A Study of Symbolic Interactionism and Communication from the Perspective of American Social Psychology

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The concept of 'symbolic interactionism' has been particularly compelling since its inception as a method for studying human group life and human behaviour. Symbolic interactionism represents one of the most sociological reserach projects in social psychology, and the founders of communication, such as Lazarsfeld, Lewin, and Hovland, are all related to social psychology. Therefore, this article will attempt to answer the following questions through a historical review of the development of social psychology in the United States: symbolic interactionism is so closely related to communication studies, but why is it gradually missing in the establishment of communication studies? Can symbolic interactionism have a new academic resonance with contemporary communication research?

Introduction

The understanding of the genesis of communication research has remained, for quite some time, under the largely accepted framework of Harold Lasswell, Paul Lazarsfeld, Kurt Lewin, Carl Hovland, and Wilbur Schramm. However, since the 1980s, many American communication scholars have noted the thoughts of the Chicago School of Sociology and research findings, and believed that it occupies an important place in the history of communication. Take Everett M. Rogers as an example. In *A History of Communication Study*, Rogers traced the European ideological origins of American communication and gave the Chicago School of Sociology a significant position (Rogers 2012). It is no coincidence that Armand Mattelart referred to the Sociology Department at the University of Chicago as the cradle of communication sociology in the United States. In *Media and the*

American Mind: From Morse to McLuhan (1982), the historian Czitrom also introduced three theories for looking at the new media. In addition to the empirical school that emerged in the 1930s and the technological determinism of Harold Innis and McLuhan, there was also the sociological thought of Cooley, Dewey and Park, representatives of the Chicago School of sociology.

While the Chicago School of Sociology has profoundly shaped and influenced the direction of mass media, the history of its engagement with mass communication researchers is also a history of missed connections and opportunities (Wahl-Jorgensen 2012: 1). The concept of 'symbolic interactionism' has been particularly compelling since its inception as a method for studying human group life and human behaviour. Symbolic interactionism represents one of the most sociological research projects in social psychology, and the three scholars mentioned above, Lazarsfeld, Lewin, and Hovland, are all related to social psychology. Therefore, this article will attempt to answer the following questions through a historical review of the development of social psychology in the United States: symbolic interactionism is so closely related to communication studies, but why is it gradually missing in the establishment of communication studies? Can symbolic interactionism have a new academic resonance with contemporary communication research?

Chicago School of Sociology and American Social Psychology

The Chicago School of Sociology introduced European sociological thought to the United States. Darwin's evolutionary ideas had a profound influence on the Chicago School of Sociology, and Spencer's theory of the social organism was what initially drew Charles Cooley and Robert Park to sociological research. In terms of their influence on and contributions to communication, Mead, Dewey, Cooley and Park are most noted. These four men have influenced each other in their academic research and their contributions to communication studies are reflected at different levels. Mead's ideas about communication in symbolic interactionism reflected the School's basic position and understanding of communication. Park's study of immigrant newspapers was the first to specifically explore the mechanisms of the role of modern mass media in society. In general, they shared the ideals of moral progressivism and had great expectations of the functions of modern media, which they believed will contribute to the formation of a better social community.

Chicago scholars examined communication from the perspective of the overall process of society, and they gave communication a very important place when exploring the relationship between the roles of social communities. The main academic fields of the Chicago School of Sociology are divided into two branches: social psychology and urban sociology. 'The theoretical conceptual system of personality socialization centered on human communication' undoubtedly refers to the former, that is, 'symbolic interactionism' (Turner 2002: 310). The academic origin of social psychology as the main content of Chicago sociology is related to the popular paradigm in early American sociology. Lester F. Ward, the founder of American

sociology, followed in the footsteps of the early French mass psychology and socio-logical theory represented by Jean Gabriel Tarde and had a strong belief in the use of psychological laws to explain social processes. In the late nineteenth and early twen-tieth centuries, a whole generation of American sociologists carried on the tradition of Ward's psychologism and successfully passed the thought of social psychological from the European continent to the United States. It was proposed that sociology is a psychological science, and a social relationship was essentially a psychological rela-tionship. At the same time, Georg Simmel, one of the founders of German sociology, defined society from a psychological perspective and regarded all forms of interac-tions that arise between individuals as society. He was interested in the interplay between objective (macro) and subjective (micro) cultures (Ritzer 2000: 494). 'Small, Cooley, Thomas, Park, and others of the Chicago School of Sociology, were attracted to Tarde's individual psychological approach and Simmel's symbolic inter-actionism' (Remmling 2020: 26). It is not surprising that the 'latent academic climate' gave rise to the symbolic interactionism of which Mead was the synthesizer, bearing in mind that social psychology was the most common professional choice of American sociologists until the 1930s, a time when the Chicago School ruled.

Symbolic interactionism is a scion of 'sociological social psychology' (SSP). SSP focuses on understanding two kinds of social phenomena: the first is the feelings, thoughts, and behaviours of social actors. And the second is the relationships of these feelings, thoughts and behaviours to the social context in which they occur (Crawford and Novak 2014: 4). SSP emphasizes that 'the understanding of values, social attitudes and social behaviour is directly related to society, social groups and institutions' (Tomasi 2019: 674).

> Symbolic interactionism emphasizes process rather than structure, yet it does not ignore the latter in favor of the former; and while it frequently puts the individual in center stage rather than the society, it recognizes their mutual dependence. (Hewitt 1976: 7–8)

Most notable among the champions of symbolic interactionism is Maines, who asserts that the study of the negotiated order in symbolic interactionism is the study of mesostructure (Low and Thomson 2021: 98).

Another strand of social psychology is 'psychological social psychology' (PSP), which is concerned with how to introduce social variables into laboratory experi-ments, by manipulating and controlling them. 'PSP has little interest in culture or in the ways in which individual conduct is socially organized and directed' (Charles 2018: 32). Rather, PSP argues that the social behaviour of individuals is observed and explained through the manipulation and control of social variables (Tomasi, 2019). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, social psychol-ogy emerged from a common 'marginal' problem between the two fields of knowl-edge, sociology and psychology. The special status of the discipline has led to the existence of two different approaches from the beginning.

Scholars of the Chicago School of Sociology did not examine the manipulation and influence of media technology development from an economic and institutional

perspective, and were blind to how the new technologies of the era evolved from uto-pian ideals to commercial machines, making their optimistic expectations of modern communication technology somewhat untenable. However, the emphasis on social communication process made their ideas very inspiring and opened up a wide space for the study of media-society relations.

Symbolic Interactionism and Communication Research: An American Social Psychology Based Fundamental Theory of Communication

Symbolic interactionism is both a theory and method. It is particularly useful for understanding attitudes, motives, and behaviours and how individuals interpret experiences and events (Carter and Alvarado 2018: 2). Symbolic interactionism was first developed by George Herbert Mead as a reaction against psychology's 'kinds-of-people theories' and sociology's 'kinds-of-situations theories' (Larsen and Wright 1986: 4). He tried to develop a kind of social psychology, which aimed at treating people as a product beyond their conditions (Hartley 1992: 4). After his death, Mead's students compiled his writings so that his works were the treatment of the philosophy of symbolic interactionism (Hartley 1992: 4). Aubrey Fisher wrote that symbolic interactionism, which he called the interactional perspective, was the most humanistic of communication perspectives because it 'exalts the dignity and worth of the individual above all else' (Fisher 1978: 166). The name 'symbolic interactionism' came from the works of Blumer, who also wrote one of the clearest expressions of the philosophy and implications of symbolic interactionism (Hartley 1992: 4). Blumer laid out the tenets of symbolic interactionism in four basic premises:

> (1) individuals act based on the meanings objects have for them; (2) inter-action occurs within a particular social and cultural context in which physi-cal and social objects (persons), as well as situations, must be defined or categorized based on individual meanings; (3) meanings emerge from inter-actions with other individuals and with society; and (4) meanings are con-tinuously created and recreated through interpreting processes during interaction with others. (Blumer 1969: 61)

Symbolic interactionism as a social theoretical framework is based on the hypothesis that our social world is constructed through the daily behaviour of social interaction. Through the repetitive behaviour of interaction, each person as an actor in relation to social communities forms symbolic and shared meanings. Importantly, symbolic interactionism does not deny the unique. It is directly concerned with how distinctive meanings are adapted and interpreted through social practice (Casino and Thien 2020: 178).

Symbolic interactionism has nearly a century as an approach to understanding human communication, which centres on the subjective interpretation of meaning by individual actors. With its roots in pragmatism (Dewey), social theory (Mead, Blumer), and later social psychology (Goffman), symbolic interactionism contends

that humans interpret and assign meaning to events via an elaborate set of symbols (Casino and Thien 2020: 180). The meanings of these symbols or signs generate and develop through human social interactions. These interactions constitute the basis for individuals' conceptions of self and society. Therefore, the physical world, as well as notions of self, is constructed through interactive behaviours and social behaviours. Symbolic interactionism is a micro-level theory that deals with how the social world is created and maintained through continuous and varied interactions among individuals. It is useful in the study of communication because it explains meaning creation among interlocutors, and symbolic interactionism is a theory of language, communication, and socialization (Fernback 2019). Symbolic interactionism does not deny that social institutional structures are important. Rather, it focuses on the behaviour of meaning construction – the repeated and important interactions among individuals, and with environments which construct the social order. During the 1980s and beyond, subjective epistemology gained academic value with the interpretive turn in social theory. It was also since then that symbolic interactionism began to become more prominent and influential in other theoretical strains, including identity theory, feminist and queer theories, post-structuralism, critical race theory, and theories of performativity (Fernback 2019). Methodologically, symbolic interactionism's emphasis on symbolic meaning and interpretive epistemology, compel it toward discourse and textual analysis, ethnography, observation, and performance studies (Fernback 2019). With its broad perspectives, symbolic interactionism has gained status in the study of communication (Fernback 2019).

We can draw the following three points from the above discussion. First and foremost, symbolic interactionism is a philosophical theory of democratic practice. This theory addresses important issues such as the formation of the self, the collaboration and cooperation of people in social organizations, and the ways in which modern society is spiritually cohesive. Ultimately, it points to the way in which a democratic system might exist. It investigates consciousness, meaning, and the emergence of the self in the context of specific and ongoing interaction, which overturns the rationalist view of the essence of the human world in the history of western thought. Symbolic interactionism regards human interaction by means of symbols as the main mechanism of self-formation. Through interaction, people acquire concepts of self and other, on the basis of which they can make the necessary social emotion, social cognition and social judgment for effective social coordination and social organization. This specific human interaction is a necessary condition for the survival of democracy. Cooley, Mead, and Dewey not only elaborate on how people interact through symbolic mediation to form the self at the micro level, but also push this interaction into a broader social arena. In addition, they push the linguistic symbols through which people interact with each other into a more diverse and complex system of mass communication symbols. They saw the importance of mass communication in coagulating the spirit, creating public opinion, and expressing opinions.

Second, symbolic interactionism is also a set of social psychological theories about self-formation and the role-playing of the self in society. Symbolic interactionists' explanations of self-formation are basically psychological explanations. For this

reason, Cooley proposed the famous 'looking-glass self'. Mead also basically constructs theories about the relationship between self and society from a psychosocial perspective, whose 'I', 'me' and 'the generalized other' are almost an updated version of Cooley's theory.

Third, symbolic interactionism is also a communication theory about interpersonal communication, interpersonal interaction, and meaning sharing. In the field of social sciences, symbolic interactionism is the first systematic discussion of the important role of symbols in interpersonal interaction, interpersonal communication, and meaning sharing, and their significance for the coordination of social organization. Symbolic interactionism is the most original and fundamental theory in the field of interpersonal communication. Furthermore, symbolic interactionism also addresses the importance of interpersonal communication for the creation of spiritual community.

More specifically, it is the symbolic interactionism as a philosophical and communication perspective that has had a major impact on American communication research, while the symbolic interactionism as a social psychology does not seem to have had much impact on subsequent American communication research. This is closely related to the trend of empirical and scientific social psychology in the United States. This is because empirical and scientific social psychology has had a greater impact on American communication research. Exceptionally, in the 1940s, Katz and Lazarsfeld rediscovered the existence and importance of interpersonal communication networks in their research on the role of mass communication in democratic elections and political voting, which led to the development of a two-step flow of communication, for which Cooley's primary group theory provides a footnote.

Applied Trends: The Social Context of Communication Development in the United States

After 1920, empiricism, individualism and application became the three pillars of social psychology. Experimentalism is primarily a matter of methodology. In the spirit of progressivism and scientism that influenced all social disciplines in the United States, psychology strove to become a discipline that could be used to predict and control human behaviour, to explore the laws of behaviour, and to join the ranks of the 'true sciences', such as the natural sciences. After the First World War, psychology evolved from an emphasis on instinct to an emphasis on acquisition, and Watson's behaviourism rapidly dominated the whole of America. At the same time, pragmatism was losing ground in the Roosevelt era in favour of logical positivism, which had its origins in the Vienna School and was based on the idea that science has proved to be the most powerful method of human understanding of reality and the production of knowledge. Therefore, the task of epistemology should be to explicate and formalize this scientific method so that it can be adopted by new disciplines (Lee 2020). The dominance of pragmatism in American philosophy was gradually

replaced by logical positivism and the conclusion of the zeitgeist of the 1930s and 1940s, which was 'the application of all forms of scientific methods to the study of psychological problems with great enthusiasm' (Fishman 2016: 72). This led psychologists to establish the belief that 'important and complex social events and phenomena could be quantified, that the variables of groups and societies could be manipulated experimentally, and that the laws governing group and social life could be revealed' (Lee 2020). Logical positivism was of great importance to psychologists in their search for 'scientific magic', forming a natural-scientific model of research that led directly to psychology's formal axioms of theory and operational definitions of theoretical terms (Gao and Xing 2021: 182), first defining theoretical terms operationally, then expressing the theory as a set of axioms to derive predictions, testing the predictions experimentally, linking theory to observation with operational definitions, and finally revising the theory according to the results of observation. In a similar vein, Lewin's main contribution to social psychology was to bring to social psychology research methods that included concepts borrowed from the natural sciences, such as topology, vectors and fields, and to make extensive use of mathematical models, and mathematical and physical language in psychology. Psychologists in the Second World War applied mathematical models to social psychology extensively as they worked on various issues such as morale, propaganda, and attitudes. Thereafter, mathematical theories related to communication would bring a more solidly structured mathematical model to social psychology.

The development of 'attitudes', a core concept in social psychology, typically reflects these characteristics. In 1918, Thomas and Znaniecki of the Chicago School of Sociology defined social psychology as 'the scientific study of attitudes'. In 1925, the American psychologist Thurston studied psychophysics and demonstrated that the same methods used to develop subjective psychometric scales for physical stimulation could also be used to develop 'attitude' scales for social stimulus. During the same year, Bogardes successfully conducted the first scientific study of attitudes by measuring social distance. In both historical and methodological terms, social distance theory represents a turning point in the development of social psychology, as researchers have used objective outward behaviour rather than subjective self-reports as a measure of raw reflection (Gao and Xing 2021: 185). In the 1930s, in the context of the tendency to study individuals and small groups, Moreno created the sociometry of a comprehensive measure of all social relations (Stats 1991: 900), which was a quantitative technique for describing the attraction and repulsion between individuals within a limited group. It has had a huge impact on the field of small group research and applied research in social psychology. Together, these two theories ushered in the era of attitude measurement from the late 1920s to the post-Second World War era. From the 1930s, the main concept of social psychology, 'attitude' was further studied, and measurement systems were effectively applied to the nature, origin, direction, and control of attitudes. Meanwhile, the atmosphere created by the theories and research of Freud, and psychoanalysts Moreno and Lewin, turned the solution to the practical technique of 'interpersonal relations' (Green 2017: 107).

The importance of information flow in social groups has been noted, and efforts have been made to find ways to understand how information flows, and to study the 'communication routes and networks' in groups. The combination of attitudinal research and communication is mainly reflected in the communication research at Yale University, led by Hovland, who used experimental psychology to study social communication, and spent 15 years investigating the presentation and effects of persuasive communication alone. At the beginning of the Second World War, Hovland and others made remarkable progress in effectively demonstrating the relationship between message communication and attitude change. Hovland introduced both persuasive research and experimental methods to communication (Simonson and Park 2017), leading Schramm to name him one of the 'four founders' of communication. It is worth considering that 'the impact of the research was limited compared to the decades of effort invested by Hovland and others … never made it off the Yale campus as a fundamental orientation of postwar social psychology' (Beard 2007: 344). The reason for this is that the orientation of the Yale research community is toward problem and empirical research rather than theory, and 'researchers have been overly committed to empirical research, neither focusing on theoretical guidance nor building any systematic theory of the communication and persuasion process' (Löblich and Scheu 2011).

In terms of 'individualism (small group)', it is affirmed that the 'individual' is the dominant value in American society, and this system believes in the variability of human nature, and that changing the 'individual' can change his or her social behaviour and even society. So the study of social psychology was gradually limited to the inner reflection of the 'individual' to social stimuli. PSP focuses its research on the description of personal behaviour, primarily the influence of others on personal behaviour. In the 1930s, the United States was in the shadow of the Great Depression, and a series of problems such as immigration, juvenile delinquency, and children's education were getting sharper. The social problems of these small groups have further become a major object of study in social psychology. These experiments became the direct precursors of Lewin's group dynamics. Although Lewin's early studies focused on individuals, he insisted on the principle of wholeness and the importance of the living space in which individuals live, both in field theory and in topological psychology. He firmly believed that 'the soundness of society depends on the soundness of the group; the scientific method can be used to improve the life of the group' (Axelrad 2015: 388).

From another point of view, the rapid development of industrial production and the great progress in science and technology at the end of the nineteenth century inevitably placed higher demands on the labour force, requiring social disciplines to study behavioural adaptations in the service of increasing productivity. In terms of political climate and ideology, the United States has been in the midst of intense social change and reform movements since the twentieth century, while the social dislocation caused by the war required a new ideology to unify the American mind, and progressivism sought to maintain a stable social order by controlling people behaviourally. All these factors require a psychology that aims to serve the maintenance of social

order, the preservation of social stability and the promotion of productivity. The outbreak of the Second World War stimulated the prosperity of social psychology in the United States and became the most influential external factor in modern social psychology, as 'psychological social psychologists' engaged in a series of practical tasks such as selecting recruits, boosting morale, propaganda against the enemy, military training, and improving communication between black and white soldiers, bringing social psychology to the forefront of the social sciences. It became a prominent part of the social sciences.

So, it seems that from the 1920s onwards, social psychology completed its Americanization. This is reflected in a shift from descriptive to empirical, from qualitative to quantitative, from theoretical to applied, from large group analysis to individual and small group research, and from universalism to particularism. There were also various shifts in the social sciences during this period: psychology moved from an emphasis on instinct to an emphasis on acquisition, and Watson's behaviourism rapidly dominated the whole of America; the empirical tendency was also firmly established in sociology, and Comte's ideal became a reality in America, and there was a surge of field research on non-Western peoples (Gao and Xing 2021: 186). It was also during this period of the Second World War that 'Schramm's model of communication was born' (Löblich and Scheu 2011 7–9). We can clearly identify the purpose of administrative research based on attitudinal change and effects research, the microcosmic orientation, the positivist methodology, and the behaviourist object of research, which corresponded clearly to the 'social psychology of psychology' (PSP) that was developed after the creation of American communication science (Huang and Li 2006: 17).

Symbolic interactionism, generally speaking, as a micro view, has a strong anti-positivist tendency and is essentially interpretivist and idealist in orientation, which lies between structuralism and psychological reductionism (Carter and Alvarado 2018: 13). Symbolic interactionists assume that social reality is not something that already exists, but is created when people communicate with each other (Carter and Alvarado 2018, 13). For example, your friends and you have the following conversation:

Your friends:	What are you doing?
You:	Going out.
Your friends:	What are you going out for?
You:	Nothing.

'Nothing' is a response that refuses to answer. Obviously, your friends are expecting a response such as: where you're going, when you'll be back, etc. But your answer clearly indicates the request to end the conversation as soon as possible. This shows that 'nothing' as a reality is not something that existed prior to the conversation. Rather, the 'nothing' is something you, collectively with your friends, are creating here and now through the use of verbal and non-verbal communication.

Symbolic Interactionism Fades from the Academic Perspective of American Social Psychology

In the 1940s and 1950s, the Iowa school, led by Kuhn, launched a critique of the theories of Mead and others and created a system of 'twenty statements test' (TST). TST is now the most widely used technique in the study of self-concept, with over 100 published studies using TST, and it attracted national attention when used on early astronauts (Watkins 1997: 630). Scholars who kept pace with the Iowa School of interactionist thought use a logical positivist and deductive approach to the study of interactions, often involving processes of identification by individuals or groups (Carter and Alvarado 2018: 4). Kuhn argues that interactionism is riddled with too many methodological problems, that neither the general approach nor the research path are clearly defined, the concepts lack operationalization, the main ideas need to be grasped intuitively rather than inferred rationally, there are no measurable assumptions established, the conclusions are not supported by empirical facts, and that it has no clear and distinct methodology of its own (Nash and Petras 1976: 829). Kuhn summarized the 'most important contribution of the Iowa School' as 'the key concepts of symbolic interactionism that can be made operational and successfully used in empirical research'. It is easy to see that the foundations of his argument echo the foundations of PSP, and the success of this change may be further evidence of the inevitable marginalization of early symbolic interactionism from the American discipline of social psychology. McGinty argues that whether or not a symbolic interactionist addresses social structural issues reflects their professional socialization, in particular whether or not they identify as an Iowa, Indiana, or Chicago School interactionist (Low 2021: 105).

In this way, the symbolic interactionism faded from the academic perspective of social psychology before the Second World War. The reasons for this can be found in the following aspects. On the one hand, interactionism retains a considerable degree of philosophical and humanistic tradition in its theoretical construction, trying to explore the nature of mind, self and society by describing the process of interaction, while social psychology and the whole psychology discipline under the guidance of PSP are mainly concerned with people's externalized behavioural state, behaviour prediction and behaviour control. Second, social psychology has embraced the experimental method and operationalism as the guiding principles of research methodology. Cooley, Mead, and Blumer, on the other hand, advocated an empathic, introspective approach to experience in the manner of the client. Third, Mead and others were more concerned with the construction of the theoretical system itself, and less interested in how to make it an operational, applied strategy for social reality, let alone an aid to politics or business.

Conversely, psychologists in the PSP branch have continued to write, defending, revising and adding to their theories, creating a broad spectrum of scholarship. Thus, symbolic interactionism, 'a theoretical perspective that places communication at the center of how human nature is formed and changed' (Azarian 2021: 6), did not become the entry point of communication in Schramm's vision. He chose Lewin,

Hovland, and Lazarsfeld not only because of his personal influence in the Statistics Bureau and the Wartime News Bureau during the Second World War, but also because they were closely related to the historical thoughts of the entire social psychology department at that time (Huang and Li 2006: 17).

In the 1960s and 1970s, the United States experienced the most serious social crisis after the war, but social psychologists were helpless in the face of major problems that society urgently needed to solve. This situation has caused Western social psychology to encounter the first deep crisis in its history. European scholars have described the social crisis as a litmus test of the immaturity of the entire modern social psychology field, as represented by the United States. The reasons for this are, first, the obsession with the empirical approach of the natural sciences, the excessive fascination with microscopic research that collects 'empirical data' with the help of precise methods, and the claim to be 'value-neutral' like the natural sciences – this obvious 'method-centric' tendency creates a clear tendency to reject or even abandon theory. This has led to the difficulty of experiments that cannot truly reflect objective social facts and inevitably neuter the social content of reality. Second, the study of social psychology is specific to each of the tiny areas of social activity where its practicality is most immediate and obvious. It inevitably avoids the more general questions concerning the nature of human social development and human behaviour (Stagner 1950: 163). This is because those principled theoretical explorations of macro social phenomena do not satisfy the 'realized value' and 'effect' criteria of applied research (Curtis 1956: 269). Third, individualism not only confuses the dialectical relationship between groups and individuals, but also fundamentally contributes to the failure of social psychology as a whole to examine the sociality of individuals in the context of wider social life (rather than just small groups) and the lack of theoretical insight into macro-social processes.

In the face of a communication science dominated by effects research and administrativism, James W. Carey argues that its primary orientation toward serving politics, business, and psychotherapy has not only failed to clear up the confusion of modern culture, but has had the opposite effect. Rooted in the communication research of the 'Four Founders', such as Hovland and Lewin, it focuses on persuasion, impact, attitude change, dissonance and balance, and use and satisfaction. In a nutshell, the extremely rich and universal nature of the phenomenon of communication is reduced to an instrument of political commercial power. For symbolic interactionists, communication is 'the process of replacing a merely psychological and instinctive order with a rational and moral order among people' (Gabatz et al. 2017: 3). Human society has developed as a communicative community, and the need to communicate is so primitive and fundamental a feature of human nature that we cannot regard it as separate from or additional to the need to think and to live. As a result, symbolic interactionists focused on the study of human communication processes as the key to solving social problems. Going back to symbolic interactionism, we find that the question of communication should be essentially about society, in relation to the nature of the society around which we are created and in which we live. For ordinary people, it is just a series of daily behaviours: talking to each other,

communicating knowledge, enjoying entertainment, engaging in discussion, obtaining information. Communication research should not be dedicated to political and commercial applications and control, nor is it a scientific tool free of ethical and value issues, but it should contribute to expanding people's power to learn and exchange ideas and experiences.

The model of communication research created by Schramm is only a narrow interpretation of 'communication', reflecting only a cross-section of the relationship between communication and society (Huang 2003: 446). The definition and meaning given to 'communication' by symbolic interactionism prompts us to re-investigate the essence of communication and communication research, providing value for correcting the chaotic social situation, reshaping a common culture, and rebuilding authentic and harmonious human relations.

Conclusion

In 2003, Sandstrom and Fine predicted that, in the future, symbolic interactionism would become more characterized by theoretical and methodological diversity and that the methodological differences among those in the Chicago tradition would begin to diminish (Carter and Alvarado 2018: 12). In fact, we cannot discuss the scientific mission and historical destiny of symbolic interactionism, social psychology and communication in an abstract and narrow way. Only by taking human thought as a whole can we obtain a completely open theoretical vision. Communication has its own unique perspective, but in a society where media technology is developing rapidly, we need to update our understanding of human communication phenomena and realize that communication is much more than just the efficiency of information transmission; it is also a matter of 'thing', 'body' and even 'virus'. Only by fully exploring new perspectives on 'communication' can we give communication the vitality to continue to move forward.

The French social psychologist S. Moscovici was adamant that 'social psychology can only be developed by studying social processes broadly in the context of society as a whole' (Moscovici 1975: 261). The future of the symbolic interactionism and communication research seems bright, as evident by the continued development of the field (Carter and Alvarado 2018: 14). Many approaches of contemporary communication research continue to be influenced by symbolic interactionism, including cognitive communication, communication theory, semiotics, social media, and the study of social problems. As long as communication scholars remain interested in micro-level communication phenomena and the relationship between the individual and society, symbolic interactionism will not disappear completely from communication studies. In addition, research methods related to symbolic interactionism will continue to develop and improve as more interdisciplinary researches emerge.

In general, the Chicago School of sociology, as the genesis of American communication thought, is sensitive to the value and meaning of modern communication in social systems and reflects a strong pragmatic tradition that emphasizes the utility of

the practical sense. After the mid-1950s, American social psychological theory diverged, new research methods and perspectives were adopted, and more radical theories were developed. As we clarify its trajectory in the history of social science thought, we gain a new understanding of why the proposition of 'communication' that it pioneered has become a faded entry point in communication research, and what problems this absence has led to. We should think about this question next: with the prevalence of social media, what new insights can communication studies gain from symbolic interactionism?

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