The Present and Future of Symbolic Interactionism

Proceedings of the International Symposium, Pisa 2010

VOLUME I

edited by Andrea Salvini, Joseph A. Kotarba, Bryce Merrill

Sociologia

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Preface

by Joseph A. Kotarba and Andrea Salvini

> We all belong to small cliques and we may remain simply inside them. The 'organized other' present in ourselves is then a community of narrow diameter. We are struggling now to get a certain amount of international-mindedness. We are realizing ourselves as members of a larger community. The vivid nationalism of the present should in the end call out an international attitude of a larger community….What I am emphasizing now is that the organization of these responses makes the community possible.
>
> *George Herbert Mead* (1934, p. 265-6)

George Herbert Mead would be very proud of the "international-mindedness" generated by the International Symposium on the Present and Future of Symbolic Interactionism. This intellectually and socially invigorating event was held in June, 2010, in Pisa, Italy, hosted by Professor Andrea Salvini and the University of Pisa. I am a firm believer in the symbolic interactionist dictate that the situation largely shapes the substance and quality of the interaction, and our symposium is a dramatic example of the positive impact of a breath-taking setting on intellectual discourse.

The peaceful, somewhat solemn, yet warm and breezy setting for the symposium is a former monastery converted to a professional meeting facility. The sleeping rooms—or cells as they were probably designated years ago—provided for us were comfortable, but the absence of televisions in our rooms was a clear indication that this was not going to be just another Holiday Inn, corporate-style convention on which participants from North America — at least! — have been raised. No, the setting was designed for conversation: gentle pathways in the commons areas on which to stroll and chat; shaded tables and chair in the breakfast area and throughout the grounds that encouraged all of us to learn about each other, each other's work, and each other's ideas about symbolic interactionism. Although the sessions, panels, and addresses were conducted in the context of state-of-the art audio-visual services, it seemed that all of the formal presentations ended with speakers and audiences members pouring out into the warm Tuscan sun to share a coffee and an ongoing examination of the ideas just presented.

And, just what were we able to share over those three days? I think that all of us were pleasantly surprised at what the others had to offer. For the

North Americans, we were impressed to hear our European colleagues present a model of interactionism that was scholarly, literary and clearly useful for the analysis of topics relevant to a rapidly changing European social and cultural landscape. I also believe that many of us were relieved to hear that the pragmatist-inspired ideas that form the foundation of our discipline are appreciated by others who may not share our very specific histories and local concerns. The Europeans in attendance seemed impressed by our acknowledgement of the globalizing trends in the contemporary world that led all of us to increasingly share similar empirical as well as theoretical questions.

This collection of keynote addresses by some of the most important and influential interactionists anywhere illustrates well the strengths as well as the promise of a truly international symbolic interactionism. They show a deep respect for the intellectual roots of interactionism, but also for the more contemporary interpretations and extension of these roots. They show an awareness of the substantive topics that we increasingly share. And, they propose methodologies that encourage all of us to increasingly formulate general research questions that do not always end in "as is the case in Italy" or "as is the case in the United States."

In Chapter One ("Multiple Futures for Symbolic Interaction: Time for the Past and the Future"), Kathy Charmaz proposes one topic for interactionist research—temporality—that is relevant anywhere and everywhere. She begins by reflecting on the historic and canonical foundations of symbolic interactionism. The legacy of the past, for Charmaz, is twofold. On the one hand, Blumer and others established interactionism as a theory *and* a method, that is, more an approach to understanding social life than just a theory of it. Charmaz reminds us that interactionism is a perspective that historically has been concerned with processes of agentic human action, as opposed to theories of socially structured, rational behavior. Using an empirical account of a vocal performer's loss of voice and self after throat surgery, Charmaz borrows from Erving Goffman's famous "moments and their men" line, proposing the interactionist study of "moments and their meanings." One future direction, already begun by Charmaz and others, is to consider through empirical inquiry and systematic theorizing the temporality of meaning-making. As she states in concluding her essay, "It's time for time."

In Chapter Two ("Towards a Cosmopolitan Symbolic Interactionism"), Ken Plummer calls for an expansion of symbolic interactionism's intellectual borders, which he in fact sees as an inevitable consequence of the ex-

pansion of its putative geographic borders. Plummer crafts an argument that a global cohort of interactionists could and should create a globalized theory of symbolic interaction. This new crop of SI scholars, however, may not emerge as card-carrying interactionists. Indeed, Plummer's typology of interactionists, as adapted from David Maines' model, suggests that we are likely to see an expansion of interactionist work, if not the number of self-identified, card-carrying, interactionists. These interactionist "utilizers" and "transgressors," as Plummer identifies them, are the catalysts for a truly cosmopolitan interactionism.

In Chapter Three ("Symbolic Interactionism in Italy: The Development of an American Theory"), Raffaele Rauty argues that an analysis of the slow development of symbolic interactionism in Italy requires two strategies: the first is related to the origins, success and institutionalization of sociology in that country, while the second regards the more general intellectual culture and history that have led over time, often in different and conflicting ways, to this process. The "sociological delay" that characterized the slow spreading of the discipline in Italy can be attributed to a number of factors, including tradition, strong competition from several adjacent disciplines such as philosophy and history, its difficult institutionalization in the university, and the power of Marxism. Rauty highlights the fact that a net effect of this intellectual history is the loss of contact between different intellectual approaches - inside and outside of sociology - even if they are dealing with similar problems. He closes his essay evoking the increasing and widespread attention that SI has been receiving in recent years, particularly among younger scholars and researchers, who perceive the need for a paradigm to make sense of the more general, world-wide dissolution of institutional power, and capable to adequately address the pressing issues of everyday life and emotions, the rise of deviance, the problems inherent in various forms of clinical "treatment," the gender dimension and the dynamics of social exclusion.

In Chapter Four ("Symbolic Interaction Beyond the Borders"), David Altheide suggests a perhaps more radical boarder crossing than the other authors do: from the actual to the virtual. Altheide suggests that interactionist theory is fundamentally grounded in the logic of "face-to-face interaction," which he argues is thought to be "largely unmediated by information technologies and communication formats." In light of a global virtualization of reality, Altheide presses for a reimagining of SI to account for the hyper-mediated quality of "the natural world." Altheide demonstrates the interactionist approach to mediated social interaction with interview data on Formspring.me, an online social networking site. He suggests

that the integration of media meanings with social situations and emotions provides a conceptual space for further integration of symbolic interaction with ethnomethodological, phenomenological, and existential perspectives on social behavior.

In Chapter Five ("Towards a New Interpretative Paradigm: Interactionism, Phenomenology, Ethnomethodology"), Luigi Muzzetto explores the possible convergence between interactionism, phenomenology and ethnomethodology, suggesting that, from an epistemological standpoint, SI should assume a position closer to the other two, adopting a more clearly constructionist position. The author underlines the fact that SI, building on Blumer and especially on a "soft constructionist" stance, such as the one that inspires the interactionist version of Grounded Theory, takes a epistemological "middle ground" between realist and post-modernist visions. This "middle ground position," in the author's opinion, tends to maintain the subject-object dualism, and this prevents symbolic interactionism to definitely move towards a more radical constructionist position. Subscribing Pollner and Natanson critiques to the pragmatic foundations of SI, Muzzetto argues that the phenomenological concept of "common sense" could be the crucial point of convergence among the three perspectives of the interpretative family and the starting point for a shared theoretical point of view.

In Chapter Six ("Taking Chances in Everyday Life: Studying Culture Across Continents"), Joseph Kotarba responds to the growing international interest in symbolic interactionism by calling for a project that will serve as a medium for bridging various conceptual interests and methodological styles. He proposes culture as the location of this project. Culture is the "stuff" of everyday life. Culture is ubiquitous. Culture illuminates a people's - all people's - everyday life. Popular music in everyday life may be particularly useful because it represents one of the most shared and sharable of all cultural forms. In his essay, Kotarba explores the usefulness of the sensitizing concept of *cultural experimentation* for understanding how actors take chances with culture in everyday life situations in various societies. This sensitizing concept is assembled from two ideas. The *existential self* sees the individual experimenting with culture in order to reshape or tune up the self without a clear sense of what the end product might be. Michel de Certeau's notion of *poaching* sees the cultural voyager traveling across a text actively picking and choosing from meanings another has authored. He illustrates his proposal with examples from popular music experiences in Poland, the USA, the Americas more generally, and the Middle East/North Africa. This exercise

will hopefully show how we can develop interactionist concepts that apply across cultures, communities, and societies.

In Chapter Seven ("A Theory of Social Attraction"), Jan Trost draws on the microsociological unit of analysis, the dyad, to articulate an interactionist theory of attraction. Attraction, he argues, is commonly used as a noun, as in "I have an attraction to sunsets." But in true SI fashion, Trost views attraction as a verb, a process of drawing together. His interest, to paraphrase, is in understanding how someone can feel this process. Locating attraction in a nexus of processes, contexts (geographical proximity, for example), norms and values, Trost illustrates the role of SI in sociological social psychology. As such, Trost's essay eschews overly psychological or determinist notions of attraction, in favour of one that views attraction in action.

In Chapter Eight ("The Return of Symbolic Interactionism in Italy"), Andrea Salvini describes the characters of the renewed interest towards SI in Italy and Europe. In his article, after having described the position of SI in the development of the sociological discipline in Italy, Salvini discuss two possible substantive reasons lying at the base of the return of SI in Italy. The central hypothesis, around which the other revolves and upon which they depend, refers to the adequacy of the theoretical system of SI for grasping the nature and the dimensions of the essential traits of contemporary social life, in Europe and in Italy, which are characterized in a distinctive manner by interpersonal and collective communication and that are transforming the structures of collective life. The second point refers to the analytical and methodological vocation of SI. This perspective offers to scholars the possibility of penetrating the structures of relations and of grasping the dynamics of the processes which determine their emergence, their change, their birth and dissolution, without placing an analytical limit, so to speak, on the investigation. SI proposes a coherent and diversified methodological picture that offers a series of operative possibilities capable of penetrating deeply into social processes, and of grasping the role played by the actors-in-interaction as well as the effects on the broader social contexts. At the end of his contribution, Salvini highlights the fact that this "return" of symbolic interactionism have to build on the the heritage of Herbert Blumer. Although Salvini acknowledges that Blumer's contribution to social research and to sociological endeavor is not immune from flaws and compromises, he notes that the current and future developments of a discipline cannot help but to take into consideration the intellectual and scientific reasons which first motivated its birth and then characterized its evolu-

tion over time, so respecting his vocational focus – that for SI is constituted by the philosophical foundations of American pragmatism.

Empirically speaking, social life is infinitely various. It routinely ducks, dodges, and deflects abstract categorization. John Johnson's essay (Chapter Nine "The Good News: Collaborating to Work for Inter-national Justice & Human Rights"), which includes a brief summary of the incredible variety of topics covered at the conference in Pisa, implicitly reminds us that SI is not a tool suited to corralling this empirical shiftiness, but one that embraces it. By emphasizing the study of the moving parts of social life—SI's revered "processes of interaction"—the perspective is limitless in its focus. Consider, as Johnson does, that interactionist presentations in Pisa covered Jewish-Arab interactions, stress and the nature of emotions, and truck culture in Canada, among many other topics. Johnson also writes that the diversity of SI is not bound by disciplines or geographies—a diversity that is a recurrent theme in this collection of essays. What is novel and most critical about Johnson's work is the reminder that human rights and social justice should be as central to our scholarship as they are to our lives.

In conclusion, we hope you enjoy this collection of essays and the excitement it brings to the development of symbolic interactionism. This volume will be followed, in few months, by a second one that will contain a selected number of paper that were presented in the thematic Sessions of the Conference.

As an American interactionist, I have enjoyed earlier European contributions to social thought—postmodernism, critical theory and British subcultural theory, as examples—and I have incorporated some of the ideas emanating from these perspectives in my writing. With an even greater sense of anticipation and excitement, I look forward to engaging increasing symbolic interactionist thought with a distinctive European panache. The essays in this book provide a tempting taste of great things to come.

As an Italian (aspirant…) interactionist, I, Andrea, would add some brief personal remarks to the inspiring words of Joe Kotarba. In 2009 and 2010 I attended the "Annual Meetings" that were held in the U.S.A. and organized by the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction (SSSI). On those occasions I could appreciate not only the vitality of perspective, but also the atmosphere of openness, exchange and confrontation, much beyond the rigid academic formality of many Italian and European meetings. What struck me most of all was the fact that I immediately felt comfortable in this community of scholars.

The conference held in Pisa, which has coherently been given an international character, had the aim to build a symbolic and material *locus* of

encounter between scholars from different geographical and intellectual origin, to freely confront on SI, its destiny and its ability to provide useful conceptual and methodological tools to understand contemporary social phenomena.

We both agree that Professor Salvini and his staff in Pisa expended hard work and energy to make it possible, and the returns we all gained on the scientific, cultural and human levels are of immeasurable value.

We hope that this book will be read and appreciated by the international community of interactionists, but also by an increasing number of young scholars (in Italy as well as worldwide) interested in the fascinating proposal coming from the perspective of Symbolic Interactionism.

I would like to thank Joe Kotarba and Bryce Merrill for their invaluable work in editing this book, and to all the interactionists I met in these past years in USA and Europe, among the many others David Altheide, Phillip Vannini, Kathy Charmaz, Robert Dingwall, Ken Plummer, Jan Trost, John Johnson, Robert Prus and Andrea Fontana for their commitment in the effort to build a stronger European and international community of interactionist and, what is more relevant, for the friendship they show in our encounters.

We would also like to acknowledge the support of the Center for Social Inquiry in the Department of Sociology at Texas State University-San Marcos.

This is the first Volume of the Proceedings of the International Symposium on *The Present and Future of Symbolic Interactionism* held in Pisa, 3-5 June 2010, consisting of the keynotes that were presented in the plenary sessions. It will be followed in few months by the Volume Two, consisting of a wide selection of the papers that were presented in parallel sessions at the symposium.

Multiple Futures for Symbolic Interaction: Time for the Past and the Future[1]

by Kathy Charmaz

In the past, symbolic interactionists have presaged emerging currents in sociology and the social sciences such as discussions of agency and action. The perspective has also absorbed or adopted other currents. What lies ahead? Rather than foreseeing a future for symbolic interactionism, I foresee multiple futures reflecting divergent paths of its development.

To enable us to think of concrete implications of the symbolic interactionist perspective and its multiple futures, I begin with an empirical story about a thirty-one year old woman retelling a crucial moment when she was nineteen and a student of vocal performance in college. The data are from a new book, *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis: Phenomenological Psychology, Grounded Theory, Discourse Analysis, Narrative Research, and Intuitive Inquiry* (Wertz, et al 2011) in which five different qualitative researchers analyzed the same personal account and interview of a young woman, whom we call Teresa. In the following excerpt from interview, she describes what happened when she consulted her surgeon about having a goiter removed. She recalled the moment after the surgeon told her that she might lose her voice because the surgery was for anaplastic carcinoma, not the goiter that her other doctors had diagnosed. Teresa had devoted her life to becoming an accomplished mezzo-soprano. From her accounts, she had already had received extraordinary recognition in her voice program and had made remarkable progress toward becoming a professional singer:

[1]We thank Guilford Press for granting permission to reproduce excerpts from K. Charmaz (2011), "A constructivist grounded theory analysis of losing and regaining a valued self." Pp. 165-204 in Wertz, Frederick J., Charmaz, Kathy, McMullen, Linda J., Josselson, Ruthellen, Anderson, Rosemarie, and McSpadden, Emalinda. *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis: Phenomenological Psychology, Grounded Theory, Discourse Analysis, Narrative Research, and Intuitive Inquiry.*

I froze. I couldn't breathe, couldn't move, couldn't even blink. I felt like I had just been shot. My gut had locked up like I'd been punched in it. My mouth went dry and my fingers, which had been fumbling with a pen, were suddenly cold and numb. Apparently picking up on my shock, the surgeon smiled a little. "We're going to save your life, though. That's what counts. And you know what? The other surgeon working with me is a voice guy. We're going to do everything we can not to be too intrusive." I started to breathe a little, very little, and I felt myself trembling. I tried to say something meaningful, expressive… all that I could manage was, "Man… I was actually pretty good" (p. 180).

For the present, think about the effects of this moment on this young woman's life: its meaning, intensity, and implications. What was experiencing this moment like? How might such a moment affect a person's life, and the lives of those around her? What insights as symbolic interactionists might we bring to understanding it? And how might such moments suggest a direction for symbolic interactionists? To illustrate one way of moving forward, I show the analytic potential of using the symbolic interactionist perspective with empirical examples that I have analyzed with grounded theory methods.

In this paper, I will integrate several topics that might otherwise seem to raise disparate issues and divergent directions. I hope you will recognize connections between these topics and sense their directions for multiple futures of symbolic interactionism. Although symbolic interactionism originated in North America, it has moved across nations and continents as well as across disciplines and methods.

Symbolic interactionism has informed and been informed by its proponents' disciplines, societies, cultures, lives, and areas of empirical study. Its development in Italy and throughout the world will reflect the particular historical, social, cultural, and situational conditions of those who adopt the perspective. The movement of symbolic interactionism and its growing diversity open possibilities and potentials for multiple futures of symbolic interactionism—and for all of us.

When we think of starting points and standpoints of symbolic interactionism, we think of its basic conceptualization of humans as active agents engaged in practical activities in their worlds. Symbolic interactionism brings a dynamic understanding to actions and events. For exemplary symbolic interactionist insights, recall Anselm Strauss's *Mirrors and Masks* and *Images of the American City*. Our perspective gives us a way of analyzing processes and of detecting subtle relationships between events. We can discern the dialectics between structure and process. We attend to our research participants' language and how it shapes their interpretations, and

we focus on their actions and experience. We look for ways they engage in routine actions and what they see as problematic situations. Our analytical work is to make sense of their views and actions and offer a sociological interpretation of them.

Classic statements of symbolic interactionism have argued that process is fundamental for social life and actions are consequential. Instead of treating social structures as given realities, symbolic interactionists have assumed that people enact social structures through their routine and often taken-for-granted actions.

But do those who currently adopt the mantle of symbolic interactionist share a core of assumptions and beliefs? If so, what are they? Where do our assumptions take us? Where can our assumptions take us? What are their implications? I call for returning to and reaffirming core classic assumptions while attending to current debates and innovations.

1. Enduring Strengths of Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism has enduring strengths on which we all might draw in our own ways. These strengths can help us to distinguish our work and make it distinctive. To consider the implications of these enduring strengths, we must acknowledge the way symbolic interactionism has informed and enlivened empirical study. I emphasize returning to foundational statements by the early pragmatists and later by Herbert Blumer (1969) and Anselm Strauss (1959). Both Blumer and Strauss emphasized human agency. They both recognized that social structures are enacted but obdurate. And they both analyzed action.

Readers interested in symbolic interactionism typically have not acknowledged that Blumer's view of symbolic interactionism included method as well as theory. His well-known incisive critique of mid-twentieth century quantitative methods also contained general methodological principles for qualitative researchers.

The methodological development of SI, however, gained momentum when Strauss, together with Barney Glaser (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss 1987; Strauss and Corbin 1990, 1998), constructed the grounded theory method. Glaser and Strauss offered explicit strategies for recognizing agency and studying process. As their method moved across disciplinary borders, the empirical tradition of symbolic interactionism moved with it. Our perspective also holds untapped potential for theoretical innovation - and integration - and for social justice research (Charmaz, in press).

Symbolic interactionism has a long empirical tradition. It suggests a method of "naturalistic" inquiry. Social scientists may challenge the assumptions imbedded in the term naturalistic inquiry, but research engagement in the empirical world is a major strength of the interactionist tradition. While we make our work distinctive, we also attempt to make it say something new and significant about the world. The pragmatist heritage of symbolic interactionist leads us to treat ideas as arising, changing, or shifting through practice. Thus, grappling with empirical problems gives us the intellectual resources needed to form new understandings of the world.

What does being a symbolic interactionist mean in 2010?

Although much else is contested, many social scientists who subscribe to symbolic interactionism: 1) assume human agency, 2) attend to language and interpretation, 3) view social processes as open-ended, somewhat indeterminate and emergent, and 4) focus on action and meaning. In addition, how these components of everyday life activities interaction and vary by situation.

When engaging the symbolic interactionist tradition, we need to ask: which threads do we retain? Which ideas do we leave behind? I call for scrutinizing and clarifying classic ideas, for they give us the shared foundation to move ahead. We can celebrate connections between the past and future of symbolic interactionism. Moreover, we can enact these connections and challenges in the present. In brief, symbolic interactionists can move forward on the strengths of the past.

2. Re-engaging Symbolic Interaction: A Modest Proposal

With due apologies to Jonathan Swift for borrowing his title, "A Modest Proposal," I advocate advancing the symbolic interactionist perspective through its major ideas. We seem to be at a juncture between generations, between perspectives. Yet empirical study may solidify our shared perspectives and differentiate new directions. In particular, I address action, meaning, and temporality. Recall my anecdote with Teresa's statement. In my analysis of her situation, I first quoted her description of the aftermath of surgery and then interpreted it:

> It's been theorized that the surgery was responsible for shifting some things around, so things were just going to be different from that point on. That was difficult… healing physically and coming to terms with the fact that things would have to

be so different from then on….I wasn't even myself anymore after that. *My voice was gone, so I was gone, and I'd never been anything but my voice*. (Emphasis mine)

Through these words, Teresa revisits the tumult of eleven years before when she experienced the reality of loss of her voice, her self—her life. She describes this turning point as though it happened yesterday. Its meaning had ripped through her consciousness and torn her self apart. *My voice was gone*. A voice merged with self. Indistinguishable from self. All of her self. Voice is a metaphor for self. Voice unifies body and self. Voice conveys self and expresses its passions (pp. 176-177).

What do these telling moments suggest? Empirical truth? Narrative truth? A way of learning, of forming new understandings, of asking and answering questions? I do not wish to become immured in the rather tired criticism that interview and narrative methods produce accounts, answers to questions, texts without contexts, and rationales but not truth. I've addressed the context and its significance for constructing such accounts elsewhere (Charmaz, 2009; Charmaz and Belgrave, forthcoming). For now, I look at what we can scrutinize as moments.

Returning to the "methodological position of symbolic interaction," Blumer advocated gaining "intimate familiarity" with our topics and research participants and to be respectful of them. His approach meant learning about their worlds and understanding how they defined their situations and conducted ordinary affairs. Thus researchers should be engaged in sustained observation and interaction in natural settings and look at social worlds from the inside. Our ideas change and develop when we study our participants' worlds from the inside. In keeping with our pragmatist roots, I view our ideas—and theirs—as arising, changing or shifting through practice. Systematic qualitative research can shape and reshape theoretical ideas and social actions. Grounded theory, particularly in its constructivist versions, does.

When Erving Goffman (1967) advocated a sociology of occasions, he called for analyzing "moments and their men" (p. 3). I wish to analyze "moments and their meanings" as they become relived, retold, and reconstructed in multiple ways for different purposes. These moments become turning points in memory that echo through consciousness. They hold condensed and crystallized meanings.

Teresa's statement exemplifies such moments. For her, loss of voice was involuntary, uncontrollable, *immediate*, and irrevocable. Unlike many individuals who have sudden physical losses, Teresa experienced and defined the consequences of the surgery immediately. The tangible loss of