

SYMBOLIC INTERACTION AND INEQUALITY

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

STUDIES IN SYMBOLIC
INTERACTION

VOLUME 58

SYMBOLIC INTERACTION AND INEQUALITY

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STUDIES IN SYMBOLIC INTERACTION VOLUME 58

SYMBOLIC INTERACTION AND INEQUALITY

EDITED BY

NORMAN K. DENZIN

University of Illinois, USA

AND

SHING-LING S. CHEN

University of Northern Iowa, USA



United Kingdom – North America – Japan
India – Malaysia – China

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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A TRIBUTE TO NORMAN K. DENZIN

Norman K. Denzin (1941–2023), the longtime editor of *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*, passed away in August, 2023. Regarded as the “Father of Qualitative Inquiries,” Prof Denzin is considered as one of the most important scholars in the 20th and 21st centuries. Other than editing *Studies in Symbolic Interaction* since its inception in 1978 to the time of his passing, for nearly half of a century, Prof Denzin had authored more than 30 books and countless journal articles, as well as launched and edited major journals and book series. Prof Denzin’s long and successful career impacted generalizations of scholars worldwide. Prof Denzin’s legacy shall endure and live on via the continuous publication of *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*, as well as other journals and book series he had launched and edited.

Shing-Ling S. Chen
Editor

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ABOUT THE EDITOR

Shing-Ling S. Chen is a Professor of Mass Communication in the Department of Communication and Media at the University of Northern Iowa. Trained by Carl J. Couch as a symbolic interactionist, she studies information technologies and social orders, as well as communication processes and social relationships.

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ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Kimberly M. Baker, PhD, is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology, Criminology, and Anthropology at the University of Northern Iowa. As a sociologist, her research focuses on rule enforcement and substance use. Her current research has turned to addiction-themed reality television shows. In particular, she focuses on the ways that treatment professionals and families interact with and respond to individuals with substance use problems.

Carlie Carter earned her BA in Psychology, with minors in Sociology and Childhood Studies from Christopher Newport University (CNU) in 2021. She has worked with Dr Linda Waldron and Dr Danielle Docka-Filipek on research focusing on first-generation college student experiences since 2020 and currently serves as a Post-Baccalaureate Research Fellow with CNU's Center for Education Research and Policy. Carlie is pursuing her MEd at the College of William and Mary where she was awarded a graduate assistantship to work with first-generation and low-income (FGLI) students as they transition into and throughout the university.

Zhuojun Joyce Chen is a Professor Emeritus in the Department of Communication and Media at the University of Northern Iowa. The areas of her specialty are communication, culture, and community/society, media technologies, systems, process and effects, and research methods (quantitative, qualitative, and textual analysis).

Danielle Docka-Filipek, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Minnesota, Duluth. Her teaching expertise lies in race/class/gender inequalities, feminist theory/praxis, poverty and social welfare policy, sociology of mental health/illness, globalization, family/marriage, culture, law, and organizations, and teaching, learning, and inequality in higher education. Her current research projects include examining racial discourse and practices in US higher education via faculty and student encounters with the twin concepts of 'diversity' and 'academic freedom;' and first-generation students' and faculty members' well-being/mental health, work/family conflicts, and teaching/learning burdens amid the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Her work has been published in *Law & Society*; *Sociological Inquiry*; *Feminist Pedagogy*; *Innovative Higher Education*; and *Gender, Work, & Organization*.

Julien Grayer is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology, Criminology, and Anthropology at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. He was born in New Orleans where he received his Bachelor's in Sociology at the Xavier

University of Louisiana. He received his Master's in Criminal Justice from the University of Alabama-Birmingham. His research focuses on racial criminalization, criminology, stigma, racial identity construction and racialization, and symbolic interaction. He received his doctorate in sociology from the University of Missouri where he developed his dissertation project exploring how Black undergraduate students navigate their identities and interactions in predominately white environments where they are often coded as criminally suspect or deviant.

Lilith Green is a second year PhD student and teaching associate in the School of Sociology at the University of Arizona. Their work is primarily concerned with identity work in marginalized populations and assessing the sociocultural and psychosocial implications of identity negotiation, especially in regards to gender, race, medicalized deviance, and medical gatekeeping. Their current project explores the ways that gender ambiguity and embodiment, particularly among non-binary patients, are problematized in patient-provider interactions to elucidate the medical policing of divergent identities. Additionally, they are part of a multi-disciplinary team of researchers who are examining BIPOC opinions on the validity and trustworthiness of medical and scientific institutions through the analysis of PEW national survey data.

Michael A. Katovich is a Professor of Sociology in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Texas Christian University. He has written on diverse subjects, linked to the concepts and theoretical tenets that emerged within the new Iowa School of Symbolic Interaction.

Robert Perinbanayagam is a Professor of Sociology (emeritus) at Hunter College, City University of New York. His works are influenced mainly by the ideas of the American pragmatic philosophers Charles Sanders Peirce and George Herbert Mead and those of the philosopher of language Kenneth Burke. He has been awarded the G. H. Mead Award and the C. H. Cooley Award by the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction and an award by the theory section of the American Sociological Association for his work *The Presence of Self*. His latest book is *Dialogue, Dramas and Emotions* (Lexington Books).

Amanda G. Pruitt, PhD, LPC-S is a mental health practitioner and independent scholar in Nacogdoches, Texas. Her current research topics include graduate student experiences, academic environments, and emotional and mental health. Her work has appeared in *Journal of Human Services, Training, Research, and Practice* and *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*.

John C. Pruitt is Associate Professor of Sociology at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas. His research focuses on talk and interaction in education contexts. His book, *Between Teaching and Caring in the Preschool* (2019), considers preschool teachers' identity work in relation to early childhood education. He has published in journals such as *Symbolic Interaction, Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, and *International Review of Qualitative Research*.

Carol Rambo is Professor of Sociology at The University of Memphis in Memphis, Tennessee. She was the editor of the journal *Symbolic Interaction* from 2008 to 2011. Her past research has delved into topics such as strip-tease dancing, mentally disabled parenting, childhood sexual abuse, trauma, and theorizing the craft of writing autoethnography. She has published her work in a variety of outlets including *Deviant Behavior*, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, and *Qualitative Inquiry*.

Courtney Styron is an independent researcher. She received her BA in Communication and Media from the University of Northern Iowa. Her research areas include Public Relations, and Mass Communication.

Rachel Thornton is currently pursuing a BA in Criminology and a BS in Mathematics, with a minor in Leadership Studies at Christopher Newport University. She is a Presidential Scholar in the Honors Program and the President's Leadership Program. Rachel works as an Undergraduate Research Apprentice through the Office of Research and Creative Activity at Christopher Newport University. She has been actively engaged in research into the experiences of first-generation college students with Dr Linda Waldron and Dr Danielle Docka-Filipek since 2021.

Linda M. Waldron, PhD, is the Co-Founder and Director of the Center for Education Research and Policy, and an Associate Professor of Sociology at Christopher Newport University. Her research and teaching focuses on educational inequality; first-generation college student experiences; inequities in student learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic; school shootings and discipline policies; bullying and cyberbullying; and the role of social media in the lives of teenagers and young adults. Her work has been published in several scholarly journals, including *Youth & Society*, *Social Science Journal*, *Humanity & Society*, and *Sociological Studies of Children and Youth*.

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CHAPTER 1

INEQUALITY IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Michael A. Katovich^a and Shing-Ling S. Chen^b

^a*Texas Christian University, USA*

^b*University of Northern Iowa, USA*

ABSTRACT

This chapter provides the historical and intellectual context of studying inequality and domination using the symbolic interactionist perspective. Lonnie Athens' radical interactionism was identified as a useful framework to research the omnipresent and insidious inequality found in everyday life. Chapters presented in this volume represent a follow up of Volume 41 of Studies in Symbolic Interaction, edited by Athens, where he laid the ground work for the research of domination and subordination. Chapters in this volume demonstrate the advancements made in studying inequality in symbolic interactionist research.

Keywords: Radical interactionism; Lonnie Athens; inequality; domination; subordination; omnipresence

INTRODUCTION

In the first decade of the 21st century, inspired by Robert Park's insight that prolonged cooperation often leads to conflict among groups and individuals (Park, 1952), Lonnie Athens constructed an alternative form of interactionism that he named radical interactionism. In particular, Athens set out to highlight the presence of dominance and power in human life. While cooperative exchanges remained a prominent focus in Athens' *oeuvre*, the dialectical connection between sociality (Mead, 1932) and preeminent control (Athens, 2018, pp. 549–551) became the central focus of his inquiry into the possibilities associated with social life.

Athens called upon other interactionists to join him in his endeavor and to supply their own versions of how domination and power can be linked to the pragmatic and idealistic roots within the interactionist tradition. Accordingly, in 2013, Athens

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edited Volume 41 of *Studies in Symbolic Interaction, Radical Interactionism on the Rise*. In this volume, Athens laid out the basic postulates of radical interactionism, with prominent scholars discussing the possible contributions of the perspective. Ten years later, in 2023, chapters in this volume still demonstrate the advancement made in radical interactionism over the past decade.

In his discussions of radical interactionism, [Athens \(2015\)](#) examines the taken-for-granted nature of domination, the omnipresence and insidious nature of domination, the social construction of domination, and agency in domination, among many other topics. Chapters in this volume illustrate the insights noted by Athens. The chapters also offer a broad sweeping application of radical interactionism, ranging from reinterpreting the dynamics of Marxism to articulating the connection between domination and coordination as occurring in everyday life and the often overlooked corners of lived experience.

INEQUALITY AS A TAKEN-FOR-GRANTED REALITY

When discussing the relationships between individuals and the social group, George Herbert Mead noted the processes of taking into account the general attitudes by individuals in the course of socially constructing group life. As [Mead \(1934, p. 8\)](#) noted, “The point of approach which I wish to suggest is that of dealing with experience from the standpoint of society, at least from the standpoint of communication as essential to the social order.” This standpoint became a foundation for empathic attention to others, emphasizing the capacity to become an object to oneself as one takes the role of another or others.

Mead emphasized that humans become involved in the cooperative process against the backdrop of an institutionalized social order. This order involves the complex cooperative processes and activities that contribute to a functioning organized human society. However, the institutionalized processes are possible only in so far as every individual involved (and belonging within the social order) can take the general attitudes of all other such individuals – or take the role of the generalized other (1934, pp. 152–153). Taking the role of this generalized other occurs with reference to all human constructed processes and activities. Recognition of this predominant other contributes to institutional functioning; it also contributes to the organized social whole of experiential relations and interactions. Once humans understand and appreciate the generalized other (a “higher power”), they can direct their own behavior according to mutually understood social arrangements ([Mead, 1934, p. 155](#)).

Concurring with Mead, [Athens \(2015\)](#) noted that the social construction of the self involves arrangements that have a taken-for-granted cooperative nature. To sustain ordinary experiential life, humans adapt to the constructed processes of social interaction via constructs that connect the community to social selves. The community constructs not only allow for cooperative interchanges but also sustain social selves, providing a sense of enduring existential continuity. Such processes are often left implicit in group life.

According to Athens, these implicit processes not only become taken-for-granted assumptions in human group life but also constitute an unquestioned life world. Athens' twist on the Meadian process occurs when this unquestioned social world involves the construction and maintenance of inequality. Just as humans can mutually agree to the most basic of cooperative acts, they can also mutually agree to create conditions that involve dominance over others or subordination of selves. In this vein, inequality becomes an unquestioned and vital aspect of the social world and a taken-for-granted reality.

Owing to the taken-for-granted nature of inequality, the construction and maintenance of it can become insidious and implied. Athens (2015, p. 139) notes that, "Domination is usually signaled covertly rather than overtly, which can make at least the immediate detection of its operation difficult." That is, "Superordination and subordination operate under the radar" (Athens, 2015, p. 139). The construction and maintenance of inequality only become visible when the taken-for-granted inequality regarding who dominates and who submits becomes an issue. Athens (2015, p. 139) makes this point explicit when he notes that, "The only time that domination's operation can become clearly visible is when a conflict breaks out over who should perform the superordinate role in the construction of a collective act."

Athens' emphasis on the emerging covert quality of domination becomes enlivened in Kimberly M. Baker's chapter, "A Radical Interactionist Perspective on Family Conflicts and Mothers with Substance Use Problems." Baker describes how the patriarchal domination in a family often becomes generated through repeated family conflicts regarding the durability of family roles. Family conflicts in Baker's study signal the inequality and dominance present in the families, due to the difficulties experienced by some family members, notably mothers, to execute their prescribed subservient roles.

Although the construction and maintenance of inequality may be insidious and covert, such activities are omnipresent. Athens (2015, p. 37) noted that, "The exercise of power and dominance permeates all areas of human group life." Given that inequality emerges and then endures as a taken-for-granted reality, individuals, knowingly or unknowingly, take part in social activities that construct and maintain inequality. They do so, over time, without questioning or reflecting upon what they have created and maintained. Further, Athens (2015, p. 141) argued that, "The most controversial aspect of domination is that it is omnipresent." As demonstrated by the authors in this volume, power and dominance could be seen in all areas of everyday human group life from the interactions among cisgender people, family members, university personnel, to specific superordinate-subordinate relations such as those constructed by coaches and athletes.

INEQUALITY AND AGENCY

In opposition to the argument that inequality, domination, and subordination to those empowered (superordinates) are imposed by particular sectors in the

society, such as the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie, Athens (2015) argued that inequality is a collective act. In the process of creating inequality, individuals willfully and mutually participate in the construction and maintenance of asymmetrical relationships. Domination not only operates in human life via willful acts and agency but also subordination is based on social agreements. When discussing the defining characteristics of domination in collective action, Athens noted that “individuals have conscious assumptions of their respective attitudes and roles, superordinate or subservient,” and “individuals jointly participate in the collective acts of domination and subordination” (Athens, 2015, pp. 132–133).

The conscious acts and willful decisions to construct and maintain inequality adds to the legitimacy and the taken-for-granted nature of inequality. In this volume, Shing-Ling S. Chen, Zhuojun Joyce Chen, and Courtney Styron illustrate in “Performance or Appearance: Paradoxical Generalized Others of the College Female Athletes” that college female athletes are conscious of the social judgment of women based on appearances. The women willfully choose a feminine appearance over athletic performance if the athletic performance correlates with a masculine physique and masculine-like performances.

Additionally, Athens advised that human domination and subordination are collective acts. “Domination occurs when an individual or group participating in a collective act steers the direction of its development according to their particular preferences” (Athens, 2015, p. 132). Domination of collective action could also result in a problematic and unstable social structure. Over time conflicts may occur and the taken-for-granted inequality could be disrupted and renegotiated with such an occurrence. “During conflicts, units violate the taken-for-granted presumptions about who should dominate a collective act’s construction” (Athens, 2015, p. 148). In the aforementioned chapter by Baker, the patriarchal domination regarding role assignments in the family produced an asymmetrical and unstable family structure. This asymmetry, mutually recognized, constructed, and accepted, resulted in repeated familial conflicts and recurrent negotiations of assigned roles.

HOW IS INEQUALITY POSSIBLE?

The genesis of symbolic interactionist theorizing is to answer the question, “How is society possible?” After nearly a century of studying the dynamics of such a possibility, a seemingly logical progression delves into the study of another question, “How is inequality/conflict/domination possible?” By studying inequality/conflict/domination in social life and as social constructs based on mutual agreements, researchers complement the decades of research of how society is possible with insights for a comprehensive understanding of symmetrical and asymmetrical human group life.

To study inequality, many sought the connections between symbolic interactionist thoughts with the theories of Marxism. “Some believe the only real way to radicalize interactionism is to synthesize the ideas of George Herbert Mead

and Karl Marx” (Athens, 2015, p. 21). While Athens disagrees with this approach, a proposed synthesis of Marx and Mead can add to the progression from the possibility of society to the possibility of inequality in society. Robert Perinbanayagam’s contribution to this volume, “Identity and the Relations of Production,” makes insightful links between the construction of powerless identities in symbolic interactionist thought, and Karl Marx’s idea of alienation. These connections provide an additional lens to the understanding of the construction of subservience in symbolic interactionist research.

Studying inequality also allows symbolic interactionists to venture into uncharted territories so as to provide groundbreaking evaluations of activities and relationships that often go unnoticed. Lilith Green and Carol Rambo in “Too Many Genders? Ambiguity as Resistance in the Biographical Work of Gender-diverse People,” report the ambiguity experienced by gender-diverse individuals as they negotiate identity and authenticity in their performance of gender with oneself as well as others. Their study reveals the constraining and oppressive nature of binary gender, and the act of gender audit where the domination and subordination of the binary gender is performed. They advance the argument that gender audit, although oppressive, is also where the resistance, and possible social change could occur for such a gender constraint.

Green and Rambo provide substantive nuances to the omnipresent and insidious nature of inequality. Their study of gender audits directly applies to one of the main goals of radical interactionists: to examine what individuals and groups say to themselves and say and do to each other when social interaction becomes problematic. Green and Rambo add that what is left unstated when coordinated action leading to domination occurs emphasizes the cooperative and again, insidious nature of power arrangements. Their insights reveal who falls where in their group’s or community’s dominance order; that is, who decides who performs the superordinate and subordinate roles during interactions with one another (Athens, 2015, p. 38).

Returning to Baker’s study of families with substance-use mothers, what individuals and groups say to themselves and say and do to each other when social interaction becomes problematic is another dynamic that often proceeds in a theater of the unsaid. In this light, Baker revealed the taken-for-granted silence associated with domination. Such silence accompanied the process of mothers’ substance use problems. Their problems serve as unspoken affirmations of their subordination in the families’ dominance order.

Baker further noted that instead of renegotiating a new slate of family roles to relieve substance-use, mothers silently slide into subordinate roles. In the process of such slippage, family members induce their mothers into treatment so as to continue the established patriarchal domination in the families. Baker’s study reveals the taken-for-granted and insidious domination among family members. Her study also confirms the argument that the structural change from within, in this case the alteration of patriarchy, is rare (Couch & Hintz, 2015).

By studying the taken-for-granted inequality in institutions, researchers become enabled to depict institutional failure amid various organizational disasters. In their chapter, “Breaking Step: Silence, Resonance, and Everyday

Precariousness in Academic Settings.” John C. Pruit, Carol Rambo, and Amanda G. Pruit reported the subservient experience of subordinates in academic settings. Using performance autoethnography, the authors detailed interactions in which instability, insecurity, and negativity comprised the key elements of everyday life worlds for the subordinates in a setting. Forms of risks experienced by subordinates include discrimination, harassment, bullying, and structural instability. These risks become threats which permeate academic settings, and often lead to institutional failure and what the authors term resonance disasters.

Researching the experiences of subservient individuals would reveal the inadequacy of the institutional policies and organizational practices, designed to serve the subservient. Linda M. Waldron, Danielle Docka-Filipek, Carlie Carter, and Rachel Thornton in “First-Generation Students’ Identity Construction, Concealment, & COVID-driven Reckonings: Reconciling Self-Definitions Amidst Institutional Contradiction,” examined the experiences of the first-generation college students. They found that prevailing institutional paradigm, based on a risk-laden and deficit-based model, designed to assist these students, are in fact, incongruent with the experiences of these students. The authors argue that instead of perceiving first-generation students as risks and vulnerability, institutional policies and practices should reflect students as active and engaging members of the university, who are valuable and unique additions to the university environment. It is evident that by studying the experiences of the subservient, the dominant institution could adjust and fine tune its policies and practices that ostensibly serve subordinates.

Studying the experiences of the subservient individuals enriches the symbolic interactionist research, more specifically in the area of stigma research. Julien Grayer, in “Criminalized Subjectivity and Racial Stigma: Implications for the Identity and Self-Concept of Black University Students,” examined the implications of the macro-level racial stigma and crimination on the micro-level of identity construction by the Black college students. Grayer documented how Black college students navigate their identity construction, given the racial stigma and crimination which they were born into. Researching Black college students’ identity construction enriches not only symbolic interactionism but also the Sociology of Race and Race Relations.

Examining the experiences of the subservient also serve to revise the theoretical discussions in symbolic interactionism. S-L. Chen, Z. Chen, and Styron in their aforementioned study of college female athletes revealed how college female athletes referenced both the generalized other for an athlete, that is, performance, and the generalized other for a woman, that is, appearance, in their decision making. Their study provided a substantive addition to Mead’s discussion of the generalized other. Rather than an overt higher power, the authors discuss the appearance of a latent generalized other, rather than the presence of the context-specific functional generalized other, when individuals exercise role taking. They conclude with the legal and ethical consequences of choosing between the functional generalized other, and a latent generalized other.

CONCLUSION

Informed by Park's (1952) insight that prolonged cooperation often leads to conflict among groups and individuals, we concur with Athens about the importance of centering inequality and domination in our research of human group life. We would also like to advance the argument that after decades of researching "How is society possible?", it is time for symbolic interactionists to venture into studying "How is inequality possible?" Athens laid the groundwork for such an endeavor in 2013. Ten years later, in this volume, symbolic interactionists demonstrated advancements in this venture.

Chapters in this volume capture the omnipresent and insidious nature of inequality in everyday life. The results are engrossing and highly relatable. The research demonstrates the utilities of radical interactionism not only in expanding the literature in conventional interactionism but also in broadening the horizons of the understanding of social life in various sectors in the society, LGBTQ+ communities, families, universities, as well as college athletics, just to name a few. Given the fruitful accomplishments achieved so far, we encourage symbolic interactionists to continue on in this endeavor, as this venture not only enriches symbolic interactionism but also human life as a whole.

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