

Staci Newmahr
SUNY Buffalo State, U.S.A.

Featured Talk

Fine Lines: Classifying, Framing, and Policing Symbolic Interaction

A host of people have written about what and where symbolic interaction is, should be, and can and cannot do, including Carl Couch, Norman Denzin, Gary Alan Fine, Krzysztof Konecki, David Maines, Dmitri Shalin, and Sheldon Stryker, just to name a few. I am not going to make a case for what symbolic interaction is or what it needs to do, or whether the presence of a Mead, Cooley, or Blumer citation render a work interactionist, or whether Goffman should be considered a symbolic interac-

tionist. My aim today is to talk about the boundaries that are currently being drawn around, and to some extent within, the interactionist perspective.

My identity as a symbolic interactionist is important to me. And I am equally committed to my identity as an empiricist. So when I started to think about its boundaries, I turned first to the only journal devoted specifically to symbolic interaction, which is also the flagship journal of the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction. I perused every issue of *Symbolic Interaction* since its inception in 1978, as well as a good many abstracts and, of course, I read a bunch of articles in the process. And then, when I thought I had a sense of where symbolic interactionism, at least in name, has been, I did the same thing for the past fifteen years for *Qualitative Sociology* and *Qualitative Sociology Review*. As a check, I reviewed, though to a lesser extent, the titles of articles in *American Journal of Sociology*, *British Journal of Sociology*, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, and *Ethnography*.

So this became a study, at least of sorts, of titles. It is a study of how we are fashioning ourselves in and through particular outlets, and how we might begin

to think about those fashionings. I noticed several things, including the predictable divisions around quantitative/qualitative and micro/macro. They may be lessening, but one could still probably map the field using these distinctions if one wanted. I did not, mostly because I generally favor a very inductive process, and so I followed what struck me most forcefully and clearly about the titles I was reading.

This led me, as inductive processes usually do, somewhere I did not expect to be. Rather than talk about the ways that scholars are talking to each other about what symbolic interaction is and what it is good for, which is what I originally intended to do, I want to use our publications to speak for us. In particular, what I want to talk about today is: verbs. I want to talk about the use of verbs, the kinds of verbs, and how these verbs can be understood as part of a boundary-drawing process.

There are a few noteworthy things about verbs in the titles of these publications. Fairly quickly, it seemed to me that the titles of articles published in SI—that is, the journal *Symbolic Interaction*—contain verbs a good deal more frequently than in either QSR or QS. So I counted all of the articles in these journals from 2000-2014, and then I counted the titles that contained verbs. (I excluded special and thematic issues.) Roughly, 45% of the titles in QS and 40% of those in QSR contained verbs, compared with 60% of SI's articles. I looked at AJS and BJS also, but frankly, verbs in their titles are so rare that I did not bother to count them.

Okay, so qualitative researchers use verbs more often in their titles than everyone else, with papers in

SI using them most frequently. So what? By itself, that might not be all that interesting. I actually do find it somewhat compelling all by itself. But once I looked more closely, there was more to the story.

There is a difference in the specific use of the verbs in the titles of SI papers as compared to QS, QSR, and the few that appear in AJS and BJS. In the latter publications, the vast majority of titles that use verbs these are used, for example, like this:

- “Informed Consent as Process: **Problematizing** Informed Consent in Organizational Ethnographies,”
- “The Scholar’s Body: **Mixing** It Up With Loïc Wacquant,”
- “Elevated Cholesterol as Biographical Work—**Expanding** the Concept of ‘Biographical Disruption.’”

Problematizing informed consent, expanding the concept, mixing it up with another scholar—these verbs refer to what the author is doing. So verbs appear less frequently in QS and QSR, and when they do, they tend to refer to our actions; we title the papers in accordance with what we have done—theorizing, understanding, analyzing. These are verbs that highlight our intellectual contribution to the conversation.

In what I see as a rather sharp contrast, the verbs in SI titles much more commonly reference respondents’ or subjects’ actions. SI titles refer to people who are *not* the authors, who are, for example:

Dr. Newmahr is an ethnographer and symbolic interactionist whose work plays with intersections of gender, nonconformity, risk-taking, emotions, and eroticism. Dr. Newmahr’s first book, *Playing on the Edge: Risk, Intimacy, and Sadoomasochism*, was published in 2011 by Indiana University Press. She has also published in *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *Symbolic Interaction*, and *Qualitative Sociology*. She is Associate Editor of *Symbolic Interaction* and co-editor of an anthology of original work entitled *Selves, Symbols, and Sexualities* (with Dr. Tom Weinberg). Dr. Newmahr is currently studying fringe communities and practices.

email address: newmahsd@buffalostate.edu

- “**Getting Angry** to Get Ahead: Black College Men, Emotional Performance, and Encouraging Respectable Masculinity,” or
- “**Repelling** the ‘Rutter’: Social Differentiation Among Rural Teenagers,” and
- “**Managing** the Student-Parent Dilemma: Mothers and Fathers in Higher Education,” or
- “**Coming of Age** in the Bubble: Suburban Adolescents’ Use of a Spatial Metaphor as a Symbolic Boundary,”
- “**Walking** an Emotional Tightrope: Managing Emotions in a Women’s Prison,” and
- “**Claiming Competence**: Biographical Work Among Victim-Advocates and Counselors.”

These titles feature *other* people taking action: getting angry, repelling, claiming, doing work, walking tightropes. Once I started seeing this, I coded the articles with verbs in the titles across these journals over about the past 14 years. Of the total articles published—again, excluding special and thematic issues—the percentages of total articles that used verbs in the titles, *and* in which the verbs referred to actions taken by respondents, informants, or subjects were:

- QSR: 15% of all articles,
- QS: 25% of all articles,
- SI: over 80% of all articles.

This struck me as a relevant difference between SI, on the one hand, and QS and QSR, on the other. Of course, different camps within disciplines have different naming conventions. We know that styles and aesthetics vary for all sorts of reasons, and I have not undertaken a Bourdieuan analysis of the differences among all of our titling tastes, which sounds like a good deal of fun, but I do not have that for you.

The differences could also reflect methodological tendencies. For example, both QSR and QS publish more narrative analysis than SI; perhaps respondents’ actions just make sense in titles of participant observation and ethnographic studies. By the time I looked at JCE and *Ethnography*, I was really very tired of all the counting, but I did read all of the titles and am fairly confident in my sense that the verb usage in JCE’s titles falls somewhere in between QS and SI, but not nearly as high as 80%, and *Ethnography*’s is quite low, probably lower than QSR’s and closer to AJS. (As an aside, BJS titles have very few verbs at all, but questions in the titles are strikingly more common than in any of the other journals.)

Additionally, QSR, QS, JCE, and *Ethnography* are all journals with an explicit methodological bent, unlike SI, which is a theoretical tradition or perspective. Not surprisingly, QSR and QS also publish a lot of methodological pieces, which one might think could explain why many of their titles with verbs refer to the researcher, as in:

- “Wading the Field With My Key Informant: Exploring Field Relations,”

- “Analyzing Interview Data: The Development and Evolution of a Coding System.”

But SI publishes a good number of methodological pieces, with titles such as:

- “The Potential Contributions of Quantitative Research to Symbolic Interactionism” and
- “Situational Analyses: Grounded Theory Mapping After the Postmodern Turn.”

Interestingly, SI’s methodological titles are less likely to contain verbs than our substantive titles, which appears to be the reverse of QSR and, to a lesser extent, QS. Also, since SI is not a method or even a family of methods, and, in fact, it is not even necessarily qualitative, if the verb issue were purely methodological, one might expect *more* variation in SI’s naming conventions than in the other journals, not less. So I do think this difference is meaningful when we think about the boundaries being drawn between SI and other ways of thinking about social reality. Specifically, I want to highlight three potential implications of the differences in the titles of work published across all of these journals: process, the production of social action, and issues of authority and representation.

I. Process

In the first place, and obviously, titles with verbs tend to be about processes. It makes sense that these three journals publish articles about processes more often than AJS and BJS, following the Durkheimian notion that we can study the facts

that arise out of the process, but not the process itself.

And this emphasis on process is, I think, the most clearly-drawn boundary between interactionists and qualitative researchers who are not interactionists.

Consider a few titles from *Qualitative Sociology Review*:

- “Cynicism in the Indian I.T. Organizations: An Exploration of the Employees’ Perspectives,”
- “First Graders in a College Sociology Classroom: A Reflection,”
- “Images of Crisis and Opportunity. A Study of African Migration to Greece,”
- “Precariousness of Everyday Heroism. A Biographical Approach to Life Politics.”

On the whole, QSR’s titles are less process-focused than either SI or QS. Their titles generally describe the aim of the paper from the perspective of the author; the words “Reflections” and “Notes” and “An Analysis of” appear much more frequently in QSR’s titles than in either of the other two journals.

On the other hand, QS titles are more likely to deploy nouns in much the same way as AJS does—with large concepts that denote social processes beyond the level of social interaction:

- “Parkour: Adventure, Risk, and Safety in the Urban Environment,”

- “Moral Panics and Urban Growth Machines: Official Reactions to Graffiti in New York City, 1990-2005,”
- “Time Off: The Social Experience of Time on Vacation,”
- “Cultural Discourse in Action: Interactional Dynamics and Symbolic Meaning.”

These differences, across all three journals, do not reflect substantive or methodological divisions; most of these titles suggest that they are within the scope of each of the other journals. But there is a pattern here, and it indicates that both QSR and QS titles more often emphasize the analytical outcome of the work. On the contrary, SI titles, on the whole, focus on how things are happening with people and how their processes work.

As an aside—I had a brief moment of excitement as I was reviewing the *Qualitative Sociology* volumes—I said, aloud, “Oooh, *there we go!*” because the title was: “Constructing Physical Fights,” and then the subtitle was: “An Interactionist Analysis of Violence Among Affluent, Suburban Youth.”

It appeared to me after this step, then, that when we use verbs in the titles of our works to showcase social processes, we might be performing symbolic interactionism.

II. Acts and the Production of Social Action

In the second place, I think we are looking at very different statements about both the priority and the

role of microsociological data. What is to be done *with* research on social processes at the micro level? What is its value?

In 1984, Carl Couch emphasized the importance of process for symbolic interactionism, maintaining that not only must the acquired data be that of social processes but during the analysis attention must be focused on how people fit together their acts to produce units of social action.

If we look back at the titles, we can see that this *is* what most SI titles are privileging. To the extent that there is a formula for titles in SI, it is a verb that is an interpretation or analysis of the action taken by the respondents, followed by a subtitle intended to capture the process of producing social action. So, to refer back to an example from a moment ago, an SI title says that black college men are taking the action of getting angry as part of a broader sequence of the emotional performances assembled to encourage respectable masculinity. On the whole, titles in SI focus explicitly on both social processes at the level of the individual, and on the analyses of these processes in order to understand how people produce social action.

III. Authority and Representation

In the third place, the use of verbs in these titles is also a difference in the positionality of the researcher. This is an issue at least as old as anthropology, and has been especially salient for fieldworkers, ethnographers, and participant observers, since Malinowski’s diaries were published. It is a ques-

tion of authority, of whose voices and meanings we seek, to whose ends, and the balance between interpretation and representation. The titles of our publications contain insight into not only what we are trying to understand but what we think our understanding contributes, and what we think we *should* be contributing. When my self-titled contribution is my own expansion of a concept or reflection on a method, I am taking a different position as a researcher than when I direct you, in my title, to women managing emotion in a prison setting.

The third implication that I find of the different uses of verbs across these journals is, at least potentially, a different relationship to our subjects and—or perhaps *or*—a different relationship to our own academic authority. In the latter case, that is probably an even more interesting question, and one that could bring us back to Bourdieu. But that is another project.

Maines’ optimism, in 2001 and 2003, about the place of symbolic interactionism stemmed from the fact that mainstream work was increasingly paying attention to pragmatist and interactionist principles, whether the authors realized it or not. He outlined four overlapping types of interactionists:

- *explicit interactionists*—who know they are using interactionist thought, and there are two kinds of those:
- *interactionist promoters*—who seek to further the perspective, and
- *interactionist utilizers*—who do not

- and then there are unaware interactionists—using interactionist ideas, but who seem not to know they are doing so.

So Maines saw interactionism all over the place, and felt that sociology was growing stronger as a result of the incorporation of SI principles into mainstream sociology, whether people knew it or not.

Several years later; in fact, four years ago, at this very conference, Neil Gross, Wisconsin-Madison PhD, former Harvard sociologist, and the editor of *ASA’s Sociological Theory*, delivered a keynote—some of you may remember—on why he is (or was) a pragmatist, but not a symbolic interactionist. And his talk ruffled a few feathers—most visibly Bob Prus’ feathers, but I noticed a bunch of us squirming in our seats. The problem, as I saw it, which never clearly emerged in the conversation because we ran out of time, was that Neil was far more interested in theorizing *why* than he was in theorizing *how*. He either did not see that distinction, or was summarily dismissing the importance of the how, viewing explanations of causality as the quintessential pragmatic issue.

So I am somewhat less reassured about the place of interactionism than Maines was. Within SI, the boundaries appear to me to be remaining true to pragmatist philosophies from which SI emerged. SI continues to publish titles that appear to be not merely descriptive of situations, but interpretative of social processes, focused on action and people, and theoretically or conceptually useful for other social phenomena. But, judging from the titles that are being published elsewhere, while interactionist

and pragmatist analyses and foci have made their way into mainstream sociology, symbolic interaction still struggles towards a broader recognition of the primary importance of processes between and within social actors. Perhaps it is that “explicit interactionists” rarely send their work to QS, QSR, and AJS, or perhaps they do and their explicitness is problematic. This analysis of titles is not an interactionist study, and I make no claims to understanding the process by which these actors draw these boundaries. But we *are* drawing them, and however much in flux they might be, they still emphasize or de-emphasize interpersonal and interactional processes, the relationships of those processes to social action, and whose voices matter most in exploring them.

At this point, I see the boundaries of symbolic interaction very differently than I did a few years ago. Had I given this talk then, I would likely have drawn my own boundaries, mostly having to do with attention to meaning-making processes. But not all symbolic interactionism is particularly concerned with meaning, as Robert Dingwall has been rather gently trying to teach me for three years now. And lots of other qualitative sociology is also concerned with meaning-making, so who am I to draw that line in the sand?

Where that line in the sand is, regardless of who thinks it should be drawn where, is really an empirical question. I turned to publication titles as indicators because whether it is authors, or their mentors, editors or their reputations, or the persistence of age-old conventions, or something else entirely, the titles of our works are self-representations. It is easy to forget, in this academic market and in the state of higher education and during a wave of anti-intellectualism across at least the U.S., that when we title our works, we are making claims and drawing boundaries. We are presenting selves and constructing identities. And when we publish those works, we are publicizing those claims, those boundaries, performing those selves, and declaring those identities.

I *want* to share Maines’ optimism, though. As an “interactionist promoter,” I will confess that I walk around with a list in my head that starts with, “You might be a symbolic interactionist if...” list, which I routinely break out on many of the people I decide are “unaware interactionists.” My preparation for this talk has added an item—in fact, I am pretty sure that my list now begins with:

“You might be an interactionist if the title of your article contains a verb that refers to and interprets the social processes of your respondents.”

.....
Newmahr, Staci. 2015. “Featured Talk. Fine Lines: Classifying, Framing, and Policing Symbolic Interaction.” *Qualitative Sociology Review* 11(3):10-16. Retrieved Month, Year (http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive_eng.php).
.....