The Present and Future of Symbolic Interactionism

Proceedings of the International Symposium, Pisa 2010

Volume II

edited by Andrea Salvini, David Altheide, Carolina Nuti

Sociologia

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Preface

by David L. Altheide and Andrea Salvini

This is the second volume from the International Symposium on the Present and Future of Symbolic Interactionism, held at the University of Pisa, June 3-5, 2010. Volume I contained the major keynote addresses of this important conference and appeared in June, 2012. Papers from some 60 scholars representing 12 countries were presented on a wide range of theoretical, methodological and substantive topics in an awesome venue of an ancient monastery. It was a perfect setting to foster interaction and scholarly discussion, as well as fun and celebration, in one of the world's oldest universities with a fresh perspective of symbolic interaction.

When I first began discussing such a conference several years ago with my colleague, Andrea Salvini, I never imagined that there would be such enthusiastic interest and support for the University of Pisa to host such an important conference in this beautiful and intellectually significant city. What was most striking to me was not just the quality of the presentations, but the fervor of established scholars as well as younger social scientists, who exhibited mature understanding of the perspective and approach of symbolic interaction. This is especially important for researchers engaged in critical institutional research, cultural studies, and various approaches to qualitative research. Graduate students as well as faculty pursuing qualitative work grounded in symbolic interaction's emphasis on meaning and social context will greatly enhance their publishing and career opportunities by continuing to be engaged in this important approach to social science.

Many field studies as well as qualitative analyses of documents are presented in this volume, which is divided into three sections, although the preponderance of the papers examine the presentation of self in everyday life. Summary comments of the major points in the respective papers follow. Even if some of the contributors to this Volume are not self-defined

"symbolic interactionists", their interesting papers often make use of conceptual frames that are clearly referred to the wide "family" of constructionist and constructivist traditions.

Part I. Theoretical and methodological advances in contemporary Symbolic Interactionism

John Johnson and Andrej Melnikov address how existential sociology contributes to the understanding of context and situation in social action (e.g., "situational ethics"), and that various perspectives in qualitative approaches to social life have dealt with context and situation. For this purpose they analyzed how the concept of situation has been elaborated by Existentialism, Symbolic Interactionism, Dramaturgical Sociology, Ethnomethodology, Existential Sociology (California School), Grounded Theory and Macro- Existential Sociology. Indeed, while all recognize that social meanings are constructed in a social, cultural, community, and historical context/situation, these views do not converge on the question of how best to approach this contextualization.

Andrea Sormano's analysis of the act of transcription of audio tapes of interviews shows that it is very active, interpretive, and often creative; the quest for meaning and understandable utterances requires social action to resolve nuances and ambiguities. Ultimately, it is not just two party interaction, but rather, the interviewer, the interviewee, and the transcriber as an observer and clarifier, who must draw on tacit knowledge to capture what is implied.

Claudia Damari delineates the continuing relevance of Goffman's use of "frames" for understanding social life, particularly the significance of contexts of meaning for situating the acting self and addresses theatrical performances in their own right, as well as metaphors for understanding everyday social life and social situations. She underlines how the actor and the observer in order to make their frames operable, have to refer to a *meta-frame*, which can be interpreted as a last and peculiar version of collective consciousness (Durkheim) and/or of culture (Weber).

J. Patrick Williams and Csilla Weninger demonstrate the relevance of Goffman's insights for understanding new social media. In this way they analysed ethno-national identity and interaction with textual media though non-face-to-face, asynchronous computer-mediated data trying to follow Charmaz's call to bring together Symbolic Interactionism' Theoretical past with emerging empirical realities.

Claudia Santoni starting from the analysis of the concept of identity in Symbolic Interactionism and Goffman, shows how young people enact and promote a kind of "transitory identity" in a pluralistic society marked by changing and often conflicting expectations and situations. Alfredo Givigliano provides an intriguing integration and comparison of the pragmatism of Blumer and C. S. Peirce in clarifying how social situations are negotiated. Lorenza Gattamorta clarifies subtle differences in the semiotic approaches of Mead and Peirce in understanding interaction vis-a-vis the sign/object/interpretant, and how this affects conceptions of the reflexive self.

Carolina Nuti shows the strengths and challenges for the Sociology of Religion in attempting to study religious perspectives and phenomena from the standpoint of symbolic interaction. While, indeed, religion is not a very widespread subject among symbolic interactionist works, it is not as easy to reach the same conclusion concerning research about the Sociology of Religion. In particular, there is an inclination by some scholars to selectively use some interactionist concepts and methods in Sociology of Religion, often without explicit reference to the term "Symbolic Interactionism".

Rosalba Perrotta draws on experiences with colleagues formal and informal evaluations of the scientific merit of symbolic interaction and qualitative methodology. In this way she tells the story about how she has become an interactionist and the difficulties she came across during this process such as the stigma of "non scientificy", and the didactic problem of the diffuse boundaries of the approach. Vincenzo Mele provides a cogent overview of Simmel's work on sociability, including social forms. These concepts have been used for the "ubiquitous media". These new media seem to promote the emergence of "electronic narcissism", which hinders interactions with others and de-emotionalizes the public sphere. Riccardo Venturini delineates several of Blumer's key concepts and shows their relevance for sociological inquiry.

Part II. Symbolic Interactionism, Culture, Media and Dramaturgy

Christopher J. Schneider provides some empirical evidence to validate the importance of mediated social cues and how this contributes to the definition of the situation. He examined how Canadian students understand and react to criminal justice precepts drawn from the United States, especially the popular TV program, "Law and Order." This contribution provides some empirical insight as to how select crime media operates at the

level of interaction, demonstrating how these media may serve as important social cues that help to interpret and understand social reality.

Anna Liv Jonsson's ongoing research into theatrical performances sharpens the distinctions drawn by between role playing and role making, in particular how important it is for professional actors to internalize the role and character of the person they are playing. Vincenzo Romania brings a fresh set of eyes and integration of symbolic interaction concepts to the conceptualization of "passing" and avowed membership by examining strategies used for gender passing, on the one hand, and approaches used by Albanians to pass as Italians, on the other hand. Chiara Bassetti creatively notes of dancers that their bodies are a kind of medium for joining a present to what can be, as the performance is situated in terms of possibilities, "Practices of emotional and corporeal self-management are therefore transformative practices."

Giuseppe Toscano'S brilliant analysis of actors' perspectives and orientations to standards of competence demonstrates how the present situation is informed by temporal sequences that involve expectations of self and others. He elucidates how performance artists can be analyzed as "reputational entrepreneurs" in exploring the occasional tension between performance and art. Irene Psaroudakis humanizes total institutions by exploring how the self is restructured through social interaction in new and often challenging contexts. In studying Foucault's work, she shows how though the "practice of self" reflected on the way in which the subject develops himself in aN active manner. In this way, the self is considered as a rite of artistic performance, in particular of theatrical expression. Tara Leah Prystawik-Karam conceptually transforms pick-up trucks into meaningful extensions of identity and self presentation in a rural community. The relationship with the vehicle is explained as a negotiation process of everyday life, integrated with the relationships, first of all those with the family members.

Part III. Social exclusion, social work and social policies

Salvatore La Mendola and Antonietta Migliore discuss identity transformation by drawing on experiences learning about ethnography as performance in a family setting, including observing emotional reactions of marginal family members. They underline the desire to use in ethnography not only words but also other forms of communication like emotions. Nicoletta Pavesi clarifies how innovative social workers can enable welfare recipients to become empowered in multiple situations. She underlines how

the new perspective of "welfare society," based on the relationship between the public dimension and individuals, relations groups and communities, can clarify some problems of the Welfare State. Dania Cordaz examines how poverty in an Italian city is a process and not just a stage or single category. She has delineated the life-course of some marginalized persons in order to capture poverty careers. Considering poverty in this perspective means looking at this phenomenon in terms of A wider process of social vulnerability, and reconstructing the process and chains of factors that led to the condition of social exclusion. Gabriele Tomei and Matteo Villa clarify how rhetorical commitments to help people receiving welfare are contextualized by situational enactments by case workers and others facing many contingencies in the Tuscany welfare experiment. The constructivist frame used into evaluation processes, favoured a radical new approach of inclusion of the recipient and the stakeholders in research design, promoting in Italy a new reflection on participative evaluation in health-care and social policies.

Many of these scholars will, undoubtedly, continue to develop their understanding of the theoretical and methodological approach of Symbolic Interactionism over the coming years. This will be aided as the critical mass of researchers gather for conferences, edited publications, and perhaps team and collaborative research projects on the many important topics and issues facing the European situations. In addition to the various European learned social science societies, the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction (SSSI - http://www.symbolicinteraction.org/) invites all interested students, researchers, and faculty to join in future European conferences on symbolic interaction, as well as visit the SSSI web page, attend national meetings held in conjunction with the annual summer meeting of the American Sociological Association, as well as attend the annual "mid-year" meeting of the Couch/Stone Symbolic Interaction Conference. We invite this growing body of scholars to subscribe to the journal *Symbolic Interaction*, now being offered by in both print and electronic versions on the web. We also look forward to future European conferences and attendant publication of the creative work.

Part I

Theoretical and Methodological Advances in Contemporary Symbolic Interaction

Existential and Sociological Interpretations of the Concepts "Situation" and "Context"

by Andrey Melnikov[1] and John M. Johnson[2]

Existential thought is a broad and ambiguous intellectual and cultural movement which developed in Western Europe in the first half of the XX century. Existential thinkers, and those influenced by existentialism in different areas of arts and sciences, emphasize the individual's struggle to find or create meaning, and implied that the meaning of a human act is related to the immediate cultural, social, and historical context or situation. The emergence of "situational ethics" was one development influenced by existential ideas. This paper analyzes these ideas about "context" or "situation," first by some existential progenitors, and then by social scientists who have sought to integrate core existential ideas or themes into contemporary social science; symbolic interactionism, dramaturgical sociology, ethnomethodology, grounded theory, and existential sociology.

1. The Concept of Situation in Existentialism

The literature of existentialism emphasizes the nature of the individual's struggle to find or create meaning, often in a world where meaning is absent, problematic or uncertain. There is an assertion that all individuals are free, but this does not mean that they are absolutely free. All individuals are born into a family, culture, community, nationality, religion (or none), racial or ethnic group, and they do not so much "choose" these as they are "thrown into them" (Martin Heidegger). All individual choices are embedded in social, cultural, political, and historical situations or contexts. Are individuals 99% free or one percent free? Existentialists would find this

[1] East Ukrain National University, Ukraine.
[2] Arizona State University, USA.

question entirely uninteresting, because whatever the answer or percentage, there remains an essential openness to discretion, interpretation, and choice.

An individual can approach his or her life "in good faith," which means an acceptance of one's freedom to make choices in response to situations, or "in bad faith," which means a denial of one's agency, often with attribution of agency to external circumstances, people, or structures. Sartre emphasized individual responsibility for making and then owning the products of one's choices, and this perspective is developed in his *Being and Nothingness* (1956).

Many of the existentialist novels and plays dramatize individuals' agonizing struggles to find and create meaning, and to live in good faith. How do existentialists define "the situation" an individual is thrown into? There are many different answers to this question in existentialist literature, and these answers demonstrate the various individual responses to critical situations (Camus, 1948), the difficulties of existential choice (Sartre, 1947), the alienation and absurdity of conventional existence (Sartre, 1964), the anguish about the meaningless shell of social being (Dostoevsky, 1970; Tolstoy, 1960), and many other depictions of overlapping personal, social, and cultural situations involved simultaneously.

Existential writings present individuals and their actions in situations; subjective, emotional, personal, interactional, familial, political, cultural, historical. There is no consensus concerning the significance or priority of these. The implication is that individuals are embedded in many of these situations, and thus a truthful representation must articulate their interrelations. For anyone interested in a methodological program, it is unclear how this is to be done.

2. The Concept of Situation in Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is both a theoretical and methodological position, growing out of American pragmatism, and arguably most closely associated with the seminal works of George Herbert Mead (1863-1931). There are many controversies about symbolic interactionism as a theoretical perspective (Bales, 1966; Blumer, 1966, 1979, 1983; Campbell, 1983; Fine and Kleinman, 1986; Fisher and Strauss, 1979; Lewis and Smith, 1980; Rochberg-Halton, 1983; Habermas, 1987; Athens, 2009a, 2009b), and controversies about its methodological program (Douglas, 1970; Denzin, 1994, 1996; Maines, 1996).

The words "symbolic interaction" were never used by Mead himself, but were the words of Herbert Blumer, used to describe the essence of Mead's thought. Blumer's *Symbolic Interaction* (1969) explicitly seeks to articulate the general principles of symbolic interactionism as a theoretical and methodological position. Symbolic interactionism seeks to study human meaning, and the context which has definitive influence is the *face-to-face* situation.

Individuals may approach a given face-to-face situation with a complex combination of attitudes, beliefs, opinions, knowledge, intentions, purposes, perspectives, orientations, or any other abstract cognitive set, but all this pales in significance to the immediate social encounter with one or more others. Whatever the cognitive, emotional, or interpersonal ingredients brought to a situation by a given actor, these have to be expressed and *negotiated* with or against other social actors in the immediate situation. As a methodological plan, these ideas emphasize actual observations of what people really do in concrete situations, as opposed to what they might say about what they do.

One early interactionist was Charles Horton Cooley (1864-1929), who emphasized the role of emotion and subjectivity in human meaning. For Cooley, reality was located in the human mind, but his concept of the "looking glass self" reflected an awareness of how individuals take into consideration the perceptions and actions of others in the social setting.

Another early progenitor, William I. Thomas (1863-1947), thought that individuals' attitudes were influenced by the situation, and he explicitly adopted a *situational analysis* in his classic work co-authored with Florian Znaniecki *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918-1920). Thomas is well known for the concept *definition of the situation*, the individual's unique perceptions and reactions to a social context, and the famous Thomas Theorum: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (1928: 571).

For Thomas and Znaniecki it is clear that "the situation" has broader parameters than the face-to-face encounter, taking into account the larger social, political, and historical forces of Polish immigration. But when the time came for Blumer to distill these early influences into a "first principle" for symbolic interaction, he considered the face-to-face encounter of two or more individuals to be the basic building block for further studies.

3. The Concept of Situation in Dramaturgical Sociology

The sociological contributions of Erving Goffman are legendary, and in a series of books spanning three decades he analyzed how people presented themselves in public situations, and how they interacted with one another. Like Georg Simmel, Goffman is very interested in social forms, and he seeks to know how members of society create and maintain social meanings through these forms. Goffman distinguishes between public settings and private settings by using a dramaturgical metaphor of "front stage" and "back stage". Like Mead, Goffman felt that the self, as a concept, was best seen as being constituted by the definitions of others, but, unlike Mead and the early progenitors, Goffman saw one's self-presentation as a highly problematic and uncertain enterprise, and potentially subject to many conflicts or break-downs. Mead and Goffman both believed that human social interaction obtained its meaning from the efforts of the individuals to try to understand what the other was intending, and then trying to make actions in light of this. While Blumer thought people presented their self in a more or less straight-forward manner, Goffman asserted, that individuals try to use *impression management* in order to gain advantage from the other.

The image of the self in Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) is that of human selves oriented to the responses and approval of others, but in *Asylums* (1961) he shows how individuals can break away from the exigent social conventions ("secondary adjustments"), even within the confines of a "total institution," which seeks to control all aspects of everyday life. His *Behavior in Public Places* (1963) seeks to elucidate the taken-for-granted forms of social interaction in public settings, and then *Interaction Ritual* (1967) and *Relations in Public* (1971) describe the situations where individuals co-operatively produce meanings and order. They often seek to construct "normal appearances" to manage the exigent moment, or engage in "remedial interchanges" when things go awry. In the latter works, Goffman does not treat all individual performances in public settings as equal, but differentiates them according to the relationships which exist between parties. The presented self in the first book suggests the social self is a chimera, with little substance lying behind the masks of impression management, drifting in the winds of the immediate face-to-face encounter. In the latter works there is a suggestion that behind all these appearances lays some kind of social actor, but from Goffman we learn little about the substance of this social self.

The face-to-face social situation receives its greatest emphasis from Herbert Blumer, but Goffman adds several layers of complexity to this. For

Goffman, the exigent social and culture forms, the relationship between the social actors, and the socially organized collaboration also receive their due.

4. The Concept of Situation in Ethnomethodology

Following Garfinkel's programmatic *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (1967), ethnomethodologists seek to study the methods people use to make sense of their actions or situations. This approach is derived from phenomenology, but differs in terms of its focus on specific, concrete situations in everyday life, and the purpose to study and understand how commonsense cultural actors make sense of their situations (rather than making some interpretation of how they do that).

Ethnomethodologists study everyday life, the ordinary, taken-for-granted world of practical actors going about their business. Their larger theoretical interest lies with grasping the social and communication competencies of social actors, so this means that ethnomethodologists tend to have relatively little interest with feelings or emotions, one of the main interests of existentialists and existential sociologists, and, in addition, they have little interest in selves, socialization, communities, and meanings, as do symbolic interactionists. The interests of ethnomethodologists are more cognitive, on what social actors know and assume about their interactions and negotiations with others.

An important concept in ethnomethodology is "indexicality." Garfinkel attributes the origins of this interest to Husserl's writings about "indexical expressions" (Garfinkel and Sacks, 1970:342). Indexical expressions or communications are those made by speakers, during the context of an ongoing conversation or other communication, which make reference to (or "index") part of the situation or communication itself. These indexical expressions are often critical for speakers and hearers to know the meaning of what is being said or communicated. While philosophers and other observers have noted the existence of such statements for over 2,000 years, the preferred approach has been to try to "remedy" this problematic feature of human communications by substituting more objective or trans-situational terms, but Garfinkel and the ethnomethodologists feel that such indexicality is "irremediable" (Garfinkel and Sacks, 1970). Their view is that indexicality is one of the formal properties of common sense.

Even if the reality of indexical expressions is accepted, there remains an issue of *how* indexical they are, or to what extent are human communications or meanings dependent on the immediate situation. Garfinkel's view is that