



Research Paper

## The Interpretive Paradigm: Symbolic Interactionism

Syamsudin<sup>1</sup>, Siti Haerani<sup>2</sup>, R.A. Damayanti<sup>3</sup>, Sanusi Fattah<sup>4</sup>

*1 Universitas Nasional, Jakarta 12520, Indonesia*

*2 Universitas Hasanuddin, Makassar 90245, Indonesia*

*3 Universitas Hasanuddin, Makassar 90245, Indonesia*

*4 Universitas Hasanuddin, Makassar 90245, Indonesia*

**ABSTRACT:** *This paper aims to explain the methodology of symbolic interactionism in its use in interpretive paradigm research. It also clarifies the difference between the symbolic interactionism approach and the phenomenological approach. The study uses a library approach, namely research by studying related books and collecting the results of previous research. The results of the study show that the symbolic interactionism methodology emphasizes the meaning of an object or symbol. The meaning assumes that the interaction between the individual and the individual and the individual and the community and even the individual with himself will affect the interpretive process of meaning. The difference between symbolic interactionism and phenomenology lies in the emphasis on understanding the subjective experience of phenomena or events and their relationships, while symbolic interaction rests on the interpretation of the subjective (symbolic) meaning that arises from the interaction.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Symbolic Interactionism, Phenomenology, Paradigm Interpretive*

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Scientific work requires a clear philosophical footing. This philosophical foundation is a paradigm. Paradigm is a way of looking at something which contains several assumptions, theories, models, and certain solutions regarding the subject matter, objectives, and the nature of the study material (1). There are three research paradigms, namely (1) the positivistic paradigm, (2) the interpretive paradigm, and (3) the reflexive paradigm (Neuman, 2011, p. 62).

The positivistic paradigm is often called the quantitative approach, commonly used in natural science research, but how many social sciences use this approach. The interpretive paradigm is usually called the qualitative approach, which is generally used by the social sciences and humanities. The reflexive paradigm is matched with the critical approach, which is commonly used in cultural studies, media, communication, feminism, discourse, and literature, and politics (Neuman, 2011, p. 62; Berutu & Harto, 2012 : Chua, 1986).

Research in the social sciences today uses a positivistic paradigm that assumes the basis of causality in life. In contrast to the positivistic paradigm, the interpretive paradigm views social reality as something holistic (not separate from one another). Social life is not causal but reciprocal. The relationship between symptoms is reciprocal. Life is also complex, full of dynamics, and full of meaning (1).

The interpretive paradigm views social reality as something that is always in process, full of subjective and dynamic meaning. Humans act on things based on meaning. The meaning is obtained from the results of social interactions with other people. This meaning is continuously refined during the process of social interaction (Blumer, 1969, p. 2).

Research in the interpretive approach intends to understand "the world of human experience" (Cohen et al., 1994, p. 23), Suggesting that "reality is socially constructed" (Mertens, 2005, p. 12). This paradigm relies on the "participant's view of the situation being studied". (Creswell, 2003, p. 8), and draw from their backgrounds and experiences. These studies generally do not start with theory (as with postpositivists) but rather they "generate or inductively develop theories or patterns of meaning" during the research process (Creswell, 2003, p.9). This paper will explore more deeply the interpretive paradigm, especially related to the symbolic interactionism methodology. Look for the background of the approach of the two methodologies. Look at the similarities and differences between the two methodologies.

## II. METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted by literature study. Literature research is research by collecting information from the literature in the form of journals, books, notes, documents, magazines, and other references. This method also studies relevant previous research results to get answers and theoretical foundations regarding the problem to be studied (9).

According to Zed, (2008), the steps of library research can be explained as follows:

- (1) Selection of topic, theme, or topic idea. Topics can be taken from phenomena or problems that arise;
- (2) Exploration of relevant information related to the topic;
- (3) Determine the research focus, determine the priority of the problem;
- (4) Looking for sources of information in the form of journals and books related to the problem;
- (5) Read critically and deeply relevant sources of information;
- (6) Make notes from reading results;
- (7) Processing research notes for analysis to get a conclusion drawn up in the research report;
- (8) Prepare reports by the applicable writing systematics.

## III. RESULTS

### 3.1 Historical Perspective of Symbolic Interaction

The term symbolic interactionism was first introduced by Herbert Blumer in 1937 in his writing entitled "Social Psychology". This article appears in chapter four of Emerson Peter Schmidt's book "Man and Society: A Substantive Introduction to the Social Science" (Blumer, 1969, p. 1). Although the term was coined in 1937, the basic ideas of this perspective are the ideas of Herbert Mead, who was the teacher of Herbert Blumer. There are at least three models of thought that greatly influenced Mead, namely: the philosophy of pragmatism, Darwinism, and behaviourism (Charon, (1998) & Arifin, (2012)).

The philosophy of pragmatism has four basic ideas, namely: (1) everything that is real for us always depends on our active intervention, that is, humans interpret everything; (2) knowledge for humans is always associated with situations and judged based on its usefulness; (3) the objects we experience in a given situation are always defined according to their usefulness to us; and (4) understanding humans must be inferred from what they do. From these four basic ideas, we can see that the philosophy of pragmatism influences the perspective of symbolic interactionism which places interpretation as an important point in understanding human behaviour.

Symbolic interactionism was also influenced by Charles Darwin in the belief that humans should be understood from a naturalistic, not a supernatural, perspective. In addition, Darwin's theory of evolution also influenced Mead's view of humans. Humans, in Mead's view, are unique creatures based on their ability to think and communicate symbolically with themselves and others. Therefore, everything related to humans is believed to be a process, not something that is stable and fixed. The influence of Darwinism is strong, it can even be said that the basic concepts of Mead, which later also played a central role in the development of the symbolic interactionist perspective, such as the concepts of truth, self, and symbols, cannot be separated from the influence of Darwinism which tends to be a naturalist and evolutionary.

Behaviourism from John B. Watson had a fairly strong influence on Mead's thinking, especially the basic idea from behaviourists which stated that the most scientifically valid way to understand all animals, including humans, was through their behaviour. Mead adds social conditions that must be considered when observing human behaviour. Mead argued that when we observe an actual action, we must always pay attention to what is going on in terms of definitions, interpretations, and meanings (11).

American pragmatism, especially the views of John Dewey, influenced Mead's views in his thinking (13). Pragmatists argue that humans are creatures that are in a continuous process of adaptation in a constantly changing social world. The existence of the mind proceeds through contemplation of a situation that may occur.

In addition to the three models of thought embodied in Mead's ideas above, the historical roots of this symbolic interactionism perspective cannot be separated from the two main figures of classical sociological theory, namely Max Weber and Georg Simmel. Max Weber can be said to have had a fairly strong influence on this perspective through his *Verstehen* method. *Verstehen* is to understand human actions and the meanings contained in those actions objectively, this method is the beginning of the formation of interpretive sociology. In addition, Weber's theory of action, which emphasizes the individual's interpretation of situations and the importance of subjective meaning, greatly influenced the early development of the symbolic interactionist perspective.

Meanwhile, Georg Simmel's contribution to this perspective can be seen from his basic idea about a society which he views as an interaction system, which places the individual as the most important part of the social system, where it is at the individual level that the interaction process occurs and then echoes to form society. The term Simmel uses to describe this process is "geometry of social space."

In the following discussion, we will look at the basic terms developed by this perspective to see the social reality that exists in society.

### **3.2 DEFINITION OF TERMS**

There are some key terms that we need to understand before we can further describe how this perspective works. Some of these key terms relate to definitions of the meaning of symbols, self, social interaction, and society.

Symbols in this perspective are defined as social objects that are used to represent whatever is agreed to be represented. That said, most human actions are symbolic because they are intended to represent something beyond the first impression we receive, such as someone smiling when they like the person they are talking to, or someone turning on a car's signal light to indicate that it is turning. Likewise, with other objects. Flowers, for example, can be symbols, but they can also not be symbols. When flowers are used as medicine or for food, they are not symbols. But when flowers are used to express love for others, then they become symbols.

The second key term, namely the definition of self. "Self" is defined as a social object that the actor acts on. That is, sometimes the actor or individual acts on the environment that is outside of him, but sometimes he also takes action that is intended for himself. By making the "self" as a social object, a person begins to see himself as an object separate from other social objects around him because in interacting with others, he is designated and defined differently by others, for example: "you are a student", or "you are a smart student". This of course indicates that the "self" will always be defined and redefined in social interactions according to the situation at hand. Thus, the issue of self-assessment and identity is also closely related to the situation of how a person should define and categorize himself.

The third term we need to pay attention to here is the concept of social interaction. In the perspective of symbolic interactionism, social interaction is defined in terms of three things: shared social action is symbolic, and it involves role-taking. A simple example to illustrate social interaction is the game of chess. When a person moves a chess piece, often he or she has a plan to move the next chess piece. However, when the opposing party responds by moving certain seeds, then he will try to interpret his opponent's move, try to understand the meaning and intent of the opponent's move and then try to be able to determine the best step to take, even though the move is different from the previous plan. From this simple example, it is clear that in social interactions we learn about other people and expect something from that person through taking roles or understanding situations through other people's perspectives to understand ourselves deeply, what we do, and expect. Therefore, interpretation becomes the dominant factor in determining human action. Unlike most psychological theorists who see human action based on a stimulus and response approach, however, after humans receive a response, they will carry out an interpretation process first before determining what action to take.

The fourth term which is quite basic in the perspective of symbolic interactionism is the concept of society. In line with the previous basic concepts, which emphasize the importance of the individual and interaction, this perspective sees society as a process where individuals interact with each other continuously. Blumer himself asserted that society could form from social actors who interact with each other and from their actions about others. So it is clear that society is individuals who interact with each other, adjust each other's actions during the interaction, and symbolically communicate and interpret each other's actions. Therefore, it can be said that society is a product of individuals who are seen as actors who are active and always in process.

Finally, it can be concluded here that symbolic interactionism is a perspective through four basic ideas. First, symbolic interactionism focuses more on social interaction, where social activities dynamically occur between individuals. By focusing on interaction as a unit of study, this perspective has created a more active picture of humans and rejected the passive picture of humans as determined organisms. Second, human actions are not only caused by social interactions but are also influenced by interactions that occur within individuals. Third, the focus of this perspective is all forms of action that are carried out in the present, not in the past. Fourth, humans are seen as more difficult to predict and behave more actively, that is, humans tend to direct themselves according to the choices they make.

### **3.3 BASIC CONCEPTS**

Three basic premises are the basis of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969, p. 2), which are: (1) humans act toward things based on the meanings those things have for them. (2) the meaning of these things comes from or arises from the social interactions that a person has with each other. (3) these meanings are handled and modified through the interpretive processes used by the person in dealing with the things he or she encounters. The meaning of objects, for example: (1) the meaning of physical objects, such as houses or chairs; another human being, such as a father or a shop clerk; (2) the meaning of human categories, such as enemy or

friend; institutions, as government or schools; guiding ideals, such as individual independence or honesty; (3) the meaning of other people's activities, such as their orders or requests; and such situations as individual encounters in daily life.

From the three premises put forward by Blumer, we can conclude that the position of the meaning of the symbol is very important because it becomes the basis for humans to take action. In addition, this also indicates the importance of the other three key terms in understanding the perspective of symbolic interactionism.

In addition, Blumer, (1969, p. 68-69) explains some important points in object/symbol analysis, namely:

- (1) The nature of an object is shaped by the meaning it has;
- (2) This meaning is not intrinsic to the object but arises from how the person is initially prepared to act towards it; they vary in meaning, for example, a tree is not the same object for a forest scholar, forest entrepreneur, a woodcutter, a botanist, or a poet; a star is a distinct object between modern astronomers and ancient herders;
- (3) Objects—all objects—are social products in which they are formed and transformed by the process of meaning that occurs in social interactions. The meaning of objects—trees and stars or something else—is formed by the way others refer to those objects or actions toward them;
- (4) People are prepared or arranged to act toward objects based on what the objects mean to them. The human organization consists of meaningful objects, that is, their tendencies to act on their meanings;
- (5) Human actions are interpretive actions made by humans themselves. A person can freely organize his or her actions to respond immediately; examine an object, think about it, draw up a plan of action in that direction, or decide whether or not to act in that direction.

### **3.4 SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM METHODOLOGY**

Blumer asserts that the methodology of symbolic interaction is a direct study of social phenomena. Blumer himself directs the methodology of symbolic interactionism as exploration and participation (Blumer, 1969, p. 40). The methodology aims to obtain a clearer picture of what is going on in the research subject's field, with an attitude that is always alert to the urgency of testing and correcting observations. The result of this observation is referred to by Blumer as an act of "expanding the concept" (increasing the sensitivity of the concept used). The principles of the symbolic interaction methodology developed by Denzin are as follows: (1) Symbols and interactions are fused. It's not enough if we just record the facts. We also have to look further than that, namely looking for contexts so that those symbols and their true meanings can be captured; (2) symbols and meanings cannot be separated from personal attitudes, so the subject's identity needs to be "captured". Such understanding of the subject's concept of identity is important; (3) Researchers must at the same time link between symbols and identity with the environment that becomes their social relationship. The concept of identity is related to the sociological concept of social structure, and others; (4) Situations that describe symbols and their meanings should be recorded, not just recording sensual facts; (5) The methods used should be able to reflect the form of behaviour and the process; (6) The method used should be able to capture the meaning behind the interaction; (7) Sensitizing, which is simply directing thoughts, is compatible with symbolic interactionism, and when it begins to enter the field, it needs to be formulated into more operational ones, becoming scientific concepts.

In symbolic interactionism, the researcher's first step is to explain the process of how meaning is formed. In addition, it also reveals how the nature of meaning is represented in the interactions between or among human beings. The second step is to understand this meaning through interpretation.

Blumer proposes a symbolic interaction methodology by understanding the world as a whole and analyzing it in terms of participant actions and interactions through exploration and inspection. Researchers must be able to actively interact with the people being studied and see things from their point of view and in their natural context. Therefore, when adopting symbolic interactionists, researchers must be actively involved in the study, for example by using participant observations.

## **IV. DISCUSSION**

The perspective of symbolic interactionism is very different from phenomenology. The phenomenological approach according to Moleong, (2007) seeks to understand the meaning of events and their relation to people in certain situations. Phenomenology does not assume that researchers know what things mean to the people they are studying. Phenomenological inquiry begins in silence. Silence is an action to capture the meaning of something that is being studied. While symbolic interaction understands the meaning of the consequences of the interactions that occur.

The emphasis of phenomenology is the understanding of the subjective experience of events and their relationships that surround the subject. Example: research on communication phenomena related to the level of trust of the recipient of the message to the message conveyed. Researchers try to understand how the recipient of

the message responds to each message conveyed. For example, from observations, researchers found the fact that message recipients had negative (bad) experiences with messages that (turned out) could not be verified. From this incident, their view of the credibility of the message giver (communicator) becomes bad. For this incident, in the view of the messenger who has low credibility, every message conveyed is always responded to negatively (untrusted). Conversely, messages that include direct and tangible evidence make the recipient of the message immediately feel the truth of the message so that trust can appear instantly. From this phenomenon, the researcher raises a theory or model of communication, namely a communication model with direct and real evidence so that every message conveyed is directly felt by the recipient of the message.

If phenomenology focuses on understanding the subjective experience of an event, then symbolic interaction focuses on interpreting the subjective meaning that arises from the interaction with other people or the environment. Symbolic interaction gives rise to a special meaning and gives rise to interpretation or interpretation. Symbolic comes from the word 'symbol', which is a sign that arises from the result of a mutual agreement. How things become a shared perspective, how an action gives special meanings that are only understood by the people who do it, how these actions and perspectives affect and are influenced by the subject, are all studied by symbolic interactionists. So the researcher tries to 'enter' the process of meaning and define the subject through the participant observation method.

For symbolic interactionists, 'meaning' is one of the main elements in understanding human behaviour, interactions, and social processes. They claim that investigators need to 'grasp' the meanings experienced by participants in a given context to reach a full understanding of social processes. In this case, symbolic interactionists have much in common with phenomenologists in their emphasis on individual life experiences, the inner world of human behaviour, understanding the meanings felt by participants, and understanding situations from the participant's point of view.

The thing that is no less important in symbolic interaction is the subject's self-conception. As the subject sees, interprets, and defines himself or herself based on the definitions and meanings given by others.

## V. CONCLUSION

So, the basic difference between symbolic interaction and phenomenology arises from the meaning of the word itself: interaction and phenomenon. Phenomenology focuses on understanding the subjective experience of natural phenomena (phenomena) or events and their links, while symbolic interaction rests on the interpretation of subjective (symbolic) meanings that arise from the interactions. In phenomenology, like a photographer, the researcher 'records' the world (subjective experiences, thoughts, and feelings) of the subject and tries to understand or explore it, while in symbolic interaction, the researcher interprets the symbolic meanings that arise from the interaction of the subject with his environment by entering the world and exploring the process of meaning.

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