

EXCHANGE AS SYMBOLIC INTERACTION: CONVERGENCES BETWEEN TWO THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES *

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American Sociological Review 1972, Vol. 37 (August):414-424

This paper explores convergences between symbolic interactionism and exchange theory in four major areas: (1) both theoretical orientations assume the operation of constructive mental processes when actors act toward their environment; this assumption is explicitly stated by symbolic interactionists and implied in exchange-theoretical propositions dealing with valuation, decision-making or justice; (2) exchange theory implies processes akin to G. H. Mead's "self" and "generalized other" in the sense that interaction in exchange requires persons to imaginatively assume the roles of others and view themselves in terms of the conceptions of others; (3) in both perspectives social organization is viewed as emerging from constructed individual acts "fitted" to one another; such "elementary" interactions give rise to institutional modes of behavior which, once established, exist as a reality sui generis over and against the individual actors; (4) in both perspectives social dynamics is conceived in dialectic terms, arising out of contradictions between micro- and macro processes and inherent tendencies in social organization toward inconsistency, conflict and change. It is proposed that a possible synthesis between exchange theory and symbolic interactionism can begin by postulating a dialectical process in which objective realities become subjectified by actors and subjective meanings become objectified in social institutions. A synthesized theory based on such general postulates can be empirically tested when (a) the concrete "subjective" and "objective" contingencies which make acts meaningful for the actors are posited and empirically indicated and (b) longitudinal observations show changes in some of these contingencies so that predictions about behavioral changes can be made.

EXCHANGE theory is one of the most stimulating current sociological theories because it provides a general rationale for explaining human interaction while at the same time generating specific propositions for predicting concrete behaviors. While all proponents of exchange theory explicitly reject the assumption that human behavior is guided mainly by the deliberate assessment of available means for attaining given ends, the postulate that human behavior is to a significant degree reward-oriented has been useful in generating a large body of testable generalizations.

On the other hand, exchange theory has shed little light on why many behavior patterns in human groups appear manifestly "unrewarding" to an observer. As Abrahamsen (1970:283-284) has pointed out in a recent critique of Homans' exchange theory, understanding and predicting human behavior requires considering the experiences and interpretations of the actors. Especially

Homans' behaviorist approach does not consider that human behavior is subjectively meaningful, and that there are multiple dimensions along which behaviors can be meaningful for the actors. These dimensions have, in Pareto's terms, "logical" as well as "non-logical" aspects, but they all provide the framework in which behavior is motivated.

A theoretical perspective which foremost postulates the subjective meaningfulness of human action is symbolic interactionism. This paper will explore the convergences and possibilities for a synthesis between the basic assumptions of that perspective and exchange theory.

SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM AND EXCHANGE THEORY: AN OVERVIEW

Neither symbolic interactionism nor exchange theory is represented by a unified body of systematically interrelated propositions, partly because so many authors have added their particular styles to the respective approaches, George Herbert Mead, while not coining the term, may be considered the father of symbolic interactionism.

* I am indebted to Russell Curtis, Jack Gibbs, John Higley, and Joseph Lopreato (University of Texas at Austin) for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

But such later writers as Blumer or Berger and Luckmann have modified his perspective in significant ways. Exchange theory also appears in different manifestations; the ones to be considered here can be found in the writings of Homans, Blau, and Thibaut and Kelley. For this reason, and also because both approaches have been discussed and summarized repeatedly elsewhere,¹ the following outline will be confined to select aspects of symbolic interactionism and exchange theory.

Symbolic Interactionism. The point of departure for symbolic interaction theory is the dialectic interdependence between the human organism and his natural and social environments. While the environment has its own reality *vis-a-vis* the individual, it is selectively perceived and reacted to by the organism. Human action is thus at the same time a creative response to a subjectively meaningful environment as it is constrained by the objective nature of natural and social phenomena. The human "mind" represents the organism's capacity to respond subjectively to given objective stimuli through conceptualizing, defining, symbolizing, aspiring, valuing and reflecting. It is the mind that makes human actions "rational," "pragmatic," or "meaningful." In this sense, action or behavior is not a mechanical response to external stimuli, but a thing "constructed" creatively and selectively.

Interaction between humans is "symbolic" in the sense that actors respond to the behaviors of others not for some inherent quality in them, but for the significance imputed to them by the actors; a "conversa-

tion of gestures" becomes "meaningful" for the participants when given gestures arouse the same response in the actor as in others. Meanings shared in this way form the basis for human social organization.

In this process of symbolic interaction man develops his self. Parts of his self become "lodged" in significant dimensions of social structure when he identifies with individuals in similar positions and contrasts himself with others in different positions. His mind enables him to "take the role of others" with whom he interacts and thus to view himself as an "object" through their eyes. His "looking-glass" self-idea is thus of social origin and varies with his involvement in different aspects of social structure. But at the same time, the self becomes a motivating force in its own right and dialectically acts back on and changes the social environment from which it derived.

Society consists essentially of overlapping networks of symbolic interaction. Paradoxically, it only exists in the constructed interactions of individuals and can thus be viewed as a corollary of these interactions (cf. Blumer, 1969:18, 75; Shibutani, 1961:175); but at the same time, society is historically prior to the individual member:² the individual is born into an already existing society which sets the institutional parameters for his self-development. Self and society thus develop together and because of each other in a dialectical process of mutual transformation.³

Exchange Theory. While symbolic interactionism is essentially a grand-theoretical attempt to clarify the nature of the interrelationships between individual and society, exchange theory has been phrased in terms of variables and provides a more specific plan to investigate concretely why given actors act as they do in given social situations.

Exchange theory assumes that men have needs and that fulfilling these needs constitutes a reward. Behavior becomes positively

¹ For original formulations of exchange theory, see Homans (1961, 1958), Blau (1964a), and Thibaut and Kelley (1967). Emerson (1962) had developed the power dimension in exchange before the extensive treatment by Blau. For a discussion and critique of Homans' work, see the special issue of *Social Inquiry*, 24 (Spring, 1964), notably the papers by Alexander and Simpson, and Blau. The first comprehensive formulations of the interactionist perspective are by Mead (1932, 1934, 1938). The tradition has been continued and partially modified by authors such as Blumer (1969:11-89), Shibutani (1961), and Berger and Luckmann (1967). For summary presentations and critiques of Mead's social philosophy, see Natanson (1956) and Meltzer (1964). For an overview of the developments in symbolic interactionism after Mead, see Kuhn, (1964b).

² This theme is touched by Mead throughout *Mind, Self, and Society*.

³ This dialectical synthesis is elaborated in Mead's general work, and it has received further systematic analysis in Berger and Luckmann's (1967) brilliant book which integrates symbolic interactionism with Schütz's phenomenology.

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reinforced when it is associated with the experience of a reward and negatively reinforced when associated with a punishment. Behavior therefore is directed toward maximizing rewards and minimizing punishment. Actors may or may not be aware of this reinforcement process in any given situation, and their behavior may or may not be directed toward explicitly recognized goals: the crucial assumption is that given actions are more likely to occur when they are associated with past or anticipated future rewards.⁴ Social interaction results from the fact that others often provide a person's rewards. In order to induce Other to reward him Person has to provide rewards to Other. Social interaction thus becomes a complex exchange of mutually rewarding activities in which the reception of a needed benefit is contingent on the delivery of a returned favor. Needs, anticipations, and predictions of others' behaviors thus become important ingredients in a person's decision-making.

Exchange relations are power relations.⁵ If Person is in a position to provide Other with a benefit he needs and cannot obtain elsewhere, he can make Other provide benefits to him as an inducement, i.e., he can modify and influence Other's actions. A balanced exchange relationship is one in which Person needs Other's services as much as Other needs his; in an unbalanced relationship the benefits exchanged are of unequal value, which gives "power" to the one who can provide the superior or more needed benefits. The dynamics of social interaction then consists in the continuous balancing and rebalancing of power which takes the form of reducing needs, acquiring by force, providing inducements, or seeking out alternative sources for rewards.⁶ Thus, exchange has a larger dimension in the social structure that provides the opportunities and constraints within which the bargaining takes place.

* On this point, Blau appears to disagree with the more strictly "behavioristic" approach taken by Homans.

⁵ The following discussion is based mainly on Blau (1964a) and Emerson (1952).

⁶ The problem of unilateral dependence and alternatives to compliance with the power-holder's wishes has been discussed in detail by Blau (1964a:118-125). It has already been anticipated by Albert Chavannes in 1884 (cf. Knox, 1963:344).

Mind

"Mind," according to George Herbert Mead, "as constructive or reflective or problem-solving thinking, is the socially acquired means or mechanism or apparatus whereby the human individual solves the various problems of environmental adjustment. . . ." It is the mind that gives the capacity to "turn back critically . . . upon the organized social structure of society . . . and to reorganize or reconstruct or modify that social structure . . ." (1934:308). The mind reflects the human capacity to *conceive* what the organism *perceives*, define situations, evaluate phenomena, convert gestures into symbols, and exhibit pragmatic and goal-directed behavior.

The mind-related aspects of human interaction have been explicitly recognized in the writings of exchange theorists. Perceptions are seen as more than passive receptions of stimuli. They entail cognitive, expressive, and evaluative dimensions. Interactants are aware of possibilities and alternatives (cf. Homans, 1961:57-60, 102; Blau, 1964a:96, 119-120), and they have aspirations and expectations (e.g., Homans, 1961:58; Blau, 1964a:95-97). A specific form of mind-oriented behavior, abundantly discussed in the exchange literature, is the formation of value judgments about actions and objects.

The process of valuation becomes especially apparent in Homans' concept of "distributive justice" (1961:74-78) or Blau's related concept of "fair exchange" (1964a:154-160; 1964b). Both principles stipulate that in exchange relationships men will expect the rewards for an activity to be proportional to its cost, or that profits be proportional to investments (Homans, 1961:75). The problem, however, is that when qualitatively different goods and services are exchanged, men "differ in their ideas of what legitimately constitutes investment, reward, and cost, and how these things are to be ranked" (Homans, 1961:246). Accordingly, valuation is a subjectively meaningful activity (cf. Homans, 1961:247) which determines what constitutes a "just" reward for given services. It is worth noting here that in exchange theory "value" is conceived not as something that people "have"

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or something that is only culturally imposed on them. Rather, valuing is an *activity* that has a distinctively subjective and situation-specific dimension.⁷ Such a conception is quite compatible with the symbolic interactionist notion that "culture" is not a phenomenon external to the individual but exists only insofar as it is continuously reconstructed and interpreted in the actions of men (cf. Blumer, 1969:18, 75; Shibutani, 1961:175).

The subjective qualities of the human mind are also apparent in Thibaut and Kelley's (1967) highly instructive approach to the study of exchange in small groups, which recognized that human choices cannot be accurately predicted from knowledge of the matrix of "objectively available outcomes" (1967:25) alone. Rather, the matrix which becomes behaviorally relevant "describes the *subjective* understandings and anticipations of the possible interactions and outcomes, however inadequately these may represent the actual universe of possibilities" (1967:24, italics original). The recognition of the mind as intervening between "stimulus" and "response" is also manifested in Thibaut and Kelley's key concepts of "comparison level" and "comparison level for alternatives" (cf. 1967:25), both of which imply a capacity for subjective understandings, evaluations, feelings, and decision-making that enables man to construct his world actively within the structure of his environment.

Current exchange theory has thus gone beyond the purely "behavioristic" approach of many reinforcement theories by recognizing, more or less explicitly, that the human mind mediates the relationships between stimuli and behavioral responses. A possible synthesis between symbolic interactionism and exchange theory might, therefore, begin with the premise that human actors have perceptions of objects and

events in their environment, but also that these perceptions are ordered by the actors to form a subjectively meaningful context within which intelligent action is possible. Such action is directed toward goals, aspirations, and expected outcomes—notwithstanding the fact that not all goals are explicitly recognized, not all aspirations are satisfied, and not all outcomes are the same as the ones anticipated. In exchange, persons define the perceived actions of others in terms of the rewards and punishments these actions entail for themselves, and "objects" are defined in a similarly subjective manner. Behavior is then directed to elicit responses from others which are anticipated to be rewarding for oneself. The point is that these rewards are not inherent in the response itself, but must be *defined* as such by the reward-recipient before they can motivate his behavior. Thus, it is not sufficient to postulate that a significant part of human interaction consists in mutual barter for the exchange of rewards. It is equally important to recognize that the rewards exchanged have symbolic significance for the interactants (cf. Homans, 1958:599, 606); they are "rewards" only in so far as the interactants assign that meaning to them.

Self

The concept of self is not only central to symbolic interactionism but can also be accommodated within the framework of exchange theory. While for Mead the "self" was primarily a process in which actors reflect on themselves as objects, other authors of the symbolic interactionist tradition have focused their attention on the "self-concept" held by actors.

Psychologists have often pointed out that men have a need for validating their self-concept by others, especially when they hold a positive image of themselves (cf. Thibaut and Kelley, 1967:44). Accordingly, Other can reward Person by expressing positive evaluations of Person consistent with his self-concept. Friendship and interpersonal attraction can thus be viewed as exchanges of mutually self-supporting evaluations and behaviors (cf. Thibaut and Kelley, 1967:43-44; Blau, 1964a:70).

⁷ Homans (1961) implies the subjective dimension in his treatment of distributive justice as practically unattainable because of the subjectivity of human valuation (246-247). The situation-specificity of values is reflected in his treatment of "value-per-unit-activity" (41). Homans tends to disregard the cultural framework within which values are formed, a point on which he differs from Blau (1964a, 1964b).

A similar bridge between exchange and self-theories has been pointed out by Thibaut and Kelley (1967:245-246). When discussing the "internalization" of roles, they suggest one process in which situationally specific selves are socially developed. They argue that a person may choose to play certain roles in a group because he is rewarded for it. Social reinforcements perpetuate his role-conforming behavior to a point where he identifies himself (partially) in terms of his roles in the group. This type of approach appears to be very fruitful for constructing a dynamic theory of social behavior that includes both symbolic interactionist and reinforcement perspectives. Over time, imbalances may develop between the actual reinforcements of a set of acquired behaviors and the self-concept of the actor; this happens when, for example, self-identification becomes an autonomous source of motivation perpetuating behaviors even when the reinforcements originating them have changed. A theoretical focus on this kind of imbalance could greatly stimulate our theories of behavioral dynamics.

The preceding considerations suggest that the self and social reinforcement can be interdependent but autonomous sources of motivation. Accordingly, exchange theory and symbolic interactionism can be mutually complementary in that one theory explains what the other leaves open. In addition, we suggest that an integration of symbolic interaction and exchange theory can fruitfully incorporate the conception of self. It is a central principle of exchange that the behavior of persons is designed to elicit favorable responses from others. Consequently, persons seek to behave in manners they believe to be rewarding to others in the expectation that the others, in turn, will reward persons by their actions. This implies that persons predict the behavior of others, which is only possible by "taking their roles" imaginatively. Thus, a conception of something akin to Mead's "generalized other" can be incorporated in the most general assumptions of exchange theory. Homans himself was well aware that expectations derived from past experience with *specific* others tend to become *generalized*

and associated with any other person in similar circumstances:

When one man makes a request of another and is turned down, although the conditions surrounding the other resemble those of men who provided similar rewards in the past, the man that made the request is apt to display some degree of anger. The other is "the sort of man" who "ought" to have granted the request (1961:73).

Furthermore, insofar as exchange behavior necessitates predictions of Others' responses toward Person's self and actions, it requires Person to view himself in terms of the perceptions and interpretations held by Others about his own self and actions. Thus, by looking at themselves as "objects" through the eyes of those Others from whom they wish to receive rewarding responses, persons are able to act intelligently in exchanges. The operation of what Cooley called the "looking-glass self" is, therefore, another basic assumption of a synthesis between symbolic interaction and exchange theory.

The point can be illustrated by the example of reference group theory, according to which self-other comparisons are important determinants of expectations and evaluations of relative rewards. Exchange theorists have cited considerable empirical support for the thesis that persons expect the rewards they receive to be equivalent to the rewards received by people in similar positions and who have provided similar services to others who provide these rewards. Correspondingly, it is no surprise that "reference group theory" has been "claimed" by both exchange theorists (Thibaut and Kelley, 1967:88; Blau, 1964a:151-160; Homans, 1961:73-74, 151-152, 248) and symbolic interactionists (cf. Kuhn, 1964a; Shibusani, 1955).

Society

In their analyses of social structure, both symbolic interactionists and exchange theorists take the observation of microsocial processes as their strategic point of departure. The central unit of analysis for both classes of theorists is the social "act" or "activity," although authors differ in their respective conceptualizations. While in symbolic interaction theory, acts are always con-

ceived as constructive and creative processes, exchange theorists present a less unified perspective. Whereas Blau and Thibaut and Kelley in many places imply the constructiveness of human acts, Homans' "activities" simply refer to overt behavior as a unit of observation.

In both theories human *interaction* is conceived as the mutual stimulation of responses by a set of actors (cf. Mead, 1934: 144-145; Thibaut and Kelley, 1967:10; Homans, 1961:35). In their approach to interaction, exchange theory and symbolic interactionism can be linked in two ways. In the first, interaction consists of formative processes of "fitting developing lines of conduct to one another" (Blumer, 1969:66), or "stabilizing" behaviors at levels that are perceived as most "profitable" under current conditions (Homans, 1958:601). In this sense, interaction is continuously constructed and reconstructed by actors who "test" the adequacy of their actions in relation to the responses of others. Even relatively recurrent patterns of interaction are "stable" only until "further notice."⁸ Second, exchange may be conceptualized as symbolic interaction. We have already suggested that in exchange persons may define and interpret the activities of others in terms of their usefulness in meeting their own needs; that is, subjective meanings are assigned to the activities of others. Persons may view their own actions in terms of the putative interpretations and definitions of others. Thus, exchange goes beyond a "conversation of gestures" to symbolic communication in which the meanings of objects and activities are shared by the interactors (cf. Mead, 1934:144-152).

Continued interaction tends to give rise to relatively stable social positions. Thibaut and Kelley's previously cited conception of role routinization through identification deals with such processes on the small group

level. In the larger societal context, institutionalization represents the stabilizing of established behavior patterns through social control. One very important convergence of symbolic interactionists and exchange theorists is that they tend to view institutions dialectically as arising out of the actions of individuals which, once established, exist as objective realities in their own right over and against the individuals.

For Mead, institutionalization arises out of the individual's capacity to assume the roles of a "generalized other" and respond to particular situations in common with other members of a group or community. An institution is, thus, a shared behavior pattern in a particular, socially defined situation which is so organized that it enables actors to take the attitudes of others toward their own activities (Mead, 1934:260-262). Such institutions are, on the one hand, conservative mechanisms of social control by perpetuating an existing social order (Mead, 1964:20). On the other hand, Mead recognized that institutions need not necessarily be oppressive obstacles to the expression of individual spontaneity. Rather, he argued, that institutions define socially responsible conduct in a broad sense that leaves ample room for individual flexibility. He suggested the operation of a dialectical process in which the self learns to understand itself by reference to institutionalized definitions; as an individual thus matures, he becomes increasingly able to impress modifications upon social structures through mindful, pragmatic action (Mead, 1934:262-263, esp. fn. on p. 236. Cf. also Blumer, 1969: 17; Berger and Luckmann, 1967).

In exchange theory we find several references to institutions and institutionalization which share the dialectical perspective taken by symbolic interactionists. For Blau, the dialectic property of institutions is reflected in what is required to maintain them. These requirements are first, the internalizing of values and commitments by the actors as a source of legitimation and support; and second, a formalized structure, supported by the dominant powers in the community, which channels the behavior of actors (1964a:273-277). The interaction of subjectively held legitimizing values and objec-

⁸ This process of "fitting together" has been explicitly recognized in both theories. In symbolic interactionism the point has been stated by Blumer (1969:17-19, 66-67), and especially by Berger and Luckmann (1967:55-59). In exchange theory, the formative processes have been described by Thibaut and Kelley (1967:64-79) and Blau (1964a: 69-85).

tive structures leads to the dialectics of institutions, in the process of which

the very cultural values that legitimate existing institutions contain the seeds of their potential destruction, because the idealized expectations these values raise in the minds of men in order to justify the existing social order cannot fully be met by it and thus serve as justifications, if need be, for opposition to it (1964a:280).

This view of individual and society as a dialectic unity appears superficially to contradict the "psychological reductionism" advocated by Homans (e.g., 1961:380-381). But Homans himself remains a psychological reductionist only as long as he analyzes "elementary" behavior. As he expands his approach to the analysis of larger social structures, he clearly recognizes that "institutional" structures form a reality *sui generis* independent of the "non-institutional" elementary behaviors; both forms of behaviors are described by Homans in terms of a dialectic process of mutual transformation (1961:378-398).

Values such as justice or fairness are similarly treated both as individual activities and social norms in exchange theory. Arguing that assessments of fairness are subjective "matters of taste" (1961:247), Homans glossed over his recognition that consensus among actors on the meaning of "justice" "is easier to achieve among people who in similar backgrounds have acquired similar values" (1961:247). Blau (1964a:156; 1964b) more explicitly recognized that exchange is not possible unless socially shared norms stipulate what should be returned for a given benefit received.

Dynamic Aspects

The problem of structural balance. In Mead's social psychology, a fundamental dualism between micro and macro structures is that of the individual organism and his "environment." The environment is not objectively there but subjectively defined in terms of action problems to be solved. What does and does not constitute the "environment" of an individual varies according to the problems at hand and can, strictly speaking, be determined only *ex post facto*, since it is functionally defined as that which is being acted upon (Mead, 1938:361; also

Shibutani, 1961:97-108). On the other hand, the environment becomes changed by human action, thus giving rise to new problems of definition and action and constituting a new "social world" for the individual who, in turn, must now redefine himself as a social object and solve new action problems. Individual and environment thus mutually determine one another, and the very nature of the relationships between the two is a constant source of change in these relationships (Mead, 1934:127-134).

In exchange theory the dualism of micro and macro structures becomes apparent in the above-mentioned contradictions of elementary and institutionalized behavior, and in the recognition that exchanges take place not between isolated individuals but within a larger societal context. This context differentially affects the interactants' bargaining positions, the relative values of the rewards exchanged, and the legitimation of relationships. Homans shows awareness of these problems, e.g., in his treatment of the nature of "givens" or "external system" (1961:205-231) and in his discussion of what may be considered as the conflict between individual needs and organizational demands (1961:397). Foremost among exchange theorists, Blau makes it a point to view macrostructures as a hierarchy of overlapping substructures which are partially integrated and partially in conflict (1964a:283-311). He is quite explicit in recognizing the larger structural supports of power in exchange (1964a:325-326); the point is illustrated in his thesis that the means for social esteem in one group can be obtained in socially disapproved ways in another group whose approval is considered less significant (1964a:105-106).

This suggests that the lack or incompleteness of integration at different levels of social organization is a major source of its dynamics. The point is *not* that there is no integration, rather that integration in historical reality is always short of complete and that conflict and "incoherence" (or: imbalance, dissonance, disintegration) are normal features of social life. On this issue, both symbolic interactionists and exchange theorists have postulated that incoherence

is not only a *practical* reality but an *inherent* quality of social organization.

One source of incoherence inherent in social interaction is discussed in terms of "multiple selves." Mead recognized that multiple personalities are "normal" since our self-concepts vary with the different aspects of social structures in which we are involved. He assumed ideal-typically that a unitary social structure will be reflected in a unitary personality structure (1934:144), but a "dissociation of personality" (1934:144) can take place in which the unitary self is broken into its components reflecting different and potentially conflicting aspects of social structure. While Mead in most of his writings seemed more concerned with the ideal-typical unity of the multiple self, later writers have stressed its dissociative aspects. Kenneth Gergen (1968) has argued persuasively that selves are "situational" and that seeming contradictions in behavior in dissociated circumstances may therefore not be perceived by the actors as incompatible. On the other hand it is possible that different social contexts are not dissociated but make conflicting demands upon actors. Reference groups may not be mutually sustaining, and actors then have the choice of becoming marginal individuals or committing themselves to one group at the exclusion of the others—a point made by both symbolic interactionists and exchange theorists (cf. Shibutani, 1967:166-167; Blau, 1964a:105-106). Indeed, both approaches are compatible with the proposition that *any differentiated pattern of social organization contains the inherent capacity of generating conflicting self-concepts and interests, both between and within individuals, and that perfect integration of such social structures is, therefore, impossible in reality.*

Conflict and Change. Incoherence in social organization is closely associated with the problem of conflict. For Mead, conflict was an inherent quality of social organization in that cooperation and antagonism among individuals are both of social origin (1934:303-305) and contribute to the functioning of social structures (1934:305-306). Most importantly, the multiplicity of a self's social involvements results not only in what we called incoherence, but also in conflict

among individuals (cf. Mead, 1934:307).⁹ Conflicts are resolved through reconstructions of situations and social structures (Mead, 1934:307-308). As has been shown above, such reconstructions are inherently temporary because reconstructions change social worlds for self and others, thus resulting in needs for new reconstructions. The dialectic structure of this argument becomes strikingly similar to the principle applied throughout Blau's exchange theory (1964a:26): "... that balanced social states depend on imbalances in other social states; forces that restore equilibrium in one respect do so by creating disequilibrium in others." In this continuous process or rebalancing conflicts arise, are solved, and give rise to new conflicts (cf. Blau, 1964a:7, 33-59, 220, 280, 314-321).

Change, as incoherence and conflict, is an ubiquitous possibility inherent in social organization. As indicated above, the notion of interaction between individual and social environment as a continuous process of reconstruction made it impossible for Mead to view social institutions as inherently conservative, rigid, and inflexible. Rather, the imbalances in the reciprocal determination of self and environment lead to a constant change in selves and environment (1934:202-204, 307-311). The "problem of society," thus, is not to maintain a given order, but "to incorporate the methods of change in the order of society itself" (1964:21).

Within the framework of exchange theory, change is also conceptualized as a dialectic consequence of imbalances in reward and power structure. According to Blau (1964a:335), such imbalances arise when vested interests, powers, institutionalization, or the internalization of cultural values help to maintain "undeserved" rewards for those in privileged positions. "Traditional institutions, endowed by pro-

⁹ Mead has elaborated the ecological aspects of this problem by suggesting that with increasing population size and societal complexity the capacity of the individual to play everybody else's roles becomes increasingly impaired. The degree of the division of labor is thus directly related to the conflict-proneness of a society. Mead also maintains that the universality of social differentiation makes the "ideal" integrated society a utopia (1934:317-327).

found values with symbolic significance, tend to defy innovation and reform even when changes in social conditions have made them obsolete;" and powerful groups defend their vested interests regardless of the value of their "service" to society.

Homans describes such imbalances in a very similar fashion. Institutional processes can come into conflict with antithetical "elementary" behavior and generate a new institutional synthesis (1961:395). Not surprisingly, both Homans (1961:152) and Blau (1964a:197) qualify the functional theory of stratification in very similar terms: status and prestige are rewards that are only partly deserved, since they may be maintained through institutionalization and power without providing the benefits on the basis of which they had originated. It is such built-in contradictions that generate dissatisfaction, conflict, and strain toward change in social organization (cf. Blau, 1964a:304-305).

TOWARD A THEORETICAL SYNTHESIS

The preceding analysis suggests that symbolic interactionism and exchange theory converge when we treat exchange as symbolic interaction.¹⁰ In exchange, men "produce" themselves through symbolic interpretations of realities and reward-directed, constructive action. Such reward-directedness, or "rationality," does not imply that men necessarily interpret the actions of others "correctly" or that their own actions necessarily bring the desired results or any rewards at all (Singelmann, 1971). But social action *is* subjectively meaningful and purposive; knowledge of the "objective" bargaining positions of interactants does not enable us to predict their behavior satisfactorily unless we know how they *interpret* their situation and what value they *assign* to that which the others have to offer. The

¹⁰ I would like to emphasize that I do not reject the significant contributions which have been made by the more experimentally and behavioristically oriented exchange theorists (e.g., Emerson). But I contend that social behavior outside the laboratory can at least sometimes be better explained by the additional references to mental and symbolic processes. This paper is an attempt to indicate the lines along which such an expansion of our model can be undertaken.

dynamics of social organization rests in the paradox that "realities" have subjectively assigned as well as objectively given significance for human actors. "Objective" realities constrain behavior, but the subjective interpretations of such realities direct actors to change these boundaries. There is a continuous dialectical process in which objective realities become "subjectified" by human actors. "Reality" can thus be conceived only as simultaneously objective *and* subjective (cf. Berger and Luckmann, 1967).

In the light of the preceding discussion, it appears desirable to formulate exchange theory as a process of symbolic interaction. While this endeavor has not been the purpose of this paper, the main elements of such a formulation can be sketched summarily:

1. In exchange, actors construct normative and existential definitions of themselves, others, actions, goals, and assessments of "fairness."
2. These definitions are not only subjectively constructed but to a large extent socially shared and thus constitute a constraint external to the individual actors.
3. In exchange, the hedonistic strivings of actors are limited and qualified by the nature of the subjective and socially shared definitions of the objective world which includes the self and others.
4. In exchange, actors will change their behaviors or definitions when:
 - a. changes in the objective world render existing behaviors and definitions problematic,
 - b. changes in some of their subjective definitions render other definitions or existing objective conditions and behaviors problematic.

These propositions, which make explicit some assumptions of Blau, Thibaut and Kelley indicate the relevance of cognitive consistency theories and may guide the formulation of theories about concrete behaviors and social structures. The advantage of such a formulation lies chiefly in its potential for explaining the dynamics of behaviors which could be viewed by outside

observers as "irrational" and contradictory to the self-interest of the actors. The thus-labelled behaviors can be more fruitfully conceived as subjectively meaningful within the context of the actors' definitions and interpretations. A case in point are theories concerned with the persistence of "traditional" exchange patterns in the face of changing objective conditions. An approach stated solely in terms of objective reinforcements and bargaining positions will fail to account for such persistence of tradition. Conversely, changes in definitions (e.g., of distributive justice) may induce actors to reject traditional social patterns even though there have been no changes in patterns of objectively available reinforcements.

It may be argued that the postulate of meaningfulness is ultimately tautological since it permits an *ex post facto* explanation of any behavior, regardless of what has been predicted. This becomes especially apparent in proposition (4) according to which given imbalances induce actors *either* to change their behaviors *or* relevant definitions. Space limitations allow only a few general comments here. This paper has explored the convergences between the most general premisses of exchange theory and symbolic interactionism. The most general premisses of *any* theory, however, are ultimately tautological. What distinguishes scientific theories is that they spell out the historical contingencies under which concrete predictions derived from the theory can be tested. Such contingencies can be specified in the analysis of historical phenomena and include those of the relevant objective conditions as well as subjective definitions involved in a given interaction pattern. Once these contingencies have been empirically specified, changes in any one or more of them enable the observer to predict adaptive behavioral changes of given actors. Longitudinal studies thus enable us to verify our theories based on the assumption that human behavior is meaningful by observing what happens when given behaviors have become meaningless over time.

CONCLUSION

The preceding discussions suggest that in the analysis of institutionalized behaviors exchange can be fruitfully conceived as sym-

bolic interaction in which human actions are viewed simultaneously as subjectively meaningful and objective realities in their own right. With this conception, the old question whether the "ultimate" premisses in the explanation of social behavior are "psychological" or "sociological" becomes reduced to the pragmatic question for the individual investigator of what is the most useful strategy for his particular purpose at hand. The perspective outlined above can increase the generality of exchange theory while at the same time solving the problem of tautology pragmatically. Instead of testing the ethnocentric assumptions that behaviors are "rational" or guided by "false consciousness," we test whether the contingent variables which were posited enable us to construct accurate predictions of behavior changes. In this manner the dialectic unification of two seemingly disparate theoretical orientations can give us a better understanding of social behavior than the mere "adding up" of the two approaches taken by themselves.

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ROLE DIFFERENTIATION *

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American Sociological Review 1972, Vol. 37 (August):424-434

The concept of role differentiation has been used by sociologists to explain a wide variety of social phenomena. Most who have used the concept have assumed that task and social roles are incompatible. The present paper clarifies the concept of role differentiation and re-evaluates some of the basic evidence. Neither the data originally published by Bales nor data from a number of more recent studies strongly support the proposition that task and social roles are incompatible. The paper also comments on some recently proposed methods for measuring role differentiation.

IN the last twenty years the phenomenon of role differentiation has been used often to explain not only many phenomena in ad hoc informal groups, but aspects of the family (Zelditch, 1955; Grusky, 1957), organizational processes (Etzioni, 1956), and the course of developing nations

(Ness, 1965). Typically the concept of role differentiation has been used in ways which imply that it refers to a reasonably specific phenomenon and that the evidence for that phenomenon is well based. Whether the phenomenon is well delineated, however, is debatable. Even Bales and Slater, the early proponents of the concept, adopted a series of positions about role differentiation, a fact not appreciated by many of their readers. If the concept of role differentiation is to continue to play an important role in sociological theory, it might be good to take another look at the concept and the evidence for it.

* An extended version of papers read at the annual meetings of the Ohio Valley Sociological Society (1971) and the Pacific Sociological Association (1972). I wish to give special thanks to Joseph B. Kadane and James C. Moore, Jr., for their criticisms of an earlier draft of this paper and to Phillip Bonacich, Claire Kaplan and Thomas Weisman for the use of their data.