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## **A Symbolic Interactionism Perspective in the Social Rehabilitation Theory and Clinical Social Work**

### **Abstract**

The interactionist approach to deviance is summarized drawing heavily on Blumer's conception of continual self-indication and Becker's examination of the socialization of deviants. The concepts of the self, the definition of the situation, significance, reciprocity and interaction constitute an idea of a human being who is best defined by such terms as *homo reciprocus* (man in interaction), *homo symbolicus* (symbolic man), *homo faber* (man the maker) and *homo aestimans* (man who evaluates). Symbolic interactionism is used to guide professional assessment and intervention by human services professionals. Correction officers, social workers, counselors, street workers, therapists are positions that would apply the ideas presented in the article.

**Key words:** *symbolic interactionism, clinical social work, social maladjustment*

### **Introduction**

A theoretical trend of symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934, Blumer, 1969, Lyman, 1988, Stryker, 2002, Hałas 2001, 2006) has called into question the meaning of such concepts as needs, traumatic experiences or intrapsychic conflicts in the explanation of subjective behavior. Instead, it has established a concept apparatus that in a completely different way determines the source of social and individual actions. The concept of the self, the definition of the situation, significance, reciprocity and interactions constitute a conception of man who is best defined by such terms as *homo reciprocus* (man in interaction), *homo symbolicus* (symbolic man),

*homo faber* (man the maker) and *homo aestimans* (man who evaluates) (Hałas 2001, pp. 39–48). According to this theory, the behavior of a social subject, i.e. taking a stance on any perceived objects (artifacts, other people, social duties, the self as a specific object of self-reference, etc.) is determined by concepts which are attributed to particular objects in the process of signification (concept formation). Thus, these concepts are the key to the understanding of social and individual actions. The process of concept formation is an initial process defining human behavior. However, as symbolic interactionists remark, the concept is not included in objects themselves. The concept does not emanate from these objects, it is neither a psychological supplement to an object nor a subjective expression of the mind. The concept comes into being in an interaction between people (Hałas 2001, pp. 42–43). Hence, from the perspective of symbolic interactionism, the processes of upbringing and social work may be perceived as a particularly important kind of social interactions that, if properly planned, decide about the stocks of activated concepts and social actions of social service clients. An attitude towards work, education, other people, law, or public property, does not result from the concept that is immanent for these objects, which does not mean that these objects are deprived of such concepts, but it results from the processes of interpersonal defining of those objects. People are symbolic creatures (*homo symbolicus*), for whom objects and concepts (*signifié*) become different signs (*signifiant*). Therefore, human behavior is often conditioned not by objective facts that result from a particular social situation, but by concepts that people attribute to those facts (Lynch, McConatha, 2006, p. 89).

The meaning of a given element, object depends, among other things, on the context in which it is being considered. In such a way, Gestalt psychologists explain the difference of the sense of an element depending on its placement in the whole (in the context). For example, a segment of the same length has a different sense if it constitutes a side of a triangle and different if it is a side of a square. A bamboo stick has a different significance for an ape if it lies aimlessly in a cage and different if it is included in the whole situation and is used by the ape as a tool to achieve an aim (Tomaszewski, 1998, p. 124). For a criminal, fair work is 'naivety', an activity that should be avoided. For Marxist proletarians work was a form of alienation, for others it has ennobling, pragmatic, developmental or preventive values, etc.

Hałas notices that a human being mostly acts manipulating objects to achieve their own aims (*homo faber*). Concepts have a pragmatic nature since human actions are their consequences (Hałas, 2001, pp. 44–45). If a thief realizes that his skills bring a substantial income, it will be difficult to persuade him that it is not worth taking advantage of the dexterity of his hands and proficiency in the use of

certain tools to break down barriers protecting the property of others. However, one's abilities (in the case of a thief, a proficiency in breaking down barriers, e.g. in unlocking) can be used either for illegal actions (the only perspective a thief sees to use his own abilities), or legal actions (I have personally heard of a former thief who has registered his business and currently provides services to those who locked their keys at home or in a car; his service is much cheaper than breaking a window or extracting a door). *Homo aestimans* assesses and evaluates his world. That former thief assesses his abilities in a similar way as before, however he has changed the definition of the self and others from perceiving himself as a thief and others as 'patsies' (who were to blame for wrong protection of their properties and allowed for being robbed) to a service provider and clients. He considered (evaluated) such a change more beneficial. The pragmatism of an action is a vital factor determining daily choices of social actors.

A human being is not a medium for factors affecting him (determinants) but a subject actively constructing their actions (the self). There are situations in which the self gives in, succumbs to an action of a determinant, however it does not happen without its will but in the process of interpretation where the self deems that a particular need, a definite social requirement must be met now and in a specific way. Jenks (2005, p. 56) realizes that symbolic interactionism refers to individual actors, however not to an individual in isolation, since symbolic interactionism is a sociological not a psychological theory. It concentrates on individual units indeed, but in relations with others in the process of interaction as well as united in an intersubjective network of meanings. Individuals often use this intersubjective network of meanings, they are not forced to construct meanings continuously and individually, but they can adopt the given ones, which they often do using meanings common in the community. Symbolic interactionism indicates the significance of a volitional apparatus as the last instance of undertaken social actions and an act of interpretation as a primary causative factor of human behavior. The theorems of symbolic interactionism significantly enrich the studies of deviant behavior. Even the expression of such it would seem a biological (physiological) need as a sexual drive can be explained in the concept categories of symbolic interactionism. Gecas and Libby notice that "sexual symbolism also creates sexual experience" (1976, p. 34). It can even be said that it is not libido that shapes fantasy (especially male one), but it is the fantasy that shapes libido, whereas stimuli that arouse a desire between a woman and a man have more symbolic than physiological nature. A sexual experience as well as a clash of expectations related to the kind of expected love experience depend on possessed cognitive models accompanying a sexual relation (a female focus on romanticism, a male focus on leisure, love textbooks

beginning with Christian ones, Romantic ones and sexual revolution exposing various approaches to sexuality) (Gecas, Libby, 1976).

### **Symbolic interactionism in the analyses of deviant behaviour**

The idea of a good life and the ideals of juvenile delinquents can be reduced to a desire of immediate pleasure that may be derived 'here and now'. It is a life strategy that B. Suchodolski called 'living for the moment'. Life is defined as a streak of present moments and one should get the most out of them since all life opportunities and charms are incorporated in those moments. It is the life for passions which have to be fulfilled almost immediately (Suchodolski, 1983, pp. 99–107). In this strategy of life future is not considered as important. Modern society requires thinking about the future and planning it. The future is a target that should be indicated and considered a vital life category. Blumer (1969) realizes that whatever a human being is conscious of has been indicated by them. A conscious life of a human being, from awakening till going to bed, is a continuous stream of indicating oneself, noticing objects that one deals with and considers. Such a theoretical perspective explaining human behavior immensely enriches the methodological aspect of thinking about the change of life priorities for persons socially or morally deprived. Everyone who in their practice of social (pedagogic) work has entered into any contract with a tutee knows how important it is to indicate the vital aspects of life and tasks to fulfill in order to obtain crucial changes in the way of life of those clients. We are symbolic creatures (*homo symbolicus*) because we indicate objects to ourselves and denote them (interpret).

The question why a deviant behaves in a different way than a person considered as a conformist seems to remain fundamental in our reflections. If a deviant behaves in a reprehensible way towards other people and breaks social rules, e.g. reacting in a vulgar way once accidentally pushed by a stranger in a crowd, it suggests at least two phenomena. The first one applies to all of us and results from the fact that none of us feels well while, even accidentally, experiencing such a push. Another phenomenon is the reaction to this incident. It is claimed that adapted man, well-brought up, will wait for an apology in order to reply that nothing has happened or in the case he does not receive an apology, he will regard that person as somebody ill-mannered, who should be pitied. Another reaction, e.g. insulting the guilty party or taking even more dramatic steps, makes us pose a question about the causes of these different reactions. Whereas the first phenomenon has features of an unconditional reaction, the other one (the possibility of reacting in various

ways) suggests that something else has occurred between the stimulus (a push) and the reaction, something that has decided against a polite or vulgar behavior. For an interactionist, these decisive factors include the self of a reacting human being and an interpretation of a particular situation used by that person. Obviously, it may be claimed that beyond these different social reactions there are acquired patterns of general behavior, i.e. simply an attitude. In the first case, it is a model (an attitude) of a friendly reaction, by way of compromise, in the other one, a hostile and violent reaction to an incident. Thereby, the causes of such behavior depend on the nervous system, character, personality, etc. Symbolic interactionism, however, in these various social actions notices different ways of assigning significance to phenomena of the outside world. In the first case, the well-brought up actor takes a stock of interpretative models, on the basis of which he is willing to justify such incidents. The world is friendly to him and ordered. If any incidents happen, the disturbed order should be soon restored.

The second actor ascribes hostile intentions to the world and he interprets such events as, e.g., a push, as a provocation. Plausibly, he had already been pushed several times before and the guilty parties had explicitly shown him then their disrespect for him, the feeling of their superiority or an invitation to a confrontation. It may be realized in the situation analyzed above that different human actions are possible in the same circumstances. However, only one reaction is socially expected in that particular situation. Someone pushing someone else should apologize to them, and the apology should be accepted. A person socially maladjusted either does not have such a knowledge (so they cannot interpret that situation in a proper way) or, which is much more common, they assign a different significance to that situation. It may be said that a socially maladjusted person defines the situation without respecting commonly acceptable social rules. Thus, an opportunity to steal, abuse somebody weaker, avoid school duty becomes a chance for a social deviant, which he willingly takes advantage of, whereas for other people, those socially well-adapted, it is either a temptation that must be overcome or a possibility that will never be used. If a socially maladjusted child notices a wallet left through inattention, he will not consider long whether he can appropriate it. The child would feel 'a pang of conscience' (would feel guilty) if he did not do that. Simply such a definition of this situation activates in his mind; a wallet activates a significance of money and potential benefits that the child can derive from it (the child will boast among his peers that he has 'cash', will buy necessary things, 'will buy himself' a temporary approval and respect of the community). The mind of a socially well-adapted child will activate a reverse model of interpretation in such a situation. This model demands that he will restrain a natural inclination to ill-gotten gains

since the money belongs to somebody else, so regardless of potential benefits that the profit could bring, the child is aware of the fact that it would be theft. Even if the child succumbed to temptation, he would feel pangs of conscience. The feeling of guilt would make the child give the wallet back. Socially maladjusted people have a set of definitions of situations which is different from that of the rest of society making and obeying socially adopted rules. People mostly respect specific values and comply with socially adopted rules neither because in a natural way they feel the moral responsibility nor because they have a general inclination to appropriate or inappropriate conduct; rather they do so because other people have made them aware (or not) of the significance of those values and rules. Upbringing, understood here as an intentional transmission of specific definitions of situations and not always intentional organization of the living environment, is the creation of a human being.

Conducting research in the 1940s into marihuana smokers and entertainment musicians, Becker (1963) noticed that the members of these communities were considered deviants not because some previous deviant motivation, negative inclination had generated in them, which made them break social rules adopted by a statistic majority of citizens. They became deviants for society just because of the society itself. They were labeled deviants, on the one hand, due to the fact that some part of society quite arbitrarily considered them deviants, as these phenomena for some time had not caused any outrage (relativism of standards), but on the other hand, another part of society provided them with specific definitions of situations in the process of socialization, which standardized their deviant lifestyle for them. These are the people who want to listen to music in nightclubs, who create a group of night musicians who neglect their own family life carrying out unconventional lifestyle. Similarly, an initial experience of smoking marihuana is almost never positive since it rarely brings desired biological reactions at once and it more often evokes a state of anxiety. It is other people (other deviants) who teach subsequent smokers in which way the action of smoking (not a value then or a forbidden action), which at the beginning arouses only curiosity or even negative experiences, is redefined into a desirable action (now a value). Becker proved that after the first experience nobody would smoke any more if they did not redefine their impressions considering the effects of marijuana as enjoyable.

These examples indicate how far-reaching consequences may be brought by interpersonal interactions, definitions of situations used by others or activated significance, finally social relationships that people establish, especially children and teenagers who are most susceptible to socializing effects. Becker's research shows another vital feature of deviation, namely the relativity of criteria of its

assessment. Something that for somebody is already an obvious violation of a social norm, for others is still within the range of conventional behavior. Commenting on the social reaction theory (*labeling theory*), Danuta Urbaniak-Zajac states that ‘the same event perceived from the perspective of one participant and, e.g., from the perspective of a correction officer who is responsible for looking after this particular participant, may be interpreted and defined differently by them. The possibility to acknowledge a given definition of the situation as valid depends on the social position of the person who defines. A juvenile delinquent has poor chances to persuade the correction officer that he was a participant of a social gathering and not a booze-up, as the correction officer asserts’ (Urbaniak-Zajac, 2003, p. 128).

The diversity of social groups, multiple cultures, socializing circles and the mind’s ability to absorb new concepts constitute a primary source of human behavior pluralism. It should be remarked that the mind of an individual is not only shaped by communities, cultures, religions or family traditions, but also by another man. “The social stock of knowledge” (Keller, 2011, p. 44) that conditions the behavior of the individual may be an effect of an interaction with only one person, who turned out to exert a key impact on the personality and Weltanschauung of that individual. Psychoanalysts perceive especially the father as this influential person since the emergence of superego originates with the identification with him. Counselors highlight the significance of the mother, who develops the most basic life expectations in her child and satisfies the child’s primary needs. Sociologists talk about “significant other” and publicists about authorities.

Thus, since such creative power is embedded in “intersubjectivity” (Siebold, 2011), it should be used by counselors (social workers), who due to the nature of their work have to ‘construct’ another person in a planned and intentional way and take responsibility for them within various aspects of their educational practice (intervention). Self-change, in fact, is anticipated as the nature of important social relationships shifts; personal order and personal change are aspects of a larger social process (Meddin, 1982, p. 154, Stryker 2002, p. 216).

According to P. Zimbardo, people whom he has met during his life have exerted the greatest impact on his life and career. ‘The reason why I have become successful [he recollects in an interview with Victor Osiatyński Zimbardo – added by M.B.] and my brother not, is not because of the difference of personalities but due to the fact that I had different teachers and friends, I have been in other situations, etc. The conditions made me focus on the future and my friends taught me how to plan. I kept thinking what my life might look like. And it helped. My brother was more oriented to the present. He could live for the moment and enjoy it but he could not change his life’ (Osiatyński, 1980, p. 195). It is hard not to appreciate the influence



of conversations with unique people in our life. Similarly, the significance of role models exerts a vital impact on the rehabilitation of tutees (*correctional treatment*).

Even the presence of a counselor among tutees (clients/patients) is a correctional method. The counselor with his physical presence brings in his own social stock of knowledge, his own interpretations and, above all, his own attitudes towards a tutee (client/patient), which has an influence on social experience and the significant resources activated by the tutee. Obviously, it must be constructive presence which, planned adequately and intentionally, becomes *constructive upbringing presence*. A negative world image that induces a tutee to a negative attitude towards the environment comes not only from opinions which he has encountered in his own environment (interpretations conveyed by means of symbolic communication of significance), but mostly from frustration experiences with people who are close to him and destructive values that these people share. Especially these negative experiences make him define the world in a way that enables him to break social norms. Hence, constructive presence should concentrate not only on the cognitive reconstruction of the tutee's consciousness, but also on the fulfillment of his needs and the creation of new normative orientations, which activates a desired significance and as a result, a positive social action. In such a way, more and more outside world referents gain positive significance, which consequently activates proper social behavior. Thus, the tutee, even subconsciously, adopts the counselor's world of values and significance. The method of constructive presence acts on two levels. On the one hand, it activates the processes of identification with a role model, modeling, copying or imitating. On the other hand, it allows for an indirect upbringing, using Brezinka's terminology, the upbringing that 'assumes that counselors try to acquire features, thanks to which children, students and tutees can feel that their relationship with counselors is something enjoyable and not sad. Adherence to normative points of reference [significance and interpretations of the situation – added M. B.] originates in childhood and adolescence, usually due to love to people who are close to that person and who value these points of reference. However, an aversion to a counselor who is hostile, does not have enough knowledge or abilities and who has lost his authority, may cause emotional rejection of the »values« [significance – added by M.B.] that the counselor holds' (Brezinka, 2008, pp. 36–37).

A good counselor saves the authority of an adult since among maladjusted children this authority has degraded. An adult should invoke associations with responsibility, safety, initiative, however, often these associations are reverse. It is important that the adult activates a desired significance since the child needs support and the feeling of dependence in order to properly go through the period of

childhood. Graniger points out rightly that in a family in which the relationships are disturbed there are no bonds or constructive rules of functioning, children have a problem to construct the authority of a parent and thus they rebel against their parents, disrespect them, demonstrate a flippant attitude towards their parents' laws and power. Thus, the counselors' task is to save the authority of an adult whom one may trust (2006, p. 119).

## **Conclusion**

Words have a performing dimension. Interpretations (definitions of situations) that we use in diverse social situations activate social actions. One of the most important interpretations for our performance is the one in which we do not refer ourselves to objects of the outside world labeling particular meanings to them, but we become such an object to which the outside world attaches significance. The sense of social rehabilitation is within the assumption that it is possible to redefine the self of a socially maladjusted person. It depends on the environment which the tutee uses as a primary narration recalled in occurring social situations. "Meaning occurs through social interactions, and new meanings are managed or modified through such interactions. Mead further asserts that the development of a self is a reflective process. The self is constructed based on what others tell us about ourselves, our perceptions of what others say about us, and the internalization of those perceptions [...] Change in meaning is related to the social context in which alternative meanings are being offered. Clinical social work has favored an interactionist perspective as a basic tenet of practice" (Siebold, 2011). The above theoretical analysis indicates that in social work methods (rehabilitation) it is very important to praise the tutee's traits disclosed in upbringing situations which may constitute a constructive element of their self; the element (one's resources) that they will recall while making life decisions. A counselor, as a significant other, is able to instill principles into his tutees, the ideas of how one can and should take social actions in accordance with social standards.

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