



Block 2

Perspectives in Sociology-II

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UNIT 5 INTERPRETIVE SOCIOLOGY*

Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 Meaning and Definition
- 5.3 Differences Between Interpretive and Positivist Sociology
- 5.4 Origins of Interpretive Sociology
 - 5.4.1 Max Weber
- 5.5 Branches of Interpretive Sociology
 - 5.5.1 Symbolic Interactionism
 - 5.5.1.1 The Contributions of George Herbert Mead
 - 5.5.1.2 The Contributions of Herbert Blumer
 - 5.5.2 Dramaturgy
 - 5.5.3 Phenomenology
 - 5.5.4 Ethnomethodology
- 5.6 Limitations of Interpretive Sociology
- 5.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.8 References

5.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you should be able to:

- Discuss the meaning and nature of Interpretive Sociology;
- Know the key differences between Interpretive Sociology and Positivism;
- Describe Max Weber's contribution to the approach;
- Acquaint with other branches of Interpretive Sociology; and
- Identify the limits of Interpretive Sociology.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit is divided into five sections. In brief, section 3 gives a general picture meaning and nature of interpretive sociology. Section 4 lists the major differences between positivism or positivist sociology and interpretivism or interpretive sociology. Section 5 discusses the contribution of Max Weber to the field of interpretive sociology, and finally, section 6 gives an overall sketch of the branches of interpretive sociology; with an overview of the thinkers, their central ideas and some of their important works. It concludes with a discussion on the limitations of this approach and finally concludes with a summary of the key ideas.

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5.2 MEANING AND DEFINITION

Interpretive sociology focuses on the meanings people attach to their social world. It shows that reality is constructed by people themselves in their daily lives. Since sociology was founded as a discipline in the 19th century by the French philosopher Auguste Comte, the study of society has developed in several different ways. The early rise of sociology was deeply rooted in positivist philosophy favoured by Comte, which relied on scientific methods and techniques to study society. Interpretive sociology developed as an alternative to positivism.

Interpretive Sociology can be defined as the study of society that focuses on discovering the meanings that people attach to their social world. In sociology, the study of interpretive sociology, occupies central importance. This can also be loosely defined as ‘understanding’, rooted in the concept *Verstehen* (German term which means ‘empathic understanding of human behaviour’). It is an approach that centres the importance of meaning and action when studying social behaviour and interactions. This approach diverges from positivistic sociology by recognizing that the subjective experiences, beliefs, and behaviour of people are intrinsic aspects of what we observe or in other words there is no such thing as a purely objective phenomenon. In simple words, this approach tells us that in order to study and understand society and social phenomena, we must ‘enter or step into the shoes of the other’ and nothing can be understood from the outside. Let us look at the following example in order to understand this concept and thereby this approach in a better and easier way. Look at Box 1 for an example.

Box-1

Interpretive sociology employs rational understanding of motivations. Max Weber (1978) suggested that we understand ‘the chopping of wood’ or ‘aiming of a gun’ in terms of motive. We know that the woodchopper is working for a wage; for his own use or possibly is doing it for recreation. But he might also be working through a fit of rage (an irrational case).

Similarly we understand the motive of a person aiming a gun if we know that he has been commanded to shoot as a member of a firing squad, that he is fighting against an enemy, or that he is doing it for revenge (Weber, 1978: 8-9).

Activity 1

Read carefully the example in BOX 1 on the central idea of *verstehen*. Discuss with your friends or family members about this and see if you can draw similar examples from your everyday life. Compare your notes, if possible, with notes of other students at your Study Centre.

5.3 DIFFERENCES BETWEEN POSITIVIST AND INTERPRETIVE SOCIOLOGY

Positivist and interpretive sociology have their own and unique standards for observing and drawing conclusions about human behaviour in a social context. Let us look at some of the differences between them in the following table:

Table 5.1

Positivist	Interpretive
1. The concept of positivism was developed by the French sociologists Auguste Comte and Emile Durkheim, modelled along natural or rational sciences- physics or chemistry.	Interpretive sociology was initiated by German sociologist Max Weber and developed by Georg Simmel and others.
2. Positivist sociology aims to understand social institutions by relying on observation and knowledge or facts.	Interpretive sociology aims to understand the meaning behind actions through the subject's position within a system of meanings
3. Positivist sociology sees an objective reality 'out there'.	Interpretive sociology sees reality as being constructed by people according to their own understanding of the phenomenon.
4. Positivist sociology makes use of quantitative methods and data.	Interpretive sociology relies on qualitative methods and data.

5.4 ORIGINS OF INTERPRETIVE SOCIOLOGY

5.4.1 Max Weber

The origins of this approach lie in the contributions of the early twentieth century German Sociologist, Max Weber (1864-1920). Weber's rich legacy of sociological writings includes works on sociology of religion as well as on society, economics, politics and government. Some of the notable ones are *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904), *The Religion of India: the Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism* (1958) and *Economy and Society* (1978). He wrote extensively on many subjects but focused on developing an interpretive sociology of social action and of power and domination (Aron, 1967; Bendix, 1960). Another major concern of Weber was the process of rationalisation in modern society and the relationship of the various religions of the world with this process. His approach to sociology can be seen as an attempt to compromise with positivism and its aims to create a scientific sociology (Bilton et al., 1981). Weber defined sociology as a "science which attempts the interpretive understanding of social action in order thereby to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effects" (Weber, 1964: 88). Here social action needs to be understood as reciprocally oriented action which is intentional, meaningful and symbolic. In contemporary sociology, we can say that the term refers to as interaction.

As we have discussed earlier in this unit, Weber introduced a key methodological concept called *verstehen* which means comprehending or understanding on the level of meaning. Weber believed that this aspect lent an advantage to the social sciences over the natural sciences. While, in the natural sciences we can only observe and generalize; in social sciences, we can understand the actions and

comprehend the subjective intentions of the actors also (Abraham, 2015: 17). As a result, it makes for a scientific study of social behaviour in two ways: on one hand, it allows us to directly observe and understand the meaning of actions. On the other hand, it facilitates an understanding of the underlying motive. When a chemist studies the properties of a particular substance, he does so from the outside. When a sociologist tries to understand human society and culture, he approaches it as an insider, or a participant. Being human, the social scientist has access to the motives and feelings of his or her subject matter. Social scientists can understand human action by probing the subjective meanings that actors attach to their own behaviour as well as that of others. Sociological understanding is thus qualitatively different from that of other (natural) sciences.

Weber points out that a natural scientist understands natural phenomena from the outside. But by using the method of *verstehen*, the sociologist should be able to and should visualise the motivations of the actor by trying to interpret feelings through the understanding of the situation. We can understand that Weber's contribution to this approach was supreme as he attempted to fuse the concept of social action with scientific sociological explanation. And this was only possible through the use of *verstehen* (interpretive understanding). This is the process by which the sociologist attempts to gain access to the meaning of action for the actor. For Weber, action is defined as subjectively meaningful human behaviour. He also emphasizes on the 'motive' present in the mind of the actor as the 'cause' of the act.

Weber argued that the overall objective of the social sciences was to develop an 'interpretive understanding of social action'. Since the central concern of the social sciences was with social action and since human actions necessarily involved subjective meanings, the methods of enquiry of social science also had to be different from the methods of natural science. For Weber, 'social action' included all human behaviour that was meaningful, that is, action to which actors attached a meaning. In studying social action the sociologist's task was to recover the meanings attributed by the actor. To accomplish this task the sociologist had to put themselves in the actor's place, and imagine what these meanings were or could have been, known as an empathetic understanding.

Raymond Aron (1967) discusses the same with the following example: one can understand why the driver stops in front of a red light; He or She does not need to observe how often drivers regularly stop before red lights in order to understand why they do it. This is because the subjective meaning of the actions of others is often immediately comprehensive in daily life (Aron, 1971: 191). It was precisely for these reasons that Weber argued, the overall objective of the social sciences was to develop an 'interpretive understanding of social action'. He wanted to develop and express that these sciences were thus very different from the natural sciences, which aimed to discover the objective 'laws of nature' governing the physical world. He also believed that the primary concern of social sciences was with social action, which involved subjective meanings. Thus, the methods of social sciences also had to differ from those of the natural sciences.

Weber also wanted to establish an alternative approach (to positivism) as it would focus on understanding subjective experience and not be merely based on observation or adherence to facts. As a result, the perceived facts that are inherent to the positivist observational method can take on an entirely new meaning from

the perspectives of different individuals. Weber persistently emphasized the role of interpretation in the cultural and social sciences. He also underlined that, social scientists should never be content to just understand the ‘rules’ of a society but they must ‘interpret’ and ‘explain’ the actions and beliefs of social agents.

Another key contributor to this approach has been Georg Simmel, who was a contemporary of Max Weber. He was a very popular early sociologist and has also been recognized as a major developer of interpretive sociology. Weber and Simmel both recognized that the positivistic approach was not able to capture all social phenomena, nor was it able to fully explain why all social phenomena occur.

Check Your Progress

- 1) Describe in about two lines what is meant by *verstehen*.

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- 2) List three differences between positivist sociology and interpretive sociology?

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- 3) Discuss in about five lines Max Weber’s contribution to interpretive sociology.

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5.5 BRANCHES OF INTERPRETIVE SOCIOLOGY

Interpretive approach has given rise to diverse theoretical traditions of sociology under the general category of social constructionist approach. Some of the prominent ones are symbolic interactionism, dramaturgy, phenomenology and ethnomethodology. The notion of the social construction of reality lies at the heart of symbolic interactionist perspective Anthony Giddens describes the study of everyday life as telling us how humans can act creatively to shape reality and that social behaviour is guided to some extent by forces such as roles, norms and shared expectations. He further tells us that individuals perceive reality differently according to their backgrounds, interests and motivations. In other

words, reality is not fixed or static – it is created through human interactions. (Giddens, 2006: 130).

Wallace and Wolf suggest (1995: 183-184) that the forerunners and direct contributors to the symbolic interactionist perspective include Georg Simmel and Robert Park; However, Max Weber's contribution and emphasis on the importance of *Verstehen* (interpretive understanding or subjective meaning) for understanding social life was most important. It also demonstrated Weber's ability to bridge 'macro' and 'micro' perspectives. In the following sub-sections, brief overviews of the interactionist perspectives will be discussed, in order to understand how and why these theoretical traditions are integral to interpretive sociology. Let us begin with symbolic interactionism.

5.5.1 Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism has been one of the most significant sociological perspectives from North America. It traces its roots to the philosopher George Herbert Mead. The sociologists who developed this perspective further include Herbert Blumer and Erving Goffman. George Herbert Mead is known as the founding father of this perspective; although the perspective was named and popularized by his student, Herbert Blumer. While the symbolic interaction perspective is generally associated with Mead, it was Herbert Blumer who took Mead's ideas and developed them into a more systematic sociological approach. Blumer coined the term symbolic interactionism. Blumerian symbolic interactionism is often referred to as the 'Chicago School of Symbolic Interactionism'.

Some of the main features include study of interactions, interpretation of action and the social construction of the self. M Francis Abraham (2015) contends that Symbolic interactionism is a "social-psychological perspective that is particularly relevant to sociology. Instead of dealing with abstract social structures, or concrete forms of individual behaviour, symbolic interactionism focuses on the nature of interaction, the patterns of social action and social relationship" (Abraham, 2015: 36).

5.5.1.1 The Contributions of George Herbert Mead

According to George Herbert Mead socialisation depends upon the child's understanding of others' views as important in her/his life. Mead (1972) stresses upon two stages in the development of the self: the stages of 'play' and the

Box-2

Example of Mead's development of 'Self':

Children's play gradually develops from simple imitation to difficult games where a child of four or five years old will enact the role of an adult. For example, children are often found imitating the classroom situation where one becomes the teacher, the others become students and they enact a classroom teaching session. Most children locally refer to this play as 'Teacher-Teacher'.

Another similar act of play is that of 'Doctor-Patient' where children imitate the role of a doctor, nurse and patient and try to enact a situation where a patient goes to the doctor for treatment.

‘game’ are important in the development of the self. Most importantly, both the stages are dependent on interaction patterns. Mead says that, in the ‘play’ stage, the child simply assumes one role after another of persons and animals that have in some way or other entered into its life. However, in the game stage, one has become all of the others implicated in the common activity— must have within one’s self the whole organised activity in order to successfully play one’s own part. The person here has not merely assumed the role of a specific other, but of any other participating in the common activity; he has generalised the attitude of role-taking (Mead, 1972: xxiv).

In doing so, Mead introduced the concepts of ‘generalised other’ and ‘significant other’. ‘Generalised other’ can be understood as those rules and values of the culture of a particular group in which the child is engaged. By understanding the ‘generalised other’ the child is able to understand what kind of manners is expected as well as valued in any social setting. ‘Significant other’ consists of those persons who are of importance in the child’s life and affect her/his understanding of self along with the child’s emotions and behaviours. Hence, while Mead lays the foundations of symbolic interactionism, his student, Herbert Blumer popularized the perspective. Let us look at his contributions in detail in the following paragraphs.

5.5.1.2 The contributions of Herbert Blumer

Herbert Blumer (1969) suggests that symbolic interactionism is based on three main premises. First of all, it is based on the premise that human beings act towards things on the basis of meanings that those things or objects have for them. Such things may include physical objects such as trees or chairs; or human beings such as friends or enemies; or even institutions such as school or a government building. The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from the social interaction that one has with one’s fellows. The third premise is that these meanings are modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters (Blumer, 1969: 2). Hence, symbolic interactionism views meaning as having a different source than those held by the two dominant views just considered. Instead, it sees meaning as arising in the process of interaction between people.

To summarise, the core of Blumer’s approach can be captured in his three propositions: first, humans act toward people and things based upon the meanings that they have given to those people or things. Second, language gives humans a means by which to negotiate meaning through symbols. Third, thought modifies each individual’s interpretation of symbols. Thus people define situations in different ways depending on their life experiences and perspectives. This means that for symbolic interactionists, interpretation becomes the key.

Hence, Blumer contends that we are indebted to George Herbert Mead for the most penetrating analysis of social interaction. While Mead identifies two forms or levels of social interaction in human society which he refers to as ‘the conversation of gestures’ and ‘the use of significant symbols’; Blumer understands these terms as ‘non-symbolic interaction’ and ‘symbolic interaction’. Blumer further says that ‘non-symbolic interaction’ takes place when one responds directly to the action of another without interpreting that action; whereas, ‘symbolic interaction’ involves interpretation of the action. Let us understand

this with the help of an example. Blumer suggests that, ‘non-symbolic interaction’ is observed in reflex responses, for instance in the case of a boxer who automatically raises his arm to parry a blow. However, if the boxer were reflectively to identify the forthcoming blow from his opponent as a feint designed to trap him, he would be engaging in symbolic interaction (Blumer, 1969: 8-9). Thus, more importantly, and bringing back Weber, we can understand that the significance of symbolic interactionism lies in the fact that, it involves reflection and interpretation of the action.

5.5.2 Dramaturgy

Apart from Blumer’s popularising of the symbolic interactionist approach, another major contributor to this perspective was Erving Goffman. He made a distinctive contribution by popularising a particular type of interactionist method known as the dramaturgical approach. The dramaturgical approach also derives from the interpretive approach and it compares the everyday life to the setting of a drama – a theatre or a stage. M Francis Abraham attests that, “The dramaturgical approach is the study of social interaction as though participants are actors in a play in a theatre....hence; social behaviour becomes analogous to theatrical drama (Abraham, 2015: 98).

Box-3

Example

During a class or an examination, we may feel the need to project a serious image; however, at a party, it may seem important to look relaxed and not appear serious in order to please others.

This approach, popularised by Goffman is based on the following premises. Just as actors act in front of us and present to us certain visuals or images, we individuals also like to present certain qualities of our personalities in front of the outside world; while we like to hide some of them.

The example (Box-3) suggests that Goffman’s primary focus has been to understand the process of impression management. Hence, individuals not only present themselves to each other in a presentable manner, but also attempt to manage the image they present. This aspect gives an important dimension to dramaturgy. That is, it assumes that ‘all the world is a stage’ and that people manage their acts in face to face interactions. In a way, it also gives a complex dimension to the action perspective. If we are to understand the meanings of actions as Weber postulated, it would be necessary to deeply and subjectively involve ourselves during interactions, in order to gauge whether an individual is engaging in the act of impression management.

Hence, Bilton et al., (1981) suggest that the symbolic interactionist perspective as an action perspective has been widely influential especially in the study of small-scale interaction, personality development and deviant behaviour. The work of Mead stresses the social construction of the self to the exclusion of the biological and instinctual elements. A classic study adopting this perspective is Goffman’s work *Asylums* (1961) in which he looks at the career and social situation of mental patients and other inmates in their respective confining institutions. Therefore, after having understood the importance of symbolic interactionism with respect to interpretive sociology, we will now look at two other approaches, phenomenology and ethnomethodology.

5.5.3 Phenomenology

Phenomenological sociology has largely developed out of the works of Alfred Schutz, who is best known for *The Phenomenology of the Social World* (1967). Schutz suggests that in the course of our action, we employ assumptions about society and how it works and we use *verstehen* in a crude way to predict the action of others. As a result, our acts are ‘meaningful’ not because we have a particular intention or motive, but because other actors interpret our action as having symbolic significance. It is said that the phenomenological perspective take the interpretive approach, initially developed by Max Weber and later on by other thinkers, to the extreme.

This perspective further says that our reality consists just of meanings; therefore the job of the sociologist is to discover the meanings of actions and behaviour and nothing else. In popularizing this approach, Schutz uses the philosophy of Edmund Husserl in order to critique Max Weber’s methodology. He does this in order to construct a radical account of the nature of social action. In Schutz’s view, Weber failed to give any real account of the way in which actions can only be constructed by drawing upon a shared set of social concepts, symbols and meanings.

Phenomenological sociology is the study of the formal structures of concrete social existence as made available in and through the analytical description of acts of intentional consciousness. The object of such an analysis is the meaningful lived world of everyday life or ‘*life-world*’. Bilton et al., (1981: 739-40) suggest that, symbolic interactionists acknowledged shared definitions and stressed upon symbolic communication through language. Therefore, Schutz developed this perspective in order to basically suggest that, we individuals act successfully only when all share the same set of meanings. Thus, in many ways we can understand this approach as a departure from the conventional model of interpretive sociology.

Just like Weber, Schutz believed that social research differs from research in the physical sciences and that people engage in making sense of the world. In interacting with other fellows, we are seeking to make sense of their sense-making. What distinguishes the social sciences is that the social scientist assumes the position of the disinterested observer. He or she is not involved in the life of those observed – their activities are not of any practical interest, but only of cognitive interest. Here, shared meanings and common knowledge gains importance as opposed to the Weberian model, wherein only individual subjective experiences were given primary significance.

5.5.4 Ethnomethodology

In this final sub-section, we will discuss the ethnomethodological approach. Although the term ethnomethodology appears long and confusing, once we break the term into two, the meaning becomes very simple. The term ethnomethodology was coined by Harold Garfinkel who is best known for his work *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (1967). ‘Ethno’ refers to the stock of common sense knowledge available to members of society; ‘methodology’ refers to the strategies which actors use in different settings to make their meanings understandable. Ethnomethodology is a perspective within sociology which focuses on the way people make sense of their everyday world. In this regard, Garfinkel attests that,

“Ethnomethodological studies analyze everyday activities as members’ methods for making those same activities visibly rational and reportable for all practical purposes” (Garfinkel, 1967: vii).

People are seen as rational actors, but employ practical reasoning rather than formal logic to make sense of and function in society. It refers to the analysis of the ways in which we actively make sense of what others mean by what they say and do. Much of our everyday interaction occurs through informal conversations with others. Garfinkel analysed these conversations. He showed how these conversations are based on shared understandings and knowledge. He refers to these shared understandings and knowledge as ‘background expectancies’. The theory argues that human society is entirely dependent on these methods of achieving and displaying understanding.

Although this approach was developed by Garfinkel, it is based on Schutz’s phenomenological reconstruction of Max Weber’s interpretive sociology. Bilton et al., (1981) have attested that, ethnomethodologists work from Schutz’s claim that the social world is produced and reproduced by the practical actions of actors, on the basis of taken for granted assumptions. Thus, most importantly, ethnomethodology has its roots in the fusion of symbolic interactionism and phenomenology.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) Describe in about two lines what is meant by dramaturgy.
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- ii) List three key features of symbolic interactionism.
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- iii) Discuss in about three lines Alfred Schutz’s contribution to phenomenology.
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5.6 LIMITATIONS OF INTERPRETIVE SOCIOLOGY

Interpretive sociology has various limitations. The major ones are:

- It is possible that observation may be influenced by personal bias.
- Direct observation also requires prior knowledge of the culture being studied.
- It assumes that people in society consider their actions to be rational, which may not always be the case.
- It also has been regarded as an inadequate account of action since it remains excessively individualistic.

5.7 LET US SUM UP

Interpretive theory is more accepting of free will and sees human behaviour as the outcome of the subjective interpretation of the environment. Interpretive theory focuses on the actor's definition of the situation in which they act. Although symbolic interactionism traces its origins to Max Weber's assertion that individuals act according to their interpretation of the meaning of their world, the American philosopher George Herbert Mead introduced this perspective to American sociology. Symbolic interactionism is a major framework of sociological theory. This perspective relies on the symbolic meaning that people develop and rely upon in the process of social interaction. The notion of the social construction of reality lies at the heart of symbolic interactionist perspective.

MODEL ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Describe in about two lines what is meant by *verstehen*.

Answer: Verstehen can be defined as 'understanding'. It is a German term which means 'empathic understanding of human behaviour'. It is an approach that centres the importance of meaning and action when studying social trends and problems.

- ii) List three differences between positivist sociology and interpretive sociology.

Answer: The concept of positivism was developed by the French sociologists Auguste Comte and Emile Durkheim, modelled along natural or rational sciences- physics or chemistry. Whereas, interpretive sociology developed through the work of German sociologist Max Weber.

Positivist sociology aims to understand social institutions by relying on observation and knowledge or facts. On the other hand, interpretive sociology aims to understand the meaning behind actions through the subject's unique point of view.

Positivist sociology sees an objective reality 'out there'. Whereas, interpretive sociology sees reality as being constructed by people.

- iii) Discuss in about five lines Max Weber's contribution to interpretive sociology.

Answer: Weber believed that interpretive sociology or understanding lent an advantage to the social sciences over the natural sciences. He also points out that a natural scientist understands natural phenomena from the outside. But by using the method of *verstehen*, the sociologist can be able to and should visualise the motivations of the actor by trying to interpret feelings and the understanding of the situation. We can understand that Weber's contribution to this approach was supreme as he attempted to fuse the concept of social action with scientific sociological explanation. And this was only possible through the use of *verstehen*.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) Describe in about two lines what is meant by dramaturgy.

Answer: Popularised by Erving Goffman, this approach is based on the following premise that, just as actors act in front of us and present to us certain visuals or images, we individuals also like to present certain qualities of our personalities in front of the outside world; while we like to hide some of them.

- ii) List three key features of symbolic interactionism.

Answer: While the symbolic interaction perspective is generally associated with George Herbert Mead, it was Herbert Blumer who took Mead's ideas and developed them into a more systematic sociological approach.

Instead of dealing with abstract social structures, or concrete forms of individual behaviour, symbolic interactionism focuses on the nature of interaction, the patterns of social action and social relationship.

For symbolic interactionists, interpretation becomes the key tool for analysis.

- iii) Discuss in about three lines Alfred Schutz's contribution to phenomenology.

Answer: Phenomenological sociology has largely developed out of the works of Alfred Schutz, who is best known for *The Phenomenology of the Social World* (1967). Schutz suggests that in the course of our action, we employ assumptions about society and how it works and we use *verstehen* in a crude way to predict the action of others. As a result, our acts are 'meaningful' not because we have a particular intention or motive, but because other actors interpret our action as having symbolic significance.

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UNIT 6 SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM*

Structure

- 6.0 Objectives
- 6.1 Introduction
- 6.2 George Herbert Mead: Basic Concepts
- 6.3 The Emergence of Symbolic Interactionism
- 6.4 Other Schools of Thought
- 6.5 Erving Goffman and the Dramaturgical Approach
- 6.6 Recent Studies
- 6.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 6.8 References

6.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to understand:

- In this Unit the student will be introduced to the school of Symbolic Interactionism that dates back to the early 20th Century but has its relevance even in the Post Modern Era;
- The classical base of the theory and the early thinkers;
- The Various Schools of Thought within this school;
- Its more recent applications; and
- Its relevance for future research.

6.1 INTRODUCTION

Sociology developed as a discipline in the early 20th Century with the predominance of the Structural School in which social behaviour was viewed as emanating from the rules and norms set by the overall social structure. Sociology, with its evolutionary and functional framework was thus a discipline with a macro perspective. Symbolic Interactionism with its roots in Behavioural Psychology of the late nineteenth century ushered in a micro perspective in contrast. Instead of viewing individuals as constrained and moulded by society and its norms, it preferred to examine how individual behaviour creates relationships and to view the individual and society relationship in reciprocal fashion. Individuals were importantly seen as both subjects and agents and not merely as objects.

The concept of social roles and statuses was supplemented by the concepts of self and consciousness. Social personhood was seen as a process and not simply as a given. Thus with symbolic interactionism, a dynamic and processual methodology was introduced into sociology as well as a notion of social psychology. Unlike Durkheim who wished to explain social facts only by social facts, the Symbolic Interactionists allowed psychological considerations to enter

into their concepts of individual, self and society. Instead of just discussing about how society affects individual behaviour, symbolic interactionists worked up from below trying to find out how individuals make sense of the society and find meanings in what they do.

George Herbert Mead, an early twentieth century thinker, a social psychologist and philosopher, is regarded as the founder of this school of thought even though he never coined the term symbolic interaction.

6.2 GEORGE HERBERT MEAD: BASIC CONCEPTS

George Herbert Mead (b.1863) was a major American thinker and philosopher. He taught philosophy and social psychology at the University of Michigan, and never published anything in his lifetime. His book, *Mind, Self, and Society: From the standpoint of a Social Behaviorist* was compiled and published posthumously by his students in 1934. This book laid the foundations of the school of symbolic interactionism. His theory about the development of self and of consciousness is the bedrock on which other theories were built. The basic premises of his theory are that the self emerges, not by itself but through interaction with others. We learn to see ourselves through the eyes of others. Or, how we perceive who we are is largely influenced by what feedback we get about ourselves from those around us. Social communication thus comprises of making gestures to others that we first understand ourselves and then communicate through commonly understood symbols to others. In other words, a gesture, in the form of language or otherwise must be similarly understood by both the person making it and the person receiving it; and this shared understanding is its meaning. We thus live in a world of shared meanings. Our understanding of our own self, will also be conditioned by the response and communications about one's self as received from others.

The most consistent of these gestures are the symbols of significance that are made significant by the important role they play in the society to which a person belongs. Significant symbols are both often repeated and universally understood. The community of actors also communicates with each other to form shared complexes of meaning. Thus a group of individuals who participate in the same society take on the combined attitudes of the others towards himself or herself and the community thus become for the person, what Mead has referred to as 'Generalized others'. Thus even when a person is by herself, she will behave as if others were present and the behaviour will be conditioned by the universal presupposed presence of the generalised others. Like if we are sitting alone in a park or walking on the road, we will still behave according to how we are supposed to behave in response to the combined expectation of the society at large. Thus when we are addressing a person whom we even do not know, our expectations will be shaped according to this generalised other, one that is reflected within ourselves, that is in accordance with what we expect ourselves to do. In other words, most of the time, we expect others to do what we would do under that same or similar conditions.

Thus growing up the sense of self develops in two stages. In the first, the infant absorbs the responses of those close to itself. Thus its sense of self is formed by the organisation of the particular attitudes of the specific persons towards it. But

with maturity the specifics combine to form the generalised others, that is the community as a whole. However this does not mean that there is only a one way interaction of formative experience. The interaction of self and society is never completely one sided or static. If this were so then society would comprise of robots and not humans.

Thus Mead brings on the difference between 'I' and 'Me'. 'I' is the ego, the self that is consciously self, the one we perceive as being our self as an individual. 'Me' is the self that is reflected by society. In our actions if we act as 'Me' then we are doing what society expects from us. But at one instance of time, we can also act as 'I'. There is an ongoing conversation between the 'I' and the 'Me', when we negotiate what it is we want to do and how we do it. At times we comply, at times we manipulate and at times we rebel. When the rebellion takes the collective form of the generalised others, then society transforms itself and a different kind of conversation ensues.

6.3 THE EMERGENCE OF SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

The name was coined by Herbert Blumer of the Chicago school, following the lead given by Mead. In essence, Blumer (1969) identified four basic tenets of symbolic interactionism. These are:

- 1) Individual actions take place in response to the meanings that gestures or objects have for them. For example, if the sign of red means danger in any particular setting, then individuals will act accordingly.
- 2) All interactions take place within already defined and categorized social contexts. In other words, all social situations are already provided with meaning in terms of a shared classification that is well understood by all who share that common social setting. Like if something is sacred in a society, then all members would be already aware of it and will act accordingly.
- 3) These meanings emerge from the continued interactions that persons in a society have with each other and with society at large. For example a child may learn that the temple is sacred from his parents, but this particular meaning will be confirmed for him by other members of the society so that later it will become a part of the generalised system of meanings that he or she holds.
- 4) Meanings are not static, and new meanings may be imparted and old ones discarded as a part of social interaction with others. Like if a new object emerges that is considered sacred by some, then over time the meaning can be accepted or even rejected by more members, and a change can occur or be nipped in the bud, depending upon the circumstances.

Thus following Mead, Blumer considered individuals and society as enmeshed and not separate from each other, a point of view that was not prevalent in the Fifties. Blumer considered symbolic interaction as the particular form of interaction that can only take place between human beings as they interact according to the meanings that they impart to objects and gestures (including language). Although Mead had neither put anything in writing nor discussed

any particular methodology, Blumer was of the opinion that meanings can only be elicited through a qualitative methodology. He was particularly critical of the efficacy of positivist scientific methods for the study of social behavior. Instead he advocated for a more subjectively oriented technique for understanding what goes on inside the heads of persons and how they regulate their actions with respect to others. Thus an investigator of human behaviour must get to an in depth understanding of that behaviour and that can only be achieved by qualitative methods, what Blumer has referred to as , ‘sympathetic introspection’, which requires an analyst to put himself or herself in the place of the other person to understand his or her behaviour. Since such methods require a close relationship between scholars and the subjects of study, the findings may not always tally as they are supposed to do in a scientific study. The three basic premises of symbolic interactionism as summarized by Blumer are:

- 1) All humans act towards other things (objects or symbols) in accordance with the meaning these objects have to them. These meanings vary according to context, both individual and collective.
- 2) These meanings arise out of the social interactions that one has had with other members of the society.
- 3) These meanings arise in an interpretative way that is they are not inherent to the object but are an outcome of the mental process by which they assume significance. For example a particular tree, stone or building may assume significance beyond their basic structure, which may be due to the historical or sacred meaning assigned to them by members of a community.

Thus interactive determinism plays a key role in this theory but the notions of human agency cannot be overlooked. For example something may be sacred to most members of a community but one person may still rebel and refuse to accept the significance. Also, since it is an interpretative process, all such significance is largely symbolic in nature.

However there were other interpretations of Mead’s work and they comprise different schools of thought than the Chicago school that Blumer established.

6.4 OTHER SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT

Two other important schools of thought are those of the ‘Iowa school’ and the ‘Indiana School’, represented by Manford Kuhn and Sheldon Stryker respectively. Both of them gave alternative methodologies to what had been proposed by Blumer. They were more inclined to go for positivist, quantitative methods. Kuhn attempted to use rigorous scientific testing for symbolic interactionism. From the point of view of the Iowa school, behavior is to be understood as purposive, and while it is projected to the future, it is guided by past experiences. Behaviour follows a pattern that makes it intentional, contextualized within a time frame, and open to self-correction. Methodologically the scholars who study behaviour should focus on small groups like dyads and triads that can be subjected to more strict observations. They also advocated for laboratory settings to compare controlled behaviour with that occurring in the natural setting. To facilitate scientific rigour it was also postulated that a more precise scientific vocabulary should be developed to describe the factual situation that is being studied. The development of such a terminology would help usher

in scientific comparability and result in more uniformity of results. They were in favour of more systematic testing of the principles proposed by Mead.

Kuhn developed the 'Twenty Statements Test'. Mead had proposed that the self emerges through social interaction. This test has twenty questions for the informant to answer, pertaining to the core query of 'Who am I'. The answers to these questions can then be coded and a systematic analysis can reveal the manner in which an individual is assessing his or her self- conceptualisation and identities. Since the responses are given by the informant in person, they stem from a self-assessment that is in tune with the basic precincts of the symbolic interactionist school as it retains the subjectivity inherent in the theory. The personal agency will also show up as one comes across idiosyncratic responses as well as more uniform and structured ones. The researchers of this school also utilized data generated from laboratory based research to produce a considerable body of work. The major criticism directed against them was with respect to the constraints put on the responses that were structured artificially rather than being free flowing. Also the methodology was found to be reductionist and contrived.

A student of Kuhn, Carl Couch, improved upon Kuhn's methodology, adding dynamism and time depth to the interactive data, and also extending it across space. Thus instead of the static environment of the laboratory, the data was collected from extended observations of interactions that were spread across both time and space. Some people refer to the Couch era as the New School of Iowa.

Another scholar from Indiana University, Sheldon Stryker followed Kuhn in applying a positivist methodology to symbolic interactionist analysis. He believed that social interactions crystallized into stable patterns over time to form a social structure, to the analysis of which both qualitative and quantitative methods can be applied. According to him, George Herbert Mead's theory should only be treated as a framework for building up, what he considered a concrete theory of symbolic interactionism. He tested the propositions put forward by Mead as testable hypotheses and treated his assumptions as operationalizing variables.

Stryker's major contribution was in his development of the concept of social roles as Structural Role Theory. This was based upon Mead's proposal of role taking or the assumption of roles in a social interactive situation. According to Stryker, persons assume roles in social interactions by using symbolic cues as emanating from other actors that regulates their actions towards them. Thus, while interacting with another person, an individual has some expectations of reciprocal action that take into account the attitudes of others. These are built up from past experiences as well as socially provided norms that are attached to the particular statuses that are held by the actors. Thus from the roles that are attached to particular statuses, future actions can be predicted, although in a situation of social change, these will transform giving rise to new expectations and attitudes. Thus even if the norms may not change completely the nature of role performance may be different. The process of socialisation is the basis of most role expectations that are both informed by and which help to keep social norms in place, leading to structural continuity. Thus individuals understand how they must interact and reciprocate by their own understanding of the social status they occupy in that particular situation. A commonly understood normative pattern gives rise to shared expectations that both guide the actors as well as make them recreate the

roles that they are expected to play. This is the relationship that individuals have with society. Individuals thus act according to the expectations of others without having to make conscious decisions all the time. These actions become reflexive as far as they apply to known and familiar role playing situations like that between teacher and pupil, mother and child and so on. These become internalized over time as social persons develop into mature adults and ultimately become their identity, for example identities of gender, class, occupation, family etc. Thus Stryker combined the bottoms up, or micro sociological approach provided by symbolic interactionists with the macro sociological perspective of the Social Structuralist. By emphasizing the importance of social norms that are attached to social statuses that form the social structure, he demonstrated how the behaviour of the individual is conditioned by the social structure even as collectively they help to reproduce it.

6.5 ERVING GOFFMAN AND THE DRAMATURGICAL APPROACH

Erving Goffman's contribution to symbolic interactionism in the form of the dramaturgical approach, where he views social life as a drama and social interactions as a performance by social actors, each playing a role; has been immensely popular. His books have been influential in bringing about a new perspective in the analysis of society especially in the form of social organisation and the internal working of social groups.

According to him, no social interaction is completely spontaneous, as they all evoke a prior understanding of the situation by the persons engaging in it and who bring to the situation of interaction a prejudgment of how they visualize the situation and their part in it, as well as a conception of how they expect the others to behave. Each person in this context also has a self-identity or self-perception. In other words, individuals interacting in a social situation have a 'working consensus' where they present that aspect of their self that works best under the circumstance. Thus it is presupposed that there are many aspects of the same social person, each fitting into the multiple roles that people usually play in society. Through our experience of living in a particular society, we are able to judge the kind of role we are expected to play in any situation along with the expectation of how others will play their roles in the same situation. Thus the initial information that a person has, by socialisation, life experience and any other means about the fellow participants, plays a crucial part in setting up of a successful interaction.

Each one of us as members of a society is familiar with the concepts of familiarity and the unknown. We are always comfortable with the known and the predictable situation and nervous about the unknown, like going to a strange place for the first time or meeting a new set of people about whom we know little.

In any situation, there is always the role of the self- conception and each one expects to be treated in congruence with what they feel they are entitled to because of whatever may be their self- perceived character like age, gender, class, academic qualification or any other. Any wrong interpretation of the situation in terms of any of the criteria as discussed may lead to a breakdown of the interaction. For example one may be wrong about how they had expected

the others to behave or wrong in terms of the role play they had set up for themselves or they may feel disappointed or hurt by the way they have been treated by others. Any break down in expectations from any side may lead to a disjointed or failed interaction.

To safeguard against potential breakdowns in social interactions, two kinds of mechanisms are put in place. These are the defensive practices and the protective practices or tact. Together they are employed to manage the impression created by a person in front of others. For example in many social gatherings stories, myths or narratives are told about untoward incidences that may have happened or could happen, to create a sense of catharsis. Individuals caught in embarrassing situations may get a reassurance that they are not alone in facing such a situation. Tact is often the qualification of being a successful hostess or a diplomat, when one has the quick sense to cover up for an embarrassing slip or *faux pas*.

Goffman (1956) has defined some terms that he uses in his description of social life as a drama. He defines an interaction or encounter as all interactions which occur throughout any one occasion when a given set of individuals are in one another's continuous presence. A 'performance' may be defined as all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants. In a group, if we take one person as our locus, then the others become audience, observers or co-participants. For example if we are focusing on a teacher giving a lecture in a class room, then the students can be viewed as an audience. If we focus on a particular surgeon performing an operation then the other doctors, nurses and helpers become co-participants.

When a performance repeatedly follows a pre-established pattern may be called a routine or when referring to a person's actions may be called a part. Like a policeman on duty follows a routine and a politician addressing a rally plays a part. Since most people play many roles, they play different parts on different occasions. A politician also plays the part of a husband and father when he is with his family or the part of the friend when he is with a friend.

A social role also has a series of rights and duties attached to it. However even while playing a role or discharging duties, a person may vary in the degree to which he or she may be fully convinced ideologically or rationally about the part they are playing. When a person plays a part without at all being convinced about it, like a politician may talk about peace without meaning it, the person is called a cynic. When a person is totally convinced about his or her role playing, like a mother taking care of her child, the person is sincere. Many other role playing parts may fall somewhere in between.

Most social persons put up expressive equipment suitable for the occasion that is called a 'front'. This also means that most people tend to hide some of their real feelings or opinions or states of mind while performing a role. For example while attending an important meeting, an executive may hide the fact that she is sad at having lost a friend or a diplomat while discharging an important assignment may suppress feelings of being ill. All social interactions take place and are supposed to take place within some appropriately defined setting. For example is a mourning is to take place then the setting will be quite different from that suitable for a birthday party. Similarly there is a personal front too, like dress, appearance, facial expression, manners and other aspects of the

physical effect that is produced by a person's presence in a social encounter. One puts up a very different appearance or personal front for a job interview than while dating a friend. For any successful social interaction, there must be coherence between setting, appearance and manner. In any society, there are always pre-existing 'fronts' available for given statuses. For example if one is to get married, there are already existing role play available, or of one is going to attend office, there are standard 'fronts' available according to one's job description.

Idealised performances are usually undertaken by those who wish to climb up the social ladder. For example, in a hierarchical society, the mannerisms and fronts of the upper strata may be emulated by the lower strata to gain in hierarchy, and they make extra effort to do things well. An industrialist at the top of the ladder may dress casually to office but a subordinate wishing to get a raise will take pains to dress impressively.

When a team effort is involved, there is a tendency to project the finished product, and hide the efforts that have gone in. For example while watching a television show, the audience never comes to know what mishaps occurred during its making. A hostess pulling off a perfect party hides all the bungling that had happened in its organisation.

Goffman had studied many organisations and social situations to come up with all the strategies and 'front stage' and 'back stage' performances that go into everyday life social encounters. He had also spread his research cross culturally to show that performances may vary according to local norms and values but the essential aspect of social life, that most of us at all times are putting up a performance and that there is a crucial discrepancy between our 'all- too- human-selves' and our socialised selves, holds true for all societies. Impression management remains a key aspect of all social encounters, whether it be a shaman in a tribal society or a high performing business magnate in an urban society or a wife in a family or a student in a class room.

Thus Goffman's theory brings into the one framework the concepts and findings derived from three different areas of social research; the individual personality, social interaction and society. Thus the failure of a social interaction affects all three dimensions.

Symbolic Interactionism has found relevance in a wide area of research and in the next section we shall read about some of them.

Important Research done with Symbolic Interactionism Methods

A classical study is that of Becker (1953) on Marijuana users, where he shows that the feelings of 'getting high' by the users of the drugs is dependent not on the physiological effects of the drug but the interaction of the drug user with others. The drug users feel high only if they are in the presence of others who expect that kind of reaction in them. Thus the symptoms are more of a symbolic construction than objectively real. In a more generalised context, Becker's study shows that role behaviours are acquired and conditioned by interaction with others. Other classical studies in symbolic interactionism that are recognised even today are those by Glaser and Strauss (1964) which indicated how awareness or lack of awareness conditions social interaction. Persons who are unaware or

lacking information will interact in a different manner than those aware. They have given the example that terminally ill patients in a hospital were kept uninformed about their condition by the medical professionals to keep up their spirits and give them a chance to better pass the last days of their lives. Styker (1957) had used symbolic interaction to study family role performances. Rosengren (1961) studied changing self- images as how one understands one's self is conditioned by how others perceive and interact with you. This was a seminal observation made George Herbert Mead, and Rosenberg, in his study of young boys who had been institutionalised showed how this hypothesis could be tested in a situation that approximated a laboratory but was at the same time a social institution in a natural setting. This study was also an indicator of the kind of research methods that could be used to study symbolic interaction in a controlled and therefore testable setting.

Inspired by these classical works, this theory has been applied by post-modern scholars as well, in recent times.

6.6 RECENT STUDIES

Important contributions have been made in the field of identity studies with the use of symbolic interactionism, where the study of roles and role performance has been linked to notions of identity. In other words how people perform is related to how they perceive themselves. Roles are thus conditioned by the perception of others towards whom the perception is directed. For example is a high expectation is put upon a person by peers, then that person will try to live up to that expectation. As demonstrated by Turner (1962), role expectations are also embedded in the social structure through the norms and expectations attached to a social status. Thus a mother will take very good care of her child, not only because she wants to but also because society expects her to.

Another area in which large numbers of works keep appearing is in the field of Affect Control. These studies show the link between emotions, identity and behaviour. When a person is emotionally aware, through disappointment or discredit, that his or her role performance has not fulfilled the cultural expectations or that they feel through similar emotions that others have not fulfilled what was expected of them. In both such conditions a realignment of self and others takes place. When things do not go according to expectations, then an effort is made towards restoration, by bringing about changes in one's identity and also in the role performances and expectations towards others. Studies of such reorientations, of creating of social worlds are ongoing. A lot of work still connects identity and self-perceptions to motivations, emotions and performance in social situations. Thus a salient identity, whether of religion, philanthropy or political, affects the way a person will behave, in areas not even directly connected to these dimensions. Thus the fact that one is Right wing or Left wing will affect interpersonal relationships, one's behaviour towards the environment and towards society in general.

Symbolic interactionism has also been found useful in understanding Gender and Sexuality constructs. The now classic work, 'Doing Gender' by West and Zimmerman (1987) shows how concepts of masculinity and femininity are constructed out of the way a person is socialised and the manner in which others in society interact with them. Thus a gendered self- image is largely a social

construct, having very little base in biology. They also showed the importance of a gendered identity in all types of social interactions, as people are almost always judged on their gender in assessing performance or in terms of role expectations. Societal resources and economic, political and organisational power allocations are almost always conditioned by gender identities forming the basis for patriarchy.

Applied research also uses symbolic interactionist methods to assess how people, both implementing and at the receiving end of policies view and assess them according to their own expectations and moral constructs about role play.

Check Your Progress

- 1) Define how you understand the concepts Social Encounter and Generalised Others

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- 2) From whose works have the basic premises of symbolic interaction developed? Discuss.

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- 3) Name at least two schools of Symbolic Interactionist theory and how they differ from each other.

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- 4) What do you understand by dramaturgical approach. Who formulated it?

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- 5) Describe how gendered identities are constructed using the symbolic interactionist approach.

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- 6) What do you understand by ‘Back stage’ and ‘Front stage’ performance in social interactions.

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7) Describe what you understand by a social role and how it is played.

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8) Can we study social change through symbolic interactionism? Discuss.

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9) How can symbolic interactionism be used in applied research?

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10) How is symbolic interactionism different from macro level social theories like structuralism and functionalism? Can these perspectives be combined?

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6.7 LET US SUM UP

To sum up at the end, in this lesson you have learnt about an important and widely used social theory and methodology. It is a theory that originated in early twentieth century but holds forte even today and has given rise to significant research both theoretical and applied. It basically connects individual to society at both the micro level of interpersonal interaction and through the use of role playing and norms providing legitimacy to social statuses, to the larger social structure. It also links the psychological self to the social self, indicating how concepts about one's own self are conditioned by how others perceive you and what expectations they have about you. Since all communications in human society are through symbols, including language, the theory got its name as symbolic interactions.

We have also learnt about various important theories and applications of symbolic interactionism and about its relevance in contemporary social theory mainly in identity studies and applied fields like policy research.

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