

**Commentary on Sheldon Stryker's Essay on 'Whither Symbolic
Interaction?'**

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My own introduction to symbolic interaction came after I had left graduate school and taken my first job at Indiana University where I met Alfred "Lindy" Lindesmith, and Sheldon Stryker. I was assigned to teach the introductory social psychology course with the assigned text being the Lindesmith and Strauss: *Social Psychology* (1956). Having studied small group processes from the Balesian tradition, looking at patterns of interaction, I was intrigued to discover an approach based on language, meanings, and symbols. For me, this was the addition of content to form. This interest in meaning as the basis of interaction has stayed with me and was further developed by discussions with Lindy and with Shel. I continued to try to make sense out of the structures I had studied from the point of view of the participants and the meanings that such "structures" had for them.

I remember sending a paper to ASR that contained some research results on identities that I had done. When the editor's response came back, along with a rejection of the paper it contained a review that began: "This research is following in the misguided footsteps of Sheldon Stryker..." The other two reviews mentioned some issues that could easily have been fixed. When I wrote to the editor about what I considered an unethical and somewhat biased review, I received back a letter that said in effect that the editor saw no problem with the review in question. After I got over my anger, I remained sad because the discipline seemed as if it were becoming less professional in its orientation, more particularistic and more personalistic. I have since learned that it is not necessarily the profession, but some of the persons in it, and those are as variable as

anything can get. But, it also spoke to the division in social psychology and animosity between people in those divisions that occasionally appeared over the years.

Of course, all of this should be explainable by the positions and self-meanings or identities that people have within those positions, the commitments to and salencies of those identities as well as the meanings that exist in a situation. People do seek self-verification, and respond, often strongly, to threats to or disturbances of the verification process. While my own work has been primarily focused on examining how this basic self-process works and on measuring the concepts and relationships implied by the theories and understandings we have of the process, I have always thought that this process is not divorced from the world or worlds in which we live. The poor aren't poor because they see themselves this way. More likely they see themselves this way because they observe that they can't control any monetary resources, and their failures have social meaning, that is to say, most people would interpret the situation in the same way. We share a basic understanding of what it means to be poor. And, yes, there is variability, but the shared aspects that are made possible by empathy and role-taking dominate our social lives.

If we focus too much on the individuality and uniqueness of responses (meanings) to stimuli in situations, we lose sight of the fact that there is a great deal of commonality in our responses (within a culture), and it is that commonality that allows for language and communication. And that it is through language as we are socialized into it and through communication that we are social and build relationships that ultimately define the social structure into which we and those who come after us are born.

There is another constraint besides the social structure in which we operate from one or more positions, and that is the physical world in which our biological being exists.

That without food we die is true, but that is the extreme case. We as individuals spend much of our lives manipulating things: computers, automobiles, clothes, make-up, thermostats, doors, televisions, money, books, pencils, papers, etc. There is certainly symbolic value (meaning) in all of these things, but they are also simply things, objects. And, I have often wondered what ever happened to the concept of signs that existed in the early SI literature (e.g., Lindesmith and Strauss 1956) but seems to have faded as we concentrate most of our attention on the symbols that give symbolic interaction its name. Sign meanings, as Lindesmith and Strauss noted, allow us to live in, work in, and manipulate our material environment. By ignoring or downplaying signs and sign meanings we tend to ignore and downplay the part of our environment that we spend much time and effort manipulating and maintaining. Without the notion of signs, much of what we do, it would seem, is inexplicable, for it is based on signs rather than symbols – meanings still, for it is meaning that has always been the important concept to me, as it is to most persons working in the SI tradition.

It has always pleased me to see that some, like Shel, held on to the importance of the formal structures that I had studied and to the importance of the material world in which we all exist in trying to understand human behavior. In his earliest papers (e.g., 1959) he notes that symbolic interactionists have bypassed the question of the “reality” of society (espoused by some as the ultimate social reality and eschewed by others as a social construct with no underlying reality) by focusing on the *social act*. By studying social interaction, from which notions of both the individual and society emerge, one can study the linkages between society and the individual without denying the reality of either.

Central to this thinking, in my view, was his identification of the basic premises of the symbolic world in which these interactions take place. The list of eight postulates that

form the basis of “one version” of SI that appeared in his *Symbolic Interaction: A Social Structural Version* (Stryker 1980) have always helped clarify for me the way in which social structure intrudes into the process. Incidentally, the outlines of this formulation can be seen in much earlier work (Stryker 1968). The first of these postulates is that “behavior is premised on a named or classified world. The names or class terms attached to aspects of the environment, both physical and social, carry meaning in the form of shared behavioral expectations that grow out of social interaction. From interaction with others, one learns how to classify objects one comes into contact with, and in that process also learns how one is expected to behave with reference to those objects” (Stryker 1980:53-54). This is one of the most succinct laying out of the basic symbolic character of the world that I had come across. But it is also clear from this view that the physical and social objects are out there and that we respond to them, that our responses give them meaning.

The second proposition made clear to me the way in which social structure fits into the paradigm. “Among the class terms learned in interaction are the symbols that are used to designate ‘positions,’ which are the relatively stable, morphological components of social structure. These positions carry the shared behavioral expectations that are conventionally labeled ‘roles’” (p. 54). Here, for me, was the way in which roles were not just constructed or created, but existed out there enough to be seen, reacted to, and labeled within society. The fact that the labels/categories already exist and are shared by members of the culture into which we are born or socialized seems forgotten or downplayed in some writings that overemphasize the creative, arbitrary, and negotiated character of symbols (which character they have). We need to remember, however, that

once created those labels/categories are there to be shared by all participants of the culture.

It was the third and fourth propositions, however, that showed how we as actors with identities fit into the scheme. In the third proposition we see that people in society are named or labeled in terms of the positions they occupy. In the fourth proposition we see that we also name ourselves with respect to these positional designations, and that these labels and the expectations attached to them become internalized and become part of our self. We are thus intimately tied to or become a part of the social structure that is named in proposition two. This is the “collective and distributive aspects of the same thing” that Cooley (Cooley 1902:2) talked about when referring to the individual and society. These self labels thus define us in terms of positions in society, and these positions in society are relational in the sense that they tie individuals together. For example, father is tied to son or daughter. This is reflective of James’ notion that we have as many selves as we have relationships to others (James 1890).

In these propositions, then, Stryker has kept alive the early ideas of the symbolic interactionist tradition. Not only do the symbols let us interact, but they also name ourselves and others, and in so doing help define the nature of the relationships among all the named categories. The interesting twist is that all of these are embedded within the larger social structure as named and understood by the symbolic community. These names and their associated meanings are learned by each individual, internalized, and shared within the community.

Propositions six through eight make it clear that in this view social structure and naming are not fixed or static. There is some fluidity to the conceptual basis that is brought in by introducing Ralph Turner’s concept of role-making that takes place

situationally as persons interact and negotiate common meanings which may reshape, reinterpret, and otherwise change the “situation.” However, this is variable. Proposition seven suggests that some structures (open) are more open to role-making, negotiation, and change than others (closed). In the more open structures, names and classes as well as possibilities for interaction may be modified through negotiation and interaction.

These propositions form the skeleton around which other ideas and concepts are built and understood, and it is in the further discussion that many of the important ideas are contained. Explicit recognition is given to the physical and biological “worlds” in which we live, as well as the social that is traditionally emphasized in SI. In 1994 Freese and I introduced the idea that identities are concerned with more than just symbols when we suggested that identity standards guide our control of resource flows and levels in situations based on signs rather than symbols (Freese and Burke 1994). But, the idea that resources are an important consideration within the SI framework was introduced much earlier when Stryker points out that the locations of individuals in the social structure provides or denies access to resources and action opportunities (Stryker 1980). Indeed, it is through this embeddedness of individuals in the social structure, connecting them to some and separating them from other individuals (who are also named and located within the social structure) that the idea of commitment begins to take shape.

More than any other concept, commitment makes explicit the embeddedness of individuals in particular locations of the social structure. This is an idea that took me a while to fully understand and appreciate. Commitment is both a resource and a constraint. Connections with others provide opportunities for interaction, exchange, help, love, and support. But, the connections are to particular others in the social structure, whose locations are named and thus symbolically, meaningfully defined, who themselves have

access to particular others, to particular resources made available within the context of the social system. Because we are connected to some and not to others while in a particular role, we are constrained to the opportunities that are thus provided. Note the similarity to the concept of social capital that is often used in more structurally oriented sociology.

A concept that does not appear very often in Stryker's work is the concept of power – the power of one individual over another. Yet, it is implicit in the concept of role connections, of meanings and expectations attached to the different roles that are connected, of the different resources available to individuals in particular positions and playing (or making) the roles thus provided/allowed. It is also implicit in the concepts of the degree of openness or closedness of the structures in which roles are embedded (thus allowing more or less role-making and negotiation of meanings, resources, and expectations). Clearly, what makes some structures more closed is the power and resources that some positions have to control and enforce definitions and meanings.

While commitment represents the links of the individual in one position to other different and differently named positions in the social structure, salience represents the activation of an identity, a concept that is necessary in complex societies in which people have many positions, not all of which can be activated at the same time. Commitment is the strength of the link to the outside, salience is the strength of the link to the inside, to all of the identities a person holds by virtue of the many positions he or she occupies. When living in a complex, differentiated society in which most people occupy many positions, people will have complex, differentiated selves with multiple identities. Not all of these identities can be activated at the same time without conflicts and role strain.

While the organization of society offers some means such as scheduling to prevent conflict among the multiple positions people hold, some mechanism is necessary to turn some identities off and others on appropriately. Salience as a concept does not deal with this level of factors that turn identities off and on,¹ but with the more general level of the likelihood that a given identity will be activated. Identities that are more likely to be activated are more salient or, in Stryker's language, higher in the salience hierarchy. More salient identities are ones that are in fact activated more frequently, thus they are more central to a person's life.

The concept of salience that Stryker has put forward is not a function of the situation that may activate an identity, but is a characteristic of the identity itself that carries across situations. Especially as an identity attached to one position is influenced by the number of other positions tied to it (and the strength of those ties), salience is not situational. Indeed, as Stryker points out, person's with highly salient identities will enact these identities over others that are less salient even when both may be appropriate in a situation (Stryker 1968). Additionally, those persons may seek out or create opportunities to enact a salient identity (Stryker and Serpe 1982) thus emphasizing the active, agentic character of the self. The concept of salience not only deals with the likelihood of an identity being activated across situations and over time, but with the idea of a salience hierarchy, one identity can be compared to another in terms of the relative likelihood of being activated. Even when more than one identity is relevant not all will necessarily be activated, and the identities that are higher in the salience hierarchy have a higher likelihood of being activated.

¹ This is the focus of social identity theory when discussing salience (Oakes 1987).

There is a tie between commitment and salience that is reflected in the hypothesis form (Stryker 1968:562 - as hypothesis four; Stryker 1980:83 - as hypothesis 1) that “the greater the commitment premised on an identity, the higher that identity will be in the salience hierarchy.” This hypothesis is developed out of Mead’s notion of the link between society and the individual. Commitment in the theory is the representation of society, reflected in the ties and connections between named positions. Salience in the theory is the representation of the self, at least in that aspect of the likelihood of a particular identity that is tied to a named position being played out in a situation. This link has been repeatedly verified in research (e.g., Burke and Reitzes 1991; Serpe and Stryker 1987; Stryker and Serpe 1982).

How the self operates in situations to create behavior through the control of meanings has been the subject of much of my own work building upon structural symbolic interaction and has been less developed in Stryker’s work (Burke 1980; Burke 1991; Burke and Cast 1997; Burke and Reitzes 1981; Burke and Stets 1999). On the other hand, the basic mechanisms are clear in his work; identities operate through the control of meanings in the situation to reflect the meanings contained in the identity (Serpe and Stryker 1987; Stryker and Burke 2000). There is an interesting suggestion in hypothesis ten (Stryker 1980:84) that the meanings that are controlled and portrayed in a situation are more likely to be reflective of institutionalized values and norms when there is more commitment, and it is when there is less commitment that more novel and creative meanings will be portrayed. In this Stryker spells out some of the conditions under which there is more or less role-making, more or less creativity associated with the self.

This makes a great deal of sense when you consider commitment as the number of others to whom one is tied by virtue of having an identity and the strength of those ties.

The greater the number of people one interacts with in terms of a particular identity, the greater the number of people who must share given meanings for that identity in order for the interaction to happen sensibly. The conservation of meaning occurs because each is constrained to meanings that the others understand and share and this makes it more difficult for any one person in the set to change meanings independently of others.

The idea that people occupy many positions within society and thus have many identities is a theme that has played in much of the writing of Stryker and comes out in his concept of identity salience and the salience hierarchy of identities in terms of their likelihood of being activated in any situation. For example, he showed that people who occupy the positions of spouse, parent, or worker and thus have those identities have lower salience of the religious role identity. But, the full import of the relationship between multiple, perhaps competing identities is made most clear in his analysis of identities in the context of social movements. Here, the issue of salience is not to compare one identity with another in a person's salience hierarchy, but to compare the relative salience of identities across persons; salience which is in part a function of ties to others (commitment). In this, Stryker points out, we can come to understand why some individuals are more likely in social movements to activate the movement identity than others, and choose behaviors consistent with that identity such as giving time, money, or other resources (Stryker 2000).

The version of symbolic interaction that Stryker is developing is not divorced from many of the ideas and developments in mainstream sociology (cf. Stryker and Vryan forthcoming). It thus serves to bring to the attention of sociology as a discipline the importance of the SI perspective that interaction is based on shared meanings and that most of what people do is to control meanings, both sign and symbolic. The importance

of the individual as an agent is maintained, especially in the concept of role-making, but it is recognized to be limited to the extent that the identity is embedded in a more closed structure, and when there is greater commitment due to the many others with whom one interacts in terms of the identity. Self and society are intimately linked through the named positions around which meanings and expectations evolve, are internalized, and shared. These are the meanings that define the person and the positions in social structure.

While I find the version of SI as put forward by Stryker to be one that resonates well with my own thinking and work, it is clear that others have different views, not all of which are compatible. However, there is value in diversity and keeping an open mind. One of the points that Stryker made when discussing the “two social psychologies” (talking about sociological social psychology and psychological social psychology) is that we should not necessarily work toward a full integration of the two (1977). Instead, he suggests, more creativity and growth can occur when there are separate disciplines as long as they talk to each other and share each others efforts through some sort of cross fertilization. This basic idea was reiterated in a different context two years later when he called for a broadening of the identity of sociologist to incorporate a common vision of the work that all sociologists do (Stryker 1979). I think he would maintain the same position with respect to the two (or more) varieties of symbolic interaction. Do not merge them. Let each grow independently, but create a broader identity for SI that shares the relevance of the contributions and issues of all the subparts. Talk and share ideas, examine each other’s assumptions, and be open to each other’s possibilities. As is clear, this has not always been the case. Perhaps this step will continue that development.

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