Definition of the Situation – a Misunderstood and Undervalued Concept. The Contribution of Literature

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Abstract

Definition of the situation, the core concept of Symbolic interactionism, sometimes erroneously confused with Merton's self-fulfilling prophecy, is often overlooked both in sociological theorization and in everyday life. Since human beings tend to believe in the existence of a solid, incontrovertible reality, they do not put themselves in the role of others to know their definitions of the situation; consequently, misunderstandings and suffering arise. Being often obscure, difficult to grasp and remote from the men and women it studies, sociological theory that could help to improve social life often remains in textbooks. As social sciences and good literature have the same object of interest - human beings and their relationships - a better formulation and better understanding of sociological theorizations could be obtained by linking them to novels, short stories and plays. Narratives could clarify sociological concepts and highlight their potentialities. I have focused here on two episodes, one taken from Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, the other from Elizabeth von Arnim's *The Pastor's Wife*, that let us see how the same object can be defined in opposite ways. Subsequently, I have highlighted how the contributions of Proust and Pirandello, two authors who look at reality with a symbolic interactionist gaze, could help in better understanding the dramatic power and the fragility of the definitions that give sense to human behavior and human existence.

Keywords: symbolic interactionism, definition of the situation, literary texts.

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1.   Defining 'definition of the situation'

As Blumer (1969: 153) affirms: 'To speak of science without concepts suggests all sorts of analogies – a carver without tools, a railroad without tracks, a mammal without bones, a love story without love'. Sociological concepts are tools that help us to handle reality, instruments that allow us to grasp it and give it order.

Symbolic interactionism (S.I.) has introduced a large array of concepts which have spilled over the boundaries of the approach and are now part of the common sociological and psycho-sociological lexicon. *Definition of the situation*, the core concept of S.I., which is at the basis of Thomas and Znaniecki's *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918-20), underlines the importance of human interpretation of reality, and gives origin to *sensitizing concepts* (see Blumer, 1969) such as *role-taking, value, reference-group, self, stigma*, etc.[1] The assimilation of these concepts by mainstream sociology has given them popularity, but at the same time, it has risked overshadowing their humanistic character. Fine (1993: 67) observes: 'The appeal of interactionist concepts further blurred the boundary between those who are not interactionists. With these ideas spread so widely one can claim that interactionism as a bounded sociological perspective is in danger, even in its period of greatest triumph'.

Highlighting the pillars on which S.I. stands, Blumer (1969: 2) says: 'Symbolic interactionism rests in the last analysis on three simple premises. The first premise is that human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them'. Such things, he explains in the second premise, 'include everything that the human being may note'. This meaning, he adds in the third premise, has been learned in the interaction with others, and is elaborated in the personal interpretative process.

Definition of the situation indicates to us that individuals do not react automatically to stimuli but, before acting, they define them, and are then guided by the meaning they have given them. The importance of definitions of the situation drives researchers to sociological analysis based on personal documents, such as letters and autobiographies, in the wake of the famous research by Thomas and Znaniecki (1918-20)[2].

When explaining the concept of *definition of the situation*, two contributions by Thomas are often referred to. One is taken from *The Unadjusted Girl*, the other from *The Child in America*. In the first excerpt we read:

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[1]Some basic concepts of S.I. and the relationships amongst them are analyzed in Perrotta, 2005.
[2]For a consideration of the relevance of personal documents and of the power of narratives, see Plummer (1983); Plummer (2001); Plummer (2019).

> Preliminary to any self-determined act of behavior there is a stage of examination and deliberation which we may call the *definition of the situation*. And actually not only concrete acts are dependent on the definition of the situation, but gradually a whole life-policy and the personality of the individual himself follow from a series of such definitions. (Thomas, Swaine Thomas, 1923: 42)

The second quotation, introducing the so-called *Thomas theorem*, says: 'If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences' (Thomas, 1928: 572). This is a concise sentence that is often referred to, and which could be misleading because it seems to affirm that what has been anticipated in the definition will always be true. The way in which the *Thomas theorem* has been formulated and the way some scholars have expound it can, in effect, lead to confusing the concept of *definition of the situation* with Merton's concept of *self-fulfilling prophecy*, which, as Merton (1948) says, was suggested to him by the *Thomas theorem*. In an Italian textbook of Sociology, for instance, after the quotation of the *Thomas theorem*, we can read:

> If the rumor is spread that a bank is in difficulty, those who have deposited their savings will hasten to withdraw them, often without finding out about the real situation, with the consequence that the bank will actually have difficulties even if it did not have any before. A development of the Thomas theorem is the concept of 'self-fulfilling prophecy' by Merton (*my translation*). (Bagnasco, Barbagli, Cavalli, 2013: 99)

However, the situation to which Thomas (1928) connects his *theorem* does not leave any doubt that he is not referring to a self-fulfilling prophecy. He quotes a case that had happened in the prison of Dannemora where an inmate with mental problems had killed some people talking to themselves in the street because he imagined that they were saying evil things about him. In spite of the fact that the court had granted this prisoner permission to go out for some specific purpose, the warden decided not to allow his outing on the premise that he could once again meet people talking to themselves and, as consequence, commit other violent acts. The difference between the *theorem* and the *self-fulfilling prophecy* is evident, here and in the other cases considered in Thomas's research: believing in something does not make it come true; the prisoner who imagined that people talking to themselves were speaking about him did not make them really do that.

It is possible that if people behave according to their definitions, they create the conditions for their prophecy to be fulfilled: this may happen (and in some cases it does happen) but it might not happen as well. Clients who believe that a bank will fail withdraw their money and make it fail, but people who believe

that they will become great artists, or that they will win at the casino, and behave according to their definitions, rarely see their prophecies fulfilled. A lot of human suffering is based on wrong definitions, on the pursuit of definitions of the situation that have the consistency of chimeras. We can find an example of this in the film *Il papà di Giovanna* (*Giovanna's Father*) directed by Pupi Avati (2004), in which Giovanna, a girl considered plain by her friends, accepts her father's definition of the situation and sees herself as a beautiful girl with whom boys will fall in love; she behaves accordingly, and has negative experiences that unbalance her psychic equilibrium and lead her to a mental breakdown.

Assimilating the *theorem* to the *self-fulfilling prophecy* renders the concept of *definition of the situation* bizarre and impressive, but it can give it a deterministic strength and reduce its fundamental value, not considering that the definitions of the interacting parts might remain different.

The *self-fulfilling prophecy*, in line with the optic of mainstream sociology, has overshadowed the importance of the subjective, personal interpretation present in Thomas's *definition of the situation* (or *theorem*), a concept that clearly promotes an attitude of *role-taking*. Human beings define reality before acting, and to understand their behavior we must know their definitions. It seems obvious, something everybody could agree with, but many sociological approaches overlook this principle.

> By and large, of course, sociologists do not study human society in terms of its acting units. Instead, they are disposed to view human society in terms of structure or organization […] These various lines of sociological perspectives and interest, which are so strongly entrenched today, leap over the acting unit of society and bypass the interpretative process by which such acting units build up their actions. (Blumer, 1969: 87)

In order to understand human behavior, the observer has to take the role of the interacting subjects.

> To try to catch the interpretative process by remaining aloof as a so-called 'objective' observer and refusing to take the role of the acting unity is to risk the worst kind of subjectivism – the objective observer is likely to fill in the process of interpretation with his own surmises in place of catching the process as it occurs in the acting unit which uses it. (Blumer, 1969: 86)

The importance of *role-taking* is often ignored in everyday life. It is uncommon to suspend one's judgment and try to look at things from the point of view of the people one interacts with. People tend to believe in the existence of a solid, incontrovertible reality that is shared, or should be shared, by everybody. We often hear sentences like: 'young people nowadays lack moral

values' and 'there aren't any values anymore'. The term *value*, introduced into the sociological lexicon by Thomas and Znaniecki (1918-20) with a relativistic meaning, to indicate the different things that different people define as important, is often used in everyday life – and sometimes also by sociologists – considering 'values' only those objects that society proposes as such.

2.   Relativity and power of the definitions. Some literary examples

Social theory is often arid, obscure and difficult to grasp[3]. We find a clear condemnation of this problem and an exhortation to overcome it in the conclusion of Fontana's *The Last Frontier* (1977).

> Sociologists must strip their own language of the veils which hide their revelations from the members of society and present their sociological understanding with a new kind of sociological imagination, one that will guide the sociologist's pen to paint a portrait of society which will stir empathy and understanding among readers. (Fontana, 1977: 195-196).

Seeming too abstruse, too abstract, too far from everyday life, and useful only to pass an exam or to further the career of social scientists, sociological theory often remains in textbooks. Consequently, concepts and theories that could help to improve social life are either not known or easily forgotten. A better understanding of sociological theorizations, particularly those theorizations that, like S.I., share with literature a humanistic approach, could be obtained by linking them to novels, short stories and plays. Sociological imagination can find inspiration and stimulation from literature[4]. Social sciences and good literature have the same object of interest: human beings and their relationships. By describing concrete situations and introducing us to the inner world of the different characters, narratives could clarify sociological concepts and highlight their potential. Artistic sensibility, literary acumen and the capacity for observation allow some writers to perceive some aspects and dynamics of human behavior that tend to escape the notice of those who are not trained to see them. With their ability to reproduce social interaction, novelists and playwrights can show us the dynamics of social encounters and, by immersing us in the situations they depict, can make us experience personally what they

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[3] In *The Sociological Imagination,* Wright Mills (1959, 2000: 26-33) makes fun of the obscurity of Talcott Parsons' language translating his farraginous prose into much simpler and comprehensible sentences.

[4] Amongst recent contributions on this subject, see: Perrotta (2016); Perrotta (2017); Bauman, Mazzeo, (2016, 2017); Turnaturi (2017).

tell. They enable us to get out of our habitual world and identify ourselves with individuals who are different from us.

By inviting readers to step into imaginary worlds and allowing them to experience what they narrate, literary texts enlarge their vision and strengthen their capacity for *role-taking*.

2.1 The fence and the tea party

As has already been said, in our society there is the tendency to think that *definitions of the situation* do not change (or should not change) according to the point of view of the actor, and to believe that for every situation there is only one possible definition that everybody agrees (or should agree) with. It is not so, and literary texts can show us clear examples of how the same object can be defined in different, and even opposite, ways.

The relativity of definitions of the situation is effectively illustrated in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (Twain, 1876, 2017), in the episode of the fence, referred to in the cover illustration of many editions of the novel.

On one Saturday morning, Aunt Polly, concerned about Tom's vivacity and naughtiness, decided to punish him by turning his holiday 'into captivity at hard labor' (2017: 5): she forbade her nephew from going out and enjoying himself with his friends and obliged him to stay at home and paint the garden fence.

Mark Twain describes the beauty of the morning and the disappointment of the young boy condemned to work against his will:

> There was cheer in every step […] Tom, appeared on the sidewalk with a bucket of whitewash and a long-handled brush. He surveyed the fence, and all gladness left him and a deep melancholy settled down upon his spirit. Thirty yards of board fence nine feet high. Life to him seemed hollow, and existence but a burden (Twain, 2017: 6).

Tom worked with an attitude of sorrow and disappointment, and anticipated that his friends, who were going to enjoy their holiday, would make fun of him. But, suddenly, something changed his gloomy mood. 'At this dark and hopeless moment an inspiration burst upon him! Nothing less than a great, magnificent inspiration.' He had the bright idea to propose to his friends a different definition of the situation: painting the fence was not boring and heavy work but, on the contrary, an unusual, fascinating activity! 'Does a boy get a chance to whitewash a fence every day?'

It was a successful stratagem: his friends accepted the definition of the situation that he had proposed to them and asked him eagerly if they could participate in the painting. Tom answered that it was not possible. Painting the

fence, he explained, was an enjoyable and delicate job that only skilled and attentive boys could manage; he could not let them do it because they were not able to reach the high standard that Aunt Polly required.

The boys insisted, and in the end, after many requests and the offering of interesting rewards (twelve marbles, a tin soldier, a kitten with only one eye, etc.), Tom gave them permission to paint.

Knowing his friends' *definition of the situation*, Tom Sawyer had the ability to change it by proposing a different way of looking at things, and so got what he wanted: 'He had a nice, good, idle time, all the while – plenty of company – and the fence had three coat of whitewash on it!' (2017: 8).

In the end, Tom's friends defined as privilege what for him was punishment. Painting a fence has not an immutable meaning: it has a negative connotation when it is seen as compulsory, but if it appears as a prize it is defined as a desired activity.

Not knowing the definition of others and imagining that they share our way of looking at reality may have misunderstandings, disappointmentsand problems as a consequence. This is particularly evident when people from different cultures meet.

In *The Pastor's Wife*, a novel by Elizabeth von Arnim (1914, 2015), we find examples of how people who have been socialized in different cultures might have opposite definitions of the same situation.

The book reflects the experiences of the novelist, a young woman of British origin, who went to live in Pomerania after her marriage to a German count. The main character of the novel, Ingeborg, an English girl married to a German pastor, has to cope with the difficulties of living in a rural context where the values and customs are different from the ones she has been socialized to, and there are ways of thinking and of behaving that she did not even imagine could exist.

Many things that were normal in England were defined negatively in Pomerania and, vice versa, ways of behaving considered virtuous in the country she now inhabits would not be acceptable if judged by English standards. Making pregnancy the subject of mundane conversation, for instance, would have been inappropriate in England but it was a very common and appreciated habit in Pomerania. On the contrary, using chloroform to alleviate the pains of childbirth, a remedy accepted in England, was severely condemned in Pomerania.

In Pomerania, guests invited to tea expected to remain for supper. Not knowing this, and unaware of the other norms that ruled social encounters, Ingeborg organized a disastrous tea party for her mother-in-law, in spite of her concern and good will towards her.

Elizabeth von Arnim shows us the attention and the enthusiasm of the young woman in planning her first social meeting with her husband's mother. Having tea out in the garden would be a lovely experience, she thought, and worked to make it unforgettable.

> She and Ilse were immensely active the whole morning preparing, both of them imbued with much the same spirit with which as children they prepared parties for their dolls […] The cakes were of a variety of shapes […] the coffee was of a festival potency, sandwiches meant to be delicate and slender were cut […] When the table was set out under the lime-trees and finished off with a jug of roses she gazed at her work in admiration. And the farther she got away from it the more delightful it looked […] the glimpse of the old church at one end, the glimpse of the embosomed lake at the other, and in the middle, set out so neatly, with such a grace of spotlessness, the table of her first tea party (Arnim, 2015: 77-78).

However, Ingeborg's tea party was bound to fail. She had not been able to take the role of her mother-in-law and put herself in hershoes; she had notimagined that her mother-in-law's definitions of the situation would be different from her own. Her husband's mother did not consider the garden and its panorama to be beautiful, and she did not enjoy eating outside. What Ingeborg had planned as a charming meeting she defined as an act of rudeness and disrespect, and expressed her disappointment as follows:

> 'A widow', wept Frau Dremmel, 'a widow for ten years. When I think of your dear father. How much he thought of me. My first visit on your marriage. My visit on your marriage. Treated as though I were anybody. Forced to drink coffee out of doors. Like a homeless animal. No sofa. No real table. Flocks of mosquitoes. No supper. No supper at all, nothing prepared for me. For the mother. For your sainted father's wife.' (Arnim, 2015: 82).

2.2 Proust and Pirandello as symbolic interactionists

The relativity of reality and the possibility of defining it in different ways was particularly acknowledged by intellectuals and artists from the end of nineteenth century to the first part of twentieth century. Technological and scientific advancements which facilitated communications showed the inconsistency of traditional ways of defining reality; moreover, class mobility and migration made it evident that different groups have different ways of looking at the objects of their experience.

In the first part of twentieth century, Marcel Proust and Luigi Pirandello highlighted the fact that human beings act according to their *definition of the situation*, and that if we want to understand the meaning of their behavior, and

interact successfully, we must know these definitions. Proust and Pirandello show us how definitions considered as absolute Truth can vary in different contexts and in different people, and how they can change even in the same person in different moments (Perrotta, 1988).

In his world-famous novel, *In Search of Lost Time* (*A la recherche du temps perdu*), Marcel Proust describes how groups may define the same reality in different, even opposite, ways, and how the way in which a person sees an object can change over time. This is particularly clear in *Swann in Love*, a 'novel in the novel' which is part of *Swann's Way*, the first volume of the *Recherche* (Proust, 1913, 2018). The French novelist describes the values and habits of two groups of Parisian social life: the aristocrats of the Faubourg Saint-Germain, and the bourgeois of Madame Verdurin's 'little clan'.

The 'Creed' upon which the Verdurins' based their behaviour takes a distance from the definitions of the Faubourg Saint-Germain's society:

> To admit you to 'the little nucleus', the 'little group', the 'little clan' at the Verdurins', one condition sufficed, but that one was indispensable; you must give tacit adherence to a Creed one of whose articles was that the young pianist, whom Mme Verdurin had taken under her patronage that year, and of whom she said 'Really, it oughtn't to be allowed, to play Wagner as well as that' left both Planté and Rubinstein 'sitting'; while Dr. Cottard was a more brilliant diagnostician than Potain. Each 'new recruit' which the Verdurins failed to persuade that the evenings spent by other people in other houses than theirs, were as dull as ditch-water, saw himself banished forthwith […] Evening dress was barred, because you were all 'good pals', and didn't want to look like the 'boring people' who were to be avoided like the plague (Proust, 2018: 163-164).

The definitions of the aristocrats of the Faubourg, although in contrast with the Verdurins' 'Creed', are equally rigid: what is considered funny in the Verdurins' group would be judged to be stupid and vulgar by the aristocrats. Sobriety, a quality that is appreciated by the Faubourg Saint-Germain's society, is defined as squalor by Odette who is attracted by showy objects, things that would appear tasteless to the aristocrats. Seeing the marquise de Villeparis is in 'a black serge dress and a bonnet with strings', Odette comments: 'But she looks like a pew-opener, like an old charwoman' (2018: 212).

Proust tells us that Swann has been driven towards the Verdurins by his interest in Odette: 'there was no connection whatsoever between the 'little nucleus' and the society which Swann frequented' (2018: 164-165). At the beginning of his love story, 'the little nucleus' seems to him a new homeland, and he finds in it an authenticity he does not find in the Faubourg Saint-Germain's society, his former *reference group*, but when he understands that the

Verdurins are hindering his relationship with Odette, his definition changes, and once again he judges their values to be cheap and repulsive. The life in the Verdurins' group 'which he had so often described as "genuine", seems to him now the worst possible form of life, and their "little nucleus" the most degraded class of society'; in conclusion, he affirms: 'What a sound intuition there is in the "*Noli me tangere*" motto of the Faubourg Saint-Germain' (2018: 250-251). In the end, when his definition has changed and his love for Odette has vanished, Swann bitterly comments: 'To think that I have wasted years of my life, that I have longed for death, that the greatest love that I have ever known has been for a woman who did not please me, who was not in my style!' (2018: 331).

In his novel, Proust explains to us that we cannot see Reality in its wholeness: as we are looking at it from our particular point of view, we can only glimpse fragments of it.

In his plays, novels and short stories, Pirandello shows the relativity of our definitions of the situation and the importance we give them, and highlights the suffering that is the consequence of imposing one's own definitions on others.

The theme of the relevance and the relativity of traditional customs and ways of thinking is central in all his works: the Sicilian playwright scandalizes his public by turning habitual mores upside down and showing how unconventional definitions can be more 'moral' than the traditional ones. The irregular family of *Pensaci, Giacomino!*, for instance, is presented as more virtuous than the 'normal' one that Giacomino's sister and the priest, Father Landolina, want to impose on him. In *The New Colony*, a group of social outcasts wants to promote a better society: a prostitute, La Spera, a smuggler, Currao, thieves and informers always in conflict with the forces of order, escape to a desert island with the desire to create there a world based on love, freedom and justice.

Deviant definitions can be more correct than traditional ones, but nobody should impose his or her own vision of reality on others. In *The Mountain Giants*, Pirandello shows the dramatic consequences of the conflict between two groups with opposite but equally dogmatic definitions: the followers of the materialistic values of The Giants and the actors who want to impose the message of a dead poet they venerate.

Pirandello's thought is sometimes explicitly enunciated by one of his characters who assumes the function of the playwright's *alter ego*. In *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, for instance, The Father explains: 'But a fact is like a sack which won't stand up when it is empty. In order that it may stand up, one has to put into it the reason and sentiment which have caused it to exist' (Pirandello, 1931, 1957: 230). And he also says:

> But don't you see that the whole trouble lies here. In words, words. Each one of us has within him a whole world of things, each man of us his own special

world. And how can we ever come to an understanding if I put in the words I utter the sense and value of things as I see them; while you who listen to me must inevitably translate them according to the conception of things each one of you has within himself. We think we understand each other, but we never really do. (Pirandello, 1957: 224)

Pirandello's message aims at promoting an attitude of tolerance. In *It Is So! (If You Think So)* Laudisi, another *alter ego* of the Sicilian playwright, explains that nobody can be sure of his or her 'truth', and that we should therefore respect other people's ways of looking at reality:

> *Signora Sirelli.* All you are saying is that we can never find out the truth! A dreadful idea!
> *Signora Cini.* I give up! I give up! If we can't believe even what we see with our eyes and feel with our fingers…
> *Laudisi.* But you must understand, madam! All I am saying is that you should show some respect for what other people see and feel, even though it be the exact opposite of what you see and feel. (Pirandello, 1922, 1957: 71)

At the end of the play, the mysterious woman in whose identity different truths coexisted appears on the stage. Her face covered with a thick, black veil, she says: 'I am she whom you believe me to be'. Then she leaves.

Laudisi bitterly comments: 'And there, my friends, you have the truth!'. Then he ironically asks: 'Are you satisfied?' (1957: 138).

However, the position of Proust and Pirandello is not nihilistic: by showing the limit of one's definitions of the situation, both authors want to drive their public towards a better form of knowledge, a knowledge that permits their readers to recognize and avoid stereotypes and prejudices (Perrotta, 1988:. 105-116). Arising from Pragmatism, S.I. gives central importance to what can improve human existence. In the introduction to Mead's *Mind, Self and Society*, Morris (1934, 1967: xxxiii) highlights the importance, in order to reach this aim, of 'the reinterpretation of the social situation in the terms of the best knowledge available'. The concept of *definition of the situation*, both in these two authors and in S.I., can be of great help in promoting the attitude of tolerance and *role-taking* that is necessary for building a better society.

3. Conclusions

When confused with the *self-fulfilling prophecy*, the sensitizing concept *definition of the situation* risks assuming a deterministic meaning and loses the potentialities that could drive both sociologists and ordinary people to an

attitude of *role-taking*. The connection with good literature could help to highlight the features of sociological concepts by rendering them clearer, less abstract and more fascinating. Excerpts taken from *The adventures of Tom Sawyer* (Twain)and *The Pastor's Wife* (Arnim), for instance, can make us better understand the relativity and the power of the different definitions of the situation; and the reference to Proust and Pirandello, two giants of literature who look at reality with an interactionist gaze, shows us the importance of an attitude of tolerance. Highlighting the power and relativity of definitions of the situation, Symbolic interactionists and writers invite us to control our prejudices and to take the role of the other. In this way, they help us to reach the deeper knowledge needed to build a better society.

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