependency (Quist-Adade, 2012).

Socialization —the process by which we learn to be human— makes us who we are or who we will become. It also makes us flexible and unpredictable. One basic characteristic of the human being is that we are all capable of both good and evil. ***Whether we turn out to be "Good Samaritans" or evil-minded persons depends very much on a "conspiracy" of factors, the most important of which is socialization, which involves the internalization of societal norms and values.***

Socialization is no small matter (Babbie, 1993). The twists and turns of the long and winding process of socialization make a person adequately human, capable of discerning good and evil, distinguishing between morality and immorality and ethical and unethical behavior. At birth, the person relies merely on his or his instincts and imitation of significant others to navigate his or her "limited" world. With the passage of time and the accumulation of biological maturation, the individual gradually learns the norms and values of his or her society. An important and indispensable part of the socialization process is the learning and the use of symbols in their multiple forms, including language, verbal, non-verbal, kinetic, tactile, etc. The use of symbols is the foundation of micro, interpersonal interactions. Symbols allow for smooth and effective interpersonal, intergroup, and intercultural communication. But

the misuse of symbols could lead to your being shut out, ex-communicated or shot dead! For example, raising your thumb in North America is an expression of praise. But the same symbol in Iraq is the equivalence of showing someone of the middle finger in the U.S.

Fig.1:1 –The Middle Finger and Significant and Non-significant Symbols

Source: Pixabay (https://pixabay.com/en/finger-provocation-rebel-422529), and **Freepik** (https://www.freepik.com/free-photo/male-hand-giving-a-thumbs-up-sign_1327563.htm)

In Ghana, flicking the thumb has the same meaning as showing the middle finger.

Context—place, time, power dynamics, gender relations, cultural settings, etc., are equally crucial in how symbol use by interlocutors can be successful or problematic. **Significant symbols** or symbols that have shared meanings for the interlocutors generally make interaction problem-free, while **non-significant symbols**—those that elicit confusion, misunderstanding, and incomprehension—become problematic. Humans are symbol creators and users. Our ability to create, recreate, manipulate, and change symbols in an infinite number of ways is what distinguishes us from other higher primates.

The study of how humans create and recreate social reality through interactions and the use of symbols is the focus of symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism views the individual as an active agent at the center of his or her world. In joint action with fellow active individuals, the individual shapes and reshapes his or her lifeworld. But, this does not mean that individuals are free-floating, masters of their world. Their actions are constrained contextually. Yet, as rational, thinking, reasoning social actors, they dance according to tune, as it were, gauging and responding to each situation in line with the appropriate or corresponding norms and "rules of engagement." In other words, the individual actor acts according to his or her **definition of the situation**.

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