

Symbolic Interactionism – An Analytical Framework

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1 Key Issues - Analytical Framework

Symbolic interactionism is a practical, empirical framework for the study of human society. It is a perspective of enquiry in which human activity is not simply regarded as a set of invoked behaviours, responses to stimuli, forms of conditioning, or needs-drives. Instead, symbolic interactionism empirically examines the *processes* and *sub-processes* that lead to actions and interactions that are observable in specific situations, and involving specific groups of people or individuals. Symbolic interaction is founded on the idea that people define and consider *particular plans of action*, and therefore the *potential outcomes* that these actions represent. These definitions are formed via a set of *reflexive* and *self-monitoring* processes invoking the 'self,' the 'mind,' and the 'other,' in which people are said to assess their symbolic engagement with other social beings as they are related to their accomplishments, as they are remembered, and as they lead to adjustments both "during immediate events and following earlier episodes" (Prus, 1996, p. 14).

Symbolic interactionism, like all forms of social enquiry, takes a particular *perspective* and provides a specific *frame of reference*, through which we are able to make sense of the interactions that are observed and understood in social life. Unlike forms of social enquiry that mimic the natural sciences (i.e. mechanistic, positivistic or instrumental forms of experimentation), symbolic interactionism is grounded in the human capacity to communicate symbolically, which goes beyond any immediate situation, beyond any immediate stimuli that might be encountered, and thereby leads to effective forms of collaboration, cooperation and problem solving. Symbolic interaction therefore accounts for:

- The nature and importance of the use of symbols.
- The nature of the self that is the object of interactions.
- The nature of the mind and minded activity that informs interactions.
- The role of the other in establishing the basis for cooperative activity.
- The potential for human action that results from these understandings.
- The wider implication for social interaction on a larger scale as groups or as complex societies.

1.1 What Can We Study? - Subjects of Analytical Framework

The large and complex societies that humans are capable of forming, give a life-long framework through which our sense of belonging and identity is founded, our sense of sociability is articulated, and the processes that help us to manage the complexities of social life are regulated (i.e., its sustainability). We are born into these social fields, but they are not of our making. Occasionally, it is possible that we might be shocked out of the frame of reference that we use to comprehend our social field, though the regulating interactions and understandings that we usually assimilate, provide

much by the way of stability and sustainability in our interactions and cooperative relationships with our identified social groups. According to David Keirse, “whatever we think or feel, say or do, occurs, must occur, in the iron crucible of social relationships” (Keirse, 1998, p. 132). Each set of attitudes and actions that we are informed by, are therefore given form in relation to the prevailing viewpoint, outlook, or point-of-view that is offered to us in our social matrix. We therefore work within, and are oriented to different worldviews, or ‘*Weltanschauung*.’ These worldviews provide us with our vantage point for figuring out in what way we can be understood and act. Symbolic interactionism, therefore, regards human group life as a set of interrelated processes that are : “intersubjective,” “(multi) perspectival,” “reflective,” “activity-based,” “negotiable,” “relational,” and therefore “processual” (Prus, 1996, pp. 15-17).

1.2 Importance of Symbolic Interactionism

The importance of symbolic interactionism can be defined in relation to several key ideas:

1. Humans are social actors who communicate symbolically, and who use symbolic forms to both communicate our actions and to interpret other people’s actions.
2. The mutual social interaction that we engage in is made possible through the process of symbolic communication and interpretation, and gives us the basis by which we understand one another’s acts.
3. This involves taking roles and organising our acts in an ongoing basis as a changing stream of activity that we account for and organise.
4. It is in the process of interaction that we form our human qualities and come to regard ourselves as social objects in ourselves, as symbolic representations, as a reflexive ‘self’ with an operating concept of ‘mind,’ and importantly, an ability to take the role of the ‘other’.
5. As action takes place over time we interpret the actions of other people, who in turn use their interpretations to form the basis for their unfolding actions.
6. Social interaction, therefore, is itself a cause of action in its own right.
7. Social interaction and action shapes our identity in the social field, through a process of negotiation that shapes a personal and a social persona. As we negotiate these definitions of identity we label the interaction of others, who in turn label and shape our understanding of who we think we are in this process. We tell others who we think we are by interacting with them.
8. It is in the process of interaction that we come to a view of our sense of self, and our identity is formed. Further actions that we wish to enact are thereby influenced by who we and others think we are in the social field.
9. Finally, and as noted by Joel Charon, this process of “social interaction creates society” (Charon, 1995, p. 163).

So, instead of suggesting that our social actions are caused by inherited, mechanistic or transactional behavioural traits, as some forms of social science do, symbolic interactionists look instead to the process of interaction *itself* as the mechanism by which we *define* the social objects that are available for us to use in different situations. We enter any social situation cognisant of our sense of self (however limited and underdeveloped), established in a framework of understanding and knowledge that is founded in the operational identities that we foster, that are themselves symbolically represented, and thereby allow us to account for the past and develop a view of potential future actions. These actions are goal orientated, and are recognised by others because they fit with any relevant reference groups and perspectives that we are adept at accommodating, as well as understanding and acting in relation to. What matters in this process is that our interaction unfolds in a symbolically meaningful manner, and gives way to further lines of action that can be accounted for and adapted as the acts unfold. If we consider our isolated acts, and how they change when other social actors are involved in the process of enactment, we can identify what difference these processes make. Indeed, as a reciprocal process of enactment, it is possible to observe how these processes change over time, how they are adapted, and how they enable us to explore new territory as these reciprocal conversations unfold. Alternatively, when reciprocity and negotiation does not occur successfully, it is possible to trace the sense of frustration or disenchantment that comes from not being understood, which itself represents a sense of being thwarted when we seek to follow a potential action stream that we might otherwise wish to undertake.

Humans use symbolic representation to communicate in social situations, though it is the process of interaction itself that gives rise to the symbols that are used, and not the other way around. Social interaction is an act of creation that goes beyond that which is provided for in nature, and according to which we have learnt how to interact for our mutual benefit. To act in the world is to socially agree what the objects are that our actions represent. Collectively we decide what objects mean. However, this is not static and fixed, but is instead a process of change and adaptation. New symbols and forms of representation take the place of old ones. We create new definitions through the process of interaction, and thereby agree what these symbols mean to one another. By agreeing and sharing symbols, and using those symbols as the basis for our accomplishments, humans differentiate themselves from other animals. And because our interactions are founded in the symbolic representation of our potential forms of enactment, we take up roles that help us to communicate and interpret these interactions. By adopting interpretative roles, it is possible for us to adjust our acts in relation to each other's understanding, and thereby, we are able to adopt the perspective of the other as we learn, in turn, what other people expect of us. Thus, it is through role making that the

other comes to know us, and it is through role taking that we learn what they wish to accomplish and what they can expect from us in return.

Realistically, however, there is as much chance that this process of interaction is dysfunctional and misplaced, as it is functional and operative. Our observations of social interaction are as likely to establish that the processes of accomplishment have broken down, as they are to account for the patterns of accomplishment that have been successful. Indeed, all social interaction is a combined process of finding out what works and what doesn't work in a particular situation, thereby making it sustainable. Sometimes, however, the sense of disconnection and conflict in a dysfunctional situation can be palpable when two competing frames of thinking and acting – i.e. alternative perspectives, frameworks or vocabularies - are not aligned, and a mutual sense of potential accomplishment is not forthcoming. In these circumstances, it would still be relevant, if not essential, for the symbolic interactionist to seek out and study social practices and activities that demonstrate the emergence of collaborative and cooperative accomplishments in practical experience, both as they are functionally operative, or as they might be dysfunctional and incongruent. As Dewey notes

Progress is not steady and continuous. Retrogression is as periodic as advance. Industry and inventions in technology, for example, create means which alter the modes of associated behaviour and which radically change the quantity, character and place of impact of their indirect consequences (Dewey, 2016, p. 80).

The basis of symbolic interactionism, then, recognises that all social interaction is symbolic and changing, and that when we study people and social groups we should pay attention to the processes of symbolic interaction that people have with each other and themselves (i.e. the 'other' and the 'self'). It is in accounting for the decision-making processes (i.e. the symbolic framework), as they are related and directed to the potential streams of action of agents and social groups, that symbolic interaction makes its mark. As Meltzer *et al* identify

Individuals in human society [are] not seen as units that are motivated by external or internal forces beyond their control, or within the confines of a more or less fixed structure. Rather, they [are] viewed as reflective or interacting units which comprise the societal entity (Meltzer, Petras, & Reynolds, 1975, p. 42).

Symbolic interactionism's conceptualisation of the individual and the group, then, is founded in a recognition of the symbolic, as well as the practical basis of human society, particularly as it changes over time. Sometimes this change is gradually and imperceptible, and at other times it is violently

and abrupt. The relationship between the individual and the group, however, is regarded as a significant social process in its own right, in which social actors are able to incorporate the conceptual framework of the other into their own conceptual framework. In this way, the social processes of interaction give rise to individuals and social groups that are able to learn of their own mind, and in turn learn about the minds of others. If this process functions correctly, it results in the harmonious adaptation of definitions and acts towards both ourselves and those we relate to as others, and thus gives rise to social accomplishment. If these processes fail to function correctly, then we are likely to witness social dysfunction and conflict.

So, it is in forms of communication and symbolic representation that a combined sense of self and society both emerge. Symbolic interactionism is a model of communication that goes beyond a simple transaction of meaning, in which signals or stimuli are calculated or assimilated.¹ Instead, symbolic interaction can be thought of as a process of interpretation about the *potential* or *intended* meanings that are negotiated in social settings. Group life can thereby be accounted for as a body of symbolic understandings that are the collective products of interacting individuals. If the group is to be successful, and individuals are to develop a sense of belonging and mutual recognition, and thereby attempt to meet the groups' goals, then the reciprocated sharing of these meanings gives rise to potential lines of interaction and potential collective accomplishment. Symbolic interactionism, therefore, considers that "the individual and the group become part of a larger system, and both become... two sides of the same coin" (Meltzer et al., 1975, p. 45).

Moreover, rather than seeing human activity and experience as defined in isolation and merely the experience of co-presence; or, as an experience that is conditioned through responses to stimuli; or, as an experience that is solely driven by impulses, symbolic interactionism instead regards individual and group behaviour to be *creatively* and *symbolically* bonded in the relationships between the individual and the social groupings in which they are part. These forms of symbolic bonding, however, are unpredictable and indeterminate, based as they are in the spontaneous interplay between social actors and the social group. It is this interplay, according to Herbert Blumer, that is the "fundamental source of innovation in human society" (Blumer & Shibutani, 1973, p. 9).

Symbolic interactionism, then, and as conceived by Herbert Blumer, resists forms of mechanical determinism. Instead, social life, according to Blumer, is regarded as a formative process that takes the "cultural norms, status positions, and role relationships as only the frameworks within which social

¹ Witness the endless discussions of communication process articulated by theories of mass communication.

action takes place and not the crucial and coercive determinants of that action” (Meltzer et al., 1975, p. 64).

1.3 Symbolic Interactionism Defined

Following Mead, Blumer posits that there are two levels of human interaction that are distinguishable: that which is symbolic and distinctively human; and that which is non-symbolic, but which is shared with non (or infra-) humans. Infrahumans are capable of making gestures and responding to stimuli, but they lack the essential human ability to seek to understand the standpoint of the other agents that they are interacting with. Reaction to gestures is a basic inherited response that human’s use of symbolic interaction that social cooperation moves beyond. Symbolic interactionism, then, counsels that human events can be comprehended by observing how the people involved in social situations adjust to their projected and actual accomplishments - thereby adjusting what they do in the light of what other people do.² As Herbert Blumer describes, “the first premise is that human beings act towards things on the basis of meanings that they have for them,” and that the meanings that these occasions and events generate are “derived from, or arises out of the social interaction that one has with one’s fellows.” These interactions are “handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process” that is articulated by each person when they are dealing with the things that they encounter (Blumer, 1969, p. 2). Put simply, and according to Joel Charon,

Interaction means human beings act in relation to one another; they take one another’s acts into account as they act. Interaction means that the acts of each individual are built up over time depending in part on what others do in the situation. Interaction means that individuals are not simply influenced by others; it means that actors influence one another as they go along. Hence, a more dynamic and active human being emerges, rather than an actor merely responding to others in the environment (Charon, 1995, p. 23).

The root assumption of symbolic interaction, therefore, is that people who act in the world are *creative, autonomous* and *reflective*, and that they act as *agents* to fashion their own *experience* (Shalin, 1986). This is in contrast to mechanistic views of social engagement, which speculate that social understandings are subject to experiences that are fabricated by greater entities or agents. As Meltzer *et al* summarise

First, human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them. Secondly, these meanings are a product of social interpretation in human society.

² “Envisioning people as having capacities for human agency; to think, act, and interact within a community (intersubjective) context, [means that] ethnographic research is the method in the social sciences which is most attentive to the manners in which people define the situations and accomplish their activities on an ongoing, day-to-day basis” (Prus, 1996, p. 23).

Thirdly, these meanings are modified and handled through an interpretative process that is used by each individual in dealing with the signs he/she encounters (Meltzer et al., 1975, p. 1).

The propositions that underpin the symbolic interactionist framework, moreover, are based on pragmatic ideas of social and individual understanding, and ask if the sense of *agency*, *meaning* and *intention* that are found in our social actions, in our social experiences, and in the social structure in which we inhabit, are observable (Flick, Kardorff, & Steinke, 2004, p. 82). Herbert Blumer makes the point that

Psychologists turn to such factors as stimuli, attitudes, conscious or unconscious motives, various kinds of psychological inputs, perceptions and cognition, and various features of personal organisation to account for given forms or instances of human conduct. [And] in a similar fashion sociologists rely on such factors as social position, status demands, social roles, cultural prescriptions, norms and values, social pressures, and group affiliation to provide such explanations (Blumer, 1969, p. 3).

In such scenarios, Blumer explains, both the psychological and the sociological explanations of the meanings that people hold and articulate are either *evaded* or otherwise *consumed* in the accepted wisdom used to account for their behaviour. In these situations, according to Blumer, meanings are subsumed as factors of *explanation*, rather than of the direct meanings that are held by the people involved. However, and as Blumer goes on to note, “the position of symbolic interactionism, in contrast, is that the meanings that things have for human beings are central in their own right,” and so to “ignore the meaning of the things towards which people act is seen as falsifying the behaviour under study” (Blumer, 1969, p. 3). Coming from an altogether different tradition of social enquiry, Michael Oakeshott echoes this point when he suggests that

Understanding is not so much that we either enjoy it or lack it altogether. To be human and to be aware is to encounter only what is in some manner understood. Thus it may be said that understanding is an unsought condition; we inexorably inhabit a world of ineligibles (Oakeshott, 1975, p. 1).

Therefore, when undertaking studies that attempt to articulate a social interactionist perspective, emphasis is placed on the analysis of social behaviour, which according to O’Sullivan, “cannot always be accomplished via the systematic isolation of suspected variables.” Instead, and in contrast to many forms of realist and positivist forms of social research, the “social context of interaction must be emphasised, together with the inter-dependence of variables in a variety of settings.” Moreover, what is gained in this *holistic* and *ecological* approach, is an ability to focus on the “typical, everyday

episodes or scenes” of daily life, “as they occur within real-life contexts” (O’Sullivan, Hartley, Saunders, Montgomery, & Fiske, 1994, p. 313).

Symbolic interactionism, then, recognises that cultural and social exchanges can be accounted for as a series of ongoing *processes*, in which the agents who are engaged in social acts, and who are attempting to engage in socially understood behaviour, are able to interpret each other’s acts. As John Hewitt suggests, “the individual engaged in interaction with another must be able to assign meaning to the acts of the other in such a way that he can act appropriately himself” (Hewitt, 1979, p. 55). The significance that is achieved from an analytical point of view, therefore, is found in recognising that it is individuals who interact, and that “societies are made up of interacting individuals” who are themselves “constantly undergoing change in interaction.” As a consequence, society is itself “changing through interaction” (Charon, 1995, p. 23).³ In this respect symbolic interaction may be regarded as challenging to accepted wisdoms, because, and according to Joel Charon,

By emphasising the active nature of humans, it [also] questions the scientific potential for fully understanding and predicting human behaviour. It asks that we focus on a definition of the situation, which is an active process, impossible to predict exactly, but to some extent understandable through careful and systematic investigation (Charon, 1995, p. 227).

Social interaction, therefore, takes place among the minds and meanings that form the basis for human society founded on what Mead calls “the generalised other” (Charon, 1995, p. 174).⁴ Symbolic interaction is hence recognised as a process of *self-objectification* and *role-taking* that allows individual agents to take each other’s intentions into account by labelling these intentions with an agreed sense of identity. In this framework, the individual is inseparable from society. It is possible to identify these two precepts separately for the sake of analysis, but they cannot be so easily separated in practice and lived reality. They are two sides of the same coin that need to be understood together. Typically, the symbolic interactionist will seek to map the two sides in the form of the roles and identities that are made available and negotiated. This is made possible because identity is the process

³ “In taking up a point of view on the action, withdrawing from it in order to observe it from above and from a distance, he [the researcher] constitutes practical activity as an object of observations and analysis, a representation” (Bourdieu, 1977 p.2).

⁴ “A culture is a society’s perspective and generalised other. Whereas ‘perspective’ implies that culture means a shared reality, ‘generalised other’ places the emphasis on a culture as a shared body of rules. A generalised other is the law that must be obeyed; it is the system; it is the conscience of the group that individuals are expected to follow in social interaction” (Charon, 1995, p. 174).

by which meanings are attributed to people in a social situation, with the resulting acknowledgement of their sense of self as an object itself. Therefore, identity is an oblique and indirect source of motivation, as witnessed in the *acting-out* or *role-making* of different identities that are given symbolic and conceptual space for us to creatively apply the properties of these identities, especially as we anticipate the consequences of available role-taking accomplishments. In other words, as practical and reflexive agents operating in a social field.

1.4 Reflexivity and Meaning

Essential to the symbolic interactionist outlook, then, are the processes of *reflexivity* and *meaning*. According to the symbolic interactionist perspective, there are two important distinctions that help to shape the *representational mediation processes* that mould interaction and mutual definition sharing. The first is that 'self-meanings' come to be known by agents through their negotiated interactions with other people, and second, that this process is performed in relation with the self through which internalised conceptual frameworks and vocabularies are established as they are negotiated, experienced and learnt. Our sense of self, and the meanings that we attach to this sense of self are accomplished when we interact with others in different situations, and thereby learn to enact a recognisable and defined role - as others respond to the appropriate and recognisable gestures and role performance (i.e. intersubjectivity). However, rather than simply being gestures and responses, this is a process, instead, of *negotiation* and *enactment* that is regarded by symbolic interactionists as a continuous loop, or *representational mediation process*, in which we reflexively engage with feedback to the self as we identify the potential outcomes of the processes that in turn shape the sense of the self. As we engage in performance we are influenced by, or take into account, the performances of others, and thereby make adjustments to our ongoing performances (Goffman, 1990). As we adapt our performance, the role associated with this expression is either changed or restricted, which in turn changes our sense of identity that is defined socially and in relation to our sense of self. As Sheldon Stryker suggests

Reflexivity is the feedback to the self of the consequences of the processes that are the self: identities influence performances and performances are assessed by the self for their identity implications (Stryker, 2002, p. 132).

Symbolic interactionism, then, offers its most effective contribution to understanding these social processes because, as an analytical framework or perspective, it is sensitive to the emergent properties of interaction as they are articulated and accomplished in the contingent, temporary and passing social world. Therefore, the focus of symbolic interactionism is to locate and describe the social structures or patterns of social engagement that are negotiated by agents acting in the social realm. The study of human behaviour according to social interactionists, then, is rooted in the lived experiences that humans undertake and make sense of, with a focus on “people’s meanings, interpretations, activities, and interactions” (Prus, 1996, p. 9).

1.5 Freedom and Agency

If we are to be able to recognise, account for, and learn from the changing nature of our lived experiences, the changing worldviews that we hold, and the changing social processes that our relationships and understandings are established in relation to, then symbolic interactionists propose that we give due regard to those aspects of human association that remain *unfixed* and *indeterminate*. Herbert Blumer stressed that the individual is not simply the product of social forces that exist externally to the individual, such as models of culture are often said to operate, which ‘stamp’ their imprint on them. Instead, and according to Blumer, human association, is

A moving process in which the participants note and gauge each other’s actions, where they organise their action in relation to one another, and where they inhibit themselves, encourage themselves, and guide themselves as action unfolds over time (Blumer, 1953, p. 197).

Whereas freedom and agency, or self-actualisation, are often regarded as the *product* of social arrangements and processes (for example Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 2011)), symbolic interactionists are instead able to demonstrate that freedom and creativity (i.e. agency), give rise to our social practices, and not the other way around. As Joel Charon notes, “in truth, society does make us as we interact with to others. But with what society provides – symbols, self, mind, role-taking ability – we turn around and make society” (Charon, 1995, p. 183). The culture that we inhabit, therefore, is created and changed as people interact and develop particular meanings, express particular ideas that they believe in, even as they revise the validations of the past, challenging what is already known, and seeking new settlements and new agreements. This is a process that sometimes involves conflict and disruptive negotiation between social actors, as they fight the battle of meanings (symbolic or actual) that will establish which definitions, labels and terminologies gain currency, and thus which vocabularies and meanings will provide the basis for future interactions. If agreement of these terms fails to emerge, and socially established meanings cannot be cooperatively and

harmoniously regulated, as Joel Charon notes, then “sometimes a consensus does not emerge in interaction, and society collapses” (Charon, 1995, p. 176).

Symbolic interactionism’s grounding in the pragmatic tradition emphasises that human nature is a process of potential creativity, in which individuals and social groups enact expressively through their social relationships, rather than being “suppressed by the social order” (Meltzer et al., 1975, p. 7). This means that pragmatist forms of social enquiry generally seek to understand the conditions that are most likely to allow individuals to develop their potentiality, and thereby enact their lines of action. In this respect, the pragmatist frame of reference and perspective views the problems of modern social life as “bound up with the lack of recognition of the plasticity of human beings” (Meltzer et al., 1975, p. 15), and is thus a challenge to the deterministic view of social arrangements that fail to conceptualise and account for the vitality of the human spirit, the changing forms of social arrangements, and the full usage of the creative potential that humans are capable of demonstrating. As John Dewey argued, there can be no knowledge or thinking that stands beyond the individual as a thinking force (i.e. as metaphysics). As Dewey notes “like all facts subject to observation and specification, they are spatial-temporal, not eternal” (Dewey, 2016, p. 52). Instead, Dewey proposes that the routines and practices of thinking individuals have to be viewed as grounded in the social practices and interactions that give rise to the conditions in which agents as thinking individuals themselves can develop. As Meltzer *et al* describe

Rather than construct artificial situations and attempt to study phenomena when they occur within these static boundaries, the social scientist [according to Dewey] was to study phenomena through instituting deliberate changes into the social body. For, given the nature of human society, it was only in this way that societal change could be studied with reference to the other changes evoked (Meltzer et al., 1975, p. 21).

When linked with Mead’s functional theory of mind, symbolic interactionists regard the symbolic relationship between social objects and the individual as a tool that operates with an *adjustive capability*. Pragmatically our experience is grounded in the behaviour of individuals, but it is also located in the symbolic understandings that are articulated in our minds. The processes and relationships that form the basis of the symbolic interactionist model of study is focussed, therefore, on the relationships that people have with their environment, their social interaction, and their sense of self that is built up over time. This reflexive process indicates a level of development among humans that keeps moving beyond the patterns of behaviour that are signified in practical, physiological experiences. In

this sense humans have the ability to recognise their own framework of experience, and to seek new ways to progress that understanding by incorporating, synthesising and learning from the conditions that are recalled in memory. This reflexive approach is the foundation of the symbolic interactionist worldview, with its focus on the plasticity and adaptability of the sense of self, mind and accomplishment that is formed in our social interactions. As Robert Anton Wilson notes about modern thinking

Uncertainty, Indeterminacy and Relativity appear in modern science for the same reason they appear in modern logic, modern art, modern literature, modern philosophy and even modern theology. In this century, the human nervous system has discovered its own creativity, and its own limitations (Wilson, 2016, p. 26).⁵

Symbolic interactionism, then, takes a stand against the determinism that prevails in much of social science. Symbolic interactionism attempts to demonstrate that the possibility of freedom exists through the use of symbols, self, and mind. So instead of simply asserting that human beings are in fact free, symbolic interactionism also recognises many of the limits of the forms of freedom that we negotiate. As Joel Charon remarks, “freedom is a complex issue; to symbolic interactionists its existence is possible, but it is always limited” (Charon, 1995, p. 229).

⁵ Robert Anton Wilson also notes that “All kinds of maps or models also show, on examination, the personality or ‘mental furniture’ of their creator, and, to a lesser extent, of the creator’s society and linguistic system(s) – the semantic environment” (Wilson, 2016, p. 28).

2 Research Orthodoxies

According to Norman Denzin, symbolic interactionism has had a “tortured history in American sociology. Many times its death has been announced, and its practitioners maligned, but the perspective refuses to die” (Norman Denzin quoted in Flick et al., 2004, p. 81). Tim O’Sullivan describes symbolic interaction as an approach to the study of social activities and relationships that “emphasises the importance of negotiated meanings associated with symbols exchanged in interaction between the self and others” (O’Sullivan et al., 1994, p. 313). Furthermore, and according to Becker and McCall,

Symbolic interactions is a sociological tradition that traces its lineage to the Pragmatists – John Dewey and George Herbert Mead, particularly – and to sociologists of the ‘Chicago School’ – Robert E. Park, Herbert Blumer, Everet C. Hughes, and their students and successors (Becker & McCall, 1990).

Symbolic interaction, however, is not commonly taught as an orthodox research method in British media and cultural studies, although it is in many ways related to, and shares, many common ideas and preconceptions. The approach of media studies in the United Kingdom rests largely on political, industrial, economic, cultural, content, textual, discursive or archival analysis (Cobley, 1996; During, 1999; Hartley, 2011; Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2002; Livingstone, 2006; Long & Wall, 2009; Thornham, Bassett, & Marris, 2009). For example, David Gauntlett suggests that “for a couple of decades, from the 1980s, media studies had settled into a reasonably stable cluster of subject areas, such as ‘institutions’, ‘production’, ‘audiences’ and ‘texts’ (Gauntlett, 2015, p. 1). As such, Gauntlett argues, there are few opportunities to develop *practice-based* forms of media analysis, grounded in the day-to-day experience of people, especially in the way that they use, create and experience media. Consequently, there is a clear lack of commitment to the training and schooling that is required when undertaking forms of investigation that can encompass the newer forms of participation and experimental media.⁶ However, there is a useful affinity marked in the British cultural studies tradition. Norman Denzin describes how Stuart Hall’s view of the cultural subject is “in part symbolic interactionist,” because people are defined as being able to work out the conditions in which they operate for themselves.⁷ According to Denzin, Hall explores how

⁶ Sonia Livingstone and Leah Livrouw describe how the increased focus on ICT in media studies has brought about a renewed interest in “what people do with media and each other,” which has led to a reorientation of communication research and scholarship toward a “more contextualized account of agency in everyday life” (Livingstone, 2006).

⁷ Hall, however, maintains that British cultural studies, in contrast with American cultural studies, is an attempt to institute a “genuine cultural and critical practice, which is intended to produce some kind of organic intellectual political work, which does not try to inscribe itself in the overarching meta-narrative of achieved knowledges, within the institutions” (Hall, 1999, p. 108)

The meanings [a] subject brings to his or her situation are shaped by the larger ideological forces in the culture, for consciousness is 'always infused with ideological elements, and any analysis of social frameworks of understanding must take account of the elements of 'mis-recognition' which are involved' (Hall quoted in Denzin, 1992, p. 118).

The pragmatist challenge to this notion of infused ideology operating as an *extrinsic* or *determining* force should be clear by now, but it is worth noting the significant differences that remain between the approach taken by Hall (*hegemony*) and that suggested, for example, by liberal pragmatists like Rorty (*interpretivism*). More recently, audience studies has gained currency in media studies approaches, combined with the expansion of the study of virtual communities and with the shift toward participative forms of ICT and social media. Configurations of communities of practice and fan communities have shifted the focus of media studies away from the singularly *textual* approach, to the participative and experiential. This signifies an important shift, therefore, and one that recognises the developing field of participative enactment studies that argues that it is *not what academics and theorists say in their studies of media that matter, but what people living in different communities and lifeworlds achieve and accomplish with media that is important*. This places the use and development of symbolic interaction in a contested but central position. If symbolic interaction, and its aligned data collection method of participant observation, are approaches that can be usefully reconsidered for the value that they offer to the study of people using media, then they need to be embedded in the mainstream media studies curricula. Symbolic interaction is a well-established methodology and field of study in its own right. One that is time-honoured and proven to give meaningful insights into the operation of cultural and social activities. Symbolic interaction, moreover, has the advantage that it recognises *agency* and diminishes *ideology* in its founding principles, and that these principles are expected to be enacted on the basis of empirical observation and pragmatic practicality.

Norman Denzin summarises the predicament faced by the symbolic interactionist, however, when he explains that

Of course, there are no real biographical subjects, independent of the stories told about them, and even these texts, in the telling, displace the teller. We can never get back to raw biographical experience. The closest we can ever get is when a subject, in an epiphanal moment, moves from one social world to another. In these instances the subject is between interpretative frameworks. When this happens, experience is described in words that are yet to be contaminated by the cultural understandings of a new group (Denzin, 1992, p. 19).

The challenge then, is to define a set of tools and an approach that can look at practices of media participation, engagement and the contingent, localised meanings that are articulated and accomplished within the lifeworlds and communities of people as they engage with media on a day-to-day basis.⁸ These tools should seeks to redress the wider sense of social breakdown and symbolic dysfunction that is increasingly prevalent, by offering a *distributed* and *creative* view of social participation, practice, communication and social interaction. This is a view, as has been established, that is governed by the ethos of self-representation and creative agency, rather than being viewed as a response occurring in relation to the dull hand of social and economic conformity. This conformity is locked into the transactionalist, instrumentalist and positivist mindset of the individual who is seen or viewed as simply grounded in social forces beyond their control, rather than these social forces being grounded in the individual's potential for symbolic communication and action. As Joel Charon summarises

Those who have emphasised structure have tended to examine the historical reality of society: Society is a set of forces that exert themselves on the individual. Society is a set of institutions, stratification systems, and cultural patterns into which individuals are born and are socialised, playing roles according to scripts laid down by others, living and dead. Society has a permeance that shapes each individual. Society socialises the individual; the individual internalises society (Charon, 1995, p. 167).

Instead, symbolic interactionism rejects these forms of “determinative social structure” and instead offers a perspective that is founded in the interactional processes that are observable in practice between agents (Stryker, 2002, p. 135). This gives rise to a different approach to theory building and forms of analysis. Symbolic interactionism is focussed on accounts of the strategic processes that people employ, and from which they are able to manage reflexively the interactional process of mind, self, identity and the comprehension of the other.

2.1 Key Criticisms of Symbolic Interactionism

It is often argued in response to the perspective offered by symbolic interactionism, that there is a tendency to overlook several operative factors that are at play in society. These include the nature of power, the nature of institutions, the nature of social structures and cultural patterns, as well as

⁸ The work of Robert Prus forms the primary source of methodological direction in this study. Prus has written extensively in this area, both as a practicing ethnographer and as a critic and theorists of pragmatic ideas. Prus is described as “tracing the developmental flow of pragmatist thought from the classical Greek era (c700-300 BCE) to the present time. This transhistorical venture has taken him into a number of areas of Western social thought – including rhetoric, poetics, religious studies, history, education, politics, and philosophy” (Puddephatt, Shaffir, & Kleinknecht, 2009, p. xv).

the constant focus on the role of interacting individuals who are said to be perpetually invoking a process of social change, either consciously or through their instinctive reactions. The fear being articulated through this criticism, as Joel Charon notes, is the “wonder that society is able to exist at all and maintain its structure with the constant self-direction that takes place” (Charon, 1995, p. 167). Furthermore, the general criticisms of symbolic interactionism are, according to Meltzer *et al*, that the process of enactment of the symbolic interactionist process is difficult to enact, difficult to operationalist, difficult to test, and that the concepts are subject to inductive forms of reason and intuition, as opposed to the more prevalent form of deductive reasoning and experimentation found in the approaches to social observation that are modelled on the physical sciences.

It is difficult to spell out the specific procedures of the symbolic interactionist approach as they can be somewhat confusing and developmental. For example, what is the difference between self and mind? How is the view of self arrived at in the process of negotiation with other agents who are simultaneously seeking to negotiate their own view of self? In practical terms these observations are often founded in conflicting and intersecting activity streams, so how can we be certain that we have clearly delineated the activities and reflections of different individuals, without probing into a form of mass or aggregate psychology? The self in the symbolic interactionist model is never fixed, it is always inconsistent, it is often contradictory, and it isn't easily confined to the routines of a script or dominant discursive approach. This suggests that symbolic interactionism neglects the unconscious as a driving force in human nature, as it is difficult to come up with a model of interaction that accounts for both the internal and the external social processes that we are dealing with as we interact with one another, and reflect on those interactions. As Meltzer *et al* point out, however

Of all the presumed deficiencies of the symbolic interactionist paradigm... two stand forth as the most crucial: (1) limited consideration of human emotions, and (2) unconcern with social structure. In effect, the first of these shortcomings implies that symbolic interactionism is not psychological enough, while the second implies that symbolic interactionism is not sociological enough. Symbolic interactionism is, of course, a social psychological perspective; hence, it could be argued plausibly that what others consider limitations are seen by social psychologists as simply affirmations of the proper concerns of social psychology. (Meltzer *et al.*, 1975, p. 120).

Symbolic interaction, however, is a useful tool that helps to describe and analyse the interaction that is necessary for the development of society. It is through interaction that, as Joel Charon points out, that “society is formed, reaffirmed, and altered, and it is through the absence of continuous interaction that society ceases to exist. Society depends on individuals continuously interacting with one

another and with themselves” (Charon, 1995, p. 163). The importance of the symbolic interactionist perspective is important, therefore, because it calls for a change in direction and a questioning of the assumptions that are made about human interaction. By emphasising the active and creative nature of people acting in their lifeworlds, symbolic interactionism questions the terms on which we understand and might predict human behaviour. Joel Charon believe that this is “revolutionary,” because as an active process, human interaction is impossible to predict exactly, though to some extent human interaction can be made “understandable through careful and systematic investigation” (Charon, 1995, p. 227).

3 Symbolic Interactionist Applied Analytical Framework

As a framework for analysis, then, symbolic interactionism offers a recognisable and examinable set of processes, including:

1. How people establish goals in the situation they are located in.
2. How people applying their acquired or emergent perspectives gained from their interaction with significant others or reference groups associated with the situation.
3. How people identify or label to themselves (their self), any relevant objects in a situation (for example the identities and roles of other people, any natural or human-made objects, any shared concepts and ideas, their use of language and descriptive terms, for example).
4. How people take a role and thus become a recognisable other, either as individuals or as a group as a whole.
5. How people define their sense of self in different situations in regard to:
 - How we assess what we do in relation to each situation.
 - How we assess what is happening in different situations in relation to our sense of self.
 - How we ascribe a sense of value or worth to our sense of self in different situations.
 - How we articulate or negotiate a sense of identity in different situations.
 - How we interpret what we are experiencing emotionally as self in different situations.
6. How people define the future streams of action that are potential in our acts in different situations. These potential streams of action might be imagined to be distant or immediate, tangible or intangible.
7. How people apply their prior acquired knowledge in a situation in the form of memories from the past and apply them to the present situations.

In using symbolic interactionist principles to explain social situations that we wish to understand, we are agreeing, and seeking evidence, that the following have the potential to occur:

- The interaction of agents acting reflexively is what defines any situations they encounter.
- We are seeking evidence of how actors act towards one another, and how these actions are developed or unfold in the situation that these actors are defining.
- We regard these actors as social objects that are defined in relation to one another.

- The acts that are accomplished are not originated from discrete motivations, but are influenced by actions that are encountered as other actors interact.
- Social interaction is therefore acknowledged as the intersection of different actors' emerging streams of action, each changing his or her own stream of action according to what others do.
- Subsequently, these interactions lead over time to a shared view of reality (a worldview or perspective) which itself becomes part of the definition and labelling of social interaction, shaping the potential for decision-making and the direction of future actions.

In applying the insight that is gained from the symbolic interactionist perspective, then, we are establishing that human interaction takes the form of acts within a world of social objects, and that when we act in this world we do so, not in relation to any world that can be said to be 'out there,' but instead to a world that is defined by others through symbolic communication. As Joel Charon notes

We share with others a definition of the world and its objects. Objects are transformed from physical stimuli responded to automatically into objects socially constructed. Each time we interact with others we come to share a somewhat different view of what we are seeing. We see what is out there in a new light. As we interact we develop a perspective as to what is real and how we are to act toward that reality (Charon, 1995, p. 55).

Therefore, given the contingent, multifaceted, uncertain and emergent nature of human relations, there is no way that a definitive methodological set of instructions can be provided which will result in a fixed and certain analysis of the social field. Symbolic interactionism is always open to, and defined by, the interpretative process of negotiation that shapes other social processes.

We can, however, take a view about social action that recognises the interpretative processes that are being articulated and subsequently observed. As Sheldon Stryker notes

This cannot be done on the premise that social action is the product of pre-existing causative factors. The formation of action must be traced by seeing the situation as it is seen by the actor, observing what the actor takes into account and how he interprets what is taken, noting alternative acts that are mapped out, and trying to follow the interpretation that leads to the selection of one of these acts (Stryker, 2002, p. 97).

Symbolic interaction may be envisioned, instead, and according to Robert Prus, as

The study of the ways in which people make sense of their life-situations and the ways in which they go about their activities, in conjunction with others, on a day-to-day basis. It is very much a 'down to earth' approach, which insists upon rigorously grounding its notions of the ways in which human group life is accomplished in the day-to-day practices and experiences of the people whose lives one purports to study (Prus, 1996, p. 10).

The research objective of the symbolic interactionist, then, is to enter the worlds of the people that they wish to understand, and to gain a sense of their thoughts, feeling and actions. This is a process of shared experience, of understanding, and taking the role of the other, and reflexively assuming the role of a participant who is unencumbered by instrumental notions of objectivity and bias, and who instead embrace the shared viewpoint, perspective and worldview of those we are seeking to understand. This means that the interrogative process that is followed by the symbolic interactionist is far from the so-called dispassionate and objective models of social science, but seeks, instead, to "understand what people intend and why they act as they do" (Kathy Charmaz in Prus, 1996, p. xiv). In this regard, the symbolic interactionist analytical functions are themselves a process of shared experience and insight that focuses on *plausibility* rather than *objectivity*.

3.1 Analytical Use of Symbolic Interactionism

The analytical framework that is offered by symbolic interactionism can be summarised, then, as a set of interlinked social process of reflection and accomplishment. Put simply, reflective practice is "the practice of periodically stepping back to ponder the meaning... [of] what has recently transpired" (Yanow & Tsoukas, 2009, p. 1340). These processes are grounded in a sense of cooperation and reciprocal meaning-making, and are only to be understood as they are practiced, experienced and negotiated through social interaction.

3.1.1 Ongoing Communication

First, to establish a sense of social cooperation the people involved in a given situation must be 'copresent'. That is, they must be operative in a situation in which they recognise one another as both subjects and objects of their communication. There has to be a mutual exchange of ideas. Individuals have to be able to make requests of one another, and they have to be able to discuss or show how situations and problems can be dealt with using the resources and the social materials that are at hand. Symbolic representation and communication are therefore wide and varying in their forms, and the gestures or representations that are shared will be recognised from remembered symbolic repertoires that are held common

by each social grouping. Mutual actions depend on people expressing and comprehending mutual communications, and *vice-versa*, as they go along.

3.1.2 Mutual Role Taking

Second, social cooperation is founded on the mutual responsiveness that actors are able to articulate. Actors are engaged in an ongoing process of seeking and establishing the intersections of mutual engagement, as they emerge over time, and as they align with the operational goals that individuals or groups aspire to accomplish. Social actors have to be able to observe and understand the intended acts of others, in order for them to be able to align their intended social actions with others in a cooperative manner. Actors who are incapable of performing this exchange of intentions, or who choose not to note the intentions of others, will be incapable of cooperating. Role-making and role-taking are therefore essential elements of social interaction.

3.1.3 Defining the Others as Social Objects

Third, when social actors are able to align their vocabularies and their identities in congruent manners, they do so because they have recognised the other in a situation and ascribed them a mutually recognisable identity. However, this sense of identity is not free floating, but is aligned with the goals that each actor wishes to accomplish in their social field and on the basis of their worldview. This process grounds identity in both the symbolic and the practical frame of engagement, as recognition of an actor's identity must be useful for the others operating in this situation.

3.1.4 Defining Social Objects Together

Fourth, the alignment of reciprocal and cooperative social understandings provides grounds for the development of shared attention structures. These attention structures are important for each of the actors involved, and there is recognition that they will also have value for the collective and cooperative social group. If these definitions are not grounded in mutual recognition, then they lose value and currency by not being understood and assimilated into the repertoire of ongoing conversations and performances.

3.1.5 Developing Goals in Interaction

Finally, social interaction is a process of alignment of goals. Social interaction is collaborative and cooperative, and enables the wider clustering of goals that enable complex and distributed social arrangements to occur. Society therefore emerges from the unique interactions of individuals cooperating for mutual benefit.

4 Analytical Framework

The symbolic interactionist approach is close to cultural anthropology, and is informed by ethnography, with its focus on investigations that seek to understand how people talk, think and act in their everyday lives. The symbolic interactionist analytical approach therefore prioritises the functional arrangements that people report and experience in the ways that they adopt, and come to be familiar with, their own and other people's worldviews. This is founded in the negotiation of the conceptual perspectives that enable these worldviews, the use of symbols as their main form of communication about these worldviews, and their sense of self, and their sense of mind that is articulated in their social interactions. Each of these processes leads to an operational sense of identity and a role-making/role-taking process that implies cognisance of the function of the other in social interactions. Actions and accomplishments are therefore part of a process of communication, representation, thinking, comprehending, reflecting, defining and labelling. It is through this process that social interaction forms its patterns and associations, and from which a sense of society is formed. This is the basis on which social cooperation is achieved.

To study a social group or situation, then, one must look and examine the following:

4.1.1 Perspectives

Forms of investigation that are based on symbolic interactionist ideas will seek to understand the role of the individual in relation to society, describing and accounting for the sense of shared culture by considering the perspectives of specific individuals and comparing them with the perspectives that are ascribed to the generalised other. This can be described as an interplay between the shared body of rules that agents are faced with, and the expression of those general principles that individuals are expected to negotiate in practice. The cultural expression of these generalised rules is to be found in the products and symbolic representations that individuals share and incorporate into their own worldview.

4.1.2 Symbols

The perspective that individuals operate with are acquired through the sharing and use of symbols. It is only with the acquisition of language, and other forms of symbolic communication, that individuals are able to understand themselves, take their own experiences into account, take account of the experiences of others, and form and modify their potential lines of action on the basis of these symbolic representation. As Robert Prus notes, "it is the attainment of language that makes the possession of a 'self' possible" (Prus, 1996, p. 11).

4.1.3 Self

Symbolic interactionism recognises that the self is variable, and that it is the product of the social processes that individuals reflexively engage in as they participate in social activities and actions. Symbolic interactionism avoids attributing these processes to habit, instinct or external social forces, but recognises, instead, that the self is the outcome, if a variable outcome, of the process of interaction. As Sheldon Stryker notes, the image that we have of the self is "constructed in the situation," and is a "working model for constructing interaction; as it is flexible enough to accommodate role-taking as well as role-making, role enactment as well as role construction" (Stryker, 2002, p. 133).

4.1.4 Mind

Symbolic interactionism is able to form this model of selfhood because it has a view of mind that regards people as persons who are "active, constructivist, problem-solving, intentions actors capable of recognising and communicating with other persons" (Stryker, 2002, p. 119). The centrality to observed patterns of problem solving is the basis for the view that in engaging with the world self-consciously and reflexively, that humans are able to articulate and use thought processes that seek out patterns, that seek to deliberately learn from past experience, and which seeks to achieve lines of action and that go beyond simple habit and custom. As Meltzer *et al* note

Reasoning power in human beings, as manifested in their individual and social behaviour, involves references to the relationships between things by the use of the symbols that are learned through interaction in a particular society (Meltzer et al., 1975, p. 36).

4.1.5 Identity

By invoking the meanings and the shared symbolic representations that form the basis of social life, it is possible to invoke a concept of identity that others are able to recognise and engage with. The meanings that we articulate and agree have implications for the lines of action that we wish to pursue. Being a meaning-holder, i.e. having an identity, is crucial to how we adapt to operating in different circumstances, and in turn how we allow others to adapt to our sense of 'temporal stability.' As Stryker explains

The image, not the identity, guides the immediate interaction. The identity guides the construction and maintenance of the image; and the image influences the identity, although this impact is likely to be small relative to the reverse. Thus the image acts as a buffer between the identity and the vicissitudes of normal interaction (Stryker, 2002, p. 132).

4.1.6 The Role of the Other

The negotiation of these definitions and constructions of reality are articulated between people who are recognised as other. We do not get our way entirely in these instances, but are able to achieve harmonious and congruent recognition of each other's desires because it is possible to ascribe symbolic meaning to others that we interact with in our social field. We continuously share and continuously define ourselves and each other in the process of interaction, and the process of interaction alone. We are actors who are guided by our interactions with others as they unfold over time. As Robert Prus explains

All constructions of reality, all notions of definition, identifications, and explanations, all matters of education, enterprise, entertainment, interpersonal relations, organisational practices, cultic involvements, collective behaviour, and political struggles of all sorts are rooted in the human accomplishment of intersubjective interpersonal relations (Prus, 1996, p. 2).

4.1.7 Action

In order to progress and determine the direction of our self, symbolic interactionism starts with the assumption that individuals are free to pursue lines of action. We don't do this in isolation, but rather we achieve this as we negotiate the potential lines of action that we seek to direct with others. Action is therefore a process of negotiation with the self and the others that we come to recognise in our social field. Action is understood, not as the result of external causes, or forces within ourselves, but as the result of our negotiations and reflections on what might be individually desirable and what might be socially possible. Actions therefore have consequences that we apply our thought processes to considering. Tracing

the patterns and the implementation of our actions as they unfold over time, allowing us to get a sense of the relative levels of freedom and collaboration that we are in control of or influenced by at any one time.

4.1.8 Social Interaction

Social interaction is therefore regarded as a complex set of interrelationships that are accountable, not from a mythic past, or an extrinsic force, but instead as an *intersection* between individuals acting in response to a generalised other, a culture, a model of social organisation, and a repertoire of symbolic instruments that change and shift over time. Therefore “symbolic interaction calls for social science to see humans from a different perspective, and to adjust its scientific focus and techniques accordingly” (Charon, 1995, p. 227).

4.1.9 Society

The working stocks of knowledge, and the conceptual schemes that we learn to appreciate, are comprehended in practical and situated contexts. Social experience is both novel and creative. Social experience is understood in the context of the linguistic and symbolic repertoires that people have access to – their vocabularies. However, the collective basis of the expression of social identity is fast moving and outstrips the abilities of each of us to “retain and formulate more precise or lasting images of these events” (Prus, 1996, p. 12). The collective retention of social memory, and patterns of accomplishment, are what forms social groups and society. The enduring task of the symbolic interactionist, therefore, is to demonstrate how we become social entities, and how this is born from “human endeavour[s] in the course of day-to-day life” (Prus, 1996, p. 2).

5 Absence of Cooperation

The absence of mutual understanding, the absence of social practices of collaboration and cooperation, might be said to be the defining worries of our age. Indeed, this is a concern that symbolic interactionists in the pragmatic tradition have expressed for some time, and is clear in the work of Dewey, Mead and Blumer (among others). The pragmatic prognosis is that mass and industrial society has been making the grounds for successful social cooperation and collaboration that much more difficult to achieve in a harmonious, forward looking, self-actualising, mature, responsive and mutually supporting manner. The ground underneath society, it is argued, has become arid and infertile, and offers little in the way of sustenance for interaction and cooperation that might be meaningful and independently nurtured. Joel Charon summarises the importance of cooperation for a functional and harmonious social order when he says

In every instance of cooperative social interaction... there is communication, taking others into account, recognising one another as useful in dealing with situations, defining objects in the situation in a similar way, and developing similar or complementary goals (Charon, 1995, p. 172).

As mass society continues to transform and develop, with the introduction of electronic and data-driven forms of communication and exchange, it is essential to acknowledge that if we fail to nurture and explore the potentiality that is represented in the symbolic social world, then our social world will become increasingly dysfunctional. In whatever form we view society: either as a mass or a collection of interlinked groups; as a patchwork of embedded communities, or as complex cultures and societies with historical roots in our material manipulation of the physical world, it is essential to maintain some regard for the way that individuals symbolically recognise and adapt the social intersections and networks that they are part of. It is in the way that individuals interact that group and social life is defined and formed. This involves people doing many different things which constitute their interactions, such as: “role taking, communicating, interpreting one another, adjusting their acts to one another, directing and controlling self, sharing perspectives.” (Charon, 1995, p. 167). Our ability to analytically separate these instances, such as ‘group,’ ‘society,’ ‘organisation,’ and ‘social world’ is a useful start to being able to understand the emergent nature of these organisation, though from a symbolic interactionist perspective it is not entirely necessary.

Instead, it is by understanding other people’s acts from their perspective that we learn how society is made possible. It is in communicating to others that we intend to do something that we, and they,

come to understand the forms of social accomplishment that we wish to achieve. Society and social forms of collaborative and cooperative behaviour are only possible because we are able to communicate symbolically about our intentions, and likewise others are able to communicate about their intentions. As Charon summarises

It is through understanding the act from the other person's perspective that society is made possible. It is through communicating to others what one is doing, what one believes, and what one is. Cooperation depends on symbols, actors, communicating and interpreting one another's acts as they go along (Charon, 1995, p. 169).

The questions that need to be resolved, however, are what happens if this process breaks down and we are left with social arrangements that are fossilised in institutions, in hierarchical and stratified social relationships, in cultural patterns that are fixed in historical memory, but which lack applicability to the ever changing and emerging nature of the world? Symbolic interactionism's strength is that it emphasises the dynamic and changing nature of social life, and it de-emphasises the historical, economic, or otherwise deterministic forces that are said to account for social change. Symbolic interactionism focuses on change and the future. It recognises that we are influenced by the past, but that we are not defined by the past. We are able to create the future anew because society is recognised as the result of processes in which individuals interact.

6 Summary

The establishment of cooperation and reciprocal understanding is necessary for the survival of society. The dominant instrumental control model that has been in place following the turn to scientific rationalism, lacks the capability to nurture enduring and sustainable social relationships. Symbolic interactionism suggests that we can overcome the problems of social dysfunction if we are able to “assume the attitude of the others who are involved with them in a common endeavour” (Meltzer et al., 1975, p. 37). Our society is itself formed in these social interactions. The social objects that we use are created in the process of interaction, and can therefore be changed in the process of social interaction. As Joel Charon suggests, “we learn about what exists, we learn to call those things names, and we come to understand them” (Charon, 1995, p. 151). We have the power to alter reality if we shape and nurture the social interactions that are available to us in a basic and sustainable manner. Social definitions change. New symbols are adopted and shared. The meanings of these symbols are applied in practical engagement with others in our social fields. Bringing people in different social fields together so that they can relate to their independent experiences is a significant challenge, but out of the old relationships, it is always possible to create new relationships.

Interaction is what creates, defines and allows us to view ourselves as objects. Interaction also allows us to interact with significant others in our reference groups. As Joel Charon suggests, “we become aware of ourselves as objects, we come to see, assess, judge self, and create identities” (Charon, 1995, p. 151). And whether this minded activity is covert or explicit, it provides us with the ongoing tools for social interaction and the development of the self, the roles that we make and take, as well as the understandings that we are able to form as we interact. Humans are by their nature symbol users. As we work with symbolic forms of communication and interaction we become self-aware, we develop a sense of mind, we role-take so that we can understand other people, and we do this constructively and creatively. Our social characteristics are not something that we simply possess, they are not provided for us in a state of nature. Instead they are developed and practiced through our social interactions. Symbolic interactionism therefore can help us comprehend problems in our social world, which should not be dismissed lightly.

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