

## Introduction

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## INTRODUCTION

This special issue of *Symbolic Interaction* aims to explore the role of the concept of 'Interaction' in contemporary theory and research within the discipline and cognate areas. The impetus for this collection of essays came from the observation that studies in Symbolic Interaction and other 'interactionist' approaches differ greatly in the extent to which interaction is a focus of concern, and, where it is of interest, in the theoretical and methodological resources that are employed to explore it. As the articles that form the beginning section of this edition will show, Interaction Ritual Theory, Structural Symbolic Interactionist approaches, Ethnomethodology, and the Iowa School, all represent quite distinctive orientations to this issue.

*Hausmann, Summers-Effler and Jonason* compare Interaction Ritual Theory (Collins 2004) with Sheldon Stryker's (2008) structural approach to Symbolic Interactionism. Following Collins the authors argue for the importance of participants' emotional orientation to situations. They see individuals' actions being motivated by an anticipation of emotional energy. In contrast, Interaction Ritual Theory entails a clear focus on interaction as a Durkheimian ritualistic activity, through which the sense of society as a moral entity emerges. *Miller's* article illustrates that the Iowa School's concern continues to be with developing universal models of co-presence and social processes that outline the sequences of forms of action such as greetings, negotiation, deviant activity, as well as particular forms of relationships, such as authority or autocratic relationships. In contrast, *Dennis's* chapter demonstrates that this is quite different to an ethnomethodological approach, which is not directed towards generalization, but with exploring the distinctiveness or the 'just-thisness' of particular settings. As these

examples show then, the theoretical or conceptual models of interaction differ in fundamental ways between perspectives.

While interactionist theory has been prolific, there have been some high profile complaints over the years about the absence of empirical advance in the analysis of interaction. In his 1982 ASA Presidential Address Erving Goffman (1983) powerfully argued for social situations as a prime domain for sociological investigation. Drawing on his published work, he argued for the central importance of scrutinizing in detail the processes of enacting and of reading bodily displays as components of the construction of social settings. This now infamous impassioned call to action was an attempt to make the empirical concentration on people's real-world contexts a priority (cf. Smith 1999, 2006).

This argument might seem strange in the context of what we have already described as a diverse disciplinary interest in studying interaction. Indeed, Interaction, and the processes of actions through which participants ongoingly create a sense of intersubjectivity were at the heart of G. H. Mead's work. Mead (1934) saw communication processes and the inter-exchanges of significant symbols as central to his theory of mind and as constitutive of the ways that people internalize social conventions and collaborate in the construction of meaning. Mead himself did not develop a particularly nuanced analysis of the 'pragmatics' underlying social action – that is, of the activities that are coordinated between individuals and which are constitutive of communication. *Turner's* paper in this collection plays an important role in drawing out the implicit and under-explored features of Mead's model, and, as he describes it, as filling in some conceptual apparatus for a Meadean theory of interaction. However, an important part of the context of Goffman's critique is that the transformation of G.H. Mead's concepts by Herbert Blumer (1969)

into what now is known as Symbolic Interactionism has to some extent led to a privileging of social psychological rather than sociological concerns. This has been evident in some of the themes that have been explored in detail within this journal over the years, such as participants' attitudes to situations and how their identity emerges from participating in interaction. This interest in subjective processes has involved taking the operations that enable the emergence of "joint action" (Blumer 1969) and the development and negotiation of definitions of situations for granted. The specific mechanisms through which people's real-world interactional activities are organized are of peripheral interest to the analysis in such cases.

Blumers' writings, which were so important in transforming Mead's contributions into an empirical agenda, have of course provided the basis for a wide range of ethnographies of work, occupation, healthcare, family life, race relations and shopping behavior that in many cases are concerned with social interaction and processual aspects of intersubjective understandings (Becker, 1974; Becker, Geer, Hughes, & Strauss, 1961). Similarly, Strauss and colleagues (Strauss, 1996; Strauss & Wohl, 1958; Strübing, 2007) (Strauss, 1978) have conducted influential work on negotiation and related issues. However, these studies tend to stop short of a close analysis of the interactional phenomena that constitute the contexts under investigation: as Garfinkel (1967) has argued, they represent a "loose Phenomenology", which misses the object from its analysis.

The relative lack of interactionists' interest in the situation reflects a disengagement from one of sociology's key question, namely how people arrive at an intersubjective understanding of an object. With this special issue we hope to make a small step towards

a Symbolic Interactionist return to issues such as interaction processes, practices and intersubjective understanding. The resurrection of concerns that in the past have been at the heart of Symbolic Interactionist debate requires a reflection on contemporary concepts of interaction.

The special issue therefore opens with four invited contributions by scholars grounded in symbolic interactionism and related approaches like Interaction Ritual Theory and Ethnomethodology. These contributions relate their different perspectives on “interaction” to Symbolic Interactionist concerns and debates. The theoretical part of the special issue is followed by three empirical studies of interaction in different social domains: Interaction between charity workers and the homeless, the life of a local ethnic minority in Western Thrace; and professional activity in the operating theatre. *Smith’s* analysis of the service encounter between outreach workers and homeless people in Cardiff draws on Rawls’ (1987) reading of Goffman’s work to explore the ways that participants normalize and disattend to the “problematic” aspects of homeless identity. Through Smith’s work, we come to see the relevance of analysing the interaction order and how, through Goffmanian concepts, we can come to understanding the production of encounters, roles, responsibilities, understandings of “normal” and “ordinary” and so on. *Evereti’s* study of racial discrimination in Western Thrace focuses on the ways that ethnic communities create intersubjective understandings of situations as “discriminatory”. Paying particular attention to the stigmatised group, Evereti also draws on Goffman’s work to show how communities create and negotiate their identities through interaction. In this way, discrimination is viewed not as a psychological property

or propensity, but as a socially grounded and contextual relation between communities of people.

*Bezemer et al's* examination of professional activity in an operating theatre involves the microanalysis of video recordings of inter-professional activity in operations. The analysis shows the various bodily, gestural and verbal communication strategies that are employed in order to communicate and to repair (or avoid) failures of communication. The analysis highlights the problems with the distinction between “non-technical skills” (such as communication) and “technical skills” that is often used to describe, and indeed to “curricularise” the work of surgeons. In this study we come to see in detail the in-situ interactive practices through which professionals make sense of each other’s intentions, and achieve the shared understanding of lines of action. The Special Issue ends with Tuma’s review of Heath, Hindmarsh and Luff’s (2010) exploration of video-based approach to examine social interaction.

While the articles presented here cover a broad set of empirical and theoretical areas, they do of course only offer a snapshot of a very extensive domain. It seems clear, however, that even this partial representation demonstrates the richness of “interactionist” approaches to the study of intersubjective understanding by focussing on interaction processes.

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