



❖ CHAPTER FOUR ❖

SYMBOLIC INTERACTION

INTRODUCTION

Max Weber's work was particularly influential among early social scientists who wanted to break away from using the physical science model in the social sciences. Weber had argued that it is meaningless to attempt to reduce empirical findings to social laws. According to Weber, laws are only conceptual aids for understanding reality—knowledge of social laws cannot constitute an understanding of reality. Weber (1978) argued that knowledge of cultural processes is possible only by understanding the meanings that the specific and shared reality holds for those involved. He used the term *verstehen* to characterize the deep level of understanding that is necessary in order to *interpretatively re-create* (not just to follow) cultural processes. These two aspects of Weber's work were particularly influential among the early efforts of social researchers to examine social interaction.

In addition to Weber, the philosophical school of American Pragmatism profoundly influenced the development of symbolic interaction.¹ Inspired by Charles Darwin, the work of American pragmatists contrasted sharply with that of Descartes. Pragmatists argued that reality is *not* ready-made and waiting to be discovered. Rather, knowledge acquisition is the active process of coping with life's demands and therefore always "in the making" (Baert, 2005, p. 129).²

From these philosophical roots, symbolic interaction began with the premise that the individual and society are interdependent and inseparable—both are constituted through shared meanings. Symbolic interaction emerged as an effort to understand social life through something other than laboratory research and behaviorist conceptions of stimulus–response. Consequently, it shifted the goal of social research from an objective study of an empirical reality to a deep understanding of the symbolic practices that make a shared reality possible.

This chapter begins by offering some key linkages between pragmatist philosophy and contributions to social research by Charles Horton Cooley, George Herbert Mead, and Herbert Blumer. It then offers a brief glance at the varied landscape of symbolic interaction today and offers a general summary of the framework. From this foundation, it moves into analyses of data and corresponding analyses of symbolic interaction before concluding with discussion about the implications for social research and relevance for social justice.

SYMBOLIC INTERACTION: A BRIEF HISTORY

American pragmatists John Dewey and William James were particularly influential among scholars who were thinking about symbolic processes and social interaction (Reynolds, 2003b). Dewey distrusted the theoretical premise of what

¹The philosophical school of pragmatism originated in the late 19th century. William James (1902) attributed the term *pragmatism* to Charles Sanders Peirce; however, Peirce never claimed to be the founder of modern pragmatism (Helle, 2005).

²"Darwinism taught pragmatists that it is perfectly possible to explain how the human species developed language as one among many sophisticated methods of survival, but it is difficult to see how human beings would have acquired the capacity to represent the universe as it actually is" (Baert, 2005, p. 129).

he called “spectator knowledge”—the idea that knowledge is based on the accurate observation and representation of existing realities. He, like other pragmatists, conceptualized knowledge production as an active process. Pragmatists argued that truth is not the property of an idea or thing; rather, truth is a process of becoming: truth is *made* true. “Truth lives, in fact, for the most part on a credit system. Our thoughts and beliefs ‘pass,’ so long as nothing challenges them, just as bank-notes pass so long as nobody refuses them” (James, 1948, pp. 163–164). Pragmatism shifted notions of truth from the academic to the everyday—from what scholars think about the world to the “everyday truths” that everyone encounters and uses as the basis of decisions and actions (Helle, 2005, pp. 35–36). Both pragmatism and symbolic interaction are defined in some measure in relation to these two key points regarding truth and knowledge: Truth is not the property of things, and truth is made true through everyday interactions.

William James’s philosophy of instinct, habit, and self were also of key importance both to pragmatists and to the development of symbolic interaction. James was a Cartesian materialist—that is to say he believed that the self was identical with the brain. Like Descartes, he believed that bodily states follow from perception. He famously argued that people do not run from a bear because we are frightened; rather, we are frightened because we are running from a bear. James argued that given the human capacity for memory, repeated patterns of behavior must be understood as reflecting socially learned habits—not as basic instinct as had been thought previously.

For James (1902, 1948, 1971), the self was not an expression of some unitary inner being, but rather, it was the *effect* of caring about the opinions of distinct groups of people. This is particularly significant for two reasons. First, it means that the self is a social product—not a divine creation or a biologically determined one. Second, to the extent that individuals care about the opinions of many groups of people, each person could be said to have multiple selves. It is important to note this is not a postmodern notion of multiple selves but closer to a conflation of roles (e.g., parent, student, or athlete) and identity. Pragmatists believed that the potential of human nature could only be actualized in interaction with others; therefore, they were concerned with identifying the conditions that would most effectively develop that potential. Early scholars working in (what was to become) symbolic interaction drew strongly from these concepts in pragmatist philosophy to develop theories of self and interaction.

Table 4.1 Cartesian and Pragmatist Ontologies

Cartesian Dualism	Pragmatism
Ontological realism	Modified ontological realism
Subject = Person	Subject = Person
Subject/object dualism	Intersubjective
Objective truth	Truth is made true
Subjects have experiences	Subjects interpret experience
Language is neutral (transparent)	Language as symbolic communication

The influence of William James and John Dewey can be found in the ideas of Charles Horton Cooley, George Herbert Mead, and Herbert Blumer as well as in the most defining features of symbolic interaction: the looking-glass self, significant symbols, and lines of action. For example, Cooley's concept of a "looking-glass self" synthesized William James's philosophy of self and J. M. Baldwin's earlier theory of a looking-glass self. Cooley argued that a sense of self develops along two parallel lines: one in which the child develops a sense of power (agency) through her/his ability to manipulate the social and physical environment and one in which the child becomes aware of the fact that his or her own self-image reflects the imaginations of others concerning him/her. In this later sense, the self exists as an imaginative fact: People imagine how they are viewed by others and act accordingly.

Cooley, like James, believed that society does not restrict human behavior and creativity but rather, nurtures these and other qualities in social settings—social experience provides the conditions under which individuals develop. Cooley is linked to George Herbert Mead by a continuous analytic thread: the attempt to find a methodically satisfactory solution to the problem of the separation of subject and object (Helle, 2005, p. 53). Taking up this problem, George Herbert Mead extended what previously had been the province of psychology into sociology.

Mead belonged to an early tradition of scholars who viewed themselves as both philosophers and scientists: As a philosopher, Mead was a pragmatist, and as a scientist, he was a social behaviorist (Mead, 1962). Both fields mark his contributions to symbolic interaction. Mead (1962) drew from William James's concept of multiple selves to argue that institutional order is real only

insofar as it is *realized* in performed roles (such as manager, parent, scholar); however, roles are *defined and rendered apparently objective* by institutions (Rousseau, 2002, pp. 238–239).

In order to develop a framework for understanding interaction, Mead drew from John Dewey. Like Dewey, Mead argued that in order to effectively understand social interaction, researchers need to examine how “lines of interaction” are fitted together in what he called flexible, ongoing, and spontaneous ways (Blumer, 2004). Mead contended that interactions are an ever-evolving series of gestures that can spontaneously change directions. For example, Mead wrote

Much subtlety has been wasted on the problem of the meaning of meaning. It is not necessary, in attempting to solve this problem, to have recourse to psychical states, for the nature of meaning, as we have seen, is found to be implicit in the structure of the social act, implicit in the relations among its three basic individual components: namely the triadic relation of a gesture of one individual. A response to that gesture by a second individual, and a completion of the given social act initiated by the gesture of the first individual. (Mead, 1962, p. 81)

Mead’s understanding of interaction is related to the pragmatist notion of truth. For Mead, as for the pragmatists, *truth* and *meaning* must be understood relative to purposeful action, rather than as expressions of relationships of correspondence to reality.

In addition, this excerpt makes clear Mead’s social behaviorist perspective—both through his conceptualization of interaction as a linear trajectory as well as in his focus on social behavior—phenomenological processes of interaction, not interior processes of understanding. Further, as a social behaviorist, Mead theorized how individuals fit lines of interaction together by distinguishing between what he called gestures and significant gestures or significant symbols.

According to Mead, a gesture foreshadows action; gestures also presuppose a response on the part of the other. Mead offered dogfights as a classic example of gestures. Dogs signal a potential fight through their behavior, and this stimulates a response in another (Mead, 1962, p. 43). Gestures do not represent ideas nor do they stimulate ideas in response. People respond to gestures without thought or conscious awareness—much like a boxer responds to a punch.

Mead argued that in interaction people more often respond to a considered *interpretation* of gestures—what he called significant gestures or significant symbols. Significant gestures entail the use of symbols for specific meaning

and hence become “language” (Mead, 1962). For example, one must interpret whether the person shaking her or his fists is expressing anger or playfulness. Any gesture will become a significant symbol if it is interpreted as indicating forthcoming lines of action—an anticipated future (Blumer, 2004, pp. 18–20).

According to Mead, interaction pivots on three key points. First, since the interpreted meaning of an action depends upon what the action appears to portend for the future, interaction is always conducted with regard to *anticipated* behavior. Second, in role-taking, one imaginatively rehearses the prospective action of the other person; hence, the social ceases to be a purely external event and assumes an interiorized relation. Third, activity is self-directed, not evoked; prospective actions are not simply reactions, rather they are intentionally chosen actions (Blumer 2004, pp. 30–31).

Mead’s theorization of self and of lines of action influenced Herbert Blumer (1986, pp. 70–77), who drew from Mead to develop a distinction between a personal “I” (how one sees oneself) and a social “me” (how one imagines that one is seen by others). Blumer referred to the ongoing process of “conversation” between the “I” and the “me” as “self-indication.” This process entails internal conversations, which include questions such as Should I say this? Will this joke be funny? Will I look foolish if I do this? To answer questions that we pose to ourselves, we must take the position of another person looking back at us. We then shape our behavior in response to her or his imagined perspective.

For Blumer (1986), the foundation of all social interaction rests in the process of representing ourselves to ourselves—of thinking about ourselves as we think about other objects of consciousness.³ Joint action requires the ability to think about ourselves as we do others. Individuals fit lines of action together by first imagining how those with whom we are interacting might perceive us and then adjusting our behavior accordingly.⁴ Thus people communicate

³Blumer (1986) delineates three types of objects: (1) social objects (such as children, professors, or painters), (2) abstract objects (concepts such as loyalty or compassion), and (3) physical objects (such as buildings, parks, open spaces, and desks). Physical environments are never “just” backdrops for social interaction; they are an important part of interaction because people assign both symbolic value and forms of agency to them (Smith & Bugni, 2006).

⁴While joint lines of action are generally orderly, they are necessarily open to uncertainties. Joint actions must be initiated; can be interrupted, abandoned, or transformed; and may be oriented to different premises. Even while definition of a joint action is shared, participants may take quite different lines of action: New situations may arise that call for new lines of joint action and participants may rely on considerations outside of the immediate context to interpret each other’s lines of action (Blumer, 1986, pp. 71–72).

symbolically and imaginatively with others, and also with ourselves, as we experiment with potential lines of action in our minds.⁵ In short, self-indications enable individuals to create meaningful, purposive action; to adjust to circumstances that emerge; and to imagine how others might react. In addition, the process of self-indication involves the concept of multiple selves. For example, a person will shape joint lines of action on campus (when thinking of one's self as a scholar) differently than she or he would at home around a dinner table (when thinking of one's self as a lover, spouse, or parent). Blumer believed that the salience of any identity is context dependent and therefore should be thought of as identity-in-use.⁶ Since identities change over time—both in terms of substance and meaning—they are far from being fixed or permanent.

According to Blumer, the empirical world is always interpreted through a human imaginary (Blumer, 1986, p. 22). Therefore, all objects are social products that emerge out of social interaction; the meaning of an object exists in terms of how people make it meaningful. Yet Blumer was not a radical constructionist; he did not believe the world existed only in terms of the conceptions and images that people hold of it—Blumer argued that the world can and does “talk back.” Blumer (1986) argued that reality does not necessarily bend to our conceptions of it; the task of a social science is to test the images and concepts that people use by scrutinizing the empirical world.

Although Blumer was concerned with the symbolic and interpretive processes of social life, he worked within a model of science that was derived from the physical sciences. Consequently, Blumer argued that human documents, such as life histories, can only make clear the *nature* of the interpretation, not its validity. Given the impossibility of providing truly exhaustive accounts of human behavior, Blumer sought *validation* for interpretations in statistical analyses that compared research findings with a control group (Blumer, 1986, pp. 123–126).

In 1937, Herbert Blumer characterized ongoing research regarding the use of significant symbols at the University of Chicago as “symbolic interaction”

⁵Social control is understood fundamentally as self-control (Blumer, 1986). Social disorganization is understood as the inability to mobilize action effectively, not as the failure of social structures.

⁶“The fluidity and multivocality of these identities also implies that socially constructed realities are likely to be characterized by multiple and changing meanings rather than fixed and shared ones. This is a point of departure for SI from the European phenomenological tradition, which tends to more strongly emphasize the intersubjective and shared aspects of reality construction. SI on the other hand, is definitely more concerned with the multiplicity of realities within any situation” (Prasad, 2005, p. 22).

(Platt, 1996, pp. 120–121). Today there is no single school of symbolic interaction. Over the years, symbolic interaction has thrived in a variety of schools and genres, none of which represents a homogenous intellectual presence. At a minimum, some scholars have inflected symbolic interaction with feminist and critical race theories. Yet several distinctions have been institutionalized as particular schools of symbolic interaction—although the number and significance of the schools continues to be strongly debated (cf. Denzin, 1992). With that caveat emptor, I want to note a few of the competing lines of thought that have emerged. These delineations are not intended to point to homogeneous schools that are absolutely distinct from each other but to provide a brief, descriptive overview that might be useful as a general heuristic for conceptualizing movements of thought.⁷

Roughly between the First and Second World Wars, social scientists working at the University of Chicago began to move away from laboratory research and toward a more naturalistic mode of inquiry; their research is referred to as the first Chicago School (Travers, 2001, p. 18). This school includes scholars such as Robert Park, Herbert Blumer, Nels Anderson, W. I. Thomas, Louis Wirth, and Everett Hughes. Research from the first Chicago School is characterized by case studies and ethnographic fieldwork that tend to incorporate functionalist analyses and emphasize social competition for scarce resources. In addition, these studies draw particularly from the functionalist language of norms and values and rely on positivist standards of data analysis (Herman-Kinney & Verschaeve, 2003). Perhaps most notable among these ethnographies was *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, published in 1918 by Thomas and Znaniecki. As noted in Chapter 3, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, although crafted in the causal language of physical sciences, broke new ground by examining life histories (Musolf, 2003, pp. 92–93).⁸ While *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* broadened sociological notions of evidence in ways that were critically important to symbolic interactionists, it also drew strong criticism from Blumer (1941) and other symbolic interactionists for a lack of clear methodology.

The second Chicago School refers to research after the Second World War and today is commonly referred to simply as the Chicago School. The second

⁷It is beyond the scope of this book to provide analyses of the social, economic, and political contexts that gave rise to these schools. However, it is important to keep in mind that all research paradigms are products of such contexts.

⁸Thomas's axiom of "If men (sic) define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" has since become foundational in sociology (Musolf, 2003, p. 93).

Chicago School differs from the first in that it rejects generalizability as an analytic goal and focuses instead on internal validity and the production of theory. It includes the “new” ethnographies of Herbert Gans, Howard Becker, Elliot Liebow, Blanche Greer, and Elijah Anderson. These later ethnographies emphasize the unfolding and emergent nature of human interaction. In addition, the second Chicago School is characterized by sympathetic introspection, participant observation, and interviews—the hallmarks of contemporary ethnographic research.

By contrast, Manford Kuhn at the University of Iowa drew from the more behaviorist aspects of the first Chicago School, as well as from the physical sciences, to develop what came to be known as the Iowa School (Katovich, Miller, & Stewart, 2003). Kuhn emphasized the positivist features of Blumer’s work—in particular standardization and hypothesis testing (Herman-Kinney & Verschaeve, 2003) and incorporated only those aspects of Blumer’s and Mead’s work that could be operationalized (Helle, 2005, p. 41). The result was quantitatively driven and expressed a more fundamentally deterministic view of human behavior. After Kuhn’s death, Carl Couch continued a quantitative approach to symbolic interaction and created the New Iowa School (now referred to as the Iowa School). Couch incorporated a positivist approach with a pragmatist philosophical foundation; research in this school emphasizes the study of dyadic relationships over time.⁹

Yet Couch was not alone in developing a variation of Kuhn’s first Iowa School. Jan Stets and Peter Burke also modified ideas from the original Iowa School to develop what is known as the Indiana School, which focuses on *structure*, both as the source of identity and action. In this framework, social roles are understood as expressions of social structures; the analytic emphasis concerns interactions between *roles* (parents, teacher, spouse, etc.) rather than between individuals (cf. Burke, 1980; Stryker, 1980). The Indiana School may be best known for its pioneering work in technology, particularly cybernetic models of mind and social interaction and artificial intelligence (Herman-Kinney & Verschaeve, 2003, p. 223).

At the University of Illinois, Norman Denzin cultivated what has come to be known as the Illinois School—a version of symbolic interactionism combined with postmodern and poststructural theories (Travers, 2001). The

⁹The Iowa School itself has been subdivided into four waves of research, each connected to Mead and Couch’s empiricism but with distinctly different themes (Katovich, Miller, & Hintz, 2002).

Illinois School takes up the politics of representation by deconstructing symbolic practices, as well as by incorporating a psychoanalytic perspective. With a primary focus on cultural production and consumption, the Illinois School reorients symbolic interaction toward cultural studies. It also underscores the reflexive nature of interaction and extends the concept to researchers as well who must role-take (place themselves in the position of those they study) in order to make sense of interactions, objects, events, and contexts.

In this sense, symbolic interaction in the Illinois School involves a double hermeneutic: one involving the relationships and interpretations among participants, and another involving the researcher's relationship to, and interpretation of, the social context or interaction. The researcher is not just an observer but someone who is actively (re)constructing the process of meaning in order to be able to understand and interpret it (Helle, 2005, p. 19). In addition, researchers actively construct their findings for others—this could be said to constitute another double hermeneutic: one regarding the researcher's process of writing and one regarding the reader's interpretation of the text.

While the Chicago, Iowa, Indiana, and Illinois Schools constitute the *primary* variations of contemporary symbolic interaction, some scholars identify two subfields of symbolic interaction: dramaturgy and ethnomethodology. Erving Goffman (1959b, 1967) argued that the process of interpretively recreating social knowledge has an essentially dramatic structure that makes reality appear to simply unfold—hence Goffman developed what now is called dramaturgy. The influence of Cooley's looking-glass self is evident in Goffman's concept of dramaturgy. Goffman took the premise that, in interaction, each person behaves (consciously or not) in ways that attempt to manage the impressions that others might gain of them—in effect, individuals put on a “show,” or performance, for others. Goffman's dramaturgical framework centers issues of role-taking, as well as front stage and backstage performances. Goffman also drew from Cooley's work on emotion, specifically regarding pride and shame (Scheff, 2005). In particular, Goffman (1963) famously examined shame in relation to stigmatized performances. In his later work, Goffman shifted his analytical emphasis from face-to-face interaction to frame analysis, which regards broader aspects of language. This shift remains controversial, with some scholars choosing to ignore frame analysis as a blemish on an otherwise brilliant career and others asserting that his research on frame analysis was the pinnacle of his intellectual achievement.

The second of these subfields is ethnomethodology, which was developed by Harold Garfinkel. Concerned with the production of apparently natural social worlds, Garfinkel (1967) pursued a distinctively different path in order to examine the *assumptions* underlying the meaning-making processes of ordinary activities in daily life. Ethnomethodology is discussed in detail in Chapter 5; for now, suffice it to say that ethnomethodological research is characterized by a primary concern: How is a particular social activity done and what must be assumed in doing it?

It is important to repeat that there are fundamental challenges to nearly all delineations of interactionist schools. For example, while some scholars (Boden, 1990; Denzin, 1970) consider the general project of ethnomethodology to be congruent with symbolic interaction, others (Maynard & Clayman, 2003) have argued that it is *fundamentally incompatible* with symbolic interaction. In addition, although both symbolic interaction and ethnomethodology claim Erving Goffman as part of their lineages, in his lifetime, he chose not to affiliate with either. More generally, scholars continue to debate whether researchers should refer to symbolic interaction or symbolic interactionism; the latter is contested as an inappropriate reification. While a rich debate continues, I will sketch the basic principles of symbolic interaction as an interpretive framework in the following section.

THE BASIC PREMISE OF SYMBOLIC INTERACTION

Today, symbolic interaction is most often practiced as a loose amalgam of Cooley's "looking-glass self" and Blumer's sociological interpretation of Mead's theories. Generally, symbolic interaction is associated with three basic tenets.¹⁰ First, people act toward things based on the meanings that the things hold for them (Blumer, 1986). A tree might be a sacred object for one person, an example of a particular botanical species for another, and cubits of lumber

¹⁰Manis and Meltzer provide seven principles of symbolic interaction: (1) Distinctively human behavior and interaction are carried on through the medium of symbols and their meanings. (2) The individual becomes humanized through interaction with other persons. (3) Human society is most usefully conceived as consisting of people in interaction. (4) Human beings are active in shaping their own behavior. (5) Consciousness, or thinking, involves interaction with oneself. (6) Human beings construct their own behavior in the course of its execution. (7) An understanding of human conduct requires study of the actors' covert behavior (Manis & Meltzer, 1978, pp. 6–8 in Musolf, 2003, p. 104).

for another. Each person will act toward the tree on the basis of the meaning it holds for him or her. This first tenet is a critical but not a defining feature of symbolic interaction.

Second, the meanings of things are generated over time through human interaction (Blumer, 1986). The source of meaning for symbolic interaction is collective; it is not individually determined nor is it intrinsic to objects. This is a key point for symbolic interaction and one that distinguishes it from analytic realism in which a chair is seen as a chair in and of itself. In symbolic interaction, objects and events are never just backdrops for interaction. Mead (1962) argued that people imagine not only the likely positions of other people but also the objects and places with which we interact. Consequently, inanimate objects can be understood to have a kind of agency in that they have profound and integral effects on human responses and interactions. The field of material culture is socially alive.¹¹

Third, meanings are modified during interaction through interpretive processes (Blumer, 1986). A sense of meaning involves an interpretive process during which an individual communicates with him/herself; in the process of self-indication, he or she may come to suspend, regroup, or transform meanings. For example, in the course of reflecting on cutting down trees, a logger may come to see trees not as lumber but as sacred objects to be protected.

As a qualitative interpretive framework, symbolic interaction is dependent on the procedural techniques of analytic induction or grounded theory. As described in Chapter 3, analytic induction and grounded theory both rely on inductive logic and empirical evidence in localized contexts. Common modes of study for symbolic interactionists include ethnography, participant observation, life history, unstructured interviews, focus groups, as well as textual and visual media (including photographs, film, and vlogs) analyses.

Significantly, Blumer (1933, 1986) believed that the task of media was to accurately reflect the empirical world; in this sense, Blumer treated film as an iconographic sign that represented the real world. Consequently, from this perspective, the primary task of media analyses necessarily regards the

¹¹This perspective is distinctly different from ethnomethodology in which inanimate objects are generally not analyzed in the production of meaning.

success or failure (the relative accuracy) of the media's reflection of the world it claimed to represent. Blumer (1933, 1986) also asserted a causal relationship between film and the social behavior of audiences, although he never developed a method of analysis that could pursue the relationship. Contemporary scholars (cf. Clough, 1988, 2000; Denzin, 1992, 2002b) associated with the Illinois School have developed analyses of media analysis that go well beyond Blumer's realist conceptions—often by combining symbolic interaction with poststructuralist and/or psychoanalytical theory. I turn next to a practical application of symbolic interaction, followed by reflexive analyses.

ANALYSIS OF NEWSPAPER, TELEVISION, AND INTERVIEW EXEMPLARS

This section uses what might be called the tenets of mainstream symbolic interaction associated with the Chicago School highlighted in the previous overview. Subsequent sections present exemplars from three forms of empirical data (newspaper, television, and interview) as done in Chapter 3. They are the same exemplars with the same brief contextualizing overviews. After analyzing each exemplar, I then reflect on how the various philosophical commitments of symbolic interaction shaped my analysis. As in Chapter 3, I conclude the chapter by considering the relevance of ontology and epistemology to social justice.

Newspaper Analysis

The purportedly objective nature of news reporting makes it a particularly interesting site for analysis. News stories are carefully crafted narratives that select and assemble a narrow range of sources and events from a wide range of possibilities. Through multiple revisions and edits, a story is shaped into an apparently linear “news event.” Despite this well-established process, the general public commonly reads a news story as a *description* of an event. This holds particular promise and pitfalls for social researchers. What is the most effective way of analyzing news articles? Symbolic interaction provides a distinctive framework.

Newspaper Exemplar

Being a double amputee is not often described as an unfair advantage, but that is the argument made by the governing body of world athletics, the International Association of Athletics Federation (IAAF) in newspaper articles about Oscar Pistorius, a 20-year-old South African runner. Pistorius was born without fibulae in his legs; his parents, on the advice of multiple medical experts, had their son's legs amputated just beneath the knee when he was 11 months old (Philip, 2005). Pistorius has run for many years in the para-Olympics with record performances in this and other events at 100 meters (10.91 seconds), 200 meters (21.58 seconds), and 400 meters (46.34 seconds) (Longman, 2007). While those times do not meet Olympic qualifying standards for men, Pistorius is fast enough that his marks "would have won gold medals in equivalent women's races at the 2004 Athens Olympics" (Longman, 2007).

When the Beijing Games were still 15 months away, Pistorius petitioned the IAAF to run in the 2008 Olympics. I examined newspaper articles about Pistorius's petition and the IAAF administrative response and found that administrators, athletes, and ethicists argued that Pistorius's prosthetic legs create a potentially unfair advantage for him over runners with biological legs. The following newspaper excerpt is an exemplar of coverage on the issue:

"The rule book says a foot has to be in contact with the starting block," Leon Fleiser, a general manager of the South African Olympic Committee, said. "What is the definition of a foot? Is a prosthetic device a foot, or is it an actual foot?"

I.A.A.F. officials have also expressed concern that Pistorius could topple over, obstructing others or injuring himself and fellow competitors. Some also fear that, without limits on technological aids, able-bodied runners could begin wearing carbon-fiber plates or other unsuitably springy devices in their shoes.

Among ethicists, Pistorius's success has spurred talk of "transhumans" and "cyborgs." Some note that athletes already modify themselves in a number of ways, including baseball sluggers who undergo laser eye surgery to enhance their vision and pitchers who have elbow reconstruction using sturdier ligaments from elsewhere in the body. At least three disabled athletes have competed in the Summer Olympics: George Eyser, an American, won a gold medal in gymnastics while competing on a wooden

leg at the 1904 Games in St. Louis; Neroli Fairhall, a paraplegic from New Zealand, competed in archery in the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles; and Marla Runyan, a legally blind runner from the United States, competed in the 1,500 meters at the 2000 Olympics in Sydney. But Pistorius would be the first amputee to compete in a track event, international officials said.

A sobering question was posed recently on the Web site of the Connecticut-based Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies. "Given the arms race nature of competition," will technological advantages cause "athletes to do something as seemingly radical as having their healthy natural limbs replaced by artificial ones?" wrote George Dvorsky, a member of the institute's board of directors. "Is it self-mutilation when you're getting a better limb?" (Longman, 2007).

This excerpt demonstrates how "disability" emerges as a product of intersubjective social agreements about what constitutes ability/disability, rather than as the result of any particular physical, emotional, or mental characteristic. The excerpt illustrates that social agreements regarding the nature of disability are reached over time, in multiple contexts, and by multiple actors. In some respects, the excerpt also demonstrates how such social agreements can change; in the article, the meaning of being a double amputee shifts from a disadvantage to a potential advantage.

At issue for IAAF officials is the kind of body that Pistorius has—not his ability to meet required starting times or his ability to run the distance of the race. The article demonstrates how the meaning of disability is created not in relation to *ability* but in relation to a conventional body—not even necessarily an athletic body. Because disability gains meaning through the perception of bodies, rather than abilities, the article is able to characterize an Olympic gold medal winner, George Eyser, as disabled. To the extent that disability is framed in relation to an idealized human body, eye surgery and elbow reconstruction can be understood as *restoring* elements of a "natural" body rather than as *replacing* them—which begins the journey to becoming "transhuman."

Pistorius's Olympic bid is symbolically framed as a moral contest between humans and technology that threatens to redefine the ideal body—and indeed challenges the meaning of humanness. Further, by placing the human body, rather than athletic ability, at the center of the discussion about disability, the article constructs Pistorius as a potential threat to human bodies. Consider for instance Dvorsky's concern that Pistorius might inspire other athletes to willingly amputate their own legs.

Although people may have different limbs, sense faculties, and so forth, *disability* is the product of how the social environment and cultural institutions interpret and respond to those differences—becoming disabled is a symbolic and interactional process. Pistorius’s bid for admission to the Olympics is a clear (if implicit) assertion that he rejects limitations associated with being labeled *disabled*—and consequently, rejects the cultural meanings of ability and disability produced through idealized bodies. This rejection seems to be at the core of the IAAF’s apparent troubles. Embodiment that diverges from a hegemonic ideal remains deliberative grounds for disqualification as the meaning of disability slides from being a potential disadvantage to being a potential advantage.

Analyzing the Analysis

Symbolic interaction is not a form of textual analysis per se; it enables the researcher to bring broader concepts and theories to bear on the reading of the text.¹² For example, to analyze disability as a symbolic process, I made reference to “social agreements” about disability. At the most basic level, the preceding analysis illustrates the ways that various actors (Pistorius, the IAAF, and ethicists) respond to the range of meanings that ability/disability hold for each. Yet none is acting from an individual construction of meaning—the tenacity of the various meanings has been established over time and through multiple contexts. And they remain open to challenge—as is evident both in Pistorius’s bid for Olympic competition and as the meaning of being a double amputee shifts from a disadvantage to a potential advantage.

However, as in Chapter 3, the analysis does not substantially address the symbolic construction of ability. Human bodies are treated as a *referent* rather than a symbolic construction in and of themselves. In this sense, ability is still the unmarked center from which difference is measured. Overall, the analysis demonstrates how the meaning of humanness is tethered to an idealized body as the article raises the question of cyborgs and transhumans. While the analysis is not tightly tied to the text, broader considerations, such as athletic segregation and the effects of race and gender, are inaccessible because they are not reflected in the text. Again this likely appears to be a matter of common sense—why should researchers analyze what is not in the text?

¹²This is why, in part, some ethnomethodologists seek to distance the two frameworks. In addition, in symbolic interaction, researchers often verify their emerging understandings of an ethnographic context through interviews with key informants. In ethnomethodology, this process of verification is problematic and will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Rooted to a pragmatist philosophy, the analysis does not rely upon, or offer, a fixed notion of reality but rather examines a series of negotiations through which Pistorius is symbolically constructed as “disabled,” despite his ability to run competitively. However, the analysis also relies upon the procedural technique of analytic induction—the exemplar is brought to the page through analytic induction. What are the effects of combining a process of formalization/systemization that relies on a Cartesian ontology, with a process of interpretation, which relies on a pragmatist ontology?

First, the analysis treats the newspaper article as a transparent accounting of news; it does not examine how events are assembled to appear as news. However, this could simply be a shortcoming of the researcher’s analysis. There is nothing in symbolic interaction that would preclude an analysis of the symbolic construction of news—although this omission is extremely common among symbolic interactionist analyses. So while it is possible to argue that the influence of a Cartesian ontology might foreclose or restrict the analytical impulse to study news as a cultural product, for now I want to simply acknowledge that the analysis (as done) examines the symbolic production of disability, and at another level, it also replicates the realist ontology that it resists. The competing theoretical foundations have perhaps clearer effects where the analysis encounters many of the same limitations as in Chapter 3 regarding the nature of evidence and the production of knowledge.

If people create the meaning of social realities through symbolic interactions, we must accept a limitless number of layers to the meaning-making process. Given that all meaning is a link in an infinite chain of meanings, at what point(s) can/should the researcher bracket the meaning-making processes? Symbolic interaction is rooted to a Cartesian ontology through the procedural techniques of analytic induction/grounded theory. The process of formalization determines, most broadly, what can count as potential evidence. Consequently, my examination of meaning-making processes is confined to localized contexts—even though epistemologically, I take up an interpretive analysis of meaning-making processes.

The resonance of a Cartesian ontology also is evidenced in the subject/object dualism that enables the analysis to appear to write itself. Because there is no consideration of how the researcher is constructing data, evidence, or meaning, the analysis creates the appearance of objective (if interpretive) knowledge. The analysis lacks reflexivity—both as a critical expression of self-awareness and more broadly as an acknowledgment of the symbolically mediated, intersubjective relational process of social research.

Although experience is understood as an interpretive process, the analytical process can obscure the locus of agency and the meaning of subjectivity. The early founders of symbolic interaction equated subjects with persons and hence directed their analyses to the production of identities-in-use. Today, mainstream symbolic interaction acknowledges the fluidity of identities but also conflates identities with roles (parent, scholar, banker). This is particularly problematic, not only because some identities are more fixed and permanent than others, but also because it reduces identity to roles. For example, many scholars today would assert that gender, sexuality, and race are *subject locations*, not roles, precisely because there is no place to stand outside of them.

An implicitly Cartesian concept of subjectivity is evidenced in the treatment of disability and ability as dichotomous and fixed positions—even as symbolic interaction demonstrates that the meaning of those positions is culturally created. There is no empirical evidence in the article that would support an analysis of the ways that segregation makes it possible for “able-bodied” athletes and audiences to ignore the ways in which all ability exists on a continuum—or that such segregation also encourages “able-bodied” athletes and audiences to ignore how their own behavior *produces* what they have come to perceive as “disability” in others.

Also, in the earlier analysis, the question of agency never explicitly arises because it is implicitly assumed as a property of a Cartesian subject. The ability of “disabled” athletes to participate in the Olympics is constrained in this article by the external force of the Olympic vetting process—through the exercise of its own agency. Congruently, the analysis does not problematize the nature of experience—it is simply something that individuals have. In this sense, experience seems to be constituted in an interactional environment.

Finally, because Pistorius’s gender, race, and class are never mentioned in the article, they fall outside the context available for analysis and hence appear to be irrelevant. Yet as a South African who was born without fibulae, his race, class, and gender have much to contribute to his success as an Olympic athlete. Had they been mentioned in the article, I could have brought cultural knowledge and social theory regarding whiteness, wealth, and masculinity to bear on the analysis. Analyses of the symbolic construction of ability and disability (which are rooted to a pragmatist ontology) are dramatically shaped and constrained by the demands of Cartesian ontology, which forms the basis of analytic induction/grounded theory.

Television Analysis

Generally television dramas are premised on the commonsense attitude of ontological realism—viewers believe that the drama is a realistic portrayal, even if this requires temporarily suspending particular moments of disbelief. Audiences are invited to engage in a kind of voyeurism, in which the drama serves as a private window into events unfolding, apparently spontaneously, in the lives of others. For researchers, the pitfalls of approaching television shows with an analytic foundation premised on ontological realism are obvious. Yet it would seem from existing media studies in mainstream social sciences that such an approach is equally hard to avoid. To what extent does symbolic interaction offer promising insights?

Television Exemplar

The ABC drama *Brothers and Sisters* features a white, upper-class family in Southern California involved in the daily dramas of a family-run business—complicated (of course) by interpersonal relationships and family intrigues. The series is unusual in that one of the adult siblings in the Walker family is gay, which makes it a potentially interesting site for examining talk about sexuality. I examined shows from the first season and found two relevant patterns.

First, scenes consistently allowed for multiple and contradictory audience engagements with politically controversial issues related to sexuality. *Brothers and Sisters* commonly dramatizes political issues that affect many families in the United States—particularly with regard to same-sex marriage and the Republican/Democrat partisan divides that characterized the George W. Bush administration.

Second, scenes consistently left disagreements about sexuality unresolved. The show framed these disagreements within the contexts of family intimacy, human frailty, and political aspirations—and typically used humor to drain or divert dramatic tension when very harsh or divisive conflict threatened to break out.

The following excerpt features a scene between siblings Kitty Walker, played by Calista Flockhart, and Kevin Walker, played by Matthew Rhys. Kitty enters this scene having just come from a meeting with Republican Senator

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Robert McCallister (played by Rob Lowe), who offered her a position as head of communications for his presidential campaign. Their meeting holds particular significance to the following scene for two reasons: Kitty and her deceased father have been the only Republicans in a family with strong Democrat affiliations, and it exposed romantic tension between Kitty and the senator, who is a father of two young children and is in the process of a divorce.

Kitty has just mentioned the job offer to her brother, Kevin, who is an attorney and the only gay primary character in the show in the first season.¹³ As the scene opens, Kevin is upset with Kitty because Robert McCallister has voted in favor of a constitutional ban on same-sex marriage. Throughout this scene, Kitty is preoccupied with the mail while Kevin is consumed by the conversation; the camera alternates with the speaker, taking the view of the listener.

Kevin: Well, why *you*?

Kitty: Well, what the hell does that mean?

Kevin: [*stuttering*] Well, c-cause it's completely absurd. You can't work for this guy!

Kitty: Why? [*Kitty laughs.*] Why, Kevin? Because he's a Republican?

Kevin: No, because he's against gay marriage!

Kitty: There are lots of people in the world, Kevin, for instance *me*, who have no problem with gay people but still believe that marriage is fundamentally a religious institution that has nothing to do with the [*camera turns to Kevin who is visibly upset*] state and that does not discount civil unions or domestic partnerships or anything you . . .

Kevin: [*Voice escalates*] Oh come on! That's just a cover that people like you provide for people like him who hate people like me.

[*Kitty shakes her head.*]

Kitty: Oh, Kevin! Please, let's not make it personal.

Kevin: Ah, ah . . . [*Raises eyebrows*] Personal? Kitty, in 10 years . . . in 20 years, when I am finally . . . m-mature enough to sustain a committed relationship I would like to settle down and get married. That's personal.

[*Kitty stops glancing through mail and looks up to speak.*]

¹³Subsequent seasons have included several other white gay men.

Kitty: That's improbable.

Kevin: Don't take this job, Kitty. I'm warning you it will cause a great deal of

Kitty: Wait a minute. Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait a minute. You're *warning* me?

[*Brothers and Sisters*, Episode 11: "Family Day" 1/7/07]

Brothers and Sisters, like all television shows, finds an audience by representing the social world in ways that resonate with large numbers of people. Viewers become part of a regular audience when they reliably find characters and situations with which they can identify in reality or in fantasy. In this sense, studies of popular media can offer important insights into contemporary social life. For example, the excerpt from *Brothers and Sisters* both draws upon and exposes the tensions that exist in many contemporary U.S. families around issues of same-sex marriage and politics. The excerpt highlights these tensions in the argument that arises between Kitty and Kevin in response to McCallister's job offer to Kitty.

Throughout the show, and in this scene, Kitty represents the current "moderate" Republican view that asserts marriage is a religious issue having nothing to do with the state or with quality of life issues. Her family more consistently represents positions associated with "liberal" Democrats. Yet with regard to this particular issue, only Kevin, who is gay, advances marriage as a civil rights issue that regards basic equality; other family members are silent on the issue. In this scene, Kevin advances an emotional response rather than an analysis of how the state is involved in allocating special rights to married people. The emotionality may bring to light that this is a personal issue for him as a gay man, or it may frame this as a sibling conflict; it also may raise some questions about his maturity and masculinity in ways that are consistent with dominant homophobic views.

Kevin's response and his difficulty in maintaining intimate relationships (again an element of a homophobic discourse) are parlayed into a sibling conflict between an older sister and younger brother—which enables both interpretations of the conflict to coexist. While sibling intimacy *enables* a conversation about personal and political differences that emerge in relationship to same-sex marriage, as a political argument begins to unfold, Kevin de-escalates the conflict from a political debate to a sibling spat through self-deprecating characterizations of his own marital aspirations. The show thus brings up political issues but reduces them to personal differences by stripping arguments of their political/social value.

Analyzing the Analysis

Consistent with the Chicago School, this analysis takes up media representations as being reflective of social life. It provides some insight into how political tensions in the show are introduced and averted as well as demonstrating how multiple interpretations of the scene would enable a broad range of viewers to find their own political values validated by the show. While the analysis takes up the issue of representation from the point of view of potential audiences, we lack the necessary audience for making arguments regarding the dialogic relationship between audiences and representations.

Similarly, the analysis does not take up the *construction* of television shows—the deliberate practices of writers, editors, producers, actors, and advertisers. Although the scene is acknowledged as a constructed representation, “mainstream” symbolic interaction does not provide the necessary tools for analyzing the processes of representation that would be relevant to this scene. As a consequence, even though the analysis critiques representational practices, agency seems to be limited to what one sees—the lines of action taken (or not taken). This is consistent with the realist ontology of a Cartesian framework and contributes to the somewhat transparent quality of representation: The show appears to be the equivalent of social life, which leaves the meaning of experience in a liminal state that is at best irrelevant and at worst the property of the television characters. The analysis carries an implicit Cartesian understanding of social subjects as equivalent to persons—even if those persons are fictional.

While the symbolic interactionist epistemology expresses the commitments of a pragmatist philosophy directed at processes of interpretation, the analytical focus expresses those of a Cartesian ontology embedded in analytic induction. This is evident by the notion of evidence that is bracketed in such a way as to focus only on what is on the screen, or in this case in the transcript. Clough (2000, p. 92) argued that television is not narrative media but rather is a ceaseless flow, an endless circulation of information and images. This flow cannot be accounted for in my analyses because it is rooted to the processes of analytic induction. In addition, because no one talks about race, gender, ability, or class, there is no evidence to analyze in this excerpt. Hence, these systematic forms of cultural privilege appear to be irrelevant to representations of and political debates about sexuality.

Interview Analysis

Historically, scholars working with symbolic interaction have tended to produce ethnographies; interviews are an important cornerstone of ethnographic

study. However, the strong emphasis on behavioral observation in symbolic interaction leads researchers to use interviews to check the validity of the researcher's emerging interpretations of events and situations in the ethnographic context (Cahill, 1987). My analysis of my interview with Tony Romero attends only to symbolic elements rather than to processes of verification, which exceed the structure of the example.

Interview Exemplar

While dominant public discourses in the United States construct race as natural, and apparently self-evident, in interviews with Native American Indians, I found that talk about race consistently exposed the social, historical, and legal processes of racialization. The exemplar that follows is from my interview with Tony Romero an Esselen Indian. It is important to note that in the early 1900s, Esselen Indians (indigenous to the land that came to be called California) were declared "extinct" by the U.S. government. The federal government's policy of recognition for Native Americans requires genealogical evidence of unbroken ancestry over hundreds of years. Indigenous nations unable to provide that evidence were "terminated" by the government—that is to say denied federal recognition that would have entitled them to land and other settlement claims, as well as university scholarships and other forms of affirmative action candidacy. The Esselens, however, were never officially terminated but rather declared "extinct."

The federal declaration of their "extinction" has become part of a dominant cultural discourse. For example, the *Economist* featured an article on the Esalen [*sic*] Institute, and described it as "named after the Esselen, a now-extinct Indian tribe that used the place as their burial ground. In 1910 the Murphy family bought the land from homesteaders" (*The Economist*, 2007). The Esalen Institute is a spa/retreat center that has drawn renowned authors including John Steinbeck, Aldous Huxley, and Henry Miller. In the 1950s, the beat poets visited Esalen, and it later became a home to Alan Watts (*The Economist*, 2007).

In the following excerpt from my interview with Tony Romero in 2000, he talks about growing up in California as an Esselen Indian.

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(Continued)

Celine-Marie: I wonder if you could tell me what it was like for you growing up and crossing worlds between your family and your home and the rest of the culture you experienced around you.

Tony: Well grownin' up, uh, growin' up, I remember my mom and dad always told me, "Don't tell anybody you're Indian." Uh, they were scared because I had uncles that were either drug behind horses or hung just 'cause they said they were Native American Indians. I have documentation of that. I had a couple of my relatives that were hung in a barn in Carmel Valley 'cause they wouldn't sell their property.

Celine-Marie: I'm so sorry.

Tony: It's things like that that happened in those days, and you know were talkin' like the '50s—1950s—and things like that were still goin' on like I remember when I was in high school I used to go down Monterey, I used to go to Louis' Bar on Alvarado Street. My uncle used to hang out, and there were two Obispo used to hang out in front of Louis' all the time and sit, they used to have these benches in front of all the pool halls. They were like, I guess there were like 10 or 12 pool halls you know on Alvarado Street and all these bars. So the Indians always used to carry these little pints of whiskey. I'll never forget the whiskey bottles cause they're, they're made in a shape where you can put 'em in your back pocket and they just fit perfect cause they had a little concave, concave shape to 'em.

Celine-Marie: Mmm.

Tony: And, uh, I remember 'em always sippin' out them damn whiskey bottles and, uh, but I remember one time I was comin' out of Louis' pool hall and my uncle was fightin' with these two white guys. He was tellin' how they were on his land, he didn't like it you know, he was feelin' a little tipsy there. So then I just ignored him, went across the street with some friends of mine to another place. And about a half an hour later I came back out and my uncle was sittin' on the same bench but he had a bloody nose, his eye was all black and blue, what they did was, they drug him in the back alley, beat the shit out of him to teach him a

lesson, you know, that it wasn't his land anymore, it was theirs. And, uh, it was things like that that happened in Monterey where my mother was scared. She said well don't tell anybody you're Indian, tell 'em you're Spanish. So then when I *did* tell people I was Spanish and Indian, the first thing that came into mind was you're *Mexican*. I said no, no. I said bein' a Spanish Indian didn't make you Mexican. It wasn't the idea that I was ashamed of bein' a Mexican, it was the idea of wanting to be called what I really *was*. And I wasn't a Mexican. And I *knew* that and my parents knew that and, uh, so anyway, I went through that through my whole school years. You know OK, Tony, you're Spanish and Indian but you're Mexican. I says no. So anyway I had to go through this whole thing when I was a kid. I was always, I was always, when I was a kid I was always fightin' to protect my heritage.

Celine-Marie: Mmm.

Tony: Always fightin' you know to show people I was Native American Indian and I was proud of it. But then, uh, after a while I just, I just ignored the whole thing. But then after my mom passed away, I will never forget my mom passed away in 1970, she, uh, she looked at me and says you're Native American Indian. She said be proud of it. I'll never forget that. She says you're Esselen Indian. She said be proud of it. And, uh, so ever since then I've been fightin' for my recognition as a Native American Indian. I'm doin' it not only for her, but for my family, you know my existing family I have now, which isn't much.

Through a narrative defined by conflicts (internal and external) Tony represents himself as both a victim and a warrior. His identification as an Esselen Indian is anchored to a life history that seems to revolve around pool halls, whiskey pints, and various forms of social and cultural violence. Tony represents his survival as an Esselen Indian—perhaps economically as well as physically—as being dependent upon becoming culturally invisible. Yet if his parents' admonition to deny that he was Esselen Indian protected him from racist violence, it also enacted another form of violence characterized by continuing forms of conflict in Tony's life. Further, the cultural invisibility that saved the lives of Esselen Indians also advanced a quite lethal form of violence

by enabling the U.S. government to declare them extinct. If the word *extinction* conjures species of plants, animals, and insects, it works here to mask the more appropriate word *genocide*. Metaphorically, Tony's mother gave birth to a "new" Tony on her deathbed when she told Tony to stop hiding his identity, to be proud, and to never forget that he is Esselen Indian. The excerpt ends with a claim to cultural citizenship as Tony pursues both personal and cultural visibility by launching a fight for the Federal recognition of the Esselen Nation.

Analyzing the Analysis

This analysis offers some broad and interesting insights into symbolic processes at work in this interview. It seems to articulate key concepts of pragmatist philosophy: Identities are negotiated and changeable, and social life is understood as an emerging process, rather than as a defined reality. In addition, my focus on symbolic processes moves the analysis away from ontological realism. Yet the philosophical commitments are not entirely clear. Notably, my analysis did not problematize subjectivity, agency, or experience; hence, they appear to be either irrelevant or self-evident—qualities of a Cartesian ontology in either case. Although symbolic interaction understands experience as an interpretive process, the analytical process obscures the locus of agency and the nature of experience.

The system of formalization (analytic induction) is evident through the implicit ontological realism that dominates the analysis. In addition, it is evident as well in the way the analysis is presented as transparent—written by no one in particular. To the extent that interviews appear to be less constructed (there are not hosts of writers, editors, and advertisers that escape the analytical frame), interviews can seem to be more objectively accessible and more effective forms of social research. Again, these are features of ontological realism. Although my analysis concerns symbolic processes of interpretation in the *narrative*, the analysis is not self-reflexive with respect to the production of knowledge. The researcher always frames the analysis—bringing some things to the fore and leaving others behind. This process alone must undermine the belief that interviews are not constructed events.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL RESEARCH

Symbolic interaction is a process of interpretation that draws from American Pragmatism and which also relies on a Cartesian framework for the process of

formalization that generates evidence. The double nature of symbolic interaction as rooted to *both* philosophical pragmatism and Cartesian dualism enables the proliferation of schools with apparently contradictory approaches to social life and social research. On the one hand, symbolic interaction is practiced as an interpretive framework—leading some to incorporate poststructuralism. On the other hand, its grounding in Cartesian dualism leads others to implement it as a quantitative strategy committed to models of scientific inquiry associated with physical sciences. To the extent that both pragmatist and Cartesian ontologies are present in symbolic interaction analyses, schools with completely oppositional ontological and epistemological frameworks share the same rubric of symbolic interaction.

The pragmatist and Cartesian cross-currents enable and disable quite a variety of potential analyses. This also produces a sizable dilemma in which human interactions (and representations of human interaction) are reduced to, or made equivalent to, free will. Symbolic interaction is not able to get at unconscious processes or the constraining effects of cultural forces. Further, Mead's notion of multiple selves, reduced to social roles, seems to mask an underlying commitment to a Cartesian self who enacts the various roles. This is presumably what Blumer called "the self that is known only to the self"—a purely transcendent self that is not shaped by, or known to, others.

Further, while symbolic interaction emphasizes the way definitions and shared meanings are worked out between people in a localized setting, it has some trouble getting at routine relations of power. As in Chapter 3, the commitment to a particular kind of empirical evidence left me unable to analyze race, class, gender, and ability as routine relations of power and privilege—both with respect to Oscar Pistorius and the representation of same-sex marriage in the *Brothers and Sisters* excerpt. In the transcript of my interview with Tony Romero, I was able to analyze the symbolic meanings of being an Esselen Indian but unable to analyze the processes of racialization or the production of whiteness that is critical to the meanings of being an Esselen Indian in his narrative. Further masculinity, heterosexuality, whiteness, and ability, as unmarked categories of privilege, appear to be irrelevant. Scientific reality creates a particular type of order by enclosing (i.e., ordering) phenomena that fit within that which has already been ordered; science is a way of creating order out of chaos, albeit "at a cost" (Latour & Woolgar, 1986, p. 246). Ultimately, even as I pursued processes of symbolic meaning, my analyses reified categories of race, gender, sexuality, class, and ability.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

While symbolic interaction can tell us a great deal about the processes of representation through which social life is constructed, it carries analytical constraints that prevent analyses of forms of power that produce and shape the localized context.¹⁴ In localized contexts, a commonsense view necessarily reduces subjects to persons because there is no way to apprehend the processes of subjectification. If interpretive frameworks do not allow us to take up questions of subjectivity, how are we to understand social locations, such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability? They must be understood as real conditions that have symbolic meanings—they are features of a real world that in Blumer's words "talks back to us." This seems to imply that while we can (perhaps) change the associated symbolic meanings, these categories are vested with an inherent existence. The implications of this view raise serious concerns. For example, if the ability to recognize race is itself a product of racism (Memmi, 2000), scholars must ask what is the liberatory potential of analyzing the shifting symbolic meanings of race? While symbolic interaction is a very useful framework for social research, its promise for disrupting relations of power and generating insights into the creation of research useful to social justice seems to be more limited—despite the best intentions of researchers. The unresolved paradigmatic conflicts embedded in symbolic interaction create logical inconsistencies that are broadly relevant to social research.

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¹⁴These are precisely the limitations that scholars in the Illinois School have attempted to address by incorporating poststructural and psychoanalytic frameworks into symbolic interaction.