

SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM an influential approach within interactionist perspective. North American origins in ideas of philosopher George Herbert Mead & the studies of the Chicago School 1900-1930s. Formalized as a distinctive approach early-1960s. Initial impact on British Sociology through research on deviance & crime, & then spread rapidly to research on education, law, medicine, family, gender, race & ethnicity, organizations & work, mass media & communication.....& then on to psychology, politics, geography.....

Long-standing opponents of the consensus & conflict perspectives. They are opposed to the use of the methodology of the natural sciences ("positivism") & social surveys in Sociology: they place a strong emphasis on the need for lengthy, intimate & first-hand involvement with the subjects of their research, using participant-observation, in-depth interviews, life-histories & case-studies.

Three Guiding Concerns of Symbolic Interactionism

- (1) Human beings are complex symbol-manipulating animals. Therefore the social sciences must study the objective/material worlds people inhabit as well as the distinctive symbols & meanings they use to construct, interpret & negotiate those worlds (a position similar to Weber's "social action").
- (2) Symbols & meanings are not universal, fixed or absolute - they vary/change over time, place, culture, biography & situation. Because symbols & meanings are ambiguous, they must be investigated as they emerge & are negotiated between specific individuals interacting in specific situations. Here the central processes of concern to symbolic interactionists are socialization & social interaction, Self/personal identity, social identity, careers/status passages, definitions of the situation, & negotiated orders.
- (3) The study of social interaction is important: (a) because it provides a bridge between strictly biological & psychological research (which tends to play-down the social dimension) & strictly sociological research (which tends to play-down the individual dimension), & (b) because it is necessary if we are to adequately describe & explain social life.

Our Self enables us to selectively interpret, reflect & act: to look at ourselves & our actions, as well as those of others, in order to plan & carry out the demands of social life & to pursue our own goals & interests. Our interpretations & reflections & actions are not strictly determined by social structures or by the definitions of others. We all have our own unique biographical endowment & our own interactive history which enables us to respond in different ways, in different situations at different times to the definitions of others & to the constraints imposed by the structures of society.

Symbolic Interactionism is then, an attempted synthesis of "determinism" & "voluntarism", of "the social" & "the individual", & of the "material" & the "symbolic" - herein lies much of its attractiveness & several of its problems.

Critics from the consensus & conflict perspectives often argue that symbolic interactionists neglect class, status, power & history. With the result that they are unable to adequately locate their studies within the wider society.

Symbolic interactionists reply that they do study these forces, but only in so far as they directly influence social interaction, & that it is impossible to study "total societies". Further, such terms as "society", "class" & "power" are empty abstractions if they cannot be directly related to specific individuals interacting in specific situations.

"Instant History" - Just add hot water & stir ?

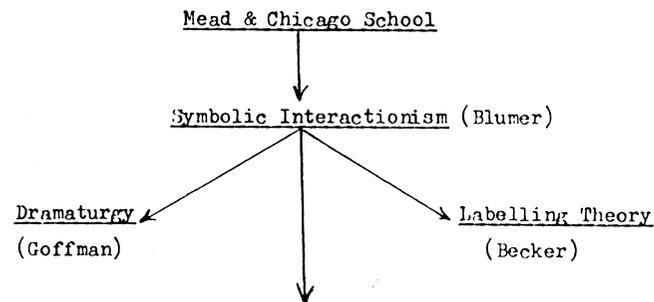
(1) George Herbert Mead (1876-1931): Mind, Self & Society

For Mead, humans are practical, problem-solving animals: the socialization process involves actively learning facts, skills, norms, meanings & social identities & acquiring a sense of Self. We do not experience ourselves directly but indirectly from the standpoint of specific individuals & groups ("significant others"). Our Self enables us to selectively interpret & reflect on the world (hence, he is opposed to S-R conditioning, behaviourism & social structural determinism). We interpret, reflect & act through social interaction with "significant others", & through them we learn about the rest of society ("generalized others"). The Self is a process of "becoming", the result of a continual conversation between "I" (personal identity or Self-concept or Self-Image) & "Me" (the social identities we are called-on to learn, act-out or negotiate in interactions & social life).

(2) The Chicago School (1900-1930s)

Persistent themes in three decades of research included the loss of community & consequences of urban life, social problems, deviance & crime, immigration & adaptation, racial discrimination & minority groups, generational conflict & the family. Mead's ideas were taken-up & used to develop the concepts of "the looking-glass Self" & "the definition of the situation" in research which pioneered the use of participant-observation, in-depth interviews, life-histories & case-studies.

(3) The emergence of Symbolic Interactionism in 1960s & beyond



(4) Major fields of study & impact in Sociology

Deviance & crime, education, medicine, law, gender, family, race & ethnicity, organizations & work, mass media & communication.....

Qualitative research methods: participant-observation, in-depth interviews, life-histories & case-studies.....

(5) Interactionist perspectives are very well-established in Sociology today.

Symbolic Interactionism is thriving, although it is seen as a little unfashionable compared to more recent approaches like Phenomenology & Ethnomethodology. Ideas & concepts from Symbolic Interactionism can be found throughout the social sciences today, & there are symbolic interactionists in all of the social scientific disciplines.

The theoretical & methodological commitments of Symbolic Interactionism were first formally set-out in early-1960s by Herbert Blumer (e.g. "Society as Symbolic Interaction," in A. Rose (ed), Human Behavior & Social Processes, Routledge, 1982).

The theoretical commitments of Symbolic Interactionism

1. The human capacity for thought is shaped by social interaction & language.
2. In social interaction people learn the meanings & symbols that allow them to selectively interpret, reflect & act.
3. People are able to modify or alter the meanings & symbols they use in social interaction on the basis of their interpretation or definition of the situation, e.g. people construct their behaviour in the course of its execution, rather than responding mechanically to external stimuli or to such internal forces as drives, motives or needs.
4. People are able to make these modifications & alterations primarily because of their ability to interact with themselves, which allows them to examine possible courses of action, assess their relative advantages & disadvantages, & then choose one & act on it.
5. The intertwined patterns of action & interaction make up groups & societies.

For symbolic interactionists, biological, psychological, historical, social, economic, political & cultural structures do not determine social life/social interaction. While these are the essential background constraints within which social life takes place, we must acknowledge (& of course, study the ways) that.....

- a) these structures influence different people in different ways & times, in different situations & with different consequences; &
- b) individuals, groups & structures do not simply elicit pre-established responses from each other - we have to work out what's happening (define a situation) before, during & after we engage in any social interaction: monitoring our own actions & interpretations as well as those of the other people involved.

Thus, symbolic interactionists do not see "society" as a well-defined, tightly organized system of structures & functions, but as a relatively fragile & loose arrangement of heterogenous individuals & groups making up a myriad of competing, complementary & cross-cutting social worlds. These social worlds are partly inherited (biology, psychology & history) & partly imposed (class, status & power), but they are always experienced & interpreted by specific individuals or groups engaged in specific interactions, in specific situations, times & places.

Individuals are socialized (taught, tutored) by "significant others" through social interaction the shared meanings & symbols that lead to patterns of social action. However, this is not a deterministic one-way process - social life is a continual process of socialization, interpretation, reflection, negotiation, interaction..... In all of this, learned meanings & symbols of Self & social identities are particularly important: influencing what we do & with whom, how we do it & when, where we do it & why, & how we interpret & act upon what we & others have done.

The methodological commitments of Symbolic Interactionism

Since social life is a continual process of socialization ("becoming") through social interaction, social research must also be seen as a process of socialization that can only really be accomplished through social interaction with individuals & groups in their natural habitats or settings, using methods & techniques that can catch the complex & dynamic interactive nature of social life without disrupting or distorting it too much.

1. Symbolic interactionists use open-ended research strategies with little theoretical baggage in the early stages of research ("sensitizing concepts") & emphasize deriving findings from fieldwork (inductive analysis). The theoretical & conceptual issues are often discussed at the end. Little use of quantitative data, except for background information.
2. Favoured research methods & techniques include participant-observation, in-depth interviews, life-histories & case-studies.
3. Favoured research locations include individuals or groups in specific settings - schools & classrooms, hospitals & wards, factories & offices, police stations, courtrooms, shops, pubs & clubs - very often with a focus on "minority groups" or "outsiders".

How are the theoretical & methodological commitments of Symbolic Interactionism reflected in Becker's study ?

What are his major findings & how does he interpret them ?

What are the strengths & weaknesses of Becker's study ?

Becker's study laid the foundations for a new approach to the study of deviance & crime that later came to be known as "Labelling Theory". What aspects of Becker's study are important for the study of deviance & crime ?

What does Becker's study indicate about the strengths & weaknesses of Symbolic Interactionism ?

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Mead & Chicago School

Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer)

Dramaturgy (Goffman) Labelling Theory (Becker)

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