

ESSENTIAL ISSUES IN SYMBOLIC INTERACTION

Edited by Norman K. Denzin
and Shing-Ling S. Chen

STUDIES IN SYMBOLIC
INTERACTION

VOLUME 59

ESSENTIAL ISSUES IN SYMBOLIC
INTERACTION

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Series Editors: Norman K. Denzin and Shing-Ling S. Chen

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STUDIES IN SYMBOLIC INTERACTION VOLUME 59

ESSENTIAL ISSUES IN SYMBOLIC INTERACTION

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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Douglas P. Schrock is a Professor of Sociology at Florida State University. He has published research on many topics, including the transgender community and movement, violent men and intervention programs, and Donald Trump and his supporters. Much of his works addresses gender, sexuality, race, and class and focuses on culture and identity, emotion and embodiment, and personal and social change. What ties his works together is an enduring interest in how interactionism can help us better understand how inequality is reproduced and challenged.

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FORWARD: AN ISSUE FOR A GENERAL SOCIOLOGY

Joel O. Powell

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ABSTRACT

This volume answers a call by the late David Maines for forums to showcase symbolic interactionism. Eight papers in this volume answer Maines' call by illustrating the value of interactionist approaches, defining and describing directions for research. Exploring a broad range of topics including accounts, identity, sex work, and yoga, the eight studies show the breadth and innovation that Maines saw as crucial to a general sociology.

Keywords: Symbolic interaction; David Maines; critical interactionism; accounts; Gerda Walther

Volume 57 of *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*, was Shing-Ling S. Chen's labor of respect for the life and career of David Maines. This volume, Volume 59, also salutes Maines. A formidable advocate for the interactionist project, Maines often called for forums and compendiums that would showcase symbolic interactionism as the best hope for a general sociology. He found this aspiration witnessing the many clumsy attempts of sociologists to reinvent concepts refined for decades by interactionist researchers. Because of a failure to genuinely engage with interactionism, Maines argued, the interactionist perspective is caricatured as a dissident, qualitative school limited to observations in microworlds (Maines, 2001; See also Schrock, this volume). Without irony, he observed that sociology is becoming more mature in the unreflective adoption of interactionist precepts.

Eight papers in this issue answer calls from Maines to illustrate the value of interactionist approaches by defining and describing directions for research. While none of these efforts will provide a definitive framework, each is a fine specimen of investigation, commentary, and speculation. Their common threads are bright. Society is enacted, so action and joined activity are always processes for study. People interpret one another as individuals and in their togetherness.

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Language is central to these processes. It is impossible to separate society from the individual, the individual from society, or micro- and macro-cosmic social worlds. While the research sites in these works range from sex work to yoga, and the topics from mind, to motive, to identity, to collective behavior, all examine the facts of people doing things together.

This action orientation is often counter-intuitive. People tend to see themselves and others as collections of traits or features that are mostly unchanging. In a courageous ethnography of male sex workers, Cyrus Rinaldi rejects such a common sense, essentialist orientation. Sexuality is not a state of being, but an active, improvisational process. Rinaldi emphasizes the agency in becoming sexual in social contexts rather than the condition of being sexual. This permits scrutiny of crucial symbolic features of sexual orientation and activity. Much can be lost and gained in navigating the complex worlds of work, sex, and masculinity. The map and compass are vocabularies of motive, with which the sex worker guides others away from stigmatizing conclusions. The sex worker flounders in common sense understandings that men having sex with men means being gay or somehow less than masculine. In the examination of motive talk, Rinaldi pulls together the phenomena of individual agency and traumatic cultural pressures on self-definition.

The nebulous cultural definitions that people must manage reside alongside sharp, institutional labels that are no less essentialist, but carry additional scientific credence. Mehmet Bicacki explains how the psychological label of “gifted underachiever” fails to account for variations in context and the different ways in which people manage self-definition. Children may or may not see themselves as underachievers, but the definitions and experiences of underachieving are decidedly social. For example, students may deliberately underachieve to avoid stigma or garner acceptance. They can resist or accept definitions with a variety of accounts. Moreover, once the label of giftedness emerges and is widely available, many actors (along with the gifted ones) develop vocabularies of motive to explain the behavior of self and others. Institutional responses become selective and exclusive. Gifted educational programs could certainly be made available to everyone, but the privileges as well as the stigmas are reserved for children who have been matched with their definition. This happens, as Bicacki observes, in a field where definition and measurement are entirely problematic. So, the pointed, clinical estimation of the child takes on the appearance of objective assessment.

The paper in this volume taking the most direct approach to accounts is Eric Silva’s discussion of United States (US) political culture. Accounts and stigma are conspicuous in political discourse, particularly in the “culture wars.” In the hyper-mediated national conversation, people are confronted with more demands to account for their political views. Accounts for political worldviews are readily available – often as threadbare distortions of the views of the other – and arguments for why one political standpoint should dominate will simplify and satirize other views. But actors choose vocabularies and modify them in countless ways. By considering the construction of political reality as an act of agency, Silva resists the

tendency to present US political strife as a simple struggle between right and left. Instead, Silva calls for deeper explorations of phenomena such as agreement across factions, intrafactional conflict, and the “dialogic ways opponents influence each other.”

Perhaps the ease with which modern sociologists have dismissed interactionism as microcosmic stems from interactionist attempts to understand the self. Self seems a plain, assumed, even trivial piece of the human experience compared to theorizing geo-politics, world-economies, or social history. But the interactionist starting point for understanding self is that it is a developing social structure. More importantly, self does not exist except that it is minded, situated among others, and acting in and on society. David Schweingruber and David Wahl recognize this seamless joining of self and society and present a minded-self that moves in concert with the social world. They ask whether investigating internal conversations will help sociologists to understand society. Of course, it will. In the dialog with self, society is formulated and applied to immediate problems, plans for the future, reconstructions of the past, and vagrant daydreams. Schweingruber and Wahl are not content with these assumptions, however reasonable. They call for a systematic study of internal conversations and offer innovative methods for accessing continuing internal narratives.

Krzysztof Konecki notes that a minded self is also an embodied self. In an intriguing and detailed study of doing yoga, Konecki finds that bodily action in the company of others reveals minded selves to one another. Konecki’s insight is inspired by Merleau Ponty in a compelling (and comforting) observation that the minds of others are not really hidden. This view of intersubjectivity through shared corporeal experiences is a reminder of the importance of phenomenological thought to the interactionist project, and harks back to a reappraisal of Husserl and Schutz by 20th century interactionists. It is a reminder, too, of the fundamental pluralism of interactionist thought. There is no definably human body, mind, or self that is not tethered to the company of others.

Robert Perinbanayagam considers another seemingly individualistic phenomenon, identity, and unites self and society with a grammar of naming. After reviewing extensive interactionist work on identity and providing several pertinent illustrations, Perinbanayagam concludes that identities are not only a set of socially provided names but also a complex dialectic of lumping and splitting (See also [Zeerubavel, 1996](#)) or a “unity of opposition.” The Black American is not white, but also is not German. Here the simple example reveals that the grammar of identity is situational. However, the acknowledgment of identity is not a passive process. Instead, identity is a dynamic “from which one draws the rhetoric of motives that leads to the selected acts of the agent.” Perinbanayagam shows the relevance of this with a stark reference to the murder of George Floyd. As onlookers pleaded with Derek Chauvin to release a suffocating George Floyd, Chauvin remained committed to an identity and course of action that resulted in Floyd’s death. As Perinbanayagam observes, Chauvin’s identity moved his acts, while at the same time his acts “nourished” his identity.

These works on accounts, selves, and identities may herald the promise of a critical interactionism. Douglas Schrock is content that many different interactionist approaches can flow into a critical project so long as they explore power and inequality. All the phenomena explored in this book are germane because power and domination involve bodies, minds, and identities. And Schrock sees the potential for understanding power in the interactionist commitment to “power as constituted by what people do together, how such actions shape what happens elsewhere, and the consequences for unequal relations.” In contrast to Foucault’s translucent view of power as determining relations, or the Exchange theorists’ simplistic understanding of dependency, this transactional standpoint emphasizes power as a social accomplishment. Ultimately Schrock’s hope is for an interactionism that breaks through the barriers of misunderstanding identified by Maines by consciously demonstrating its relevance to understanding systemic oppressions.

One feature of Mead’s philosophy that endures in all interactionist thought and research is a pluralistic approach to mind, self, and society. Centuries of dualistic and monistic thinking were not adequate to a science that asked questions about mutual understanding, collective activity, and intersubjectivity. Understanding the connections of one to another is vital to any apprehension of the human condition.

In their article on collective intentionality, Zeynep Melis Kirgil, Andrea Voyer, and Gary Alan Fine revisit problems of mutuality and cooperation by rejecting a dualistic conception of self and other. They concentrate on the sense of collective membership that is felt by people acting in concert. While much of early social behaviorism focused on the mechanics of joined activity, such as how people divine what kinds of objects they are in a situation, Kirgl, Voyer, and Fine attend to the experiences of sharing intentions, objectives, and sensibilities sufficient for large social arrangements such as community. They credit the work of Gerda Walther as first and right on the matter of community life. Walther showed the way to understanding that people are joined by empathy and a meta-understanding that they are apprehending their situations in similar ways. This early formulation anticipates the work of Couch (1995) and his associates (Miller et al., 1975) who identified reciprocity and mutuality at the core of cooperative action – as people actively form social objectives based upon a shared focus of attention.

Kirgl, Voyer, and Fine do a real service to sociology with their continuing inquiries into the work of Gerda Walther and also in their call for research and analysis in the meso-domain. In communities, the people who are experiencing life together exist at the weld of grand social forces, intimate understandings, and unique social experiences. These things are inseparable, and Kirgl, Voyer, and Fine rightly insist that they be studied together.

David Maines observed that the accumulation of knowledge in sociology was inhibited by a lack of awareness of the theories and frames of knowledge in which

sociologists were working. His particular concern was for the absence of engagement with interactionist research and commentary across a broad range of topics. He did his best to create opportunities for dialogue. This volume of *Studies* continues that effort.

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MALE SEX WORKING AS SEXUAL SCRIPTING: A SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONIST ACCOUNT

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ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to outline the ways in which symbolic interactionism shifts the focus of inquiry into sex from being sexual toward becoming sexual, which takes into account doing sexualities, rather than tracing their origins in a static conception of nature. This means that our being sexual varies according to the rituals and performances in which we are involved as part of our daily lives. Such is the case any time we perform a role to communicate our identity to one or more audiences from communicative, expressive, aesthetic, and verbal points of view. This process is particularly manifest in male sex working where social actors are involved in the use of excuses, justifications and, generally, motive talk that are useful to neutralize their own sexual conducts and negotiate the gender appearance and sexual practices. Using the late developments of sexualities' symbolic interactionist studies emphasized by sexual scripts theory, the chapter focuses on the theoretical necessity to understand that there are far more reasons to be sexual than ways to be sexual.

Keywords: Male sex working; masculinities; sexual scripts; becoming sexual; sexual career

INTRODUCTION

The actual existence of a biological substratum, of impulses and physiological traits undoubtedly allows the construction of bodily and sexual experiences; however, these take full meaning only if they defined in *sexual terms* within social interactions and contexts. An *impulse* – any kind impulse – “works” as long as it

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can be *specifically named*, as long as it becomes the object of interpretative processes of experiences common to a specific group and, therefore, endowed with symbolic meanings.

In his seminal work, *The Philosophy of the Act*, George Herbert Mead following Dewey, rejected the behaviorist one-dimensional stimulus–response scheme favored by most behaviorists, in which stimulus and response were considered isolable events independent from the process that bonds the organism to its environment. Following Mead’s ideas about the four stages of the act (impulse, perception, manipulation and consummation), the (sexual) act may be considered not as a linear and deterministic process, but mainly as a line of actions through which we shape and comprehend our own world (Mead, 1938).

If the biological dimension is a “brute fact,” natural and immutable, why is it that every culture in every different historical time has attributed different meanings to sex – codifying and regulating sexualities in very different ways? Since our sexual organs themselves do not seem to have changed conspicuously in the last few centuries, why do sexual practices assume a high degree of variability? Our sexual existence only becomes meaningful as far as it is experienced in the form of symbolic communication (Gecas & Libby, 1976). Our sphincters and genital organs do not possess any trans-historical significance nor can sexual practices be regarded as trans-cultural manifestations, or sexual desires, which cannot be explained on the basis of constant motivations in every period of time and across every culture (Gagnon, 1999). We do indeed attribute meanings to impulses, stimuli and sensations that, although they are regularly considered as *objective and universal* characteristics, they have *different meanings* depending on the group considered, the cultural context, or different historical periods. We learn to attribute meanings to the stimuli we are *subjected* to, and we *learn* to feel effects in relation to physiological urges, drives, or desires. Obviously, perceptual organs *do* exist materially, but the same arousal is activated within cultural and symbolic contexts. We are able to interpret a “symptom” (*erection*) and give it a certain meaning in order to “feel something” or to be able to “do something” (*orgasm*) only when we have learned to respond to specific stimuli and learned a series of techniques, of modalities, related to *what to feel and how to enjoy*, not only in relation to our “desires” and “fantasies,” but also because *we know how to stimulate ourselves properly, we know how to identify the effects and how to feel fulfilled and for what are the reasons and relative purposes* (which often they have nothing to do with specifically sexual matters).

Our sexual conducts are formed and directed according to our inner culturally defined experience: individuals must understand what is happening (they must be able to “name” their sensations, their own actions, those of others, and give a prompt response) (Rinaldi, 2016). They refer to “scripts,” to metaphorical and dramaturgical dimensions that support human sociosexual actions (Gagnon & Simon, 1973).

Whereas “essentialist” or “naturalist” perspectives view sex/sexuality as something “given,” as a set of immutable, “natural,” fixed characteristics (Weeks, 1985), symbolic interaction(ism) engages with the idea that human sexuality is fundamentally unstable and variable. By definition, “sex” is the effect of society and of culture, one of many variables which are the effect of different arrangements and