

SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM AS KEY CONCEPTUAL FRAME FOR INTELLIGENCE ANALYSIS

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Abstract:

The goal of this paper is to explore the potential of using sociological paradigms as analysis frameworks within the intelligence tradecraft. Although macro-oriented theoretical systems (e.g. structuralism, functionalism, conflict theories) have tried and tested uses in intelligence, especially when it comes to making sense of large-scale phenomena, events and trends, there is still little attention given to the paradigm of symbolic interactionism. At first glance, intelligence analysis has little to gain, knowledge-wise, from an empirically untestable scientific perspective which deals with the social micro-cosmos. Nevertheless, keeping in mind the fact that societal systems are constantly negotiated, consolidated and reformed through the most minuscule of daily interactions, understating the latter can help paint a correct picture of the “shared reality” of large or small groups at any given moment. I believe that intelligence practitioners can use insight derived from symbolic interactionism to better apply their tradecraft in an extensive palate of cases. Moreover, in an increasingly virtualized social universe, human interactions take new forms and generate new types of shared meanings and symbols, altogether changing the very social structure that fosters them. For intelligence practitioners that operate online, from all-source strategic analysts to OSINTers and SOCMINTers, understanding how this new medium emerges is of the utmost importance.

Keywords: *symbolic interactionism, intelligence analysis, collective behavior, observer-expectancy effect, OSINT.*

Introduction

In the simplest terms, intelligence analysis aims at limiting or eliminating the ambiguity of certain situations characterized by a high degree of uncertainty using human cognition. To do so, the analyst mixes and

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matches data and information in order to evaluate the tableau of knowledge about target situations and entities. The analyst must also always keep in mind the blank spots that inherently appear on any knowledge map and focus on shaping and reshaping the constructed narrative through problematization. By checking all these items off of the “best practice” list, he or she can generate valid inferences at the operational, tactical and/or strategic level regarding future developments.

While this rather simple, albeit abstract, recipe has not changed profoundly since the “birth” of the intelligence practice, the backdrop of this process is today greatly different. Avoiding intelligence failures is, after 9/11, a task that is said to require a greater emphasis on what makes good analysis. Strategic surprises stem today not so much from poor collecting but from poor analysis.

The nexus of the scientific process and intelligence analysis

Augmenting the quality of intelligence analysis has been done through borrowing and adapting models, frameworks, methods and techniques from the outside. One of the most selfless “donors” has been science. For example, the fields of economy, psychology, sociology, history or anthropology (just to name a few) offer a huge volume of knowledge that can immediately be put to use in intelligence analysis. In sociology, functionalism, structuralism, conflict theory and interpretative sociology are the basic paradigms that build analysis frameworks for phenomena, processes and trends that define the social dynamic. The same cannot be said, unfortunately, for symbolic interactionism and phenomenological sociology, as intelligence analysts have yet to harness the explanatory power of these paradigms.

At first glance, the critique of symbolic interactionism as a “bad” theory, one that cannot be empirically validated and, by only dealing with the micro-cosmos of social interaction, circumvents the required criteria for paradigmatic frameworks, is persuasive.

This paper aims to argue that symbolic interactionism dully deserves a role in the paradigm repertoire of any sociologist that practices intelligence analysis.

Conceptual pivots of the interactionist paradigm

Symbolic interactionism stems from the idea (Thomas Theory) that “if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas &

Thomas, 1929, p. 572). In other word, reality is a social construct which is constantly generated, consolidated, and negotiated through the multiple daily interactions of the participants to the social life.

Through these repeated interactions, symbols are created (habits, rites, rules etc.) and the individuals assigns means and significance to the things, events, and situations around them, and also interpret them accordingly.

Thus, symbolic interactionism presumes that people do not actionably respond to what we might call „reality“, but to the socially and individually accepted meaning of reality.

Herbert Blumer, the creator of symbolic interactionism, most clearly underlies the main ideas of this sociological perspective, stating that the significance the social actors convey about things and other persons, the bargaining they carry out and the interpretations generated in this way are being read in this paradigm.

Exponents of the Chicago School analyzed the way individuals socially act, considering the subject of *projected self-image*. George Herbert Mead coined the term „self“, meaning that image about him/herself, equally composed from social ego (as a result of interiorizing social roles) and psychological ego (as a personal, intimate component) (Doise et al., 1996), where Charles Horton Cooley handled (1902) differently this matter, stating that there is a „looking glass self“, amid an image about your own person which is build from the interaction between individual's image about himself and the image the individual thinks others have about him.

Erving Goffman introduced the concept of “dramatic perspective” into the social daily analysis. Through „The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life” (1959), he proposed the theatre metaphor in order to explain the emergence of some particular features related to social context: in public, individuals “perform”, trying to present themselves as favorable. They choose a “mask” (meaning they exhibit those features considered to be preferred in that particular social context), they use appropriate settings and props and, then don't find themselves in front of the audience, they use the back of the stage to temporary renounce the role that they assume.

Despite the critiques of conceptual incongruence and lack of empirical testability¹, symbolic interactionism takes advantage at the fact that it

¹ These critiques are the result of treating symbolic interactionism as a theory not as a scientific orientation. More underlain critics reproach this paradigm the fact that it studies a very narrow social niche, meaning the interaction inside small groups and specific psychosociological

conceptually concatenates the way *some* social symbols are generated through a *particular* type of interaction that takes place in a *particular* social structure. This interaction produces also a *particular* type of interpretation and internalization of structure. Symbols, in turn, become a part of the social structure, feeding a cycle of social regeneration. This circular causal concatenation allows us to understand the smooth relation between macro- and micro-social frames – from social structure to group interaction.

Nevertheless, the reasoning of the present paper does not support the preeminence of symbolic interactionism over the other paradigms, but the fact that there are a series of relevant social instances in the security field that can be more easily understood through explanations originated from the interactionism.

Symbolic Interactionism and intelligence

Strategic surprises

Despite the discussion about “objective” and “social” reality may seem philosophical and less important in terms of practical consequences, some social phenomena do emerge on the score of symbolic inter-individual negotiations and do modify tangible reality. For intelligence analysts, the emergence of these phenomena takes the form of a strategic surprise when they have important implications in the field of national security.

For example, during an economic crisis, the diffuse perceptions such panic related to the banking systemic sustainability may generate phenomena with actual consequences, even if, objectively speaking, banks are stable. To that effect, the most famous example regarding the effects of emotional spiral that validates Thomas’s Theorem in Black Tuesday, that historical day from October 1929, when the Wall Street Stock Market precipitated and provoked an economic collapse.

Amid a pronounced dynamic of the transactions, the Stock Market closed in October 24th with a 6.38 points decline of Dow Jones Index. During the weekend, the US newspapers heavily reported about the skid on the Wall Street, generating a large sense of panic amid investors. After the weekend, from Monday to Thursday, the Stock Market collapsed in a rapid pace because everybody tried to sell and get out of the market.

phenomena. Obviously, no sociological paradigm ever reached the performance of delineating a theoretical frame that „explains everything”.

Of course, Black Thursday only officialized the unsustainability of the speculative bubble that hallmarked the '20 in the United States of America. Despite this, the trigger was based on the spreading of rumors, false information or assumptions that, once considered as being the truth, brought into play actions that validated wrong premises.

Analyzing the causal chain of the events that generate "announced" crisis, Robert Merton proposed the term „self-fulfilling prophecy" (Merton, 1948, p. 195). In intelligence, generating self-fulfilling prophecies is a specific objective (example below) of influence operations. Black and grey propaganda are meant to create and disseminate a product-message that present a version of reality according to the interests of the issuing entity. Their scope is to obtain a certain reaction or non-reaction from the target.

The example from below, largely mentioned among experts, had a very ample social impact at its time: in the left image there is the picture press channels broadcasted after the statue of Saddam Hussein from Firdos Place in Bagdad was pulled down (April 9, 2003).

Press reports insisted on the large support of the Iraqi population for the military operations. In the right picture is the same picture but from another angle.



Influence operations that intend to coagulate a general consensus („all the Iraqi population in 2004 wants to throw down Saddam Hussein's regime") presenting a false local consensus („all the persons in Firdos Place participated to the pulling down of the Saddam Hussein's statue") work by the Keynesian principle of rational agent's action – individuals action according to their own assessment about majority's opinion (Keynes, 1936, p.100).

Tagging

Another situation intelligence analysts often confront when they try to anticipate the actions of a hostile actor is the confirmation of the most

dangerous scenario, despite the premises that might underpin less dramatic trends. Sometimes, the future seems to confirm the gloomiest expectations.

Howard Becker, a well known symbolic interactionist, proposes a social deviance theory derived from that of „looking glass self“. *Social tagging* (Becker, 1963) is the trigger phenomenon of the deviance, not because of the intrinsic features of the acting, but as a result of the social network it generates.

The theory of social tagging is similar to the self-fulfilling prophecy theory, inserting in the explanatory circuit the driver of „others' expectations" and the of the way these expectation are internalized by the social agent. In intelligence, Zulaika (2009) states that this sort of mental frame usually emerges from cases related to preventing and countering terrorism. If authorities anticipate the fact that a specific group manifest violent tendencies (ideological radicalism, terrorism etc.), prevention and countering measures they adopt might push the members of those communities to that specific type of behavior they try to alleviate.

The example Zulaika offers related to military operations in Iraq, where the US Army and its allies intervened in order to eliminate Saddam Hussein, under the suspicion of Hussein developing chemical weapons of mass destruction and financially and logistically supporting terrorist organization such as al-Qaeda. Actual proofs for both hypothesis were not found, but the presence of US Army in Iraq favored the emergence of a high scale terrorist and insurgent phenomenon. If Iraq was not a propitious environment for terrorism before 2003, it surely became one after that.

Online collective behavior - the contribution of symbolic interactionism to understanding the emergence of new psycho - sociological phenomenon

Neither symbolic interactionism nor other paradigm will ever make „unknown unknowns“, the field where strategic surprises develop, to disappear. According to Donald Rumsfeld's taxonomy (2002): „known knowns, unknown knowns, known unknowns, unknown unknowns“. Nevertheless, a better understanding of the profound mechanisms of social emergence may diminish the field of „the unknown that can not be known" and the *effects* of strategic surprises.

Intelligence analysts became more and more interested in understanding the virtual space, a space of interaction and an informational resource with extensions that have never been substantially explored so far.

Hybridization of collective behavior, with emerging and actionable components both online and offline, generate surprising effects for those organizations responsible for preventing violent social movements.

Today, the daily global society is networked (Castells, 2004) and virtualized. The social density is exponentially growing, generating a “conductive” infrastructure that encourages social interactions using symbolic interactionism. That is why it is easy to understand the mechanism used to augment the velocity and frequency of generating new social symbols which, in turn, became part of the social structure, bolstering new interactions and internalized interpretations. This self-propelled cycle of symbol development will generate structural mutations at the limit between chaos and complexity, inducing more volatility in the security environment that seems to lose its sense of equilibrium.

Even if does not always permit this identifying of the next strategic surprise, this key of interpretation allows the intelligence analysts to be more alert in a renegotiated space between the participants to the social life, in a more alert pace than B.I. (*Before Internet* era).

Conclusions

Considering things in retrospect, the inability of intelligence analysts to foresee the moments of inflexion seem to be a natural consequence of cause-evolutions and is often due not only to the superficial knowledge of analyzed spaces, of history, of geopolitical profile, of culture or of psycho-social determinants regarding the targeted population.

Most of the time, this inability is generated by the social structure whose agent the actant is (the analyst), its features reflecting, at least partially, in his perspective, predilections, and preferences. Understanding this connection is very important in intelligence analysis, and the reasoning of the present paper is that symbolic interactionism, along with other scientific perspectives, may contribute to avoiding cognitive biases.

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