

Doing Symbolic Interactionism: Engaging Students to Foster Comprehension of Theoretical Concepts and Principles

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ABSTRACT. This paper summarizes an activity in which students engage in a meaning-making process (via group interaction). Class discussion follows the activity, in which the instructor facilitates deconstruction of symbolic interactionism (SI) theory concepts and principles. Discussion is designed to design foster students' abilities to identify potential links between SI theory and familial dynamics.

Keywords: Symbolic interactionism, meaning-making, group dynamics, deconstruction, flipped classroom, class activity, andragogy

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Background

Symbolic interactionism (SI) is an important theory in family science. SI has been used as a conceptual lens to understand various familial events and processes such as adoption (Hollingsworth, 1999), holiday celebrations (Horowitz, 1999), post-divorce parenting (Madden-Derdich & Leonard, 2002), and pet-human relationships (Blouin, 2012). SI theory is commonly addressed in undergraduate textbooks (Carrothers & Benson, 2003) and graduate family theory courses. Despite the abundance of textual resources, instructors can find it challenging to help students understand SI concepts and principles. For example, some criticize SI as too obtuse, abstract and vague (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993); students sometimes struggle with these abstractions. In this context, traditional lecture might not be the most effective means for teaching SI theory. Responding to these challenges, the author developed a *meaning-making activity* (MMA) in which students “do” SI.

Objectives

This course is designed to focus on theories that are relevant to family science (such as SI, social exchange, structural functionalism, and family development). The course focuses on the central tenets or elements of these theories. In addition, there is an emphasis on the application of theory in various contexts. Conceptual applications can also occur during class activities. During the MMA, students should be able to assign meaning to objects or media the instructor provides. At the conclusion of the MMA, students should be able to (a) identify SI concepts and (b) articulate linkages between SI principles and the activity.

Rationale

This *meaning-making activity* MMA is conducted in a graduate family theory course. The course has class meetings once per week. The first week’s readings focus on the general relevance of course topics (Fitzpatrick, 2012); each subsequent week focuses on a specific theory. Typically, the course addresses SI during its third week. At this point, students have had some exposure to course topics, instructor’s teaching style, and peer interactions. However, the class has not yet had sufficient time to become entrenched in group dynamics such as roles, informal rules, or boundaries. Thus, a window of opportunity is available during which the instructor can alter communication patterns (such as assigning group membership) without facing significant student resistance.

This MMA is consistent with *flipped* classroom principles (McLaughlin et al., 2014). In a flipped classroom, students are expected to complete readings and recommended tasks (such as practice tests) before coming to the classroom. Class time is for engaging in activities such as

experiments or debates that allow students to use course concepts. Activities should be designed to give students exposure to skills or information that will enhance understanding of course concepts (Kim, Kim, Khera, & Getman, 2014). In contrast to traditional lecturing, these activities require more student involvement and less instructor control. Instructors play a facilitative role to help students glean insights from activities. Such classroom activities are consistent with an emphasis on active student learning (Dilworth, 2002; Kim et al., 2014; McLaughlin et al., 2014). Instructors need not commit to an entire course flip; instead, they can simply engage in *micro-teaching* activities or “quick flips” (Datig & Ruswick, 2013, p. 249). Instructors can follow a quick flip with other teaching techniques to foster students’ comprehension of learning activities and their relevance to course concepts. This MMA could be considered a quick flip.

Procedure

The instructor enters the classroom with a box of ten manila envelopes, each with a number from 1 to 10. She informs students that they are to form small groups (Ballard, 2001), but these groups can be composed only of classmates with whom they have not interacted before. (If all students have interacted with one another, they form groups of classmates with whom they have had the least amount of interaction.) The instructor informs the class that group size is limited to 3-4 students, but gives no additional guidance for enacting the group formation process. After group formation is complete, the instructor asks each group to randomly select a number between 1 and 10. When a number is chosen, the group receives the envelope corresponding to that number. (The numbers have no inherent value and give no indication of the meaning or importance of items in the envelopes.)

Each envelope contains a single object, word, photo, or website address. For example, an object envelope could include an item considered iconic in US society or a more mundane item (such as a coffee cup). A word envelope contains a piece of paper with only a word written on it. (There is no explanation or definition of the word.) A group is asked whether any member knows the word’s definition. If any group member knows it, then this word is withdrawn and the group receives a new word. The word’s meaning is not obvious from its spelling, such as *bildungsroman* or *pocourante*. A picture envelope contains a photo or illustration (a) of individuals whom students are unlikely to know or (b) an ambiguous image and situation. Similar to what occurs in child development research (McGlothlin & Killen, 2006), there can be diverse (but equally valid) ways of interpreting the ambiguous images. Website addresses are for access to photos, audio, or video. The purpose of videos is to display actions. For example, a group might receive a link for

(1) photo of cats with “breadheads”:

https://images.search.yahoo.com/yhs/search;_ylt=AwrT6VpS6AhWj2gAbdAnnIIQ;_ylu=X3oDMTEzbWJkMnE2BGNvbG8DZ3ExBHBvcwMxBHZ0aWQDRkZSQUMwXzEEc2VjA3Nj?p=Cats+With+Bread+On+Their+Heads&fr=yhs-mozilla-002&hspart=mozilla&hsimp=yhs-00],

(2) adults replicating a childhood picture:

<http://www.zefrank.com/youngmenowme/permalink.html?481>,

(3) Storycorps audio biographies:

<https://storycorps.org/listen/>,

(4) uncommonly heard sounds:

<http://strangesounds.org/>,

(5) video of a precision walking competition:

<http://www.neatorama.com/2010/09/04/japanese-precision-walking-competition/>,

(6) video report of a woman seeking to rent a family for her birthday party:

<http://abcnews.go.com/US/colorado-woman-enlists-craigslist-rent-family-birthday/story?id=31392059>

It should be noted that when students receive access to web links, they are permitted to use only the full screen feature. Thus, students may not view ancillary information (such as titles or comments) within the website that could influence their groups' interpretations.

After each group has (a) received an envelope and (b) had an opportunity to see or hear the content (hear audiolink), the instructor informs them of their task. She states that each group is to create a list of meanings that could be attributed to the item. The instructor brings a sample item to demonstrate the difference between a definition and a meaning. For example, the instructor might use an apple pie to explain that while "apple," "sweet," and "hot" might be *characteristics*, these terms are not *meanings*. Rather, terms such as "comforting" or "home" would more accurately reflect meanings. The instructor also explains that positively and negatively-valenced meanings can be attached to the same items, ideas, or actions (such as money, power, hugs, or solitude). She explains that each group should make a list of the meanings and be prepared to share these lists during the class meeting. The instructor informs the groups that they have 15-20 minutes to complete this task and then leaves the room.

When the instructor returns, she asks each group to initially explain the list of meanings they generated (for the items in their envelopes). She writes all lists on a large whiteboard. During this explanation process, group members often volunteer information about why or how specific meanings were created. Groups with ambiguous or arcane items (such as unknown words) often describe their (a) difficulties in meaning creation and (b) discomfort in lacking (1) adequate information or (2) knowledge of whether their interpretations were accurate. The instructor listens to all members' statements but does not comment.

After writing all lists on the whiteboard, the instructor makes linkages to the MMA and SI theory. Using methods similar to reverse engineering or psychological autopsy principles (Botello, Noguchi, Sathyavagiswaran, Weinberger, & Gross, 2013; Nezhad, Naghavi, Packirisamy, & Geitmann, 2013), the instructor tries to deconstruct the communication process that the groups just completed. This deconstruction is designed to help students make linkages between their involvement in the activity and SI concepts and principles.

Throughout the deconstruction process, the instructor engages students in discussion. For example, she elicits more information about their group communications or invites them to identify other examples relevant to SI concepts. Thus, deconstruction is an interactive rather than unidirectional process. The instructor begins with principles of symbolization and emergence (Snow, 2001). She explains that the items (in each envelope) had no inherent or absolute meanings. Rather, group members determined the meanings they assigned to their items. At the beginning of the task, group members might not know what meanings will be assigned to an item. Rather, meanings emerged from their interactions with the item and each other (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). The instructor notes that different group memberships or items might have generated different meanings.

Next, the instructor discusses human agency (Snow, 2001; Vrasidas, 2001). She explains that meaning-making is an active process. Individual students needed to recognize how they responded (emotionally, cognitively, or behaviorally) to items and chose what information (about their responses) they disclosed to other group members. In turn, members could choose how to react to disclosures. The instructor notes that group communications can be positively or negatively-valenced. Thus, individuals have some control over the creation of meaning (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993).

At this point, the instructor elucidates the contrast between *information* and *meaning*. She provides facts about arcane or lesser known items in the envelopes. If necessary, the instructor spends several minutes on this task until there is consensus that all students comprehend those facts. Next, the instructor discusses the point that information is not identical to meaning. She explains that individuals and families (a) are exposed to a great deal of information that is meaningless to them and (b) can assign meaning to many items or experiences with limited factual information. Therefore, knowledge does not inherently create interest or meaning (Horowitz, 1999). The instructor also notes that individuals or families cannot pay attention to everything, so they *filter* their attention. Factors such as ethnicity, culture, social class, and personal history influence filtered attention (Blouin, 2012; Hollingsworth, 1999; Vrasidas, 2001). This filtering can become so prevalent that families lose awareness of creating and engaging in the process (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993).

Next, the instructor addresses concepts of roles and identities. When the instructor was absent from the classroom during the initial task, group members might have engaged in rolemaking processes. Given that the specific composition of these groups was new for this task, students could not simply rely on former or entrenched group roles. Via their interactions, they determined who would take primary leadership roles in managing the tasks. Group members might have taken or allocated other functional and socio-psychological roles (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). The fact that they might not have explicitly discussed role allocation does not mean allocation did not occur. The instructor notes that allocation processes can sometimes reflect other dynamics, such as those of power (Dennis & Martin, 2005).

This portion of the discussion is also a chance to address the *looking-glass self* concept (Cook & Douglas, 1998). More specifically, the instructor begins by reminding students of the looking-glass self's elements: an individual's (a) awareness that another person has a particular perception of him/her, (b) interpretation of the other person's perception, and (c) considerations of her/his self-perception. Since an individual actively creates interpretations (element b), he or she has some control over the extent to which others have an impact on her or his self-perception. Thus, it is not inherently true that self-perceptions are altered in the looking-glass process (Franks & Gecas, 1992). The instructor provides examples of other interactional events, such as date nights, in which the length and meaning of interactions often vary for individuals (Fitzpatrick, 2014). After this overview of looking-glass self processes and elements, the instructor can ask about students' awareness of self- and other-perception during the MMA. She asks questions about the extent to which students (a) were thinking about their group members' reactions to their comments, (b) were aware they interpreted these reactions, and (c) altered subsequent self-thoughts or behaviors (such as degree of disclosure) in response to interpretations.

Next, the instructor addresses the concept of *interactions*. She explains that all forms of verbal and nonverbal communications that occurred during the initial task (and subsequent deconstruction) are interactions. For example, the instructor notes that degrees and types of self-disclosures among group members were interactions. In addition, some members might have responded to items (and to each other) based on their degrees of personalization with previous or current life experiences (Blouin, 2012; Horowitz, 1999). Students might have interacted in ways that defied or replicated traditional norms about issues such as gender or minority group status (Horowitz, 1999; LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993; Rastogi, Fitzpatrick, Feng, & Shi, 1999). Similar to other teaching techniques, the strength of interactional processes might have been evident in how quickly groups moved from metacommunication (Baltzersen, 2013) to task communication (Larson & Tsitsos, 2013).

Finally, the instructor addresses the issue of *context* (Cook & Douglas, 1998; Madden-Derdich & Leonard, 2002; Vrasidas, 2001). She explains that the entire SI process occurred within a specific social context. Parallel to other experiences (Hollingsworth, 1999; Snow, 2001), the instructor set basic parameters of context (such as classroom setting and time limits), but group members determined how they would function within the context. The instructors' absence (during the initial task) placed responsibility for dealing with context on groups. The instructor addresses specific aspects of context such as *structuralism* and *mesostructures* (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993).

Similar to other teaching activities (Ballard, 2001; Dilworth, 2002), the hope is that students will be able to extrapolate concepts from single activities or somewhat artificial conditions (such as hypothetical scenarios). Thus, the instructor opens class time for broader discussion of how SI concepts and principles are enacted in actual families. Students are encouraged to identify specific examples of meaning-making processes, items of particular relevance, and behaviors that reflect significant interactional dynamics. The instructor provides

facilitating questions (Blume & Isbey, 2002) to help students make linkages between their examples and particular SI concepts. In some classes, students have even asked for opportunities to repeat the initial task (now that they are armed with greater comprehension of the theory).

Reflection

There has been no formal evaluation of this MMA. However, the instructor has used the activity repeatedly over several years and there is a common pattern to student feedback. Of all the class exercises used in the course, the MMA has led students to express the most initial frustration and the most prolonged satisfaction. At the end of the SI class meeting, students often offer unsolicited comments that they found the abstract, complex nature of the theory to be intimidating. Indeed, some students disclosed that the depth of the SI readings led them to consider whether they should withdraw from the course. However, students report having greater comprehension after the instructor guides them through deconstruction of the meaning-making task. Periodically, students have asked to keep items used in the initial task. Some students have disclosed that these items were meaningful to them either (a) in connection to personal history or (b) due to group communications. For either reason, the instructor has always granted these student requests. From the instructor's perspective, the requests reflect SI principles.

Over the remaining weeks of the semester, group members often reveal they did not like the initial task conditions (such as limited instructions or the instructor's absence). However, students have also noted that they see more value in the task when looking at it retrospectively. The instructor validates these responses and discusses the relevance of SI concepts to this ongoing meaning-making process.

The instructor has been mindful of the potential risks of negatively-valenced interactions that could occur during her or his absence from the classroom. For instance, some students might be tempted to engage in disrespectful communications in an effort to steer group members toward a specific interpretation of an item. Before leaving the room (in which students perform the initial task), the instructor reminds all students of course policies about appropriate communications (such as civility, student privacy and academic integrity). This underscores the fact that policy violations can result in academic consequences, such as grade deductions. To date, no students have reported uncivil behaviors toward themselves or other group members. After completion of the task, discussion of course policies offers another opportunity to highlight SI concepts.

Conclusion

This MMA's parameters are highly adaptable to instructor preferences or class dynamics. For example, group formation can occur in diverse ways (Williams, 2002) or undergo changes during the activity. Changes in group membership could be a means to (a) provide variety in meanings that are generated and (b) allow students to experience the ways in which group communications influence their reactions to each other and SI stimuli (e.g., objects, words,

media). Alternatively, it is possible for instructors to conduct the MMA in an individual format. Similar to other assignments (Maurer, 2003), the entire class can encounter the same stimuli, but each student can submit written comments or questions that reflect her or his own interpretive processes. Instructors might also create transitory exposure to stimuli. For example, each student might be given a limited period of time to interact with stimuli (e.g., observe video, listen to music) and then generate meaning. At the conclusion of this period, each student could be required to pass the stimuli (and the statement of meaning) to the next student. As the list (of meanings) becomes longer, the time period for each student could be extended. This process has some parallels with other assignments in which instructors guide the sharing or passing of information among students (Ballard, 2001). Another variation in the sharing process could be achieved via “speed dating” parameters (for example, student dyads communicate about SI stimuli for two minutes and then change dyad partners). Previous use of these parameters exposed college students to concepts such as *impression management* and *group formation* (Hansen & Hansen, 2011; Larson & Tsitsos, 2013).

Instructors can also use SI concepts or principles for deconstructing other activities, such as skits, debates, or documentary viewership. In a more proactive format, students can create skits as a means to demonstrate specific course concepts (Dilworth, 2002). Alternatively, family science instructors might collaborate with colleagues in Drama/Performing Arts departments to allow students engagement with traditional or experimental plays. For example, drama instructors could permit family science students to attend theatrical rehearsals and participate in deconstructive discussions with performers. Instructors can also use media such as documentaries or fictional films (Bulman, 2002; Simpson, 2008). Some instructors have created film festivals (Adams & Hall, 2015), which can be another venue for the MMA. In sum, there are many resources for guiding students to comprehension of SI concepts and principles. Instructors can select resources or approaches that best fit their teaching styles (Barton, 2004; Fitzpatrick, Boden, & Kostina-Ritchey, 2010). Students will likely benefit from instructors’ efforts to create opportunities to enact elements of family theories.

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