

## The Expanding Interactionist Community: On the Remarkable Breadth and Depth of Symbolic Interactionism

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*The Expanding Interactionist Community: On the Remarkable Breadth and Depth of Symbolic Interactionism*<sup>1</sup>

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Dear Colleagues,

I was delighted to learn about your third *Interactionist Talks* meeting. Reviewing your program gave me a sense of the diverse array of interesting interactionist scholarship taking place in Italy. I regret that I was unable to attend, but offer the following reflections about the growth and health of Symbolic Interactionism. My wish is that we continue to build bridges between our respective corners of the world and expand our vibrant and growing scholarly community.

Over the past decade, we have witnessed a renewed interest in Symbolic Interactionism, and in pragmatist theory and methods more generally. Along with this renewed interest, we have seen a remarkable diffusion of interactionism into multiple areas of sociological research. This expansion of interest, coupled with theoretical and methodological diffusion into different substantive areas, has presented us with certain challenges. For example, how do we organize and acknowledge interactionists as an intellectual *community* given the broad influence of our ideas across different sub-groups and areas of research? How do we break out of our geographically situated organizations and develop functional cross-contextual (and international) modes of sharing ideas and research? The expansion of interactionism has also presented us with some great opportunities. How can we more fully engage the broader field of sociology in a way that advances the ideas at the

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<sup>1</sup> A modified version of this essay was delivered as opening remarks for the Couch-Stone Symposium and annual meeting of the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction, Lancaster, England, July 5, 2018.

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core of our concerns? How can we work to answer unresolved questions, and launch new research programs? With these questions in mind, I will outline just a few of the ways that I see Symbolic Interactionism expanding into new territory, and offer some reflections on the possibilities ahead.

While Symbolic Interactionism has always been a general theoretical framework and mode of conducting research without restriction to any particular substantive concern, one sign of its current health is the extent of its growing reach into a wide array of research areas. These include criminology, mental health and illness, cognition, memory, trauma, emotion, sex and gender, race, political sociology, and immigration, to names just a few examples. Over the past several years, our journal, *Symbolic Interaction*, has published articles on midwives working in areas where it is illegal to do so (Suarez, Bolton, 2018), gambling (Mc Namara, 2017), commemorative work in Israel (Kidron, Handelman, 2016), the phenomenon of 'leftover women' in China (To, 2013), how to be a good alcoholic based on fieldwork in Norway (Skjælaaen, 2016), home ownership and foreclosure (McCormack, 2012), the lives of gay Christians (Creek, 2013), war veterans and combat trauma (Snyder, 2014), and Chinese nationalism (Yeh, 2015), as well as papers dealing with many other topics. In your conference program alone, we see research pertaining to militarism and torture, care systems, emotions, sexuality, and bullying, to select just some of the papers you are discussing. As I wrote in the fall 2017 issue of our society's newsletter, *SSSI Notes*,

Across the field of sociology and beyond, we are witnessing a renewed interest in pragmatist theory and methods and Symbolic Interactionism. Consider, for example, the 2015 pre-ASA conference on pragmatism at the University of Chicago, the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Interactionism Panel at the 2017 Couch-Stone symposium in Milwaukee, and the vibrant mini-conference (one that I co-organized with Daina Harvey) on Pragmatism and Symbolic Interaction at the 2017 Eastern Sociological Society meeting in Philadelphia. These events drew scholars speaking on multiple topics from many different institutions. Consider also new books (way too many to provide a comprehensive list!) that demonstrate new interest in the roots of pragmatism (for example, Daniel Huebner's *Becoming Mead*, our 2016 Cooley Book Award winner, or Norbert Wiley's *Inner Speech and the Dialogical Self*, one of two 2017 Cooley Award winners), new directions and studies in interactionism (for example, Elizabeth Hordge-Freeman's *The Color of Love: Racial Features, Stigma, and Socialization in Black Brazilian Families*, a 2017 Cooley Book Award Winner), and pragmatist methods (for example, Iddo Tavory and Stefan Timmermans's *Abductive Analysis*, which builds on the work the C. S. Peirce to present a fresh methodological perspective). There are many more fine examples, as well as numerous articles within the pages

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of *Symbolic Interaction* and other important journals which show that our area is alive, well, and blossoming. (*SSSI Notes* 46(2): 9).

This expansive breadth of relevance is remarkable and healthy! Interactionism is undeniably one of the most influential theoretical and empirical perspectives in the field. Not only is interactionism of extremely broad significance in the field, as scholars in all of the areas mentioned above are applying the tools of Symbolic Interactionism to advance our understanding of their particular areas of concern, but interactionists are also commonly scholars who think across topics and contexts in order to see how the foundations of meaning are built in otherwise very different cases and settings. This is a strength we must embrace, and write about more explicitly. Yet, I think we are also simultaneously seeing a bit of a liquidation effect in our organizations (at least in the United States) – where the tenets of Symbolic Interactionism have been so widely accepted as the cultural microsociology of our day that those who engage in this work sometimes do not even think of themselves *as* symbolic interactionists. We need to find new ways to bring these scholars to the table – to our events and organizations, even if that means adapting our own organizational identities.

In addition to claiming interactionism's expanding *breadth* of relevance, let us also more explicitly acknowledge the *depth* of analysis that is central to our work. In line with the premises of interactionist thought and research, we aim to reveal the underlying structures, processes, and meanings of social life. That said, we interactionists should actively engage other qualitative and cultural researchers (including cultural anthropologists, strong program cultural sociologists, qualitative social psychologists, and psychosocial scholars) who use other interpretive lenses to make claims about the foundations of shared meaning and understanding in the world. For example, while strong program cultural sociologists are focused on revealing the deep and pervasive cultural codes and narrative structures that underlie social events and experiences, interactionists have concerned themselves with the emergent character of these meaning systems. We can certainly find ways that our respective programs complement one another. While psychosocial scholars are concerned with the ways that psychoanalytic concepts can inform our investigation of social phenomena, many interactionists are committed to revealing how sociological principles shed light on psychological phenomena. Current research, I hope, can explore the relationship between these approaches and their respective levels of analysis. We can also find points to debate, around the table and in various publications. There was a time when Symbolic Interactionism may have benefitted from maintaining a certain sectarian mystique, if you will, but I am not sure such a reputation (or manner)

is helpful anymore; we have grown beyond it and must work to build bridges with other organizations and thought communities. This is exactly what we accomplished with our conference, ‘The Roots and Branches of Interpretive Sociology: Cultural, Pragmatist, and Psychosocial Approaches’ (Philadelphia USA, August 10-11, [www.interpretivesociology.com](http://www.interpretivesociology.com)). The SSSI co-sponsored this event with the Yale Center for Cultural Sociology and the Psychosocial Scholars Group to provide a space where scholars from various interpretive traditions could engage in dialogue with others about their different approaches to common questions. The discussions, we hope, will lead to new and innovative research questions and theoretical frameworks.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge interactionism’s expanding international web of scholarly communication and cooperation. The Society for the Study of Symbolic Interactionism is becoming more of an international society each year. We can see this increasing international diversity by looking through articles that have appeared in our journal *Symbolic Interaction*, previously under Robert Dingwall’s and now Scott Harris’s editorial leadership. In 2016, I attended the conference of the European SSSI in Bulgaria and met scholars from several nations. In 2017, this meeting was held in Poland. In 2018, the official annual conference of the SSSI was held at Lancaster University in the UK (July 4-6). We still have a lot of work to do to connect other scholars to this community, especially scholars working in the Global South, but there is good reason to believe that we are moving in a positive direction.

All of this is evidence of a deepening and broadening symbolic interactionist movement in the field of sociology and beyond (from anthropology and political science to nursing and education) but there is work to do. Your conference, *Interactionist Talks*, is obviously an important part of this diverse and interconnected movement. Let us work together to build the future of Symbolic Interactionism and remember – the state of our field is healthy when there are *good problems* to solve.

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