Theoretical Perspectives

4. Interpersonal interaction

http://users.ox.ac.uk/~sfos0060/
SociologicalTheory.shtml
Introduction

Social life comprised not of individual actions (lecture 1) but rather social situations
  • even solitary individuals are recalling/rehearsing situations; virtual situations
Lecture 3: individuals act according to evaluations embedded in meaningful worldviews; explanation by value and meaning
Are values/meanings really individual?
Values $\iff$ social approval/esteem
  ‘there is no stronger means of breeding traits than through the necessity of holding one’s own in the circle of one’s associates. … The Puritan sects put the most powerful individual interests of social self-esteem in the service of this breeding of traits.’ (Weber 1906/1920)
(approval most potent in social situations)
Interaction => self

G.H. Mead

- ‘The self, as that which can be an object to itself, is essentially a social structure, and it arises in social experience’ (1934)
  ‘the “me” of introspection is the same “me” that is the object of the social conduct of others’ (1913)
- ‘We are continually following up our own address to other persons by an understanding of what we are saying’ (1934)
  *thinking is internalized conversation*

Symbolic interaction: emphasizes *shared* meanings;
ethnographic method

- e.g. Howard Becker (1973) on marijuana
Goffman’s interaction ritual

- ‘two or more individuals are physically in one another’s presence’ (1983)
- social system with life of its own
  - individual is ‘the peg on which something of collaborative manufacture will be hung for a time’ (1959)
- *contra* symbolic interaction: appearance not discursive meaning; deception and manipulation not consensus
- proliferation of terminology
Focused interaction

Situation makes intricate demands on participants (which we take for granted)

• **Deferece** to situation/individuals
  • presentational rituals
  • sometimes avoidance
  • appropriate involvement
  • deference only overt
  • terminating an encounter may be difficult

• **Demeanour**—what people give off
  • differs for front v back stage
  • individual needs preparation to put on front
Situational breakdown

Error: “in wrong face”

• **face**: image of self that is supported by other participants
• **face-work**: shaping action to be consistent with face (including helping others)

**Profanation**: deliberate violation of rules, disruption of performance

Persistent failure = mental illness
Unfocused interaction

Even ‘alone’ in public places, we perform …

• civil inattention
  • glance towards, looking away
  • violations: hate stare

• waiting for someone
  • study watch, search up and down
Example: smoking (Collins 2004)

• chemistry/biology insufficient
• smoking as tool in interaction rituals: relaxing, carousing
• cigarettes driven by upper-class women demonstrating elegance (cigarette holders/cases, jewels)
• men adopt cigarettes to mingle with women; tool for opening an encounter
• sharing cigarette/light as reciprocal gift exchange
• keeping your hands occupied; subordinate involvement
Problems

• Individual disappears; merely a succession of masks
  • ‘Self … is not an entity half-concealed behind events, but a changeable formula for managing oneself during them’ (1974)

• focus on strangers: ‘a personal relationship can be defined as a coalition between two players to provide each other with expressions of the existence of a desirable bond’ (1974)

• where is the motivation? (surely pride/shame?)

• No explanation of individual trajectories
  • ‘encounters in which the “impressions” subjects make during the interaction affects their life chances’ (1983)

• Collins (2004): individual maximizes emotional energy, gained from successful situations

• No analysis of historical change/cultural variation
  • universal grammar of situations
Virtues

• co-presence is the stuff of social life; everyday interactions (usually taken for granted) need explaining

• material as well as discursive
  • student evaluations of lecturer (> 30 hours) predicted \((r = .76)\) by 30-second video clips without sound (Ambady & Rosenthal 1993)

• close scrutiny can surprise, e.g. Collins (2008) on violence
QUESTIONS

• ‘Society is not an aggregate of individuals nor a macro-level structure; it is a series of face-to-face encounters.’ Discuss.

• Does the method of ethnography entail any theoretical commitments?

• Goffman treats the individual as ‘the peg on which something of collaborative manufacture will be hung for a time’. How useful is this approach for explaining face-to-face interaction?

• What situational rules constitute the Oxford tutorial?

• How does digitally mediated interpersonal interaction differ from face-to-face copresence?

• ‘Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) failed to supplant conventional university lectures, despite providing higher quality for lower cost. This proves the importance of face-to-face copresence.’ Discuss.

George H. Mead, ‘The Social Self’, *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods* 10 (1913)

George H. Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist* (1934)


