



## **THE IMPACT OF SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM ON RESEARCH STUDIES ABOUT COMMUNICATION SCIENCE**

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Symbolic Interactionism studies have their roots grounded in thought schools based on George Herbert Mead's, Behaviorism, Darwinism and Pragmatism. Sociologist Herbert Blumer linked Mead's social psychological approach to sociology and depicted Symbolic Interactionism as a pragmatic method to interpret social interactions. Symbolic interaction is a process shaped through individual behaviors and it is conveyed and interpreted symbolically with the help of daily actions. During the interpersonal interaction process, Symbolic Interactionism studies that concentrate on the origin and interpretation of the meaning, establish a foundation for communication science studies. While Symbolic Interactionism studies are guiding in explaining interpersonal communication processes, however their limited focus on interpersonal communication restrict the research perspective. In addition to this, the potential of Symbolic Interactionism to analyze and explain "individualized mass media" communication studies such as social media, which enable interaction, may be also discussed. Within this framework, this study aims to present the ground set by Symbolic Interactionism for communication science studies and to discuss its analysis potential for other current studies conducted.

**Keywords:** Symbolic interactionism, Cultural studies, Interpersonal communication, Individualized mass communication.

### **Introduction**

Symbolic interactionism is based on the work of Herbert Mead (1880;1969), a philosopher and social psychologist. Mead's work supports behaviorism, Darwinism and pragmatism. In Mead's (1880;1969), social and philosophical approach, humans should be analyzed by looking at their actions. He considers communication as an important factor in the social development of humans and thinks that interaction is realized through symbols. Herbert Blumer (1973), a sociologist, establishes the relationship between sociology and social psychological approach, and considers symbolic interactionism as a pragmatic method to interpret social interactions.

According to symbolic interactionism human actions have three premises (Blumer, 1973: 80 ff). The meanings of objects determine human actions. The meanings of objects are formed in social interactions through social process. Humans do not only receive meanings, they also shape, change and create them. This depends on interpretation. Symbolic interpretation is shaped by individual behavior, transmitted

symbolically by daily acts and interpreted accordingly. Meanings are not pre-given. They are formed in social interactions and interpreted accordingly. According to this framework, social interactionism implies a dynamic network formed through social interaction, and order is established and changed within this network.

This study discusses the fundamental role symbolic interactionism plays in communication studies and to determine its explanatory power in contemporary communication studies. It also examines symbolic interactionism's explanatory power in individualized mass media such as social media.

### **The Effect of Action Theory on Social Interaction**

Thinkers (Mead,1969; Blumer,1973), of social interactionism who emphasize the concept of action use Max Weber's (1978 [1922]), definition of social action. According to Weber social action implies an inclination towards others' action to which people attach a meaning. Social relations emerge when actors initiate a mutual relation and consider each other as a point of interest. Thinkers (Mead,1969; Blumer,1973) of social interactionism developed Weber's (1978 [1922]), approach by focusing on the meaning of social action, and it was supposed that those who act create the meaning of their actions mutually and recognize a common situation.

According to Blumer (1973:86), human groups are formed of individuals and it is only action that creates a society. He showed that those who act tend towards interaction, and through actions people produce common symbols by approving, arranging and redefining them. Thus, interaction is defined by a mutual change of interpretation. Interaction is mutual change, the ground of socialization.

Action theories consider individual actions shaped by culture and society as the basic category of social sciences. Communication requires establishing relationships with others. Therefore, it implies a social relation. The relationship between media and individual, television and its reception are social actions. The use of television, or more broadly, media provides a connection with a communicative event or fact. As a result, instrumental relations with things emerge on the one hand, and interpersonal communicative action on the other. Living, thinking, and particularly, communicating are forms of a general social action theory. Action theories have an important place in communication studies, because action is the ground from which the creation and development of cultural and social reality originates (Krotz, 2008:30; Krotz,2007:57).

Unlike other social sciences, symbolic interactionism focuses on the concept of action instead of culture, class and power. Accordingly, behaviorism, Darwinism, pragmatism, as well as Weber's (1978 [1922]), action theory contributed to the development of social interactionism as a theoretical perspective in communication studies.

### **The Differences and Complementariness between Symbolic Interactionism and Cultural Studies**

In symbolic interactionism, social production implies a creativity produced in mutual relations. Accordingly, symbolic interactionism affects the approach of cultural studies. Cultural Studies focuses on different fields of research on different continents and in different countries and can be traced back to the field expressed as the critical theory in the past in the US and England (Winter,2009: 67). In the tradition of English Cultural Studies, the concept of politics denotes the constellation of conflicts and power and aims at the recognition of power symmetries, cultural identities, lifestyles, and differences. For this reason, it shifts its point of focus from politics to social and cultural fields such as class, race, sect, gender, elderliness and the politics of lifestyles, fields of consumption, and family types. English Cultural Studies tends towards correlating theory with politics, coding with decoding, cultural identity, gender, and racism with media (Hall,2002;1998a;1998b). American Cultural Studies (Fiske, 1997; Grossberg, 2000;1999a;1999b; 1996) tends towards the culture of visual and audio media as the sign systems of popular culture and the bearer of collective ideology. In this context, it has been determined that studies focusing on culture, sexuality, and media phenomena are being conducted with an explicit methodology

within the scope of human sciences that are becoming more and more important in the tradition of Anglo-Saxon Cultural Studies. In Cultural Studies conducted in German-speaking countries, the studies on communication science, media studies (Hepp et al., 2009; Hepp, 2006; Winter, 1999), reception context (Göttlich & Winter, 1999) and gender research (Klaus, 2004; Lünenborg, 1996) are becoming important.

Cultural Studies operating beyond disciplines without a theoretical design, method, and assessment method makes use of or discovers the tools of other scientific disciplines. Clarity, textuality, and heterogeneity are essential for research direction. The context of consciousness and difference reception conditions of various scientific disciplines brings about the comprehension of Cultural Studies itself as a political project and intellectual praxis. In this perspective, knowledge production is understood as a theory, a strategy and a tool to shift from context to concrete state and to benefit from that (Lutter & Reisenleitner, 2008: 14-15). Cultural Studies, as an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary project, has its roots in social and cultural scientific approaches, however it has distanced itself from history, sociology, literature, and traditional science of culture research since its emergence. Thus, Cultural Studies is accepted as a basic anti-disciplinary and anti-methodological program.

As a lifestyle located historically and contextually, cultural understanding raised interest in studies of popular culture and subculture. The distinction between high culture and popular culture is the expression of social power relations. In this context, the hierarchical structure of the concepts of high culture, daily culture, or popular culture is not foreseen. Specific culture is tended towards in different social, ethnic, age, and gender contexts. Cultural Studies places the concepts of entertainment and pleasure within its basic research subjects in the production of daily culture, and creates effective media receptor by locating the concept of entertainment in opposition to the concept of ideology and comprehending the experience of entertainment as a resistance to the dominant ideology. Cultural studies refuses the notion of a passive consumer, and promotes instead the image of a consumer who can effectively use media in daily life and read media texts in multiple ways (Hall, 2002; Fiske, 1997). If there are social or historical differences between producer and consumer, different codes are required by media texts. Media communication is always characterized by changes of interpretation and includes, to a certain extent, a multiple structure (Hall, 2002:105 ff). This way, by moving further from Frankfurt School's passive and injudicious consumer design, the design of a receptor that can effectively benefit from the media in daily life and can perform multiple reading of media texts gains importance.

Symbolic interactionism and cultural studies both make effective individual designs. However, they focus on different concepts. Cultural studies, contrary to symbolic interactionism, mostly ignore the creativity and openness of human actions due to its strong relation with the structural version of semiology. Symbolic interactionism creates important problems for the idea of symbols and signs in semiology (MacCannell, 1986:161 ff; Harman, 1986:147 ff).

Symbolic interactionism considers the individual as a subject with a social position on the one hand. It defines the individual as the designer of a contextual and communicative identity on the other hand. However, cultural studies emphasize constantly changing social descriptions, reproduction of culture and society, and power and hegemony. The structural and cognitive approach of cultural studies are harshly criticized, while symbolic interactionism is regarded as ignoring social power structures and excessively emphasizing context. Moreover, it is possible to combine action and context oriented approach of symbolic interactionism and structure oriented communication approach of cultural studies in a complementary fashion (Krotz, 2007:81-82).

Unlike symbolic interactionism, which does not emphasize the power relations in interpersonal interaction, cultural studies brings a critical approach to authority, provides a political analysis of power relations and social struggle and explores how power structures determine world views. Yet, cultural studies do not sufficiently discuss the economic structures that have an important role in power relations.

### **New Communication Technologies and Forms**

With the development of communication and media technologies, new communication forms emerges. Transformations of communication implies change in personal communication forms, personalized mass

communication and relations with interactive mass media. Besides the traditional media, new communicative environments and forms based on the integration of traditional media and new media arise.

Symbolic interactionism had a great role in making interactionism a prominent concept in communication studies. The concept of interactionism comes to the fore with the new media. Despite some handicaps, the dialectical structure of new media promotes interaction and active participation. Thus, reader becomes writer, and writer becomes reader.

The new media—with services such as e-mail, chat, mobile phone and SMS—changes interpersonal communication. It creates new interpersonal communication habits. With contemporary technological developments, media goes beyond the erstwhile technical, social and cultural limits to attain a mode of communication with high communicative potential and computerized message transmission. The removal of the barriers of space and time and of limitations related to social context allows the new media to be used in daily life. The spaces used in the new media intersect. This removes the limitations arising from separate media channels, and it signals the integration of communication forms and functions that were performed separately until now (Krotz, 2008:42; 2007:95-96).

Given that media communication is a modification of face-to-face communication among people, it can be stated that communication occurs on the basis of participants' conditions and roles just as it does face-to-face communication. Every understanding depends on the reception of imaginary roles and perspectives, and when something is said or understood every media communication accompanies an internal dialogue. Hence, media communication is form of symbolic action and a modification of interaction (Krotz,2007:86). Accordingly, new media technologies that widen the scope of interaction offer new perspectives in the analysis of personal and collective communicative action.

## **Conclusion**

Symbolic interactionism focuses on group interaction, psychology and internal dynamics of social actions. This micro-theoretical approach (Mead,1969;Blumer,1973) differs from macro theories (Marx, (2009 [1975]); 2009; Parsons, 1967) which aim to explore society holistically.

The functionalist theory developed by Durkheim and Parsons considers society as an organic and structured entity which has an independent life, whereas Marxism puts social struggle at the center of social change. Symbolic interactionism focuses on the micro dynamics of society, daily life, the ways in which people interact with each other through symbolic interaction and how people create order and meaning (Slattery,2007:333 ff). Traditional and linear communication theories focus on the transmission of communication, whereas Mead (1969), recognizes a self-conscious subject, and by emphasizing interaction he prioritizes the role of mutual harmony in communication. Mead's emphasis on harmony in communication has a leading role in new communication theories.

Both action theories and cultural studies make use of symbolic interactionism, reconstruct its legacy and have explanatory power in the analysis of communicative process. Action theories conceive of an active individual who confronts structures in its analysis of the new interactions generated by the development and transformation of communication and media technologies. Similarly, cultural studies assume a productive individual in interaction, who creates meaning through interpretation.

Hence, symbolic interactionism studies (Mead,1969;Blumer,1973) that focus on the emergence and interpretation of meaning have a leading role in the analysis of interpersonal communication. However, a limitation of these studies is that they only focus on interpersonal communication. They have a restricted scope to explore mass communications.

Moreover, new communication forms emerge alongside the previous ones. Previous communication forms change. New possibilities for use, situations, contexts and communication forms become combined in human action. These include not only technical possibilities, but also the social spaces of daily life. As a result, increasingly more people become engaged in new communication tools and environments. The

internet brings new conditions of micro-social communication and new rules of interpersonal communication (Krotz,2007:99-100).

Unlike traditional media, new media is a tool that offers new communication environments and choices. It allows people with different interests to avail themselves of new communication tools. However, confrontation and interaction in new media cause a safety problem that does not exist in face-to-face communication. In new media, people do not meet each other bodily in a real space, thus it is not always possible to get accurate personal information about people. People represent themselves in new media with identities they create as they wish. The relationship between the public and the private change since interpersonal communication is not limited to face-to-face encounters, and traditional and new media become integrated.

Accordingly, symbolic interactionism, action theories and cultural studies can contribute to theorizing the complex structure of interactive digital media technologies. Symbolic interactionism, along with the perspectives action theories and cultural studies provide, have an explanatory power in the analysis of personalized mass communications such as social media. By widening its scope from microanalysis focused on interpersonal interaction to mass communication, symbolic interactionism can also provide a theoretical perspective for macroanalysis.

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