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Principles of Sociology

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Meaningful Interactions

Even since the inception of human evolution, communications of signs and symbols have become the cornerstone of every society. The interpretations of signs and symbols in life construct the civility in every individual, installing a foundation for values and beliefs. Though these values and beliefs are subjectively different from one culture to another, they still contribute a large foothold for a society to develop its identity. Sociologists look at this social growth through the perspective of symbolic interactionism. Many rightly use symbolic interactionism as a way to explain how socialization on a smaller scale—interactions between family members, friends, peers—influences the functions of a society. Through this micro-sociological theory, sociologists link interactions between individuals to the social change and social order, more specifically, the meanings that are assigned through these social interactions. At the core of symbolic interactionism, social interactions between individuals are key to understanding how their meanings and actions impact the bigger social issues (racism, gender role, education, etc.). Along with the spike in popularity of social media, symbolic interactions become more seamless and salient in studying how influential an individual's meanings have on a society. Ultimately, symbolic interactionism is essential and most important out of all the perspectives to study the structure and flaws of societies through the usage of an individual's performance and meaning assignments.

When addressing the usefulness of symbolic interactionism, Erving Goffman's Performance of Self theory plays a pivotal role in shaping the social orders. Considering one's surroundings as a theater stage, one has to always perform a role, a front, to adapt to societal conformity. Goffman's theory links every person in their world as actors to a stage, performing a variety of roles to "fit in" to the bigger scheme of things. According to the reading "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life," Ashley Crossman presents an overview of the theory itself, giving various aspects to what makes the theory so crucial to understand societal behavior. Actors, every person, have to put on a performance—putting on a front self—to engage in what is called "impression management" where everyone tries to dramatize themselves to prevent any embarrassing outcomes. The theory ties into the social interactionism theory through the idea of people creating meaning through their own behaviors. Through one's front self (the performance), one relies on the audience's reaction to gain understanding and civility about their own society. **Crossman points it out in her "Manner" section of the reading, stating, "Inconstancy and contradiction between appearance and manner may occur and will confuse and upset an audience ... when one does not present himself or behave in accordance with his perceived social status or position" (Crossman).** In a way, behaviors from any individual perceive different meanings to their audience, creating different kinds of emotional reactions. Positive reactions will allow the actor to continue their role while negative reactions hinder the actor's status or reputation. For instance, a young boy plays with his doll in front of his parents and witnesses their negative reactions towards his action; additionally, the young boy will internalize this moment as negative, altering his whole performance to please his parents (audience). Thus, this example leads sociologists to study gender roles in society, and the study originates from one's performance and interaction with one's settings. Moreover, social

media amplifies Goffman's theory with everyone presenting themselves as an influencer to others. Through the practice of social media, human interactions become virtual, seamless, adding more meanings to simple objects that one would never interpret as such. Slowly, social media transforms itself from a simple medium to a big theatrical stage for any individual to perform on; reactions from the virtual audience create a bigger impact on one's conformity to society. Liking a picture or disliking it deliberately shapes one individual's views or values based on the social reactions. In a way, it creates societal changes and norms directly from one's interactions, or performances, both on and off social media. Goffman's theory proves that symbolic interactionism has more to offer for sociologists than just a mere communication-related observation.

With the Goffman's theory in play, every individual is capable of influencing another person's opinion and belief. Through a symbolic interactionist's lens, small socialization has a bigger correlation when connecting an individual life to one's society through meanings. An example of small socialization would be education, more importantly, the interaction between the teachers and the pupils. Following the explanation in "11.2 Sociological Perspectives on Education," the reading showcases how influential schools have on a young individual through the usage of social interactions. The reading showcases how all three perspectives of sociology can be deduced out to study the foundation of education, and its relationship in shaping social civilization. The reading, however, focuses more on the symbolic interactionism aspect of education. It first mentions the how interactions in the school's playtime activities leads to establishing gender roles with girls play casually while boys play competitively. Additionally, the reading narrows its focus to the interaction between the teachers and the students. **In one instant, the reading simply states, "When teachers think students are smart, they tend to**

spend more time with these students, to call on them, and to praise them when they give the right answer” (“11.2 Sociological Perspectives on Education”). In this instant, the teachers have a big impact on their students through simple interactions in the classroom. Explicitly, the teachers are reinforcing good cheers to the “smart students,” rewarding them with better influences and confidence. Implicitly however, the teachers might push away the others who are not as smart, negatively delivering a message to them as they are not achievable as the others. In doing so, those students internalize these concepts and values—assigning subjective meanings to these behaviors, and translate them into bigger societal issues like suicide and gender inequality. Simple interactions may not seem so important to other perspectives, but they have a bigger correlation to the bigger picture of society. Thus, symbolic interactionism reveals to be more important to study about how human meaningful interactions intertwine with society in a sense that it contributes to the better understanding of human condition as a whole, and how it instills different meanings to different individuals.

Symbolic interactionism dives even further on explaining how interactions can shape the relationship between one’s inner life and the meanings of things by showing the impact of one’s assignment of meaning. Through the story of alcoholism recovery from The Washington Post, addiction has a negative connotation on the everyday interactions between father and daughter. In the inspirational news story “A teen’s letter about her dad’s alcoholism went viral—and helped heal their relationship,” the author, Cathy Free, reports the emotions shared between Preslee Scott and her father, both before and after her father’s rehab. The article showcases Scott’s tenth-grade essay, displaying how her father’s addiction causes her so much pain and how his recovery reconnects their love. **Casey Scott, the father, expresses—while recalling his inception of alcoholism, “I’d sneaked away at a parent’s party to drink or experiment with**

alcohol with some older kids. Pretty soon, it was a regular part of my life” (Free). The meaning of alcoholism strikes Casey Scott as a fun escape, but soon, it translates into a dependence. Due to his interactions with older kids, more likely to be peer pressure, he engages on his journey towards alcoholism because the older kids praise him on his destructive behavior. Thus, he constructive a positive meaning on the word “alcoholism” and its effects. Symbolic interactionism proves the father’s relationship with alcoholism is positive—internalizing a subjective meaning within him. After the accident where he crashes the car, the meaning of alcoholism changes, in addition to his daughter’s words and interactions from the essay. Through re-habitation, Scott changes his meaning on the word and becomes a better member of society. Through the usage of his platform as well—his podcast, Scott is able to communicate his views and ideologies to millions of listeners, shaping social orders. Ultimately, symbolic interactionism relies on the assignments of meanings between individuals to understand how society functions as a whole.

Conclusively, symbolic interactionism is salient in helping sociologists understand the connections between one’s interpretation of meaning to the structure of society when compared to other views. Through signs and symbols, one applies meanings to behavior and objects that sew into one’s belief and value system. Eventually, those beliefs and values travel between individual to individual through social interactions/performances (personal and virtual), crafting an image, an identity to a group, a culture, and a society. From small interactions between any individual, meaningful socializations can occur and shape one’s internal view on society. Moreover, it helps sociologists to connect personality to social change, and how it changes the social order. Social institutions’ values and beliefs start from the interpretation of signs and symbols from an individual. Religions, education, laws, and government—to name a few, are the

product of one's subjective interpretations and social interactions; ideas and beliefs are exchanged among people, passing from one individual to another like a virus. Ultimately, symbolic interactionism has a tremendous value in analyzing how society functions, viewing from a small scale to the big picture of the human condition.

Work Cited

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