Chapter 10 Applied Symbolic Interactionism

Chapter Outline

I. Introduction
   A. The creation of symbolic interactionism (SI) involved Hull-House social workers and University of Chicago academics
   B. Dewey, Mead, and Addams were founding figures and collaborators in many academic and social action projects
   C. Shared philosophy of pragmatism: knowledge should be used to help communities and their members

II. Related Dialects, Associated Schools of Thought
   A. Symbolic interactionism is the name coined by Herbert Blumer
   B. Schools of thought (distinctions were relevant in past but not present)
      1. University of Chicago
      2. University of Berkeley
      3. University of California
      4. University of Iowa
   C. Alternative titles for applied symbolic interactionism include applied interactionism, applied or social pragmatism, the membership perspective, interactionist social work, and the socialization approach
   D. There are many parallels between symbolic interactionism and social constructionist approaches

III. Applied Symbolic Interactionism: Exemplary Models
   A. John Dewey – a philosopher, educational innovator
      1. Developed “intelligent social reconstruction”: a method for cooperative and creative inquiry and problem solving
      2. Worked closely with Jane Addams and Hull House
      3. Engaged in much service and reform work
   B. George Herbert Mead- an exceptional scholar, emphasized “amelioration through understanding”
      1. Formulated a theory of progressive social change
      2. Developed many interactionist concepts related to the social self, role-taking
      3. Worked closely with social workers and served on many community-oriented committees
   C. Jane Addams
      1. Cofounder of SI
      2. Developed settlement house theory of the planned change process
      3. Influential scholar who wrote many articles and books
      4. Leader of Hull-House and generated innovative services and applications of interactionist/pragmatist ideas
   D. Hans Falck developed The Membership Perspective, a framework for social work (based mainly on symbolic interactionism

IV. Applied Symbolic Interactionism: Root Metaphors
   A. Varied metaphors include
      1. Interaction is like dance, interaction is like jazz
      2. The person is like an artist communicating creatively through various media
3. Social life like a theatrical performance
4. Researchers are like impressionist painters creatively interpreting landscapes

B. The Person as Member
1. There are several types of membership (Falck)
   a. Membership in the same species and basic human membership capacities
   b. Membership in primary groups; families and peer groups socialize us to general membership roles
   c. Membership in secondary groups with membership coaches who socialize us to group specific membership roles
   d. Membership in tertiary groups, large institutions and categorical memberships. This membership slants our socialization in accord with the perspective of others in the category
2. Humans are never alone (seen memberships and unseen memberships)
3. Membership means rights and responsibilities like members of a mental health clubhouse. Members help set rules and decide on activities. A club has minimal hierarchy

C. The social environment is like a social clubhouse (Pee Wee Herman’s clubhouse, a mental health clubhouse, a community center with many clubs)
1. Society is like a large collection of clubhouses; each with own language, rules, traditions, and activities
2. At the societal level, society is like a grand conversation between members of all the different clubs, and a society develops a set of favorite stories and topics (its shared culture)
3. At the interaction level, conversations between members of different clubs are difficult because of the different symbols, dictionaries, preferred topics of conversation, and favorite stories
4. At the individual level, conversation is among members of internalized clubhouse (parts of the self)

D. The social worker is like a group worker
1. The club worker like worker in community center serves all center’s clubs
   a. Learns the culture and language of each club
   b. Consults with club to enhance membership experiences for all
   c. Helps socialize novice members
   d. Helps the club select represents and participate in center decision making
   e. Helps the club increase its capacities for work with other membership groups or clubs

V. Core Assumptions of Applied Symbolic Interactionism
A. Basic assumptions were articulated by Blumer
   1. Humans act toward objects on the basis of the meanings of the objects
   2. Meanings emerge through interaction
   3. Meanings are used and modified through an interpretive process and this facilitates transactions with the environment ?

B. Assumption of the dialectics of self and society, science and practice
   1. SI is against dualisms (either-or)
   2. SI is for synthesis (both this and that)
      a. Falck’s example of the dialectics of membership in a collective, the individuality-groupness effect

C. The person is active and socially self-determining
1. Members are capable of consciousness, sense-making, (generate alternative interpretations and possible lines of action), delay responses to stimuli long enough to choose an alternative
   a. SI is against downward reductionists, view that humans are compelled by inner forces
   b. SI is against structuralists and upward reductionists, view that humans are compelled by outer forces
2. SI prefers active process verbs (selfing and minding) instead of passive nouns for concepts

D. Interactionists focus on the distinctively human qualities
   1. SI accepts evolution
   2. But appreciate emergence of distinctive capacities for symbol-making and using
      a. Capacity for manipulation physically and mentally of objects (and ideas)
      b. Capacity for self reflectiveness (awareness)

E. Human beings are fundamentally social
   1. Participation in groups is unavoidable
   2. Communication, community, and common are similar words
   3. SI rejects the “individualistic fallacy” and assumes a membership perspective

E. Modern society is a “multiverse”
   1. There is territorial diversity and heterogeneity of social structures
   2. There is a proliferation of systems of meaning (and social realities) with challenge of facilitating communication and coordination across multiple membership groups and social worlds

F. Social arrangements are negotiated and negotiable
   1. Social orders are negotiated agreements (by couples or social organizations, for example) about shared purposes, rules, roles, and decision making procedures
   2. Over time the negotiated nature of arrangements may be forgotten/ as if structures have been set in concrete
   3. Persons vary in the power and material resources that they bring to negotiations

G. Human action is multidimensional
   1. Humans are complex members of complex interactional fields with all dimensions of person interrelated (holistic view)
   2. Humans are capable of novel action because of complex interrelations
   3. Human activity is unified even if it can be divided for analytic purposes

H. The scientific approach requires participant observation
   1. Social life always changing, and bound to a context, so research must respect the nature of reality
   2. SI prefers participant observation. Immersion in lives of group members to understand their symbol systems is required

I. Interactionists Have faith in the possibility of human betterment
   1. They take a melioristic perspective: conditions can always be bettered and humans are capable of creative adjustments to circumstances
   2. They use the method of intelligent social reconstruction
   3. They believe that knowledge is one of best tools for solving problems and improving membership conditions and experiences

VI. The Interactionist Approach to Human Development: Self Development for Competent Membership
   A. Exemplary role models include
      1. Charles Horton Cooley (the primary group, the looking glass self)
2. George Herbert Mead (levels of development: presymbolic, play, game)

B. Assumptions
1. Human development is stimulated by episodes of interaction
2. The life span is the ordering of a series of episodes
3. Socialization is a matter of developing the capacity for responsible membership

C. Root metaphors
1. Humans can progress to higher “levels” of capacity for socially minded conduct
2. Socialization is like a recruitment and membership training process by which person is transformed from novice to full member

D. The interactionist approach, the example of gender identity (Spencer Cahill’s model)
1. Includes concepts gender identity, gender socialization, language acquisition, interaction processes (social labeling, instruction, playful experiments, reflected appraisals), social context
2. Levels of socialization to a gender identity
   a. Acquiescent participation
   b. Unwitting participation
   c. Exploratory participation
   d. Apprentice participation
   e. Bona fide participation

E. Critical Comments
1. Schwalbe’s model blends personal agency with patterning of socialization by membership organizations
2. Cahill’s work has not been extended to memberships other than gender

F. Applications
1. There are no clear examples. Interactionists often fail to apply their theories and models.

VII. A Theoretical Map: Labeling Theory: Social Justice, and the Self
A. Introduction – labels have great power
B. Social acts are given meaning through social interaction; labels are one form of meaning attached to certain acts and persons
C. Societal reactions especially those of social control organizations to actions are important
   1. Psychiatrists in state mental hospitals using DSM category system to attach labels to “unruly” or “bizarre” community members
D. The characteristics of the labeled person influence if they are labeled and if a label sticks (power, status, value to community are relevant characteristics. For example, Salem witch trials saw labels successfully attached to powerless women)
E. The characteristics of the labeler are related to their likelihood of using negative labeling
F. Labels have an impact on the self-concept and then on behavior
G. Propositions regarding labels (and social worker use of labels) include
   1. Those labeled deviant are likely to change their self-conception towards a deviant identity
   2. Those treated differently because of a label are likely to begin to act in accord with the expectations of the labelers
H. SI concludes: Label with care

VIII. Mapping Applied Symbolic Interactionism
A. Figure 10.1: Eco-Map: The Applied Symbolic Interactionism Version
B. Applied Symbolic Interactionist Translations

1. How are connections Conceptualized?
   a. As symbolic interaction via significant symbols
      1. Linguistic symbols – words, phrases, etc
      2. Expressive symbols – facial and bodily behaviors used to communicate
      3. Appearance symbols – clothes, tattoos, etc
   b. Interaction can be symbolic or non symbolic
   c. Connections become systems of shared meanings over time
   d. Interaction includes relationship messages and task messages

2. How is the quality of connections differentiated?
   a. Positive = constructive and coherent communication
      1. Coherence and accuracy
      2. Clear – symbols chosen from shared dictionaries
      3. Congruent
   b. Negative = incoherent and destructive
      1. Use different symbol systems – slang or jargon
      2. Deception or manipulation
      3. Negative connections can result in a Tower of Babel
   c. Tenuous connections – understanding possible but difficult, ambiguous communication

3. What is the typical unit of attention or focal system?
   a. the member with seen and unseen memberships
      1. unseen memberships – internalized others (I, You, Me, They)
         a. I – spontaneous aspect, the impulses
         b. Me (with we and they) – the internalized representations of significant others
         c. You – the internalizer other or future self to which actor directs inner conversation

4. How is the environment conceptualized?
   a. Symbolized and interpreted not experienced directly
   b. There are multiple social worlds or clubs; each with own way of symbolizing the environment
   c. Symbolic interaction is constrained or facilitated by dominant technology (medias for communicating) and membership organization’s structure

5. Is particular emphasis given to any systems? Priority goes to meaningful others and groups
   a. significant others
   b. reference groups
   c. generalized others

6. How are resources and their flow conceptualized?
   a. Resources include
      1. Symbolic resources: words, images, information, etc (judged by force, resonance, resolution)
      2. Symbol using capacities as resource (President Ronald Reagan, the great communicator)
   a. The transfer of meaning can be
      1. Symmetrical / dialogue
      2. Asymmetrical / monologue

7. What descriptive words are used?
   a. Dynamic membership language with terms drawn from everyday language
b. The terms generated by members of particular membership groups

8. How is change conceptualized? As symbolic transformation
   a. Assessment of symbols used and of memberships
   b. Change at personal level involves self-concept (symbols about self) change
   c. Change at interactional level involves improved communication and coordinated action, the development of new meanings
      1. The social worker is expert communicator and translator

9. How are actual and ideal eco-maps contrasted?
   a. Ideal versus actual
      1. Ideal inner life – I-G effect, dialogue among internalized others, balance of I-me- you; growth as achievement of unity within diversity versus imbalance of elements of the self
      2. Ideal membership organizations and communities are characterized by democracy, power equality, open communication, fair deliberations versus non democratic and manipulative organizations
         a. Members develop large selves versus narrow selves
         b. Members develop role-taking propensities and abilities versus no development
      3. Ideally global context includes universalization of empathy and spread of social intelligence

10. How are issues of diversity, color and shading addressed?
    a. Society includes multiple symbolic communities with distinctive languages and perspectives
    b. Cultural pluralism is valued and difference respective
    c. Dedicated to promoting harmony and understanding across nations

11. What would be Added or Deleted?
    a. Social worker with dual membership (agency, helping group)
    b. Time shifting beyond present (life histories to portray past and projected self to imagine the future)

IX. The Limits of Applied Symbolic Interactionism: A Social Work Appraisal
    A. Too little attention to large social structures
    B. Naïve about social inequity
    C. Failed to develop theories scientifically and operationalize concepts
    D. Little application

X. An Interactionist Model for Work with the Chronically Depressed
   A. Interactionist conception of the problem: Depression associated with ambiguity about the meaning of the condition, the meaning of the proposed remedies. Depression a feature of individualized societies that limit connections among members
   B. Interactionist Assessment: appraisal of problems in sense making related the label of depressed person, the value of advice from medical experts, the recommended treatments, and the responsibility of the depressed person for his or her plight
   C. Interactionist Intervention: a mutual aid group where members deliberate about possible meanings, generate new and alternative definitions of the 4 problems in sense making, and help members choose the meanings that are most useful and affirming