THE FAULTLINE OF CONSCIOUSNESS
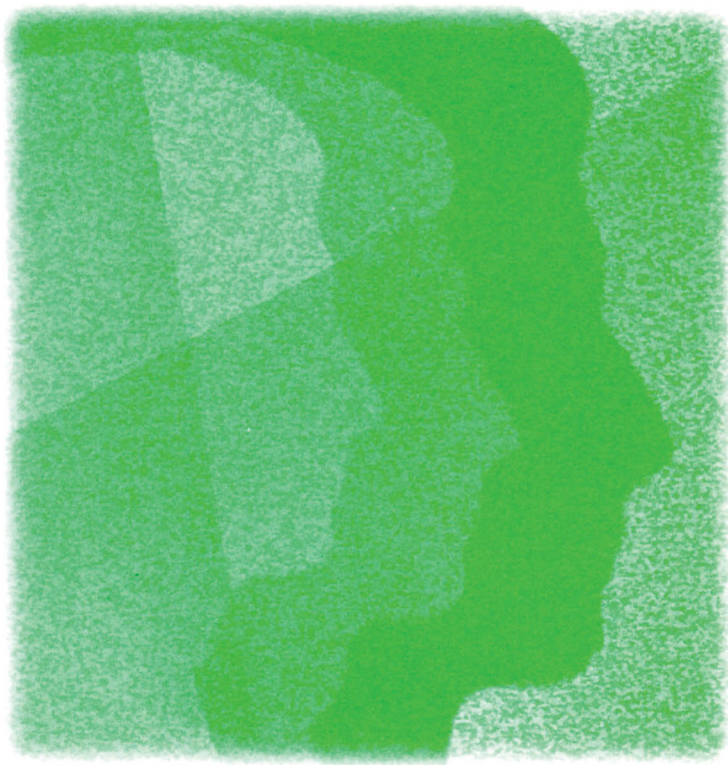
A View of Interactionism in Sociology

David R. Maines

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For
Robert W. Habenstein

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Preface

We all remember the puzzle about whether or not a falling tree in the woods makes any noise if no one is there. The answer, of course, is that it does not make any noise, since the membranes of the ear are required for noise to be brought into existence. By the same token, those membranes must be activated by the air disturbances mobilized by the falling tree, and therefore a person with fully functioning membranes who is in a situation with no air disturbances would just as obviously be in a noiseless environment. Accordingly, we can conclude with certainty that in this instance the hearing subject and falling object are both required for noise to come into existence. As anyone conversant with pragmatism would say, noise exists not merely as a thing nor as an individual experience but rather as a transaction. In the vocabulary of interactionism, noise is said to be produced from the conjoint acts of subjects and objects in a process of mutually constituting one another.

This viewpoint is easy enough to comprehend when considering the physical properties of wave lengths and frequencies in relation to the neurophysiological properties of auditory processes. It appears to be a bit harder, though, when the puzzle pertains to questions of society, and we can note how forms of that puzzle have made their way into social scientific inquiry in ways that mask the same obvious answer. For a long time, many social scientists, sociologists in particular, have taken the position that, metaphorically speaking, the falling tree will indeed make noise even if no one is around. American sociologists have especially liked that idea, which they think was proved by Durkheim when he wrote about social facts. They took Durkheim's notion that there was something left over after adding together all the parts in Spencer's organic unity, and they began trying to figure out how those leftovers (social facts) did things. We've all read sentences from those sociologists such as "social systems require . . . "or "population density does . . . " or "organizational structures need . . . " or "sex ratios permit . . . " and so forth. Those sociologists would fill out those kinds of sentences by referring to other social facts, such as "rules" or "balance" or "normative change" or to characteristics of people such as "conformist" or "decision-making capacity." There is no doubt that we all collectively learned some useful things from using that approach in which we pretended that falling trees make noise all by themselves, but we paid

the price of committing the fallacy of misplaced concreteness and thereby have more or less lost our way. Sociologists started thinking that structures and organizations and fertility rates and power distributions actually *do* things all by themselves, which clearly is an ontologically spurious position. Even the postmodernist and cultural studies crowd seem to have been infected by this way of thinking to some extent as well. They like to write a lot about "texts," and in writing about them we read that "texts create subject positions" or that "texts read people." Texts, it would appear, do all sorts of things to us. Like fertility rates or sex ratios, though, texts clearly do not *do* anything at all. Certainly they exist, as do ratios and rates, and can become quite important in some situations, but to confer action or agency on them is to argue that falling trees out of earshot make noise.[1]

Pragmatism represents a set of ideas that allows scholars who like to think falling trees make noise to keep their integrity and simultaneously help to reconfigure their thinking in a more productive and ontologically realistic manner. One of the appealing features of pragmatism is that one doesn't have to like philosophy or sophisticated social theory to make use of it. Certainly pragmatism *can* be sophisticated and complexly argued, but I am merely suggesting here that, for sociologists who are somewhat impatient with pure philosophical argument, such as myself, taking seriously the basic principles of pragmatism can contribute to improved sociological work. Most sociologists know about George Herbert Mead and his significance for sociology. The reason that Mead is such a good anchor for sociology, though, is not so much because of his discussions of the "I" and "Me," as depicted in so many textbooks, but because he remained faithful to the characteristics of human beings as a species of animals. That is, he took Darwin seriously. Along with John Dewey and other pragmatist theorists, he appreciated the fact that through evolution humans acquired language and symbols, they acquired abstract time systems, and that in the course of those processes they acquired a very sophisticated and complex way of making objects of themselves which has had enormously significant consequences. These are simple facts of our species that should not be lost on our imaginations. Moreover, Mead gave us the idea that there also is the "world that is there" that is independent of human experience, and there is the world of human experience that has emerged through evolutionary processes. While both are real and neither can be denied, human group life exists not solely in one or another but in their dialectical relationships. It is this kind of thinking that allows the pragmatist to solve the puzzle of falling trees, a puzzle that cannot be solved at all either by realist or idealist philosophy.

Symbolic interactionism, the way I have come to understand and use it, is merely the concerted application of pragmatist principles to sociological inquiry. One of the better and more general characterizations of the inter-

actionist perspective comes from Stone and Farberman (1970), which draws attention to processes through which people transform themselves and their social worlds as they engage in communication. There are three basic elements to this characterization. First, *people transform themselves:* people are selved beings who reflexively form their conduct and thus are capable of adjusting their lines of action and creating new ones. Second, *people transform their social worlds:* human action takes place in contexts of situations and social worlds. People can modify the social matrices in which they act, and thus people are agents of change. Third, *people engage in social dialogue:* communication is generic and is at the heart of both stability and change. A fourth element, however, should be added. *People respond to and deal with these transformations:* people construct situations and societies; they establish social structures and cultures. These are the consequences of human action, and once formed they reflexively function to direct and channel conduct.

This is not a theory; it is a characterization or a series of declarations about human beings and what they do. It suggests that the starting point for sociological inquiry, as Dewey (1896) told us long ago, is with ongoing activity. Humans are naturally active, and it is a disservice to sociology to ask questions about why they are active, because such questions lead us into answers like "God made us that way," which sidetrack us into unproductive discussion. So, the fundamental interactionist insight has always been that sociology deals with a species of animals who are self-aware and who can use that awareness to form their activity.

Another fundamental interactionist insight is that when people do things together they can create enduring group formations, such as divisions of labor, rules for inheritance, wage-labor relations, or ideologies. These are instances of group characteristics that influence human conduct and indeed are not reducible to the traits of individuals making up the group or society. It does not take a Durkheimian or a "macrosociologist" to recognize that group structures are real and that they can influence what we do. The interactionist, however, is reluctant to reify those structures by treating them solely as independent variables in a linear causal model. Rather, those group properties are structurations, to use Giddens's term. Divisions of labor, for instance, are group structures that are perpetuated and kept in place through human activity in which people recognize task specialization in relation to other specializations, who are sufficiently aware of the situation as one of divided labor, and who define that situation either as acceptable or inevitable. Just as clearly, divisions of labor can change so gradually that people are imperceptibly aware of that change or they can be completely dismantled by administrative decree. There clearly is nothing particularly noteworthy about these observations, except to say that they are rather obvious sociological expressions of pragmatist princi-

ples, and that the interactionist over the years has steadfastly insisted on seeing human group life in all its forms as a dialectic of creativity and sedimented consequences of ongoing human activity.

From the inception of the perspective, interactionists have been both catholic in scope and very curious about exploring the common and / or new ground with other perspectives. One result of that breadth of perspective has been the identification of various categories of interactionist thought. I do not here refer to the unfortunate and mistaken distinction between the so-called Iowa and Chicago schools (Meltzer and Petras, 1970) from which many sociologists got the highly distorted idea that Manford Kuhn was "scientist" and Herbert Blumer was a "humanist." Rather, it is the idea that there exist many versions of interactionism, which have been labeled as structural, phenomenological, semiotic, behaviorist, postmodern, Simmelian, dramaturgical, Marxist, Weberian, and feminist interactionism (Fine, 1990, pp. 120–21). It is not at all clear what these designations mean in and of themselves, but I am certain that they are nowhere close to being "schools" of thought that are somehow distinguishable from one another and that represent divergent paradigmatic approaches.

I mention these versions, because it is against the backdrop of their contemporary articulation that I have written this book. Indeed, this book is "my view" of the bearing of interactionism on sociological inquiry, and, as my subtitle suggests, the interactionism that can be found in general sociology. My view, however, is most certainly not yet another "version" of interactionism that I offer in competition with the other versions. Instead, it is a kind of invitation to reconsider the promise of sociology. What the specifications of all these versions of interactionism tell me is not just that there is diversity within interactionism, but that there are tremendous numbers of sociologists who are dealing with interactionist ideas in serious ways. Seen in this light, the central feature of interactionism is not its parochialism, as some have characterized the perspective, but its vitality, breadth, and capacity to frame analytic issues for a diverse sociology.

My audience for this book consists of those who work in the area of general sociology. I am frankly rather unsure of what the term "general sociology" exactly means, but whatever it is I am certain there is a healthy diversity within it also. In reflecting on it, though, I think that general sociology includes interactionists and noninteractionists alike, and refers to those scholars who focus their work on the topic of people doing things together and who try to understand better what happens when people do that. They also recognize that in various ways collectivities are forms of activity and that under certain conditions those collectivities themselves can act just like individuals do. Furthermore, these scholars understand well that human group life is probabilistic and that some measure of uncer-

tainty exists in every social arrangement. Accordingly, I think of general sociology as a broad-based attempt to understand and ideally explain the problem of order. Order, or sufficiently regular and predictable patterns of events, is problematic precisely because of the inefficiency and inadequacy of the structures and arrangements that humans develop as a means of guaranteeing order. The problem of order therefore consists of the simultaneous presence and operation of predictability and unpredictability, of boredom and chaos, and I think that general sociology is an area of inquiry involving scholars who pursue answers to that problem.

I consider myself a general sociologist, in fact, as a sociologist first and an interactionist second. My conviction is that the interactionist perspective, in its broadest terms, is exceedingly useful for asking questions and framing answers to various instances of the problem of order. Moreover, I thoroughly agree with Herbert Blumer's position that should interactionism be shown as inadequate, then it "should be thrown ruthlessly aside" (1969: 49). While some critics of interactionism clearly have expressed the view that such a time has come and gone, I will present evidence in this book suggesting that not only are those critics misguided, but that interactionism may well be becoming more useful and significant to the development of general sociology. My overriding view in this book, suggested by its title, is that sociologists over the years have learned a way of talking about themselves and their discipline in a way that has compartmentalized interactionist work and relegated it to the margins of scholarly consideration[2] while simultaneously and unknowingly becoming more interactionist in their work. This drift toward interactionism, however, is a fractured and relatively unproductive process because the prevailing rhetoric of interactionist marginality, expressed not only by noninteractionists but by some interactionists as well, masks that very trend. This drift and its fractures, I think, rests at what I call sociology's "faultline of consciousness."

This book is organized as an expression of my view of the centrality of interactionism to general sociology. Each chapter, most of which are organized into three major sections with an introductory essay, is designed to do a certain amount of work in the articulation of this view. Chapter 1 presents a definition of the basic point of view of interactionism, discusses and refutes a range of common professional stereotypes about the perspective, and then shows some evidence that sociology is becoming increasingly interactionist but is largely unaware of that trend. My argument obviously is not definitive, but I am confident that it is sufficiently well-grounded to justify further inquiry into the proposition.

The first major section of the book, Theoretical Concerns, consists of chapters on Mead, Park, and Blumer. As I explain in the introduction to this section, these chapters address the awareness context element of my proposition of interactionism's growing centrality. Being a naive idealist,

as Carl Couch playfully called me, my assumption is that in the best of worlds, scholars may alter their thinking if shown that they have somehow acquired some measure of trained incapacity, as Dewey called it. While I am not quite that naive, I nonetheless persist.

Chapter 2 is devoted to Mead's processual conception of social order in which it is argued that his theory of time (as activity) is a viable perspective for analyzing matters of agency, structure, and causation. This perspective, I suggest, proves far more sociologically useful than the conventional focus on the "I" and "Me," which has been part of the myth of interactionism's "micro" bias. Chapter 3 goes into some detail to show how professional myths have been developed in sociology that serve the interests of various factions of the discipline. In this case, I analyze the field of urban ecology and argue that decisive misinterpretations of Park's proposals for analyzing ecological processes became sedimented in scholarly texts and then interpreted as factual. These "mythic facts" and "constitutive rhetorics" had major consequences for retarding scholarship in this area, and directly challenge the theory growth model of social scientific inquiry. Chapter 4 explicates Herbert Blumer's theory of industrialization and social change, and reveals him more as the student of macrohistorical processes and as one explicitly concerned with a proper causal framework than as the micro, subjectivist, humanist as he so often has been depicted and conventionally regarded in sociology's collective consciousness.

If the first section of the book can be said to open new spaces for viewing the possibilities of a general sociology, then the next two sections are designed to fill those spaces. Before characterizing those sections, however, a disclaimer is in order.

I have never been especially programmatic in my thirty years as a practicing sociologist, but I have been reasonably consistent. I certainly value programmatic scholarship when done right, but for reasons of personality or circumstance, I have not done so. In fact, I have almost purposefully indulged my curiosity by studying a rather wide range of subjects—chronic illness, education, gender, urban areas, immigration, organizations, race, policy processes, religion, small groups. I admire scholars who specialize in an area and stick with it, but over the years I have come to see those specialty areas merely as research sites rather than as exclusive domains of committed expertise. The consistency in my work therefore is not substantive but conceptual in nature. Robert Habenstein, my major professor in graduate school, drummed into me that contributions can be made in several ways and that one way is in choosing the right problem and sticking with it, which is a view that was reinforced later through my associations with other notable scholars such as Eliot Freidson, Howard Becker, Anselm Strauss, Gregory Stone, and Carl Couch. As Habenstein expressed it once, a good idea will last longer than a good *p*-value.

Chapters 5–10, accordingly, display considerable substantive variation but fairly consistent conceptualization. At the most general level, they are framed as the enduring problem of freedom and constraint. This has been the problem addressed by the classical moral philosophers and political theorists, and it goes to the heart of the sociological pursuit of the problem of order. It was the problem faced squarely by Mead and Dewey, if not all the pragmatists, it rested at the base of the views developed by Park and Blumer, and it now finds itself in the angst of postmodernism and post-structuralist thought. This problem translates easily into the sociological vocabulary of the relations between structure and process, and it lurks behind every theory of agency sociologists have proposed. For better or worse, then, this has been the general issue that has guided my research and thinking.

The six middle chapters in varying degrees and modes are empirical studies I have been involved in for several years. They are examples of work that can be done; they most certainly are *not* exemplars. An exemplar sets a standard for performance. It is an ideal model for evaluation. An example is merely an instance of a generic category of performance, but does not establish a standard. Chapters 5–7 thus are *examples* of research using interactionist concepts and theory, some drawn from Chapters 1–4, that address problems of structure and agency. The ideas of Park, Blumer, Mead, Goffman, Strauss, Stone, Marx, Weber, and others are woven through the data in pursuit of a conceptualization of structure as process and in recognition that human creativity invariably must confront obdurate conditions of sedimented social arrangements. These chapters, respectively, deal with organizational rules, urban stratification, and racialized culture, and in them I examine how people and groups forge lines of action in a reflexive structuration process.

Chapters 8–10 flow along the same conceptual path, except that they take seriously the empirical fact that people are storytellers. The idea of "narrative," like "social constructionism," is in the air these days, but there still is the lingering doubt that narratives are either mere stories or some cultural studies fetish. I try to illustrate in these three chapters, though, how narrative analysis can be incorporated into the interests and purposes of general sociology. I attempt to show how acts of telling are intimately connected to cultural and contextual frames of legitimacy, and then how narrative structures (as opposed to the structures of narrative) may be intimately connected to social institutions. These are exploratory studies that simultaneously take communication processes and contextual effects seriously by considering the possibility that credibility is not only a function of narrative performance but also of contextual embeddedness.

In my concluding Chapter 11, I take up again issues of interactionism's troubled centrality to sociology. I offer the argument that the field of soci-

ology has been a social constructionist one for most of the past century, and use the metaphor of the "edges" of interactionism to discuss the faultline of consciousness and how it has played out in several areas that interactionism has touched.

The views contained in this book are my own, but some of them have been expressed before, primarily in rather obscure places, and all of them have been developed over the years through innumerable conversations with some very smart colleagues and some wonderful and productive collaborative relationships. A few of those colleagues are now deceased—Herbert Blumer, Gregory Stone, Anselm Strauss, Carl Couch, Stan Saxton—but many readers will be able to see the influence of their thoughts on my views. Sheldon Stryker and David Britt were good enough to give me sound advice for revising Chapter 1, and it now is a more balanced statement as a result. In the course of editing Blumer's posthumous book on industrialization, Tom Morrione and I wrote a version of Chapter 3 that appeared in the *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* (Volume 4, 1991, pp. 533–45), which I have expanded into the present version. Chapter 4 is a revised version of an article that appeared in *The Sociological Quarterly* (Volume 37, 1996, pp. 521–49) and was coauthored with Jeffery Bridger and Jeffrey Ulmer. The idea for this chapter actually came out of a theory course I taught at Penn State that Bridger took, and through several years of discussion and reading, we developed the present argument. Chapter 5 was written with Joe Palenski and published in the British journal, *Sociological Review* (Volume 34, 1986, pp. 573–89). Chapter 6 is an original contribution that comes from the ongoing research on the Detroit Archdiocese I have been conducting with Michael McCallion, and so I am happy to have Mike as a coauthor on this chapter. Chapter 7 also is original material that my coauthor, Abdi Kusow, used for his doctoral dissertation at Wayne State University. Chapter 8 was originally given as a university lecture, at the invitation of Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner, at the University of South Florida, and then appeared in the *Michigan Sociological Review* (Volume 10, 1996, pp. 87–107). Chapter 9 originally appeared in *Symbolic Interaction* (Volume 18, 1995, pp. 303–22), written with Wendy Evans, and has been slightly revised here. The data for Chapter 10 came from contract research work Jeff Bridger and I did in the early 1990s on a Lilly-funded project concerning the parish closings in the Detroit Archdiocese. We published an earlier and shorter version in the *Iowa Journal of Communication* (Volume 31, 1999, pp. 1–15), but in this chapter I have tried to work through the conceptualization of narrative and social institutions in more detail. Peter Hall and Mike Katovich read the entire manuscript and made numerous suggestions for improvement, and not unimportantly at various points they were able to save me from myself. All in all, I have selected and reworked these materials into a choreographed manuscript

that readers can consider as an integrated view rather than as disparate studies.

I have benefited from the discussions and support of additional friends and colleagues. Michael Katovich, the two Jeffs (Bridger and Ulmer), Lonnie Athens, Norman Denzin, Michael McCallion, Jay Meehan, Gary Shepherd, Peter Hall, Stan Lyman, David Britt, Terri Orbuch, Harvey Farberman, Susan Haworth-Hoeppner, David Altheide, Richard Travisano, and Shing-Ling Chen continue to give me new thoughts and reasons to reframe old ones. My wife, Linda Benson, is a political historian of China who spent the summer finishing her fourth book as I worked on this one. She shows me the civility, humanity, and humor that help keep me balanced, and her own superior scholarship continually reminds me of the need for better comparative and historical work in sociology. Richard Koffler, executive editor at Aldine de Gruyter, overcame himself after I failed to finish a previous book commitment with him, and arranged a contract offer based on a book prospectus. Bless him—which perhaps is an odd thing for a nonbeliever to say—but bless him anyway. Bernie Phillips, editor of the Sociological Imagination and Structural Change Series for Aldine, read the entire manuscript and provided even-handed and insightful guidance for revisions. Gary Shepherd, my outgoing department chair, was patient and forgiving of my postponing and canceling necessary meetings that I, as incoming chair, needed to have with him. Bless him also. Kathy Barrett, our departmental secretary, skillfully helped to move things along in a timely manner by scanning old documents, dealing with a messy bibliography, and with Gary Shepherd helped me late one night to retrieve Chapter 6, which somehow had disappeared into cyberspace. And, Mike McCallion came to my rescue by reading an entire set of pageproofs for those last details.

Lastly, my dedication. Originally I wanted to dedicate the book to Linda and to my dissertation adviser, Robert Habenstein. Both in their own ways have been merely central to my life. I was chatting in the kitchen one day with Linda about this idea, though, and she said "Now Davey, you just go ahead and dedicate that book to Hobby. You know how important he's been to you." So, another blessing is in order, this time for Linda's selfless capacity to bless Hobby. Professor Habenstein, a Blumer and Hughes student and card-carrying member of the Chicago school, taught me a great deal about how to go about being a sociologist. He taught me and scores of other graduate students about sociology in his classes, but in our many informal conversations and especially in his comments on the margins of the first draft of my dissertation, he helped me to think and see more sociologically. He had a talent for knowing when to ratchet up the pressure and critical commentary as well as knowing when to order more beer and to allow a bit more whining. Now in his eighties, he continues to produce so-

ciological prose and he stays in touch with letters full of his latest thoughts and suggestions of books I should read. I think he must have always been that way. As his fellow graduate student, Erving Goffman, said about him, "You were the one who taught us all."

NOTES

1.   I nonetheless understand that attributing agency this way makes writing considerably easier. The reader will note places in this book where I have availed myself of this convenience, but I have tried to confine this practice to situations where collectivities can be rightly considered to constitute acting units.

2.   I recognize that many sociologists regard their areas of work as marginalized. Certainly these would include mathematical sociology, the sociology of religion, social psychology, environmental sociology, social theory, sociology of emotions, and those espousing laboratory research methods. My argument here is that in the case of interactionism there exists a paradox of its marginalization co-existing with its increasing centrality in sociological work.

1

The Interactionism of Contemporary Sociology

Some of my more frustrating moments as a sociologist took place when I was on the faculty at Pennsylvania State University and a few of the more influential members of the department called me a "symbolic interactionist." These acts never occurred as blatant instances of name-calling, as in "you dirty interactionist!" but the quieter and more effective form of dismissive labeling and indifference. Expressed only periodically, such conduct took several forms. Although I had taken my doctoral exams in stratification, urban sociology, and organizations, for example, I was assigned courses in social psychology because, so the logic-in-use went, interactionists do that kind of microlevel work. Actually, teaching those courses was fine with me, but in that department at that time, with about one-third of the faculty engaging in demographic analysis of one sort or another, such assignments were a form of ghettoizing. Another kind of dismissal is exemplified by an otherwise pleasant conversation I had with a colleague, in which she remarked that I was really aligned more with the humanities than with science. Interactionists, especially the Blumerians, are like that, she suggested. Alongside these kinds of deficit model utterances was an array of rather overtly nasty acts, but that department was a generally nasty one in the late 1980s, and a number of faculty were feeling the sting of the demography oligarchy that ran the place. Needless to say, I didn't last long there—only five years—primarily because, from their point of view, interactionists were a drag on their aspirations to become a top-ten department. And I suppose I didn't help myself much because I developed somewhat of a mouth.

Before I left in 1991, though, I conducted an informal survey of the department members for purposes of determining what in fact the major theoretical thrust of the department was. I had read something written by nearly every member of the department and had a pretty good idea of each one's basic ideas (policy analysis was big, I knew), but it still was a bit of a surprise when I discovered that *about one-fourth of the department's faculty used some kind of interactionist theory in their work.* Some used it more explicitly than did others, of course, but the clear conclusion was that if there

was a single theoretical thrust to the department it was interactionism. The really fascinating thing about that department at that time was that, with the possible exception of one other person, I was regarded as the only interactionist there. So it could be said that here was an interactionist department that didn't know it. The entire set of experiences got me thinking.

After musing for some time and scanning the journals in general sociology, I came to the conclusion that it was not just Penn State's Sociology Department but the entire field of sociology that, without seeming to be aware of it, has been moving in the direction of symbolic interactionism. I realize that such a claim sounds rather presumptuous, but with some thought I suspect that most readers can come to see that, if not justified in its own right, the proposition is at least worth further consideration. Its plausibility, though, depends on the answers to several questions: (1) What is the conceptual nature or content of symbolic interactionism? (2) What is the character of the scholarship derivative from or consistent with that perspective? (3) How do we demonstrate increases in interactionist work? (4) How do we demonstrate that a certain number of sociologists are unaware they are doing interactionist work? I will address these questions in this chapter, in the course of which I will argue the position not merely of interactionism's continuing relevance to general sociology but of its necessary relevance. To rephrase my argument in an even more presumptuous way, I would say that sociology has never had any alternative but to move eventually toward the interactionist perspective.

ON INTERACTIONISM

What is interactionism? Several scholars over the years have provided descriptions and assessments of symbolic interactionism. Some have characterized the perspective in terms of its basic propositions (Rose 1962; Blumer 1969), some in terms of lists of assumptions [Strauss (1993) lists nineteen], others have provided discussions of the perspective's background in social philosophy and its subsequent developments (Stryker 1980; Reynolds 1990), and still others have listed the perspective's basic precepts and questions (Manis and Meltzer 1978; Stone and Farberman 1970). Like all perspectives, there is some variation among interactionists concerning how these assumptions, precepts, and propositions should be expressed, just as there is variation in what concepts and propositions should be emphasized or deemphasized. For my purposes, though, I will draw from these discussions to offer a list of simple facts and statements that can serve as a point of departure for issues I will take up later in this chapter.

All interactionists and some noninteractionists tend to take seriously the following facts.

1. *People can think, and they possess self-awareness.* Despite the variation in cognitive abilities among people and the various conditions under which people may be more or less aware of themselves, this statement of fact holds. Accordingly, we find interactionists who study and write theories about cognition, selves, and identities.
2. *Communication is central to all human social activity.* Because of this fact, interactionists tend to conceptualize cognition and selfhood as persons in communication with themselves, and they tend to privilege language and other forms of representations (i.e., symbols) in their studies of social phenomena.
3. *All forms of human activity occur in situations.* Human behavior must occur somewhere, and if that behavior is overtly social then it occurs with someone in a cultural, institutional, gendered, national, racial, economic, and/or historical context. Situationless conduct is unknown among human beings.
4. *Human relationships and collectivities are forms of activity.* These forms can range from interpersonal relations to social structures to global economies, but in each case the interactionist will regard them as action- and agency-endowed.

Unlike some theories, such as expectation states theory (Wagner 1984), which depends largely on a series of assumptions and axioms for its theoretical credibility,[1] interactionists tend to adhere rather tenaciously to fundamental characteristics of the human species for their theory's credibility. Such adherence, of course, is basic to all worthwhile science insofar as it identifies a common content for disciplined inquiry. Accordingly, I call the above four statements "facts" in recognition that they apply to members of the species of animals that sociologists have identified for study. People can think and they possess consciousness, they communicate in a variety of ways that renders their conduct social, their activity is always situated, the features of their societies come from their activity, and those features influence subsequent activity. These facts are so obvious that they need not be stated, but inexplicably we still have sociologists who have conjured up explanations of human conduct that completely fly in their face.

From these four facts, interactionists have derived a series of orienting propositions that they use to conceptualize their research and scholarly inquiry. They include at least the following three:

1. *Human activity involves transactions of meaning.* If humans communicate on the basis of symbolic representations (e.g., words, money, clothing, fashion, bodily gestures, media), then they must interpret any communicative gesture in order to form a social response. Such interpretations incorporate meanings, and those meanings can range from taken-for-granted, habitlike embedded consensuality to con-

flictual, oppositional, overt nonconsensuality. Interactionists regard issues of meaning as fundamental to understanding and explaining human group behavior, and thus they tend to make it central to their approach to sociological inquiry.

2. *Variation, change, and uncertainty are intrinsic to human group life.* If we know anything about human societies, it is that even the most stable forms of social organization and institutional arrangements will not last forever. We also know that change and uncertainty go hand in hand, and that even in agreed-upon and controlled circumstances outcomes are never completely certain. The probabilistic nature of futures makes variation a natural component of social life, and together these three elements constitute much of the "ordered flux" that G. H. Mead saw in society.

3. *"Society" and "the individual" are never separable but are merely different phases of social processes.* Cooley (1909) said it earliest and best: society, he said, is the collective phase and individuals the distributive phase. Accordingly, individuals are always social beings, and societies are always composed of interacting individuals. The interactionist is reluctant to study one without studying the other, and in any case, the choice is merely a matter of emphasis brought on by the research question at hand.

These four facts and three orienting propositions are not exhaustive, and they clearly do not constitute a theory. Moreover, I really do not know many practicing interactionists who spend much time dwelling on them in the abstract. Rather, they are a starting point for conducting research and perhaps eventually formulating a theory (Nisbet 1970:57–63). Before discussing the issue of the interactionist perspective as against interactionist theories, though, I wish to make a few observations about these seven statements in light of common images and claims made about interactionism.

First, the interactionist recognition that people think and have selves and the fact that some interactionists even study these aspects of human conduct does not render the perspective a subjectivist one with an individualistic bias. Nor does the interactionist focus on meaning render the perspective subjectivistic. This issue of interactionism as having a subjective bias, I suspect, can be traced to the early 1960s after Don Martindale's *The Nature and Types of Sociological Theory* (1960) was published, in which there was a concern with categorizing and classifying theory. This view also was fostered in the 1970s with the rise of ethnomethodology, phenomenology, and existential sociology and the resulting analyses of their relationships to symbolic interactionism (see Denzin 1969; Zimmerman and Weider 1970). These kinds of discussions, I propose, contributed to the view that symbolic interactionism is a subjectivistic perspective.[2]

That view, of course, is absurd. All sociologists recognize that people think and possess consciousness, including the "macro" or "structuralist" sociologists. If one thinks about it, the phrase "subjective sociology" is an oxymoronic impossibility. Subjectivity is real and may be composed of thoughts, feelings, attitudes, mental processes, perceptions, opinions, and prejudices, but once a person expresses them they are no longer subjective. Rather, they now belong both to the speaker and to the hearer of those expressions and thus are part of the social (see W. I. Thomas on jurisdictions). The subjective-objective dichotomy is an historically rendered rhetorical construction that has no relevance whatsoever to sociology, because sociological analysis begins with the utterance of a thought, feeling, or attitude. That is, by definition subjectivity *cannot* be directly studied in a sociological manner. The more productive distinction is private vs. public in recognition that we may have thoughts and experiences we do not express (the private) but once we express them they become part of the social (public). Interactionism, accordingly, takes into account the fact that people think but considers those thoughts at the point that they are expressed in interaction and thus are part of the public realm. I would include in this formulation those interactionists who claim to be studying "lived experience," which is a redundancy that can be studied only in terms of one's expressions of an experience (Bruner 1986).

Second, to assert the centrality of communication and meanings that are transacted through communication processes does not limit interactionism's relevance solely to the area of social psychology. These processes are generic, and it is rather obvious that their relevance also is found in organizational studies, gender studies, economic sociology, sociology of science, race relations, urban studies, the sociology of religion, historical sociology, political sociology, stratification, and other areas. In these areas of study it is common to find scholars focusing on issues of media representations, language, information technologies, processes of persuasion and information control, the diffusion and segmentation of ideas, debates and assessments of various kinds of events and happenings, consensus-building, acts of collective secrecy and strategic alignments, policy formation, and so forth. All of these are issues of communication and meaning, and anyone engaging in a measure of clear-headed reflection on them can easily conclude that, while symbolic interactionism certainly is relevant to social psychology in a variety of ways, it has relevance to many other areas as well.

Third, and relatedly, the insistence by interactionists that human conduct is always situated does not fate the perspective to "micro" concerns. The concept of situation is a slippery one, but at a minimum it refers to those factors with which an actor must deal in forming a line of conduct. Elements of situations may include family income, racial and gender com-

positions of groups, access to resources, regulation of space, language, relationships and networks, economic systems, societal disturbance or stability, norms of emotion display, processes of legitimation and authority allocation, urban and rural settings, family violence and abuse, location in a dual economy, or corporate monopolies. Situations quite clearly vary in scale and content, and they affect the paths of activity actors take by providing avenues of constraint and opportunity.

Fourth, the interactionist focus on human activity and agency does not constitute a denial of social structure and institutional arrangements. Allegations of that denial, I suspect, originated in sociology's institution-building phase in the 1920s and 1930s, and persisted through the 1960s as the discipline became more quantitatively oriented. In competing for intellectual space, it was in sociology's vested interest to trade on a social factist formulation in which group properties were seen as exerting causal influences on some form of behavior. In its simplest expression, the dominant proposition adopted by the field was that "social structures cause human action." Within that general proposition we witnessed hundreds of studies in which some element of social structure (e.g., social class, power, education, residence, organizational size) would be used as an independent variable to "explain" through correlational statistics some independent variable (e.g., voting, self-esteem, earnings, socialization of children, neighboring). It was a research paradigm that worked wonders for the administrative and economic growth of the discipline and its legitimation in academic and governmental circles.

While that research paradigm was being developed, scholars such as W. I. Thomas, Robert Park, and Herbert Blumer, drawing from the philosophical pragmatists, were busy promoting an alternative formulation. They proposed that institutional and social structural arrangements were real, but that those arrangements were created, maintained, and changed through human activity and agency. In its simplest expression, the formulation they supported was that "human action causes social structures." Clearly this proposition was terribly inconvenient and poorly timed for sociology's institution-building phase, since it blurred the images of the relations between sociology and psychology. The conventional wisdom of the field was that the interactionists simply had placed the causal arrow in the wrong direction and as a consequence of that error their theories were of limited utility and potential for developing a genuine sociology. Fortunately, as will be discussed later, sociology seems to be growing out of that viewpoint.

My fifth observation pertains to research methods. There is nothing in the seven statements that requires interactionists to use, or prevents them from using, any particular set of research procedures common to sociological research. The fact of the matter is that most interactionists tend to

be methodologically rather conventional. Yet, there has persisted a great deal of misinformation and unfortunate stereotyping about "interactionist methods," some of which has been perpetuated by interactionists themselves, as if such methods have really existed. According to this distorted view, interactionists are naturally drawn to qualitative methods, which require the use of "sympathetic introspection" and "getting inside the actor's head" to generate data about some individual's inner experiences. Such a view, I declare, is categorically wrong.

Typically, these views are traced through distortions of Herbert Blumer's various writings about research methods and his alleged out-of-hand rejection of quantitative analysis. It therefore is worthwhile to take a brief but saner look at his actual views and arguments. First, Blumer's general position was that methodological choices and decisions should be derived from the research questions asked and with respect to the nature of the phenomena under study. Second, any procedure available can and should be used, including "the statistical, the case study, the historical, and the ecological" (Blumer 1939a:xxix), but in recognition that each has its own limitations. Third, research should be conducted insofar as possible in terms of intergroup relations and not necessarily in terms of individual experiences. Here, for example, are his recommendations for studying social protests.

> The proper object of scholarly concern is not the protesting group but the *arena* of collective protest. One does not understand collective protest by merely studying the protesting group, by trying to find out what kinds of people compose it and their views, their motives and their actions. One must identify the other groups acting in the arena (echelons of authority, agents of authority, interest groups, and the general public) and observe what they do. Above all, it is necessary to see how the actions of these participating groups set the stage for one another and influence each other. Collective protest is a *joint* development involving the interplay of different groups and moving in diverse directions as a result of the interplay. (1978:51–52, emphasis in original)

Furthermore, while Blumer was critical of the ritualized and thoughtless use of variable-based survey analysis and thought that a variable-analytic orthodoxy was an unproductive approach for grounding an empirical science of society, he did not reject variable analysis out of hand and in fact was quite explicit in advocating its use. He expressed that advocacy in his presidential address to the American Sociological Society:

> Variable analysis is a fit procedure for those areas of social life and formulation that are not mediated by interpretive processes. Such areas exist and are important. Further, in the area of interpretive life variable analysis can be an

> effective means of unearthing stabilized patterns of interpretation which are
> not likely to be detected through the direct study of the experience of people.
> Knowledge of such patterns, or rather of the relations between variables
> which reflect such patterns, is of great value for understanding group life in
> its "here-and-now" character and indeed may have significant practical
> value (1956:689–90).

I trust that some readers may be surprised to discover that the very person
who coined the phrase "symbolic interaction" also explicitly stated that in
some cases statistical survey research is preferable to methods designed for
the study of personal experience.

I will not press my points further [but see Maines (1989a) on Blumer's
advocacy of experimental methods] on the assumption that these few di-
rect quotes are sufficient to nullify any misinformed views of Blumer's
methodological commitments. While he certainly recommended research
that took the perspectives of the "acting units" into account (e.g., persons,
groups, corporations, legislatures, churches—whatever is being studied),
he did not reject the legitimate use of any set of procedures so long as they
were appropriate for the research problem. If I were to guess, I would say
that interactionists in general advocate a multimethod approach in which
social processes and their outcomes can be studied simultaneously (e.g.,
Ulmer 1997). Clearly, one does not have to be an interactionist to utilize
such an approach (see Taylor 1947) but it is one that at least would be gen-
erally consistent with the perspective's ontology and epistemology.

Sixth, and last, there is the common view that interactionism has re-
mained merely a conceptual perspective and has not yet reached the sta-
tus of being a genuine theory. The import of this view, as I understand it,
is that since interactionism is only a perspective, it therefore cannot be
tested and without testing it cannot contribute to an empirical science of
society. This mistaken view typically is expressed either by scholars reiter-
ating others' misguided iterations or by self-serving conceptions of theory
construction (Wagner and Berger 1985), but in either case it overlooks the
theoretical development that in fact has occurred.

It is not difficult to demonstrate the existence of interactionist theory. For
purposes of such demonstration, I will regard a perspective as an array of
concepts and ontological claims that prefigure inquiry and analysis. Com-
monly called metatheory or orienting strategies, perspectives can orient re-
searchers to particular phenomena and suggest questions to ask, but by
definition they are untestable. Interactionism, functionalism, world sys-
tems, and historical analysis would be among the many examples of per-
spectives. Theories are derived from or related to perspectives and are
composed of concepts whose utility has at least been investigated and are
constituted of statements about the relations among concepts. These state-

ments typically are written in a way that under specifiable conditions can be tested with appropriate data and ideally falsified. The goal is to construct a series of related statements that can be offered as an explanation for questions asked about some phenomena.

These characterizations of perspectives and theories are obviously rudimentary and conventional ones, but they serve as definitions necessary to demonstrate that there has been considerable theory development utilizing interactionist perspectives. Consider the following instances of such development. From Strauss's perspective on organizations as negotiated orders (Strauss et al. 1963; Strauss 1978a), Basu, Dirsmith, and Gupta (1999) constructed a theory that synthesized institutional and loose-coupling theory into a theory of intra-and interorganizational relations. From Strauss's (1978b) social worlds perspective, Ulmer (1997) developed a series of testable propositions about how court communities affect the implementation of state sentencing guidelines. From Estes and Edmonds's (1981) perspective on policy implementation as a transformation of intentions, Hall (1995,1997) has developed a "meso domain" theory[3] of how educational policies are transformed in various sectors of state-level implementation. From Blumer's (1955, 1958a) perspective on race relations, Bobo (Bobo and Hutchings 1996) has developed what he calls "realistic conflict theory." From Becker's (1960) perspective on commitment, Johnson (1973, 1991) has constructed his "three tier" theory of commitment, which Ulmer (2000) has applied to the field of deviance. Affect control theory, developed by David Heise (1979), has been directly grounded in interactionism (MacKinnon 1994). Drawing from interactionist principles, Lonnie Athens (1989) has developed an explicit stage theory of the creation of criminal violence. And, of course, Blumer's (1939c) perspective on collective behavior has influenced several theories of collective behavior (e.g., Turner and Killian 1987), and in the judgment of Snow and Davis (1995) "may be the most influential writing on the topic in this century" (p. 193).

These are but a few areas where interactionist *theory* can be found. Of course, one can argue that even these instances do not constitute theory. I presume that Walker (2000) would make that case, but then by Walker's criteria the Stanford social psychology program appears to be the only instance of genuine theory in sociology. And obviously these are examples of substantive rather than formal theory. Nonetheless, by most definitions of theory in sociology, they would be regarded as instances of theory insofar as they represent empirically based explanations of the phenomena they address. Accordingly, whereas critics may continue to debate the adequacy of interactionist theories, which is a different matter, it should be clear that the content of interactionist work does not justify the claim that interactionism is only a perspective and thus somewhat defective because of it.

I have felt compelled to comment on these issues in an attempt to create a space for a better understanding of interactionism and its breadth. I therefore felt it necessary to try to eliminate many of the common and tenacious stereotypes and misunderstandings about the perspective's most basic and general ideas. On the assumption that such a space for better understanding has been created, I now turn my attention to the task of demonstrating the breadth of sociology's interactionism.

SOCIOLOGY'S INTERACTIONISM

Richard Bernstein (1986) observed over a decade ago that the resurgence of interest in pragmatism indicated to him that pragmatism was ahead of its time. Bernstein's observation complements my thesis that interactionism was ill-timed for sociology's institution-building phase, and so in both the cases of pragmatism and interactionism there has been a lag in the conventional understanding of their relevance to and necessity for a more mature sociology.

Underneath the complex treatments of many of its topics, pragmatism rests on a fundamental resolution of the philosophical gulfs between idealism and realism. Pure idealism posits an experiencing subject without a society; pure realism posits an objective society without an experiencing subject. Both positions can be argued philosophically, but each is sociologically untenable. The pragmatists broke the tie between them by making the obvious argument that the external world exists independently of experiencing subjects but it becomes socially relevant at the point that it is mediated through human attention.[4] Furthermore, the experiences of the experiencing subject are socially formatted ones insofar as personal experience comes through the interpretive structures acquired as a biological organism is transformed into a socialized person. The dialectical relations of personal experience and society-at-large thus were posited as forever joined in processes of communication, activity, and the tensions intrinsic to ongoing and unfolding social living. This way of thinking about sociological phenomena simply was too sophisticated and nuanced for the institution-builders, and it could not at all fit neatly into the simplistic quantitative models being developed in sociology's early years in America.

The times, however, most definitely seem to have changed, and I think there are a number of signs that sociologists across-the-board are using as never before many of the basic ideas and propositions that at one time were espoused only by interactionists. This trend toward interactionism, moreover, displays the quality of what Dorothy Smith (1974) has termed a bifurcated consciousness. That is, on the one hand, sociologists expressing