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The Vitalization of Symbolic Interactionism

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INTRODUCTION

If one reviews the history of symbolic interactionism in American sociology from, say, the 1930s to the present day, there can be no doubt that its course has been anything but steady. The 1930s witnessed the early flowering of the seeds planted by Cooley, Dewey, Thomas and Mead. The 1940s and 1950s saw the emergence of a rather large-scale sociological "movement" built upon the fundamental ideas of these forefathers. Roughly the next two decades—the 1960s to perhaps the mid or even late 1970s—were years of decline in the general sociological influence of symbolic interactionism (decline in the ability of the framework to attract the best talent entering the field, decline in research product building upon the framework, decline in taking seriously the frame as a reasonable way of approaching a range of sociological and social psychological issues, decline in the development of the frame as differentiated from mere iteration or application). Finally, the most recent period has seen the reemergence of symbolic interactionism as a vital force within contemporary sociology, at least in that part of sociology that attends to issues of the relationship between society and the person. It is to the last two phases of this cycle to which I wish to pay particular attention in this paper.

From the point of view of sociology at large, and whatever was true of a stubborn set of adherents who "kept the faith" (a phrase peculiarly suitable with respect to what is being described), symbolic interactionism was essentially written off in the late 1960s, early 1970s as a viable and vibrant intellectual framework. It was written off by some as obfuscating ideology, by others as empty gloss of fundamental social processes, and by still others as "unscientific" in its usage of soft conceptualiza-

tions and even softer methods. Finally, it was written off as simply having lost its vitality.

Yet, strangely from the standpoint of the predictions that are implicit in having been written off, symbolic interactionism today exhibits a rather astonishing vitality. Assuming that the earlier charge of loss of vitality held some truth, symbolic interactionism surely gives evidence of having been revitalized. If this description is reasonably accurate, an interesting—and potentially important—set of questions is: Why? What happened that might help account for the transition? How is it that symbolic interactionism came off the floor, so to speak, and has battled back to being a viable contender in attracting sociological interest, support and talent?

This is the set of questions that frames what I have to say in this paper, and the morals that I will draw. I will pursue the questions by first expanding on what has already been said about the decline of symbolic interactionism in the period 15–20 years ago, including appraising the validity of the critiques and evaluations of symbolic interactionism that led to its being written off. I will then develop the theme of vitalization, suggesting what it is that justifies the claim itself. I will close by estimating what all of this may mean for the future of symbolic interactionism, reaching a conclusion that may even make good on the Section Newsletter's pitch in seeking to entice you to attend this award session, which pitch contained the implicit promise that I would say something provocative.

SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM IN DECLINE: WRITING THE TRADITION OFF IN THE 1960s AND 1970s

The 1960s and 1970s seem to me to have been times of relative dis-ease and disquietude within the ranks of symbolic interactionists, times of defensiveness and loss of confidence, and times of minimal intellectual excitement, relative to the way things were in the decades preceding the 1960s.¹ One can, I believe, point

Address on the occasion of the presentation of the Cooley-Mead Award, Section on Social Psychology, American Sociological Association, September 2, 1986. Peter J. Burke provided very helpful comments on a draft of this paper. Requests for reprints may be sent to Sheldon Stryker, Department of Sociology, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN 47405.

¹ Acknowledging three matters may help keep things in proper perspective. First, the premise that symbolic

to a number of immediate causes and correlates of this condition: vociferous and all-too-effective "external" criticism and equally vociferous but perhaps even more debilitating "internal" bickering,² both reinforced by the rather clear evidence that a variety of developments in sociology—from the earlier "triumph," partly intellectual and partly political, of functionalism and the somewhat later emergence of the "macro" emphases inspired by Marx, as well as the burgeoning technical developments attending survey and causal modeling methods—ran counter to themes many perceived as central to the symbolic interactionist message.

Critical attacks came from all sides. Psychologists interested in some of the same topics as symbolic interactionists tended to regard both the ideas and such methods as they saw in the work of the latter as lacking rigor and a sense of evidence, not to speak of replicable procedures by which evidence could be developed or produced.³ Committed to a behavioristic metaphysics, with occasional but comparatively rare exception they tended to deride the emphases of symbolic interactionism on minded processes, on thought, on symbols and meanings and definitions of the situation, and on the person as

independent causal agent in the production of his/her own behavior. And they tended to deprecate such research as symbolic interactionists did accomplish to the extent that it departed (and, of course, virtually all of it did) from an experimental methodology and format.⁴ This response—or lack thereof—of psychologists to symbolic interactionism might have been of little significance to the fortunes of symbolic interactionism within sociology except that many sociologists took their theoretical and, perhaps in particular, methodological, cues from psychology, including that discipline's behavioristic metaphysics and the related emphasis on the experiment as the *sine qua non* of science.

The critique of symbolic interactionism by ethnomethodology⁵ came from quite different directions. This critique is of considerable importance in appreciating the apparent decline of symbolic interactionism during this period. Indeed, in my judgment, it is difficult to overestimate the significance of the ethnomethodological attack on symbolic interactionism,⁶ for it came from and it had particular impact on many persons whose interests, styles of thought, vision of sociology, etc., might have made them sympathetic to, and participants in, work done from a symbolic interactionist perspective.

The ethnomethodological critique of symbolic interactionism was two-pronged. On the one hand, it was directed at the symbolic interactionism deriving from Blumer, regarding the description of social processes produced in that vein as a total gloss of human social interaction, demanding in its place the minute description of behavior, in particular language behavior, without reference to the "mind," or "self," or "society" that were the conceptual mainstays deriving from Mead that organized accounts of social life in the manner of Blumer.

interactionism was indeed in decline through the 1960s and well into the 1970s is based largely on impression and little on systematically garnered and evaluated evidence. Implied here is an evaluation of the quality of the evidence Mullins (1973) uses to arrive at the conclusion that by the 1960s, symbolic interactionism was dying. I do not think his evidence makes that case; nevertheless, if properly conditioned, the data Mullins presents is surely consistent with the reported impression. Second, this premise deserves serious documentation by historians of sociology and explanation by sociologists of sociology; documentation I am unable to provide. Third, through this period a reasonable number of good sociologists did a reasonable amount of work from a symbolic interactionist frame, in particular in the areas of family interaction, deviance, and medicine and other professions.

² See Stryker (1980) for a more thorough discussion of both "internal" (from within the ranks of symbolic interactionists) and "external" (from outside those ranks) critiques of symbolic interactionism. See also Meltzer et al., 1975.

³ Through the period under discussion, symbolic interactionism was largely identified in and through the writings of Herbert Blumer (1969), a fact not unrelated to his (proper) claim to having invented the term and his further (improper) claim to being the voice through whom Mead spoke the ungarbled truth. Symbolic interactionism shared the reputation of that highly influential figure as being long on criticism of the work of others but short on accomplishment that went beyond the occasional apt illustration and the casual insight. The first use of the term symbolic interaction in print of which I am aware was in Blumer's chapter in Schmitt (1937).

⁴ Much of this discussion of the psychologists' response to symbolic interactionism, or what they understood as symbolic interactionism, comes from informal, private conversations over the years. In their writings, with rare exception, psychologists simply ignored symbolic interactionists and their work, though they sometimes cited Mead.

⁵ The singular form used here is clearly inappropriate in that there neither was at the time under consideration nor is now a monolithic ethnomethodology, but rather several fairly distinctive ethnomethodologies. I cannot claim that all of the several ethnomethodologies spoke with one voice on the matters under discussion.

⁶ The referent here is to a very delimited issue, the fortunes of symbolic interactionism, and not to the more general and longer-term impact of ethnomethodology on sociology. Even with respect to the delimited issue, I cannot demonstrate the validity of my essential intuition concerning the impact of ethnomethodology on symbolic interactionism in the 1960s.

On the other hand, the ethnomethodological critique was directed at persons such as myself, who, while working within the symbolic interactionist framework, committed the cardinal sins of invoking conceptions like role in both their descriptions of and their attempts to explain social interaction and its products, or who seemed to be claiming some special privilege for the point of view of the observer as differentiated from the points-of-view of those whom the observer observed. The burden of the critique was in part that the language of role (like the language of self, or social structure, or a myriad of other terms of everyday sociological usage) was empty of observable referent; in part that such concepts were impositions on rather than derivatives from what persons could be observed doing in relation to one another.⁷ And, in still further part, the point of the critique was to assert that the presumably neutral and objective observer postulated by conventional science was him or herself merely a participant in the production of particular kinds of behaviors; and that consequently what she or he might have to say had no privileged status as "knowledge."

Perhaps even more consequential for the loss of confidence of symbolic interactionism than the ethnomethodological critique was that which emanated from the political left. (It is worth remarking that although, in point of fact, the political left was the major source of the critique to be discussed, the generic criticism involved is not or need not be tied to ideology, left or right, but is derivable from a politically disinterested commitment to sociology as an intellectual discipline). There is no need to cite the more hysterical of the political judgments of symbolic interactionism of the period, but these have in common with the more responsible judgments the theme that by neglecting social structure, and in particular the facts of social class and of power differentials that are part of that neglect, symbolic interactionism constitutes an ideology defending the political and economic structure of contemporary American society. Thus, for example, Gouldner (1970, pp. 379-86), directing his commentary specifically at Goffman but intending that commentary to apply to symbolic interactionism more generally, argues that "Goffman's rejection of hierarchy (achieved by his focus on the episodic and viewing life in terms of fluid, transient encounters) often expresses itself as an *avoidance* of stratification

and of the importance of power differences . . . thus, it entails an accommodation to existing power arrangements . . ." Locating what she calls the "bias of emergent theory" in symbolic interactionism's origins in pragmatic philosophy, Huber (1973) argued that symbolic interactionism had a status quo bias in that, through its failure to explicate its theoretical expectations it implicitly asserted that "truth" emerged from social interaction; under this circumstance, she argued, "what is taken to be true tends to reflect the distribution of power among the participants . . ." (p. 282). The charge of bias in symbolic interactionism and the characterization of this framework as an ideology are, in more general terms, claims that symbolic interactionism is not capable of incorporating adequately the social significance (and therefore the sociological significance) of social structure, in particular of social class and power distributions within society. My claim is that, in the climate of the late 1960s and early 1970s, this criticism of symbolic interactionism was effective as a deterrent to interest in the framework and to activity undertaken from the point of view of the framework. My claim is also that this "political" critique of symbolic interactionism, together with the ethnomethodological critique and the critiques emanating from the standpoint of those who continued to take conventional science seriously, provided the underpinnings to whatever truth is entailed in Mullins' (1973) judgment that, by the time he wrote, symbolic interactionism had run its course and was devoid of intellectual or social vitality (pp. 97-98) as a sociological framework.⁸

My "whatever truth" phrasing announces my view that Mullins' judgment must be taken with at least a small grain of salt. There are two somewhat separable matters⁹ that deserve some attention: the question of whether the criticisms reviewed are justified; and the question of whether or not the imputed loss of vitality actually occurred.

For some, symbolic interactionism has been and is a general sociological framework presumably oriented to a broad, if not the full, range of sociological issues; for others, symbolic interactionism has been and is a specific social

⁷ These same criticisms were used by Blumer and those influenced by him with regard to role theory and/or any other theoretical frame offered a priori as applicable to human social behavior, using the arguments involved to deny the possibility of sociological generalizations and abstract and general theoretical accounts.

⁸ Mullins (1973) was willing to recognize the distinction between symbolic interactionism as a sociological framework and as a specific social psychological theory, and to see the latter as having some life left in it. I draw on my personal interaction with him to assert that Mullins did not take this qualification to be very important. The distinction drawn enters the discussion below.

⁹ These are obviously related matters if my view (expressed above) that one is both cause and correlate of the other is correct.

psychological framework appropriate for the investigation of a delimited set of issues involving the reciprocal impact of social interaction and the social person. Criticisms levied at symbolic interactionism in one sense are not necessarily applicable to symbolic interactionisms in the other sense. Similarly, evaluations of the vitality of symbolic interactionisms may vary depending on whether one views the framework as broadly sociological or more narrowly social psychological. Mullins' evaluation of the state of symbolic interactionism, its vigor as an intellectual tradition, is phrased in terms of the former and explicitly, at least in a limited way, exempts the latter from the judgments expressed.¹⁰

Surely, however, the vision of society as simply a congeries of individual lines of action, or even strands of interaction—about as far as some symbolic interactionists went in recognizing social structure—is not adequate to meet the political criticism of symbolic interactionism, whether viewed as sociological or as “merely” social psychological framework. With respect to the former, no respectable sociology can avoid dealing in a very explicit way with the contexts of class relations, power, age structure, sex structure, etc., that taken together comprise the social environment of interpersonal relations, structures whose interrelationships among themselves constitute the heart of sociology, historically considered. With respect to the latter, if sociologists doing social psychology cannot specify the ways in which such structural contexts impact the kinds of social interactions on which they concentrate, they have little indeed of any distinctive nature to offer social psychology; if they do not or cannot do this, they have lost their *raison d'être*. Insofar as such structural conceptions did not find their way into the symbolic interactionism of the 1960s and 1970s—and, to an important degree they did not—the criticisms of the left had legitimacy. In this connection, I might add, the repeated use of the term “society” as in the iteration of the symbolic interactionist formula asserting that self is a product of society, or even introducing the argument that processes of social interaction are “structured” or organized (cf. Straus, 1979) is insufficient to meet the criticism.¹¹

Nor is there less validity to the concerns about symbolic interactionism expressed by either the ethnomethodologist or the behavioristic psychol-

ogist. In the absence of a reasonable specification of mechanisms by which society links to self and self to social interaction, symbolic interactionist accounts of these generic processes are in fact glosses, largely empty banalities; and there was little such specification in the symbolic interactionism of the time.

More, throughout this period, the essential activity of most symbolic interactionists involved in the application of the received wisdom, in particular the application of the wisdom received from Mead as this was interpreted by Blumer, rather than any attempt to develop predictive theory using symbolic interactionist ideas as the frame from which to do so.¹² Anyone who has looked at data and then developed a convincing theory to “account” for these, only to discover that the data exhibited precisely the opposite-signed relationships, and then has gone on to propose an equally convincing alternative theory to account for the newly discovered set of “facts,” understands the limitations of post hoc theorizing, the ease with which a theory can be read to “imply” the facts presumed to exist. Insofar as symbolic interactionists through this period eschewed more or less formal theorizing and the idea of data-based tests of theory, and they did, and insofar as their frame was treated as dogma rather than as subject to data-based evaluation and modification, and it was, symbolic interactionism merited the kinds of criticisms aimed at it.

In major degree, then, the symbolic interactionism of this period got what it deserved in critical appraisal. Small wonder, then, that the “best” students were drawn elsewhere, that its proponents through this period seemed dispirited and defensive, to have experienced a loss of confidence. The essential truth in this picture is attested to and reinforced by the fact that much of the energy of symbolic interactionists through this period—admittedly, this same tendency continued into more recent periods as well—went into various forms of internal bickering, interminable arguments over who was and was not true to the word or the spirit of Mead, arguments over whether one could be a symbolic interactionist and use statistical data and forms of analyses, arguments over whether it was possible to arrive at general descriptive or theoretical sociological statements, arguments over the proper role of concepts and variables—

¹⁰ But see footnote 8.

¹¹ See Maines (1977) for a spirited defense of Blumer's symbolic interactionism, as well as that of Straus and others, against the charge that they are devoid of structural conceptualizations and concerns.

¹² Indeed, Blumer (1969) denied the very possibility of predictive theory; and the arguments for “sensitizing concepts” and “grounded theory” vis-a-vis “variables” and “a priori theory” reinforced the extant sense outside of symbolic interactionism (and, in degree, inside as well) that the frame was simply inadequate by the canons of rigorous “science.”

if indeed there was *any* role that could be called proper—in sociological research, arguments over whether there was any method in qualitative work and any meaning to quantitative. Surely, the time as well as the energy that went into such argumentation through this period both speaks to the degree to which symbolic interactionism was immobilized in and by a crisis of confidence as well as the degree to which it had lost its viability and attractiveness as a vital sociological and social psychological frame.

A necessary qualification to what has been said: throughout the 1950s and 1960s high quality work continued to be produced by a relatively small number of persons who took their essential inspiration from symbolic interactionism whether they began with Blumer's vision of this frame or went behind Blumer's vision to the work of Mead, Cooley and others. Yet, relative to the intellectual excitement that characterized an earlier period and relative to the intellectual excitement that has returned in a later period, the 1960s and (at least) early 1970s were not good years for symbolic interactionism.

SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM IN ASCENDANCE THE VITALIZATION OF THE TRADITION IN THE 1980s

Symbolic interactionism currently exhibits a level of vitality that must truly confound those who had earlier announced or anticipated its demise. If the 1960s and early 1970s were bad years, the last few have been vintage. The processes that warrant this judgment did not begin in the 1980s; rather, they have roots in the continuing work from a symbolic interactionist frame accomplished through the prior years, the existence of which has been remarked. However, in the past handful of years the fact of vitalization has become, in my estimation, unmistakable.

The surest grounds for the judgment of vitalization lies in the great variety of theoretical and empirical work that has appeared over the past few years that, in part or in whole, self-consciously symbolic interactionist in derivation or not really cognizant of the link, is tied to that framework. I want briefly to refer to some of that work in order to justify inferences about its collective (or aggregate) characteristics; but, before doing this, it is worth observing—on the grounds that this may be the most convincing evidence of symbolic interactionism's vitality to those who are dubious about that major premise of the argument I am offering—that symbolic interactionisms over recent years has received the flattery of attention from, and imitation by, "outsiders."

The imitation is not necessarily deliberate,

and to some degree has involved the "discovery" of symbolic interactionist conceptions and ideas and the appropriation of these without full—perhaps without any—sense of the debt. It is, I think, more than a little ironic that many Americans have found in Giddens's (1984) writings warrant for the incorporation of a view of the relation between person and society, of the construction of person and the reconstruction of society (to introduce a language that I will come back to), of the import of "meaning" in social life and the social sources of such meaning, a view that is quintessentially Meadian and symbolic interactionist. The irony is only slightly less pronounced when the focus of attention is Collins (1981). Please note: I make no claim that either Giddens or Collins can be "reduced" to Mead, nor do I intend to disparage what goes well beyond Mead in their respective work. I do claim that much that contemporary sociology finds attractive in their theoretical efforts can be found, certainly in very different language but, perhaps because of that very fact, also certainly less obscurely, in Mead and in a number of authors whose work is in whole or in part squarely in the symbolic interactionist tradition (e.g., Turner, 1976; 1978; McCall and Simmons, 1978).

One also finds strong echoings of symbolic interactionist themes in the work of European "action theorists" in social and developmental psychology (e.g., Brandstadter, 1984); and in that set of European social psychologists (Moscovici, 1972; Tajfel, 1972; Israel, 1972; and others) who sought directions different from American experimental social psychology and found them in part at least in sociology. More recently, among Europeans, that echoing is to be found, in quite explicit and extensive form, in Hormuth's (1984; 1986) development of an "ecological theory of self."

But the most explicit and perhaps most flattering—considering the distance that had to be overcome—attention to and imitation of symbolic interactionism has come from the psychological wing of contemporary social psychology, which not fifteen years ago disdained paying that attention. A quite visible symbol is the incorporation of a chapter on symbolic interactionism and role theory in the recent third edition of the *Handbook of Social Psychology* (Lindzey and Aronson, 1985); another is a second chapter written from the perspective of symbolic interaction in the *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* (Berkowitz, 1983) series. A series of invited participations on my part in meetings of Division 8 of the American Psychological Association I take to represent the same increasing awareness of and interest in symbolic interactionism.

This interest, attention and imitation grows out of a number of developments in psychological social psychology: a disenchantment with experimental methodology and procedures—or, at minimum, an increasing awareness of the limitations of such a methodology and such procedures—represented in what has been called the “crisis in social psychology,” is one of these developments, serving both as a release from the methodological straightjacket of perceiving experimentation to be the only legitimate mode of inquiry and as motivation to look outside of psychology itself for clues as to how to deal with the crisis. More important as a development underwriting psychology’s longer-term interest in symbolic interactionism has been the so-called cognitive revolution in psychology. With respect to social psychology, what this revolution has involved is movement away from the earlier behavioristic metaphysics and epistemology to positions that made subjective experience respectable both as object of study and as causal agent in the production of social behavior. As a consequence, cognitive social psychology has been importantly concerned with self, again both as object of explanation and as causal agent, making apparent the relevance of what symbolic interactionism has to say. In my judgment, it has not hurt that contemporary versions of symbolic interactionism have foregone the antiquantitative and antigeneral attitudes of those with whom the framework was identified at an earlier time.

Again, however, the claimed vitality of present-day symbolic interactionism is best evidenced in recent and current work in a symbolic interactionist vein. Let me offer a partial representation of that work, selected to ground a characterization of contemporary symbolic interactionism to be drawn later. One feature of this work deserves to have prior attention called to it: very little if any can be deemed “pure,” if one means by that language uncontaminated by ideas whose origins lie outside of symbolic interactionism as many have in the past and may indeed today conceive of it, and/or by methods that these same many would regard as contradicting the very premises of the tradition. I take this feature to be evidence, not of apostasy but of a growing maturity.

As always, a demurrer is in order: time does not permit, even were I otherwise inclined or able, a thorough listing of relevant work; and selection of some work for mention slights other work. It may be that the superficiality with which I treat work I mention will render less offensive the omission of work I do not mention. That possibility aside, my apologies to any who may, with good cause or bad, feel slighted. A second demurrer: the interest here is not in describing the substantive contribution of

the work: rather, the interest is in suggesting its range in methodological, stylistic, attitudinal and topical terms.

It would be difficult to describe symbolic interactionism as of the 1980s, especially if the point of the description is to exhibit its range, without referencing Erving Goffman’s work. In my view, Gonos’ (1977) question, as to whether Goffman is a symbolic interactionist or a structural sociologist, is fundamentally mistaken in its presumption of an inherent opposition between the two. Goffman is, of course, both, as his career-long preoccupation with self, with focused interaction and with the “frames” of encounters attests.¹³ Goffman’s subject matter was face-to-face interaction occurring in natural settings; his data the conversation, the observed interplay that could take place in elevators, on the street, or anywhere else, the newspaper or fictional account of conversation or interaction; his method the play of a brilliant, analytic mind on the telling instance; his attitude that of the naturalistic scientist dissecting a specimen (see the final section of his posthumously published Presidential Address to the ASA, 1983); his style that of the artist. Like that of any serious artist, his work defies simple characterization. Yet, I would call attention to two specifics: first, his late career focus was on talk (Goffman, 1981), but his approach to talk was not that of the conversational analyst interested in talk for its own sake, but rather that of the sociologist intending to use talk to illuminate generic features of social interaction. To that end, he (Goffman, 1981, especially Chapters 1 and 3) admonished conversational analysts to attend the variation in structural settings within which all conversation occurs, noting that a concern with the structure of conversations per se was insufficient to comprehend those conversations; and he reminded them that they ought “look beyond the idealized model of the speaker/hearer as a transmitter of information to the framing devices and strategies through which self is displayed, maintained, validated, or denied” (Corsaro, 1983, p. 220). Second, while at pains to assert the autonomy of his subject matter and the value of his own focus on encounters as autonomous events, he (Goffman, 1983) was at the same time at pains to assert the (partial) interdependence of encounters and the larger social structures of power, authority, etc., within which encounters are embedded.¹⁴

Sharing Goffman’s focus on language and on the analysis of face-to-face interaction, drawing

¹³ Whatever the language he may have used at varying points in his career.

¹⁴ This, in his valedictory address, would appear to be Goffman’s response to the attack leveled at him more than a decade earlier by Gouldner (1970).

part of its inspiration and its style from ethnomethodology and from conversational analysis but focused squarely on the traditional symbolic interactionist problems of how the meaning of adult roles are learned and the processes by which interactive tasks are accomplished, is the work of my colleague, William Corsaro (1979; 1985; 1986). Corsaro is part of a growing coterie of sociologists using participant observational methods with a methodological rigor—evidencing concern with sampling, with reliability and other aspects of data quality, etc.—that may or may not have been possible in an earlier period but in any event was not present. And he is part of a still very small set of sociologists who study socialization processes among children—as young as nursery school age—thus turning to subjects early interactionists talked about but rarely researched. This body of research starts with interactionist premises and theory, develops records of children's interaction using strategically located video and audio equipment, inductively builds coding schemes that enable the transformations of the raw material of interaction to reliable data,¹⁵ uses that data to move beyond the symbolic interactionist premises, conceptualizations and theory with which it begins. Doing so, it illuminates a variety of interactional accomplishments—children's learning of the meaning of friendship, the ways in which children insinuate themselves into new play groups, how children resolve conflicts, etc.

Symbolic interactionists, as noted, from the very beginning of this tradition wrote about children, but rarely studied them systematically. Much the same might be said about the topic of collective behavior. A favorite focus of early interactionists because it provided the opportunity to see the emergence of forms of social interaction, contemporary interactionists continue this interest, but with differences. The differences can be seen in the researches, themselves quite different, of David Snow and his associates (see, e.g., Snow et al., 1986) and of Clark McPhail and his associates (McPhail and Wohlstein, 1986). Snow's work is close to traditional interactionist work on social movements—methodologically in its reliance on ethnographic field work, informal and in-depth interviewing, examination of documents; conceptually in its focus on convergence of meanings—yet it differs in important ways. First, while it draws on Goffman's conception of "frame," it also draws on work on social

movement organizations from a social structural viewpoint. Second, while its primary concern is with the elaboration of various "frame alignment processes"—the fundamental argument is that linking individual and organizational frames (schemes of interpretation, definitions, or meanings) is a necessary condition for participation in a social movement and that alignment is an ongoing product of interaction—it goes beyond description and illustration to tie variation in alignment processes and success thereof to phases of movement organization, protest cycles, and so on. Third, while not resolving the issue of sampling social movements, it is based on a variety of types of movements and is aware of the need to sample across the range of movement types.

McPhail is concerned with developing an explanation of elementary collective behavior taking the form of "marches,"—physical movement exemplified by milling clusters, surges in gatherings, street actions, demonstrations, marches, state processions. The starting point is the systematic specification of what is to be explained, termed "collective locomotion," and systematic measurement of this phenomenon. To these ends, McPhail and his associates conducted team field observations, assigning observers to record limited numbers of behaviors of limited numbers of actors within limited spatial areas. They then moved to film records, accompanied by extensive field notes, of a very large number of instances of collective locomotion occurring over an extended time period. Using samplings of individual frames of film records, they developed precise measures of collective locomotion based on the direction and velocity of (paired or larger sets of persons') footfalls, aggregating these into a Coordination Index. Finally, they examined variations in this coordination index for the various kinds of marches as predicted from theory based on traditional symbolic interactionist premises but joining these with Powers (1973) Control Theory, a negative feedback cybernetics model of individual behavior,¹⁶ doing so in the context of a quasi-experiment in which instructions to sets of students established the theoretically required variation in "marches."

Also drawing its inspiration from Goffman, but developing differently, is situated identity theory, largely the work of C. Norman Alexander (see, e.g., Alexander and Wiley, 1981). The theory draws on Heider and attribution theory as well as symbolic interactionism to focus on situated activity, conceived as a process of

¹⁵ Cooley (1930) may have been the first sociologist who visualized the potential of film as a "true" record of social interaction; but Cooley clearly did not understand that raw film does not data make.

¹⁶ Powers' model is also used by others whose work is tied fundamentally to symbolic interactionism, e.g., David Heise (1979).

affirming, modifying, destroying situated identities, which are themselves attributions made from salient perspectives about actor's presence and performance in an immediate social context. Arguing that identities, like the dispositional imputations on which they are based, are evaluative, and that persons choose possible identities and related performance expectations on the grounds of the social desirability of these from the point of view of others who monitor their actions, the theory argues further that behavior in situations will reflect the selected situated identity. The research examining the theory has involved simulating or replicating classic social psychological experiments, e.g., the forced compliance studies, offering situated identity theory as a parsimonious explanation of the range of findings. Much of this work involves treating the experimenter demand as an experimental variable, defining the social desirability of identities available to subjects in the experiments.

As the label suggests, emotion is central to affect control theory,¹⁷ developed by David Heise. The central issue at stake in the theory is how affect enters social interaction. Explicitly a version of symbolic interactionism, the theory also draws on perceptual control theory (Powers, 1973). Arguing that all common social actions have their bases in the psychology of affect, the theory asserts that affect and behavior are joined in a feedback loop such that actions are constructed in order to keep momentary feelings aligned with established sentiments. This dynamic is taken to be subordinate to definitions of the situation, i.e., categorizations of persons and objects in a social scene, which definitions specify limited sets of cognitive elements for use in recognizing and constructing events. Heise's goals join two facets not often seen as compatible: he intends an interpretive sociology, focusing on the meaning of events to actors, formulated with mathematical rigor. In line with that intent, his own empirical work has produced equations generating sensible actor-act-object combinations (including actor-act-other actor combinations), using as the raw material for the equations semantic differential-based EPA ratings developed from relevant subject samples.

The work of Anselm Strauss and his collaborators on negotiations may have been produced a bit early to claim as evidence for the 1980s vitality of symbolic interactionism; nevertheless, I think it appropriate to reference here because it represents a kind of work that is

integral to the continuing symbolic interactionist effort. Let me use the most developed statement of this work, by Strauss (1978), as the basis for what is presented here. This work focuses on the negotiation processes by which all social order is presumed to be constructed—in hospitals, in the market place, in the judiciary, in international conferences, etc. Thematically, the work on negotiations iterates messages that will be familiar to students of symbolic interactionism: skepticism regarding the possibility of general theory; a strong preference for sensitizing concepts and for grounded, inductively produced conceptualization and theory; a focus on ongoing interaction and on social organization as the outcome of interactive processes; a predilection for data produced through field work, including direct observation and informal interviewing; the selection of cases for study through "theoretical sampling." Nevertheless, the work goes beyond these familiarities by recognizing the necessity of linking negotiations to the contexts in which they occur, including the negotiation context (e.g., number and skills of negotiators, the complexity and clarity of issues, the relative power and resources of negotiators) and the structural context (e.g., the division of labor in a hospital setting in which negotiations between doctors and nurses occur).

Another body of work helps to define the full range of contemporary symbolic interactionism. Expectation States Theory, or Status Expectancy Theory (Berger et al., 1980) is not often identified as part of that range, but it surely is, however much its practitioners may wish to distinguish what they do from what they understand by symbolic interactionism. Justifying this identification is an essential isomorphism of the fundamental idea structures of symbolic interactionism and status expectancy theory. That isomorphism is demonstrated in the following theoretical argument, which reflects equally status expectancy theory and what I understand by symbolic interactionism:

Humans organize their behavior to resolve problematic situations, beginning the process of doing so by defining those situations, specifying who they are in the situations, who others are and the nature of the situations themselves. These definitions involve meanings taking the form of expectations for behavior attached to self and other(s). To define situations, persons will use whatever cues may be available, preferring relevant cues but using less or even irrelevant cues when necessary, drawing on whatever experience they may have had. Among the cues potentially available as the basis for initial definitions are those entailed in status differentials reflecting structural arrangements in the social units within which the interaction situations have emerged. Initial

¹⁷ An important criticism of traditional symbolic interactionism not mentioned above is that it neglected emotion or affect in its account of social life.

definitions will lead to actions and interactions consistent with those definitions, will thus reinforce those initial definitions and the structural arrangements on which they draw.

Asserting the isomorphism on the idea level of symbolic interactionism and status expectancy theory in no way disparages the real accomplishments of the latter's program of research. Those accomplishments reflect distinctive characteristics of the program differentiating it—within the commonality of longstanding interactionist ideas—from most of the work done by persons who claim the symbolic interactionist label: disclaimers with respect to interest in subjective processes; proceeding through the development of formal theory and formal models; primary utilization of experimental methods to estimate the models and test the theory.

Other participants in the vitalization of symbolic interactionism in the 1980s essentially attempt to introduce into that framework a stronger, more viable sense of social structure through developing its affinities to role theory.¹⁸ The relation between symbolic interactionism and role theory has long been recognized—the concept of “role” articulates the two, being used to build “down” to the social person, “up” to larger units of social life—but the logic of the relationship is only now being thoroughly worked out. A number of theorists have contributed and continue to contribute to this working out, including Ralph Turner (1978), George McCall and J.T. Simmons (1978), Peter Burke (Burke and Tully, 1977) and myself. My own effort in this regard has been to propound a social structural version of symbolic interactionism (Stryker, 1980) and to propose identity theory (Stryker and Serpe, 1982) as a derivation from that frame. There are differences among the persons just named: McCall and Simmons as well as Turner maintain a more fluid conception of social structure than Burke and I do. Relatedly, Burke and I tend to see more constraint and less construction in social life than do Turner or McCall and Simmons. Burke and I tend to utilize survey methods and statistical modelling procedures, Turner and McCall and Simmons tend to more traditional, “softer” symbolic interactionist methods. Turner approaches the tasks of theorizing more inductively than do the others. Burke (Burke and Reitzes, 1981; Burke and Franzoi, 1986) has examined more closely than the others the ways in which meanings underlie the linkages of persons, roles, situations and behaviors. And so on. Whatever these differences, however, all

make serious efforts to place symbolic interactionists' basic emphases on social psychological processes joining interpersonal interaction, self and behavior in the larger settings of social structure that constrain these processes.

To conserve time and space, as well as to prepare for the concluding section of this paper, I will use my own work to represent this genre of symbolic interactionist-inspired effort. And to make the remaining points I deem useful, I must provide something of the substance of that work.

The structural symbolic interactionism I proposed begins with the interactionist dicta that self guides and organizes behavior and that self is shaped through interaction with others. It adds to these, however, the assertions that it is social structures—including systems of positions and related roles as well as larger principles around which societies are organized—that shape interaction. With respect to the former, it argues that self-definitions or meanings as well as definitions of others are importantly built around positional and role designations; with respect to the latter, it argues it is these that constrain the possibilities for role-making, for the construction rather than the “mere” enactment of behavior, and that they do so by constraining who comes together in what settings to interact for what purposes with what interactional resources.

Identity theory specifies the symbolic interactionist formula asserting that self is the product of society and organizes behavior by recognizing that it is in concrete networks of social interactions that selves are produced, and by recognizing that in a world in which societies are highly differentiated, the selves that are produced will be equivalently differentiated. Thus, identity theory defines self as a structure of identities reflecting roles played in differentiated networks of interaction, and postulates that the multiple identities involved will be organized in a hierarchy of salience. The relative salience of identities is presumed to reflect interactional costs in the form of relationships foregone were the person no longer to hold the positions and play the roles underlying the identities. In turn, the theory presumes that role-related choices that persons make are a function of the relative salience of their identities. This entire commitment identity salience-role behavior process is understood to be conditioned by the larger social structure affecting objective possibilities for entering or remaining in particular kinds of networks of social relationships. In this way, the larger social structure, including systems of power, social class, sex, age, life course, etc., becomes an integral part of symbolic interactionist-based theorizing.

¹⁸ See Stryker and Statham (1985) for an extended treatment of this theme.

The range of work sampled in the foregoing is, in my judgment, impressive evidence of the current vitality of symbolic interactionism. More, not only does that range evidence vitality, it is an important contributor to that vitality. That is, the very variability of the work reviewed provides fertile soil for the emergence of still further high quality work.

Variability is marked in every relevant respect. Work ranges from that done on children to that done on diverse casts of adults. It ranges from that done strictly in an observational mode to that using questionnaires, simulations or true experiments. It includes qualitative approaches and mathematical models. It covers from paired interaction to mass movements. Some instances are highly descriptive, others highly abstract. Some proceed deductively, other develop inductively. Some are oriented to general theory, while some eschew that vision. Some reflect the attitude and the style of the natural scientist, some the attitude and style of formal science, and some that of the artist and essayist. A spirit of behaviorism dominates in portions of the work, a phenomenological spirit elsewhere.

The work sampled offers clues with respect to the sources of the vitality it manifests. What that work collectively implies is that, in important degree, we have left behind the dogmas, both conceptual and methodological, that restricted and inhibited entering effectively the research arena. We spend less of our intellectual energy on the meta-theoretical prolegomena to the research enterprise, and more on the research enterprise itself. We are concerned less with restating the inherited wisdom and more with developing and extending it. We are more willing than we once were to look for stimulation outside our restricted domains of inquiry, whether "inside" or "outside" symbolic interactionism. We have a more refined and useful sense of how self and identities are organized by and how these enter ongoing interaction. And we are clearly more attentive to the change inherent in our being, before anything else, sociologists.

With this last assertion, we bridge to the final section of this paper.

SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM: ITS FUTURE

You will, I trust, forgive me if I continue to emphasize that aspect of contemporary symbolic interactionism with which I have been most intimately connected as a basis for drawing the major moral of this paper, at the same time using it as a basis for suggesting something of the future of symbolic interactionism.

Of the various developments in symbolic interactionism in recent years, the one I deem most significant is the serious attention paid to

introducing a viable conception of social structure into symbolic interaction-based theoretical efforts, together with the related effort to elaborate the mechanisms by which social structure impinges on social psychological processes and outcomes. I deem this most significant for a variety of reasons, only one being my connection with it. Far more important and defensible as grounds for the judgment of significance is the fact that, insofar as the effort succeeds, it makes good on what I must presume is the promise of a truly sociological social psychology.

A truly sociological social psychology, in my view, is a social psychology that appreciates and that explicates the profound impact of social structure on the behavior, both individual and social, of persons. As I see matters, the claim that a social psychology deriving from sociology has something to offer beyond that provided by a social psychology deriving from psychology, the claim that the former has a distinctive value and contribution to make to knowledge, depends precisely on accomplishing this program. One thing is very clear: if sociologists doing social psychology do not locate social psychological processes in their structural contexts and examine the ways in which the structural contexts impact those processes, no one will; and if no one does, much will be lost. As I have already suggested, if sociologically-trained social psychologists do not do this, they have damn little to contribute to social psychology, and very little reason to expect that departments of sociology will continue to support them *or* that they can retain their foothold in social psychology.

But there is still another reason for the judgment offered that the incorporation into symbolic interactionism of a structural emphasis is a most significant development. Let me develop this reason by briefly treating work that I and my colleague Richard Serpe have been doing. Our work begins with an identity theory formulation asserting that large-scale social structure impacts commitments which in turn impact the relative salience of identities comprising the self which in turn impact role performances. One of our recent analyses (Serpe and Stryker, forthcoming) involves data from persons implicated in a life course transition—students leaving home and coming to a residential university—tracing the over-time relationships between joinings and leavings of various kinds of organizations and the salience of various identities associated with the role of being a university student. A quick rendition of a finding (ignoring necessary qualifications) from this work is that people join organizations that permit them to play out roles associated with salient identities (i.e., prior identity

salience predicts reasonably well the joinings of organizations at a later point in time in their university careers); and organizations joined affect the relative salience of identities (i.e., organizations joined at an earlier point in time predicts reasonably well the salience [re]ordering of identities).

I find the implications, or possible implications, of this finding reasonably exciting. As I see it, the finding offers a little bit of a handle on a most basic of all sociological issues and conflicts in sociological theory. (I recognize how minute the handle is, but am still inclined to assert the importance of the principle involved and the promise that principle contains for the future). That handle is provided by interpreting the reported finding: it says that persons will construct their social relationships in the image of their selves, reproducing the social arrangements that permit them to manifest behaviorally the structure of their identities insofar as social organization provides the opportunities for them to do so. If such opportunity is not provided (in the context of the research providing the finding being elaborated upon, if in the context of life course or other structurally-induced changes, appropriate organizations permitting the playing out of a salient identity are not available), and social relationships change, changes in self follow. The social process is one of construction and reconstruction of self and of social relationships, and, through these, of the larger system of social organization in which these are embedded.

Admittedly, that interpretation is a heavy load for the finding with which I started to carry, but other findings both in our own research (Stryker and Serpe, 1982; Serpe, 1985) as well as related research (Burke and Reitzes, 1981; Hormuth, 1984; 1986) are consistent with this interpretation. Given the validity of this interpretation, an interesting conclusion follows through a not-too-tortuous path.

A line of sociological theorizing from Durkheim to contemporary Marxism has argued that societies are essentially self-reproducing systems, i.e., that society coerces its members to behave in ways that exhibit, reinforce and ultimately reproduce extant social arrangement. In opposition to this view, symbolic interactionism has argued that persons are active agents in constructing their own behaviors and do so in ways that do not sustain existing forms of social organization. What the findings referred to suggest is that these alternative theoretical themes do not necessarily contradict one another, that both "reconstruction" and "construction" processes take their place in a more general social process that comprehends both. While in itself not a revolutionary suggestion (although I am continually amazed at the degree

to which sociological theory of whatever kind seems to resist it) in the sense that many have understood that neither simple Durkheimian or Marxist views that asserted total reproduction or a simple interactionist view that asserted that persons continuously constructed their lives do novo would do, my suggestion here goes beyond this to visualize the mechanisms and the principles in terms of which both operate and something as well of the conditions that will affect the operation of one or the other.

I make no claim that what has been said solves the fundamental problem of sociological theory, nor that the more general frame that resolves the contradictions of construction and reconstruction has been provided. My claim, if I have one, is that a properly supplemented symbolic interactionism—a symbolic interactionism which accords an important place to social structure and offers a conceptualization of structure sufficient to that task—has reentered the arena of general sociological frameworks and has the right to be taken seriously as such. In short, while those who wrote off symbolic interactionism in the 1960s and 1970s conceded, however reluctantly, that the framework had some vitality and viability with respect to problems of a social psychology, they dismissed it as a vital sociological frame. It may now be reentering a period in which it develops as a sociological perspective of some reasonably broad generality. That prospect makes the potential future of symbolic interactionism truly exciting. The range of work in which contemporary symbolic interactionism covers, its (admirable) methodological eclecticism, and its non-dogmatic stance vis-a-vis both its own ideas and the ideas of others—collectively exemplified in my earlier sketch of that work—make that exciting future more likely.

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