
This two-volume contribution to the Studies in Symbolic Interaction Series provides a summary of the decade of contributions of the so-called ‘Iowa School’ to interactionism since the publication of Constructing Social Life (Couch and Hintz, 1975). In a rather more coherent and guided manner than its forerunner the current Supplement outlines the distinctive nature of the Iowa approach to interactionism.

The approach derives from the Center for Research on Interpersonal Behavior (CRIB), which was set up at the University of Iowa in the 1960s and flourished into the 1970s. Since the 1980s, however, the interactionist approach has been under increasing pressure and the University has effectively brought the interactionist tradition at Iowa to an end. The research reported is from this later period some of it undertaken in an increasingly hostile departmental environment. If the centre at Iowa can be regarded as a school (and the claims for it seem no more valid than do claims for a ‘Chicago School’) then this is the reporting of its death throes. That should not lead the reader to assume therefore that the book is just an historical curio. Much more important from the point of view of social research is the approach, which may not meet with the approval of many interactionists but certainly bears consideration. This book offers a way into the approach by outlining the theoretical underpinnings, the epistemological presuppositions and methodic practices and by providing substantive examples of research work. The Iowa approach is not well known, certainly in Britain, and it ought to be known more widely.

CRIB was initially dominated by Manford Kuhn and tended to a singular methodology. Although the basic Kuhnian principles have been retained they have been considerably reworked and the ‘Twenty Statements Test’ caricature of the Iowa School is completely outdated. Kuhn wanted the study of social life to be based on systematically accumulated bodies of data in order to formulate generic principles. This approach is sustained in the research reported in the book. It runs parallel to the more widely used naturalistic approach (often associated with the ‘Chicago School’) and the differences are examined, while at the same time insisting that the Iowa approach is within a continuing symbolic interactionist tradition.

A central presupposition of the Iowa approach is that the study of a spatio-historically specific phenomenon can result in abstract statements of principles that can assist in the explanation and understanding of a similar phenomenon at another spatio-historical juncture. Like other interactionists the Iowans accept the tenet that human activity is voluntaristic, reflexive and purposeful. Unlike many, they regard an interaction as ‘real’ wherever it takes place. Their intention is to discover invariant sequences of social activity necessary for the construction of social forms. Theoretic conceptualisations are developed in the process of forming generic principles. Such statements are not ‘everlasting laws’ but are declarations of the discovered principles at any one moment in an ongoing programme of study. The focus of attention is on how people construct different forms of social relationships, not why they do.
As usual for symbolic interactionists, Mead provides the theoretic roots. Significantly, the Iowans emphasise Mead’s natural scientific methodological sympathies and see Mead as favouring experimentation. Once again, this revives the Blumer-Bales debate of the mid-sixties. Simmel provides another string to the Iowans theoretical bow. Often alluded to but rarely developed in detail by other interactionists in the United States, Simmel brings a European heritage to the Iowans perspective and provides a way of unifying the phenomenological and existentialist philosophy with American pragmatism. Like Mead, Simmel also called for the formulation of generic principles of social action. This was to be achieved through the analysis of social forms—the detection and articulation of patterns of human sociation. This essentially static approach does not gel well with the preponderant interactionist long-term observational approach. However, the Iowans saw the study of forms as complementing the study of processes derived from Mead.

Experimentation is the preferred approach of these latter-day Iowans. It is argued that, in principle, experiments involve two or more comparison groups and the manipulation and control of some aspects of the experimental situation. Anything else is a secondary nicety. The reluctance of social researchers to develop experimentation is that they are overly concerned by the implications of the niceties. Much of the research reported uses standard principles of experimental design and is conducted within the controlled environment of the small group laboratory. Some of the analyses adopt systematic observation, while other work is more inductive drawing on deviant case analysis in the field. Data is gathered on interactions between at least two persons over time so that the way people engage, construct and transform relationships can be analysed. Unlike most other interactionists the Iowans are not interested in the subjects’ interpretations.

The analysis of the ‘act-response transaction’, which the Iowans argue makes up a social encounter, is based on video-recordings of such engagements. Audiovisual recordings, although initiated at CRIB in 1968, only became part of a well-formed and theoretically grounded research strategy in the mid 1970s. The use of audiovisual techniques went hand-in-hand with the formulation of ‘more adequate’ conceptions of Mead’s social act and Simmel’s elements of sociation. Essentially, this boiled down to the view that humans can *simultaneously* act towards and respond to each other. The kind of experimentation undertaken by the Iowans is one in which a situation is initialised and a set of social acts set in train.

Volume 1 devotes the first 100 pages to specific papers on theory and method and the remainder 150 pages to establishing elements of interaction, defining types of interaction, outlining the nature of negotiation and accountability and providing examples of specific dyadic relationships including hypnotic encounters and intimate relationships. The second volume assesses triadic relationships and intergroup relationships before offering an assessment of the Iowa approach and contributions.

Overall, the style is a little convoluted and repetitive and two volumes is too long. There is also a rather annoying random use of male and female pronoun to indicate the third person. Nonetheless, the book is a sound addition to the Studies series.

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