

Lecture 006: Symbolic Interaction

LCD Soundsystem - Losing My Edge

<https://youtu.be/6xG4oFny2Pk>

1 Einstein 100 - Theory of General Relativity

A short film celebrating the centennial of Einstein's theory of General Relativity.

<https://youtu.be/6XSAVqm0XBI>

"An analysis of what takes place at these points of contact between the [participative] process and the social setting reveals a different picture. The picture is different in important respects. The initial factors, the x and the y, undergo alteration in interacting with each other, and furthermore, are subject to appreciable change by the entrance of new factors into the process of interaction. One cannot account for the z, the determinate social change, by a combination of x and the y; the determinate social change is the result of a process of development in which the x and the y themselves undergo change and in which other factors than the x and y may enter. What is important is the process of development and not the x and y factors that are presumed to set it off" (Blumer, 1990, p. 141).

- If we can reconcile Space and Time as a relative (relational) concept, i.e. Spacetime, can we reconcile Social Arrangements and Meaning as a relative (relational) concept, i.e. Socialmeaning?
- In General Relativity if mass changes then there is a change in both time and geometry. Neither is the product of the other, or the conditions by which the other results.
- Rather, they are the setting and the process by which things are arranged.
- What are the processes of development that give us the participatory social arrangements and meanings that we see around us today?
- If we change the meanings, then we change the social setting. If we change the social setting, then we change the meanings. The two are relational.

1.1 The question is what takes place in the process of arrangement?

"The changes have to acquire the form and character that permit one to identify them as determinate social changes. The 'determinate social consequences' are not present initially at the points of contact, but arise as a result of a process of formation. This simple observation is of central importance because it directs attention to the process of formation instead of to factors antecedent to the process. The vital question becomes, what takes place in the process of formation? rather than, What are the constituted factors that precede the process of formation and that are presumed to lead to its products? An analysis of this process reveals the two points mentioned above, to wit, that the initial antecedent factors are subject to change in the process of formation, and that the process is open to the entrance of new factors at different points" (Blumer, 1990, p. 142).

In Newtonian physics the apple falls from the tree because it is drawn by a force, in relativity the apple has nowhere else to go, as spacetime is distorted.

1.2 In terms of participation:

- What are the processes of formation?
- Where do the processes of formation take place?
- What do the processes of formation consist of?
- How do the processes of formation operate?
- How are the different processes of formation accounted for?

Participation is the result of social processes that follow the shape of Socialmeaning - that is social arrangements and meanings that are relative. Change one, and you change the other.

“As the many illustrations show, the framework is indifferent to the social form that it takes and to lines of social change that it sets into play. [Participation] is neutral with regard to the nature of the social changes that may arise in operation” (Blumer, 1990, p. 76).

2 Socialmeaning

“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).” (Watson, 2017, p. 3).

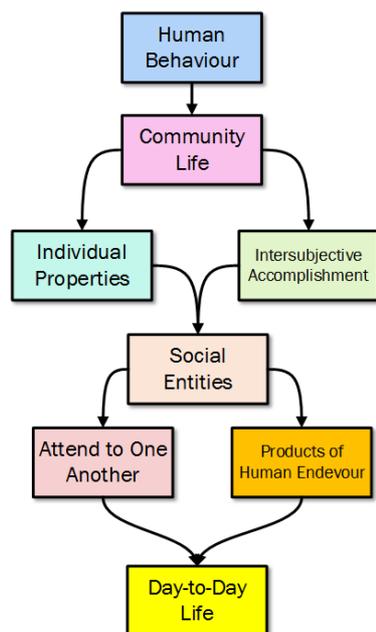
“Herbert Blumer (1969) named the theory ‘symbolic interactionism’ because it emphasises the symbolic nature of human interaction rather than a mechanical pattern of stimulus and interaction. For symbolic interactionists, the meaning of a situation is not fixed but is constructed by participants as they anticipate the responses of others” (Hustedde, 2015, p. 31).

2.1 Intersubjectivity

“We enter our research participants’ worlds to understand their thoughts, feelings, and actions. But we do so as genuine participants ourselves, not as distanced, unbiased observers who dispassionately record the doings of others?” (Kathy Charmaz in Prus, 1996, p. xii).

“To understand what people intend and why they act as they do we must enter into their experience. We must share it” (Kathy Charmaz in Prus, 1996, p. xiv).

2.2 Sociological Enterprise



“At the heart of the sociological enterprise is the idea that human behaviour is the product of community life; that people’s behaviour cannot be reduced to individual properties. A major task facing sociologists (and social scientists more generally), therefore, revolves around the study of the accomplishment of intersubjectivity; that is, indicating

how people become social entities and how they attend to one another and the products of human endeavour in the course of day-to-day life” (Prus, 1996, p. 2).

2.3 Human Accomplishment

“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).

2.4 Human Experience

“In response, the interpretivists observe that the study of human behaviour is the study of human lived experience and that human experience is rooted in people’s meanings, interpretations, activities, and interactions. These notions, they posit are the essential substance of a social science” (Prus, 1996, p. 9).

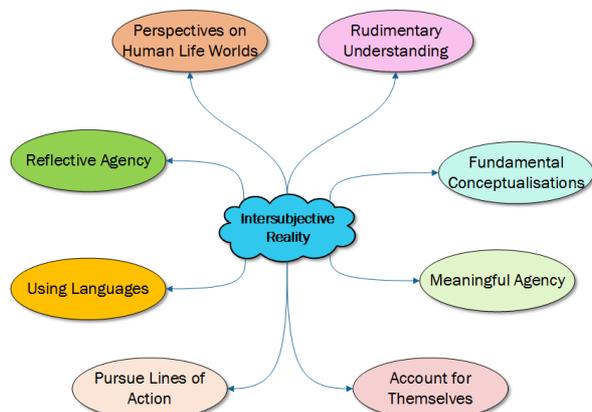
3 Symbolic Interaction

“Symbolic interaction may be envisioned 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).

Symbolic Interactionism is a field in sociology that resulted from various studies by sociologist such as George Herbert Mead, Herbert Blumer, and Charles Cooley. Symbolic Interactionism unlike many other fields of sociology reaches down to individuals instead of general groups. The definition of Symbolic Interactionism is rather quite simple, it is how an individual or a small group relates a symbol or a significance to another person or thing that changes the behaviour of that individual accordingly. <http://kduncankis.wikispaces.com/Symbolic+Internactionism>

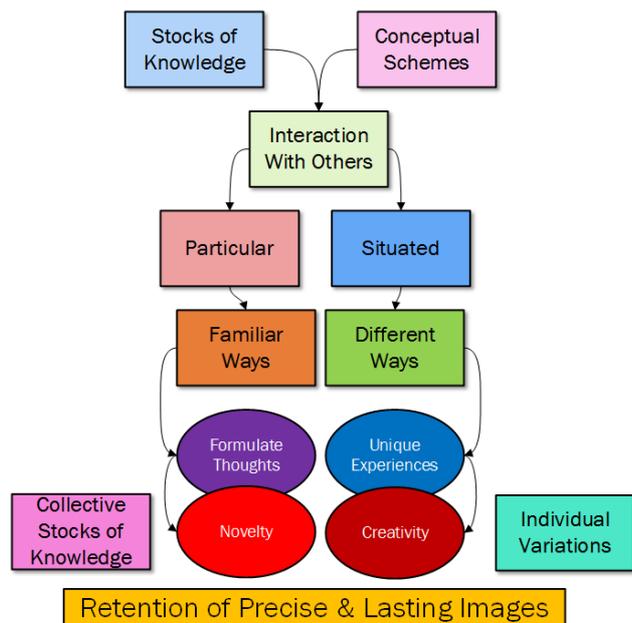
"A lot of students find symbolic interactionism to be a confusing theory in sociology. When I first learned about it, I was confused too! Luckily, once you break it down it becomes a little easier to understand. Basically, sociologists use this theory to explain social behaviour in terms of how people interact with each other through symbols. In other words, the way people communicate and act with other people is shaped by the meanings they give to different symbols. These symbols could be language, gestures, material things (ex. clothes), etc.- anything that has meaning for a culture or person. Symbols shape our basic interactions with each other based on the meanings we believe they have. For example, in the U.S. a thumbs up hand gesture is a sign of "good job", whereas in places like Greece and West Africa it is a very insulting gesture. Another example would be colours- the colour red in China symbolizes good luck, while in the U.S. it often symbolizes danger. These symbols are a good example of the way context (the situation) affects our interactions with others and the symbols we use. Symbolic interactionism is a really cool theory in sociology that can be applied to all kinds of different situations in life to help us better understand the role symbols play in the way we socialize with each other." - Fallon S., Sociology tutor on Chegg Tutors <https://youtu.be/crZOxoAZGa4>

3.1 Lines of Action



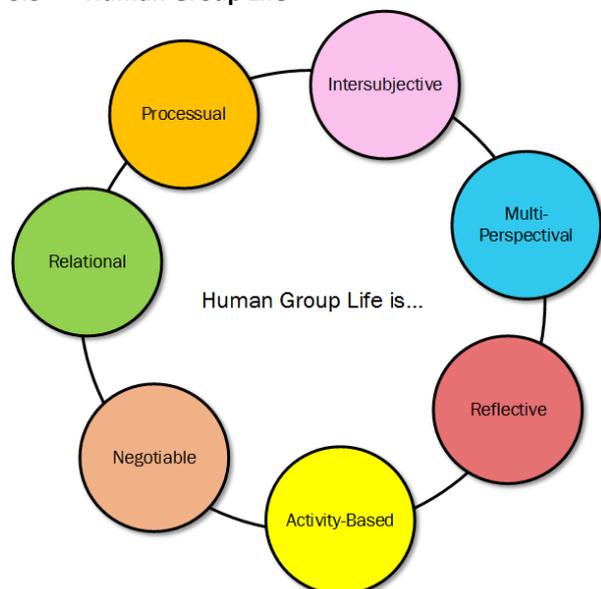
“It is in the course of developing familiarity with the language of a community that people are able to approximate rudimentary understandings of, or perspectives on, human life-worlds. Only once people develop some fundamental conceptualisations of ‘the world’ may they begin to exhibit some sort of reflectivity and meaningful human agency. Only with the acquisition of a language-based set of understandings or perspective are people able to take themselves into account in developing and pursuing particular lines of action. As Mead (1934) observes, it is the attainment of language that makes the possession of a ‘self’ possible” (Prus, 1996, p. 11).

3.2 Conceptual Schemes



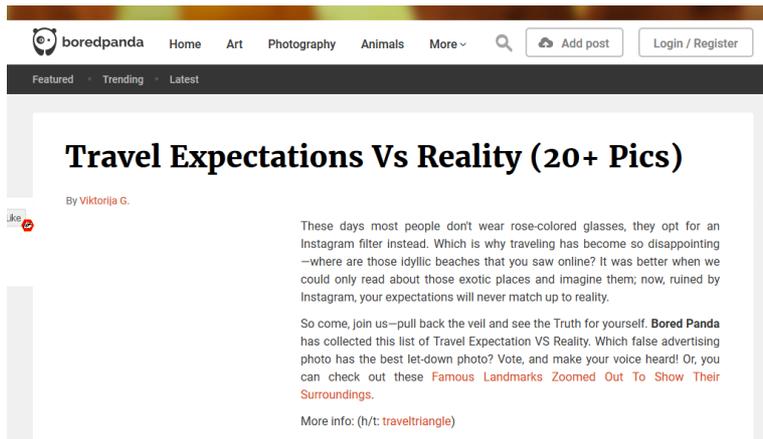
“Working with stocks of knowledge (and conceptual schemes) gleaned through interaction with others, but now applying these in particular or situated contexts, in familiar and in different ways, people formulate thoughts, achieve unique experiences, experience novelty, and pursue creativity. Indeed, given the limitations of their existing (linguistic) stocks of knowledge on a collective basis as well as individual variants within, people’s experiences may well outstrip their abilities to retain and formulate more precise or lasting images of these events” (Prus, 1996, p. 12).

3.3 Human Group Life



“Human group life is intersubjective...
Human group life is (multi) perspectival...
Human group life is reflective...
Human group life is activity-based...
Human group life is negotiable...
Human group life is relational...
Human group life is processual” (Prus, 1996, pp. 15-17)
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4 What is the Lifeworld?



<https://www.boredpanda.com/travel-expectations-vs-reality/>

Imagined Lifeworld

Office workers morphed into animals - By simply aligning a coworker's face with an animal on your computer monitor, you can also create your very own "desk safari". <http://www.nydailynews.com/life-style/boring-work-day-tour-desk-safari-gallery-1.1373158?pmSlide=1.1373151>

4.1 What are the Meaningful Routes to Action?

Artist Playfully Holds Cut Paper Silhouettes Against Towering Monuments to Bring Them to Life

Cut paper artist Rich McCor (aka @paperboyo) creates small silhouetted shapes and brings them to life by holding them against European monuments. He positions simple cut outs at the perfect angle, making it appear as though buildings, statues, and fountains are directly interacting with his work. McCor then snaps a photo to capture the whimsical scene. The playful project started when McCor decided to be a tourist in his own city—London. He wanted to explore the landmarks and history he had previously ignored, so he began researching for compelling facts and brainstorming how to photograph the locale in an original way. McCor's first photo transformed the Big Ben Tower into a wrist watch. While he was there, others nearby took interest in his work, which encouraged him to build on the idea. <http://mymodern-met.com/rich-mccor-transform-landscapes-with-paper-cut-outs/>

4.2 What are the Accomplishments?

Cat Lols

Cats get themselves into all kinds of amusing predicaments, and when there's a human on hand to capture the moment, whether in a photo or on video, that's raw material just begging to be shared. And because lots of people have cats, that's lots of content. "There are also an almost infinite number of pictures of cats or great bits of cat footage because so many people have them, meaning an abundance of raw material for meme creation," says Matt Smith, director of strategy at The Viral Factory. "Juxtaposing surprising meanings over cat images, a la the LOLcats phenomenon, allows us to engage in an activity humans have long been doing: projecting our thoughts onto the mysterious

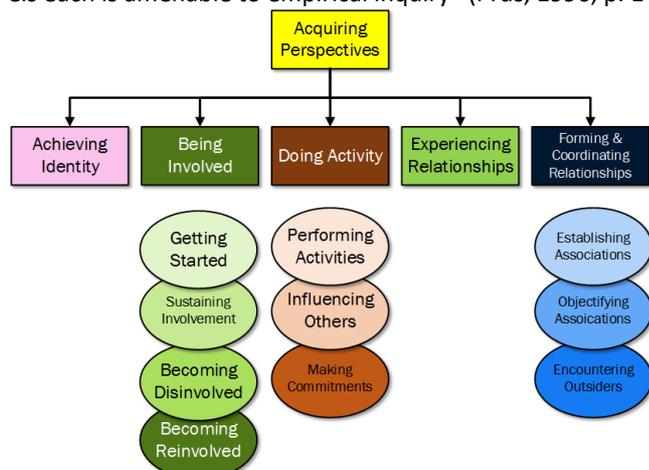
countenance of felines," says Sam Ford, director of digital strategy with Peppercom, research affiliate with the MIT Convergence Culture Consortium, and co-author of the forthcoming book Spreadable Media. <http://mashable.com/2010/10/21/why-does-the-web-love-cats/#GHHNTrlOd5qS>

Here’s Why People Are Posting Cats in Response to the Barcelona Attack

The cat campaign has its roots in a response to the November 2015 attack in Brussels, in which people posted cat pictures on social media to keep from divulging information about investigations into the terrorists immediately afterward. <http://time.com/4905356/barcelona-terror-attack-cat-posts/>

4.3 Acquiring Perspectives

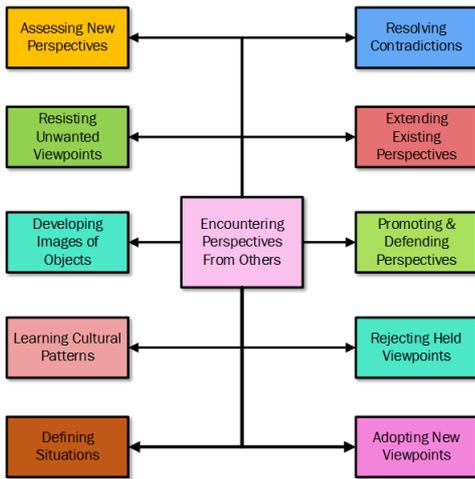
“The processes following not only significant key elements of people’s involvements in situations, but also define the essence of community life. These processes are interdependent and need to be viewed holistically if we are to develop a fuller appreciation of each. Nevertheless, each process encompasses several (sub)processes within, and on these levels each is amenable to empirical inquiry” (Prus, 1996, p. 149).



- “1. Acquiring Perspectives
- 2. Achieving Identity
- 3. Being Involved
 - Getting Started
 - Sustaining and intensifying involvements
 - Becoming disinvolved
 - Becoming reinvolved
- 4. Doing Activity
 - Performing activities
 - Influencing others
 - Making commitments
- 5. Experiencing Relationships
- 6. Forming and Coordinating Relationships
 - Establishing associations
 - Objectifying associations
 - Encountering outsiders” (Prus, 1996, p. 149).

4.4 Identity Work

“‘Identity work’ is contingent on people’s capacity for ‘self-reflectivity;’ it requires that one begin to take oneself into account in developing lines of action or that one became ‘an object unto oneself.’ Reflecting the perspectives one has on the world, people’s identities or self-other definitions are not only situated within those realities, but also are influenced by the ongoing shifts in perspectives that people normally undergo over time and across situations” (Prus, 1996, p. 152).

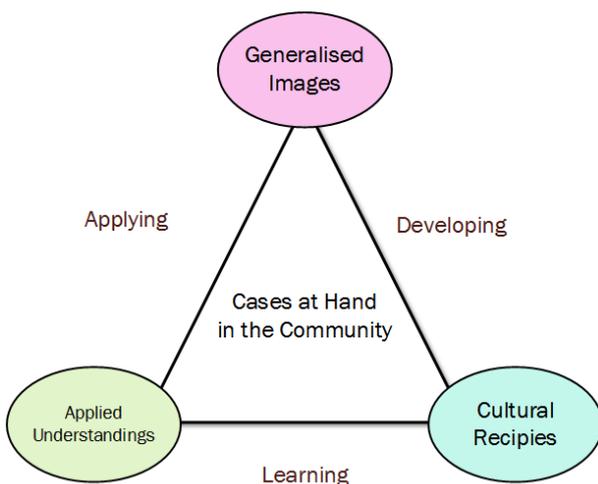


- “Encountering perspectives (definitions of reality) from others
- Assessing (new, incoming) perspectives and resisting unwanted viewpoints
- Developing images of objects (including images of other people and oneself)
- Learning (cultural patterns of objects (e.g. rules of thumb, norms, fashion)
- Defining situations (i.e., applying perspectives to the ‘cases at hand’)
- Dealing with ambiguity (lapses and limitations in existing explanations)
- Resolving contradictions (dilemmas within and across paradigms)
- Extending or improvising on existing perspectives
- Promoting (and defending) perspectives to others
- Rejecting formerly held viewpoints
- Adopting new viewpoints (Prus, 1996, p. 152).

“Like other (symbolic) interactions, emotional interchanges may be viewed best in process terms” (Prus, 1996, p. 179).

“Many emotional interchanges (and themes) seem apt to dissipate when the interactants fail to endorse or acknowledge one another’s expressed interests or affections” (Prus, 1996, p. 184).

5 Generalised Images



“The focus is on people (a) developing generalised images and understandings of emotional states as these are viewed in the community at large, (b) learning cultural recipes or ‘rules of thumb’ (how to tell when) to define situations as emotional ones, and (c) applying those cultural understandings and recipes to specific ‘cases at hand’. This in no way denies the abilities of others to offer, suggest, or attempt to impose their understandings, rules of thumb, or definitions

of the situation on the focal actor, but draws attention to the points at which people define themselves as being in emotional states or situations” (Prus, 1996, p. 177).

“Human interaction is a positive shaping process in its own right. The participants have to build up their respective lines of conduct by constant interpretation of each other’s ongoing lines of action... Factors of psychological equipment and social organisation are not substitutes for the interpretive process; they are admissible only in terms of how they are handled in the interpretive process’ (Blumer 1966: 538)” (Prus, 1996, p. 69).

“The essence of society lies in an ongoing process of action – not in the posited structure of relations. Without action, any structure of relations between people is meaningless. To understand, a society must be seen and grasped in terms of the action that comprises it’ (Blumer 1966: 541)” (Prus, 1996, p. 70).

6 Summary

“Symbolic interactionism is essential for community development because it provides insight into the ways people develop a sense of shared meaning, an essential ingredient for solidarity. When a community developer helps a community develop a shared vision of the future, she is helping them build a sense of unity. A community-owned vision comes about through the interaction of people and is related through pictorial, verbal, or musical symbols. A symbolic interactionist would be keen on bringing people together to develop a shared understanding” (Hustedde, 2015, p. 32).

“Given the complex, ambiguous and emergent nature of human relations, there is no definitive set of instructions that can provide to insure success in the field” (Prus, 1996, p. 192).

Josefin Öhrn + The Liberation - Take Me Beyond

<https://youtu.be/OzA8Jkx5GW8>

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