
SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM FROM THEORETICAL ORIGIN TO THE ROLE OF SOCIAL INTERACTION AND INTERNATIONAL INTEGRATION

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ABSTRACTS: *Weighting scale symbolizes justice. Heart symbolizes love. Pigeons symbolize peace. All these ideas are formed through the common symbolic system of humankind, transcending barriers of language, culture, ethnicity, competence and qualifications. They become tools for the formation of social interactions between individuals, communities, within a country or internationally.*

KEY WORDS: symbolic interactionism, theoretical origin, social interaction, international integration.

INTRODUCTION

History of formation and development process of Symbolic Interactionism in the world

Symbol is an ancient form of “sign”, considered as a tool of thought in the cognitive process of humanity. Therefore, the theoretical premise of Symbolic interactionism also has an ancient origin, directly linked to the development of human cognitive thinking and value system, both in the East and West. So far, the majors of symbolism such as Semiotics, Icon Anthropology have been recognized as an independent science subject with specific training contents at many major universities in the world such as Columbia, Indiana, MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), Stanford, Hawaii in the US, Toronto, McGill, Western Ontario in Canada, Tartu in Estonia, Helsinki in Finland, etc.¹

An outstanding feature of the symbolic scientific research is that the interdisciplinary approach has become a mandatory path.² Therefore, this paper focuses on the theoretical interactionism focusing on three angles (1) Cultural studies, (2) Semiotics associated with Linguistics; and (3) Sociology. These three angles are also the basic components for a comprehensive analysis of symbolic interactionism, from concepts, characteristics; to structure; and finally the meaning, and its role in society.

a. From a Culturalistic perspective

Symbols are a cultural element created by human to use as a mean of communication and symbolic communication tool. Many cultural anthropologists also claimed that the “basic

¹ Claude Levi-Strauss, 1950, in Marcel Mauss, *Comment on the gift gesture: Form and reason of exchange in ancient societies*, translated by Nguyen Tung, Intellect Publisher, Hanoi, 2011.

² Dinh Hong Hai, *Symbolistic Research - some theoretical approaches*, World Publishing House - Hanoi, 2014.

unit” of culture is the symbol - the container of information, and the first social “genetic nucleus” of mankind.³

In the Song Dynasty (a dynasty in China from 960 to 1279), in the work of Theory of Philosophy, the philosopher Chu Hy (1130 - 1200), explained that “The statue is to take one image to depict another meaning”, i.e. using the “can understand” to illustrate the “hard to understand”, or using the specific to illustrate the abstract, using the still to illustrate the movement, using the tangible to illustrate the invisible.⁴

Meanwhile, in the West, since the nineteenth century, the theory of symbolistic has flourished. Ernst Alfred Cassirer (1874-1945), in *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* proposed to replace the definition of man as a “rational animal” with the definition of man as an “animals producing symbolic forms”. He supposed: “The symbolism of behavior and thought is the most representative characteristic of human life, and the whole of human culture develops based on these conditions”.⁵ Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908 - 2009), a French anthropologist and ethnologist, also asserted that: “All cultures can be seen as a set of symbolic systems, in which ranks first in terms of language, marriage rules, economic relations, arts, science, and religion”.⁶

Thus, the concept of symbolism is placed within cultural interactions. Therefore, on the basis of the human “symbolic” capacity and see the symbol as a form of “representative cultural language” expression, “International Encyclopedia of Cultural Development” (International UNESCO's Thesaurus On Cultural Development, Mexico, 1982) defined: “Culture is a collection of symbolic systems, it regulates human behavior and makes it possible for a large number of people to communicate with each other, uniting them into a separate community.”⁷

a- From Semiotics and Linguistics perspective

The essence of semiotics is linguistic research. From the first studies of the duality of *the signifier* and *the signified* of F. Saussure - the founder of semiotics - in the late nineteenth century, the study of symbols has both sequential and groundbreaking succession, accompanied by research and discoveries on semiotic notation.⁸ By the beginning of the twentieth century, semiotics had developed by important names such as Louis Hjelmslev, Charles Morris, Roland Barthes, Algirdas J. Greimas, Thomas A. Sebeok, Raymond Firth, Juri Lotman, Umberto Eco. Symbolic research is always accompanied by the development of

³ Nguyen Van Hau, *Symbolics as a "basic unit" of culture*, <http://www.vanhoahoc.vn/nghien-cuu/ly-luan-van-hoa-hoc/llvhh-nhung-van-de-chung/1186-nguyen-van-hau-bieu-tuong-nhu-la-don-vi-co-ban-cua-van-hoa.html>

⁴ Nguyen Van Hau, *About the iconics and symbolism in cultural and artistic works*, Journal of Cultural Research - Hanoi University of Culture, No. 2 (September 2010).

⁵ Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Yale University Press, United States, 1998.

⁶ Jean Cheralier, Alain Greerbrant, Literature University, translated by Nguyen Du, *Dictionary of world cultural symbols*, Da Nang Publisher, 1997, page XXIII

⁷ Unesco, World Conference On Cultural Policies, *Final Report*, Soregraph, Paris, 1982.

⁸ Cao Kim Lan, *Symbolics: from semiotics to rhetoric*, http://www.vienvanhoc.vass.gov.vn/noidung/tintuc/Lists/LyLuanVanHoc/View_Detail.aspx?ItemID=57

semiotics (from linguistics - structure, cultural semiotics, psychological semiotics, interpretative semiotics, etc.).

In particular, the structuralist approach in R. Barthes's Semiotics (1915-1980) states that every symbol must first be an image. The category of Symbol refers to the part where the Image goes beyond itself (literal meaning) and always contains abstract values (implied meaning). Image can be said to be a “common symbol” as Symbol is the “super symbol”. In general, the Image and its implicationz (polysemantic) are two inseparable poles on the symbol spectrum. Because, if separated from the image, the “meaning” will lose the expression, but if separated from the “meaning”, the image will decay into a regular image which is no longer a symbol. Thus, from the structural approach to linguistics and semiotics, Symbol is distinguished from Image. In particular, the biggest difference is that Image is “typicalized”, while Icon is “symbolized”.

b. From Sociology perspective

The use of the Symbol in explaining social relations was mentioned by Chicago School sociologists in the theory of Symbolic Interactionism, which was born in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This approach was built into the writings of Charles S. Pierce, William James and John Dewey (1859-1925). George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) is considered the founder of the symbolic interactionism theory. His doctrine of the ego pointed out that social interaction is the basis for forming human personality. This doctrine is evaluated as one of the ten greatest social doctrines of mankind. The three original points of Symbolic Interactionism Theory were demonstrated by George Mead: “*First*, people treat objects on the basis of the meanings that objects give them. *Second*, the meaning of objects arises from interpersonal social interactions. *Third*, the meaning of objects is captured and adjusted through the explanatory mechanism that individuals use when approaching objects.”⁹ However, until G. Mead died in 1931, this doctrine did not have a name. It was not until 1934 that one of Mead's outstanding students at the University of Chicago (USA) named Herbert Blumer (1900-1987), along with Everett Hughes, to complete and popularize the symbolic interactionism theory. By the late 1960s, H.Blumer gathered some of his own writings (based on and expanded Mead's ideas) into a book entitled “*Symbolic Interactionism - Interactive Theory*” (1969).¹⁰

Herbert Blumer emphasizes, objects do not own its means. Rather, the meanings of derivative objects are born through social interaction. People know what objects mean as they interact with each other. In doing so, they place great emphasis on the language and communication processes that it facilitates. Through these processes, people learn how to identify and act towards the objects, events, and experiences that make up their environment. In essence, they learn how to view and respond symbolically to mediated realities - socially constructed realities.

Thus, on the basis of the perceptions of symbolic interactionism researcher, based on the “symbolic” capacity, people perform social interactions and social actions. Symbolic interaction mechanism becomes a prerequisite for diverse social links, extensive integration

^{9, 13} Bryan S. Turner - translated by Ding Hong Phuc (2006). *The Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

processes both in terms of social structure such as groups, communities, and spatial structures on the extent of local, regional and international.

1. Social connection mechanisms through symbolic interaction

In order to form symbolic interactions in social relationships, each individual person first needs to promote the ability to capture and use their individual avatars through socialization process. The process of social interaction helps shape the personality of the individual (socialization), from intimate handshakes, kisses, winks, and duel, to beer parties, soccer games, and the building of religious beliefs. Every time people turn themselves toward others and others' actions, while not considering about their motives of either hurting others, helping others, transforming or destroying others, is when they conduct a social behavior. Individuals try to conduct themselves appropriately and appropriate for others. While doing so, they may act as individuals or as representatives of a group or organization such as a church, university, corporation, or government.¹¹ This process is, in essence, the development of cognitive thinking about the self. While thinking, people shape the meaning of objects, by accepting, rejecting, or modifying them to suit their definitions and subsequent behaviors.

On the other hand, the meaning of symbols depends on the context. People create behaviors based on the meaning they attribute to situations and their interactions with others. This leads to a characteristic that the symbol can change with each period of social development. The symbol changes its meaning and way of affecting social life based on the inference of the individual about the situation. People always tend to test possible types of action, evaluate the relative advantages and disadvantages, and make reasonable choices. It is this model of action that is mixed, intertwined and interacted to create groups as well as society, hence creating social change.¹²

2. Implementing symbolic interactions in international connection and integration

Based on the analysis of social connection mechanism through symbolic interaction as above, this section would look into some of the world famous symbols to understand their meaning as well as how to create the meaning of symbols catering to international connection and integration.

Our first example is the Olympic flag symbol. This flag was introduced by Pierre de Coubertin, president of the International Olympic Committee, in 1913. The five circles (5 colors) represent 5 continents (Asia, Europe, America, Africa, Australia), signifying inseparable solidarity. At the same time, they symbolize the spirit of fairplay, frank competition and friendship among athletes worldwide.¹³ True to that spirit, from the first modern Olympic Games in 1896, as the Olympic flag flew, not only athletes, sports groups, but all sports fans in the world felt its symbolism of honesty, fairplay in competition, solidarity and friendship among nations, regions, peoples and races around the world.

¹¹ Bryan S. Turner, translated by Dinh Hong Phuc (2006). *The Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

¹² Bui The Cuong et. al., *Oxford Sociology Glossary*, Hanoi National University Publisher. Hanoi, 2010, pg.567

¹³ <https://www.olympic.org/olympic-rings>

Next, the picture of “Syrian boy on the beach” is our second example. The image viraled on the mass media on September 2, 2015, taken the body of 3-year-old Aylan Kurdi lying on the beach near the area of Bodrum resort in Turkey. The image took the world by storm, representing a naked truth about the brutal civil war in Syria that has killed hundreds of thousands and displaced millions. The image quickly became a symbol of the crisis of migrants from Syria and North African countries to Europe in 2015. A overwhelming global empathy, flushed with hastag and shares on social networks, Aylan-shaped shirts are sold everywhere, acted as a awakening of humanity's conscience in face of an ongoing disaster. The power of this symbol has led many countries, including the German government - a conservative capital, decide to open the border to welcome refugees.

The famous next example is called: “Panda diplomacy” - a Chinese policy to promote diplomatic relations through the giving or lending of large pandas to countries around the world. This policy has long existed in Chinese history. Between 1958 and 1972, China transferred 23 large pandas to 9 countries around the world. The highlight of this policy was the Chinese government's gift to the United States of America two large pandas after the visit of President Richard Nixon in 1972. Over twenty thousand visitors were seen in the first day and a total of about 1.1 million visitors in the first year came to see this pair of pandas at the US National Zoo in Washington DC. The popularity of the pandas is a clear testament to the success of China's panda diplomacy, in specific is the desire to establish official diplomatic relations between China and the United States.¹⁴

In another development, in 1961, the World Wide Fund For Nature (WWF) was established and decided to choose the panda as an icon based on the animal's impressive criteria: easy to identify, easily break down all language barriers. WWF founders agreed that the big and cute, beloved animal deserves to be a great symbol. Moreover, the black and white color of panda on the logo also helps save WWF printing costs in public awareness campaigns about animal protection.¹⁵

DISCUSSION

The importance and significance of Symbolic Interaction for Social Development was mentioned in the opening of “*Dictionary of World Cultural Symbols*”: “The period without symbols is the era of death, a society lack of symbol is a dead society. A civilization with no symbol will die, it only belongs to history.”¹⁶

The Olympic flag, the “Syrian Boy by the Sea” picture, WWF panda pictures, or Chinese panda diplomacy, are used as official and popular symbols in social connections and international cooperation. Thus, symbols are expressed in many forms, many levels of expression, from inanimate objects such as circles, squares, to animal images and the highest - the image of people. Symbols such as the Olympic flag, the Red Cross are formed by people assigning it symbolic and representative, with its conventional, uniform uses. These symbols

¹⁴ <https://thedi diplomat.com/2017/11/chinas-panda-diplomacy/>

¹⁵ http://wwf.panda.org/knowledge_hub/endangered_species/giant_panda/panda/panda_evolutionary_history/

¹⁶ Jean Cheralier, Alain Greerbrant, Literature School of Nguyen Du translated (1997). *Dictionary of World Cultural Symbols*, Da Nang Publisher House, pg. 3.

require thought and explanation to capture and convey meaning. Meanwhile, the image of the panda, or the "Syrian boy on the beach", are symbols that create strong emotions right after they appear, gaining understanding, unanimity and rapid sharing because they belong to the world of experience, the moral values system, the humanity and the common aesthetic of humanity.

However, the most important point of the symbol is not how they appear, in what form they are expressed, but the hidden power behind them, the meaning and the role that symbols play. The power of the symbol is reflected in the frequency of use, the speed of spreading, viral ability and the effect and significance of promotion for the common goals. Functionally, the symbol is not only a substitute (the medium) for real objects, but also replaces all processes, images, ideas of people. Besides the replacement function, symbol also has other attributes and functions such as education, connections, forecasting, communication, information, etc.

On the international level, symbols are used to share the cultural value system, to enhance the ability of integration and solidarity among communities, nations and regions. The symbol also creates a mechanism for expectation of responsibilities and obligations of each community and each country. The appropriate and careful use of symbols would promote relationships, both widely and deeply, which is the basis for increasing social capital for individuals to exploit and use. On that basis, symbolic interaction fosters bilateral and multilateral relationships in addressing global issues such as poverty, conflict, war, gender equality, disease prevention, environmental protection, as well as establishing global partnerships for development purposes.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the basic principles of symbolic interactionism theory allow us to analyze the capacity of human cognitive thinking and social relations. The meaning of symbols allows for the development of cognitive think, human capacity to seek and foster human bonds. Besides, people have the ability to modify the meaning of symbols based on their interpretation of the situation. This mechanism contributes to the forms and levels of interpersonal connection. As such, symbol interactions become the premise for diverse and effective connections; for extensive integration processes both in terms of social structure such as groups, communities, and on the spatial structure level such as domestic, regional and international.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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