



Susie Scott

NEGOTIATING IDENTITY

Symbolic Interactionist
Approaches to Social Identity

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Susie Scott

polity

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1

Interacting selves

Symbolic interactionism encounters identity

Identity is an evocative and intriguing concept, replete with paradoxes. On the one hand, it refers to something private and personal – our understanding of ourselves – yet, on the other hand, it remains intangible, elusive and resistant to definition (Strauss 1969). We may think we know who we are, but these ideas are constantly changing, shaped by our experiences, relationships and interactions: who I am now is not the same as who I was yesterday or who I will be tomorrow. We also tend to think of identity as something highly individual, which marks us out as unique – yet in forming these self-images we inevitably draw on wider cultural representations, discourses, norms and values, which we share with those who inhabit our social worlds.

Sociologists have always been interested in identity, because it resonates with many of the issues and debates that characterize our discipline. Interpretivist sociology, in particular, is concerned with the relationship between self and society (Hewitt 2007), which is mutually constitutive: the social world is created by people interacting in routinized and orderly ways, while the meanings they attach to these experiences are shaped by those very patterns, in the form of socially constructed structures, institutions and normative frameworks. Max Weber, on whose work this tradition is based, argued that sociology should involve the interpretive study of social action: the process by which individuals organize and make sense of their behaviour by taking into account other people's meanings and motivations (Weber 1904). We think, feel and behave not as isolated individuals, but as social actors with a relational consciousness. Meanwhile, sociology's aims to 'make the familiar strange' (Garfinkel 1967) and relate 'private troubles to public issues' (Mills 1959) are relevant to the study of identity as an aspect of everyday life that we often take for granted, despite its social and political dimensions. The latter have come to prominence since

the mid-twentieth century through the rise of identity politics, citizenship debates and civil rights activism, reminding us that, aside from academic theorizing, we have a moral and ethical duty to investigate identities (Wetherell 2009).

What is identity?

Identity can be defined as a set of integrated ideas about the self, the roles we play and the qualities that make us unique. Ostensibly, this implies a relatively stable entity, which we perceive as internally consistent (Allport 1961; Gergen 1968), and use to sustain a boundary between ourselves and others. However, this very image may just be a construction: one that is constantly changing and whose existence is more illusory than real. Lyman and Scott (1970) conceive identity as an aggregate of social roles that one has played across different situations, which together create the impression of something ‘trans-situational’, or greater than the sum of its parts. Turner (1968), similarly, points towards a succession of ‘situated selves’ that we inhabit as we move between social settings, which are ‘averaged out’ to create an overall sense of identity. Here we encounter what Lawler (2008) suggests is a central paradox of identity: that it combines notions of sameness and continuity with notions of difference and distinctiveness.

A similar duality is recognized by Williams (2000), who makes a distinction between *identity*, a sense of oneself as a coherent and stable entity, and *identification*, a social process of categorizing ourselves as similar to certain social groups and different from others. Social identity is therefore relational: defined relative to other people or groups. I find out who I *am* by knowing what I am *not*: understanding where and with whom I do (or don’t) belong. For example, the Twenty Statements Test, devised by Iowa sociologists Kuhn and McPartland (1954), asked students to write a list of twenty words to describe themselves. The overwhelming majority of these referred to social categories, roles, statuses and group memberships, such as gender, age, ethnicity, occupation and family relationships. Other common descriptors that were found, such as ideological beliefs, interests, ambitions and self-evaluations, can also be seen as socially shaped.

We can distinguish identity from two closely related concepts: *selfhood* and *personhood*. *Selfhood* is a reflexive state of consciousness about one’s internal thoughts and feelings, while *personhood* is a set of publicly presented or externally attributed characteristics that others use to determine our status (Jenkins 2004), with moral, philosophical or political connotations. Cohen (1994) similarly points to the primacy of the *self*, as those aspects of experience which are private, internal and

subjective, over *personhood*, as a set of publicly externally attributed characteristics, rights or statuses. Jenkins (2004) suggests that self and personhood are interconnected dimensions of experience which are mutually constitutive. Identity is the dialectical process of their articulation, an umbrella that encompasses them both. Lindesmith et al. (1999: 218) also distinguish between the *self*, a reflexive, communicative subject who witnesses him- or herself through a succession of transitory moments of interaction, and *identity*, or the meanings individuals give to these experiences as being unified.

Jenkins (2004) suggests four features of identity: *similarity* (a sense of one's uniformity and consistency), *difference* (a sense of one's uniqueness and distinctiveness from others), *reflexivity* (the ability to think about ourselves) and *process* (agency, independence and change over time). Lindesmith et al. (1999) agree that identity is multi-layered, incorporating different types of self: the *phenomenological self* (an internal stream of consciousness about one's current situation), the *interactional self* (as presented and displayed to others), the *linguistic self* (representations of the self to oneself or others through language and biographical stories), the *material self* (the body and externally visible parts of the self, which are potentially commodifiable) and the *ideological self* (broader cultural and historical definitions of what it means to be a good citizen in a particular society).

Then, there are different types of identity, which have been theorized across the social sciences. The social philosopher Harré (1998) saw *social identity* (externally applied categorizations or attributions) as being different from *personal identity* (the belief individuals have in their own self-consistency). In social psychology, Tajfel (1982) defined *social identity* in terms of affiliations with reference groups and the processes to which this gives rise, such as social comparison, in- and out-group relations and prejudice. Meanwhile Hewitt (2007) distinguished between *personal identity* (a sense of uniqueness and difference, together with integrity and consistency), *biographical identity* (the self as recounted through narratives and stories), *social identity* (group memberships and affiliations that forge connections and shared values) and *situational identity* (produced through the presentation or 'announcement' [Stone 1962] of particular versions of the self in specific interaction settings, and the extent to which these are accepted by those we encounter therein). In sociology, Goffman (1963a) made a distinction between *personal identity* (the 'single, continuous record of facts' that documents an individual's life, for example in photographs), *social identity* (the 'complement of attributes' seen as ordinary, natural and normal for members of a recognized category) and *ego identity* (a person's subjective sense of their own character, developed over time).

This book is concerned with social identity, but even this has different theoretical interpretations. Macro-level sociologists emphasize the *collective* identities through which we understand ourselves as members of social groups, and which are mobilized in political arenas. Demographic factors like social class, family and kinship, religion, and so on, formed the focus of ‘traditional’ sociological studies of identity in the context of workplace relations (Goldthorpe et al. 1969; Beynon 1973), local communities (Willmott & Young 1960) and gender divisions (Walby 1997), and continue to be hotly debated today. Meanwhile, ‘new’, more nuanced forms of collectivity have been recognized as shaping contemporary identities, for example through subcultural affiliation (Hebdige 1979), idiocultures (Fine 1987), fan cultures (Hills 2002), neotribes (Maffesoli 1996) and contested ethnic classifications (Lentin & Titley 2011). Bourdieusian theory shifts our attention towards the social processes of distinction (Bourdieu 1979) and positioning (Lury 2011), whereby people define themselves through their *relative* social class status, in terms of tastes, possessions and lifestyle practices: identifying with one social category often goes hand-in-hand with demonstrating one’s disidentification with another. Last but not least, micro-level perspectives like symbolic interactionism theorize social identity as something that is formed through face-to-face encounters in everyday life. This is the approach I will be taking throughout this book, as we explore the *negotiation* of identities through processes of social interaction.

The social self

Symbolic interactionism is concerned with the social dimensions of the mind: imagination, motivation, perception of others, self-consciousness and emotions. Empirically, we can study the mind through its effects on behaviour, which is understood as not merely habitual or instinctive but rather ‘minded, symbolic, self-reflective conduct’ (Lindesmith et al. 1999: 21) – in other words, Weberian social action. This can be contrasted to psychological approaches, which include the ‘theory of minds’ (the cognitive and developmental processes through which we can imagine the world from someone else’s perspective), and philosophical approaches that focus on metaphysical questions of ontology and consciousness. Rationalists, such as Descartes, emphasized the introspective primacy of the thinking subject, located in the ideal rather than the material realm, while empiricists claimed that only knowledge acquired through the senses could be verified as true (Williams 2000). The empiricist Hume (1739) questioned the notion of an underlying

self, the transcendental subject, who interprets these experiences. Ryle (1949) similarly disputed the rationalist ‘ghost in the machine’ as a ‘category mistake’ of Cartesian dualism, arguing for the interconnectedness of mind and body. Locke (1689) conceded that we may have a *sense* of our own sameness and continuity from recurrent empirical experiences, but that this was just an illusion. Harré (1998) made the similar point that our sense of self may just be based upon linguistic conventions, such as the use of the pronoun ‘I’, which locates the speaker/thinker in relation to others. However, this is an elusive and slippery agent. If we can only reflect on our conduct retrospectively, we can never witness our own subjectivity acting in the present moment: as Mead (1934: 174) put it, ‘I cannot turn around fast enough to catch myself.’

The symbolic interactionist concept of the ‘social self’ centres on the idea that selfhood is relational, arising through social interaction at the micro level. This is a symbolic and communicative process by which actors understand themselves through their relations with others. It involves reflection and perspective-taking, definitions and judgements; the self is an active agent, capable of manipulating objects in the social world. Hewitt (2007) adds that the social self is processual: it is not a fixed object or entity but, rather, fluid, emergent and mutable. Selfhood is never finished but in a constant state of becoming. Identity, similarly, is ‘never gained nor maintained once and for all . . . it is constantly lost and regained’ (Erikson 1959: 118) through social negotiation.

These theories stem from the philosophical tradition of pragmatism: the study of human praxis, or meaningful activity. Ontologically, pragmatism teaches that social reality is constructed through human action: we define the social world and the objects within it in terms of their use for us, or practical effects upon situations (Dewey 1922). The term ‘object’ here incorporates people, and, most crucially, one’s own self: we can reflect upon ourselves as social objects in other people’s worlds, and imagine their perceptions and judgements of us. James (1890: 295) argued that this is a key means of understanding ourselves, which also suggests multiplicity: an actor has ‘as many social selves as there are distinct groups of persons about whose opinions he [*sic*] cares’.

Pragmatism suggests that the self has two sides: it is both subject and object simultaneously. The mind has a reflective capacity: we think, feel and act, but also reflect upon the social consequences of this, and modify our self-image accordingly. Cooley’s (1902) concept of the Looking Glass Self had three elements: imagining how we appear to others, imagining how they might judge us, and the resultant self-feelings, such as pride or shame. This in turn shows that the self is a dynamic *process*, which is never complete: we do not simply ‘have’ selves but rather ‘do’ or ‘make’ (and re-make) them, through constant reflection.

Animation and personification help us to imagine this process more clearly. James (1890) made a distinction between two phases of the self: the 'I', the agent of thought and action, and the 'Me', the version(s) of oneself that were presented to others. Mead (1934) developed this idea further, arguing that the self unfolded through an inner conversation between 'I' and 'Me', as alternating phases of the self. He defined these as subject and object, respectively. The 'I' is the creative, impulsive agent of social action, while the 'Me' is an image (or collection of images) of oneself, viewed from the perspective of others. This is internalized into the self-concept as the 'organized set of attitudes of others which one himself [*sic*] assumes' (Mead 1934: 175). For Mead, mind, self and society were all intertwined parts of the same process: we import 'society' into the mind through an internalized set of attitudes and responses from others, which we then use to guide our conduct. The self, then, centres on the ability to take oneself as an object of reflective thought, to be both subject and object simultaneously. We cannot experience the self directly, but only through the imagined responses of others.

This reflective intelligence is used as people imagine and mentally rehearse possible courses of action and anticipate likely responses. This involves the manipulation of symbolic social objects (Blumer 1969) in the mind, which are translated into communicative gestures. Mead (1934) suggested that humans have a unique capacity to use 'significant symbols' (such as language), which convey a shared meaning to those in our immediate milieu: actors can be said to be making a communicative gesture when they understand the meaning it will have for the other and can anticipate the response it will 'call out' in them. Mead proposed the analytic concept of the 'act' (and, more specifically, the social act) as the most elementary unit of conduct: the smallest meaningful unit we can extract from the ongoing stream of human behaviour (Hewitt 2007). The act is a discrete unit with a beginning and an end, which begins when a previous act ends or is interrupted; it is also functional, purposive and goal-directed in helping the actor to express or realize an intention. The act has four stages – perception, impulse, manipulation and consummation – whereby we identify symbolic objects, indicate these to ourselves, design intentions and carry them out.

Mead (1934) proposed that the self developed through a sequence of stages in childhood socialization. The first stage is *play*, when the child begins to 'take the view of the other', imagining situations from another person's perspective. This enables them to engage in fantasy and role-play, orienting their conduct towards what they think the other person perceives (this echoes the 'theory of minds' in psychology). However, this perspective-taking is limited to discrete, specific other individuals

whom the child has directly encountered, such as parents or friends. The second stage, called the *game*, occurs when the child is able to take the view of a whole group or a collective perspective. Mead used the term '*generalized other*' to describe this symbolic object, which we use as adults to organize our conduct: we have a tendency to orient ourselves towards what we think 'people in general' will think, say or do.

The social self can be broken down further into several components (Hewitt 2007). Each of these is imaginative, relational and emergent, as we consider alternative ways of knowing or viewing ourselves through the eyes of others. Charon (2007) distinguishes between the *self-concept* (an image of oneself), *self-esteem* (feelings about one's status or worth) and *self-judgements* (the processes by which we arrive at these things). Rosenberg (1979) similarly suggests that the *self-concept* refers to the totality of thoughts and feelings about the self as a stable object. This is reflected in both personal dispositions (characteristics one sees oneself as possessing) and social identities (groups and categories to which one imagines oneself to belong), and the relationship between these two comprises the basic structure of the self. Meanwhile, *self-image* involves cognitive schemas, such as the templates of 'possible selves' (Markus & Nurius 1986) that are available for us to choose between within our cultural repertoire (Gubrium & Holstein 2001). Finally, *self-esteem* refers more to the emotional aspects of identity, such as feeling accepted and valued (Gecas & Schwalbe 1983) as we evaluate how successful or 'efficacious' a course of action has been in communicating an impression of self to others (James 1890).

Of particular significance here are the self-conscious emotions (Tangney & Fisher 1995) – shame, pride, guilt and embarrassment (and, I would add, shyness [Scott 2007a]) – which arise when we evaluate our own conduct through the eyes of significant others, and consider its implications for our social and moral status. Scheff and Retzinger (1991) argue that shame signifies a perceived threat to the social bond (that which exists between the individual and their reference group), while I define shyness as a perception of oneself as being relatively incompetent at managing social interaction, with the anticipation of negative judgement by others (Scott 2007a).

What happens when the social self enters into interaction? The phenomenologist Schütz (1972) pointed out that we need to align our 'streams of consciousness' so that we can co-ordinate our behaviour in situations. This in turn contributes to social order, by allowing the social world to flow smoothly, in an orderly and predictable fashion. Schütz argued that while individuals inhabit their own subjective reality, this is an imported microcosm of the wider social world. The 'lifeworld' is a sphere of mundane, everyday practices and common-sense knowledge,

on which we rely to make our lives as orderly and predictable as possible. We do not consciously reflect on the contents of the lifeworld but, rather, take them for granted: it constitutes a ‘paramount reality’ in which we believe unless convinced otherwise by disruptive and unexpected events. The actor translates this stock of background knowledge into action by adopting the ‘natural attitude’: as we cannot consciously attend to every possible interpretation of events, we assume that the most likely and common meaning is true, and bracket out our awareness of all alternatives. This means that we encounter the social world as if it were real, external and objectively verifiable, beyond our control. In their theory of the social construction of reality, Berger and Luckmann (1966: 89) called this process ‘reification’: ‘... the apprehension of human phenomena as if they were things’. An important component of this capacity is the stock of generalized schemas or representations about what might be meant in familiar kinds of situations: these include *typifications* about the types of people (or roles) that we expect to find in certain contexts, and *recipe knowledge* about the chain of interaction that is likely to unfold (Schütz 1972).

Multi-dimensional subjects: fixity or fragmentation?

An important debate concerns the question of whether or not there is a core, essential, ‘true’ self, which is fixed and stable, below the levels of discourse, performance and interaction. Social constructionist theories pose a challenge to the essentialist assumptions underlying more traditional theories, which are seen as having been produced from a position of white, male, heterosexual privilege. Hall (1996) argues that identity can no longer be taken for granted as something fixed, stable and internally coherent, for it is now subject to fragmentation, uncertainty and doubt. Calhoun (1994: 13) contests the notion that individuals can have ‘singular, integral, altogether harmonious and unproblematic identities’, while others have challenged representations of social groups as having a collective identity based on a set of core or essential features, such as gender (Connell & Pearse 2015), sexuality (Weeks 2003) or ethnicity (Gilroy 2000). These theorists point instead to the instability of the self as something that is fragile, fragmented and dispersed rather than integrated, as well as fluid, mutable and resistant to definition. Meanwhile, postcolonial writing on race, ethnicity and citizenship has pointed to the way in which nationalist and racist discourses constructed notions of the ‘other’ as a threatening outsider (Said 1978; Hall 1996). Challenging and rethinking these culturally inscribed boundaries, and in some cases reclaiming stigmatized identities, has been central to the

rise of civil rights activism and identity politics since the late twentieth century (Plummer 2003; Lentin & Titley 2011).

The anti-essentialist ontologies of these theories challenge not only the idea of unity, totality and sameness, but also the agency of the human subject (Williams 2000). Identity can be viewed not as something that we have, but as something that we do, or that is made and bestowed upon us. There may be no underlying referent or subject, but merely surface-level representations, descriptions and images of groups of people. This poststructuralist view is epitomized by the work of Foucault (1971), who, drawing on Nietzsche's nihilistic pronouncement of the 'death of the subject', argued that identities – or the idea of them – were discursively produced. Identities come into being through cultural and linguistic conventions, which in turn are a reflection of dominant systems of knowledge and power. That is, discourses (ways of seeing, thinking and writing about a cultural object [Hall 1996]), which are created within cultural and historical contexts, come to define certain ways of being. Foucault (1961, 1976) referred to 'subjectivities' or 'subject positions' rather than 'identities', and argued that a succession of these emerged in different historical eras: for example, the hysterical woman, who was a discursive product of nineteenth-century psychoanalytic theory. Moreover, these 'discoveries' reflected not absolute truths, or the triumphant march of progress in scientific knowledge, but rather the interests of the powerful in each era. They indicated who held the power to define what was normal, natural and inevitable, and, conversely, what was abnormal or deviant. The post-Enlightenment birth of the human sciences (clinical medicine, psychiatry, criminology, economics and demographics), with their emphasis on reason and rationality and systematic logic, led to attempts to map out the terrain of social characteristics through systems of classification and categorization (Foucault 1963). This reflected a desire to know about, gaze at, penetrate into, understand, monitor and regulate the behaviour of populations (Foucault 1975).

This is a rather nihilistic view in suggesting that there can be identity without agency (Williams 2000), but some more contemporary poststructuralist theorists have attempted to bring the autonomous subject back into the debate. Hacking (1999), for example, argued that discursive texts and practices create identity categories by defining the conditions of personhood, or ways of being a certain social type. Individuals may then fit themselves into these categories and find meaning in them as identity monikers.

Another example of this is Judith Butler's (1990, 1993) model of gender identities. For Butler, there is no pre-discursive subject, or core essential self, lying beneath the level of surface appearances. The self

has no fixity, stability or substance; it consists merely of a series of stylized, repetitive performances that create the illusion of this: appearance precedes essence. Butler claimed that masculinity and femininity were not essential ways of being that were expressed through appearance and behaviour, but just performative effects, or ways of ‘doing gender’ (West & Zimmerman 1987). As Butler (1990: 25) famously argued: ‘... there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results.’ Butler disputed hegemonic constructions, such as the gender binary (the assumption that there are only two categories of gender, male and female), cis-gender (the state of congruence between one’s biologically attributed sex and subjectively felt gender identity), the gender order (Connell & Pearse 2015) or the sex/gender system (Rubin 1975; the hierarchy of culturally preferred gender identities, with male heterosexuality at the top), and heteronormativity (the assumption that heterosexuality is the default ‘normal’ state of being). She advocated the subversion of these through disruptive and dismantling acts of resistance, such as transvestism and drag, as well as the recognition of identities that lie outside the ‘heterosexual matrix’ (Butler 1990), such as transgender, gender-queer, non-cis-identified and pansexual.

However, these apparent signs of agency may just reflect the insidiousness and pervasiveness of social control. Rose (1989, 1990) argued that the Foucauldian disciplinary gaze was not only internalized by subjects, but also regarded by them as positively helpful as a means of regulating their own behaviour. Through ‘governmentality’, individuals willingly turn the gaze upon themselves by becoming self-surveillant, while at the same time offering themselves up to knowledgeable experts, such as social workers, life coaches, solicitors and counsellors. Rose (1989) points to the curious paradox of social control and regulation being delivered through discourses of liberation, freedom and citizenship: we are obliged to be free. Disciplinary power infiltrates both subjectivity and intersubjectivity: the desire to gain knowledge of oneself, other people and the spaces in between. One of the most prominent media he identifies is the expertise vested in the ‘psy’ industries, with their twin weapons: the ‘therapeutic culture of the self’ (Rose 1989: xii) and the construction of ‘neurochemical selves’. Although Rose suggests that we learn to ‘assemble’ ourselves and to cite motives of self-fulfilment, self-actualization and self-improvement, he attributes these motives to the ‘colonization of the lifeworld’ (Habermas 1981), whereby the channels of communication between genuinely free citizens have been blocked by ideology: our thoughts are not our own, and our perception of our own (and others’) competence is limited.

The symbolic interactionist position in this debate is something of a compromise between the extremes of fixity and fragmentation. Symbolic interactionist scholars do refer to such notions as self and identity, which may be experienced by individuals as relatively consistent, but do not claim that this constitutes a 'pure' essential core, immune to external social influences. Instead, we refer to social actors, who are defined in processual terms, by their actions and capacities (for agency, perspective-taking, role-play, conformity and resistance). Moreover, the self is subject to ongoing challenge, definition and modification by significant others in the course of interaction, and so it is fluid and mutable, constantly evolving. Actors may even construct an assemblage of multiple selves as they move between different situations and interact with different audiences. Nevertheless, this still logically presupposes that there is some kind of agent: the actor behind the performances, or the author of the selves. This agent 'does' or creates (performs, authors, narrates, represents and reflects upon) his or her own social identities, but always through negotiation with others.

Symbolic interactionism

Let us now take a closer look at symbolic interactionism (SI), the theoretical approach I will be taking in this book. SI is a micro-sociological perspective that focuses on small-scale, often face-to-face, encounters between social actors, and the meanings they attach to their behaviour. SI regards identity, like society more widely, as a process of negotiation: it is relational, communicative, and symbolically meaningful. Becker (1963) wrote of people not *being* but rather *becoming* social types, as their identities emerge from ongoing patterns of interaction and are never completely finished. Within this perspective, I include Goffman's dramaturgical theory (discussed more below), which focuses on how social actors present, perform and strategically manage different versions of themselves in different situations; the cumulative effect of this creates the precarious structure of the 'interaction order'. Identities are contextual, the details of their expressions varying between settings and situations, as well as dynamic, mutable and contingent. Their meanings are forever shifting in line with situational demands, group values and normative expectations. In summary, I suggest that SI describes and analyses the social processes of interaction through which identities can be *created, shaped, maintained, communicated, presented, negotiated, challenged, reproduced, reinvented and narrated*.

Historical origins, branches and schools

SI is a broad tradition encompassing many strands. Even its most devoted advocates have pointed to its 'messy' intellectual development (Fisher & Strauss 1978), varied historiography and disputed terrain (Atkinson & Housley 2003). Nevertheless, we can trace the historical origins of SI through a number of commentaries (Meltzer et al. 1975; Rock 1979; Fine 1995; Charon 2007) that emphasize its unique, distinctive position.

SI grew out of North American sociology in the twentieth century, and so is a relatively modern perspective. In the inter-war years of 1920–40, the University of Chicago was home to some highly influential figures in the world's first sociology department (William Thomas, Robert Park, Ernest Burgess, Louis Wirth, Albion Small), as well as its new flagship publication, the *American Journal of Sociology*. The city of Chicago at this time was undergoing a period of rapid social transformation, following the Great Fire of 1871, and so constituted the perfect 'natural laboratory' in which to observe how social processes of urbanization, migration, crime and poverty were affecting the everyday lives of ordinary people. This new interest in 'urban ecology' lent itself to empirical field studies of 'social problems' and their effects upon the experiences of those on the margins of society, such as Polish immigrants (Thomas & Znaniecki 1918), homeless people (Anderson 1923), criminal gangs (Thrasher 1927) and juvenile delinquents (Shaw 1934). The emphasis on empirical field research was something novel and unique to this group, who would conduct ethnographies in particular local settings, based on interviews and participant observation (Bulmer 1984).

Initially, there was a bifurcation between this Chicago School, with its emphasis on interpretivist theorizing, humanist ontology and pragmatist epistemology, and the lesser-known Iowa School, whose approach was more positivistic and quantitative (Meltzer et al. 1975). However, the latter did not survive beyond one generation as it was absorbed into other disciplines like social psychology. By contrast, the Chicago School continued to thrive. After the initial flurry of activity, the first generation of scholars were replaced by a more geographically dispersed 'second Chicago School' (Fine 1995). This consisted of iconic figureheads like Everett Hughes, Howard Becker, Anselm Strauss and Erving Goffman, who set up new SI-inspired departments around the USA.

Another distinction can be made between two branches of SI that focus on either the regular, patterned and normative aspect of interaction or its fluid, processual, contingent character (Hausmann et al. 2011). The former is represented by structural symbolic interactionism (Stryker 1980), which focused on how the structure of society – albeit

one envisaged at the micro level as merely ‘the pattern of regularities that characterize most human interaction’ (Stryker 1980: 65) – shapes the self. For example, through normative routines and practices of socialization, we learn culturally shared rules of behaviour or roles that we are expected to play. The latter branch is represented by interaction ritual theory (Collins 2005), an approach inspired by Durkheim’s (1912) functionalist theory of religion. Durkheim argued that collective worship took a ritualized form that symbolized and reinforced its followers’ adherence to shared *social* values, thus strengthening their cohesiveness and solidarity. Collins developed this by suggesting that the same processes occur in mundane everyday situations insofar as these involve ritualized forms of interaction (e.g. greetings and farewells, or apologies). Interaction rituals involve similar states of mutual awareness and a shared focus of attention; they can also generate a collective mood of ‘emotional energy’, which is dynamic in instigating further action. As we shall see in Chapters 2 and 4, Goffman (1959, 1967) showed how interaction rituals like displays of civility, politeness and decorum reveal actors’ common commitment to upholding the interaction order.

Key concerns

Epistemologically, symbolic interactionism is concerned not with making objectivist claims about what is ‘out there’ in the ‘real’ world, but rather with grasping participants’ subjective experiences of their own situations. This illustrates Weber’s (1904) notion of *verstehen*, or the interpretive understanding of social action. In terms of its substantive subject matter, Atkinson and Housley (2003) suggest that SI studies the interdependency of *social action, social order and social identities*. This in turn lends itself to two domains of empirical study: the *production and distribution of social identities* through micro-social processes, such as the creation and use of moral types, labels and social categories, and the *relationship between social actors and social organizations*, for example when members of an institution become socialized into role-identities that are defined by that structure. We shall consider these, but also other, aspects of identity in the chapters of this book.

Blumer’s symbolic interactionism

The term ‘symbolic interactionism’ to denote a distinct theoretical perspective was introduced in a classic text by Herbert Blumer (1969). Atkinson and Housley (2003) suggest that Blumer inherited the dual traditions of Chicago thought – Mead–Cooley pragmatism and Park–Burgess empiricism – and blended them into an original approach.

Blumer took Mead's rather abstract notion of the social self and showed how this was grounded in the practical, everyday world of social interaction (Manis & Meltzer 1978). While Mead had emphasized the human capacity for reflexive thought, Blumer argued that this was not merely introspective but, rather, shaped by and emergent from the social process (Rock 1979). For example, the 'social objects' that comprise our everyday world, including representations of self and others, were constructed, defined and modified by processes of communicative interaction.

Blumer (1969) identified three key principles of symbolic interactionism: firstly, humans act towards social objects on the basis of the *meanings* that these things have for them; secondly, these meanings arise out of social *interaction*; and, thirdly, meanings can be modified by *interpretation*, or the *interpretive process*. In this way, he said, humans create the worlds of experience in which they live: a constructivist ontology of social reality.

Blumer introduced the concept of the communicative *gesture*, making a distinction between gestures that are *non-symbolic* (instinctive and unreflexive) and those that are *symbolic* (having a meaning that is reflexively understood and shared between participants). For example, compare a blink and a wink. The social world is mainly symbolic rather than non-symbolic: we respond not merely to conditioned stimuli but to actively constructed meanings (Charon 2007), which are subjectively perceived, negotiable, mutable and open to constant redefinition. Hewitt (2007) refers to symbols as being 'conventional' in that they are socially constructed, shared, mutually known about and therefore normative; they are learned through socialization, and designed for a communicative purpose. The most obvious example of symbolic gestures is the use of language.

Blumer extended Mead's original notion of the act: a four-phase process of perception, impulse, manipulation and consummation, by which individuals exercised their will in relation to objects. Blumer argued that acts were not simply individual but often co-operative: what he called *joint acts* involved people using symbolic gestures and drawing on shared meanings to co-ordinate these. Joint action is a collaborative venture of making sense of situations together, constructing order out of perceptual chaos. This involves considering the action from all sides and seeking to find common ground between different perspectives. Thus the internal dialogue that Mead posited between the 'I' and 'Me' of the self was re-imagined by Blumer as a 'conversation of gestures' between different selves. Actors make constant indications to themselves and others about how their symbolic gestures should be interpreted, whilst simultaneously reading meanings from the gestures that these others

give. SI theorists agree that through this interactive process of mutual perspective-taking, meaning-making and communication, social situations emerge: ‘We modify our lines of action on the basis of what we perceive alter’s implications to be with respect to our manifest and latent plans of action’ (McCall & Simmons 1966: 136); ‘Interaction means actors taking each other into account, communicating to and interpreting each other as they go along’ (Charon 2007: 140). This in turn allows SI to theorize micro-level structures and social order. ‘Society’ is not an objective, external structure, but rather just a subjectively perceived semblance of such. This is based upon regular patterns of interaction: routinized, habitual ways of doing things that come to be regarded as normal, natural and inevitable. The phenomenologists Berger and Luckmann (1966) called this ‘the social construction of reality’, which involved both *reification* – the apprehension of constructed objects as if they were external – and the *negotiation process* – an ongoing cycle of definition, redefinition and mutual adjustment.

Goffman’s dramaturgy

Dramaturgy can be understood as a theoretical perspective in its own right, but I find it helpful to think of it as a variant of symbolic interactionism, with which it shares some key concerns: the micro-sociological study of face-to-face interactions; actors’ collaborative work in creating definitions of reality; and the idea that social identities can be produced, negotiated and performed through these situated encounters. We shall examine Goffman’s theory in more detail throughout the book, particularly in Chapters 4 and 5, but an overview of the approach may be helpful at this stage.

Erving Goffman (1922–82) was a graduate student of sociology at the University of Chicago in the late 1940s, in the aftermath of the Chicago School’s heyday, and was taught by some of its key figures, most notably Everett Hughes. The fieldwork Goffman carried out in the Shetland Isles on ‘the social structure of an island community’ would later form the basis of his most famous book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). In attempting to catalogue and analyse the minutiae of human behaviour, using typologies, taxonomies and classification systems (Lofland 1980), Goffman was heavily influenced by anthropology, ethology and game theory (Smith 2006). Although he went on to teach in the sociology departments of Berkeley and Pennsylvania, he remained reluctant to describe himself as a sociologist, much less as a symbolic interactionist. However, this may have been less a question of fervent occupational identity than one of mere disengagement and

disinterest: Ditton (1980) suggests that Goffman was largely indifferent to disciplinary boundaries, and kept himself away from the 'turf wars' of academic identity politics.

Goffman's perspective of dramaturgy was inspired by Kenneth Burke's (1945) dramatism, as outlined in his book *A Grammar of Motives*. Burke argued that everyday interaction consisted of actors trying to interpret and align their different motivations, work out frames of meaning and establish modes of co-operative action; all of this was unpredictable and dynamic. Apart from studying the narrative design and format of situations, Burke said that we should examine people's motives. Mirroring the key questions of 'who, what, where, when and how' that characterize mystery detective stories, he proposed an analytical 'pentad' of five elements that could be found in ordinary social situations. These were: the act (what happened), scene (where this took place), agent (who was involved), agency (how the action was accomplished) and purpose (why the actors were motivated).

Goffman's writing style was also imitative of Burke's 'perspective by incongruity', in that he sought to highlight the dramatic elements of social interaction by drawing analogies to mundane phenomena with which readers would be familiar from their everyday lives. Seeing the juxtaposition of the routine and the remarkable forced readers to make associations and draw parallels between the two, jolting them into a new state of awareness and generating fresh insights into social reality, by 'making the familiar strange' (cf. Garfinkel 1967). To this end, Goffman employed various metaphors, such as the con game, the service industry, ritual worship and animal behaviour (Lofland 1980). Most famous, however, was his theatrical metaphor.

Dramaturgy is based upon the idea that social life is like a theatre, with many comparable features. Goffman (1959) described social actors as being like actors on the stage, who are constantly performing: playing their part, or role, in the drama of each situation, and presenting various different characters to the audiences they encounter therein. This tendency is called *self-presentation*. We try to control the images of ourselves that we convey, using the skill of *impression management*: we devise moves, lines, gestures and tactical displays of information. One of the greatest contributions of Goffman's work was his systematic and exhaustive cataloguing of these myriad tactics and strategies. He showed how actors manipulate social objects, settings and definitions of reality as instruments of communication (Perinbanayagam 1985). Identities, in this model, are situated and performative: it is difficult to ever know the 'true' self, or the person behind the mask, the actor behind the characters they play, because in every social situation we encounter we will be performing one persona or another.

Performances can also be collaborative: actors work together like members of a theatrical cast to uphold a collective group impression or definition of the situation. Goffman (1959: 85) defined the 'performance team' as 'any set of individuals who co-operate in staging a single routine'. The reference here to 'a single routine' reminds us that these formations are contextual: fellow actors may be supportive team-mates in one situation but strangers or even adversaries in another. Team-mates are those on whom we rely to help us out of embarrassment, tactfully save our face and get encounters back on track. They repair the damage caused by disturbed expectations, for whatever happens, 'the show must go on'. In Chapter 5, we explore the intricacies of this 'dramaturgical loyalty' (Goffman 1959), to see how team-mates manage matters of casting, recruitment and boundary monitoring.

Audiences have an important role to play in accepting or rejecting these performances. While actors make identity claims, or 'announcements', audiences interpret these with 'placements', which may or may not be 'coincidental' or congruous (Stone 1962). They may decide an identity performance is not convincing and be suspicious that an actor is not who they appear to be. This may mean that audience members refuse to co-operate in supporting it through their own lines of action: remember that they are simultaneously actors, and the protagonists in their own dramas. Audiences are always scrutinizing the performances they see, trying to interpret their significance and read characters' identities correctly. Goffman therefore thought it was important to study not only the impressions people 'give' deliberately but also those they 'give off' unintentionally. For example, in a job interview, we may attempt to create an image of competent professionalism, but feel betrayed by nervousness and self-doubt leaking out.

The physical context in which individual and team performances are given is very important. Goffman (1959) suggested that the self is divided into two main parts, or regions, which correspond to areas of a theatre. The *frontstage* region is where public performances are given, and where we enact carefully scripted role-identities. The 'front' of a performance consists of its *setting* (location, scenery and décor), which is fixed in one place, and the *personal front* that actors bring to the situation (items of identity equipment, such as clothes, material objects as props, and facial expressions). Meanwhile, the *backstage* region is where actors relax out of character, and may contradict their public identities: this is a private space to rehearse, dissect and reflect upon one's role performance and recharge one's batteries before going back on stage. When alone in these backstage regions, actors might become aware of their 'true', private self-identities, but this is a rare and privileged insight.

Criticism and defence

Of course, symbolic interactionism is not without its limitations, which have been identified both within and outside of the perspective (Meltzer et al. 1975). One of the most obvious and major criticisms is that SI, in its focus on the micro-sociological level of analysis, neglects to examine wider or deeper macro-level structures. This is important because it implies a lack of recognition of social inequality, power and conflict (Gouldner 1973). However, this may be an over-simplistic (mis)interpretation of the perspective that misses the subtler ways in which SI and dramaturgy do theorize these concepts. Indeed, Jenkins (2008) describes Goffman as a major theorist of power. Goffman's work is replete with commentaries on unequal power relations in different interaction contexts, such as the 'institutional arrangements' of the psychiatric hospital (Goffman 1961a; see Chapter 7 below) and the attribution of stigma (Goffman 1963a; see Chapter 6 below). Neither does SI make the rose-coloured claim that social actors are free to interpret their roles and perform their identities in whichever way they choose: power relations and social divisions can be found at the micro level, through patterns of interaction, normative conventions and dominant, agreed-upon definitions of reality. These impose constraints upon individual agency and limit the repertoires of action that are open to social actors: for example, when a person's role within an occupational setting is prescribed by formal regulations (Hewitt 2007).

A related criticism is that SI is fixating on the trivial. The analysis of micro-level encounters, interaction dynamics and the minutiae of social life can appear superficial to some, who argue that SI 'fetishizes' everyday life (Brittan 1973) or celebrates image, style and performance at the expense of substance (Gouldner 1973). At the same time, the perspective has been described as 'quaint' and out-dated for its emphasis on face-to-face, localized encounters, which seem less relevant in a contemporary, media-saturated, globalized and virtual world (Gergen 1991). Whether or not these criticisms are valid is debatable – as noted above, such dismissive readings of SI neglect to appreciate how the perspective does theorize deeper issues and social problems, albeit more subtly – but even if so, we might counter, does this matter? There is no obligation for social theory to be politically effective or morally worthy, and some social phenomena are simply interesting to study.

Taking this further, Denzin (1969) defends SI against its criticisms. He argues that the perspective has been accused of not doing what it had never intended to do anyway, such as examining macro-level structures or offering political analyses of inequality. As outlined earlier in this chapter, SI has never claimed to be concerned with the 'why' of