

Essay #3: Symbolic Interaction

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Symbolic Interaction

Defining Symbolic Interaction

George Herbert Mead, Charles Cooley, Herbert Blumer, and Erving Goffman are all sociologists who developed the term symbolic interaction. According to Carter and Fuller (2015) “Symbolic interactionism is a micro-level theoretical framework and perspective in sociology that addresses how society is created and maintained through repeated interactions among individuals” (p. 1). George H. Mead’s definition of symbolic interactionism was influenced by pragmatism, self-awareness, and social psychology. George H. Mead believes with symbolic interactionism that it is a lifelong process. However, Charles Cooley has the belief that the self is seen as a looking-glass, meaning that there is reliability of one's social self is based on one's appearance towards others. Herbert Blumer developed his definition of symbolic interaction in 1937. Blumer defines symbolic interactionism as “arrangements of people who are interlinked in their respective actions” (Dillon, 2020, p. 262), as opposed to seeing it as a structural and bureaucratic hierarchy. Erving Goffman identifies symbolic interactionism as a society as a ritualized social interaction, taking an approach that is called dramaturgical approach. Goffman sees that social roles are socially scripted, not spontaneous or individual creations, and that we act out and enact the socially shared expectations that inhere in various and diverse social roles.

Development of Symbolic Interaction

In terms of the development of symbolic interaction, Mead made his arguments that the self is active when understanding the process of what is going on. According to Dillon (2020), “We are engaged, if you will, in an ongoing internal conversation with ourselves, and in this process we monitor and evaluate the self” (p. 256). George H. Mead focused his development of symbolic interactionism with the self. Mead established the development of symbolic

interactionism by defining the self's subject as the "I," the object is considered as "me," and there is a dynamic interaction between the "I" and the "Me." This sociologist focused his symbolic interactionism on practical conditions and the consequences of the actions that were to follow. The self is how the individual internalizes the attitudes and morales of others toward themselves. Mead also developed the three stages of self, which individuals go through, which are: preparatory stage, play stage, and the game stage. In terms of development for Cooley's definition of symbolic interaction, Dillon (2020) says, "Cooley emphasizes that your distinct self, your self-feelings of pride, joy, embarrassment, shame, etc., are always felt and interpreted in relation to others" (p. 259). As previously mentioned Blumer had three different premises of symbolic interaction. "Symbolic interactionists view society as an ongoing process of symbolic interaction wherein we continuously interpret and respond to cues, that is, signals or messages, in our social environment" (Dillon, 2020, p. 261). Herbert Blumer believes that symbolic interactionism pays close attention on a micro-level. Harriet Blumer places his emphasis on symbolic interaction in three ways: cues, social contextualized meaning, and interpretive process. Erving Goffman's study of symbolic interactionism was through how people react to and their responses, along with social roles. According to Dillon (2020), "We all perform multiple social roles as we enact the expected behavior associated with 'the rights and duties attached to a given status'" (p. 263). Goffman believed that these social roles were given to us by a script, but that does not solely mean that the role-playing is fake or unnatural.

Observations

The observer made observations at the open microphone night, on the evening of November 17th, located in the first floor lounge in Upchurch for an hour and a half. I had noticed that there was slight disorganization, because it was the first time there was an open microphone

night. The observer heard that this open microphone night was a collaboration with a few organizations on campus, which were: WMLU, Student Government Association, and Lancer Productions.

Concepts of Observation

During the observation that I had noticed that the way Cooley defined symbolic interactionism is used in this environment. Mead argued that humans have significance to what they are communicating or intending to communicate, and these meanings derive from our consciousness of and the ability to manipulate, interpret, and use shared symbols, language, and gestures. I noticed when a few people were on stage singing, they felt nervous, out of their element, and they had a sense of 'I have never done this before in public' look on their faces and body language was very tense. There were a few others who performed on stage who felt comfortable on the stage because their body language was more relaxed than the ones who felt nervous, and I have seen them perform at other events, like Oktoberfest and Spring Weekend before. I noticed that the people who were performing and hosting took Mead's approach to symbolic interactionism and the people who were in the audience watching took Cooley's approach of symbolic interactionism. The reason why I believe that the performers were using Cooley's perspective on symbolic interactionism, was because the individuals were relying on others for the feedback of their performance if they should continue singing after one or two songs, or if they should stop after the one or two songs that they prepared themselves for. Cooley's influence of symbolic interactionism is the sense of self is viewed through having interaction with significant others or other relations. Erving Goffman noted that for symbolic interactionism, social life and society would be merely impossible if there were no social roles. We all come into life with having a social role, whether that if we see it or not. The social roles

that I observed were college students that were anywhere between 18 and 22 years of age, also there were both males and females.

Commonalities of Observation

Themes that I have noticed that the event was brought together by a few members of the organizations that were hosting the event. I did not notice any advisors of the organizations at the event, so it was mostly students that I witnessed. There were roughly about 25 people all in total who attended the event, of which about six out of 25 of those individuals did participate in the open microphone night. I noticed that the advertisement was saying that open microphone night was open to everyone and anyone who wants to sing, play a musical instrument, channel their inner stand-up comedian, and slam poetry. I noticed that all the six who participated sang a song either by karaoke or with a musical instrument. One performance that made the students really happy was seeing Spiderman sing the Spiderman theme song. Another student did a couple song covers from Tyler Childers, which was my favorite performance of the evening since I am a Tyler Childers fan myself. I did notice that the student crowds did enjoy listening to Spiderman the most out of all the other student performers. After students participated in their singing acts on stage, I noticed that the students in the audience were supportive of those who were on stage singing by demonstrating smiles, applauding, and some students would be vocal with saying, "You did a wonderful job, I am so proud of you [their name]." I also had noticed that the performers took on a social role, which is what Erving Goffman had studied, when they were singing on stage. The social role that students challenged themselves to do on stage was being a singer or musician, besides being just a typical college student instead of an audience member. The people in the crowd were not only college students, but they were also taking on the social

roles of being a member of an organization that they are a part of, especially for those who were hosting the event, and an audience crowd member, also.

Previous Symbolic Interaction Research. Symbolic Interaction has an immense impact in social research, in sociology, psychology, and social work. In sociology, we view social interaction from the outside perspective of why do people view the perspective that they view on a social level. Symbolic interactionism is utilized when discovering the relationships between the social outside factors and the outcomes to clarify the causes and outcomes of scenarios. Psychology does play an internal role in terms of symbolic interaction of figuring out the person of who they are as a person. Leary (1995) states, “Psychologists have applied self-presentation to their study of phenomena as far- ranging as conformity, aggression, prosocial behavior, leadership, negotiation, social influence, gender, stigmatization and close relationships.” As previously mentioned, symbolic interaction is seen in the social work discipline. “Symbolic interactionism can help practitioners understand culturally different interpretations of similar social experiences, explore meanings such as those of the members of undervalued groups, and attend to the social aspects of intense emotions” (Forte, 2004, p. 391). Research has shown that “Interactionists interpret human action as meaningful and contextual, and social workers tune into behavior that is intelligible in terms of social group memberships” (Forte, 2004, p. 393).

References

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