Generic and Generative Dimensions of Interactionism: 
Towards the Unfolding of Critical Directions

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ABSTRACT

The emergent conceptual orientation of interactionism is conducive to an exploration of more critical intellectual frontiers. Informed by Simmel and Blumer, this paper argues for the development of generic forms and processes in an effort to appreciate the nature of group life. Such sensitizing concepts as the self and consciousness, grounded in "on-site processes", enable the investigation of cultural reproduction. Moreover, the reflective epistemology of interactionism and its concomitant flexible methodologies encourage the pursuit of critical directions. The primacy of subjectivity does not foreclose the exploration of culture or ideology as interactionally mediated. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to stimulate further theoretical and empirical research in linking situated struggles to the phenomenon of cultural reproduction.

Methodologically, this paper is part of an ongoing longitudinal project designed to investigate the variety of relations male street prostitutes develop with socializing agencies. Data were collected in five American and three Canadian cities. A multi-method or "triangulated" approach was utilized incorporating observations, interviews, and case histories.

Introduction — — —

THE REASONED ONTOLOGY of symbolic interactionism highlights an emergent conceptual orientation. Interactionism encourages theoretical pursuits which directly confront the time-honoured distinctions between process and structure. In general, the priority of micro-social constructions acknowledges elements of social structure. Interactionists, however, have moved judiciously in unravelling macro-conditions from the plethora of their detailed observations (Lyman, 1984). More recently, there is a growing tendency in interactionist writings to develop more formalistic directions of social enquiry. Processes of group life are articulated as generic (Couch, 1984; Prus, 1985) and alternatively recast within socio-historical influences (Rock, 1979; West, 1982; Denzin, 1984; Fleras, 1983; Saxton, 1987; Hall, 1987).

Clearly, there is no single overarching conceptual canopy that integrates process and structure. The general aim of this paper is to provide clues for link-
ing the concept of self to cultural reproduction. It is argued that the situation, as a site of cultural reproduction, mediates the tense and creative foundations of micro- and macro-sociologies. Informed by Simmel and Blumer this paper emphasizes the development of generic forms and processes in an effort to appreciate the nature of group life. Specifically, the research question asks: how does culture influence the negotiation of identities and relations? Ultimately, the social construction of reality is analyzed in terms of wider issues—the reproduction of dominant values.

Theoretical Overview: Generic Concepts and Forms of Process

To fully appreciate an interactionist analysis of structure, it is appropriate to clarify the analytic structures of interactionism. This endeavour requires a discussion that goes beyond routine stock-taking of past theoretical accomplishments. That is, the adequacy of such sensitizing concepts like generic processes in discovering "forms that universally display themselves" (Denzin, 1970: 15) must be demonstrated rather than simply stated.

Clearly, interactionism defies systemization. But, the subject of recurring regularities within diverse temporal and spatial domains has emerged as a more heightened focus of study especially in reference to generic concepts. Briefly, the generic concept is a panoptic tool that imposes order on diverse findings. Generic concepts are abstract categories or invariant properties of human life (Blumer, 1969: 86; Couch, 1984). Dimensions of social life are illuminated by ongoing comparisons of different research sites. The task for interactionists, therefore, is to delve into the universal forms of processes which make group life possible. This commitment to formalism is evinced in the repeated admonitions of interactionists. According to Lofland (1976: 31): "To scrutinize a situation generically is to seek out its abstract, transcendent, formal analytic aspects". Likewise, Wiseman (1985) argues that generic concepts reflect complex social forms that are not limited to specific settings, populations, or relationships.

The development of a formal theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 90) incorporates a higher order of meaningful generic forms that are grounded in localized interactional discourses and symbols. Forms, as properties of conjoint activities, are related to the reproduction of social order. The unity of society is derived from forms of sociation-conflict, domination, competition, exploitation; isolation, segregation, hierarchy; or symbiosis, consensus, cooperation, sociability, and intimacy (Wolff, 1950). According to Simmelian insights, these forms are experienced as reified objects that debilitate and/or enhance choice. Social life, however, is not simply a truncated constellation of inexorable forms. But, forms of association inhere in unfolding processes that are structured within routine interpretive activities.

Generic processes extend grounded theorizing by focusing upon interactions that are similar despite variations in situational contingencies. Basic social processes are generic theoretical constructs (Bigus, Hadden and Glaser,