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Studying the Human Condition: An Interactionist Approach to the Ethnographic Venture

At Greenview [a stripper bar], we started talking with Doug, a used car dealer. On learning that we were from the university, he asked what we were doing there. I didn't know where he fitted into things there, so I said, "We heard about this place at Spring Gardens [which over the years had become a very rough bar] and thought we should check it out. I thought maybe we could learn something about people." He replied, "Yeah, that's a good idea. All those things you learn in books, and I've read a lot of books myself, they don't do you any good when you're dealing with people. . . . A lot of people, writers and university people, they think that they are better than anybody else. Then they just don't find out what's happening in people's lives. If you want to learn about people, real people, you have to go to places like this. You have to go to the upper levels and to the lower levels, places like this and Sunset, the hookers' bar, or maybe Spring Gardens, where you were, it's one of the roughest places in town. (notes) (Prus and Irini, 1980:237)

This book is premised on the viewpoint that the social sciences have as their primary mission the task of attending to the ways in which the human condition manifests itself in the day-to-day world in which people find themselves. This means that those in the social sciences should not only strive to develop stocks of knowledge (conceptual schemes and substantive information) pertinent to every realm of human conduct, but that these scholars should also use every accessible instance of human behavior as foundational material on which to develop and inform an emergent social science.

Unfortunately, to date, social scientists have only been marginally attentive to this agenda. Instead of appreciating the uniquely enabling and actualizing features of the human condition, social scientists have

largely modeled themselves (theoretically and methodologically) after the physical sciences. While neither denying the accomplishments of, nor taking issue with the viability of existing practices within, the physical or natural sciences, it is posited that a different notion of "scientific inquiry" is necessary for studying the human condition. What is required is a transformation or a revitalization of the social sciences from a positivistically oriented (emphasizing objectification, quantification, causation) realm of inquiry to one that centrally attends to the actualities of human lived experience.¹

Interestingly, perhaps, if not rather ironically, the approach proposed here should not only make the social sciences relevant to a great many realms of human group life that have been largely disregarded, but it should also help demystify the social sciences for people in general. This is not to suggest that we do away with concepts, theory, data, or methodological rigor, but rather provide the means by which those in the social sciences may build more enduring, two-way bridges between their specialized stocks of knowledge and the day-to-day, human life-worlds they purport to study.

In maintaining this position, we are pursuing the pragmatist agenda, the task of developing knowledge that is directly pertinent to the world of human lived experience. At the same time, however, we are extending this agenda by locating the pragmatist concern of understanding the accomplishment of everyday life within a context that is theoretically, methodologically, and substantively informed in ways that the early pragmatists were unable to achieve.² The emphasis is on enabling inquiry and fostering a conceptually developed but substantively informed stock of knowledge.

The position taken here is a relativist one in the sense that no way of life is endorsed over others. At the same time, however, human group life is not viewed as completely arbitrary.³ Rather, at base is an acknowledgement of the fundamental human struggle for existence, the primacy of intersubjectivity (or symbolic communication) to the human condition, and the necessity of people actively engaging the world (as they know it to be). Likewise, while appreciating that people may define and act toward "the world" in a great many ways, the emphasis is on understanding and conceptualizing the ways in which human group life is accomplished in practice. The approach taken, thus, is thoroughly humanist in the sense that it focuses intensively on all facets of human experience, endeavoring to do so from the participants' viewpoints in every instance. It does not, however,

accomplishment of human lived experience, the emphasis is neither on condemning nor encouraging any particular way of life.

While drawing much inspiration from the early pragmatists, especially George Herbert Mead and Charles Horton Cooley, this statement is also heavily indebted to the conceptual works of Wilhelm Dilthey (hermeneutic, intersubjectivist, or interpretivist tradition), Georg Simmel (forms of association), and the "constructionist tradition" associated with Alfred Schutz (1962, 1964) and Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966). This material is also informed by the ethnographic tradition in anthropology, but it draws most centrally on the writings of Herbert Blumer and "the (ethnographically oriented) Chicago School of symbolic interaction."⁵

Having traced the theoretical and methodological roots of symbolic interactionism elsewhere in some detail (Prus, 1996:33–172), as well as having compared and contrasted interpretivist analysis with both positivist approaches to the physical and social sciences (Prus, 1996: 3–9, 203–16; Prus and Dawson, 1996) and postmodernist tendencies (Dawson and Prus, 1993a, 1993b, 1995; Prus, 1996:217–33; Prus and Dawson, 1996), the central premises which undergird this approach will be addressed in a more direct manner at this point. The baseline position is that *the matters of intersubjectivity and human enterprise (as discussed later) are fundamental to all comprehensions of the human condition. This includes all scientific (natural and social sciences) experience (observation, conceptualization, and inquiry) as well as any other realm of meaningful human involvement.*⁶

Theoretical and Methodological Foundations

Symbolic interaction rests in the last analysis on three simple premises. The first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings they have for them. . . . The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters. (Blumer, 1969:2)

The position developed herein may be best envisioned as an extension of "Chicago-style" symbolic interactionism, and is most adequately grounded in Blumer's (1969) collection of papers (some dating back to 1931).⁷ Very much a student of George Herbert Mead

(1863–1931), Herbert George Blumer (1900–1987) not only promotes a *thoroughly intersubjectivist conception of human group life*, but by attending to Charles Horton Cooley's notion of *sympathetic introspection* (now more commonly referred to as ethnographic inquiry, participant-observation, or field research), Blumer incorporates into Mead's conceptual scheme a methodology that centrally respects or attends to the experiential essences of the human condition.

Like Mead before him, Blumer emphasizes that *human life is group life*. However, even more sharply than his predecessors, Blumer draws attention to the misplaced tendency on the part of mainstream (positivist) social scientists to attempt to explain human behavior by invoking "factors" or "variables" (typically in the form of individual qualities or structural conditions) to account for this or that state of human behavior. Blumer argues that human behavior is not the outcome of some set of factors (internal or external) or variables *acting on* people, but rather represents ongoing social constructions. Human behavior represents instances of meaningful formulative processes that only come about as people make sense of the world and take themselves (and others) into account in developing lines of action toward the situations in which they find themselves.

Unlike other [objects] of human awareness,⁸ Blumer contends that people are "minded beings." Through their interactions with others, people develop notions of objects, including themselves. By attending to the viewpoints of the other (as expressed through language [and other shared gestures]) and applying these notions to "the world about them," including themselves, people acquire capacities for self-awareness. In the process of delineating and making indications toward objects, people achieve (self-)reflectivity or become "objects unto themselves." As objects of their own awareness, people can communicate with themselves about themselves. They can take themselves into account in developing lines of action toward this and that [thing]. Viewed in this manner, the self is a community essence. Thus (as with Mead and Dilthey), Blumer thoroughly rejects the idea of the subjectivist or individually developed self. There can be no self without the other. Like many other biological life-forms, people can "learn" things through conditioning effects, but without achieving a sense of intersubjectivity, without tapping into the viewpoint of the other, there would be no meaningful notion of mind, self, reflectivity, thinking, imagining, anticipating, strategizing, assessing, or creating.

If they were able to survive, somehow, on their own, humans would likely develop [images] of some sort of the [things] around them, but in the absence of the concepts that people acquire through

association with others, any images so experienced are apt to have minimal if any comprehensible shape.⁹ In contrast to other biological species that appear predisposed to act toward [situations] with minimal if any "symbolic interchange" on the part of others, *[Objects] become meaningful to humans only because people acquire a means of communicating or sharing understandings or viewpoints from (and then with) others. Only by achieving a sense of mutuality with the other, only by taking the perspective of the other, do humans begin to acquire a sense of mind or some preliminary ways of making sense of the situation at hand.*

Intersubjectivity occurs through an acknowledgement or sharing of the gestures, symbols, or language of the other. Only in acquiring some familiarity with the images and practices that are meaningful to others is one able to relate to others in the community in comprehensible terms. By adopting the viewpoint of the other, people may begin to envision themselves as objects amidst the other objects to which people in their community refer. This achievement of symbolic mutuality represents the foundational essence of the self. This is not to deny subsequent creativity on the part of individuals, but rather to stress that people's senses of individuality or "independence of thought" presuppose or are based on the preliminary achievement of intersubjectivity with others.

Society, thus, consists of people with selves, interacting with one another by means of shared symbols, embarking on lines of action that are mindful of the world of objects signified by those symbols. As objects unto themselves (i.e., of their own awareness), people are not only able to adjust their lines of activity relative to other objects (and other people), but they are also able to reflect upon (or envision in some respect) their involvements in these situations prior to, during, and after acting toward any particular set of objects.

In contrast to the tendency on the part of many social scientists to view human behavior as the product of various instincts, forces, factors, or variables acting upon or from within individuals, the perspective taken here envisions human behavior as a community-informed, reflective, constructed phenomenon. The result is a theory of community, agency, and enterprise that contrasts sharply with the positivist emphasis on factors thought to predispose people to act in this or that manner.

While critical of those in the social sciences who fail to appreciate the fundamentally social essence of human behavior, Dilthey, Mead, and Blumer do not wish to dispense with the conceptual rigor or methodological precision that they associate with the notion of science.

However, they envision the human essence to be so different from other objects that people might study as to make it entirely inappropriate to subject the study of the human condition to the models and methods of the physical sciences. Likewise, Dilthey, Mead, and Blumer do not deny "the physical environment" in which humans exist, but they emphasize the fundamentally interpretive, community-based, or intersubjective essence of all meaningful human activity, including all activity directed toward (known and defined) aspects of the physical environment. Instead of attempting to imitate the practices of the physical sciences simply because of the many successes they have achieved in their subject domains, Dilthey, Mead, and Blumer stress the point that those in the social sciences have the more fundamental obligation of respecting the *social essence* of the human condition.

Whereas Dilthey and Mead established the conceptual foundations for a social science that was thoroughly intersubjective in its thrust, it was not until Blumer more squarely synthesized this conceptual emphasis with ethnographic inquiry (also known as sympathetic introspection, field research, or participant-observation) that the social sciences were provided with a methodology that could adequately attend to the intersubjective and enterprising features of the human condition.

Compared to the conceptual precision and methodological rigor attainable in many realms of the physical sciences, Blumer (1928) observes that Cooley's method of sympathetic introspection (i.e., ethnography) might not appear very "scientific" from certain viewpoints. However, since humans live in interpreted life-worlds and human behavior involves the study of active, interpreting, interacting agents, *the study of human group life generates some highly unique problems for researchers, problems that simply cannot be managed by modeling human inquiry on the methods of the physical sciences.*

Blumer clearly had reservations about sympathetic introspection as a conventional mode of "scientific research." In particular, he acknowledges the problems associated with achieving comprehensive intersubjectivity with other people in the course of ethnographic inquiry and the related matters of establishing evidence and developing viable concepts.¹⁰ Still, above all things, Blumer contends, if social scientists are to achieve scientific integrity, they must respect the nature of their (human) subject matter. On this basis, he concludes, ethnographic inquiry is the *only* feasible way that one may achieve intimate familiarity with human group life as it is actually accomplished:

No one can catch the process merely by inferring its nature from the overt action which is its product. To catch the process,

the student must take the role of the acting unit whose behavior he is studying. Since the interpretation is being made by the acting unit in terms of objects designated and appraised, meanings acquired, and decisions made, the process has to be seen from the standpoint of the acting unit. It is the recognition of this fact that makes the research work of such scholars as R. E. Park and W. I. Thomas so notable. To try to catch the interpretive process by remaining aloof as a so-called "objective" observer and refusing to take the role of the acting unit is to risk the worst kind of subjectivism—the objective observer is likely to fill in the process of interpretation with his own surmises in place of catching the process as it occurs in the experience of the acting unit which uses it. (Blumer, 1969:86)

Intensively concerned that social scientists develop concepts that are both sensitive to the phenomenon being studied and foster ongoing comparisons (and contrasts), Blumer encourages a constant receptivity and openness on the part of researchers. He insists that social scientists have an obligation to adjust their preconceptions to the instances of the phenomenon that they encounter in the course of conducting their inquiry. Emphasizing the necessity of developing concepts that are attentive to individual instances of the features of human behavior under consideration, Blumer also stresses the desirability of conducting and analyzing (ethnographic) research in ways that foster conceptual comparisons. Most centrally though, he is concerned that all conceptualizations, inquiries, and comparisons on the part of social scientists be informed by the enacted aspects of human group life.

Mindful of developments in the sociology of science over the past few decades that depict the fundamentally social essence of all knowledge productions,¹¹ it is tempting to contend that Herbert Blumer was fifty years or more ahead of his time. However, the more accurate (and somber) position is that Blumer was both in step with his time and our time. The problem is that, at present, the social sciences more generally are at least a century behind Dilthey's (1833–1911) intersubjectivist (or hermeneutic) legacy. Because Blumer's work has not yet become more widely acknowledged in mainstream social science, it has only been partially effective in helping us catch up. In imitating or modeling themselves after the physical sciences, those promoting a positivistically oriented social science (with an emphasis on objectivity, quantification, and causation) have failed to attend adequately both to the intersubjective essence of the human condition and the ongoing enterprise that characterizes human community life.¹²

The scholars (e.g., Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, John Stuart Mill, Wilhelm Wundt) who set the early (essentially positivist) agenda for the social sciences developed notions that were attentive to the human condition in certain respects, but in attempting to make the study of the human condition amenable to the methodological (and theoretical) orientations that have been developed in the physical sciences, they violated the essential interpretivist, interactive, and enterprising features of the human condition (Prus, 1996:3-9, 205-16).

As a result, those in the social sciences have been laboring on an enterprise that was extremely ill-fated from its inception. Masses of books and papers (reflecting both "learned speculation" and reams of quantitative data) have been generated, but these have rather limited relevance to the ongoing accomplishment of everyday life. Focusing on factors (or variables) purported to cause or contribute to this or that outcome, minimal attention has been given to (a) people's achievement of meaningful communication, (b) people's definitions of situations, (c) the human capacity for reflective thought, (d) the ways in which people actually formulate (implement, monitor, and adjust) their lines of action, (e) the manners in which people interact (including instances of influence and resistance) with one another, (f) the ways in which people form and attend to relationships with one another, or (g) the ways in which these facets of human group life are accomplished by people in processual terms.

Despite the seemingly straightforward and unpretentious (i.e., rigorously grounded in the world of everyday life) agenda established by Herbert Blumer and others working in the interactionist tradition, this viewpoint has encountered considerable motivated resistance on the part of those in the social science. As noted elsewhere (Prus, 1992b, 1996:209-12), those working in positivist paradigms have developed a variety of deeply entrenched practices (e.g., disciplines, departmental programs, professional associations, service industries, publication venues, control of granting agencies) that serve to perpetuate positivist versions of the social sciences.¹³ As well, more personal concerns with maintaining professional competencies, achieving career advancement, and acquiring prestige also engender motivated resistances to an intersubjectively informed social science.

While some positivistically trained scholars have made or are in the process of making the transition to an intersubjectivist social science, others may be concerned that their personal situations might be significantly jeopardized were the social sciences to be transformed into a social constructionist program. Unlike the more common

practice of learning another variation of a statistical technique, for instance, the shift to an intersubjectivist social science will necessitate a rather abrupt redefinition of theoretical emphasis as well as a distinct methodological break with prevailing practices.¹⁵ It is worth observing, too, that those scholars in positions most able to foster a rapid and smooth transition to an intersubjectivist agenda are often those more steeped in, and committed to perpetuating, the positivist paradigm. In the chapters that follow, a reorientation of exactly this sort for the social sciences is proposed. Hopefully, it will be seen as relevant, accessible, and enabling rather than frightening or obstructionist in thrust.

Outlining the Premises

As a means of framing the foundational features of an interactionist approach (as developed most explicitly by George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer) in a form that may be more accessible to newcomers to the field,¹⁵ the following discussion is organized around seven premises, which although discussed one at a time, are very much interrelated in the ongoing accomplishment of everyday life.¹⁶

1. *Human Group Life Is Intersubjective.* The notion of intersubjectivity draws our attention to the primacy of the group in the conceptualization and study of human lived experience. Not only are people born into group situations on a physiological basis, but so too are they born into social life-worlds that preexist them.¹⁷ It is impossible to ascertain just how humans may have first developed a capacity for achieving mutuality or a sharing of meanings or references to this or that phenomenon, but every human group of which we have relevant information possesses a language or set of symbols that not only enables them to communicate within community contexts, but which is also used as a primary tool to enable human offspring and other newcomers to gain some comprehension of the world at hand. Although the actual symbols (and the meanings associated with particular symbols) may vary greatly from community to community, human group life centrally reflects a shared linguistic or symbolic reality that sustains human association and takes its shape as people interact with one another. All meaningful essences, including the more solitary experiences of (linguistic) members of human groups, derive from or are built on comprehensions of "the reality of the other."

2. *Human Group Life Is (Multi) Perspectival.* While language enables people to communicate with one another and to share

definitions of reality with others, each human group is faced with the prospects of making sense of the world and developing lines of action toward the world that enables both baseline survival and the pursuit of any secondary objectives. It is in the process of making and acknowledging indications about aspects of the world that groups develop and sustain perspectives (also worldviews, symbolic realities, frames of reference, interpretive frameworks, orientations). Without contesting the viability of any claims or "stocks of knowledge" that people develop, it is important to recognize that people inevitably prioritize viewpoints (and interpretations thereof) whenever they begin to act in meaningful fashions.

The notion that human group life is multiperspectival acknowledges the diverse, almost limitless, meanings that people may attach to [objects] both across groups and over time. Rather than posit the existence of a singular, stimulus, or objective reality that people experience in some uniform manner, it is recognized that people *actively* distinguish [objects], develop meanings for particular objects, and develop styles of relating to those objects as they interact with one another.

Neither the identification of [things] as "objects" nor the meanings that people attach to objects are predetermined or automatic. Objects are problematic in their emergence (i.e., human awareness or delineations), the duration of their recognized existence, and the directions (e.g., categories, attributes, valuing) given to them by this or that group of people. However, when groups of people establish consensus among themselves on the existence and meanings of particular objects, they tend to envision these definitions of situations as "real" or "objective."¹⁸

Since the adoption of certain worldviews may enable members of some groups of people to do things that others may not, it is essential to attend carefully to the symbolic realities of any group(s) under consideration. It is these viewpoints that represent the paramount realities for understanding people's participation in the situations at hand. Thus, people are seen to operate in versions of (multiple) realities which they share, albeit imperfectly, with others at an "intersubjective" level.

3. *Human Group Life Is Reflective.* Through interaction with others, and taking the viewpoint of the other with respect to oneself, people become "objects unto themselves" or objects of their own awareness. By attending to the perspective of "the other" (what Mead [1934] terms "role-taking"), people are able to attribute meanings to their own "essences" and to develop lines of action which take themselves (and

other objects) into account. Enabling people to see themselves from the standpoint of the other and to "converse with themselves about themselves," the acquisition of (self-)reflectivity fosters meaningful initiative (i.e., human agency, enterprise, intentionality) as people develop their activities in manners which take themselves into account. As reflective entities, people may pursue activities on their own as well as incorporate suggestions and resist unwanted inputs from others.

While reflectivity presupposes a sharing of perspectives, it denotes people's capacities to interpret or make sense of situations on an ongoing basis, to monitor and assess their own experiences, and to attend to the situated viewpoint of particular others. Beyond enabling people to interpret and reinterpret their situations on a more or less continual basis, it is this capacity for reflectivity, as well, that allows people to be creative, strategic, and deceptive with respect to their dealings with others.

Human group life presupposes human agency or the capacity for people to embark on meaningful intentional behavior. While people may sometimes be exempt from accountability because of age (e.g., of comprehension, responsibility) or other circumstances (e.g., illnesses, mistakes), people typically expect that others also "know that they can exercise some control or direction over their own behaviors." The notion of reflectivity does not presume an automatic "rationality" or "wisdom," although an appreciation of human agency provides the basis on which assessments of these sorts may be invoked by people in this or that situation.¹⁹

4. *Human Group Life Is Activity-based.* Humans are action-oriented beings. While some people may live rather sedentary lifestyles, either by preference or default, the sheer quest for survival necessitates highly focused sets of undertakings on the part of humans more generally. As well, the realm of human activity is readily extended to any arena of object awareness, with important implications for each realm of awareness. While people's actions are meaningful only with respect to their preexisting perspectives, these viewpoints are apt to undergo transformations of sorts as people go about implementing particular lines of action.

A great deal of human activity entails physical activity, but human activity encompasses a great deal more than the physiological movements that may be evident to an outside observer. Human activity is rooted in intersubjective communication and the related notion of perspectives, but it also reflects the human capacity for reflectivity and denotes an emergent, situated process unto itself.

Human activities vary greatly in both complexity and completeness, but activity not uncommonly implies: encounters with ambiguity and (interpretive) sense-making endeavors; anticipations of options, performances, and outcomes; behavioral implementations, situational monitoring, and ongoing assessments of these endeavors; and after-performance (re)assessments of situations, along with subsequent anticipations and adjustments. As well, although some activities may be more private and solitary in focus, a great deal of human activity is developed in ways that are mindful of others. In addition to the human undertakings that involve the explicit coordination or interchanges of activity with others, a great many seemingly solitary activities are conducted in ways that are attentive to others (e.g., things done in anticipation of or following encounters with others; activities intended to assist, entertain, deceive, or obstruct others in some manner).

Considerations of the “doing,” implementing, or constructing of action (or what Blumer calls “the active forging” of human behavior) involve a highly sustained focus on the ways in which people assemble their activities in process, how people work their ways through situations, both in a solitary fashion and in conjunction with others in a more direct, interactive sense. There is no requirement that the activity in question need be successful as intended, nor need it be viewed as wise or rational by others or even by the actors, themselves, over time. Activity draws our attention to the matter of ongoing enterprise, to the constituent notions of defining, anticipating, invoking, encountering resistance, accomplishing, experiencing failure, redefining, reassessing, and adjusting, on both interactive as well as more solitary behavioral levels.

5. *Human Group Life Is Negotiable.* Although the term *negotiation* often implies an adversarial stance, this concept may be used more basically to refer to situations in which people (as reflective entities who define their own situations from this or that viewpoint) strategically pursue particular interests in their interactions with others.

Acknowledging people’s abilities to shape the life-worlds that others experience, to influence and resist the influences of others, this premise makes the interactive dimension of human reflectivity especially explicit. Since people may have (a) similar, supportive interests in some cases, as well as (b) parallel but competitive or antagonistic viewpoints in some instances, or (c) mixed agendas (with respect to the other) on yet other occasions, matters of cooperation, competition, conflict, and compromise are all highly consequential for understanding

the alignments (and adjustments) that people develop with respect to others. While attending to the interests, intents, and tactics of the people under consideration, there is no presumption of inherent self-interestedness. People may knowingly contribute to, or intensively pursue, agendas (for the good of specific others or the community at large) that clearly jeopardize their own financial situations, physical well-being, and the like.

It is also worth noting that although alignments presume some degree of mutuality or acknowledgement, one or more parties to the interactive setting may be much more concerned about the interactional outcomes of the encounter than may others (e.g., consider a child about to ask a parent for a new toy). At the same time, however, it is essential to recognize that all parties to an encounter may adopt on a sequential or concurrent basis the roles of both tacticians *and* targets as any interchanges take place and the people involved attempt to achieve (also maintain, forego, or reestablish) what they deem more appropriate circumstances.

6. *Human Group Life Is Relational.* Like other objects of their awareness, humans define one another in developing (and maintaining) lines of action toward each other. As people distinguish others in their community and envision tentative lines of action toward others, people's associations (bonds, affiliations, networks) and related activities become more particularized, selective, or focused. This premise not only acknowledges the differing identities (i.e., self and other definitions; images and reputations) that people attach to one another, but it is also mindful of the loyalties, disaffections, and other interactional styles that emerge between and among people in the course of human interaction.

Since a great many of the activities in which people engage are made meaningful and shaped in certain manners because of people's attentiveness to specific others in the setting, an acknowledgment of people's involvements and embeddedness in particular groups within the broader community is essential in enabling analysts to comprehend people's viewpoints and activities. More generally, however, the notion of relatedness points to the fundamental necessity of locating and comprehending all of people's experience (and activities) within the community (of the other).

7. *Human Group Life Is Processual.* Although some sense of process (change, continuity, and disruption) seems applicable to the study of all phenomena (e.g., consider matters of origins, development, sequencing, stability, disintegration), the concept of process seems

especially consequential for comprehending the human condition. On the one hand, there is the widespread recognition that people change physiologically (aging, experiencing and satisfying hunger, becoming ill and well, and so forth). On the other hand, the struggle for human existence is built on an attentiveness to continuity and change in the broader environment (e.g., seasons, cycles, patterns of development). For our purposes, though, a third sense of process is pivotal, one that acknowledges the historical flow or sequencing of people's experiences across the range of life-world situations in which they find themselves. The concept of process, thus, cuts across all of the other premises, including intersubjectivity, particularized worldviews, reflectivity, activity, negotiated interchange, and relationships.

Reflecting the development, sharing, and shaping of symbolic realities, intersubjectivity is very much an ongoing process. Likewise, people's perspectives (or notions of objects, object meanings, and object-relevant behaviors) develop and change over time. As an ongoing dimension of human group life, reflectivity not only is interdependent with the flow of people's associations with others, but is most centrally experienced and expressed dynamically as people engage in instances of definition, interpretation, intentionality, assessment, and minded adjustments over time. Likewise, reflectivity assumes its significance as "human agency" in process terms as people go about their activities. Representing the implementation of the perspectives that people acquire through association with others and their senses of (reflective) self-agency, activity is fundamentally tied to process.

Denoting (experiential and behavioral) sequences of definitions, anticipations, implementations, assessments, and adjustments, that are built up over time (consider techniques, practices, skills, stocks of knowledge and manners of engaging objects), human activity represents particularly compelling instances of emergence and transition. Human interchange is steeped in process. Not only do people define situations (and selves), work out tentative lines of action, make indications to others, and interpret the indications of others on an ongoing basis, but they also make ensuing adjustments to others (in the form of subsequent definitions, plans, and indications) as their encounters unfold.

Relationships, as well, are best understood in processual terms (or as having natural histories) with respect to their emergence, intensification, dissipation, and possible reconstitution, as people distinguish and define specific others and attempt to develop their life-worlds in conjunction with those with whom they associate. Not only may we follow people's involvements in particular situations over

time, but we may also consider the ways in which “their careers” are interwoven—concurrently and sequentially—with the careers or involvements of their associates. In sum, then, the primary conceptual and methodological implication of this processual emphasis is this: since all aspects of group life take place in dynamic terms or take their shape over time, *it is essential that the human condition be conceptualized and studied in manners that are acutely mindful of the emergent nature of human lived experience.*

Conceptual and Methodological Implications

Matters of methodology will be given more explicit consideration in chapter 7, but it may be instructive to comment briefly on some of the conceptual and methodological implications of the interactionist paradigm, mindful of the premises just discussed. This will be done within the context of introducing the subsequent chapters in this volume.

First, the interactionist approach or paradigm attends centrally to *the study of human lived experience as the paramount reality in the pursuit of a social science.* Denoting aspects of intersubjectivity, perspectives, reflectivity, activity, negotiation, relationships, and process, the study of the human condition requires a theory and methodology that respects the distinctive nature of human group life. This means that the most feasible way of learning about human lived experience is through *interactive inquiry* into human life-worlds. This is not possible to accomplish either by administering questionnaires to people (about their beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, background characteristics, and the like), by running people through experimental settings, or by giving people “personality tests.” Likewise, “content analyses” of documents, messages, photographs, videotapes, or other artifacts are not adequate on their own. These forms of data do not enable researchers to achieve intersubjectivity with the other. Access to more materials pertinent to the situation may enable researchers to ask more instructive questions of the people involved in their production, but these materials in themselves do not allow researchers to access people’s perspectives, capacities for reflectivity, activities, interactions, or relationships in any substantial sense.²⁰ These types of data are woefully inattentive to the ways in which human behavior is accomplished (in process) by living, thinking, acting, and interacting beings.

What is required is an active appreciation of the lived situations of the other, and this can be attained most effectively by venturing

out into the life-worlds of those being studied and interacting extensively with those involved therein. Indeed, one can acquire a viable understanding of the lived experiences of the other only through the sustained pursuit of intersubjectivity or a mutuality of experience with the other. This may be achieved most effectively through ongoing participation in the life-worlds being studied and through extended open-ended conversations with those whose activities and experiences are being considered.

Clearly, an important message emerging from this introductory chapter and the volume more generally is that social scientists (instructors, researchers, and students) have a primary obligation to respect the fundamentally social essence of the human condition, and that can be accomplished only by achieving intersubjectivity with the other. This means attending to the human capacity for symbolic interchange, the acquisition and use of perspectives, reflectivity, the social construction of activity and interaction, and the development of relationships in process terms.

Still, while appreciating the necessity of examining and understanding human behavior within the particular contexts in which it occurs, the objective is not to pile up isolated or disconnected studies on a variety of life-worlds. Thus, the present volume is also intended to focus attention on the importance of developing a body of concepts that allows us to access, comprehend, and compare the life-worlds of others as we go about doing research across a range of settings. It is to these interrelated tasks of (a) learning about the various manifestations of human experience (by actively pursuing intersubjectivity with the other) and (b) developing a set of concepts applicable to the study of the human condition across communities, that the rest of this volume is directed.

Readers are apt to find much that resonates with their own lived experiences in chapter 2, "Subcultural Mosaics and Intersubjective Realities," but this statement redefines the social science project in some very consequential manners. Although maintaining an attentiveness to the more broadly shared aspects of the general culture, this chapter reconceptualizes "culture" in a way that rather uniquely enables sociologists, anthropologists, and other social scientists to focus on the various realms of human enterprise that constitute the human community. While attending to the "transcontextual intersubjectivities" that provide the basis for notions of a "shared broader culture," this chapter considers the ways in which culture as an element of the human condition both takes its shape from, and gives shape to, the vast realms of meaningful enterprise that characterize the

human community. Despite various practical and more particularistically motivated tendencies toward cultural consistency and continuity, it is argued that community life is realized through people's involvements, activities, and interchanges in shifting configurations of sub-cultural ventures. Thus, consideration is given to a multidimensional, processual conceptualization of culture, one which recognizes the fundamental or essential nature of the great many subcultural enterprises that constitute human group life in local as well as more global realms. Beyond challenging the prevailing, totalizing notions of "culture" and providing some terminology that people may use to delineate and represent a variety of interlinked life-worlds, the sub-cultural mosaic represents a unique, processually grounded manner of integrating vast realms of human enterprise.

Chapter 3, "Subcultural Involvements," establishes a further foundation for pursuing the subcultural mosaic by presenting readers with a set of "generic social processes." This "conceptual tool kit" not only outlines a set of action-oriented concepts that may be applied to any new realm of study, but also provides scholars with a means of achieving transcontextuality with the existing ethnographic literature. Beyond enabling scholars to build on both the concepts and substantive insights that have been generated in several decades of ethnographic research in the Chicago tradition, this material also provides researchers with a means of (comparatively) assessing their immediate work and theoretically synthesizing it with the works of others who've examined similar processes in contexts that may be quite different in substantive terms. Thus, for instance, concepts such as acquiring perspective, developing identities, and building relationships may not only be instructive in developing studies of dating couples, religious cults, biker gangs, feminist associations, police departments, or work groups, but may also enable researchers to compare and contrast people's experiences and practices along these lines across these (and countless other) realms of involvement in conceptually meaningful and productive manners.

Representing an agenda for pragmatizing the social sciences, chapters 4, 5, and 6 build squarely on the conceptual material developed in the preceding discussions of subcultural mosaics and generic social processes. Focusing on matters of *achieving intersubjectivity, managing place and space, maintaining presence, encountering the interpersonal other, managing morality, emphasizing community presence, and experiencing the self*, these chapters outline a research agenda that addresses the ongoing accomplishment of human community life. In addition to recasting many of the more conventional research topics

in the social sciences in manners more amenable to ethnographic inquiry, this material also draws attention to a great many presently overlooked realms of human activity. While by no means exhaustive, this research agenda is intended to make the social science venture relevant to each and every area of human behavior. By attending to the human enterprise entailed in the subcultural mosaic, readers are presented with a conceptual scheme that lends itself to considerable cross-contextual insights as well as providing an analytical frame for synthesizing both seemingly substantively disconnected research and so called micro and macro levels of analysis.

Pursuing the matters of researcher accessibility to the subcultural mosaic, chapters 7 and 8 outline a set of research and writing practices that may be used in conjunction with the research agenda presented here. Chapter 7, "Doing Ethnographic Research," considers the ways in which ethnographic inquiry is accomplished in practice. It's a discussion of field research that Mary Lorenz Dietz, Bill Shaffir, and I developed mindful of the sorts of messages we try to convey to our own graduate and undergraduate students. In attempts to achieve what Herbert Blumer terms "intimate familiarity with one's subject matter" (i.e., particular "life-worlds"), ethnographers rather uniquely pursue the tasks of (a) attending to various facets of the social worlds of the other as fully and carefully as they are able; (b) noting, probing, recording, and analyzing the situations they encounter; and (c) attempting to convey these notions to outsiders in careful, balanced, representative manners.

Like people (more generally) venturing into and achieving acceptance in other settings, researchers in the field also very much face the prospects of both accessing particular groups of people and maintaining a viable, working presence in those arenas over time. Thus, ethnographers find themselves attempting to come to terms with (i) the perspectives or worldviews characterizing the people in the settings in which they find themselves, (ii) the sets of self and other identities that people in those settings invoke, (iii) the activities that take place in those arenas, (iv) the relationships that develop between the participants in those life-worlds, (v) the emotionalities that people in those contexts express, and (vi) their modes of achieving communicative fluency. With these matters in mind, chapter 7 considers the ways in which ethnographers access, comprehend, study, and analyze the life-worlds into which they venture. Beyond a more standardized textual account of these issues, however, we've inserted sets of comments pertaining to our own experiences and observations with respect to various aspects of the research enterprise. Hopefully, this will help

newcomers to the field appreciate the very human aspects of stage fright, ambiguity, adjustment, resistance, frustration, and readjustment that field research entails.

Chapter 8, "Writing Ethnographic Research Reports," builds on many of the notions developed in chapter 7, but follows it one step further as we (Prus, Shaffir, and Dietz) try to indicate how people might go about "producing an ethnographic text." This statement is not intended as a magic potion for creating ethnographic accounts, but rather represents a reference point for people embarking on this undertaking. Simply put, it is a statement dealing with the things that we routinely attempt to convey to our own students when they ask us how they might go about writing up their studies. Noting the sorts of objectives, practices, and dilemmas that undergird the production of ethnographic texts, we try to walk newcomers through the process. Thus, consideration is given to titles, introductions, literature reviews, methodological statements, data and analysis, conceptual contributions, and the like, indicating some of the different ways these may be developed or combined in practice.

Newcomers should be cautioned, however, that the style of research introduced here (that is, an interactive, open-ended, inquiry into the life-worlds of the other) also is apt to be one of the more challenging, difficult, and frustrating ventures on which one may embark. This approach requires considerable patience, self discipline, and perseverance. As well, since ethnographic research involves other people in a very direct interactive manner, one faces the task of obtaining cooperation from others on an ongoing basis. The matters of accessing others, gaining and maintaining their acceptance over a period of time, and achieving openness in dealing with them typically require considerable interpersonal flexibility, persistence, and congeniality.

Further, researchers attempting to study the life-worlds of others are apt to find themselves having to fend off the critiques of positivist social scientists and (more recently) deal with confusions generated by the postmodernists²¹ as well as the efforts of any variety of moralists or control agents who may attempt to tell researchers how they should proceed and what questions they should be asking of the other. Researchers may also find themselves explaining their projects to, or pursuing funding from, bureaucrats who want or are pressured into obtaining "quick (and usually highly simplistic) fixes" to some problem they are encountering.

The approach introduced here is by no means perfect, even when executed by the most competent researchers under the most ideal circumstances. Ethnographic research involves people and all the

complexities that they develop in the course of coming to terms with their daily lives. The world of human lived experience cannot be reduced to nice, neat little boxes, charts or tables. Not only is every ethnography apt to be a labor-intensive undertaking, but the matter of building an intersubjective social science will also be a slow and challenging process.

Still, despite these drawbacks, those venturing into this mode of research are apt to find it one of the most fascinating and intellectually stimulating pursuits they might entertain. As well, because of its simultaneous open and situated nature, ethnographic research has the potential to be the most conceptually stimulating and rigorously grounded (i.e., empirical) mode of inquiry in the social sciences. And, when informed by interactionist premises, it also is the method that most thoroughly respects (i.e., is attentive to) the emergent nature of human lived experience:

It's not so much that they don't want to explain their situations, but until you've instilled that confidence in you as a person, they don't want to open up all that's good and bad about their business. . . . Once you get to know that businessman and show him that you're up front with him, then he'll let you know, "I'm having trouble in this area." They don't want you to go to another businessman and tell him, "Joe Blow down the street is really having troubles selling so and so's." Once you've established confidence with him, then he's not afraid to let you know what his problem is. . . . With repeat people, the more you work with them, the more you realize what it is that they really want to push. You begin to understand more about their businesses. . . . You have to listen. That's number one! The clients really do want to let you know about their businesses, because otherwise you can't help them. And I think that a lot of salesmen find that one of their biggest downfalls, they talk too much. And if you're talking, you're not listening. What you have to do is listen. (promotions-radio) (Prus, 1989a:88)

Endnotes:

1. See Prus (1996:3-9, 203-16) for an extended consideration of the foundations of positivist social science and its relationship to the quest for intersubjectivity in the social sciences. Since the present discussion builds extensively on materials developed in that volume more generally, I will be