

## TECH3022-17 Advanced Social Media Production

### Lecture Week Twenty: Symbolic Interaction

001	Symbolic interactionism is a technique for analysing the practices and accomplishments of community life that recognises human group life as inherently meaningful.
002	The main characteristics of the symbolic interactionist approach are:  Sharing a set of foundational principles with ethnography, and acting as a variant or offshoot of cultural anthropology, symbolic interaction is 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.”
003	This is a “down to earth approach” that “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).
004	The aim is to learn about how community life is experienced and accomplished as people exchange ideas, act to get things done, and embed themselves within the routines and the patterns of community life.
005	By interacting in the practices and accomplishments of community life, it is argued, the ethnographic investigator will be able to draw upon a sense of intimate familiarity with the communities that are being examined “in sustained, participant-informed detail, the (enacted) social essences of the human group” (Prus, 1999, p. xiv).
006	The intention of this approach is to encourage social scientists “to attend to every single context in which human group life may take its shape – from the most basic of human activities to those that seem the most conceptually sophisticated, technologically developed, and organisationally complex.”
007	So by paying attention to the things that people do or accomplish “this approach provides a theoretically coherent means of connecting a great many seemingly diverse and disjointed activities that take place on a community-wide, societal, and even global basis” (Prus, 1997, p. 85).
008	Moreover, the reason that this more embedded approach to social investigation is needed is because of the limitations of other forms of research, which often approach their subjects only from a distance, and in the abstract.
009	We are limited in the questions that we can ask if we operate only by seeking to make observations that fit with our already pre-determined theories.
010	The classic instrumental approaches of the social sciences, according to Prus, often view components of social life as discrete and compartmentalised, and come up with explanations that are themselves discrete and compartmentalised.
011	In realist forms of classical social theory ordinary people are given little credit for what they do, what they understand, and what they are capable of achieving.
012	As an alternative to this deterministic approach, however, the interactionist approach, according to Prus:  “Attends centrally to the study of human lived experience as the paramount reality in the pursuit of a social science. Denoting aspects of intersubjectivity, perspectives, reflectivity, activity, negotiations, relationships, and process, the study of the human condition requires a theory and methodology that respects the

	distinctive nature of human group life" (Prus, 1997, p. 17).
013	"It is easy to understand why so many scholars view such networks or institutions as self-operating entities, following their own dynamics and not requiring that attention be given to the participants within the network. Most of the sociological analysis of institutions and social organisation adhere to this view. Such adherence, in my judgement, is a serious mistake. One should recognise what is true, namely, that the diverse array of participants occupying different points in the network engage in their actions as those points on the basis of using given sets of meanings. A network or an institution does not function automatically because of some inner dynamics or system requirements; it functions because people at different points do something, and what they do is a result of how they define the situation in which they are called on to act. A limited appreciation of this point is reflected today in some of the work on decision-making, but on the whole the point is grossly ignored " (Blumer, 1969, p. 19).
014	"Meanings are formed, sustained, weakened, strengthened, or transformed, as the case may be, through a socially defining process" (Blumer, 1969, p. 20).
015	"They are caught up in a vast process of interaction in which they have to fit their developing actions to one another. This process of interaction consists in making indications to others of what to do and in interpreting the indications as made by others" (Blumer, 1969, p. 20).
016	"The empirical social world, in short, is the world of everyday experience, the top layers of which we see in our lives and recognise in the lives of others" (Blumer, 1969, p. 35).
017	"So the question should be faced. The answer to it is simply that the empirical social world consists of ongoing group life and one has to get close to this life to know what is going on in it. If one is going to respect the social world, one's problems, guiding conceptions, data, schemes of relationship, and ideas of interpretation have to be faithful to that empirical world" (Blumer, 1969, p. 38).
018	"For symbolic interactionism the nature of the empirical social world is to be discovered, to be dug out by a direct, careful, and probing examination of that world" (Blumer, 1969, p. 48).  "These four central conceptions are: (1) people, individually and collectively, are prepared to act on the basis of the meanings of the objects that comprise their world; (2) the association of people is necessarily in the form of a process in which they are making indications to one another and interpreting each other's indications; (3) social acts, whether individual or collective, are constructed through a process in which the actors note, interpret, and assess the situations confronting them; and (4) the complex interlinkages of acts that comprise organisation, institutions, divisions of labour, and networks of interdependency are moving and not static affairs" (Blumer, 1969, p. 50).
019	"Let me remind the reader of the basic premise of symbolic interactionism: human group life consists of the fitting to each other of the lines of action of the participants; such aligning of actions takes place predominantly by the participant indicating to one another what to do and in turn interpreting such indications made by the others; out of such interaction people form the objects that constitute their worlds; people are prepared to act toward their objects on the basis of the meaning these objects have for them; human beings face their world as organisms with selves, thus allowing each to make indications to himself; human action is constructed by the actor on the basis of what he notes, interprets, and assesses; and the interlinking of such ongoing action constitutes organisations, institutions, and vast complexes of interdependent relations" (Blumer, 1969, p. 49).  "The premises of symbolic interactionism are simple. I think they can be readily tested and validated merely by observing what goes on in social life under one's nose" (Blumer, 1969, p. 50).
020	It is necessary, therefore, that ethnographic researchers take a more direct and familiar manner with their subject matter, so that ideas and models can be developed in closer proximity to the people whose experience is being studied.

	<p>According to Prus:</p> <p>“What is required is a transformation or a revitalisation of the social sciences from a positivistically oriented (emphasising objectification, quantification, causation) realm of inquiry to one that centrally attends to the actualities of human lived experience” (Prus, 1997, p. 4).</p>
	<p><b>References:</b></p>

Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic Interactionism*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press.  
Prus, R. (1996). *Symbolic Interactionism and Ethnographic Research*. New York: State University of New York Press.  
Prus, R. (1999). *Beyond the Power Mystique*. New York: State University of New York Press.