

A CONTRIBUTION FOR AN
EMPIRICALLY GROUNDED SYMBOLIC
INTERACTIONISM

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Symbolic interactionism (hereafter abbreviated as SI) has come to be understood as the "loyal opposition" within sociology (Mullins, 1973). In contrast to "standard American macrosociology," SI involves an alternate epistemology, research method (i.e., qualitative) and a conception of society emphasizing a dynamic of loosely related "social processes" rather than tightly integrated "structures" (Blumer, 1954:78, Manis and Petras, 1970:46-7). While sometimes applied to larger scale phenomena, the central focus of SI has been on the interpersonal interaction between a subject, or actor, and "others" and the implications of this interaction in defining self, others, and situations. Language and the development of symbolic meanings are viewed as the crucial medium as well as by-products of this interactive process.

This is, of course, an oversimplification. There have been periodic but often unnoticed attempts to conduct SI research which is "empirically grounded" in the conventional quantitative sense. The most notable and sustained effort was that of Manfred Kuhn and his students at the University of Iowa. This effort spanned the decades of the '50s and '60s. Unfortunately, it was connected with the fate of a particular research instrument (the "twenty statements test" or "who am I") about which critical questions regarding its stability, validity and utility remain unanswered (see Spitzer et al., 1966; Tucker, 1966, and Tucker and McPhail, 1972). While the "twenty statements test" was used in over 100 researches prior to 1970, its utilization in the sociological literature since that time has been far less frequent.

In spite of the attempts of Kuhn and others, the major impact of SI in sociology has been that developed at the University of Chicago by Blumer and his students. Emphasizing the qualitative aspects of self-other interaction and larger-scale phenomena

as dynamic social processes (e.g., collective behavior and social movements) this "Chicago interactionism" has become so pervasive and diffused within so many specialty areas, that it has almost become the way of understanding SI research among sociologists. While the criticisms of this school of thought are still germane, it is widely utilized and has a large number of research and interpretive practitioners, audiences, and functions within the discipline. It is no longer, however, a "badge" for a radically different sociology. Though the orientation deserves to be understood as a serious scholarly framework in its own right, it has also functioned to produce a colorful body of research attractive to many and to provide a "sense of understanding" about the phenomena of everyday life in various contexts. With regard to such an emphasis on the "everyday life contexts" of social life, interactionism now competes with other related, though different, theoretical orientations. Notwithstanding Denzin's proposal (1969) for an alliance between interactionism and ethnomethodology, both ethnomethodology and "phenomenological sociology" appear to be developing independently of Chicago-style interactionism. Additionally, there seems at this time little transaction between Chicago interactionism and major trends in macrosociology.

While it is probably too severe a judgment to imply, as does Mullins (1973:98) that SI has 'run its course' as a set of ideas, it does seem that Chicago-style interactionism is not now dealing with any really new research questions, modes of interpretation, or evidence about the nature of the social world that have not been developed during the last two decades. The argument being made here is not that SI has indeed exhausted its potential but rather that the time is ripe to continue the development of an empirically based interactionism--"empirical" used here in the conventional positivistic meaning.

TOWARD AN EMPIRICAL SYMBOLIC-INTERACTIONISM. Several justifications can be offered about why the present time is a propitious one for a renewed effort to develop an empirically based SI. First,

although the Chicago interactionists cite Mead as their seminal figure, recent analyses of the origins of Mead's thought suggest that the subjectivism of the Chicago school seriously distorts Mead's thesis. Thus according to Lewis ". . . there are serious discrepancies between the methodological position of SI and Mead's philosophy of science. In some respects, SI shows more similarity to aspects of pragmatism of William James and John Dewey. [and further that] . . . Because symbolic interactionists construe Mead as advocating a phenomenistic conception of knowledge and scientific theories (Desmonde, 1970; Stone and Farberman, 1970:111-2), they have moved toward a subjectivistic conception of scientific activity in the social sciences. This subjectivistic tendency is especially apparent in the work of Herbert Blumer (1976:347-8)." In contrast with this approach developed by Blumer and his students, it is contended that

. . . the realist social psychology of Pierce and Mead implies the methodology of social behaviorism . . . the meaning of a significant gesture is public; it means what the community says it means . . . this does not involve the conception of man as passive responder to external stimuli. People still think, plan, anticipate, and in short construct responses: however, they do so within the perspective and language of some community. (Sewis, 1976:357).

Finally Lewis suggests that there is much similarity between Mead's use of the term "significant symbol" and Durkheim's conception of "collective representations." These interpretations suggest that there are at least ample theoretical reasons for the attempt to develop an empirically based SI.

Second, in addition to theoretical justifications for such an effort, it must be remembered that the analyses of self concept instruments (Wylie, 1961; Gergen, 1971; Wells and Marwell, 1976) do not conclude that the attempt to develop an empirically based self concept literature is futile-but

rather that the voluminous literature represents an underdeveloped field, in terms of (1) fragmentation, (2) lack of vigorous instrument development, (3) the lack of cumulative development, and (4) variation in conceptualizing and operationalizing self concept instruments (so that they are of unknown equivalence).

Third, aside from Kuhn and his students there have been (1) a significant number of seldom noted efforts to develop empirically based research not utilizing the TST instrument (e.g., Miyamoto and Dornbusch, 1956; Quarantelli and Cooper, 1966; Kinch, 1963; Reeder, Donohue and Biblarz, 1960; Franks and Marolla, 1976; Williams, Bean, and Curtis, 1970; and Schafer, Barito, and Bohlen, 1976) and (2) attempts to formalize interaction theory in roughly conventional ways (e.g., Kinch, 1963; Lauer and Boardman, 1971).

The beginnings made by these investigations (which treat SI in conventional theoretical and methodological contexts) need to be developed and extended. What they need is the kind of cumulative development which has occurred within the Iowa and Chicago orientations.

Fourth, and finally, in spite of the attenuated development of an empirically-based SI within sociology, there has been and continues to be such interests within other disciplines that parallel the substantive interests of sociologists (e.g., clinical and developmental psychology). Other disciplines have in fact, probably contributed more than sociology toward the development of an empirical literature exploring aspects of the self (e.g., studies cited in Hamacheck, 1971). While sociologists could profit from such related research and perspectives of other disciplines, those disciplines could be enormously enriched by an empirical literature which locates the genesis and maintenance of the self within structural contexts. This could be, in fact, an issue for the development of enhanced rapport and transaction between disciplines. Thus, in sum, there seem to be sufficient theoretical, empirical, substantive, and pragmatic reasons for a renewed effort to develop an empirically-based SI at this time. What issues should be addressed by such an attempt?

To the extent that the foregoing analysis is plausible, it requires a program of development with the following major directions:

(1) Instruments developed over time in a cumulative fashion, to facilitate the development of known parameters for sampling distributions in various populations.

(2) An emphasis on utilizing previously developed instruments, in so far as it is feasible, so that the issue of criterion validity (Phillips, 1971:198-99) can be addressed.

(3) An emphasis--ultimately--on the development of data bases from which multivariate analysis could at least address the issue of causal order among variables, a historic weakness of symbolic interaction theory.

(4) An emphasis on the conceptual and operational nature not only of the self, but also of the "other" (significant other, orientational other, reference group, etc.) which has been the neglected side of the interactionist equation (for notable exceptions see Denzin, 1966 and Perinbanayagam, 1975).

(5) An emphasis on studying interaction variables within the broad context of larger structures (e.g., the family, complex organizations, stratification systems, etc.) to construct a linkage between SI and conventional macrosociology. In other words, as Lofland (1970) has suggested, there is the need to spell out the broader implications of symbolic interaction theory and research.

The point worth emphasizing again is that while there seem to be a number of practical difficulties in addressing such questions, none of them are theoretically beyond our reach. Notwithstanding the argument of Mullins, (1973), it is here argued that there is still much "unmined potential" within the SI orientation, which has been limited by the vagaries of its own historical development.

SOME ILLUSTRATIVE INSTRUMENTS AND DATA. What follows is an attempt to suggest some examples of instruments and data around which a program along the above lines could be developed. These

illustrations could be taken to address, in a preliminary way, the feasibility of points 1, 2, 4, and 5 (but not 3) raised above.

The research population in this instance (Harper, 1974) was a sample of 286 families with 4 or 5 year old children in a mid-western urban area. Families were selected as part of a frequency matching design to permit controls for family structure variables, SES variables, and the child's participation in pre-school child care centers (These illustrations derive from a larger research project aimed at understanding the sociological contexts of self concept development in pre-school children). Interviews were conducted in homes during which the following kinds of data were collected: (1) an assessment by mothers of the "developmental and social adjustment adequacy" of the child's behavior, (2) scores from a self concept inventory administered to the child by the interviewer, and (3) information about a variety of structural and demographic characteristics of the family.

Relevant instruments were chosen because of their accessibility in the various professional literatures and because of their appropriateness for the goals of the previously mentioned larger study. With regard to the first kind of data (the mother's assessment of the developmental "adequacy" of the child's behavior) an instrument called Behavior Disorder Checklist developed by Glidewell et al. (1957) was utilized. Using this instrument involved asking the mothers about the occurrence, duration, frequency, and severity of the child's behavior difficulties in the following areas: (1) digestion, (2) getting along with grownups, (3) unusual fears, (4) nervousness, (5) getting along with other children, (6) sleeping, (7) eating, (8) temper tantrums, (9) daydreaming, (10) saying things that are not true, (11) destructiveness, and (12) stealing. These, according to Glidewell et al., are symptoms of "social and psychological disturbances in children when they occur with great frequency and severity. The authors found a positive correlation between scores on the checklist and blind clinical assessments of children. In addition, Williams, Bean, and Russell (1970) have used the checklist to generate scores which related meaningfully

to the impact of parental constraint on the development of social and behavioral maladjustments in children. Mothers were asked whether or not the child had ever exhibited the symptom, how frequently, and how severe and long the symptom had persisted. The responses were then converted into rank order scores, and a percentile rank assigned to each respondent for each dimension. Finally, the standard scores for each dimension were simply added to produce a single index number, termed the "social behavior adjustment index." For the present purposes, these scores can be understood as "assessments of a significant other" toward a subject self (the child).

For the second typed of data (a self concept inventory score administered to the child) the U-scale developed by Ozehosky and Clark (1970) was utilized. This instrument is a projective-type self concept inventory designed to measure aspects of the self concept of children, but unlike most such instruments it (1) has explicit scoring protocols, and (2) makes rather few imaginative demands on the subject. The instrument consists of a series of bi-polar outline drawings of children in various positive and negative situations designed to tap such self concept dimensions as autonomy, competence, appearance, sex role identity, and interpersonal relations with adults and other children. The child was asked to indicate which drawing in each case is more like himself. A value of 1 was assigned for each positive choice, and 0 was assigned for each negative choice. The summed self concept score is merely the summed scores for each card. It is important to emphasize that the U-scale measures only selected aspects of the self concept: not the self in its idiosyncratic totality, or even all such "aspects" of the self that might be interesting.

Ozehosky and Clark (1970) found that when administered to pre-schoolers the U-scale discriminated at the .01 level between levels of "school readiness" as measured by the Metropolitan Readiness Test. Also, of interest to the present concerns, is the fact that Ozehosky and Clark judged the U-scale to be superior to several "free-response" projective instruments in discriminating between levels of school readiness.

This instrument was pre-tested and refined in several ways. First, it was thought that there might be a significant variation in response patterns for white and non-white children. An initial pre-test suggested no important differences when sorted into these ethnic categories. Second, an item analysis was undertaken to select those cards from the U-scale most strongly associated with high overall scores. The computation of a point-biserial correlation suggested that there were about seventeen items from the whole set of fifty cards which were highly predictive of high overall scores. For this reason, as well as the desirability of a somewhat shorter inventory those seventeen cards were used in the study. Subsequent data analysis suggested that there were modest positive correlations between the various dimensions of the test, ranging from $r = .20$ to $.38$.

TABLE 1
CORRELATION OF FAMILY FACTORS
WITH CHILD'S SELF CONCEPT

$r_{05} = 16, N = 268$, decimals omitted.

	1	2	3	4	
Socio-economic status	1				
Less trouble with child	2	33			
Maternal warmth	3	22	19		
Social behavior adjust.	4	08	20	25	
Self-concept score	5	-03	07	26	36

Each variable was measured with drastically differing types of research instruments (a verbal descriptive set of responses by the significant other and a projective type inventory by the "subject self") both of which, it is argued, are amenable to parametric data analysis. Furthermore, the relationship between these two variables becomes even stronger when various other factors are controlled. Partial r 's between self concept and behavior adjustment controlling for the educational status of the parent equals .409, for family structure complexity equals .447, for family economic status equals .470. Casual order, if any, among these variables is uncertain from these data, but the fact the r^2 values obtain for the partial correlations which approach 22% seems rather dramatically to establish

the existence of a relationship between the self concept and assessments of significant others.

The SI perspective suggests, of course, that this self-other relation is not merely correlational, but "causal" (in a rather loose genetic and interactive sense"). Or as Perinbanayagam suggests:

"The other should . . . be viewed as exercising power over the emergent self and, to a certain extent, determining the character of that self" (1975: 502).

That there is an active, casual relationship between the assessments of significant others and the emergent self is consistent with these data. Definitive demonstration of this interpretation awaits more rigorous multivariate analyses.

Turning briefly to several "contextual" variables, we find that the "assessment of the significant other" is positively related to other indices of parental behavior (observations of maternal warmth) and attitudes (the perception that the child is becoming easier to deal with). As with the original self-other relationship, controlling for various factors (family SES and family structure complexity) produces partial r 's stronger than the zero order relationship. Further, these parental attitudes and behaviors are in turn positively related to family economic and education status. Thus these data enable one to begin to address point five (above), namely to examine the self-other relation within the context of larger structures and social forces. The findings here about the relationship between family SES, parental behavior and attitudes, and the self concept development of the child are broadly consistent with the findings of Kuhn (1969), Bernstein (1964) Coopersmith (1967). Thus these data would suggest at least the plausibility of empirically examining the self-other relation in the broader contexts of diverse organizational, occupational, and sub-cultural structures and settings, and hence establishing linkages between symbolic interaction theory and "standard American Macrosociology".

In conclusion this paper has attempted

to provide theoretical, pragmatic, and empirical justification for a continued attempt to develop an empirically based SI which is not as insulated from "standard American sociology." Further, an attempt was made to suggest an agenda of issues, both methodological and substantive that future research could address.

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