

“A” Level Sociology

A Resource-Based Learning Approach

Theory and Methods

Unit M5: Interactionism

Introduction

The main purpose of these Notes is to provide a basic overview of different sociological perspectives. Each set of notes is organised around three basic themes:

1. **A brief overview of the perspective.**
2. **An outline of the “basic principles” on which each perspective is based.**
3. **A brief evaluation of the perspective.**

These Notes are, therefore, intended to serve as a general introduction to different perspectives, although they may also be used as revision notes.

Interactionist Perspectives: (Social Action Theory)

The **Interactionist perspective** is a **generic** (or "family") name that is normally given to a group of sociological perspectives that consists of three variations, namely:

- **Phenomenology.**
- **Symbolic Interaction.**
- **Ethnomethodology.**

Not all textbooks refer to this group of theoretical ideas as **Interactionism** - some refer to them as **phenomenological** theories or **Social Action theories** – but for **A-level examination** purposes **none** of the **major exam boards expect** students to have **detailed knowledge** of each “sub-perspective”; the most they require is a **general knowledge and understanding** of “**Interactionist-type Sociology**”.

Whatever the specific terminology it is evident that the above perspectives refer to a specific way of looking at and explaining the social world - one that is quite different to both Functionalist and Conflict perspectives.

In general, **Interactionist perspectives** tend to concentrate upon relatively **small-scale levels of social interaction** (between individuals, small social groups and so forth) and, for this reason, they are sometimes referred-to as a **micro level** of sociological analysis.

The **basic ideas** that Interactionist sociologists have in common (and which make them different in many respects to macro perspectives like Functionalism and Marxist Conflict theories) can be summarised as follows:

They focus upon the way in which individuals (or "social actors" as Interactionists like to call them) **consciously act** - rather than simply react to social stimulation.

The way in which different social actors **interpret** the behaviour of others is significant as a means of **understanding** the way in which the world is **socially constructed**.

This social construction of the world is focused upon the **meanings** people give to behaviour and the way in which they **interpret** the **meaning** of behaviour.

A simple **example** here might be if we were standing at some traffic lights waiting to cross the road. If we see a car go through a red traffic signal we may interpret that behaviour as "wrong" (because it is dangerous) and / or "illegal" (because it breaks the law). If, however, the car that races through a red light has a flashing blue light and a wailing siren we may interpret that behaviour as "understandable", given that we assume the police officers in the car have a very good reason for acting both dangerously and illegally.

This **example** also illustrates something about the idea of "**meanings**" in Interactionist thought, since there is **no very clear relationship** between a "red light" and the action "stop"; it's only because we have been socialised to make an association that a red light actually means stop to us. If you imagine, for example, someone from a society where cars do not exist, they would not associate red traffic lights with "stop" or "it's dangerous to cross the road when the light is green" because that **symbolic association** between the two things would not be a part of what Interactionists call their "**symbolic system** (or **universe**) of meaning".

The **social context** within which people interact is significant for both their **interpretation** of the behaviour of others and the way in which they **choose** to behave at any given time.

We can see the relationship between the social context in which interaction takes place and the ability of people to (theoretically at least) behave in any way imaginable by examining two concepts developed by the Symbolic Interactionist **George Herbert Mead** (see "Mind, Self and Society", 1933).

Mead argued that whilst we are each conscious, thinking, individuals, the way in which we choose to behave is conditioned by the social context of that behaviour. In this, he said that our behaviour as individuals is conditioned by two aspects of our self-awareness (that is, the ability to "see ourselves" as others see us).

- a. The "**I**" aspect which largely consists of spontaneous actions and
- b. The "**Me**" aspect which consists of an awareness of how other people expect us to behave at any given moment.

The "**I**" and the "**Me**" are parallel parts of what **Mead** called "**The Self**" and it is the ability of human beings to develop a "self-concept" that makes us different to most animals.

In **animals**, for example, the "**I**" is **dominant** (to the almost total exclusion of the "**Me**" in most animals). This means, in effect, that most **animal behaviour** is **instinct-based** rather than socially-constructed.

In **humans**, on the other hand, the reverse is true. The "**Me**" is dominant to the almost total exclusion of the "**I**". This means, in effect, that most **human behaviour** is **socially-constructed** rather than instinct-based.

If we look at an **example** of the "I" and the "Me" these points should become a little clearer.

If someone accidentally puts their hand into a fire, the "I" aspect of the Self is expressed by such things as feeling pain, pulling your hand out of the flames quickly and so forth.

The "Me" aspect of the Self, however, will condition how the person who has burnt their hand will react.

This reaction will be conditioned by such things as:

1. **Who** we are (social factors such as gender, age and so forth).
2. **Where** we are (at home, in public and so forth).
3. **Who we are with** (our family, friends, people we don't know...).

Thus, if you are a **young child**, your reaction to being burnt may be to cry. If, on the other hand, you are a **young man**, you may feel that crying is not a socially-acceptable reaction - so you may swear very loudly instead. Swearing loudly may be acceptable if you are at home by yourself - or with someone who accepts the fact that you swear on occasions - but may not be acceptable if, for example, you are fixing someone's fire as part of your job.

Similarly, if you had been messing around with a group of friends when you burnt your hand, their reaction to your accident may be to laugh and make fun of your pain. Laughter would not be an appropriate reaction if it was your child that had burnt their hand...

As you may imagine, the list of **possible responses** to the act of "burning yourself" is **many and varied** and each will **depend** upon **who** you are and the **social context** in which the act takes place.

This, interestingly enough, also tells us something about the way in which Interactionists view the possibility of our being able, as sociologists, to **predict** people's behaviour. This, if you think about it, is going to be **extremely difficult** - if not impossible - because **behaviour is not**, according to Interactionists, a **simple response** to some form of **external stimulation**. In effect, people will **react differently** to the **same social stimulation** depending upon the **circumstances** in which the act takes place.

Interactionists **reject** the idea that **society** has an **objective existence** that is **separate** from the **people** who, through their **everyday relationships**, create a **sense of living in a society**. **Society**, in this respect, is seen as an "**elaborate fiction**" that we create in order to help us make sense of the structure of our social relationships.

In order to "**make sense**" of the confusing world that we experience on a daily basis, Interactionists argue that we use a process of **categorisation**. That is, as we interact we (consciously and unconsciously) **categorise similar experiences** (or **phenomena**) in some way. In this respect, we create categories of people based around our perception of them as, for example:

Male or female.
Young or old.
Employer / employee.
Traffic warden / police woman.
Husband / wife.

Each category of related phenomena is like a little box that we hold inside our mind and, for our convenience, each little box has:

- a. A name or label that identifies it for us (for example, the label "mother").
- b. A set of social characteristics inside. That is, a set of related ideas that we associate with the label on the box.

Thus, when someone we meet reveals one of their social **labels** to us ("I'm a mother") we mentally "open the box" that contains our store of knowledge about "motherhood".

This might include objective (factual) information (a mother is someone who has given birth to a child) as well as subjective (based upon opinion) information (I love my mother so all children love their mothers; a mother has a duty to look after her children and so forth).

By **categorising** the **social world** in this way we give it the **appearance of order and regularity**, since when we meet people we are able to interact with them on the basis of the "general things that we know about this type of person".

When we meet a police officer, for example, we might give them an exaggerated respect because we realise that they have the power to arrest us...

Basic Principles.

The Interactionist perspective is usually considered to consist of three related "sub-perspectives" (Phenomenology, Symbolic Interaction and Ethnomethodology). Only a basic understanding of the overall perspective is required. You are not expected to have a detailed knowledge and understanding of each of these sub-perspectives.

1. Human behaviour is a product of the way we interpret the social world on a daily basis. The social world is created and recreated by people going about their lives.
2. The way in which people interpret and give meaning to the behaviour of others is a significant factor in the understanding of the social world.
3. "Society" is seen as an "elaborate fiction" that we create in order to help us to make sense of the bewildering range of behaviour that we experience on a daily basis. "Society" does not have an objective existence, as such, since it is experienced subjectively by people.
4. For **Mead**, social life consists of people interacting (that is, behaving with reference to each other - taking note of the way people behave towards each other), setting- up mutual expectations - or norms - and then acting with reference to these norms.
5. The concept of **categorisation** is important because people classify various similar phenomena in their daily lives in order to make sense of these phenomena.
6. The process of labelling (giving names to the phenomena we classify) is significant because the labels we create (mother, criminal, insane and the like) help us to define (or stereotype) the nature of the social categories we create. In modern societies people tend to behave towards each other on the basis of the labels that each person attracts from others.
7. Some labels are termed "master labels" because they are so powerful they condition every aspect of our behaviour towards the person so labelled. Examples of master labels in our society might be: Criminal, homosexual, heterosexual, mad and so forth. The labels we attract (either through choice (achievement) or through being given them (ascription)) are important because people's knowledge of a label serves to unlock the assumptions we hold about particular social categories. This conditions the way in which we feel it is appropriate to behave towards a person.
8. For Interactionists, **social order** is:
 - a. Ultimately a product of our mind (we make ourselves believe that the social world has order and predictability and, by so doing, help to convince each other by our actions that this is indeed the case).
 - b. Real only for as long as we are able to individually and collectively maintain this belief. In this respect, for as long as people define a situation as real it will be real in its consequences...
9. All social interaction involves **meanings** and **interpretations** and the Interactionist perspective highlights the way in which the social world is actively constructed (rather than passively experienced as some Structuralist perspectives argue) by people going about the process of making sense of the actions of others.

Some General Points of Criticism...

1. Interactionist perspectives have been criticised for their **over-emphasis** upon "the **individual**" as the object of sociological study. There tends to be little conception of social structures (other than "structures" being "elaborate fictions" we somehow create and sustain).

2. There is little attempt to explain **how** the **social relationships** that we create (especially when we live in very large, very complex, social groups) "**reflect back**" upon our behaviour to apparently **force** us into behaving in ways that give us little real choice.

Similarly, Interactionists are criticised for failing to theorise the nature of **power** relationships in society (where, for example, the origins of power lies in society). While Interactionists tend to talk about power relationships, there is little or not attempt to develop a social theory of the origins of power in the way that Marxists have attempted, for example.

Thus, although Interactionists make frequent **reference** to the concept of **power** (in relation to ideas like **stereotyping**, **labelling** and so forth), there has been little attempt to try to develop a **theory a power** (why some individuals / social groups are more powerful than others). This is mainly because they **fail to address** questions of **social structure** and how these structures **affect** individual perceptions, meanings and interpretations.

3. The perspective concentrates too much on the **small-scale**, relatively **trivial**, aspects of social life. It tends to immerse itself in the minute details of social existence while ignoring the much bigger picture of life at a society-wide level of analysis. The individual, in this respect, is seen to be too small a level of analysis (just as Structuralists' are criticised for tending to ignore the role of individual social actors).

4. By concentrating upon individuals and their "**common sense**", **subjective**, **interpretations**, all knowledge about the social world is seen to be fundamentally **relative** (that is, nothing can ever be wholly true and nothing can ever be wholly false).

This is significant for a sociological understanding of the social world since it effectively holds that sociology is more-or-less a pointless exercise. Statements about the social world made by sociologists can be no more reliable or valid than any statements made by non-sociologists. It also, perhaps more importantly, shows how Interactionist thought can, at least on this level, be linked to **post-modernism**.

5. Interactionist sociology does not adequately address (or explain) questions of **social order** and **social change**. The concepts used by Interactionists are not adequate enough to explain, for example, why societies change.