



HERBERT BLUMER

KEN PLUMMER

Driving Impulses

The Trouble with Sociology

‘Herbert Blumer’s work was lodged in the tradition of American Pragmatism, of James, Dewey and Mead. Indeed, it could be said that Herbert Blumer was the last sonorous voice of that tradition in this century.’¹ Troy Duster’s comment hints at the quietness of the revolution in sociological thought ushered in by Blumer and those whose work he developed and continued. As Howard Becker has put it: ‘Though we seldom recognise his enormous impact, few sociologists are untouched by his thought.’² When discussing Blumer we are thus confronted by a paradox. On the one hand, he was ‘an inspiring teacher, engaging writer, talented administrator, charismatic personality, and forceful intellectual.’³ On the other hand, he is probably the sociologist who is least known about by the students who read this book. Yet he is the carrier of a very distinctive sociological tradition – symbolic interactionism; with a very specific set of practical concerns – to do sociology ‘naturalistically’. This brief article aims to introduce some of his ideas.

Throughout much of the twentieth century, Blumer was driven by an irritation with many of the sociological orthodoxies of his day, and sought to develop his own humanistic, pragmatist approach – now popularly known as ‘symbolic interactionism’ (a term he coined in 1937). Blumer was a perpetual and ardent critic of all the major traditions of sociological reasoning from the start of his career to the end of it. At one extreme, he stood opposed to the trivial and quite misleading reduction of social life to surveys and measurements as if they actually told us anything; and at the other extreme, he questioned the superimposition of abstract and reified concepts like culture, structure, attitude or industrialization on to social life, as if they somehow explained something. For him, the appropriate stance for sociology was to look closely and carefully at human group life and collective behaviour through ‘action’: ‘action must be the starting point (and the point of return) for any scheme that purports to treat and analyse human society empirically.’⁴

In one discussion he put it like this:

More and more over the years, as I have had occasion to reflect on what is going on in sociology, the more convinced I have become of the inescapable need . . . of recognising that a human group consists of people who are living. Oddly enough this is not the picture which underlies the

dominant imagery in the field of sociology today. They think of a society or group as something that is there in the form of a regularised structure in which people are placed. And they act on the basis of the influence of the structure on them. This is a complete inversion of what is involved ... [instead] there are people who engaged in living, in having to cope with situations that arise in their experience, organising their behaviour and their conduct in the light of those situations they encounter, coming to develop all kinds of arrangements which are ongoing affairs ... The metaphor I like to use is just 'lifting the veil' to see what is happening.⁵

Here we have the kernel of his thought, still relevant today. Most sociology cuts out the living lives in process and turns instead to grander schemes of analysis: from structures and variables to discourse and advanced methodologies. Blumer wants to bring back the huffing and puffing human being in action.

This is not a fashionable view today, and we must be careful not to misread Blumer. As Becker says, 'he was never anti-theoretical, anti-empirical, or anti-measurement'.⁶ And he always saw the importance of social organization, power and history. But his concern was that theories and observations had to be about real things in the world: 'Empirical research [should] pay attention to the nature of what was being studied; and ... we [should] measure real quantities.'⁷ This was his abiding concern: he urged sociologists to talk about 'real' things with 'real' evidence. If you wanted to understand drug user activity, for example, you had to explore and inspect these worlds closely and carefully from every angle you could, building your understanding out of this. It was hopelessly misconceived to cut short the work of intimately familiarizing yourself with 'drugs' by constructing abstract theoretical schemas about it; likewise it was a gross error to think you could simply 'measure' drug life from abstracted interviews and questionnaires conducted aloofly. One of his students, Howard S. Becker, produced the classic study of marijuana use, in his *Outsiders* (1963), precisely because of this first-hand involvement in a social world, followed by his subsequent close attention to conceptual building (a litany of powerful theories and concepts are developed in his book: labeling, 'motives', 'culture', 'moral crusaders', 'becoming and careers').⁸ And the same was true of race relations, or trade union activity, or the industrialization process in Latin America – all areas he worked on. His passion was to improve sociology and to do this he adopted the perpetual mantle of critic. He was against thoughtless measurement and obscure abstract theory equally. And insofar as he was, he was opposed to the two major strands of doing sociology. It remains the case today that sociology can largely be divided into those who theorize with little empirical content and those who produce elaborate data-sets with very little theory. What he complained about for 60 years has still not been rectified.

On Background and Style

To understand Herbert Blumer's work, he should be seen as the mantle bearer of two important, connected, North American intellectual traditions, which he found at the University of Chicago, the foremost sociological centre for much of the earlier part of the twentieth century.⁹

One source of Blumer's passion clearly lay in his admiration for his great teacher, the Chicago philosophical pragmatist George Herbert Mead. Blumer attended his lectures, assisted in their posthumous publication, and became the major sociological proselytizer on Mead's behalf for many years after Mead's death (most notably, in three key publications).¹⁰ For Blumer, Mead was probably 'the only "true genius" he had ever met, and he clearly had a profound impact upon him. He was teaching his ideas throughout his life.'¹¹ For both Mead and Blumer, 'science' was the major form of thought for the modern world, a science grounded in the pragmatic attitude.

Another source of his passion lay more generally in being part of the Chicago School of Sociology. He was trained there, gained his Ph.D. there in 1928, taught there from 1931 and, when he left in 1953 to chair the Department of Sociology at the University of California at Berkeley, he took this inheritance with him. The core concerns of Chicago sociology – in the work of W.I. Thomas, Robert Park and others – was to study the city as a mosaic of social worlds; to get away from the library and to do real research in the city, and to build out of this a conceptually and theoretically grounded view of the social world. The philosophical strain of Mead and the empirical obsessions of 'Chicago' left a marked impact on Blumer.

I think this dual background generated tensions in Blumer's work, for the Meadian influence was not always compatible with the fieldwork Chicago inheritance. The former, after all, highlighted a philosophical issue, the latter an empirical one.¹² One paradox concerns his advocacy for empirical work yet his general failure to do it. From his earliest doctoral work on method in social psychology to his last ruminations, he was obsessively concerned with finding out the best way to study everyday collective behaviour and group experience – doing it as scientifically as possible, yet at the same time he often seemed reluctant to actually do it himself. There are some studies of media, fashion, race and industrialization but in the main doing empirical work was not his strength – even though he advocated it all the time. As a critic said to him in the early 1950s: 'you seem to advocate a lingering intellectual hypochondria in which we dwell upon all the dire things which may go wrong if we do attempt research.'¹³ It may indeed well be that he saw the doing of sociology as so difficult, as so fraught with problems in 'getting it right' that he incapacitated himself.¹⁴ While, ironically, he is something of a 'scientific absolutist'¹⁵ and his work reeks of a sureness about what sociology most surely is and indeed surely should be, he also advocates a deep scepticism and a critical approach to all things. He is, if you like, sure about being unsure.

He was also against systematizing and synthesizing. Much of his work reads like scattered fragments; his most famous book, *Symbolic Interactionism* (1969), was only written under duress, encouraged by his students. He was against providing coda, recipes, models. Others have tried to do this for him – but it is clear he did not personally like it. Codification and abstraction strain against pragmatism.¹⁶ But Becker, for example, one of his foremost students, remarked after his death that Blumer's work in fact harboured a deductive axiomatic theory – one organized around the idea of the collective act: 'any human event can be understood as the result of the people involved continually adjusting what they do in the light of what others do, so that each individual's line of activity "fits" into what the others do.'¹⁷

Key Issues – Theorizing in the Empirical World: Sampling Blumer’s Work

While Blumer is probably best known for his writings on George Herbert Mead and his development of the theory of symbolic interactionism (SI), there is so much more to him than this. A full-length appraisal of his work must still be awaited. Among his accomplishments were the development of a distinctive methodological style; the exploration of key areas of social life – industrial relations, race and racism, the mass media, collective behaviour, social movements and social problems; as well as a concern with industrialization, social structure, social change and comparative sociology, especially within Latin America. (Some of these latter interests are not commonly recognized.)¹⁸ Although he personally never swerved from the position of interactionism that he championed, his chairmanship at Berkeley was characterized by a wide-ranging support for a variety of styles of doing sociology. In a short review I can only briefly highlight a few of his contributions.

Creating Symbolic Interactionism and Developing a Theory of the Self

For Blumer:

Human group life consists of the fitting together of the lines of action of the participants; such aligning of actions takes place predominantly by the participants indicating to one another what to do and in turn interpreting such indications made by the others; out of such interaction people form the objects that constitute their worlds; people are prepared to act towards their objects on the basis of the meaning these objects have for them; human beings face their world as organisms with selves, thus allowing each other to make indications to himself; human action constructed by the actor on the basis of what he notes, interprets and assesses; and the interlinking of such ongoing action constitutes organisations, institutions, and vast complexes of interdependent relations. To test the validity of these premises one must go to a direct examination of actual human group life.¹⁹

Here we have a litany of sensitizing concepts: selves, joint actions, objects, interactions, interpretations, organizations, interdependencies.²⁰ What lies at the heart of SI is an image of the world that says:

- always look for the processes, the changes, how lives, groups and whole societies emerge. Nothing is ever fixed and static: social life is always emergent. ‘The empirical world is continuously recast’²¹
- always look for the meanings, the symbols, the languages in which social life gets done. It is this which makes human life truly distinctive, and why it needs special kinds of methods to ‘dig out’ these shifting meanings
- always look for the interactions and interconnections. There is no such thing as an individual in this view, as individuals are always in interaction with others. Societies are interactive webs of people ‘doing things together.’²²

One key concept that binds much of this together is the concept of the self, developed from Mead. What makes human beings distinctive is that they develop reflective and reflexive ideas of who they are through communication with themselves and others. People are able to indicate who they are; they are able to see themselves through the eyes of others; they are able to indicate to others who they are; they are able to make, present, transform and work on 'selves'. Selves, for Blumer and Mead, are processes contingent upon language, communications, role taking and interaction with others.

It is crucial to see that Blumer's work neither ignores nor minimizes the importance of wider social forces, power, history or the economic. He is certainly opposed to grand theory in the abstract and had he lived he would have been no friend at all to the current whirl of discourse analysis that so often becomes cut off from empirically observable language. But he is not opposed to a wider sense of social structure insofar as a society is constituted through symbolic interaction: 'Human society is to be seen as consisting of acting people, and the life of a society is to be seen as consisting of their actions.'²³

For Blumer, society is 'the framework inside of which social action takes place and is not a determinant of that society'.²⁴ Collective actions are the concern. Blumer always stresses the 'group setting' in which all of social life is conducted.

Building a Methodological Stance of 'Naturalistic Rigour'

Closely allied is his work on methods. Blumer developed the 'pragmatic turn' that highlighted the importance of grounding analysis in concrete sets of experience. Pragmatism is a general philosophical position that shuns grand abstractions, dualisms and split thinking in favour of directly and practically looking at the limited and local truths as they emerge in concrete experience.²⁵ The much heralded self, for example, was one major way around the classic dualist split of subject and object, individual and society. Neither should be given priority; both were always present and in dialectical tension with each other. By looking at the self in concrete situations, it was manifest that self was both subject and object: only abstract philosophy could say otherwise.

For Blumer, then, it becomes a *sine qua non* that 'an empirical world exists as something available for observation, study and analysis'. Moreover, 'it *stands over against* the scientific observer with a character that has to be dug out'. 'Reality for empirical science exists only in the empirical world, can be sought only there, and can be verified only there.'²⁶ The obdurate empirical world has to be the focus of study.

This leads to much of Blumer's work being about methods.²⁷ One of his most famous contributions to such debates comes in his (book-length) review of a sociological classic in 1939. At this time in the USA, there was an evaluation of the state of USA sociology, and the study by W.I. Thomas and F. Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, had been adjudicated the best example of good sociological work. Some 2,000 pages long, it charted the migration of Polish peasants from the old communities to the new cities in the USA. It used life histories, letters and documents of many kinds as a way of collecting data. And Blumer was asked by the Social Science Research Council to provide a review of it. While he was, as usual, very critical of this study, he also praised the range of methods, the concern with detail and the importance given to subjective factors. This is

never to suggest that he denied 'objective factors'; but he is concerned with any sociology that does not take seriously the fact that humans 'always act in social situations', 'actors are always oriented and guided in situations by subjective dispositions'.²⁸ Sympathetically drawing from Thomas and Znaniecki, he says:

(1) Group life consists *always* of the action of human actors; (2) such action always takes place as an adjustment of human actors to social situations; and (3) action in situations is always in the form of actors expressing their dispositions. Ergo, sociological research has to ferret out the play of subjective dispositions, and sociological propositions have to incorporate the record of that play.²⁹

Human documents, naturalistic study, life histories: these are the tools Blumer favoured to get at these subjective dispositions. And this agreed, they then need their own methodological logic: much of the standard talk about representativeness, data adequacy, reliability and decisive theoretical validation leads up wrong paths once 'subjective dispositions' become the issue. For instance, representativeness is usually seen to raise the problem of sampling. But, for Blumer, modern sampling theory usually overlooks the fact that

not all people who are involved in the given area of social action under study are equally involved, nor are they equally knowledgeable about what is taking place; hence they cannot be regarded as equally capable of supplying information on the form of social action under study. Some of the people ... are in the periphery; others ... may be in the mainstream ... [but] poor observers. To include them ... may weaken the study.³⁰

If grasping subjectivity is the issue, representativeness changes its character. For example, in his research on labour arbitration, Blumer suggests not a random sample of workers but rather the need to listen closely to the 'key informants' who know much better what is going on. Not everyone does. All this means that standard views on 'representative samples' need challenging.

Studying the Empirical World: An Example – Going to the Movies

Blumer researched a number of areas, but he was one of the first to conduct audience research on the movies, and as such he anticipated the much later development of 'audience ethnography' found in such works as Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance*.³¹ As part of a widespread concern about the impact of movies on young people, a series of investigations were set up in the late 1920s and early 1930s (popularly known as the Payne Studies, they were initiated by a pro-movie censorship group, the Motion Picture Research Council). Blumer was involved with one of these that looked at young people. Straightforwardly, he asked some 1,500 young people to write 'motion-picture autobiographies', backed up with more selective interviews, group discussions and observations. In all this, he demonstrated his commitment to the empirical world – effectively to know what impact media had on young people's lives, it is best to simply ask them. And

following on from this, much of his ensuing book *Movies and Conduct* (1933) is given over to young people's first-hand accounts of the films they have seen – how they provide the basis of imitation, play, daydreams, emotional development and 'schemes of life'. For Blumer, the task is not to impose some preordained theoretical framework on his subjects (as so much contemporary audience ethnography chooses to do – usually from a psycho-analytic frame), but rather to let the people speak for themselves. One entry – dealing with stereotypes – reads:

Female, 19, white college senior: One thing these pictures did was to establish a permanent fear of Chinamen in my mind. To this day I do not see a Chinese person but what I think of him as being mixed up in some evil affair. I always pass them as quickly as possible if I meet them in the street, and refuse to go into a Chinese restaurant or laundry.³²

Quite rightly, others more recently have been critical of his straightforward naivety of approach. Just ask people. Denzin, for example, has recently been very critical of Blumer's work in this area, suggesting that, while progressive in method, it is shrouded with Blumer's assumptions ('pro-middle class and anti-film'),³³ was open to being used to crusade against movie content, and viewed texts unproblematically.³⁴ True, Blumer's initial studies in the 1930s now look somewhat simple: but he was the first to take audience responses seriously.

Creating a Public Philosophy: An Example – the Problem of Race Relations

Lyman and Vidich, in their analysis of the work of Herbert Blumer, suggest his work should be seen as the embodiment of an emerging new creative 'public philosophy' in North America during the course of the twentieth century. Suggesting the bankruptcy of past ideas, and especially those of social science, and drawing from the pragmatic mode of Chicago philosophers, Blumer saw the need for the systematic investigation of problems in American public life: from race to industrial relations; from the media to the consequences of industrialization. This work is less well known than his account of the Meadian self, but it is all part of a coordinated, seamless approach.³⁵ His was not a counsel of despair in the face of so many social problems, and neither was it a plea for revolutionary change. Instead, a public philosophy – pragmatic, populist, democratic – had to be forged that recognized the empirical world and opened debates around it. As Lyman and Vidich comment:

His approach emphasizes the collective construction of meaning that imparts definitions to the various schemes of social reality, repudiates the allegedly irrevocable effects of structural arrangements, and allows for – indeed, expects and encourages – opposition, individuality and idiosyncrasy within the social order.³⁶

An example of all this can be found in his abiding concern with race relations – the big issue of North American sociology. From some of his earliest writings, and under the influence of Robert E. Park, Blumer took an active interest in the study of race relations

(although contemporary studies more or less systematically ignore all his work). For him, 'race prejudice has a history, and the history is collective.'³⁷ 'The defining process must be seen as central in the career of race relations.'³⁸ Starting with a paper in 1937 on 'the Nature of Race Prejudice' and ending with a summary paper in 1980 on 'Theories of Race and Social Action' (co-authored with Troy Duster), Blumer evolved a comprehensive theory of race relations. It was a fully social theory – he dismissed biological accounts of race, saw the whole process as a social one involving relationships and categorizations, and urged public debates to change and weaken segregation and discrimination. Using Blumer's own words, the following could be taken as a summary of his position:

1. Race prejudice is fundamentally a matter of relationships between racial groups (and not as a set of feelings that members of one racial group have towards the members of another racial group) ... this directs us immediately to a sociological level and not a personal one.
2. Race prejudice is directed towards a 'conceptualised group' or abstract category; it exists as an attitude towards what is logically an abstraction (the Jew, the Oriental, the Negro) ... this directs us to a concern with the abstraction, categorizations and defining systems surrounding groups.
3. Race prejudice is a highly variable, changing and complex phenomenon; it differs a great deal from time to time and from place to place ... this directs us to its changing historical nature, its variability amongst different groups and times, to the fact that nothing is permanent about it. One group like 'the Jew' may appear at one time for one group; another like 'the Negro' may appear at other times for other groups; and others like the 'Arab' or the 'Moslem' may appear at yet another.
4. Race prejudice is a collective process through which racial groups form images of themselves and of others; it is a process in which two groups define their position in relation to each other; it is the sense of social position emerging for this collective process of characterization that provides the basis of racial prejudice ... this directs us to concerns with labelling, racialization and the creation of 'others'.
5. Race prejudice is a collective process that involves four patterns in the dominant group: (1) a feeling of superiority; (2) a feeling that the subordinate race is intrinsically different and alien; (3) a feeling of proprietary claim to certain areas of privilege and advantage; and (4) a fear and suspicion that the subordinate race harbours designs on the prerogatives of the dominant race ... this directs us to hierarchy, dominance, difference and privilege as bases of race prejudice.
6. The source of race prejudice lies in a felt challenge to this sense of group position. Race prejudice has its origins in many sources. One of them undoubtedly is the general ethnocentrism of groups, but of more importance is a sense of threat where a dominant group feels insecure and has its status, or economic position, threatened ... this directs us to the fact that the conflict is group based not individual based.

This is only a very provisional summary of Blumer's position. But like so much of his work, if followed through, these ideas are highly suggestive for public change.

Seeing Things Differently

Blumer brings to sociology a perspective for seeing the world that has influenced a great many studies: from illness and dying to occupations and classroom interaction; from social movements and collective behaviour to the patterning and organization of social problems; from crime and deviance to labour and industrial relations; from media studies to life history research; from self theory to race relations. Blumer's overarching concern with staying true to the empirical world and providing a rigorous methodology for inspecting and exploring it has guided a great many sociologists. Wittingly or unwittingly, a large corpus of work has flowed from Blumer's seminal ideas.

I read Blumer in 1970, shortly after embarking upon a Ph.D. that was to explore the sociology of sexuality. The major intellectual influences on me at that time had been Howard S. Becker's *Outsiders* and David Matza's *Becoming Deviant*, which had both introduced me to the key ideas of labelling theory; it turns out that both had been strongly shaped by Blumer's ideas. Yet these were both 'substantive' or topic-based studies, and it was only really when I read Blumer's *Symbolic Interactionism* that the full weight of his arguments became clearer. The book itself has major flaws: there is repetition (as one might expect from a series of largely previously published essays); it was dated in parts (much of it draws from the 1930s and 40s – which to a child of the 1960s could have been seen as very old-fashioned); and there is very little in the way of referencing, footnoting or acknowledging to guide the reader any further. But it came to me as a serious exhortation to think about what I was trying to do sociologically. It gave me a series of themes (process, symbols, interaction), an image of society (as a precarious network of interactions) and human beings (as symbolic, active creators of social worlds who inhabit coordinates of repetitive social actions), a view of methodology (which largely reiterated the old Park dictum to 'get off the seat of your pants and see what is going on' but tempered it with a concern for the logic of method), and a sense of required techniques for studying society (those which advocated intimate familiarity with the social world – through field research and life histories in particular). All these themes helped shape my view of sociology, but also of sexuality in general and homosexuality (as it was then called) in particular. And some have suggested more recently that many of its ideas these days implicitly shape much more of sociology than has been generally credited.³⁹

There have been several major traditions for the study of sexuality: Kinsey's surveys, Masters and Johnson's therapies, psychodynamic theories turn to the unconscious, anthropological travel notes about patterns of sexual behaviour in remote islands. As a graduate student, I read through these studies assiduously, but felt something was lacking in each. Overwhelmingly, they suggested the importance of biology, the natural and an essentially uncontested notion of sexuality: it was a given and remained untheorized socially. Only the anthropological approach came near to capturing the distinctly human features of sexuality. Blumer's ruminations hence came as a brilliant, even shocking, set of tips for how human sexuality could be studied. In effect, he told me to go and look at sexualities in naturalistic settings (a bit like the anthropologists) and to build up life stories of people's sexualities (while being aware of how hard this was to do). He suggested

to me that human sexuality should be approached as a massive symbolic enterprise, as something that emerges in human interactions, and that it is something we effectively piece together as joint actions. It is patterned but creative, symbolic while being biologic, and always social – varying in meaning in time, places and encounters.⁴⁰

I was not alone in these realizations. A little earlier in the ground-breaking work of Gagnon and Simon,⁴¹ they had come to similar conclusions and developed an approach to sexuality that they called a ‘sexual scripting’ approach. It provided the foundations of what some now call (perhaps inappropriately) the ‘constructionist’ approach to sexualities.

Legacies and Unfinished Business – Blumer at Century’s Turn

Blumer was a sociologist for the twentieth century. His influence – primarily as the founder of symbolic interactionist theory – has been enormous. Not a prolific writer or researcher himself, he seems to have trained whole generations of sociologists in his distinctive view of the world.⁴² He gave them all the pragmatist inheritance.

Nevertheless, by the time he died, many of his ideas had been moved on. We had entered a ‘Post-Blumerian World.’⁴³ It is true that symbolic interactionism had become a strong force with its own journal, yearbook, professional body and conferences.⁴⁴ Likewise, many of his leads were continuing to be developed. Thus, the theory of action continues to be refined.⁴⁵ Mead and Blumer’s abiding concern with self and identity as processual and changing has become a widespread concern of more and more scholars (indeed in the 1990s, identity theory became highly fashionable). Ethnographic and life history work continues, and becomes more sophisticated. And some have significantly reworked the theory so that it can now look better at emotions, structures and semiotics. Others have not just developed it, they have pushed it into hitherto unknown territories. For some, it has become the harbinger of postmodern social theory.⁴⁶ Feminism,⁴⁷ gay activist theory⁴⁸ and the politics of race⁴⁹ have all recently been linked further to it. Yet although Blumer may not have approved of all these developments, he would certainly not have been surprised. Sociologists come and go, as do sociological ‘fashions’ – indeed, this was yet another area he studied – and Blumer would have been the last to claim that new generations should stick to old orthodoxies. Since Blumer saw change as rapid and inevitable, he would not have been overly puzzled by them. As he remarked, ‘Social change is woven into the very fabric of modern life ... It represents modern society in action.’⁵⁰ ‘We have to transform our mentality to suit the new world [and] you are hereby enjoined to begin the change.’⁵¹ He has left us a rich legacy with which to further this change.

Postscript Second Edition: Wonderful Directions for Research

Whatever Blumer’s legacies have been, I have continued to find his ideas fruitful and the work of the symbolic interactionist tradition continues to infuse and stimulate contemporary research. Blumer and the theory of symbolic interactionism has indeed ‘got under my skin’, just as it has for Norman Denzin, a prime contemporary exponent.⁵²

On a number of recent occasions, as I start to think about research areas, I have found that symbolic interactionism always provides some wonderful directions. In looking at stories in social life,⁵³ at social movements⁵⁴ and at human rights,⁵⁵ a focus on Blumer has provided me with a myriad of questions to examine. In each one of these areas, I have drawn on the symbolic interactionist image of the world outlined earlier, looking for processes of change, for the meanings by which things get done, and for the major interactants, their interconnections and how they 'do things together'. I also ask what stages are biographies, situations, campaigns or networks moving through? So, in writing about the lesbian and gay movements, I identified definite stages in which rights appeared through 'rights work'.⁵⁶ Thus, there was a series of overlapping temporal stages in which an initial imagining of rights then opened out on to a vocalizing of claims to these rights. There were claims to legal equality; claims to acceptance on equal grounds with heterosexuals; claims to equal opportunities at school and work; the claim to be free from homophobic attack; and the claim to behave as heterosexuals might in the street – holding hands, even kissing.⁵⁷ The imagining and vocalization of such claims was followed by a stage in which they were fed into the shifting construction of identities and also became a source of empowering storytelling. Gradually, over time, social sub-worlds were related, in which some of these rights came to be respected more of the time, in tandem with the establishment of a public culture of rights that increased their visibility and legitimacy, albeit always in parallel with similar interactional sequences of backlash and resistance.

I have found the symbolic interactionist view of the world fruitful to examine any area of social life. The world - view works best when it is joined to the methodological injunction to get close to the features of social life you wish to study – through observation of self and others, participant or otherwise, and through ethnography, documents and stories. It may not be fully adequate on its own, but it is certainly a valuable pathway to much that is essential in social relations.

Further Reading

Atkinson, P. and Housley, W. (2003) *Interactionism*, London: Sage concurs with the observation with which this chapter began, arguing that even though relatively few sociologists explicitly identify themselves as symbolic interactionists the ideas of Mead, Blumer and others in this tradition have permeated sociological research to the point at which they are an often unnoticed but profoundly pervasive influence. Atkinson and Housley are excellent guides and they provide a very good charting of the history of symbolic interactionist thought. They also provide an important and intriguing account of recent British sociology. An important foundational text for symbolic interactionism is **G.H. Mead's (1934) *Mind, Self and Society*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press**. Works by Blumer himself that it is important to consult directly include:

Blumer, H. (1969) *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Blumer, H. (2004) (edited and introduced by Thomas J. Morriane) *George Herbert Mead and Human Conduct*, Alta Mira, NY: Rowman & Littlefield.

Blumer, H. and Duster, T. (1980) 'Theories of race and social action', in *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism*, Paris: UNESCO, pp. 211–38.

Norman Denzin's (1992) *Symbolic Interactionism and Cultural Studies*, Oxford: Blackwell is a good overview of ways in which symbolic interactionism has influenced and been influenced by cultural studies in both its US and British forms.

Gary Fine's (ed.) (1988) Special issue of *Symbolic Interaction*, 11(1) on Herbert Blumer's legacy is essential reading.

Lyman, S. and Vidich, A. (1988) *Social Order and Public Philosophy: The Analysis and Interpretation of the Work of Herbert Blumer*, Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press is an excellent source through which to explore the importance to Blumer of creating pragmatic, populist and democratic dialogue and debate about social problems. Such dialogues had to be grounded in engagement with the empirical world. Blumer's work here has many resonances with the contemporary resurgence of Public Sociology.

Maines, D.R. (2001) *The Faultline of Consciousness: A View of Interactionism in Sociology*, New York: Aldine De Gruyter focuses much more closely, as the title indicates, on issues of consciousness and processes of doing and being.

Supplementary Reading

Plummer, K. (1995) *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds*, London: Routledge. Symbolic interactionism, with its emphasis on the ubiquity of social change and social becoming, is combined here with narrative analysis and the sociology of sexuality to explore the new domain of 'Intimate Citizenship'. The study focuses on the intersection between storytelling and sex, understanding sexual stories as the product of negotiated networks of collective activity.

Plummer, K. (1998) 'The gay and lesbian movement in Britain, 1965–1995: schism, solidarities and social worlds', in B. Adam, J.W. Duyvendak and A. Krouwel (eds) *The Global Emergence of Gay and Lesbian Politics*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Plummer, K. (2006) 'Rights work: constructing lesbian, gay and sexual rights in modern times', in L. Morris (ed.) *Rights: Sociological Perspectives*, London: Routledge. This is discussed briefly in the postscript, above, to this second edition.

Notes

1. T. Duster, 'Herbert Blumer: 1900–1987', *ASA Footnotes* 15(6) (1987), 16.
2. H.S. Becker, 'Herbert Blumer's conceptual impact', *Symbolic Interaction* 11(1) (1988), 13–21.
3. Page 20 in P. Colomy, and J.D. Brown, 'Elaboration, revision, polemic and progress in the second Chicago School', in G.A. Fine (ed.) *A Second Chicago School?*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995, pp. 17–81.
4. H. Blumer (1969) *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

5. L. Lofland, 'Reminiscences of classic Chicago: the Blumer–Hughes talk', *Urban Life* 9(3) (1980), 251–81, reprinted in K. Plummer, *The Chicago School*, vol. 4, London: Routledge, 1997, Ch. 45.
6. Op. cit. Becker, 1988, p. 14.
7. Op. cit. Becker, 1988, p. 14.
8. A wonderful account of this which bridges Blumer and Becker is to be found in D. Matza's *Becoming Deviant*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1969; H.S. Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*, Illinois: Free Press, 1963.
9. K. Plummer (ed.) *Chicago Sociology*, 4 vols, London: Routledge, 1997.
10. H. Blumer, 'Sociological implications of the thought of George Herbert Mead', *American Journal of Sociology*, 71 (March 1966), 535–44; H. Blumer, 'George Herbert Mead', in B. Rhea (ed.) *The Future of the Sociological Classics*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1979b; H. Blumer (ed. and intro by T.J. Morrione) *George Herbert Mead and Human Conduct*, New York: AltaMira Press, 2004).
11. Commented upon by Lonnie Athen as he describes 'Blumer's advance social psychology course' in *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*, 14 (1993), 156.
12. This debate can be found embodied in the controversy over the publication of J.D. Lewis and R.L. Smith's 'American Sociology and Pragmatism: Mead, Chicago Sociology and Symbolic Interactionism', Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980. The debates are found in Plummer, K. (ed.) *Symbolic Interactionism: 2 vols*, Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1991, vol. 1, pp. 227–326.
13. A. Abbott, and E. Gaziano, 'Transition and tradition: departmental faculty in the era of the second Chicago School' in G.A. Fine (ed.) *A Second Chicago School? The Development of a Postwar American Sociology*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995, pp. 221–72.
14. Cf. M. Hammersley, *The Dilemma of Qualitative Method: Herbert Blumer and the Chicago Tradition*, London: Routledge, 1989.
15. Cf. Abbott and Gaziano 1995, p. 253.
16. Cf. P. Rock, *The Making of Symbolic Interactionism*, London: Macmillan – now Palgrave Macmillan, 1979.
17. Op. cit. Becker, 1988, p. 18.
18. D.R. Maines, 'Myth, text and interactionist complicity in the neglect of Blumer's macrosociology', *Symbolic Interaction*, 11(1) (1988), 43–57.
19. Op. cit. Blumer, 1969, p. 49.
20. Elsewhere he suggests three basic postulates: 'that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them'; 'that the meaning of such things is derived from ... the social interaction that one has with one's fellows'; and 'these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person' (Blumer, 1969, p. 2, op. cit.). These are a rather limited and possibly even trivial set of postulates, although as he points out, such a view is 'ignored or played down in practically all contemporary social science' (p. 2).
21. Op. cit. Blumer, 1969, p. 23.
22. Cf. H.S. Becker, *Doing Things Together*, Chicago: Aldine, 1986.
23. Op. cit. Blumer, 1969, p. 85.
24. H. Blumer, 'Society as symbolic interaction' in A. Rose (ed.) *Human Behavior and Social Processes*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962.
25. For discussions of pragmatism, see Plummer (op. cit. 1997), 2.
26. Op. cit. Blumer, 1969, pp. 21–2.
27. The central location of this discussion is Blumer (op. cit. 1969), Chapter 1.
28. Op. cit. Blumer, 1979b, p. 85.

29. Op. cit. Blumer, 1979b, p. 85.
30. Op. cit. Blumer, 1979b, p. 94.
31. J. Radway, *Reading the Romance*, 1991, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
32. H. Blumer, *Movies and Conduct*, New York: Macmillan, 1933.
33. N. Denzin (1992) *Symbolic Interactionism and Cultural Studies*, Oxford: Blackwell, p. 107.
34. P.T. Clough, *The Ends of Ethnography*, London: Sage, 1992.
35. In this he followed Mead and Dewey: For Dewey, 'Every generation has to accomplish democracy over and over again. (J. Dewey, *The Problems of Men*, New York: Philosophical Library, 1946, p. 31). 'The very idea of democracy ... has to be constantly discovered, and rediscovered, remade and reorganized' (p. 47).
36. Lyman, S. and Vidich, A. (1988) *Social Order and Public Philosophy: The Analysis and Interpretation of the Work of Herbert Blumer*, Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press.
37. This quote is from Blumer (1958), reprinted in Lyman and Vidich (op. cit. 1988, p. 206). The section which follows is culled from quotes on Blumer's writings on race prejudice and I have tried to piece together a kind of systematic statement. See pp. 183–233 of Lyman and Vidich (1988) for the original statements.
38. See the last key statement in H. Blumer and T. Duster 'Theories of race and social action', in *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism*, Paris: UNESCO, 1980, p. 235).
39. D.R. Maines, *The Faultline of Consciousness: A View of Interactionism in Sociology*, New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 2001; Atkinson, P. and W. Housley, *Interactionism*, London: Sage, 2003.
40. Cf. K. Plummer, *Sexual Stigma*, London: Routledge, 1975; K. Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds*, London: Routledge, 1995.
41. J. Gagnon and W. Simon, *Sexual Conduct: The Social Sources of Human Sexuality*, Chicago: Aldine, 1973.
42. A word needs to be said about his style. In reading Blumer, one is immediately struck by the almost total lack of referencing. These days sociology books are cluttered with references, quotes from others, long bibliographies. All these are absent from Blumer. He hardly ever does any of the above. Nobody is cited, there are no references and no bibliographies. It is not that there are not many allusions to the works of others – only that they are never named. Most of his essays, and that is what they are, read like thoughtful self-reflections. His standard mould is to argue against several dominant views of the world, and then to proceed to evolve his own painstaking account of it.
43. G.A. Fine, 'Symbolic interactionism in the post-Blumerian age', in G. Ritzer (ed.) *Frontiers of Sociological Theory*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1990, pp. 117–57.
44. See, for instance, the journal, *Symbolic Interaction; the year book*, *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*; and the organization, The Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction. Details are provided in Plummer (op. cit. 1991).
45. A. Strauss, *Continual Permutations of Action*, New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1993; H. Joas, *The Creativity of Action*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997.
46. Op. cit. Denzin, 1992.
47. M.J. Deegan, and M.R. Hill, (eds) *Women and Symbolic Interaction*, Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1987.
48. K. Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds*, London: Routledge, 1995.
49. B.B. Lal, *The Romance of Culture in an Urban Civilization*, London: Routledge, 1990.
50. H. Blumer, 'Society as symbolic interaction' in A. Rose (ed.) *Human Behavior and Social Processes*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962, p. 356.
51. Ibid. p. 359.

52. Op. cit. Denzin, 1992, p. 155.
53. Op. cit. Plummer, 1995.
54. K. Plummer, 'The gay and lesbian movement in Britain, 1965–1995: schism, solidarities and social worlds', in B. Adam, J.W. Duyvendak and A. Krouwel (eds) *The Global Emergence of Gay and Lesbian Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).
55. K. Plummer, 'Rights work: constructing lesbian, gay and sexual rights in modern times', in L. Morris (ed.) *Rights: Sociological Perspectives*, London: Routledge, 2006.
56. Op. cit. Plummer, 1995, p. 125.
57. Op. cit. Plummer, 2006, p. 157.