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On the Promise of Symbolic Interaction  
For Social Welfare  
(A comment by the editor of the special issue)  
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In a previous article ("Theoretical Models of Social Structure and the Practice of Social Work," Arete Spring 1976, Vol. 4 no. 1) I commented on the variety of non-interchangeable social theory doctrines utilized by social work, past and present, to explain the relationship between the client (or client group) and society. In it I indicated the hidden assumptions of the practitioner as revealed by his social theory of choice. As therapist he (or she) inferentially laid the onus of adjustment on the client; as advocate--on the society, depending upon the particular consensus or conflict theory utilized. I pointed out that the most appropriate theory, however, for analysis of the probable relationship between most individuals and society is symbolic interaction, in that it provides mechanisms for study of the view as seen by the client, as seen by the society and as seen in the interaction between the individual and the society. Aside from social problems deriving from severe structural faults or from severe individual deficiencies, most situations found in social work settings represent problems of interactive patterns between social settings and clients which tend to reinforce problem conditions.

Interaction theory focuses on Communication; a process with which social work has had long experience. It is communication which is used by most social work practitioners to resolve problems and it is communication problems which most often underlie social dysfunctionality. Social Work's task, under interactionist theory is to seek to maximize the misunderstanding which underlies much of the conflict between people, by maximizing the skills of knowing what one means, and what one means to say, by bridging seemingly antagonistic definitions of situations, social work can provide a service not otherwise generally available in other professions. In a sense, social work's emphasis on "problem-solving" is yet another indication of the affinity between social work and symbolic interaction theory.

In reducing the incongruity of meanings which a person may have in his own understanding or in his contacts with others, we reduce communication entropy and promote a more mutually acceptable, civilization for all. The "tower of Babel," built up by the variety of non-interchangeable theories of human behavior which separate practitioners from one another in and out of social work can also probably be restructured into a workable bridge of functional and productive interaction, given the theory and tools of symbolic interaction. A start in this direction has recently been published by University Press of America (Segalman: Dynamics of Social Behavior and Development; A Symbolic Interaction Perspective)

Symbolic interaction theory, unlike other social theory provides us with both macro- and micro orientations of analysis. Unlike other

macro-social theory it does not assume that either the system or the participants have greater or lesser influence on events. Unlike other micro theories it seeks out the purposes of behavior (and development as well) motivations rather than assumed instincts or conditioning. More than other theories it provides promise of the possible development of a community of interest among scholars, of an accessible, interchangable and derivable assemblage of methods of study and intervention, and of an objective examination of resources, priorities and facilities without which rational social policy is impossible. It provides the means of analysis of the emotional filters which screen out the facts of social misunderstanding, and in the process makes possible the achievement of a congruent understanding of the nature of social dysfunction.

Treatment (or social work service) of a client (or client group) can be counterproductive if the client's meanings, the "social reality" meanings and the workers meanings are not understood and interrelated in the treatment process. Individuals or groups can be reinforced in their unnecessary exclusion (or seclusion) from the mainstream if the worker's understanding of the situational definitions are clouded. With exclusion (or seclusion) comes limited benefits and increasingly limited participation in the mainstream of society. Thus the children of such populations have even fewer chances to interact with the mainstream and develop even more separationist coping mechanisms to deal with fears, stress and feelings of inadequacies. These coping mechanisms make communication (and participation) even less likely.

Thus it can be seen how symbolic interaction theory is heuristic in the analysis of intergenerational isolation of deviance. It can be equally useful in analysis of many other common social welfare problems. Symbolic interaction theory can be used in explaining status inconsistency, cognitive dissonance and role confusion. It can be used in explaining why labelling theory works in some instances and not in others, and it is helpful in indicating ways in which social work can be helpful in prevention of devaluative labelling.

Thus symbolic interaction provides a model for explaining social and individual dynamics so that a rational plan rather than a variety of incongruent assumed constructs can become the basis for appropriate treatment planning and problem solving. By seeking common definitions on the nature of social problems and of treatment goals and methods, the theory provides increased meaning for the profession as an integration of knowledge and practice.

The articles in the special edition are only a sample of the variety of applications of symbolic interaction theory to social welfare. My co-editor and I have carefully studied the submissions, and the choices were not easily made. I herewith express my deep appreciation to Harris Chaiklin, the co-editor, for his painstaking analysis of the articles and for his suggestions and recommendations. I also express my thanks to the authors who have waited so patiently for the production of this special edition.

Respectfully,

Ralph Segalman  
Editor, Special Edition