

Microsociology, from The Concise Encyclopedia of Sociology

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Microsociology fills in details missing from abstract representations of human conduct by describing the structure/process of social life, the reciprocal relationship between these events and the nature of society.

There have been three main approaches: ethnographic, experimental, and linguistic. Ethnography uses close observations and reportage of behavior in context. For example, Edwin Lemert studied paranoia among executives in business organizations. By interviewing and observing, Lemert was able to make a contribution to the development of labeling theory.

Experimental studies by Asch represent the quantitative approach, showing how context influences conformity and non-conformity: a majority of subjects were inappropriately influenced by their conformity to the majority.

Finally, discourse and conversation analysis demonstrates regularities in linguistic sequences (such as questions and responses) that usually go unnoticed. Unlike the first two approaches, close reading of discourse reveals an otherwise invisible filigree.

However, each of the three approaches is specialized to the point that important aspects are omitted. In Milan Kundera's essay on the history of the novel he addresses the problem:

Try to reconstruct a dialogue from your own life, the dialogue of a quarrel or a dialogue of love. The most precious, the most important situations are utterly gone. Their abstract sense remains (I took this point of view, he took that one. I was aggressive, he was defensive), perhaps a detail or two, but the acoustic visual concreteness of the situation in all its continuity is lost. (Kundera 1995: 128–9)

How can a scientist or scholar capture reality, when we and the people whom we study usually cannot? Kundera suggests that only the greatest of novelists, such as Tolstoy and Proust, have come close, by reporting the evocative details that we usually ignore or forget.

Charles Horton Cooley provided an important step toward understanding social interaction. The looking-glass self has three parts: "the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance, and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification."

Cooley's conjecture points to the basic components of social life. The first two involve the imagination of the other's view of self. The other component is made up of the emotional reactions that are real, not imagined, either pride or shame.

Cooley's focus on pride and shame is provocative. Western culture glorifies the isolated, self-contained individual. The pride/shame response implies that we are dependent on others. For this reason, mention of shame and its derivatives is usually taboo.

Goffman did not acknowledge a debt to Cooley, but his analysis of concrete examples led him to a deep exploration of the looking-glass self (Scheff 2006).

Indeed, Goffman's treatment implies a fourth step. Cooley stopped at the experience of pride or shame. Goffman's analyzes, especially of impression management, imply a fourth step: the management of emotion.

Goffman's examples suggest that actors seldom accept shame/embarrassment passively. Instead, they try to manage it, by avoidance, if possible. Most of the embarrassment/shame possibilities in Goffman's examples are not about the actual occurrence of emotions, but anticipations, and management based on these anticipations.

Goffman's examples further imply that if shame/embarrassment cannot be avoided, then his actors actively deny it, attempting to save face, on the one hand, and/or to avoid pain, on the other. It is Goffman's fourth step that brings his examples to life, because it touches on the dynamics of impression and emotion management that underlie everyday life.

The Cooley/Goffman looking-glass self provides an underlying model of structure/process of social life. Alienation/solidarity can be understood in terms of degree of attunement, on the one hand, and the emotional responses that follow from it, on the other. Pride signals and generates solidarity. Shame signals and generates alienation. Shame is a normal part of the process of social control; it becomes disruptive only when hidden or denied.

Denial of shame, especially when it takes the form of false pride (egoism), generates self-perpetuating cycles of alienation. Threats to a secure bond can come in two different formats: either the bond is too loose or too tight. Relationships in which the bond is too loose are isolated: there is mutual misunderstanding. Relationships in which the bond is too tight are engulfed: at least one of the parties in the relationship, say the subordinate, understands and embraces the standpoint of the other at the expense of the subordinate's own beliefs, values, or feelings.

This approach concerns both interpersonal and intergroup levels. The Kunderarian idea of the concrete reality of relationships can be implemented by close study of verbatim recordings at the interpersonal level, and by the close analysis of exchanges between leaders of groups at the collective level. Microsociology can be applied both to interpersonal and societal interaction in a way that may afford a path to linking the least parts (words and gestures) to the greatest wholes (abstract theories and social structures).

SEE ALSO: Conversation Analysis; Cooley, Charles Horton; Ethnography; Goffman, Erving; Looking-Glass Self; Mead, George Herbert; Micro-Macro Links; Social Psychology

REFERENCES

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