Systematic Interaction Synthesis

Systematic interaction is part of everything we do in our lives: without a structure for action and reaction, society would be in complete chaos. But as much as systematic interaction can bring us together, it can push us apart because of the bias that the systems foster. We use symbolic metaphors to illustrate our thoughts and actions, though they don’t always present the full story. When we try and control the impression that we make on people, we often cannot control our whole selves. Strategically, we learn, relate, communicate and compete with each other within games that evolve with our every move, but we often have to think fast—not being able to truly assess a situation. And the alternative to offering a knee-jerk response in a time-sensitive situation is not always spending the time to let something soak in as one might expect, rather it comes in the form of hiding our reaction and moving on. Since we interpret too fast, and at best can only keep it to ourselves, bias is communicated whether we like it or not. So we rely back on the metaphors that don’t completely reveal, and the thin descriptions that group different people with shared characteristics in the same old buckets.

Metaphorical concepts create structures for what we know, or as Lakoff & Johnson (1980) put it, "Argument is War" (p. 5). It’s not that people actually physically fight when trying to convey conflicting points of view, but one only has to look at the terminology used to describe arguments to understand Lakoff & Johnson’s point: when you argue, you “lock horns,” attempt to “shoot” your opponent down, and try “to get the upper hand.” Use of metaphor is obvious, and also ordinary, as human thought processes are, according to the authors, largely metaphorical (p. 5). “What we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor,” though the authors point out that fitting as a metaphor may be, it can still hide other aspects of the concepts (p. 10). Context certainly matters (p. 12), but metaphors must remain partial, and they cannot be total. (p. 13) Therefore they can never fully explain something—they can only hope to present a frame of reference. Whole systems of metaphorical concepts can be based on this incomplete frame of reference. "Happy is Up," (p. 14) probably works for you and I, but not for all (p. 24). What metaphors do, argues *Metaphors We Live By*, is to loosely unite us, but not without loose ends. "Our values are not independent but must form a coherent system with the metaphorical concepts we live by" (p. 22).

Where metaphors serve to help us relate, interactions serve to make us cooperate. Goffman (1959) points out that “we live by inference” (p. 3) because we have to believe that others we encounter share our beliefs to some extent, lest we lead lives of constant skepticism. So when presenting ourselves to others we wish to impress upon others that we are not too indifferent than them, and also we are that which we desire to be (p. 4). This often means that we do not necessarily present an honest version of ourselves, but we certainly hope to put forth a favorable impression and the idea that our aspirations are attainable. Where we cannot bridge familiarity, we hope that our involuntary actions will pick up the slack, yet despite the need for acceptance and familiarity, there are things about ourselves we cannot control. Because of this, others are free to divide their impression of us into two parts, as Goffman writes, "a part that is relatively easy for [us] to manipulate, being chiefly verbal, and another to which [we seem] to have little concern or control, being chiefly derived from the expressions [we] give off." (p. 7)

As such, verbal and expression control in communication "reinstates the symmetry of the communication process" while making it a game at the same time (p. 8). "When an individual appears before others he will have many motives for trying to control the impression they receive of the situation," Goffman says (p. 15). There is a difference, Goffman points out, between "interactions," "encounters," and "performances." (p. 15)

Up until this point, I have discussed our overreliance on the incomplete systems with which we can communicate, as well as the systems of interaction we rely upon in order to relate to others, which are in some part completely out of the bounds of human control. In *Strategic Interaction*, Goffman (1969) now presents us with the character Harry, who is stuck in a hairy situation. Faced with life or death, Harry must decide between two uncertain choices. "Both assessment and decision-making depend on related capacities of intelligence, such as story experience of events and making this experience available when it is relevant. However, whose interests are served by an individual's intelligence is quite another matter, an understanding of which requires a shift from psychological to social terms." (p. 86) Goffman presents us with the idea that the character of Harry could be an embodiment of an ideal in a game, or a fully-fledged player in it, but the game changes, when it is life or death, and even more so when Harry's opponent is neither animal nor mineral, but "a competent gamester" (p. 94). "Perhaps the most important attribute of the players is their game worthiness," Goffman writes (p. 96), though games without opposition, where players work as a team, are possible (p. 101). Still, before trust can be attained allowing for such civility, much needs to be said about accessibility and credibility when it comes to sizing up the other players (p. 102), and for that matter, even the games themselves are not to be implicitly trusted. Goffman writes, "Games which rely on social enforcement become exposed to many issues which tight games are free of." (p. 119) In a game a "move" is not just a move, rather "an object circumstances-altering action whose efficacy just happens to be influenced by the issue of visibility," much is at stake. (p. 144)

As evidenced by Goffman’s example of Harry, when a quick reaction is often the only plausible type of reaction that can be made, this presents the problem of action upon biases, which doesn’t allow what Geertz (2007) describes in thick description. In the blink of an eye—quite actually, Geertz tells us, "the difference…between a twitch and a wink is vast" (p. 28). Since the thick description is more difficult (and time consuming) to create than the thin description, it should be fine to surmise that for the most part, thin descriptions are generally biased. Yet, even when we can recognize bias, Postman (1976) tells us, "Civility requires that we not deny our feelings, only that we keep them to ourselves when they are not relevant to the situation at hand." (p. 53) After all, "authentic communication" can help, but it can also hurt, according to Postman (p. 54), and thus we should be very careful with what we say and how we say it. "Getting in touch with your feelings often amounts to losing touch with the feelings of others." (p. 55) Yet the problem with the precept is in the inability to openly analyze what could very well be a poor assessment of a situation, not to mention the fact that it masks our ability to think about our observations, replacing them with the need to keep them to ourselves.

In other words, saying nothing can hurt as much as saying something, which is exactly what leads us to the concept of “modern racism,” which is sometimes called “symbolic racism” or “aversion racism,” according to Nadal (2013, p. 39). The example of the woman in the elevator in “A Review of the Microaggression Literature” (p. 40), and how her actions can be interpreted in many different defendable ways, despite the fact that the resounding impression was that it was a clear example of microaggression, is one such example of this. Furthermore, there in the elevator, with a game now in place, if the man takes notice and is affected by the woman’s behavior, what should his reaction be? While it’s obvious that racial microagression like this occurs, Nadal points out that occurs too often, and that microaggressions taking place toward all oppressed people are on the rise, which is why he is attempting to provide an analysis of the most typical amongst them for many different groups.

Surely Nadal’s goal with these taxonomies is to defeat the biases that we embrace so easily in the absence of thick descriptions, or the time to appropriately assess the different people and situations we encounter. In the absence of time, we all rely on systems and structures in order to interact in our society, but without a true understanding of those structures and how they work together, or how restrictive they can individually be to our understanding of one another, we run the risk of fostering bias amongst one another without being able to recognize that we’re doing so. By understanding where societal metaphors, “universal as they might seem” fall short or even fail to reveal entirely, by taking into account that the communications we deliver and receive are not entirely subject to our own control, and by recognizing the inherent biases that are often acted upon in strategic interaction, we can eke out a better understanding of those around us, especially when we take the time and consideration that is required for a thick description.