The Production of Reality

Essays and Readings in Social Psychology

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Preface

What Sort of Creature Is the Human?

We are Star Trek fans. As such we find it fascinating to note that the portrayal of certain primary characters parallels the major currents of thought in social psychology over the past two decades. Consider the contrast between the rational Mr. Spock of the first "Star Trek" series and the android, Data, featured in "Star Trek: The Next Generation." Consistent with the dominant cognitive perspective of the 1970s, the Vulcan, Spock, epitomized the being who operated according to the dictates of pure reason. Unencumbered by emotions (those messy "hot" flashes) and cognitive biases, Spock was able to assess his environment and formulate hypotheses with a detachment and accuracy that resembled a computer. Spock's character was often juxtaposed with the doctor, who, although a man of science, was frequently amiss in his judgment due to the intrusion of human biases and social attachments. Spock was the ultimate rational actor. Some episodes of the early show commented on, and perhaps even lamented, Spock's lack of emotion. However, in the end it was always the virtue of unadulterated rationality that saved the day. The message was clear: emotion and human quirks, endearing and meaningful as they might seem, get in the way of the human project. This project was to explore and chart (and master?) the universe.

"Star Trek: The Next Generation," though no less grand in its pretensions of achieving a reasoned universal harmony orchestrated by sentient beings, is much less grandiose than its predecessor in its claims for the virtue and virility of rationality. In the new show, Spock has been replaced with a potentially more perfect form of rational life, Data. As an android, Data is capable of calculation and theory construction that far surpass the abilities of even the most rationally adroit Vulcan. In a fascinating twist, however, the current show de-emphasizes Data's rational capabilities in order to play out the theme of humanness as nonrationality. Data is a focus not because of his amazing cognitive abilities, but because of the limitation his technological essence places on his endeavors to "be" human.

Data is an amazing piece of machinery. He is stronger than any humanoid, has a life span of unguessed potential, can assimilate and process any amount of information; he is even programmed to simulate perfectly many of the masters of universal culture. For example, he can play the violin like Isaac Stern, paint as if he were Picasso, and perform drama as if he were Laurence Olivier. Despite these technical achievements he is not "human."

Data's existence raises the question, What is the nature of humanness? If it is not to be found in rational, cognitive decision making that characterized social psychology in the seventies, what is the distinctive mark of our species? As a scientific culture we have long admired the computer for its rational, objective, calculating approach to the information in its environment. A great deal of our industrial technology, cognitive science, and popular mythology concerns how humans can be more like the computer; how we can be more objective and rational. Social psychology has, for many years, separated what are known as "cold" topics (rationality, cognition, and decision making) from "hot" topics (emotions). Any young scholar who wished to make a mark in the field was admonished to pursue a study of the "cold" topics. Only recently have social psychologists begun to look more closely at those aspects of humanness that are not epitomized by the technology of the computer and to ask what purpose these nonrational human characteristics play in our personal and cultural stories. Spock represented our quest to become more like the rationality of the computer. Data, who is a computer, symbolizes our search for the essence of humanness that cannot be captured in perfect cognitive activity. Data is computer technology par excellence. Thus he is the perfect jumping-off point for investigating the question, What, beyond perfect rational cognition, makes the human?

One of the features that endears Data to other members of the crew is his earnest attempts to be human and his continual failure to hit the mark. In one episode Data works fervently to understand humor, but the concept is beyond his otherwise "perfect" abilities. He just doesn't get it. In another he explores the question of love and affection and finds that, while he is capable of an intellectual comprehension of this state of being, and is, in fact, even capable of the act of physical love-making, he is unable to experience a state of "love." One by one Data explores various human institutions, the hallmarks of our social species. His factual knowledge of these institutions is an archive that would overwhelm even the most advanced student of human culture. Despite this knowledge, the android is incapable

of experiencing life as a human being. The abstract knowledge is present, but the essence is missing. This is a different message from that of earlier social psychology: perfect factual knowledge and cognitive ability do not a human make. Humanness is built on the cognitive ability to absorb and manipulate abstract symbols, but its essence is in the comprehension of the nuanced, situated meaning that takes place between human beings in social interaction.

Little by little Data appears to advance in his comprehension of the human experience. How is this achieved? Not through his impressive information-processing neural networks but through interaction with human beings. Through exposure to various human institutions, such as love, humor, grief, and betrayal, Data begins to respond to some situations in a particularly humanlike fashion. To enhance his understanding of humanness, Data attempts to "do" human things, such as develop hobbies and social attachments. To the extent that Data is able to experience the essence of humanness, it is through his interaction with humans and their endeavors to teach him just what it is that otherwise abstract institutions like "friendship" or "sorrow" mean. In a word, Data is being socialized into the human community.

We find two points worth noting regarding Data and the essence of humanness. First, Data's various experiences suggest that humanness involves not only a general comprehension of myriad facts and the ability to calculate probable hypotheses but an empathetic understanding of highly nuanced, situated meaning. We are reminded of Thomas Scheff's discussion about the computer that is directed to translate the phrase "The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak" into Russian. The computer has all the necessary dictionary terms and grammar to make this translation. Accordingly it translates the phrase as "the vodka is good but the meat is rotten." The computer provides a literal translation but this translation does not convey the intended meaning of the phrase. The computer is unable to translate the essence of the phrase because it does not have a comprehension of metaphor.

Second, the extent to which Data begins to comprehend human metaphorical meaning occurs not through his private cognitive calculations but through interaction with his companions. He notes their reactions to his various utterances and behaviors and then queries them regarding the reasons for their responses—which are often not as Data would predict based on rational calculation alone. In this way Data assembles a

litany of human metaphors and expected behaviors that, while not always rational, more closely approximate the actual human experience. The extent to which Data does achieve humanness occurs as the result of social interaction with others. The essence of this interaction is Data's schooling in the nuanced richness of human life. He learns that the meanings of objects and abstractions, despite what his computer archives inform him, are relative in human life. Humans create and recreate meaning in interaction with one another. Reality is not just a codified series of facts and possibilities; it is something that is produced and reproduced through human activity.

Humanness Is Achieved Through Symbolic Interaction

The production of meaningful realities through human interaction is the focus of this book. We intend to demonstrate that human culture is achieved through interaction between individuals who share highly complex, richly nuanced definitions of themselves and the situations in which they participate.

Perfect rationality is not sufficient to the human task. In some cases, literal, rational calculation may even be a hindrance to meaningful human interaction. We learn to be human. The possibility for humanness is in our capacity for language, not just definitions and grammar but also metaphor. The expression of what is considered appropriate human behavior is achieved through interaction with others.

As illustrated by the case of Data, we view cognitive capabilities as a necessary foundation to the development of humanness and the achievement of culture. To extend the computer analogy, neurological cognitive functions constitute the "hardware" of human existence. It is the meaningful use of symbols that makes this existence what it is, however. This ability entails more than simply loading the appropriate software and switching the computer on. In this book we build on the cognitive perspective but take as our central focus the day-to-day interactions that form the fabric of human existence as we experience it. Our primary concern is the manner in which humans learn to participate in and ultimately produce and reproduce themselves and their various cultures.

The social psychological perspective that drives this exploration is symbolic interactionism. We have endeavored to provide a cognitive foundation for symbolic interactionism and also to extend the logic of the perspective to issues of cultural

reproduction. In this regard we are expanding both the psychological and the social implications of the theory. Specifically, we ask: What cognitive capacities are necessary for the human to engage in meaningful social interaction? How is social behavior affected by a disruption of the cognitive processes? How do cognitive processes constrain the possible lines of action that we see available to us? How do these processes contribute to the production of culture? How, even when we may be personally opposed to particular cultural institutions such as racism, do our actions contribute to the reproduction of these institutions?

Our general aim is to explore the social foundations of mind, self, and culture. Our intent is not to promote symbolic interactionism per se but to provide a meaningful and relevant basis from which to study human social behavior. Many of our colleagues and students of social psychology suggest that they find symbolic interactionism useful in its presentation of day-to-day human affairs but complain that they have difficulty grasping the full implications of the perspective. Symbolic interactionism as a theoretical perspective is admittedly less precise and refined than many of the social psychological theories that deal with the "cold" topics. In our view, however, human existence is not clear and precise. Rather it is a richly textured fabric and must be studied as such. This means that at times concepts may seem less well defined than the reader might like. In mind of this we offer the following reading notes. These suggestions are intended to serve as caveats regarding the comprehension and application of symbolic interactionism.

Understanding Symbolic Interactionism: Caveats

Psychologism

Social psychologists who study human cognition note that each of us has a tendency to interpret information in terms of its specific relevance to our own experiences. This information-processing bias is termed *psychologism* (or the self-consensus bias). It has been noted that psychologism, when coupled with the American ideal of individualism, makes it difficult for students to comprehend theories that pertain to the social group. The tendency is to interpret and evaluate the information offered by these theories in terms of individual psychology and experience—"Does the theoretical perspective match my personal situation?" Theories that emphasize group knowledge

and socialization are viewed as antithetical to the primacy of the individual. This separation of individual and group is based on a false dichotomy. As we discuss throughout the book, there is no possibility of the concept of the "individual" (including individual rights, feelings, and so forth) without the social group.

In order to make full sense of symbolic interactionism the reader should remember that it is not necessary to deny the existence of private psychology in order to explore the implications of group knowledge. In fact, private psychology is taken as a starting point from which to underscore and pursue the question of how, given unique individual perception and traits, persons come to develop shared cultural meaning. In this book we treat as a puzzle the issue of what humans create through interaction (i.e., social acts) and explore how and why these interactions come to have perceivably real properties—even when the private minds of the participants may disagree with or be unaware of the social product. The reader is cautioned, therefore, to remember that what humans do in interaction with others may or may not be harmonious with private thought. However, and this is the point to emphasize, whether or not persons agree with and/or believe in their public actions, it is these actions that are observable by others and come to be real in their consequences.

Reification and Relevance

Reification means to treat an abstraction as if it had concrete properties. There is a tendency to treat many sociological concepts, for example, "norms," as if they were real structures that exist somewhere in a state of nature and "do" things to humans. When a concept is reified, or given a "life of its own," we tend to forget the extent to which our own beliefs and actions contribute to the construction and perpetuation of the "life" of the processes described by the concept. This leads to an interesting paradox. On the one hand, the reification of social concepts implies that humans are hapless robots propelled by the whim of social forces, some unseen "big brother" beyond human control. On the other hand, being "individualists" with a tendency toward "psychologism," we like to think of ourselves as beings who are in control of our own destinies: distinctive entities who chart a unique course. How is this individual psychology reconciled with a reified sociology? Most often it is not. Instead, we tend to conclude that social concepts, however compelling and accurate they may appear, describe someone else's life; individually we really don't believe that the processes

described by the concepts are applicable to us. We know that we ourselves are not robots. Thus, social psychology becomes individually irrelevant.

Symbolic interactionism offers an alternative path, one that makes use of the observation that persons act "as if" certain abstractions are real. At the same time the perspective teaches that social reality is the creation of coordinated activity between real individuals. From this perspective the puzzle becomes how abstract concepts are communicated, shared, reproduced, and how they take on patterns of stability that make them appear "as if" they were "real." This "obdurate" character of social interaction is what we come to know in a reified way as "society." The process of creating social reality is the focus of this book. For now the reader is admonished to be attentive to reified concepts and to ask of them: What processes of interaction does the concept describe? What must real people do in order to create and maintain this process to the point where it is real enough that we come to reify it? What is your individual role in these processes of interaction and what unforeseen consequences might your actions have in the production of social reality?

Level of Analysis

Most social science research employs cause and effect reasoning. This logic presents a model by which one thing affects another: A causes B. The implication is that without A, B would not exist and B has no reciprocal effect on A. (A is presumably caused by something else.) Cause and effect reasoning has many merits. One merit is that it isolates the relationship between variables so that we can explore, for example, whether smoking has a causal influence on developing cancer. Useful as this logic may be, the models suggested by the cause-effect methods of science are not adequate to capture the complexity and nuance of human social behavior and the production of culture. Applied to social behavior cause-effect reasoning contributes to reification and perpetuates misleading dichotomies. The general model is that social structures of some sort (reified concepts) "cause" humans to behave in a certain way. These social structures are conceptualized to exist independently of human beings. In sociology the result of this line of thought is a dichotomy known as the "micro/macro" distinction. According to this distinction, groups or society-level variables are treated as separate "macro" phenomena that exert causal influence over individuals. Individual action is considered to be micro activity. Sociologists argue over which level of analysis, micro action or macro structures, should be given

theoretical primacy in the study of human culture and behavior. The distinction has become so reified that much ink has been spilt in the past decade on how to bridge the "micro/macro" gap.

The result of this discourse is the false separation of the individual and society. We are told that society "causes" our behavior. Again, as individuals we really don't buy this notion. To the extent that we are willing to believe it, society is viewed as something "out there," beyond our comprehension or control. And what "causes" society? Viewed from a traditional cause-effect logic, if macro structures cause micro behavior, then it is not possible that micro activity causes macro events. Thus, sociology is again rendered irrelevant. We are hesitant to see the effects of distant reified concepts on our actual lives and have almost no understanding of the extent to which our own "micro" actions may contribute to the formation and perpetuation of "macro" structures. Cause-effect reasoning and the separation of the individual and society preclude this line of thought. The logic of traditional social science instructs us to view the world and our place in it in a manner that is completely antithetical to our actual experiences.

Symbolic interactionism has always been conducted at the intersection of individuals and society. From this perspective it is not possible to make sense of one "level" without incorporating the other. The challenge for symbolic interaction has been to represent society in a way that avoids reification, in other words, to model social patterns and relationships as the product of ongoing individual-level activity. At the same time, the perspective must account for the observation that existing social patterns do exert influence over and constrain possible lines of action for individuals. The ultimate aim of symbolic interactionism as presented in this book is to place the individual and society on the same level and to analyze the reciprocal relationship between individual action and social patterns and institutions. From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, social life is conceived as a dynamic web of reciprocal influence between members of a social group. This web is made up of the interactions of individuals. Individuals spin and respin the web. At the same time they are influenced by the existing patterns of previously spun strands. Symbolic interactionism is unique in the study of both psychology and sociology in that it is the only perspective that assumes an active, expressive model of the human actor and treats the individual and the social at the same level of analysis. In gaining an understanding of this perspective the reader is instructed to think in terms of process and feedback.

This is admittedly more complicated than representing social life in terms of simple dichotomies and cause-effect reasoning.

However, in reality individual existence and social patterns are mutually constitutive; the relationship between the individual and society is reciprocal. This perspective offers a rich story about human behavior and its social consequences. We think you will find this story to be more instructive and relevant regarding your personal life and the social world in which you are a participant.

Logic of the Book

The concept of this book, a combination of readings and "orienting" essays, is intended to make use of and combine the descriptive richness of relevant topical readings with the organizational logic and definitional advantages of textbooks. Our hope is to engage a wide audience with the diverse set of readings and to provide a general theoretical framework through the essays. The logic of this book is circular rather than linear. Our intention is to immerse you, the reader, in the puzzles and issues of contemporary social psychology and to provide a framework from which you can begin to construct your own relevant understanding of the social world and your roles and responsibilities in it. Toward this end we pose more questions than we provide definitive answers. The material contained in this book should be approached as a set of building blocks that you assemble and reassemble in the pursuit of answers to your own intellectual queries.

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