

PERSONS, IDENTITIES, AND SOCIAL INTERACTION

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we hope to advance the general theory of social interaction. We bring together symbolic and sign processes in the context of an elaborated identity theory that relates social situations of interaction to social systems of interaction. Situations contain persons with their histories and unique identity sets, pursuing simultaneous and sometimes conflicting definitions, goals, and agendas. Systems are organized active resource flows maintained by the resource interactions of persons through their identity sets. Symbolic processes are tied to potential resources and their flows. Sign processes are tied to active resources and their flows. Identity sets, devolving simultaneously from symbol flows in situations and resource flows in social systems, are the linchpins for persons to relate social situations to social systems, and vice versa.

PERSONS, IDENTITIES, AND SOCIAL INTERACTION

The current understanding of group process depends heavily upon theories that implicitly or explicitly assume symbolic actors or rational agents that behave in the process. But how much of the organization and structure of human group process depends upon "pre-symbolic" and "pre-rational" activity? In truth, nobody knows. In this paper we theorize about how unsymbolized interactions are processed by persons and become tied to symbolic interactions, and how by means of the processing (which may or may not look to be "rational") persons tie their situations of interpersonal interaction to their larger (social) systems of interaction.

There is no doubt that humans are more than symbolic actors and rational agents -- no doubt that "thinking beings" have more to think about than utilities and more to think with than linguistic symbols. Nonverbal message traffic between humans is "overwhelmingly more copious" than is verbal message traffic -- or so claims Thomas Sebeok (1991, p. 14) without apparent fear of rebuke. The noted semiotician went on to observe that "human verbal and various nonverbal means of communication are now so thoroughly intermingled that they can be disentangled only by dint of careful scientific analysis" (p. 33). The various nonverbal means of communication include the nonlinguistic sign, where sign is defined roughly as something that stands for something else or, more smoothly, as something with content that has a perceptible impact on at least one sense organ of an interpretant. A message is a sign or string of signs, and the exchange of messages Sebeok calls "an indispensable characteristic of all terrestrial life forms" (1991, p. 22).

The process of signification ought to have substantial bearing upon social psychological theories of the person, human identity structures, and interpersonal interaction. Now, it will be known to the readers of this volume, the underwriter for much of the current theory of these subjects is symbolic interactionism, an analytical framework built on the bedrock of the linguistic symbol. However, if Sebeok's observations are true, then current theory has left much undiscovered -- everything about persons, identities, and social interaction that does not depend upon symbols. That limits the contribution symbolic interaction theories can make toward the understanding of group process. We think the limitations are self-imposed and can be overcome.

We suggest how to modify the conventional theory of identity so that it may include the effects of unsymbolized resource interactions. Resource interactions we conceive as similar to symbolic interactions, but they involve the control and manipulation of resources rather than symbols. Unsynchronized resource interactions, we suggest, form the social psychological experience in terms of which persons interpret their nonlinguistic signs in situations of

interpersonal interaction. At the same time, following Freese (1988), we argue that resource interactions are the ties that bind social systems, for we conceive social systems as constituted of interconnected resource flows. We seek a basis for linking persons, their symbolic interactions, their unsymbolized resource interactions, and systemic resource flows. The linchpin is a social psychological processing that we describe using a model for identities, now suitably modified, developed by Burke (1991).

In what follows, we begin by reviewing the theory of identity and pointing out shortcomings in that theory that stem from ignoring all but symbolic interaction. In particular we note the need to incorporate signs and sign behavior into the identity process and we suggest the concept of proto-identities to accomplish this. We then further develop the idea of signs as they relate to resources, which we suggest is similar to the way that symbols relate to meanings. We then suggest that identity sets, which incorporate both the traditional concept of identity and the new concept of proto-identity, act as controllers of both meanings (identities) as well as resources (proto-identities). This is managed by making persons, as agents, be the link between identities and social structure. Finally, we discuss the way that all of this fits together so that people interacting in situations manage both systems of symbol flows and systems of resource flows to create groups and larger social structures and systems. We recognize that what follows is an incomplete effort at theory construction, and we offer no evidence. Nevertheless, we do think the understanding of group process can be advanced, if, as we suggest, group process depends on more than symbolic interaction and interpersonal transactions.

PERSONS AND IDENTITIES

We take our cue from some characteristic views of George Herbert Mead, expressed throughout his work and quoted here from The Philosophy of the Act: "In an experience within which individual and environment mutually determine each other, the unity of the environment and its constituent objects as well as that of the individual arises out of the activity of the individual" (Mead 1938:374). For us, as for Mead and many others, persons and their activities are the centerpieces to a theory of social interaction. Mead's reference to the unity of the individual was part of his concept of the self. Mead (1934, 1938) argued that the mediation of the self as an object is the necessary means of interaction between the person and the environment, if new objects are to arise in reflective experience.

For Mead the emergence of mind, self, and society were evolutionary adaptations that conferred for the human species a selective advantage -- the advantage of being able to consciously reflect on the conditions of immediate experience by using linguistic communication and role taking as functional

activities. Such activities were inherently symbolic. In his analysis of the conversation of gestures Mead emphasized signification as important to immediate experience and as the evolutionary precursor of symbolization. But the main currents of symbolic interaction theory that came after Mead, especially with the influence of Blumer (1969), emphasized that linguistic symbols are more important than nonlinguistic signs as indicators of the conditions of human experience and as a basis of social interaction. With symbolization through shared meanings there comes into being human agency and reflection and all that follows from that.

We, however, wish here to address conditions of experience that may not always be matters of reflection and, therefore, may not always figure into the systems of symbolic understandings in terms of which persons act. There are entire classes of such conditions that bear upon social interaction. Anthropologists working within the framework of cultural materialism (e.g., Harris, 1977, 1979, 1989) are quick to point out that the physical constraints imposed upon human action and organization do not always figure into symbolic systems. Social organization and social interaction are affected by feedbacks that cycle from nonsymbolic through symbolic interactions and back. We have, therefore, to conceive ways to integrate nonsymbolic and symbolic interactions, in order to understand how persons behave and social structures function.

We cannot do this using the concept of self as this is generally understood in current theory, because there has to be included the sorts of things from which self is supposed to have evolved -- the immediate experiences involving signification that are prior to as well as coterminous with self. Self is generally thought to depend upon the social character of human language¹ and the socially derived meanings by which objects, including self, are formed and identified through social interaction. We shall not use the general concept of self, for the concept of identity offers richer possibilities for our purpose. Identities are just the sorts of things that persons must possess if they are to be both proactive and reactive², two conditions generally accepted as essential. Persons must be proactive to make any difference to interpersonal interaction, and they have to be reactive for interaction to make any difference to them. If persons and their environments mutually determine each other in a dynamical process of interaction, then a theory of microscopic interaction must rest on two things: (1) a theory of the person, as both cause and effect, and (2), the manner in which interaction dynamics are organized by identity dynamics. This orientation would seem to put us foursquare in line with the classical origins of identity theory in social psychology, but we think these origins are somewhat misleading.

There are several classical notions of identity (Weigert 1983). It is the specific inheritance bequeathed by Nelson Foote (1951), and now belonging to conventional sociological wisdom, which has enhanced and expanded it, that we wish to highlight. The idea that has evolved from the influence of Foote is to interpret the concept of identity as a relation between the person and social

structure. The process of identification, in this view, is thought to proceed by the naming and labeling of persons as belonging to socially structured statuses or roles whose concatenation in situations of interaction define a person's identity. Through a succession of situations of social interaction a person's identity becomes a binding thread that links the person to the groups to which he or she belongs, through establishing membership in a common social category. An identity also is thought to establish the uniqueness of the person, and so the concept does double duty: A person is identified with others (in structured positions) while also being individuated or distinguished from them. The double duty is necessary, if one is to argue that persons are the unique products of interaction within common social structures and can so experience themselves. And so it has become one of the truisms of symbolic interactionism, and indeed of sociology, that a person has no individuality apart from identity and no identity apart from society.³ But there is a problem with this.

The development of the theory of identity now becomes unnecessarily self-limiting. The limitation is that identities are symbol-dependent. They can crystallize only because of a normative consensus for social meanings communicated through language. As symbolic interaction theory has it, the principal function of the symbol is to indicate something about an object. An object is a referent for a symbol and a symbol is a significant sign, that is, one having an arbitrary but shared meaning established through social interaction or socially agreed-upon responses (Lindesmith and Strauss 1956). Significant objects, designated by significant signs, in the framework of symbolic interaction theory are defined and differentiated only by means of linguistic symbols. The pattern of circulation in symbolic interactionism is from symbols that define objects and objects that can be defined only symbolically.

Generally left out is the role of signs that are not symbols (i.e., that do not necessarily have shared conventional responses). Sign is a more general concept than symbol. Charles Peirce, who supplied some of the roots of symbolic interactionism as well as of modern semeiotics, held that except for instantaneous consciousness, all thought and knowledge is by signs (Hartshorne and Weiss 1958:390, V.5). Peirce did not hold that all signs were symbols in the symbolic interactionist sense of the term. Subsequent to Mead's analysis of the conversation of gestures, in symbolic interaction theory nonlinguistic signs in general have given way to symbols in particular, which are usually understood to be the signs we share through language (broadly conceived).⁴ On this has generally stood the theory of identity and of self. The objects of symbolic (reflective) experience are included. The objects of sign (immediate) experience are not -- they generally are not even taken as objects, since they are unsymbolized.

However much language may matter for social interaction, it isn't all that matters and, if not, then symbols are not all that matter -- a result that we ought to accept on other grounds. A great many social animals have complicated forms of social interaction and organization without taking recourse to linguistic symbols.

They use nonlinguistic signs.⁵ There is no reason to suppose -- and certainly no evidence -- that the rich symbol systems of humans have caused the degeneration of human knowledge based on nonlinguistic signs, or have eliminated all personal and social implications of that knowledge. To the contrary, verbal and nonverbal signs are intricately comingled in the human repertoire, as (following Sebeok) we noted earlier. How can those implications be explored for the present theoretical purposes?

The only way is to turn a classic notion on its head -- specifically, the notion that identities link persons and social structure. We can do this without denying that identities have social sources, at least to a significant degree. Let's affirm that. But rather than taking identities as relations, we propose to reverse this action. We shall take persons as the link between identities and social structure. This will have two advantages. First, it will enable the person to be more proactive -- a desirable condition if interpersonal interaction is to generate social structure. Second, it will enable us to incorporate the effects of interaction conducted with nonlinguistic signs as well as with linguistic symbols -- a condition we hypothesize to be necessary for interpersonal interaction to generate social structure.

It might be objected that too many eggs are scrambled with this proposal to include signs as well as symbols into a conception of identity. Identities are symbolic constructions that emerge from social interaction. What do nonlinguistic signs have to do with this? Unlike the meanings attached to linguistic symbols, the meanings attached to nonlinguistic signs do not require language or social consensus. Therefore, it would seem, they cannot be associated with identities. What is the point of suggesting, as we do, that an identity contains two distinct meaning processes, symbolization and signification?

There are several points. First, to maintain that signification and symbolization are two distinct meaning processes is dogmatic. While the dogma may have had its uses, it also has obscured as much as it has illuminated.⁶ As a matter of principle there is no reason that theory cannot be extended to include both processes. The meanings associated with symbols as well as with signs are normally taken to derive from the reactions provoked by a given symbol or sign, so this affords no basis to distinguish the two. Both are indicators for appropriate responses to environmental input. The difference is that the meanings of symbols are taken to be arbitrary social conventions, and the meanings of signs are not. But persons have to process the meanings of both and act according to those meanings, and there is no a priori reason to think that signs and symbols are processed differently (cf. Lindesmith and Strauss 1956).

Second, social primates clearly signal, distinguish, and recognize each other, and can identify themselves in relation to others (Kinzey, 1987; Box, 1984; De Waal, 1989; Goodall, 1986; Heltney and Marquardt, 1989). They attach meanings to signs, but maybe not to linguistic symbols.⁷ Whether or not there is a true identification process here is very muddled, but there clearly is organized

social interaction in which identifiable and identified individuals make a big difference. Much if not all of that difference depends on the animals' interpretation of signs. We could whisk away the inconvenient facts of primate social interaction and organization as having no bearing on the case of humans, but this would not be in accord with the science of our day -- particularly since humans are primates. Better to acknowledge that we and these nonhuman cousins are doing some of the same things.

So as not to expunge too much convention all at once let us make a semantic concession. Part of the classic notion of self, which we said we wouldn't touch, is the notion of identity, which we now seem to be profaning. If self requires mind and mind requires symbols, how could it be otherwise for identities? Mead argued that without mind animals could recognize sensuous characters but not objects, and the argument has stuck (1938:331). So, for the time, being let us use the term proto-identity⁸ to designate a person's organization of meanings associated with nonlinguistic signs, or the objects of immediate experience; and let us reserve identity for the organization of symbol meanings, or the objects of reflective experience.⁹ We may provisionally proceed as if signs and symbols provide different material for interaction with which the person must come to terms, and that persons do so by separately organizing and processing these different sorts of meanings. The concept of proto-identity is adopted to suggest that persons are capable of accumulating sign meanings in which they as persons are implicated, during the course of their experience, into something like an identity even without the linguistic symbols that identities are taken to require. The terminological distinction, artificial and simplistic to our way of thinking, is intended as a temporary heuristic device. Upon eventual analysis of the processing we suppose to occur for signs and symbols, and for what we take the appearance of signs and symbols to mean in the experience of persons, we shall see that the distinction can be dispensed with.

SIGNS, RESOURCES, AND SYMBOLS

What is important about proto-identities, and what do they have to do with persons and their social interaction? While both Peirce and Mead provide some thoughts appurtenant here, even taken together they only provide a start for what we wish to develop.

Signs

Peirce suggested that the whole universe might be entirely composed of signs, and that there was nothing that couldn't serve as a sign. For him, signs were not things but triadic relations by which the sign connected some object to the thought, action, or experience of an interpretant. His essential idea was that knowledge or awareness of a sign carries with it knowledge of something else.

The sign, in effect, being an object of immediate experience, is an indicator of how to respond. Presented with signs, which could consist of almost anything, persons were presented with conditions of thought and action (Peirce 1958; Fisch 1978). Concerned though he was with formal logic, Peirce did not allow a hard and fast distinction between human and nonhuman sign processes (Sebeok 1975).

Neither did Mead. His concept of the gesture, adapted from Wilhelm Wundt, reflects approximately the Peircian notion of sign put to different and more limited uses. Mead locates gestures within social acts -- at the beginning of a social act, where a gesture undertaken by an individual calls forth responses by other individuals in a later phase of the act. Conversations of gestures occur because objects of experience are constituted by the meanings they have for the organisms responding to them, and the meaning of a gesture by one organism is the adjustive response made to the gesture by another organism. Thus animals other than humans could converse by means of gestures or signs. What made humans special, in Mead's view, was their use of language, because herein lay the keys to the evolution of mind and self. Language enables significant gestures, namely the conscious calling forth to oneself of the same meaning that one's gesture calls forth to another (Mead 1934). Mead's hard and fast distinction, which served his purpose, was between gesturing in general and symbolizing in particular. Only the latter enabled role taking, which was necessary for the theory he was developing.

Mead's interest was in explaining mind and self. For our purposes, more relevant are his explicit views that gesture is the basic mechanism whereby the social process is conducted (1934:13-14), that language is a complication of the gesture process, and that language symbols are simply significant gestures (consciously used with shared meanings). As he put it, "Meaning can be described, accounted for, or stated in terms of symbols or language..., but language simply lifts out of the social process a situation which is logically or implicitly there already" (1934:79). The social process, as he said, was conducted by gestures or, as we might say, by signification.

This is why we think proto-identities as sign processes are important. It would be myopic to assume, and Mead did not, that all signification in fact was represented by symbolization, or was superseded by it, or that signification was irrelevant to social interaction. If we take Peirce at his word that signs are pandemic and Mead at his word that gesture is the basic mechanism of social process, then the explanation of social interaction must reckon with the signification process of persons -- the process whereby they interpret and respond to the meanings of signs. This process is identity-connected for the simple reason that different interpretations of sign configurations, especially incorrect responses to them, may have implications for personal survival; but even those that do not have implications for personal functioning.

They also have social implications. As Mead and many ethologists have observed, cooperative activity can occur without commonly shared meanings

being given to signs, though in fact sign meanings are often commonly shared. A collapsing bridge means about the same thing to everybody caught underneath it, and so does a sentry's warning to the bison in a herd. The interpretation of gestures or signs, however, is not necessarily universal nor necessarily a property of consciousness. It is a property of the actual field of immediate experience defined through learning. So being, the configuration of signs in a field of experience, including in an asocial environment, can place persons in attitudes with respect to the field -- attitudes determined by the configuration. But what process determines the response?

Mead kept his notion of attitude within a social context, and didn't range into private experience to find causes. Proto-identities are partly private affairs, it would seem, since they contain the unsymbolized meanings in the experience of a person. But, although persons are partly private too, that doesn't imply their private experience has no measurable public effects. If the private experience of persons affects them, it should affect their social interaction also.

What do persons actually experience in connection with signs? Certainly not the signs as such. On the conventional view, which we do not question, signs convey meanings to persons by providing the persons knowledge of something else upon the appearance of the signs. Signs are markers that structure or configure experience, and the meanings and knowledge provided by variable signs are the substance of the variable experience that sign configurations organize for persons. But, if signs are pandemic, as Peirce held, is there anything pandemic about the meanings or knowledge conveyed notwithstanding the variable information content of different signs? In other words, is there any experience that might be indicated to all persons with the appearance of any sign or sign configuration?

We think there is. Sebeok (1975) hinted at it when he observed that any form of energy transfer can serve as a sign vehicle. In our view, although persons may not always consciously interpret their experience as such, signs indicate to persons the condition, state, motion or transfer of resources.¹⁰ And this is the process that determines persons' responses to the attitudes in which they are placed by their conditions of interaction. Their conditions are configurations of resource flows. Obviously, such a thought needs to be further explained, and we do that in the next section.

Resources

The term resource is unfortunate because -- in almost every Western cultural discourse -- it tends to have some very limited connotations. The connotations include resources as tangible or intangible, which allows for a decently broad scope; but beyond that the connotations narrow to resources as consumable, negotiable, commodity-like, entity-like, valued, scarce, and available from an environmental background that, as opportunities permit, social actors can

transform in the foreground to their benefit. In no science whose theories deal with resources is the concept seriously developed beyond these ordinary cultural, economically derived, connotations. For our purposes we need more than this utilitarian notion.

We proceed at a very abstract level and interpret resources as processes rather than entities. Resource processes are definable by their effects on a system of interaction. Anything that functions as necessary or sufficient to sustain a system of interaction is taken as a resource -- whether or not it is valued, scarce, consumable, possessible, negotiable, leveragable, tangible, or even cognizable. This admits almost anything to the category, but with a transposition of the idea. The idea is to focus on resource functions in process instead of resources in place (Freese, 1988a). Our argument, developed more fully by Freese (1988b), is that connected resource flows form the fundamental interaction process of any social system, out of which and because of which system structures are constituted. This includes but goes beyond the conventional idea of resources as zero-sum desiderata available for differential allocation among competing interests. It permits possessed entities of any sort, valuable or not, to be counted among the resources insofar as they behave in transfer processes that function to sustain interaction. Also counted among resources are various assorted conditions that are not entities at all -- for example, conditions of sequencing, or of structuring, or of sentiment, or of opportunity.¹¹

There is no requirement in our view that persons be consciously aware of, or have any utilitarian interest in, or have any symbolic knowledge of how to utilize, the resource flows that are functioning to sustain them and their systems of interaction. In this view, resources are not supplied from an environment in the background. Rather, resource flows are the environment -- the immediate environment in terms of which persons functionally connect to their social systems. Our focus is not on what persons and collectivities consume as resources, but on what they do that is resourceful. Something is resourceful if it sustains or enhances the interaction process and the persons connected with it. If it doesn't, it isn't.

This generalized concept of resource enables us to provide the first of several theoretical axioms that link identities to social structures. Exchange and rational choice theory can do this only insofar as utilitarian value is at issue. Symbolic interaction theory can do this only insofar as symbolic processes are at issue. But, we think there is more at issue than utilitarian value or symbolic processes. If we interpret resources as functions that sustain the social interaction process, we may connect this idea with signification, which is where this discussion began, by assuming this: To every configuration of signs there corresponds a set of active resource transfers, which is to say that persons perceive relevant resource transfers through their signs.

That, we suggest, is what signs mean to the persons (or other organisms) who are interpreting them. For Peirce, almost anything could be a sign; for us,

almost anything can be a resource. The connection is that signs are indicators of resources actively in motion. The actual or imminent transfer of resources is the experience that accompanies the appearance of sign configurations. The experience is both input to and (through learning) stored in proto-identities. When persons interact they refer to it.

Before moving on to the concept of symbol, we take a slight digression to make this idea of resources and resource flows a little more concrete. To that end, imagine a steel mill and the kinds of resource flows in and through it that define it. Imagine the flow of iron ore to the mill; the flow of coal and coke to the mill; the flow of electricity to the mill; the flow of water to the mill; the flow of heat, slag, and contaminated water out of the mill; the flow of steel out of the mill; the flow of people into the mill on a work day and home again in the evening; the flow of equipment, supplies, order forms, computers, pencils, trucks, cranes and so on through the mill; the flow of purchase orders, money, credit, and debt through the mill; the flow of skills, information, actions, and behavior through the mill; the flow of labor; the flow of organizational activities that enable the flows of physical resources and processes to be managed and utilized; the flow of esteem, respect, and power to various managers and workers.

Note that all of these objects, flows and transformations are initiated and enabled by the actions of persons. Note further that the resources themselves, material or intangible, can have no function whatever until they are in motion, that is, until they are flowing in a connected manner. What we want to suggest from the above example is that the flows and organized transformations of resources at a very abstract level are the social system, in the sense that they constitute it. And, it is the resource (and resourceful) interactions of individuals that guide and control those flows.

Symbols

The meanings associated with signs are normally taken to be properties of the context of some situation, in which the meaning of a sign to an interpretant is inferred by the response the sign provokes. The concept of a proto-identity is simply our way of suggesting that persons organize their experiential meanings associated with signs and that these meanings become properties of them as persons. Persons carry with them a collection of sign meanings, learned and accumulated from their experience, which they incorporate and integrate into their personal histories as standards for assessing signs in their immediate experience. If they do this, then sign meanings will have implications similar to the implications of the symbolic meanings associated with the person's identities. Especially they will have implications for interpersonal interaction. This is true if, by hypothesis, the appearance of a configuration of signs "means" to persons the transfer of some resource indicated by the configuration.

What do symbols "mean?" Symbols are normally taken to be significant (i.e., consciously shared) signs. But if signs indicate to persons the active flow of resources, then what is there for symbols to indicate? By attributing to signs this universal function, we shall have to do something likewise for symbols. Let us commit to a very general assumption congruent with the first: To every configuration of symbols there corresponds a set of potential resource transfers. Symbols are thus the means by which people transcend the experience of immediate signs and the resource transfers that they signal -- the means by which they store information about signs learned, make plans about signs, coordinate and regulate their plans and information, in short, how people develop a culture and transmit it.

Distinguishing active from potential resource transfers is approximately analogous to the distinction in thermodynamics between kinetic and potential energy. We think the distinction can be theoretically fruitful because whatsoever functions as a resource at some point in time might not so function at another point, and similarly things that are not now resources may, with planning, become so in the future. It depends on the meaning to the person that the resource has at various points. For example, during some event of expected long duration, being informed of the time may mean nothing early in the event and may mean something important later. Is that information not a resource in both instances? Yes, but it is not functioning in the same mode. In the first instance, the resource is not implicated in any change relevant to the interaction process. It is a potential resource with no effects. When later that same information changes the interaction process, its potential is then realized. An active resource is anything that acts to sustain persons or an interaction process in some system. A potential resource is anything that could become an active resource if it is positioned properly at the right place and time, from the point of view of the person. Active resource transfers are the objects of immediate experience, indicated by signs. Potential resource transfers are the objects of reflective experience, indicated by symbols.

That is what we take symbol configurations to mean to a person: some unrealized but potential arrangement of resource transfers in which the person is or may be implicated. For our understanding, symbols have a universal function in behavioral contexts, notwithstanding the idiographic content they might convey. It is to indicate the position of a person with respect to potential changes in resource flows. A symbolic configuration may mean to a person that some present resource function could change or that some missing resource function could be activated, thereby altering the web of social interaction in which the person is implicated. Again, we do not claim that persons necessarily understand, report, or explain their symbolic experience in this way. We claim that is the underlying experience by which persons connect symbols and objects.

Why take this view? Because all symbolized objects are potential resources. Symbols enable persons (in collaboration with others) to define,

interpret, construct, differentiate -- bring into their reflective experience -- objects of their immediate experience to which the symbol (or set of them) refers. In referring to objects, symbols may have various connotative or denotative meanings in a semantic attitude, but the objects themselves have functional meanings in a behavioral attitude. The functional meaning of the semantic content of symbols must derive from the functional meaning of the objects symbolized. And the functional meaning of the object is the resource flow potential. This is not what symbols themselves symbolize; it is what objects themselves symbolize, so to speak, in the sense that resource potential is the functional meaning that objects have for persons. Thus, although symbols may refer to objects, they must indicate more to persons than that reference value -- specifically, they must indicate a particular property of the objects, i.e., their resource potential -- a potential that interaction contexts could realize as active flows. The resource potential of objects is why persons differentiate, define, and symbolize the objects they do. There is no incentive to symbolize something that is not potentially resourceful.

IDENTITY SETS

We began by noting that there is more to social interaction and society than is contained in things symbolic. To understand the link between self/identity and social interaction we must supplement the idea of symbols and symbolic interaction by reintroducing the idea of signs. Within conventional identity theory, the concept of identity is used to control the flow of symbolic meanings. Signs are stimuli, the meanings of which reflect the current state or flow of resources, either social or physical. To incorporate the role of signs we now extend the notion of identity to a more generalized conception of an identity set. With this term we refer to the entire collection of identities and proto-identities of a person. We have a two-fold purpose in doing this.

One purpose is to suggest that proto-identity processes, which govern the flow of sign meanings (via the flow of resources), can be described with a model that has already been applied to identity processes that govern the flow of symbol meanings. One model for both kinds of process would be desirable. Whether or not persons admit into their reflective experience the conditions of their immediate experience, there must be an intimate connection between the two. The conditions of immediate experience, indicated to persons by signs, are the active resource transfers that sustain interaction. The conditions of reflective experience, indicated to persons by symbols, are potential states and changes in those transfers. Social interaction contains simultaneous flows of resources and symbols -- that is, signs of active resource functions and symbols about potential changes in them. Persons, armed with identities and proto-identities, must utilize

information about their environments in order to interact symbolically and resourcefully. We suggest a model for this in the next section.

A second purpose, implicit in what was just said, is to relate identity set processes to social interaction. The casual use of the term social interaction has long obscured the possibility that there may be a fundamental dimension of social interaction quite distinct from the interpersonal sense of the term. Current theory takes identity processes to be fundamental to interpersonal interaction -- an axiom nobody doubts. But what of proto-identity processes, or the meanings associated with signs? How do they -- how does the immediate experience of resource flows -- organize social interaction? These matters we address two sections hence.

Identity Sets and Interpersonal Interaction

The modern sociological theory of identity has been constructed almost entirely with reference to the symbolic properties of identities and the normative consensus that identification is presumed to require. Given its roots in the work of Foote (1951) and others of like mind, much of this theoretical development is quite logical. For example, the work of Sheldon Stryker (1980; 1987) and his associates construes self as a structure of identities, and places the concept of role identity front and center. On this view the sources of a person's identity are located in the network of roles, statuses, and norms of the person's subcultures -- networks that provide a structure for interpersonal interaction and, therefore, a way of locating, defining, and identifying persons. The identities¹² of a person are taken to be organized symbolic meanings relating a person and his or her social structure. With its emphasis on symbolic processes identity theory has not accorded a serious role to signification.

By now it should be clear that we do. Persons relate themselves to their surroundings partly in terms of the signs their surroundings provide. Often, but not always, persons symbolize this. When they do, these meanings are sorted into persons' various organized identities. But even when they do not, sign meanings still form part of persons' experience and have therefore to be sorted into organized proto-identities. Proto-identities represent the unsymbolized immediate experience of active resource transfers. Identities represent the symbolized, reflective experience of potential resource transfers -- with implicit expectations about possible changes in resource interactions in which the person is or would be implicated. Given this line of analysis it is hardly radical now to suggest that, for every identity, there exists at least one proto-identity with which it is correlated.

If there is some organization of sign meanings into proto-identities and symbol meanings into identities and some correlation between the two, it may be assumed that the person is able to reorganize his or her various identities, proto-identities, and relations between them in response to input from situations of social interaction. We need not assume much now about the nature of this

internal organization of meanings and meaning sets, as this is not pertinent to our present goals. It is more pertinent to assume something about the behavior of the entire conglomerate of sets of identities and proto-identities, whatever their organization, distribution, and dynamic internal interaction. Then we can connect the person to social interaction and structures of social interaction.

We have used the term identity set to include both an identity and proto-identity of a person. Since the constituent meanings of both are properties of the person, we take the person's identity sets also to be properties of the person, ones that are imputed by self to self. We doubt that anything makes much of a difference to persons during interpersonal interaction if it is not connected to their identity sets. Our reason is that identity sets provide an organization to persons' experience that enables them to assess actual or potential resource transfers that affect them. Therefore, persons ought to respond to their surroundings and affect their surroundings by way of their identity sets.

Perturbations In Identity Sets

If meanings are organized and stored into identity sets, then the stage is set for persons to be both proactive and reactive. Assume this: In any situation of interpersonal interaction the interruption of actual or potential resource flows for persons perturbs the meaning systems of their identity sets (cf. Burke, 1991). We have already reckoned that signification carries with it the experience of active resource flows and that the primary function of symbolization, insofar as it connects to signification, is to position the person in a field of potential resource flows with respect to the field of active flows. The immediate assumption, which is hardly bold, implies that persons will not be satisfied with a symbolically defined situation of interaction unless they are satisfied with the situationally relevant resource flows, active or potential. If there is not a satisfactory correspondence their meaning systems are perturbed, which is to say their identity sets are activated. The result is, persons are activated.

The significance of identity sets for interpersonal interaction is that persons use the relevant identity and proto-identity standards as referents for the processing of situational input. Persons have to have some way of sorting the meanings made available from their surroundings, and have to have some impetus to sort them, manage them, and turn them into output. The questions of means, motivation, and mechanism of response we introduce by using a model developed by Burke (1991).

Originally used for the traditional concept of identity, this model describes how a person gauges meaning inputs against a situationally relevant identity already provided as a standard. The model does not describe how an identity standard itself may change because of situational interaction. It assumes that the person compares a relevant identity standard with situational meaning inputs, is

motivated to reduce any discrepancy in order to avoid stress, and that the person will engage in behavior, in the situation, designed to restore congruity between the meaning inputs and the identity standard. Thus the model describes how meanings are cycled from the (situational) environment through the person and back again so as to involve the person in a continuous and dynamic matching process involving person and situation. The model does not presume the person acts to restore an identity to some dynamic equilibrium, nor does it presume that the attempted matching between personal identity and situational interaction succeeds.

This model is easily generalized for use with identity sets. It is sufficiently abstract in its outline that it may be interpreted to sign meanings as well as to symbol meanings -- thus to proto-identities as well as identities and to what we have called identity sets. Persons process actual or potential resource flows because that is what interaction situations present them with. The processing, according to the Burke comparison model, provides persons with readings to gauge the standards of their identity sets that actual or expected resource flows in the situation have made relevant. Whatever identity sets are activated provide standards to which the person relates or compares the symbol or sign meanings that the situation provides as input. Dynamic behavior by the person in the situation is a function of that comparison.

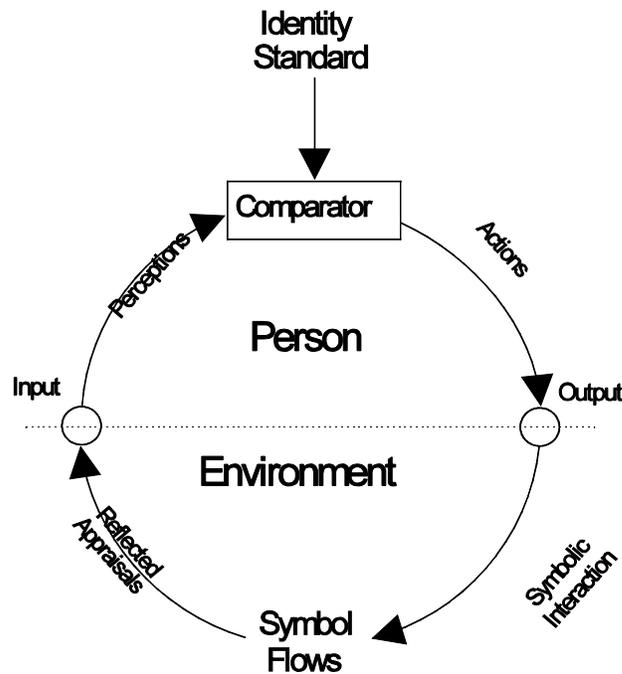


Figure 1. Model of the Identity Process

Figure 1 shows the model of the identity process as it has been developed to deal with symbolic interaction. On the input (left) side of the figure are the various reflected appraisals growing out of the interactive situation (labeled "symbol flows" in the figure). Perceptions of these appraisals or meanings are sent to a comparator, where they are compared with the meanings contained in the identity standard. To the extent that the perceived meanings do not correspond with the meanings contained in the standard actions are taken on the output (right) side of the figure. These actions as manifest in the situation are interpreted by self and other in terms of their symbolic value -- they are meaningful and contribute to the ongoing symbolic interaction. The design of the actions are to alter the symbol flows in the situation, thus altering the reflected appraisals and perceptions of them so as to bring into correspondence the perceptions and the identity standard. This is a continuously adjustive process of perception, action and symbolic interaction where the goal of the action is to bring the perceptions into alignment with the identity standard. Action is thus not simply a function of the meanings of the identity standard, nor of the perceptions (meanings) from the situation, but rather is a function of the relation between these.

Since any interaction situation represents a confluence of multiple symbol and sign configurations, and not always the same ones for different persons, continual action and reaction by persons in an interpersonal interaction situation is a matter of course. There is no state of rest. Perturbations in the identity sets of persons are the foundation for continual order-defining and sense making activities, for negotiations, renegotiations, and positioning, for explaining, accounting, and manipulating, for rearranging status and role relationships, and for reconceiving self and others. All this may be interpreted as activity designed to resolve the tensions inherent in active and potential resource flows that multiple interacting persons will differentially experience or interpret. Their identity sets are at issue. That means they are at issue.

The Burke comparison model is general enough to describe the processing of information about actual as well as potential resource flows. When applied to entire identity sets, additional matters come into play. If meanings representing actual and potential resource flows are sorted into proto-identities and identities, which themselves become correlated, then the person has a major occupation: It is to resolve the tensions between symbolic and resource interactions when they fail to correspond. This is not just a matter of social cognition or interpersonal negotiation conducted symbolically in the situation itself. The tensions may extend to unsymbolized resource flows and symbolized resource potentials, and the social interaction process now becomes more than just interpersonal.

SITUATIONS AND SYSTEMS OF RESOURCE INTERACTIONS

The concept of a social "situation" (or what we at times have called an interpersonal interaction situation) by itself is quite inadequate to provide a context for analyzing the significance of persons in interpersonal interaction. No situated episode of interpersonal interaction is self-contained, nor are repeated episodes governed by the same norms self-contained. All persons, in all situations of interaction, bring with them personal histories, unique identity sets, and common cultural norms that help to contain the interaction and to control it, as well as to individualize it. Moreover, any situation of interpersonal interaction is inordinately complex, because it combines multiple layers of social reality in the form of simultaneous and sometimes conflicting situational definitions, goals, agendas, expectations, and potential rewards and costs. A situation of interaction materializes with a gathering of assorted persons, each bringing assorted interpersonal inputs (signs and symbols). It results in variegated outputs of behavior that is both symbolically meaningful and situationally resourceful (i.e., having impact upon the resource flows in the situation). All of these inputs and outputs may be differently interpreted by different persons. How does interpersonal behavior then become patterned and organized so that microscopic interaction is converted into macroscopic structural effects? Lots of microscopic situational interaction has no discernible macroscopic structural effects at all. Still, we may assume the effects are transmitted there, in interpersonal interaction, and changed there, by way of persons. But how? With just the concepts of person, symbol, and situation of interpersonal interaction there is no way to tell.

To join the idea of a situation of interaction we need the idea of a system of interaction. Persons, after all, extend beyond situations into social systems to which they connect. By 'social system' we refer to a differentiable sequence of resource flows so functionally organized for persons as to constitute a dynamic process (or more than one) of evolving structures -- allowing that the process may be interrupted in time, dispersed in space, and intermittently applicable to given persons. Like persons, a social system is transsituational.

A given social situation, by contrast, is multisystemic. It contains, because of its different acting persons, simultaneous episodes of interaction that are realizations of states of multiple systems. An interaction situation thereby serves as a locus for change in the various system states that the situation temporarily brings into confluence. The vehicle of change is the person, who connects the situation including its resource flows to one or more systems in which he or she is implicated. The person achieves this by the processing of relevant situational inputs. Persons bring systemic inputs to situations and export situational inputs to their systems. Along the way they transform the content of both, using their identity sets as anchors in terms of which they gauge the meaning content of the information that their conditions of interaction force them to process.

We emphasize that their conditions of interaction are twofold -- situational and systemic -- and the kind of interaction in which they engage is likewise twofold -- symbolic and resourceful. How does all this sort out? It will raise no eyebrows to suggest that situational interaction provides a context for symbolic interaction. But having interpreted symbolic interaction as indicating potential resource flows for persons, to what can we assign persons' experience with active resource flows that are not symbolized at all? If the experience of persons is twofold and transsituational, their identity sets need to be organized so that persons can gauge their relations in networks of ongoing resource interactions, so as to respond to possible changes in their positions in those networks. Situations cannot provide them with that. Situations are where persons experience interaction, and the content of situations is inherently symbolic. Situations may provide a structured process useful for persons to interactively define the order of things, but the order there defined is not an end in itself. Persons can not survive just on symbols.

This leads us to suggest the following about the content of social systems: From the person's vantage point, a social system provides an organization of the resource interactions in which the person is implicated with others. That is to say, adopting a social psychological attitude, social systems should not be conceived in terms of persons nor symbolic relations between them nor structures of persons and their symbolic relations. Rather, social systems should be conceived as networks of active resource flows between persons and structures of those networks, which the activity of persons generates.¹³

There is no reason to conceive a system as a linear sum of interpersonal situations or structures thereof, and there is reason here to conceive it otherwise. Symbol meanings and sign meanings present for persons two different sorts of experience, the reflective and the immediate. But the "immediate" experiences of a person are not disconnected. If they were, the person would be disconnected. Persons extend beyond situations by way of their identity sets, which provide them with stores of information. By using the information stored in their identity sets, persons may relate their situations of symbolic interaction to their systems of resource interactions. This is portrayed in Figure 2.

It should be remarked of Figure 2 that we explicitly presume that changes in system resource interactions, insofar as persons are able to affect those, are initiated by means of the individual comparison process described by the Burke model. Each person compares resource flows in the situation with the expected flows maintained by their proto-identities, and in the event of some discrepancy takes action on the basis of that comparison. Similarly, symbolic interactions in the situation are the result of individual comparison processes, whereby each person compares symbol flows in the situation with expected flows maintained by their identities, and in the event of some discrepancy takes action on the basis of that comparison. The two flows -- resources and symbols -- are thus coordinated by being constantly and simultaneously processed by individuals. Each person

simultaneously acts to adjust flows of symbols and resources to match the flows that are expected in their identity sets. Identity sets are the mechanism which coordinate social systems of resource flows and situational interaction involving symbol flows.

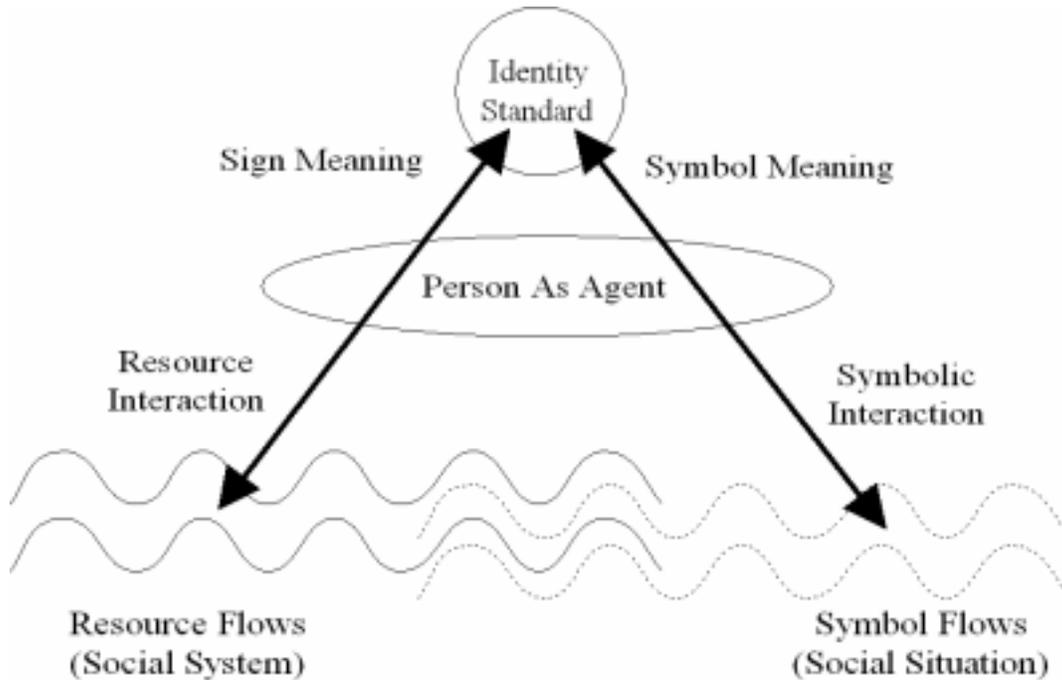


Figure 2. Identity and Social Structure

But, of course, this sounds simpler than it is. A more accurate but complicated portrayal of the simultaneous interaction processes by which persons relate situations of symbolic interaction to systems of resource interaction can be found in Figure 3.

Figure 3 portrays two separate systems. While the resource flows defining such systems are not represented, the identity sets that control the resource flows through resource interactions are represented. System 1 is controlled by five identity sets while system 2 is controlled by six identity sets. Within system 1 is portrayed a group or situation of interaction consisting of four interacting individuals -- specifically the system relevant identity sets of four individuals who are engaged in symbolic interaction. The four persons whose relevant identity sets are part of group 1 are depicted around the system in the figure. Each of the four persons is shown with multiple identity sets. Four identity sets are shown for each, but that common number is arbitrary. What we intend to portray is that each person has a system relevant identity set and other identity sets not connected to System 1. The identity sets connected by box-end lines that extend from System 1

to each person are the same identity sets. Note that one identity set relevant to system 1 is not part of the situation of interaction of group 1 because the person is not present to engage in symbolic interaction.

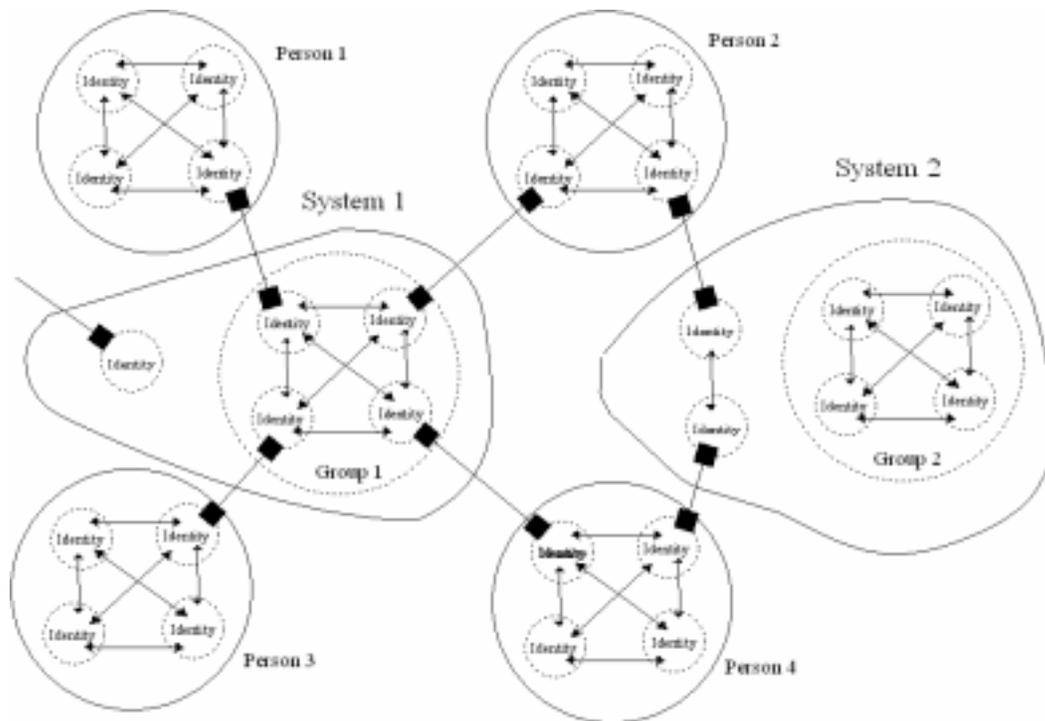


Figure 3. Systems and Situations of Interaction

In system two there are six relevant identity sets. Four of these are currently engaged in a situation of symbolic interaction as group 2. Two of the relevant identity sets are not part of the situation of interaction (group 2) because the persons (person 2 and person 4) are currently physically present in group 1. They may, nevertheless, engage in symbolic and or resource interaction relevant to system 2 while they are part of group 1, thus illustrating both the multisystemic character of situations and the transsituational nature of systems. On this latter point, one may think, for example, of two members from the same department attending a conference together. It is possible for them to conduct department business while in the conference.

CONCLUSIONS

All social action, structure, and process begins with personal activity. This personal activity is a comparison process for which the Burke (1991) model of identity provides parameters when suitably generalized. The generalization extends from considering personal identities in situations to personal identity sets,

which are linchpins for persons to relate their situations to their systems. Persons must interpret potential resource flows in situational interaction to the active resource flows of their extended systems. They must interpret from systems to situations as well. They are presented always with a problem of correspondence: How does the array of potential resource flows, defined by the symbolic configurations of a situation, fit the systems of active flows in which the person is an agent? Will those active flows be changed -- enhanced, depleted, suspended, reconstituted -- and how? The person's position as a continuing agent in systems of active flows depends upon the correspondence between those active flows and the potential flows that symbolic interaction defines as relevant. The person's situational activity depends upon that correspondence also. A potential resource flow in a situation is a reference point for active resource flows in a system, and conversely. Resolving the problem of correspondence between the two provides the person with an orientation in situational interaction. The orientation is to sample the potential resource flows that the situation indicates can be expected, compare this with the standards in the identity set, utilize knowledge of that to resolve discrepancies for transsituational systems of interaction, and act accordingly.

The impetus to change the systems of resource interactions in which persons are implicated resides in the situations of symbolic interactions that persons experience. Conversely, the impetus to change their situations resides in persons' systemic connections. All this has to be routed through identity sets. There is no impetus for any change if situational input does not disturb these meaning systems. It is the absence of perfect correspondence between situations that define potential resource interactions and systems of active resource functions, that disturbs identity sets and provides the impetus for persons to try to redefine their episodic situations so as to bring them into greater correspondence with their continually evolving systems. Their survival as persons depends upon that, because they are sustained by their systems not their situations.

Persons know this, if they do not cognize it, which is why they are proactive. Their structures of social interaction are their ways of addressing the problem of establishing a satisfactory correspondence between symbolic and resource interactions. To this end persons may create symbols or resources as needed, or destroy them as needed, where the "need" is gauged according to their identity sets. Their identity sets summarize their experience. This line of thinking suggests to us the following course correction for theorizing about interpersonal social interaction: For the evolution of microscopic structures it isn't relations between persons that matter. Persons are the relations between the things that matter -- the potential resources symbolized for them and the active resources signified to them. Persons relate the two by processing information through identity sets, which enable them to navigate through a sea of change, becoming agents who transform the symbol and resource flows they experience en route. Social interaction is organized according to that.

ENDNOTES

1. We are using the term language here and throughout in a broad manner, consistent with studies in sociolinguistics, to include not only verbal language but also bodily and affective gestures, appearance and the like, to the extent that these are symbolized.
2. We are here working with the notion of identity as the set of meanings applied to the self in a social role that define what it means to be who one is.
3. This is an application of and possibly derivative from Mead's perspective theory of objects (Mead 1938:159-165). In this theory, according to the principle of the perspective, an object exists only in relation to other aspects of its world or environment, which helps to define it. Because objects are socially defined and are relational, and identities are supposed to be objects, identities are supposed also to be relational.
4. Some semeioticians, such as Thomas Sebeok, consider it "impermissible" to ensnare the idea of a symbol with the concept of natural language (1975:90). But symbolic interactionists have conventionally done this to a considerable degree. If the rhetoric in this paper seems to conform to the convention, it is not because we endorse the convention but, rather, because we think the limitations of conventional theory will be more apparent if we use it.
5. This is substantial understatement. Apart from ethological studies too numerous to cite, there now exists a field of inquiry, complete with its own professional organization, devoted to the study of biosemiotics.
6. Mead didn't endorse it dogmatically either, except to insist that meaning is conscious only when it becomes identified with significant gestures, requiring symbols. Mead emphasized symbol meanings because only from these could there arise mind and self, which he cared to explain. Though he thought that significant gestures were available only to humans, he did not discount either the social origins or implications of unconscious meanings -- as modern symbolic interactionists are wont to do.
7. This issue is very complicated, and the nomenclature in current use in social psychology - including ours -- is not adequate to address it. For some complications see Walker (1983) and Bickerton (1990).
8. This term was suggested to us by Viktor Gecas.
9. We are not suggesting a sharp empirical distinction between signs and symbols. Signs can become symbols as their meaning becomes shared and as people are able to reflectively respond to them. Whether a particular stimulus is acting as a sign or a symbol is thus a difficult question. Theoretically, the distinction is clearer. As the stimulus functions to impart information about the current state of resources flows, it is a sign. See the discussion forthcoming.

10. To anticipate some of what follows: Our notion of resources is one of resources in use. This is a dynamic concept which is best captured by the idea of resource transfers. Resource transfer refers to the movement of a resource from one place and time to another as it is either used or positioned for use to sustain individuals or interaction among individuals. The same idea lies behind the concept of resource flow. This movement and positioning of resources as it is structured and patterned is what, later in our analysis, we shall mean by a social system.
11. No distinction between resources and opportunities is required on this view. In distinguishing them, Emerson (1987:21) uses the example of the availability of a bucket as providing an opportunity to carry water, a resource. For his purposes, this works. But we want to know, for our purposes, why that bucket itself is not a resource, why the bucket maker is not a resource, and why the very idea to use the bucket is not a resource. Is all this not resourceful?
12. Strictly, identity standards.
13. This argument was made by Freese (1988b), but without grounding it in a theory of the person. Where Freese took persons as givens, we take them as problematic.

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