

Existential and Sociological Interpretations of the Concepts “Situation” and “Context”

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Existential thought is a broad and ambiguous intellectual and cultural movement which developed in Western Europe in the first half of the XX century. Existential thinkers, and those influenced by existentialism in different areas of arts and sciences, emphasize the individual's struggle to find or create meaning, and implied that the meaning of a human act is related to the immediate cultural, social, and historical context or situation. The emergence of “situational ethics” was one development influenced by existential ideas. This paper analyzes these ideas about “context” or “situation,” first by some existential progenitors, and then by social scientists who have sought to integrate core existential ideas or themes into contemporary social science; symbolic interactionism, dramaturgical sociology, ethnomethodology, grounded theory, and existential sociology.

1. The Concept of Situation in Existentialism

The literature of existentialism emphasizes the nature of the individual's struggle to find or create meaning, often in a world where meaning is absent, problematic or uncertain. There is an assertion that all individuals are free, but this does not mean that they are absolutely free. All individuals are born into a family, culture, community, nationality, religion (or none), racial or ethnic group, and they do not so much “choose” these as they are “thrown into them” (Martin Heidegger). All individual choices are embedded in social, cultural, political, and historical situations or contexts. Are individuals 99% free or one percent free? Existentialists would find

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this question entirely uninteresting, because whatever the answer or percentage, there remains an essential openness to discretion, interpretation, and choice.

An individual can approach his or her life “in good faith,” which means an acceptance of one’s freedom to make choices in response to situations, or “in bad faith,” which means a denial of one’s agency, often with attribution of agency to external circumstances, people, or structures. Sartre emphasized individual responsibility for making and then owning the products of one’s choices, and this perspective is developed in his *Being and Nothingness* (1956).

Many of the existentialist novels and plays dramatize individuals’ agonizing struggles to find and create meaning, and to live in good faith. How do existentialists define “the situation” an individual is thrown into? There are many different answers to this question in existentialist literature, and these answers demonstrate the various individual responses to critical situations (Camus, 1948), the difficulties of existential choice (Sartre, 1947), the alienation and absurdity of conventional existence (Sartre, 1964), the anguish about the meaningless shell of social being (Dostoyevsky, 1970; Tolstoy, 1960), and many other depictions of overlapping personal, social, and cultural situations involved simultaneously.

Existential writings present individuals and their actions in situations; subjective, emotional, personal, interactional, familial, political, cultural, historical. There is no consensus concerning the significance or priority of these. The implication is that individuals are embedded in many of these situations, and thus a truthful representation must articulate their interrelations. For anyone interested in a methodological program, it is unclear how this is to be done.

2. The Concept of Situation in Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is both a theoretical and methodological position, growing out of American pragmatism, and arguably most closely associated with the seminal works of George Herbert Mead (1863-1931). There are many controversies about symbolic interactionism as a theoretical perspective (Bales, 1966; Blumer, 1966, 1979, 1983; Campbell, 1983; Fine and Kleinman, 1986; Fisher and Strauss, 1979; Lewis and Smith, 1980; Rochberg-Halton, 1983; Habermas, 1987; Athens, 2009a,

2009b), and controversies about its methodological program (Douglas, 1970; Denzin, 1994, 1996; Maines, 1996).

The words “symbolic interaction” were never used by Mead himself, but were the words of Herbert Blumer, used to describe the essence of Mead’s thought. Blumer’s *Symbolic Interaction* (1969) explicitly seeks to articulate the general principles of symbolic interactionism as a theoretical and methodological position. Symbolic interactionism seeks to study human meaning, and the context which has definitive influence is the *face-to-face* situation.

Individuals may approach a given face-to-face situation with a complex combination of attitudes, beliefs, opinions, knowledge, intentions, purposes, perspectives, orientations, or any other abstract cognitive set, but all this pales in significance to the immediate social encounter with one or more others. Whatever the cognitive, emotional, or interpersonal ingredients brought to a situation by a given actor, these have to be expressed and *negotiated* with or against other social actors in the immediate situation. As a methodological plan, these ideas emphasize actual observations of what people really do in concrete situations, as opposed to what they might say about what they do.

One early interactionist was Charles Horton Cooley (1864-1929), who emphasized the role of emotion and subjectivity in human meaning. For Cooley, reality was located in the human mind, but his concept of the “looking glass self” reflected an awareness of how individuals take into consideration the perceptions and actions of others in the social setting.

Another early progenitor, William I. Thomas (1863-1947), thought that individuals’ attitudes were influenced by the situation, and he explicitly adopted a *situational analysis* in his classic work co-authored with Florian Znaniecki *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918-1920). Thomas is well known for the concept *definition of the situation*, the individual’s unique perceptions and reactions to a social context, and the famous Thomas Theorem: “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (1928: 571).

For Thomas and Znaniecki it is clear that “the situation” has broader parameters than the face-to-face encounter, taking into account the larger social, political, and historical forces of Polish immigration. But when the time came for Blumer to distill these early influences into a “first principle” for symbolic interaction, he considered the face-to-face encounter of two or more individuals to be the basic building block for further studies.

3. The Concept of Situation in Dramaturgical Sociology

The sociological contributions of Erving Goffman are legendary, and in a series of books spanning three decades he analyzed how people presented themselves in public situations, and how they interacted with one another. Like Georg Simmel, Goffman is very interested in social forms, and he seeks to know how members of society create and maintain social meanings through these forms. Goffman distinguishes between public settings and private settings by using a dramaturgical metaphor of “front stage” and “back stage”. Like Mead, Goffman felt that the self, as a concept, was best seen as being constituted by the definitions of others, but, unlike Mead and the early progenitors, Goffman saw one’s self-presentation as a highly problematic and uncertain enterprise, and potentially subject to many conflicts or break-downs. Mead and Goffman both believed that human social interaction obtained its meaning from the efforts of the individuals to try to understand what the other was intending, and then trying to make actions in light of this. While Blumer thought people presented their self in a more or less straight-forward manner, Goffman asserted, that individuals try to use *impression management* in order to gain advantage from the other.

The image of the self in Goffman’s *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) is that of human selves oriented to the responses and approval of others, but in *Asylums* (1961) he shows how individuals can break away from the exigent social conventions (“secondary adjustments”), even within the confines of a “total institution,” which seeks to control all aspects of everyday life. His *Behavior in Public Places* (1963) seeks to elucidate the taken-for-granted forms of social interaction in public settings, and then *Interaction Ritual* (1967) and *Relations in Public* (1971) describe the situations where individuals co-operatively produce meanings and order. They often seek to construct “normal appearances” to manage the exigent moment, or engage in “remedial interchanges” when things go awry. In the latter works, Goffman does not treat all individual performances in public settings as equal, but differentiates them according to the relationships which exist between parties. The presented self in the first book suggests the social self is a chimera, with little substance lying behind the masks of impression management, drifting in the winds of the immediate face-to-face encounter. In the latter works there is a suggestion that behind all these

appearances lays some kind of social actor, but from Goffman we learn little about the substance of this social self.

The face-to-face social situation receives its greatest emphasis from Herbert Blumer, but Goffman adds several layers of complexity to this. For Goffman, the exigent social and culture forms, the relationship between the social actors, and the socially organized collaboration also receive their due.

4. The Concept of Situation in Ethnomethodology

Following Garfinkel's programmatic *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (1967), ethnomethodologists seek to study the methods people use to make sense of their actions or situations. This approach is derived from phenomenology, but differs in terms of its focus on specific, concrete situations in everyday life, and the purpose to study and understand how commonsense cultural actors make sense of their situations (rather than making some interpretation of how they do that).

Ethnomethodologists study everyday life, the ordinary, taken-for-granted world of practical actors going about their business. Their larger theoretical interest lies with grasping the social and communication competencies of social actors, so this means that ethnomethodologists tend to have relatively little interest with feelings or emotions, one of the main interests of existentialists and existential sociologists, and, in addition, they have little interest in selves, socialization, communities, and meanings, as do symbolic interactionists. The interests of ethnomethodologists are more cognitive, on what social actors know and assume about their interactions and negotiations with others.

An important concept in ethnomethodology is "indexicality." Garfinkel attributes the origins of this interest to Husserl's writings about "indexical expressions" (Garfinkel and Sacks, 1970:342). Indexical expressions or communications are those made by speakers, during the context of an on-going conversation or other communication, which make reference to (or "index") part of the situation or communication itself. These indexical expressions are often critical for speakers and hearers to know the meaning of what is being said or communicated. While philosophers and other observers have noted the existence of such statements for over 2,000 years, the preferred approach has been to try to "remedy" this problematic feature of human communications by substituting more objective or trans-situational terms, but Garfinkel and the ethnomethodologists feel that such

indexicality is “irremediable” (Garfinkel and Sacks, 1970). Their view is that indexicality is one of the formal properties of common sense.

Even if the reality of indexical expressions is accepted, there remains an issue of *how* indexical they are, or to what extent are human communications or meanings dependent on the immediate situation. Garfinkel’s view is that such expressions are “awesomely indexical” (Garfinkel, 1967:51), which means that the meaning in one situation cannot be abstracted or compared with the meanings in different communicational contexts. Of the various views about the situated or contextual nature of human life we review here, this position of the ethnomethodologists appears near one end of the continuum on this matter.

5. The Concept of Situation in Existential Sociology (California School)

Jack Douglas and his students have made explicit efforts to use existential ideas in their researches. They have been prolific, producing over 80 books and 700 articles in sociology and related fields since the 1960s, including a programmatic trilogy on “existential sociology” (Douglas and Johnson, 1977; Fontana and Kotarba, 1984; Kotarba and Johnson, 2002). Andrey Melnikov earlier called this “the California School of Existential Sociology”, to differentiate it from other varieties (Melnikov, 2008).

Studies of the California School take their beginnings from specific individuals and groups in actual situations of everyday life, and usually seek to understand feelings and emotions, in addition to the cognitive aspects of “defining a situation,” which means they generalize beyond the kinds of face-to-face situations considered by Blumer to be definitive of meaning, and the kinds of public situations studied by Goffman many times. Furthermore, many of these studies have taken as their mission to explore the connections, or interpenetrations, between individuals and social institutions (Douglas, 1971, 1988; Altheide and Johnson, 1980; Altheide, 1985, 2002, 2009; Patricia Adler, 1985; Kotarba, 1980; Fontana, 1977, 2010; Warren, 1985; Adler and Adler, 1991, 2004, 2010). These studies commonly address power and domination by grasping who or what groups are able to define situations for others.

The focus on emotions is what clearly distinguishes the California School from most research guided by symbolic interaction, dramaturgy, ethnomethodology, or grounded theory, thus influencing how one

conceives “the context” of social acts. According to this position, social actions fuse cognitions and emotions for individuals in actual situations (see Douglas and Rasmussen, 1977; Douglas and Atwell, 1984; Adler, 1980; Ferraro and Johnson, 1983; Altheide, 2002, 2009; Kotarba and Vannini, 2009; Cuthbertson and Johnson, 1995). The California School clearly asserts that there is a primordial self which is the agent of social interaction, a “brute being”, as Douglas (1985) says, an emotional self which acts to produce the appearances of everyday life, the public performances and impressions managed by Goffman’s actors, or those who engage in the face-to-face encounters so important for Blumer. These studies of everyday life do not deny the reality of *indexical expressions*, but think that good sociology involves showing the linkages between social contexts or situations.

The California School has used and advocated field research, or participant observation, as the preferred method to gain deep immersion in social settings (see Johnson, 1975), but over many decades they have expanded and modified the traditional approaches (Douglas, 1976; Adler and Adler, 1987; Fontana, 2002; Johnson, 2002; Altheide, 1986; Kotarba and Vannini, 2009; Altheide and Johnson, 1994, 1997, 2011). The California School field researchers advocate extensive immersion and involvement in the daily lives of those they study, developing relationships of trust and caring, and often serving the communities they study. In some cases the observers have been members or former members of the settings they study, and in other cases they seek membership knowledge by their long commitments. The main idea is to develop a strong empathy with the cultural members of a setting, so that one can comprehend and know the meanings of actions and behaviors to those who do them. By implication they do not feel that the indexical expressions of the members of some setting are so “awesomely indexical” that it makes no scientific sense to generalize beyond those situations, as many of these researches address larger issues of socialization, identity, community, deviance, institutional response, and history. Existential sociologists of the California School feel it is important to describe the particular facts and features surrounding the observations or data collection, so that readers may make their own assessments about whether to trust them.

6. The Concept of Situation in Grounded Theory

Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM) also first developed in California, initially animated by the prolific researches of Anselm Strauss and Barney Glaser, and in many respects closely aligned with many of the issues of symbolic interaction, dramaturgy, ethnomethodology, and existential sociology. GTM is a method for discovering, developing, and articulating *theory*. One fundamental idea of GTM is to begin this process with a deep immersion in, and close familiarity with, the concrete situations one elects to study, and from highly detailed (“thick”) descriptions, discover or articulate progressively more abstract concepts which remain true to the settings and the knowledge of the participants. The animating conception of this approach is contained in Glaser and Strauss (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, but subsequent important elaborations have been contributed by many others (Glaser, 1978; Glaser and Strauss, 1965; Strauss and Corbin, 1990, 1997, 1998; Charmaz, 1991, 2006; Clark, 1998).

The initial focus of GTM did not emphasize the context/situation of action. The early emphasis was on a “social worlds perspective” (Strauss, 1978, 1984), which directed researchers to construct abstractions from the conversations or communications they encountered in their field settings, to grasp the conceptual maps used by commonsense actors. As GTM developed over time, however, there was a progressive focus on the context/situation of an action in order to understand its meaning (see Clark, 2005:1-81). Since the early progenitors of GTM were Chicago School sociologists, GTM expresses many of the symbolic interactionism interests in self, socialization, identity, community, interaction, change, and so on. Since GTM is an approach to discover and develop theory, the researches in this tradition tend to be more abstract and less ethnographic, as compared with the California School discussed earlier. The goals of GTM are not aimed at description of some social setting, but at moving across situations or contexts in order to grasp or articulate what such situations have in common.

7. The Concept of Situation in Macro-Existential Sociology

Edward Tiryakian is another productive voice who, for over five decades, since the appearance of his *Sociologism and Existentialism* in 1962, has sought to integrate the themes in existentialism and phenomenology into sociology. His intellectual projects have always had a larger, or “macro”, focus on social structure or historical sequences, and, therefore, some might think of it as a kind of ‘macro phenomenology’ or

“macro-existential sociology,” animated by the relationships between the contents of consciousness and the changing historical or cultural milieu (see Tiryakian, 1973). Tiryakian concentrates his sociological study on macro manifestations of the individual existential categories described by existential thinkers (authenticity, choice, becoming, openness, situation), and has generalized these categories as “existential model of the self” (Tiryakian, 1968).

Tiryakian argues that the concept of situation has a phenomenological meaning which differentiates it from the notion of physical environment, and also transcends it. Social interactions are always situated, and psychological definitions are produced by the persons involved. In a sense, the situation is a factor which transforms an individual into a person, concretizes the self, and actualizes the “physical locale of potentiality” (Tiryakian, 1968: 84), that is, activates the meanings that person finds in natural reality. This is why the same physical object can have different meanings for different social actors. Demanding response, the situation is always related to the person (my situation, their situation, etc.), and, equally, the person is always committed to the situation, and the level of commitment correlates with the level of self-authenticity, varying from total personal engagement to formal, conventional responses. One of the crucial forms of personal relatedness to reality is boundary situation, or *Grenzsituation* (Karl Jaspers), which, in its social dimension, means the breakdown of conventional institutional props, and demands total self-involvement.

Tiryakian has tried to verify his theoretical position in his various empirically-focused researches. Studying a colonial African society, he analyzes societal manifestation of an existential phenomenon of alienation. In his studies of religion he reveals a realization of individual religious inspiration in collective forms of action (revolution, social movements). In examples of war, violent conflict, and disaster, he tries to find the essence of boundary situations at a macro-level. Analyzing nationalism and ethnicity, he describes expression of subjective existential identity at a level of total society (macro-stigma, the nation as a “becoming”). All these examples are brought forward to demonstrate how individual existential categories are reflected in *societal existence*, and how personal situations are becoming interpersonal and societal situations.

8. Conclusion

Existential philosophy and literature, symbolic interactionism, dramaturgical sociology, ethnomethodology, grounded theory, and existential sociology share an interest in human meaning, foundations and boundaries of our experience in the everyday world. While all recognize that social meanings are constructed in a social, cultural, community, and historical context/situation, these views do not converge on the question of how best to approach this contextualization. At one end of the continuum are the more radical ethnomethodologists, who assert that human meaning is so indexical that it is inappropriate to abstract it beyond the parameters of the immediate conversational situation. Blumerian symbolic interactionism restricts the focus on context to the immediate face-to-face situation, and Goffmanian dramaturgy highlights the differences between public and private situations, as adumbrated by complexities of individual and personal relationships. The California School of existential sociology and GTM are closer to traditional anthropological or Chicago School naturalism, including considerable variation in how context/situation is conceived in a particular research project. The view of macro-existential sociology, at the other end of the continuum, holds that some meanings, such as national identity, are relatively stable across some duration, and thus it is acceptable and normative to seek these larger patterns of societal existence.

Today, the interpretive traditions discussed here promote a wide range of scientific and other goals, and so it is important for the practitioners of each perspective to describe for readers the conditions of their research, and the nature of their research decisions and choices. In this manner, the practitioners of the interpretive traditions can enhance and communicate the trustworthiness of their efforts.

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