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From Symbolic Interactionism to Luhmann:
From First-order to Second-order Observations of Society

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ABSTRACT
The paper presents insights comparing Niklas Luhmann's general theory of
society with symbolic interactionism. The focus is on methodological issues
arising from self-reference. Questions of semiotic and hermeneutic approaches
are re-cast as questions of second-order cybernetics.

Introduction

Society exists in action and formed by individuals interacting with one another; it is

mediated by an individual's one-sided interpretation of symbols (Blumer 1969). In

contrast to symbolic interactionism, Niklas Luhmann (1995) argued that society is

comprised of communication arising from double contingency, i.e., from two sides of

interpretation: Ego and Alter. From Luhmann's perspective, symbolic interactionism

only treats half the social interaction process. Symbolic interactionism views the process

of interpretation from only the acting individual's (Ego's) perspective, without

accounting for interpretation by Alter. In this sense, the symbolic interactionism focus on

communication is good – but does not go far enough.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight methodological aspects of Luhmann's

argument vis-à-vis Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism that arise from self-

reference. Blumer (1969), following George Herbert Mead, advocated human societies

as composed of individuals who have selves. This construct provided intellectual space

to conceive of individuals (and groups of individuals) able to act and interpret within

social structures (e.g., "social systems," "social roles") without being determined by

social structures. However, the human being-self distinction is a construct that conceals

self-reference. The distinction remains ontologically and epistemologically bound to an

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external observer separate from his or her observation. Luhmann's work is a theory of social interaction without an external observer. Following the constructivism of Heinz von Foerster (1981), Luhmann replaced the 'subject' with observing systems.

The paper begins by setting out the methodological challenge of dealing with self-reference inherent in normal sociological approaches.   The weakness of symbolic interactionism's methodology stems from self-reference that arises within this framework. The implications of self-referential closure, as evidenced by semiotics and the 'hermeneutic circle,' highlight the need for an alternative approach. Next, von Foerster's second-order cybernetics and how Luhmann has developed it within sociology are presented as a methodological framework for a general theory of society. A comparative look at symbolic interactionism and social systems highlights the methodological differences. By contrasting the two methodologies the author aims to introduce Luhmann's second-order cybernetics as an alternative to normal science approaches used for the study of society.

Symbolic Interactionism, Hermeneutics, and Semiotics

Society is "mediated by the use of symbols, by interpretation, or by ascertaining the meaning of one another's actions" (Blumer 1969:79). Semiotics and hermeneutics may be seen as informing symbolic interactionism. Semiotics provides an opportunity to advance a theoretical understanding of symbols. Similarly, hermeneutics lends theoretical insights to the interpretive dimension of symbolic interactionism. However, the relations among the three areas of study would likely look different from either a hermeneutic or semiotic perspective. For present purposes, symbolic interactionism is presented as the overarching framework. Specifically, symbolic interactionism is considered methodologically for how meaning derives from interaction with others and through a process of interpreting symbols during interaction.

Blumer (1969:2) set out three defining premises of symbolic interactionism. (1) Human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings the things have for them. (2) Meaning of such things is derived from the social interaction. (3) Meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process. Based on these three premises, and building upon "the essentials" of Mead's "penetrating and profound" analysis of

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group life (1969:69), Blumer's human society is made up of individuals who have selves. Individual action is a construction built up through interpreting features in which the individual acts. And collective action consists of the alignment of individual actions. The "cardinal principle" is that society exists in individual action (Blumer 1969:6).

As a theory of action, symbolic interactionism is predicated on acting subjects (human beings). Correspondingly, society may be viewed as a moving process of communication: "human beings interpret or 'define' each other's actions instead of merely reacting to each other's actions" (Blumer 1969:79), wherein each response is based on the meanings human beings attach to symbols. Society, therefore, is interaction mediated by the use of symbols by interpretation. To this point, symbolic interactionism is consistent with a Luhmannian approach.

Methodologically, symbolic interactionism is pragmatic. It strives to "respect the nature of the empirical world and organise a methodological stance to reflect that respect" (Blumer 1969:60). The fundamental principle is to get inside of the defining process of the actor in order to understand his action (Blumer 1969:16). In this way symbolic interactionism is a stance taken by an external observer presupposing an empirical world available for observation and interpretation by a subject. The need for an external observer is a point of departure for Luhmann.

What is the nature of the boundary between observed and observer? Is Mead's distinction between human being and the self a philosophical construct designed to conceal that there is no external observer? Both semiotics and hermeneutics suggest a similar problem of maintaining a boundary between observed and observer. As Nöth (1990) explained, signs refer to other signs: "…every sign creates an interpretant which in turn is the representatum of a second sign: (Nöth 1990:43). This self-referential aspect of signs creates problems for maintaining a distinction between human being and self. Who is the interpretant? What is the representatum?

The 'hermeneutic circle' points to a similar problem for maintaining a distinction between observed and observer within symbolic interactionism. According to Richardson (1995), hermeneutics encompasses all the ways in which observers (subjects) and the observed (objects) are involved in human communication.   Dilthey (in Nöth 1990:336) provides an example. The 'hermeneutic circle' arises because the whole of a

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book is to be understood from individual words and their combination. Yet, the individual part presupposes the whole. This example relates to the relationship between individuals and society. Individuals can only be understood within society; society presupposes individuals. Within symbolic interactionism, the individual-society distinction is upheld by the boundary between human being and self. The circularity of hermeneutics suggests that the interpretive act problematises the distinction between observed and observer; circularity results in self-reference.

The Problem of Reference

While aspects of symbolic interactionism, hermeneutics, and semiotics may challenge modernist conceptions of individuals and society, they remain constrained by normal approaches used in social science. The problem of self-reference arises from these constraints. Most critically, normal science approaches provide only one point of reference: the subject. Segal (2001:133) highlights the essence of the situation. Citing Humberto Maturana, Segal argues that the subject-object position is only ontological – it will not address itself to how things come about. Reality is taken as objects observed by a subject, the external observer independent of observation. So long as the ontology of social theory rests upon subject-object as its point of reference, social theories are constrained to describing the object.

Luhmann (1995) argued that ever since Husserl, the 'subject' as external observer could no longer be viewed as the basis for social theory. Husserl clearly argued that subjectivity and self-reference were inexorably bound. He taught us that *self-reference* functions as a basal condition of subject, as a fundamental unity of self-reference and reference to others. Consciousness is, at the same moment, knowledge of itself and reference to others. Signs refer to signs. Interpretation refers to interpretation. After Husserl the problem of reference must be posed as the problem of the operative processing of the difference between self-reference and reference to others" (Luhmann 1995:xli).

Self-reference challenges the ontology of an external observer and reveals a hidden tautology and paradox fundamental to social sciences (Luhmann 1988). Symbolic interactionism, because its methodology is based on observation by an external observer,

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is challenged by self-reference. As Knodt (1995) explained, the external observer, as a self-description of society, is a philosophical construct designed to conceal that there is no external observer. This philosophical construct, however, has broken down and "linguistically based successor theories such as hermeneutics, structuralism, and analytical philosophy have been unable to halt the erosion of modernity's trust in its own self-descriptions" (Knodt 1995:xi). Knodt concluded that it is precisely the collapse of the boundaries between observer and observed that has given rise to theories of self-reference. And it is the collapse of the boundary between human being and the self that creates problems for symbolic interactionism, hermeneutics, and semiotics.

Second-order Cybernetics

The normal scientific viewpoint separates the observer and his observations because, under certain circumstances, when the observer included himself in his observations it led to paradox, like the paradox one finds in the statement, "I am a liar" (Von Foerster 1981). Segal (2001:38) explained that self-reference has been problematic since the beginnings of philosophy. Aristotle stated that if a proposition makes sense it is either true or false. Paradoxical statements, on the other hand, are neither true nor false. Aristotelians dealt with the problem of self-reference by ignoring it. To deal with self-reference science needs a theory of the observer. The task of second-order cybernetics is to provide a theory of the observer that accounts for the observer that is implied in observations. A theory of second-order cybernetics embraces self-reference, rather than ignore or conceal it.

Normal science approaches may be characterised as first-order cybernetics. That is, an observer (the subject) observing an object. Alternatively, a second-order cybernetic approach requires one to step back from this position. In second-order cybernetics the aim is no longer to construct a theory of observed phenomena but to include the observer in the domain of science (Umpleby 2001:89). This marks a difference between first-order observations that *describe* observed phenomena and second-order observations recognising that a describer (i.e., the observing system) is implied in the observation. One is no longer seeking to understand objects, but seeking to understand the observing system. The operative mandate is: observe the observer. The operative question is:

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What is the distinction being made by the observer? This means that one must determine what distinctions guide the observations of the observing system. The methodology of a second-order approach transcends existing normal sociological approaches. Hence, a theory of social interaction based on second-order cybernetics need not be constrained by a subject-object duality, i.e., individual-society duality, nor constrained by a focus upon order.

What Replaces the "Subject as External Observer"?

By embracing Luhmann's theory of social systems, one dismisses fundamental concepts of sociology, such as:

> (1) the principle of a unified, autonomous subject;
>
> (2) the idea of the social as a derivative sphere of intersubjectivity;
>
> (3) the corollary of communication as an interaction between subjects;
>
> (4) the notion of communication as a transmission of mental contents between separate consciousnesses; and,
>
> (5) the corresponding idea of language as a representation of such contents (Knodt 1995:xxv).

To advance the theory of social interaction without a subject as external observer, one must first address the paradox that arises with self-reference. Luhmann stated, "Without resolving the paradox, societal analysis as a system would then be left to dialectical materialism" (Luhmann 1995:442). Husserl made it impossible to deny the problem of "intersubjectivity" any longer. Luhmann argued, strongly, that there could be no "intersubjectivity" on the basis of the subject.

> "But the staggering naivete with which sociologists (Durkheimeans, social phenomenologists, action theorists—it makes no difference) have been content with the statement that, after all, there are such things as subjects, intersubjectivity, the social, and socially meaningful action, without anyone seriously questioning this, should not be accepted anymore." (Luhmann 1995:xli)

The sociological 'subject' offered a basis for all knowledge and all action without making itself dependent on an analysis of society. Husserl demonstrated otherwise: the analysis of society cannot be answered by beginning with a concept of the subject that does not account for self-reference. Otherwise, the situation of pure self-reference blocks further

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analysis: the subject is what it is (pure tautology) or the subject is what it is not (pure paradox).

The "loss" of the subject is one of the radically important implications of adopting Luhmann's framework. Subjects exist, but should only be viewed for what the term originally implied. That is, *subject* means (and should only mean):

> "… the modern individual conceives himself as an observer of his observing, which always operates with self-reference and reference to others; thus he understands himself as a second-order observer. One could designate the subject as a unity that, as it itself knows, lies at the foundation of itself and everything else. Or … it lays the foundations for itself and everything else" (Luhmann 1995:xxxix).

To extend this concept of subject to mean that society is composed of subjects is incorrect. Nor can there be such thing as *inter*-subjectivity: the other subject is always conceived as a construct of the first subject.

Luhmann argued that the mis-use of the term subject developed along with the rise of modernity. The motivation for this was to conceal the self-referentiality of subject. The unity of difference inherent in self-reference and reference to others was changed into a distinction between individual and society – between human being and the self. Self-identity was separated from social identity on the basis of subject and inter-subjectivity. The individual-society distinction precludes self-reference. Hence the necessary formation of "methodological sophistications." On this basis, Luhmann argued that society cannot be ascribed to individuals or to their interaction. This challenges the foundation of symbolic interactionism. Although Blumer does not refer to human beings as subjects, per se, he treats individuals in the conventional meaning of subjectivity, i.e., as external observers.

George Herbert Mead is the standard reference for situating the difference between individual and society as the difference between personal and social identity (Luhmann 1995:200): the world is constituted as the social; the world is given through others. If, according to the proposed theory of self-referential systems, the human being "is no longer the measure of society" (Luhmann 1995:200), then symbolic interaction is no longer a mediating process of interpreting symbols between individual and society.

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Symbolic interactionism and Luhmann

The intent thus far has been to account for methodological issues that arise from self-reference. An account of Luhmann's theory would help at this point to stand in contrast to symbolic interactionism. However, an account of Luhmann's theories exceeds the bounds of this paper. Instead, the following points represent a brief examination of differences between symbolic interactionism and Luhmann's general theory of society.

The examination begins by looking at the conditions for interaction in both symbolic interactionism and Luhmann's theory of social systems. Blumer stated that complexity was not a problem for symbolic interactionism. "The shaping of inquiry to a study of what is done by the people comprising a complex organisation or a complexly organised area sets no methodological problems for symbolic interactionism…" (Blumer 1969:59). Following the argument presented by Luhmann, symbolic interactionism, quite correctly, formulates a contingently acting human being that uses symbols as a process of mediation. However, symbolic interactionism is not sufficient to deal with complexity because it only accounts for half of the contingency.

Complexity means that it is not possible at any moment to connect every element with every other element (Luhmann 1995). People extract meaning from complexity by connecting one element to another element. Over time, relations among elements are embedded in the accumulation of shared meanings. From this, Luhmann builds upon a logic of operations based on communication. Social systems emerge and function to process meaning via the simultaneous reduction and preservation of complexity. When people communicate, people are always making a selection among other possibilities; communication is always a reduction and preservation of complexity. Likewise, meaning is always contingent, one meaningful distinction among a horizon of possibilities.

Each person's reality is contingent upon how they interact with others (Luhmann 1995). For each person meaning is contingent and is always selected from an infinite horizon of possibilities. However, this is not only true for one person (Alter), but it is also true for the other (Ego). Hence, meaning is always *doubly* contingent: "If everyone acts contingently, and thus everyone could also act differently and knows this about oneself and others and takes this into account, it is, for the moment, improbable that one's own action will generally find points of connection (and with them a conferral of

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meaning) in the actions of others" (Luhmann 1995:116). The problem, therefore, is that symbolic interactionism treats interpretation only from one side of the interaction, assuming that all is the same on the other. "It treats, so to speak, only half of the double contingency…" (Luhmann 1995:108).

Extending this argument, what constrains symbolic interactionism is its pragmatic belief in action. As Luhmann has argued, action theory is sustained by empirical plausibility, the daily visibility of self-inspired actions by human beings. Blumer would agree with Luhmann on this account of symbolic interactionism: "I wish to say that the three premises [of symbolic interactionism] can be easily verified empirically" (Blumer 1969:82). But conceptually as well as empirically pragmatic beliefs in action are superficial 'frames.' Anyone who ignores the issues of self-reference "must work with imprecise concepts and seek to cover over their defects by forming ideal types (rational choice) or by methodological sophistication" (Luhmann 1995:xliii). Blumer's (1969) notion of the self, following Mead, may fall in the latter category of methodological sophistication. The capability of self for self-observation, for self to be an object of its own action, conceals a process of attribution that is mired in a paradox of self-reference. "Only by the inertia of tradition can one call this 'empirical' and think that in this way one can gain access to reality" (Luhmann 1995:xliii).

Luhmann argued that actions are not the ultimate ontological givens of social analysis. Although he agrees with symbolic interactionists that human beings can act and action always occurs in situations, the question remains whether and to what extent the action is attributed to the individual human being or to the situation. "If one wants to bring about a decision of this question, one must observe, not the human being in the situation, but the process of attribution" (Luhmann 1995:xliii). In other words, as stated above, the problem of reference must be posed as the problem of the operative processing of the difference between self-reference and reference to others. Unfortunately, the action theory preferred by contemporary sociologists is sustained by the "*corpus mysticum* of the subject" (Luhmann 1995:xliv).

Conclusion

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Niklas Luhmann's general theory of society does not dismiss existing theories, including symbolic interactionism, hermeneutics, and semiotics. On the other hand, his approach does challenge the epistemology and ontology of theories of society based on either the knowing subject or action. Although the paper focussed on symbolic interactionism, both hermeneutics and semiotics must also contend with issues of self-reference. The circularity of self-reference introduces uncertainty. This uncertainty creates problems for normal science approaches that have focussed on the social order of interaction. The over-riding opportunity for social science is to find alternative approaches capable of dealing with complex social issues. The methodological framework of second-order cybernetics, as integrated into Luhmann's general theory of society, is one alternative that takes the uncertainty of self-reference as its point of departure.

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