

‘Assess the contribution of symbolic interactionism to the understanding of communications and social interactions’

Symbolic interactionism is a social-psychological theory which is centred on the ways in which meanings emerge through interaction (Scott and Marshall, 2009). The meanings one interprets from any given form of communication are significant because it establishes how and what one will aim to respond throughout the interaction, thus determining how the interplay may develop or conclude. The actual term ‘symbolic interactionism’ was founded by Herbert Blumer in 1937 (Stryker, 1980), however it is the respective works of George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) and Erving Goffman (1922-1982) that will be used to explore how symbolic interactionism contributes to the understanding of communications and social interactions throughout this assignment.

Mead’s approach to symbolic interactionism was influenced by pragmatism, Charles Darwin’s work and behaviourism (Charon, 2010). He believed that humans do not merely respond to their environment, but they interpret it through their own definition, thus making their own decision to what any given symbol means (Charon, 2010). For example, silence could be interpreted as reflective, ignorance or respectful, depending on how one wishes to understand the interaction. Mead argues that interpretations are dependent on our personal experiences and knowledge of any given symbol and we interpret the symbols according to the context in which they are presented (Mead, 1934). Derived from this belief, pragmatists view humans as actors rather than people; actors that improvise in the play of life based on what they have learnt through life experiences and knowledge that has proved useful to them (Charon, 2010). After all, pragmatism is most basically about the creative solving of enigmas in experience through the application of reflective intelligence (Emirbayer and Maynard, 2010); a skill greatly required in order to improvise.

Goffman (1990) expanded on the acting analogy in his work titled *The presentation of self in everyday life*. He extended the analogy to encompass the ‘stage’ (setting) of every given interaction, the interaction being the performance and everyday life. From this, he developed the concept of dramaturgy, where the world is a drama in which all are acting

out various roles in society in relation to the given audience, i.e. their social roles (Goffman, 1990). He believed that within every interaction, information about the individuals involved (the actor and audience) is both presented and absorbed by both parties (Goffman, 1990). According to Goffman (1990), humans continuously try to manipulate the communication of this information during social interactions.

Goffman's interpretation of symbolic interaction, is often criticised for being relatively cynical towards humans and therefore potentially a misrepresentation of social interactions (Williams, 1986). It could be argued that humans are socialised into these performances and being actors for an overall harmonious play in what is more commonly known as 'life', as society itself constructs norms for any given symbol and these are subject to change throughout time. For example, in the Victorian era a child was to be seen but not heard, therefore silence was a reflection of a well behaved child. However, in contemporary society, a quiet child may be thought to be socially inept or suffering from a disorder (Ruhland, 1993; Markway, 2012), as children are now somewhat expected to be relatively loud.

According to Goffman, the performance given by the actor is always done for the benefit of their audience (Goffman, 1990); therefore requiring the actor to be conscious of their audiences' reaction in order to keep their audience engaged. The performance is generally constructed with symbols the actor wishes to portray deliberately and therefore information 'given' by the actor. Expressions given are often 'verbal symbols or their substitutes' (Goffman, 1990:14) to which the audience is familiar, therefore providing a direct understanding to which the audience can connect. Taking this into consideration, it could be argued that all performances are 'team performances', as the actor is as much reliant on their audience making the correct interpretation from their communicated symbols, as the audience is on engaging with the performance.

Symbols are also 'given off' by the actor; this is non-verbal communication and information that the actor may not necessarily intentionally mean to convey (Goffman, 1990). The interpretations of such symbols are subject to scrutiny by the audience who will decipher the meaning according to their own ideologies. For example, during a performance the actor may fall silent for the dramatic effect of a pregnant pause; the audience however may

interpret this as the actor having forgotten their dialogue and be less impressed by the use of the symbol. Goffman (1990) later argued that symbols 'given off' can also be manipulated by the actor to impose a particular impression on the given audience, again highlighting his cynicism towards social interactions.

Goffman (1990) theorised that the human, like the actor, was either 'front stage' - acting for the given audience, or 'back stage' - preparing/developing themselves for prospective performances. Potentially when a human is entirely alone, it could be argued that this is when an actor reflects and internally evaluates how their performances were communicated and understood in their social interactions. It is during this time, in what is arguably the true 'backstage', where the actor can then evolve themselves; developing their personal thoughts and knowledge on how they engage with social interactions. This practice of self-reflection/realisation is more commonly known as reflexivity (Garfinkel, 1999) and is argued to be an inalienable human capacity (Holland, 1999) from which one learns and progresses their understanding of communications and interactions. This would insinuate, as Goffman argued, that an actor truly does intentionally manipulate what they intend to communicate during interactions.

Mead, like Darwin, saw human development as a naturalistic part of the evolutionary process (Charon, 2010). Mead however, believed that the human was able to actively direct how the natural forces act through interaction rather than natural forces acting on the organism (Baldwin, 1986), therefore the human was no longer passive, but as Goffman argued, could learn, understand and act upon nature. This would support that actors are dynamic and can be conditioned to improvise their performances in relation to their audience's needs. Due to this, Mead argued that our symbols and interpretations change and what we communicate is therefore also subject to change (Mead, 1934).

Goffman's concept of backstage could be considered as more of a rehearsal room, where the actor prepares for their performance rather than simply reflecting on or evaluating their interactive performances. In Goffman's interpretation of backstage he suggests the actor is rehearsing the performance they wish to deliver, often already in the presence of an audience, rather than developing a script they wish to perform. This insinuates that humans never stop acting unless they are alone; if this was true, communication out of character

would not be possible. When an actor's 'front' slips, that could possibly be a window in to an actor's true self, the self that the actor acts for in order to protect it. For example, when an actor suddenly realises that they have revealed too much information to the audience they may fall silent to try to recompose the situation. It is this true self that an actor can become alienated from by continuously performing their social role. Goffman defines 'front' as 'that part of the individual's performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance' (Goffman, 1990:32).

The continuous concealment of one's true inner emotions in order to create a character which one wishes to portray could be argued to alienate a human from themselves, because they lose themselves to their act. In Marxist terms, taking the acting depicted in symbolic interactionism as labour; the more effort the actor concentrates on how they communicate their social interactions, the less they belong to themselves (Marx, 1977). In other words, the more the actor tries to uphold their social role (character) and their perception of what society expects them to portray, the more likely they are to conform to existing constructions within society, regardless of what their own inner beliefs and wishes are, resulting in self-alienation. Marx would argue that society is socialised to interact this way for the benefit of capitalism. However, through this theorised exploitation of human interaction we could also reach a far less sceptical Durkheimian view of social solidarity (1984), with humans participating in this cycle of performances for the sake of maintaining a functioning society.

Despite much of Goffman's work depicting humans in a conniving light, he claimed that it had been argued that the audience contributes significantly to the maintenance of a performance 'by exercising tact or protective practices' (Goffman, 1990:227) on behalf of the actor in situations where an actor themselves fails to manage the impression of their character. This reinforces the functionalist approach of social solidarity, with both the actor and audience working as a team and uniting to uphold the dramaturgy. For example, when an actor forgets their dialogues, the audience often offers prompts to fill the silence and enable the actor to continue. It is essential that the so-called 'manipulative' act is maintained through expressive control, otherwise misrepresentations would discredit the performance and the portrayed character's integrity (Goffman, 1990), compromising the actor's social role and possibly leading to a breakdown in their social interactions.

To conclude, Mead, as a social behaviourist believed that humans must be understood in terms of what they do rather than who they are. If this is true, then, according to Goffman, all humans are manipulative actors that use symbolic interactions to coerce the rest of society into believing a social role they wish to portray through their performances in everyday life. These performances are communicated consciously to an audience that accepts and then reinforces the deceit by aiding the actor in continuing with their act. Social interactions are therefore team performances which rely upon everybody within it to uphold the drama through using both verbal and non-verbal communications, and as such, symbolic interaction is an integral part of everyday communications.

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