

SOCI302/322

PERSPECTIVES IN SOCIAL THEORY

Session 10 – Symbolic Interactionism

Lecturer: Dr. Dan-Bright S. Dzorgbo, UG
Contact Information: ddzorgbo@ug.edu.gh



UNIVERSITY OF GHANA

College of Education

School of Continuing and Distance Education

2014/2015 – 2016/2017

Session Overview

Introduction

As we can see traditional sociology by which we the works of the founding fathers and the subsequent perspectives that derived from their work, functionalism and Marxism have tried to explain human behaviour and analyze society in terms of its structure, institutions and they way such structure influence or determine social behaviour. The theories we have so far examined in the preceding sessions: Structural Functionalism, Marxism, Neo-Marxist Conflict Theory and Non-Conflict Theory are all based on the idea that society or aspects of society to a great influence human behaviour.

For example Structural Functionalism sees society as an organic or structure having a life of its won while Scientific Marxism considers the economic institution of society as determinant of social change and individual consciousness. These theories are all macro theories so long as they are look up to the broader social structures and social institutions to explain human behaviour.

Symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology (which we will study in session 12) are however micro social theories because they focus on the individual rather than society and they examine the microscopic side of human behaviour. The are micro theories because the focus on the individual and micro contexts of interaction. The major difference between interactionism on the one hand and functionalism and conflict theory on the other is that, while latter is a macro theory because they focus on the larger structures of society such as the religion, family, politics and education, interactionism is a micro theory because its focuses on the individuals in the society and their interactions

-

Session Overview (cont'd)

Introduction

Symbolic Interactionism focuses on common set of symbols and understandings possessed by a people in a group which they use in everyday life to structure their behaviours. Symbolic Interactionism looks at the minutest aspect of society, our everyday lives or everyday world and how through symbolic interaction people interact, communicate, create shared meanings and conduct meaningfully their everyday lives. In this session we will examine the ideas of George Herbert Mead. However after Mead, the two important personalities who have extended symbolic interactionism are Herbert Blummer and Erving Goffman. But we will consider only the work of Goffman-the Dramaturgical approach

Goals and Objectives

- At the end of the session, the student will be able to:
- Identify the intellectual roots of Symbolic Interactionism
- Understand the core tenets of Symbolic
- Identify and understand George Hebert Mead's major ideas

Session Outline

The key topics to be covered in the session are as follows:

- Intellectual roots of Symbolic Interactionism
- Basic assumptions of Symbolic Interactionism
- Intellectual Roots of Symbolic Interactionism
- George Hebert Mead's background and his ideas

Reading List

- Calhoun, Craig, Joseph Gerteis, James Moody, Seven Pfaff, and Idermohan Virk (2002). *Contemporary Sociological Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Cuff E. C., W. W. Sharrock & D. W. Francis (1990), *Perspectives in Sociology*. 3rd Edition. London: Unwin Hyman
- Edles, Laura Desfor and Scott Appelrouth (2010). *Sociological Theory in the contemporary era: Text and readings*. Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Sage
- Farganis, James. (2011). *Readings in Social Theory: The Classic Tradition to Post-Modernism*. 6th Edition. New York: McGraw-Hill Companies.
- Turner, Jonathan H. (1998). *The Structure of Sociological Theory*. 6th Edition. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Ritzer, George (2008). *Sociological Theory*. 8th Edition or any newer or earlier editions. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Wallace, Ruth A. and Alison Wolf (1995) *Contemporary Sociological Theory: Continuing the Classical Tradition*. 4th Edition. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Core Tenets of Symbolic Interactionism

- Human beings, unlike other animals, are endowed with a higher capacity for thought—we think and we reflection on life and circumstances. For example, we ask questions such as why are here? What will happen to us after university education, at work or in old age and when we die where do we go? Other animals do not engage in such elaborate thinking processes.
- Social interaction is the basis of human society. The capacity for thought is shaped by the contexts of social interaction where language (verbal and non-verbal) are expressed with symbolic meanings.
- In social interaction, people learn the meanings and symbols that allow them to exercise their distinctively human capacity for thought.
- Meanings and symbols allow people to carry on distinctively human action and interaction
- People act towards things but they do so on the basis of the meanings those things have for them.
- People are able to modify or alter their meanings and symbols that they use in action and interaction on the basis of their interpretation of the situation
- People are able to make modifications and alterations because, in part, of their ability to interact with themselves, which allows them to examine possible courses of action, assess their relative advantages and disadvantages and then choose one.
- The intertwined patterns of actions and interactions make up social groups and finally societies. Society is thus not manifested at a macro-level separable form people. Society is produced through ongoing interactions and what constitutes society and a product of many people.

Core Tenets of Symbolic Interactionism (cont'd)

- Symbolic Interactionism as a sociological perspective is closely associated with George Herbert Mead, who popularized it through his lectures
- **Herbert Blummer one of Mead's student coined the term symbolic interactionism in 1937.** Symbolic Interactionism as a sociological perspective focuses on individuals in the context of interaction. It examines how they interact and react to the surroundings, symbols, actions of others and material things.
- Symbolic Interactionism focuses on common set of symbols and understandings possessed by a people in a group which they use in everyday life to structure their behaviours.
- It looks at the minutest aspect of society, our everyday lives or world and how through social interaction people communicate, create and share understandings and symbolic meanings and carry out meaningfully their everyday lives.
- Given this orientation, symbolic interactionists are interested in how a repertoire of verbal expressions and body languages such as manner of sitting, gestures, dressing, nods, smiles, frowns, facial contact or avoidance of eye contact, tone of voice, etc. create symbolic meanings for actors and these meanings in turn shape their subsequent actions/behaviours.

Core Tenets of Symbolic Interactionism (cont'd)

- A common characteristic of all human beings is that they have to live their lives or **interact** in groups, communities, associations, organizations and societies. Our human nature is inevitably social because we do and have to interact with others to make our existence meaningful. Thus we often say that human beings are social animals. Through interaction with others we realize our humanness.
- In all the arenas of human interactions, individuals use verbal communications (language or words) and non-verbal communications (body language or gestures) which are symbols to give meanings to situations events, objects, actions or behaviours of themselves and others in their daily interactions and lives.
- This means that individuals are mostly not passive agents who just respond to situations or stimuli rather individuals actively define or interpret situations, events or behaviours of others and give meanings to them and then respond or acts according to those meanings, we say individuals are actively engaged in constructing a socially meaningful world.
- What becomes reality or a common understanding for all individuals in the context of interaction is socially accomplished—or reality is a social product emerging from human interaction. Symbolic Interactionism (also known as social construction or interpretive theory) is a sociological perspective that seeks to account for how individuals come to construct a socially meaningful world on the basis of symbolic communication. The theory reminds us that human beings are creatures who constantly interact in a world of symbols which they interpret to construct meanings.

Intellectual Root of Symbolic Interactionism

- The philosophy of pragmatism: truth or reality does not exist out there; rather it is actively created as we interact towards the world; people remember the world and base their knowledge of the world on their experiences and what has proven or not proven for them; people are likely to discard or alter what no longer works for them; if we want to understand actors we must based our understanding of what they actually do in the world
- Psychological behaviour: Radical behaviourism in the works of Watson-stimulus- response. Symbolic Interactionism repudiates scientificism
- Three points are critical for symbolic Interactionism: (i) a focus on the interaction between the actor and the social world (ii) a view of both the actor and the world as dynamic processes and not static structures and (iii) the great importance attributed to the actor's ability to interpret the social world (John Dewey).
- Dewey considers the human mind as a thinking process that defines objects or situations in the world, evaluates them, outline possible modes of conduct/ actors imagining the consequences of alternative courses of action, eliminating the "bad" or "costly" ones and finally selecting the "good" or efficient mode of action.
- Max Weber: We recall from our discussion of the Weber that he urged that sociologists not to just observe but also endeavour to gain insights or understandings of the meanings that lie behind people's actions. In this respect, Weber was of the view that sociologists have a special advantage over the natural scientists because they have the ability to appreciate and share the subjective thoughts and feelings of others—thoughts and feelings that the natural scientists will dismiss as unscientific because they are difficult to measures and quantify. Weber did not live long to develop fully an interpretive sociological perspective.

Topic Three:

Symbolic Interactionism

- The perspective draws much of its inspiration from the work of Max Weber; his verstehen concept
- Symbolic Interactionism is a view of in sociology that focuses on how people in the context of interaction act towards, respond to and influence one another
- Much of human interaction takes place on face-to-face basis, with the use of spoken and written language (which contains words which have meanings and also symbolize things in the environment) but interaction also involves the use of signs, gestures, shared rules.
- Humans interpret all these symbols and construct meanings out of them and use these meanings as the basis for their subsequent actions

The ideas of Herbert Mead



Interactionism (cont'd):

- Studies how people interact with one another in society
- Signs , gestures, shared rules, written and unspoken language are all symbols
- Individuals attach meaning to their own actions and to the actions of others; interaction between people takes place through the use of symbols.



Session Summary

In this session you have learnt to:

