

Interaction and Symbolic Interactionism¹

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This special issue of *Symbolic Interaction* aims to explore the role of the concept of interaction in contemporary theory and research within the discipline and cognate areas. The impetus for this collection of essays came from the observation that studies in symbolic interaction and other “interactionist” approaches differ greatly in the extent to which interaction is a focus of concern and, where it is of interest, in the theoretical and methodological resources employed to explore it. As the essays that form the beginning section of this edition show, interaction ritual theory, structural symbolic interactionist approaches, ethnomethodology, and the Iowa School all represent quite distinctive orientations to this issue.

Chris Hausmann, Amy Jonason, and Erika Summers-Effler compare interaction ritual theory (Collins 2004) with Stryker's (2008) structural approach to symbolic interactionism. Following Collins, the authors argue for the importance of participants' emotional orientation to situations. They see individuals' actions being motivated by an anticipation of emotional energy. In contrast, interaction ritual theory entails a clear focus on interaction as a Durkheimian “ritualistic” activity, through which the sense of society as a moral entity emerges. Dan E. Miller's essay illustrates that the Iowa School's concern continues to be with developing universal models of copresence and social processes that outline the sequences of forms of action such as greetings, negotiation, deviant activity, as well as particular forms of relationships, such as authority or autocratic relationships. In contrast, Alex Dennis's essay demonstrates that this is quite different to an ethnomethodological approach, which is not directed toward generalization but toward exploring the distinctiveness or the “just-thisness” of particular settings. As these examples show, then, the

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theoretical or conceptual models of interaction differ in fundamental ways between perspectives.

While interactionist theory has been prolific, there have been some high-profile complaints over the years about the absence of empirical advance in analyzing interaction. In his 1982 presidential address to the American Sociological Association, Goffman (1983) powerfully argued for social situations as a prime domain for sociological investigation. Drawing on his published work, he argued for the central importance of scrutinizing in detail the processes of enacting and of reading bodily displays as components of the construction of social settings. This now infamous impassioned call to action was an attempt to make the empirical concentration on people's real-world contexts a priority (cf. Smith 1999, 2006).

This argument might seem strange in the context of what we have already described as a diverse disciplinary interest in studying interaction. Indeed, interaction and the processes of actions through which participants ongoingly create a sense of intersubjectivity were at the heart of Mead's work. Mead (1934) saw communication processes and the interexchanges of significant symbols as central to his theory of mind and as constitutive of how people internalize social conventions and collaborate to construct meaning. Mead himself did not develop a particularly nuanced analysis of the "pragmatics" underlying social action—that is, of the activities that are coordinated between individuals and constitutive of communication. Jonathan Turner's essay in this collection plays an important role in drawing out the implicit and underexplored features of Mead's model and, as he describes it, as filling in some conceptual apparatus for a Meadian theory of interaction. However, an important part of the context of Goffman's critique is that the transformation of Mead's concepts by Blumer (1969) into what now is known as symbolic interactionism has to some extent led to a privileging of social-psychological rather than sociological concerns. This has been evident in some of the themes that have been explored in detail within this journal over the years, such as participants' attitudes to situations and how their identity emerges from participating in interaction. This interest in subjective processes has involved taking the operations that enable the emergence of "joint action" (Blumer 1969) and the development and negotiation of definitions of situations for granted. The specific mechanisms through which people's real-world interactional activities are organized are of peripheral interest to the analysis in such cases.

Blumer's writings, which were so important in transforming Mead's contributions into an empirical agenda, have of course provided the basis for a wide range of ethnographies of work, occupation, health care, family life, race relations, and shopping behavior that in many cases are concerned with social interaction and processual aspects of intersubjective understandings (Becker 1974; Becker et al. 1961). Similarly, Strauss and colleagues (1978, 1996; Strauss and Wohl 1958; Strübing 2007) have conducted influential work on negotiation and related issues. However, these studies tend to stop short of a close analysis of the interactional phenomena that constitute

the contexts under investigation: as Garfinkel (1967) has argued, they represent a “loose Phenomenology,” which misses the object from its analysis.

The relative lack of interactionists’ interest in the situation reflects a disengagement from one of sociology’s key questions, namely, how people arrive at an intersubjective understanding of an object. With this special issue we hope to make a small step toward a symbolic interactionist return to issues such as interaction processes, practices, and intersubjective understanding. The resurrection of concerns that in the past were at the heart of symbolic interactionist debate requires a reflection on contemporary concepts of interaction.

The special issue therefore opens with four invited contributions by scholars grounded in symbolic interactionism and related approaches like interaction ritual theory and ethnomethodology. These contributions relate their different perspectives on “interaction” to symbolic interactionist concerns and debates. The theoretical part of the special issue is followed by three empirical studies of interaction in different social domains: interaction between charity workers and the homeless, the life of a local ethnic minority in western Thrace, and professional activity in the operating theater. Robin James Smith’s analysis of the service encounter between outreach workers and homeless people in Cardiff draws on Rawls’s (1987) reading of Goffman’s work to explore how participants normalize and disattend to the “problematic” aspects of homeless identity. Through Smith’s work, we come to see the relevance of analyzing the interaction order and how, through Goffmanian concepts, we can come to an understanding of the production of encounters, roles, responsibilities, “normal,” and “ordinary.” Venetia Evergeti’s study of racial discrimination in western Thrace focuses on how ethnic communities create intersubjective understandings of situations as “discriminatory.” Paying particular attention to the stigmatized group, Evergeti also draws on Goffman’s work to show how communities create and negotiate their identities through interaction. In this way, discrimination is viewed not as a psychological property or propensity but as a socially grounded and contextual relation between communities of people.

Jeff Bezemer, Jed Murtagh, Alexandra Cope, Gunther Kress, and Roger Kneebone’s examination of professional activity in an operating theater involves the microanalysis of video recordings of interprofessional activity in operations. The analysis shows the various bodily, gestural, and verbal communication strategies employed to communicate and to repair (or avoid) failures of communication. The analysis highlights the problems with the distinction between “nontechnical skills” (such as communication) and “technical skills” that is often used to describe, and indeed to “curricularize,” the work of surgeons. In this study we come to see in detail the in situ interactive practices through which professionals make sense of each other’s intentions and achieve the shared understanding of lines of action. The special issue ends with René Tuma’s review of Christian Heath, Jon Hindmarsh, and Paul Luff’s (2010) exploration of a video-based approach to examine social interaction.

While the essays presented here cover a broad set of empirical and theoretical areas, they do of course offer only a snapshot of an extensive domain. It seems clear,

however, that even this partial representation demonstrates the richness of “interactionist” approaches to the study of intersubjective understanding by focusing on interaction processes.

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