

Interactionist Perspective Lecture No. 58

Welcome back to the class and in the previous two sessions, we discussed functionalism and conflict theory, now we are discussing interactionist perspective. So, I mentioned in the previous class that I am spending three sessions in order to introduce you to the later developments of sociology and interactionism is one of the important schools of thought, extremely influential schools of thought that emerged by 1930s, 1940s onwards and by and by 1980s, it became one of the very influential schools, especially so in the US more than in the UK.

And unlike the conflict theory and structural functionalism looks at society rather differently, the methodical orientations are different, the way in which it understands society is different, the way in which it understands human beings is different. So, it is a very interesting theory. You are already familiar with it because we spent a lot of time on discussing G H Mead.

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- Focus on the micro-social settings
- The centrality of interaction and human beings as meaning-making agents who construct society actively
- Influenced by Max Weber, George Simmel, C H Cooley, John Dewey, G H Mead
- Herbert Bloomer- Symbolic Interactionism
- Erving Goffman- Dramaturgical approach- "All the world's a stage..."



Mead is one of the founders of interactionist perspective because most of the subsequent scholars have been heavily indebted to the arguments of G H Mead and others. This approach focuses on this micro-social setting and why that we are saying that this interactionist perspective focuses on micro-social settings? Because unlike a conflict theory or unlike a structural functionalism which talk about macro sociological processes, large historical changes.

You just imagine the theorization of Emil Durkheim or Max Weber or even Karl Marx or August Comte, they were all talking about meta theories that spanned the entire human

history, theories that can be applied anywhere for that matter. Parsonian functionalism is a grand theory.

In contrast to such theorizations, interactionist scholars really focused on the micro-social settings, they focused on the whole question of interaction, they try to make sense of these all process of interaction, they wanted to understand what are the dynamics of this interaction? What is the chemistry of this interaction? What are the processes involved in interaction when hundreds or thousands or millions of people come together and if they share the similar culture or even if they do not share the similar culture, how is that there is a kind of a normalcy is made possible?

How that is there is a kind of equilibrium is made possible and what are the processes through which they understand the same thing? How that is somebody is made comprehensible to the other? How that is somebody is made intelligible to the other? And how is this intelligibility is shared, created, shared and constrain and sustained among different people? How do people come with a kind of shared sense of identity, shared sense of purpose, shared sense of ideas, shared sense of the social existence? These are some of the extremely important questions.

It was the centrality of interaction and the idea that human beings as meaning making agents who construct society actively. So, this is the most important element and this is in sharp contrast to people like Durkheim who did not give so much of an agency or empowerment for individuals to create society. Rather, Durkheim looked at human beings as some kind of a prisoners of society, people who are forced to behave, act in ways that are determined by society.

I hope you remember discussion on social facts, it talks about its cohesive capacity and in that place, in complete opposition to a typical Durkheimian understanding of society, here interactionist would argue that human beings are meaning-making agents, they do not simply behave, they do not simple behave on the basis of certain stimulus. They behave of course, there could be, they would react to stimulus, but more complicated processes takes place in their mind and even more complicated process take place when they are combined together, or when they share their space with others.

They actively construct society, it is not that they are forced into a society and then they lead a very limited life. They actively create society and that was that is one of the most important decisive theoretical orientation of interactionists theorist, they all share this idea that the focus

must be on to understand how there is a shared subjective understanding is created about the society.

This understanding was certainly influenced by Max Weber. I hope you remember, Max Weber was one of the most important sociologist who provided an anti-positivist turn to the methodological and epistemological debates within sociology. He brought in the idea of Verstehen and argued that human beings simply do not behave, but rather they act. His theorization on action, his typologies of action, his arguments about objectively understanding the subjective meanings attached by the actors on their action were extremely influential for these scholars whom we consider as people belong to interactionist school.

Then we discussed George Simmel and then C H Cooley who came up with this very interesting arguments about looking glass, a self-theory. You just like a mirror that you look at and then look at your own image, you look at the general public, you look at your immediate significant other and then you derive your image about you. We also discussed John Dewey and G H Mead in detail. Mead's argument about mind, self and society and about the development of the mind and the self.

Most importantly, Mead's argument about the centrality of social interaction, centrality of society in creating a healthy mind and self in every individual and his argument that a constant reciprocation between the generalised other is what constitutes the society. So, these were extremely important founding fathers of interactionist perspective and their significance is extremely important.

And another important scholar Herbert Bloomer, an American sociologist who are a, who was a student of G H Mead and who thought in University of Chicago. He is yet another important scholar who focus more on this symbolic aspect of this communication, symbolic aspect of interaction. You, Mead spoke about the significance symbols, the important symbols especially that of language and Bloomer advances that argument.

Bloomer, Bloomer develops on that argument and then brings in the whole dimension of the use of symbols. And how the symbols play important role do and how do we collectively use symbols in order to reciprocate, in order to understand and he plays na extremely important role. He played a very important role.

Then you have Erwin Goffman who coined this term 'dramaturgical approach' and it is almost says as what Shakespeare says, "All the world's a stage" and everybody is an actor. In

a sense Goffman would suggest that you and me or everybody, we are acting on a stage, our everyday life is nothing but acting. It sounds weird, but if you think from a different perspective, it is true. We are we could be acting very sincerely, is not it? Even the most sincere of the moments in front of your parents, in front of your loved ones, in front of your close friends, you are, you might be the most sincere person, but still you are acting. We cannot help but acting.

This acting is done when we adopt certain specific roles, when we know that what is expected at a particular time is different from what is expected in front of some other group. So, Goffman argued that our everyday experience, everyday existence is a set of dramaturgical processes, we interact with each other as if we are playing a drama, we are performing in front of an audience, we are performing on a stage and he uses this very interesting term called as this front stage and back stage.

Front stage is what we put up in front of others, what we want others to see in us, this is what we project in front of others, including are verbal, non-verbal, bodily aspects, how others want us to be seen and this includes your dress, the way you dress up, the kind of things that you use, the appearance that you make, the kind of tone, tenure, you're the kind of gestures that you think and the kind of voices, the modulation and of course, the intention. And here, he would argue that we are very consciously performing, very discrete roles at different times, as a student, as a lover, as a teacher, as a citizen, as a consumer you we, we are extremely adapt in changing from one troll to the other.

That is mainly possible because we are performing, we are there is a front stage in our everyday life. All our gender, our religion, our profession, all these things are on display. We know how to or how to make ourself visible. We know how to present ourself in a variety of ways. And he talks about the back stage where we are the more, the real self where we do not have to pretend, where we could be completely different from the people whom we, whom as we project. It could be completely different us, it could be people with all kind of weird thinking, it could be people with all kind of very perverted kind of thinking. Or it could be people who are completely different from what they present.

He says that he his argument, Goffman's argument is that a human interaction is never ending process of this acting between this front stage and the back stage. That really brought in interesting dimension, interesting discussing into this whole argument about how we discuss with each other, how we create sense of intelligibility and how we live our everyday life.

(Refer Slide Time: 12:59)

Phenomenology of Edmund Husserl



How do people constitute their subjective world of meaning? How do they make it intelligible to others? How is an 'intersubjectivity' created so that effective communication is possible?

Alfred Schutz- everyday life and 'stock knowledge'

Harold Garfinkel- Ethnomethodology- methods used by ethnos-
'breaching experiments'



All these theorizations including dramaturgical approach and others, they all owe to a much larger philosophical foundation of phenomenology by Edmund Husserl, very important philosopher. And phenomenology is all about the whole cost of meaning-making. It does not believe that there is already a meaningful society exist out there and you only go and need to get that meaning. It does not believe that it does not believe that there is already a social reality constructed out there for you to go and then capture it, unlike what Durkheim would argue there are no social facts as already readymade stuff out there.

Phenomenologist would argue that human beings are constantly engaged in the process of meaning creation. They create a world which in which everybody who participates equally understand the contours, equally understands the grammar of that particular word and of that particular context and only then society is possible. So, how do people constitute there subjective world of meaning? How do I read a situation? And how is mind reading of a situation he has to be similar to that of the reading of a situation of the other and how do they make it intelligible to others?

How do I communicate? How do I how do I express? Or how a group of people share, how everybody is in same plane? That could be another way of putting it. How an intersubjectivity is created so that effective communication is possible? How is that and intersubjectivity is create that everybody who is at same time they are on the same plane, just thing about a ritual, a ritual in a temple or ritual in a in a in a house or a death ceremony or a or a birth ceremony or some housewarming or any other kind of ritual and that ritual has a particular context and everybody who comes to participate in that they are on the same plane.

They understand what is to be done, what to say what not to say, how to behave, how not to behave and that they are able to communicate with that, they are able to they are they able to be on the same plane and how is that possible? They actively create that because there is no fast and fast rule about how you should behave. But socially condition you know firms, socially condition ways so behaviour tell us that this are the gestures that you are supposed to demonstrate, these are the words that you are supposed to use, these are the actions that we are supposed to enact and that we will create this particular kind of context in which a kind of an intersubjectivity is possible.

You think of a classroom where 50 or 60 students are sitting and the teacher comes and teacher walks in and that particular moment crates shapes that the space for an academic exchange, everybody is on the same plane, they know what is supposed to go on or in a or in a temple or in a church when a priest gives the ceremony, it is perfectly clear what is supposed, what is expected and what is not expected. So, starting from this such kind of very context specifying incidence or context specifying episodes phenomenology tries to understand how large process of meaning making is possible.

Alfred Schutz another sociologist again American, he elaborated on this concept and then he concentrated on this everyday life and stock knowledge. He concentrated on the on the everyday life of an ordinary person. And how do how one negotiates this everydayness of his life or her life and the importance of a stock knowledge. And stock knowledge may be can be roughly translated into the common sense that we discussed in the in the very first week.

In that class we discussed how sociological thinking must be different from common sense but Schutz, people like Schutz would say that this common sensical thinking it constitutes the stock knowledge, the enormous amount of knowledge that we carry in our head that facilitates our everyday interaction, the knowledge about food, the knowledge about etiquette, the knowledge about manners, the knowledge about role of others, role of us, the rules and regulations and in absence of this huge amount of knowledge it is extremely difficult for us to behave naturally.

That is why we are absolutely comfortable and our own cultural context because that is where we are extremely habituated with, that is our place. Whereas, if you are put into another context, another location, another place among another, among a set of strange people whose customs, regulations, food habits, you are not familiar with any of them and then you really recognize how difficult it is to live. Even you become so embarrassed, you become so

bevelled, you your action becomes extremely conscious, is not it? You do not know what to do? You do not know whether what you do would be seen as correct or wrong.

If a person is continuously put into such kind of a situation, it becomes extremely difficult for that person to survive, because you need to be in that sense of relaxed your own homely atmosphere. Why that, why we say that? When we go back to our home, we feel more relaxed because home is the most intimate place where your stock knowledge is at the highest form. It is the most intimate place or your close friends with whom you share all kind of secrets, they represent your innermost close group, your primary group.

Another sociologist is Harold Garfinkel, again American sociologist who coined this term 'ethnomethodology' and conducted a lot of experiments, 'breaching experiments', and interesting argument. So, Garfinkel focused on the question of ethnomethodology can be seen as understood as the methods of the ethnos, ethnos means human. What are the usual ways in which human beings conduct themselves? What are the strategies and what are the mechanisms through which they conduct their everyday life?

He conducted a series of breaching experiments. Breaching experiments recently, he would conduct experiments that are that would deliberately break the routine of a particular social context. For example, he conducted an experiment in a classroom where the where instead of going and then teaching, the professor entered into the class and then he did some wired thing. For example, he distributed papers on the floor and then he started collecting it back and then arranging it properly, he started adjusting the windows and that left students to completely different kind of answers.

When the students were interviewed, you got completely different kind of responses because they could not make sense of what was going on. So, Garfinkel would argue that we are all, we have all adopted certain kind of methods to live in a lie a kind of a normal life in the society. One of the usual example that I often give to the class is that when somebody ask you: how are you? We say that: hi, I am fine or we say we ask the same question back, how are you? And sometimes you say that you are fine.

On one occasion when somebody ask you; how are you? You stop that person and then ask him, what exactly really you wanted to know about me? Do you really want to know about my personal life, personal wellbeing or financial wellbeing or social wellbeing, what exactly you want to know about me? For, as an answer to this question of how are you? And you are

sure that the other person who just asked in a very casual manner, how are you, would be really surprised, and is not it?

He would be really bevelled because he would have asked you, how are you just as a gesture of acknowledging your presence or establishing that okay you are familiar faces or to say hi instead of saying hi, he would ask you how are you? And you say I am fine. When you say I am fine, it does not convey anything, you do not say that I am not fine, you nobody says that. Even if you are really not fine, you do not say that you are fine.

When you breach that agreement that when somebody ask you, how are you? You say I am fine, and you ask, how are you? So, both of you know that the other person knows the answer, the other person knows that this is only a gesture and the how are you question does not have any content. It is only a hollow question. So, but we do not pretend to be like that, we do not pretend to be like that. We pretend as if we are serious about it and ones you get this answer that I am fine, you walk away.

He conducted a series of such kind of experiments and you will find a host of similar experiments in the YouTube in host of websites especially people conduct lot of social experiments, try to understand the attitude of people towards race, caste, religion, gender and where they bring in certain kind of unexpected twist to this all episode where people's usual surrounding, usual situation is very deliberately breached, very deliberately subverted that brings in quite a lot of unexpected kind of results and scenario.

These are some of the important scholars, again I have given only a very sketchy account, and it is not a very detail account at any manner. And as I told you my intention is only to flag the kind of a direction in which social theory or sociological theory developed after 1940s and these three schools are conventionally taught in Indian Universities as well as Universities abroad as three major theoretical orientations; the structural functionalism, conflict theory and interactionism and of course there are so many sub divisions within that, there are so many theorist who had difference of opinion among themselves, but the this orientations are more or less clear, there are three broad categories.

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Later developments



Feminist theory
Rational Choice theory
Structuralist theory
Post-structuralist theory/postmodern theories
Postcolonial theory
Decolonial theories



After that let me end this section by just introducing a couple of later developments of theories which again not in order, not an exhaustive list because it is impossible to list even list out the major theoretical arguments. So, you will see feminist theory becoming very popular after 1960s, extremely popular after 1960s and by 70s and 80s feminist theory assuming serious significance and feminist theory is nothing but it is sociological theory.

We know that the question of gender, the question of women were hardly addressed by most of the major classical sociologists, but later this women question came back to the centre stage and now no sociological theory can really develop without addressing the question of gender and when I am saying gender, it is not only women, it is about muscularity studies, it is about gender studies, queer studies, sexuality studies, so it is really there has been an explosion of gender related or identity related theories in the post 80s.

Then you have this rational choice theory where scholars looked at how the way in which individuals make use of their own rational choices, they look at individual rational choices bases. And then you have this structuralist theory which was heavily influenced by sources, linguistic theorization and later Levi-Strauss brought in to anthropology and you had host of important theoreticians in sociology who argued very much against the existing theorizations who argued that there are deeper grammar in every society and the new whatever you see on the periphery are the reflections of this deeper structural conditions.

Also keep it in mind that this structuralist theory is quite different from the structural functionalism. Structuralist theory is quite different from the structural functionalism and though, both of them use structure but they use structure in very different terms, different meaning and then you have a distinct strand post structuralism theories and post-modern

theories and we know that it is again a group of theories or theorist including Foucault and other who say that they came after structuralism and they claim to represent theories that are beyond the period of modern.

But it is very difficult to name them because there is no given singular orientation. We, it is very difficult to put all of them together because they are so diverse and they only claim that these are the theories that came after the phase of structuralism. And again, that is not a settled issue, that is not a settled debate between sociologists because there are lot of scholars who argue that this argument about postmodernism is too far-fetched, what we are seeing is an extended, is a radicalised form of modernity.

People like Anthony Giddens or Ulrich Beck, they talk about reflective modernity, late modernity and so on. They are not really happy with these all celebration of postmodernity. Especially in culture studies and then other things. Then you have postcolonial theory theories that emerge from countries that experience coloniality and who wanted to come out of it and following that decolonial theories which try to develop a new conceptual frameworks, new theoretical frameworks, new sensibilities that are devoid of Eurocentric assumptions.

All these attempts are quite fraught with lot of problems because different cultural groups try to claim that what they represent is the true authentic decolonial or anti-colonial epistemological positions. Irrespective of all these diverse claims, the point that I want to drive home is that the scenario of sociological theories is a very fascinating filed. It is an extremely fascinating field, you see the complexity of arguments, you see the philosophical background of new theories, you see that the political leanings of different theoretical orientation.

Once you are sensitive to these questions, why, what is the purpose of theorization? What kind of a political possibility that such theorizations open up? And what are the pitfalls of that? And once you are sensitive to that, then understanding social theory and then appreciating its diversity, its complexity, its contradictions becomes very fascinating venture.

Let me conclude here and in tomorrow's class that is the class just before the last class, we will have a discussion about the relation between theory and methodology and methods. Because there is a very close connection between the theory, methodology and method. And many times we do not and really realise that, but it is extremely important that you

understand the connection between the ontology, the epistemology, the methodology and the method. We will discuss that tomorrow. Thank you.