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## SYMBOLIC INTERACTION AND SOCIAL PRACTICE

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### ABSTRACT

To make social theory useful for practice its concepts must be in a form which is compatible with the ways practitioners relate to people. Symbolic interaction has a unique contribution to make to this endeavor. Its unit of attention is interaction; what goes on between people. Facts and ideas at this level of abstraction can be used in intervention. By contrast theories of society and theories of system are descriptive. They provide useful background information for practice.

Symbolic interaction theory offers the hope that a social perspective can be effectively integrated into individual and family treatment. It is a hope because at this point in time the psychological perspective has many well developed diagnostic and treatment paradigms and the social perspective is a loose collection of practice wisdom.

The advantage of symbolic interaction is that in contrast to other social theories it does not pose a theory of society but, rather, focuses on individual acts and what goes on between people.<sup>1</sup> This limited world view is why it will be useful to practitioners. It is best exemplified by Manis and Meltzer's listing of the theory's basic propositions:

1. Distinctively human behavior and interaction are carried on through the medium of symbols and their meanings.
2. The individual becomes humanized through interaction with other persons.
3. Human society is most usefully conceived as consisting of people in interaction.
4. Human beings are active in shaping their behavior.
5. Consciousness, or thinking, involves interaction with oneself.
6. Human beings construct their behavior in the course of its execution.
7. An understanding<sup>2</sup> of human conduct requires study of the actors covert behavior.

These propositions direct the practitioner's attention to behavior which can be seen or elicited in practice. Among the more important concepts in the theory are those of a social self, roles built out of mutual expectations, attitudes, the importance of language in human development, looking-glass self, generalized other and reference groups.<sup>3</sup> These concepts are at the same level of abstraction or can be directly connected to concepts used in a psychological practice per-

spective. Thus, if adequate diagnostic tools and treatment protocols can be developed from a symbolic interaction perspective, a practitioner can integrate psychological and social views into practice without the confusion that comes from trying to mix theories of difference levels of abstraction.

Beyond the theoretical attractiveness of symbolic interaction there is a philosophical base which makes it comfortable for those trying to help others in the struggle to control their lives. Symbolic interaction rests on a pragmatic philosophy. This is best summed up in the dictionary definition which says it is:

an American movement in philosophy founded by C.S. Peirce and William James and marked by the doctrines that the meaning of conceptions is to be sought in their practical bearings, that the function of thought is to guide action, and that truth is preeminently to be tested by the practical consequences of belief.

Such a stance is almost unique in the realm of social theory. To be acceptable as a fruitful alternative for consideration in explaining the world, a theory has only had to be logical; it has not had to be useful in guiding action. This is not to say that symbolic interaction theory meets the pragmatic test completely. It does meet the test more than any other theory. This is best reflected in W.I. Thomas's famous dictum, "If a man thinks a thing is true it is true in so far as it governs his action." This is a truism; it also reflects the essence of pragmatism. To the extent that one controls their actions and acts on their desires the basis for that action becomes a truth. It is something that works for it provides at least a necessary explanation of that action. If from the point of view of the receiver the action is initiated through false premises the difference between the actor and the receiver is something to be worked out in interaction.

Another aspect of the cultural-value system that surrounds symbolic interaction is that it is derived from a liberal view of the world. Its roots are in a belief in progress and a commitment to freedom. It assumes that man is inherently good; this assumption is backed up by a commitment to protect political and civil liberties. Freedom is the watchword of symbolic interaction and individual autonomy is its faith.

The emphasis on the individual is the key to why symbolic interaction theory is useful to the practitioner. Pragmatism and liberalism contain the idea that individual freedom and autonomy are only possible when the rights of others are respected.

This orientation is reflected in a methodology which emphasises techniques that can be considered distinctive to the theory since they are so seldom used in other theoretical approaches. The unit of analysis is the individual; the focus of concern is explaining the individual in social terms. This social view of personality draws data from an interactive view of role, operating in the context of social structure. The research techniques used by symbolic interactionists are exactly those needed for practice research. Thus, they have pioneered in using personal documents, case histories, life histories and autobiographies. They have demonstrated that the comparative method is as necessary to advancing knowledge as are statistical tests of significance based on probability samples.

It seems almost surprising that such a powerful theory of the social individual has not resulted in a more useful theory of social practice. One reason may be that Harry Stack Sullivan, the best known proponent of symbolic interaction in psychiatry, did not propose or develop a distinctive diagnostic and treatment schema based on interactional concepts. His numerous mind-bending neologisms may constitute the groundwork for such a development but, unfortunately, many of his conceptual contributions have not received wide currency.

Sullivan worked within a traditional psychoanalytic diagnostic and treatment structure. This commitment led him to abandon an interactional approach for transactional ideas which are more compatible with the system orientation of psychoanalysis. Perhaps this is because his focus was on treating severely disturbed people; here the normal rules of interaction do not pertain and much time must be spent deciphering the unconscious. Regardless of the reason much of Sullivan's writing goes beyond the interactional and is concerned with transactions where the emphasis is on the mutual changes which occur in the participants in a treatment encounter.

Systems theories are good for seeing things whole and describing the world. They are vital for any complete system of treatment but are more useful in between practice sessions than in the moment of practice. They provide a structure; a way to organize and integrate information.

In systems theory all the elements are seen as being in constant motion; there are no facts.<sup>5</sup> The equilibrium model which is the core of systems theory has been criticized for its inherent conservatism because change is not handled in a positive way. It is noteworthy that many systems oriented therapists tend not to want to deal with the issues that people want help with; but only with their process.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps it is easier to talk about systems than to deal with real people. It is paradoxical that so many systems theorists see their approach to therapy as radical. They talk in glowing terms of "growth" without seeming to realize that with people this takes a long time; the possibilities for altering or speeding up growth are limited.

Many people who seek help for problems require a transactional relationship. This is because their world perceptions are so distorted, and have been for a long time, that help can only be given at this level of intensity. The majority of people who seek help for counseling have an essentially intact ego. While mental illness may not be a myth it is possible that one of the reasons there has been a controversy about its nature is that a psychological framework has been the only orientation available to those who help people suffering situational stress. The same holds for difficulty in handling life problems where neither the major cause or source of alleviation lies in the psyche of the individual.

In almost every area of our society where there is difficulty making a decision because there is question about the meaning of a person's behavior the tendency is to turn to those with a psychological orientation. Thus, the courts will turn to psychiatrists and psychologists. Physicians will do the same. In their training, psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and other counselors are not exposed to a systematic and organized practice model based on the assumption of a normal ego and the need for an interactional as opposed to a transactional approach. In an interactional approach the key is to be able to understand the world as the other does. The task of the counselor is to use his knowledge of where the other is to

work with him to handle the issue in his life. The counselor is not concerned about mutual changes in himself and his client, with a detailed history of the problem, with interpreting the current problem in the light of that history, or with the associations, fantasies, or even the import of the client's feelings. What he does look at is what the client does about the problem alone or with others. This approach holds whether the client needs only to change a problem definition, his own behavior, other people's behavior, or material supports or alterations in the environment are necessary.

Interaction is a concept that does not require a high level of emotional involvement or change to use successfully. All that is required is that one be able to take account of the other. Interaction is complete when each participant is aware of the others expectations and can, if they choose, take the other into account. This formulation does not guarantee that the interaction will be happy or that one participant will not take advantage of another. One is not required to grow and it is not expected that their character structure will change as a result of one encounter or a series of encounters. One can engage in interaction and still be an individual. In short, interaction implies that social business can be accomplished without either participant being deeply affected. That is why another name for symbolic interaction is social behaviorism.

This formulation of an interactional approach depends more on a definition of the situation than anything inherent in the person or his behavior in any situation. It is a diagnostic question as to whether behavior is situational or an example of a personality problem whose manifestation is relatively uninfluenced by the situation. Based on this diagnosis the counselor can determine whether to intervene on an interactional or a transactional basis.

In sum, symbolic interaction offers a pragmatic and humanitarian basis for developing ways to integrate the "social" into treatment.<sup>8</sup> Such a system will facilitate the use of multiple perspectives in treatment. This can only benefit the client. No one theory, psychological or social, explains all of behavior. While it is true that in order to guide treatment a practitioner must master one theory; it is also true that he must draw techniques from all theories to really help his client. It is time to balance the predominate psychological approaches to treatment with those that are socially based. Out of such an endeavor can come a unified theory of human behavior. Only then will those who try to help people be able to deliver, with predictable regularity, positive results from what is often a confusing, painful, demanding, and expensive effort.

#### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Neil J. Smelser, "Sociology and the Other Social Sciences," in The Uses of Sociology, ed. by Paul F. Lazarsfeld, William H. Sewell, and Harold L. Wilensky (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1967), p. 7

<sup>2</sup>Jerome G. Manis and Bernard N. Meltzer, "Intellectual Antecedents and Basic Propositions of Symbolic Interactionism," in Symbolic Interaction, ed. by Jerome G. Manis and Bernard N. Meltzer (3rd ed.; Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1978), pp. 6-8

<sup>3</sup>The source of most of the concepts identified in this section is Don Martindale, The Nature of Sociological Theory (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960), pp. 339-375.

<sup>4</sup>Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary, 1971, p. 667.

<sup>5</sup>Charles Ackerman and Talcott Parsons, "The Concept of 'Social Systems' as a Theoretical Device," Concepts, Theory and Explanation in the Behavior Sciences, Ed. by Gordon J. Dizenzo (New York: Random House, 1966), pp. 25-28.

<sup>6</sup>Shirley Gehrke Luthman with Martin Kirschenbaum, The Dynamic Family Palo Alto, California: Science and Behavior Books, 1974)

<sup>7</sup>Harris Chaiklin, "Social System, Personality System, and Practice Theory," in Social Work Practice, 1969 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), pp. 1-14.

<sup>8</sup>Harris Chaiklin, "Multiple Perspectives in Interpreting Behavior," American Dance Theory Association, Proceedings of Ninth Annual Conference (Columbia, Maryland: American Dance Therapy Association, 1975), pp. 48-59.