

“Symbolic Interactionism Notes” Web Release

Tsukasa Kuwabara

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Special Feature

Introduction of Study Cases

“Symbolic Interactionism Notes” Web Release²

Tsukasa Kuwabara

I have been studying sociological theory, specifically the theory of Symbolic Interactionism, since graduate school. I first came into contact with this theory after my admission to the Department of Regional Science of the Faculty of Letters at Kumamoto University in April 1988. There, I switched from the “Folklore Studies Course” to the “Sociology Course” and began studying medical sociology, with a primary focus on the communication and interactions occurring between the medical staff and patients in hospice care. During this research, I studied the theories of sociologists, B. G. Glaser and A. L. Strauss.

In 1993, after I had earned my degree and, was an auditing student of the university’s Graduate School of Literature, I learned that Strauss had played a role in developing the theory (a perspective and a method) called Symbolic Interactionism. I subsequently made this my specialty, as my interest shifted to the theory itself, drifting away from medical sociology. I have been posting and archiving relevant information on my homepage³ since 2001. Below is a detailed list of items that can be found there.

- (1) “Bibliography of Symbolic Interactionism”
- (2) “Graduation Thesis Abstract”
- (3) “Master’s Thesis”
- (4) “Master’s Thesis Abstract”
- (5) “Doctoral Thesis”
- (6) “Doctoral Thesis Abstract”
- (7) “The First Chicago School of Sociology and Blumer’s Symbolic Interactionism”
- (8) “The Social Nature of the Self”
- (9) “Interaction and Mutual Consent”

¹ <https://archive.is/aHKLh#selection-347.0-347.24>

² This paper is the revised version of the following: Kuwabara, T., 2017, “Symbolic Interactionism Notes” Web Release, *Discussion Papers In Economics and Sociology*, 1701.

³ <https://archive.is/aHKLh#selection-395.0-395.24>

About (1) “Bibliography of Symbolic Interactionism”⁴

Symbolic Interactionism (SI) is a sociological and social-psychological perspective propounded by an American sociologist Herbert George Blumer (1900–1987) in the beginning of the 1960s. It focuses on the social interactions of human—symbolic interaction in particular—and tries to explain such phenomena from the “actor’s perspective.” The historical origin of SI is usually traced back to the works of George Herbert Mead (1863–1931). Mead published many works in his lifetime, but his impact on SI came mainly from (1) published lecture transcripts and notes taken by his students and (2) the interpretation of Mead’s work by Blumer, who was one of his students. Blumer published many papers in the 1950s and 1960s, organizing SI. For a period of time, SI was synonymous with Blumer’s work. However, new leaders of SI appeared in the 1970s and 1980s, such as Norman Denzin, Anselm Strauss, Sheldon Stryker, and Gary Fine, which resulted in the theory being explored in new directions, as well as in the development of various criticisms against it. Furthermore, in the 1980s, Erving Goffman developed the method of dramaturgy. I have tried to assemble as many research papers and bodies of work, both domestic and international, relating to SI as possible. In enumerating the literature, I followed the explanatory notes in *Sociology of Social Processes*⁵ as a general rule. This bibliography is currently being linked to the sites listed below:

- 1) “The Research Society of Sociology and Social Science Foundations”⁶

(The Research Society of Sociology and Social Science Foundations is based on the principles of “questioning the foundations” and “ensuring sufficient discussion,” and it is led by Hironao Harie of Wakkanai Hokusei Gakuen University.)

- 2) “Sunday Sociology”⁷

(Book guides, analects, translations, etc., relating to the German sociologist N. Luhmann. Created by Taito Sakai.)

- 3) “Electronic Bibliography of Sociological Works (Osaka University)”⁸

(A collection of links to online sociological literary works.)

- 4) “Secondary Reference List Regarding Mead (Domestic)”⁹ <http://isweb43.infoseek.co.jp/school/taka-y02/7>

(Created by Takanori Yamao, Sakushin Gakuin University.)

- 5) “Human Resource Management and Organizational Behavior”¹⁰

(“Key Points of Symbolic Interactionism” <http://www.geocities.co.jp/WallStreet/4716/symblicinteraction>.)

⁴ <https://archive.is/aHKLh#selection-419.0-419.24>

⁵ <https://archive.is/aHKLh#selection-443.0-443.24>

⁶ <https://archive.is/aHKLh#selection-467.0-467.24>

⁷ <https://archive.is/aHKLh#selection-491.0-491.24>

⁸ <https://archive.is/aHKLh#selection-515.0-515.24>

⁹ <https://archive.is/aHKLh#selection-537.1-539.24>

¹⁰ <https://archive.is/aHKLh#selection-563.0-563.24>

htm¹¹)

6) “Kenichi Wakita’s Homepage” <http://www.anna.iwate-pu.ac.jp/~wakita/index.htm>

(“Links” <http://www.anna.iwate-pu.ac.jp/~wakita/link-2.htm>)

About (2) “Graduation Thesis Abstract” (Sociology Course, Regional Science Department, Faculty of Letters at Kumamoto University)¹²

The paper attempts to explicate the mechanism by which brain death and organ transplant issues are generated using William Fielding Ogburn’s theory of cultural lag. When discussing social change, Ogburn argued that the culture changes rather than society, and he categorized culture into material culture, adaptive culture, and spiritual culture (the latter two types are collectively referred to as “non-material culture”). According to Ogburn, the speed at which each of these three cultures changes is not the same, resulting in a “lag.” In other words, whereas material culture changes quickly, adaptive culture lags behind in its speed of changing, and spiritual culture lags even further. Ogburn coined the term “cultural lag” for this phenomenon, and the rapid cultural changes occurring in modern society have made it a prominent social issue. This paper (Graduation Thesis, Kumamoto University) clearly shows that the brain death and organ transplant issues that have arisen in Japan are results of this cultural lag: material culture = state-of-the-art medical technology, particularly that of respirators, angiorrhaphy, and immunosuppressants; adaptive culture = law, particularly the Organ Transplant Law; spiritual culture = Japanese people’s view of life and death, and of how to treat the dead person’s remains. (Economic Society of Kagoshima University, 2001, *Journal of Economics and Sociology, Kagoshima University*, 54: 80–81)

About (3) “Master’s Thesis”¹³

The entire text of “Rethinking the ‘Relationships between Actors and Society’ in Herbert Blumer’s Symbolic Interactionism,” submitted to the Faculty of Arts and Letters of the Graduate School of Tohoku University, as the author’s master’s thesis.

About (4) “Master’s Thesis Abstract”—Quoted from the periodical *Societas* (Tohoku University Department of Sociology), 1996, Vol. 15: 72–75¹⁴

Herbert George Blumer’s theory of symbolic interactionism proposed drastic relations between human beings and society—or between actors and society—. These relations were completely antithetical to the relation between human beings and society entailed by the structural-functionalist school of sociology

¹¹ <https://archive.is/aHKLh#selection-585.1-587.24>

¹² <https://archive.is/aHKLh#selection-611.0-611.24>

¹³ <https://archive.is/aHKLh#selection-635.0-635.24>

¹⁴ <https://archive.is/aHKLh#selection-659.0-659.24>

associated with Talcott Parsons. The latter's position, briefly stated, was that society shapes human beings in a unidirectional fashion. Against such a relation—that is, against the unidirectional formation of human beings by society—, Blumer's symbolic interactionism proposed an inverse theory and was concerned with the formation of society by human beings.

This paper seeks to reconsider the relations between human beings and society outlined according to Blumer's symbolic interactionism. In particular, based on its firm links with the self-interaction concept, which serves as the cornerstone of Blumer's theory, it attempts to unravel the reasons for society's *dynamic and processual* character within the theoretical context of symbolic interactionism.

The findings of this paper suggest, first of all, that within the theoretical context of Blumer's symbolic interactionism, the relation between actors and society has been considered to be established through the actor's self-interactions. However, such self-interactions are performed in correspondence with two a priori schemas obtained from actors' worlds and their constituent objects (i.e., other actors), rather than being freely performed.

Actors define and forge certain relations with the world according to these two schemas. However, the world does not simply acquiesce to these unidirectional acts of definition; it is an *empirical world* that can resist or “talk back” to such attempts. Moreover, it is by using such resisting or “talking back” as a clue that we may perceive the validity of—and if necessary, modify—our own acts of definition, thereby reconfiguring the existing relations that connect us to the world. Thus, in the context of Blumer's symbolic interactionism, the relation between the actor and the world is not dictated by a unidirectional act of definition on the actor's part but can rather be perceived as something that is (re)constructed through the interaction or mutual influence of the actor's attempts at definition and the world's “talking back” against these attempts.

Given this understanding, we reconsider Blumer's theory of *joint action* and provide an explanation for the society's dynamic and processual character based on the theory's firm links with the concept of *self-interaction*.

In our consideration, actors participating in social interactions (ego and alter) are also actively engaged in acts of “taking into account of taking into account” as a particular form of self-interaction; when they thus take actions in relation to each other on this basis, in the context of Blumer's symbolic interactionism, a *joint action* (i.e., society itself) is considered to be formed. Here, “taking into account of taking into account” refers to how two actors, by taking account of each other “do not merely take account of each other but also take account of each other as entities taking account of themselves.” Moreover, as a consequence, ego makes assumptions about alter's assumptions about him/herself. Blumer argued that when both parties performed this properly, it leads to the smooth formation of a “joint action.”

In such a situation, properly performing “taking into account of taking into account” leads to *common definitions* between the two actors, thus further enabling the repetition of a stable form of joint actions. Furthermore, these common definitions can also be perceived in Blumer's symbolic interactionism as

something that can only be sustained through the continued use of an identical interpretive scheme—in other words, a mutually compatible “taking into account of taking into account”—by participants involved in a social interaction. For such joint action (i.e., society) to be dynamic and processual, the mechanism by which it alters its form must be explicable. In other words, the mechanism by which participants in a social interaction alter their interpretive schemes, or the manner of their “taking into account of taking into account,” must be explained.

In the context of the dyadic model of two actors (alter and ego) who shape a joint action together, each actor will be an *object* for the other; therefore, each performs a “taking into account of taking into account” in relation to the other. Furthermore, to say that they are *objects* for each other also indicates that they are both entities that are interpreted and defined by each partners and are simultaneously a part of an empirical world that can resist or talk back against such interpretation or definition. Therefore, if one actor (alter) were to reconfigure an action that is witnessed by the other (ego), it would signify “talking back” for the latter. Moreover, if ego were to seize on this “talking back” and consider it an opportunity to reconfigure that action and if this were then witnessed by alter, it would signify “talking back” for alter. In other words, when “talking back” is oriented toward either, the party against whom it is directed will attempt to reconfigure his/her actions and thus the reconfiguration of actions on the part of the other is to be encouraged. When such reconfiguration of actions occurs on both sides, it changes the formation of the joint action that is realized between the two actors. Moreover, we have revealed that the possibility of such changes is ever-present. This is because, within the relation between these two actors, although each of them attempts to perceive the other accurately, the other is always an aspect of an empirical world “that might go entirely unperceived by human beings, and which, even were it perceived, might be perceived entirely incorrectly.”

Thus, joint action (i.e., society) alters its form according to changes in the format of human beings’ self-interactions. However, thus stated, Blumer’s formula has, from time to time, been criticized as being overly micro-oriented. Its critics have pointed to its lack of a social structural viewpoint and the difficulties associated with it when attempting to account for collective-level phenomena. In response to such criticism, various commentators adhering to the view that macro-level analysis is possible even within the theoretical framework of Blumer’s symbolic interactionism, have counter-argued that, within Blumer’s symbolic interactionism, the term “actor” also finds expression as an “acting unit” and that the referent of this expression extends not only to individuals but also to groups. In other words, when analyzing the micro-sphere, it perceives society (i.e., joint action) as being formed through interactions between individuals; on the other hand, when analyzing the macro-sphere, it *already* perceives this as being formed by interactions between groups. However, thus stated, Blumer’s theory, as far as we can see, still suffers from two limitations. The first is that when conducting macro-analysis, the concept of *self-interaction*, which is a cornerstone of Blumer’s symbolic interactionism, retreats into the background of the analysis. The second is that envisioning Blumer’s theory in such a way makes “approaches from the actor’s position”—the methodological iron rule

of Blumer's symbolic interaction—impossible to implement.

How then might we perform a macro-analysis that positions the concept of *self-interaction* at the root of social theory and complies with the methodological iron rule of approaching analysis from the actor's position? This is the greatest challenge that has been left with Blumer's symbolic interactionism. (72–75)¹⁵

About (5) “Doctoral Thesis”¹⁶

The entire text of *Sociology of Social Processes*,¹⁷ submitted to the Faculty of Arts and Letters of the Graduate School of Tohoku University in March 2000, after completing the coursework in the university's doctoral program in March 1999.¹⁸ This paper has also been published as *Sociology of Social Processes*, Kwansai Gakuin University Press BookPark (2000). Currently, this page is linked to the following sites:

“Sunday Sociology” = <https://archive.is/K2RJz>

“Electronic Bibliography of Sociological Works” = <https://archive.is/VttQv>

About (6) “Doctoral Thesis Abstract”¹⁹

On pages 248–259 of a brochure titled *Doctoral Thesis: Abstracts and Examination Result Abstracts, Faculty of Letters, Volume 11 (conferred in 1999)*,²⁰ there are two articles: “Thesis Abstract” and “Thesis Examination Result Abstract.” This page consists of the former article with slight revisions. The content on this page has also been published as the following: Tsukasa Kuwabara, 2001, “Introduction to a sociological perspective of Symbolic Interactionism (3) (The Summary of a doctoral dissertation, Tohoku University),” *Journal of Economics and Sociology, Kagoshima University*, 54: 69–86.

About (7) “The First Chicago School of Sociology and Blumer's Symbolic Interactionism”²¹

Aside from publishing the *Journal of Economics and Sociology, Kagoshima University*, the Department of Economics, Faculty of Law, Economics and Humanities has a program that releases research results in *Discussion Papers In Economics and Sociology*. My manuscript on this page is published through this program: Tsukasa Kuwabara, 2002, “The First Chicago School of Sociology and Blumer's Symbolic

¹⁵ Originally Published in Japanese, written by Tsukasa Kuwabara, translated into English by *Ulatas* [<https://web.archive.org/web/20170627221111/https://www.ulatus.jp/>].

¹⁶ <https://archive.is/aHKLh#selection-705.1-707.24>

¹⁷ <https://archive.is/aHKLh#selection-729.1-731.24>

¹⁸ <https://archive.is/aHKLh#selection-753.1-755.48>

¹⁹ <https://archive.is/aHKLh#selection-779.0-779.24>

Cf. Kuwabara, T., and K. Yamaguchi. An Introduction to the Sociological Perspective of Symbolic Interactionism. <http://id.nii.ac.jp/1066/00000183/>. 2017-10-03. URL: <https://archive.is/B85mV>. Accessed: 2017-10-03. (Archived at <https://archive.is/QUANm>).

²⁰ <https://archive.is/aHKLh#selection-801.1-803.37>

²¹ <https://archive.is/aHKLh#selection-825.1-827.32>

Interactionism,” *Discussion Papers In Economics and Sociology*, 0203: 1-8.

About (8) “The Social Nature of the Self” and (9) “Interaction and Mutual Consent”

These articles have been contributed to two textbooks. The first one is included in *Social Psychology of Ego and Self*, edited by Mamoru Funatsu and Kiyoshi Ando (Hokuju Publishing, 2002). The latter appears in *Social Psychology of Interaction*, edited by Isamu Ito and Naohito Tokugawa (Hokuju Publishing, 2002). Both articles have been revised and posted online.^{22,23}

Editor’s note²⁴

Not long ago, I made a big mistake by writing the wrong title on my manuscript. I titled the manuscript “Introduction to a sociological perspective of Symbolic Interactionism (3) (The Summary of a doctoral dissertation, Tohoku University)” instead of the correct title, “The Summary of a doctoral dissertation, Tohoku University: Introduction to a sociological perspective of Symbolic Interactionism (3)” (refer to the headers of the odd-numbered pages of *Journal of Economics and Sociology, Kagoshima University*, No. 54 [pp. 71 to 83²⁵]).²⁶ Whereas this type of mistake would have been unthinkable when papers were handwritten, it now results from frequent use of the cut-and-paste tool in word processing. However, now that word processors are becoming increasingly popular, I think we should try to be more sensitive toward words than ever before. This is what I have started thinking lately. (Tsukasa Kuwabara, Faculty of Law, Economics and Humanities)

²² <https://archive.is/aHKLh#selection-849.1-851.24>

²³ <https://archive.is/aHKLh#selection-875.0-875.24>

²⁴ This article is the English translation of the following: Kuwabara et al., 2003 [= <https://archive.is/aHKLh#selection-897.0-897.32>].

²⁵ <https://archive.is/aHKLh#selection-915.1-919.47>

²⁶ <https://archive.is/aHKLh#selection-941.1-943.47>