LETTERS

THE CONSTITUTION OF EMERGENT INTERACTION ORDERS: A COMMENT ON RAWLS

Stephan Fuchs
University of California/Riverside

Ann Warfield Rawls ("The Interaction Order Sui Generis: Goffman's Contribution to Social Theory" Sociological Theory 5, 1987:136–149) proposes the convincing argument that Goffman's microsociology offers more than thick descriptions of behavioral subtleties in the dramaturgical staging of self-presentations. Rawls claims that Goffman's more systematic contribution to social theory crystallizes in the notion of an interaction order sui generis. "Sui generis" means that the dynamics of interaction orders cannot be reduced to either societal macrostructures or to the contingencies of particular encounters. However, if we accept this claim, the task is to determine what constitutes the emergent and irreducible character of interaction orders as opposed to other types of social orders. Following Goffman, Rawls herself only vaguely suggests that emergent interaction orders employ "ground rules" and "involvement obligations" without specifying how these rules and commitments constitute the emergent quality of interaction systems. Rules and normative commitments are also employed by formal organizations, and therefore cannot explain why it is useful to interpret interaction orders as realities sui generis. This would require a theory of how interaction systems differ in kind from other types of social systems; and only such a theory could successfully resist reductionist strategies.

Niklas Luhmann's (1982, 1984) theory of social systems offers, I believe, a more comprehensive approach to analyzing the interaction order as an emergent type of social system. Luhmann distinguishes three types of social systems (interaction systems, organizations, and society) according to the different principles of self-selection and boundary maintenance they employ (Luhmann, 1982, 1984). As opposed to society and organizations, interaction systems emerge as soon as copresent interactants perceive mutual perception and select their communications accordingly. All participants in interaction systems know that they are being perceived, know that others know this, and thus must mutually adjust communicative selections. In interaction systems, it is impossible not to communicate; and even the refusal to communicate is itself a communication of conflict. Copresence is the constitutive self-selection and boundary maintenance principle of interaction systems: only those who are copresent can decide who is copresent, who belongs to the system, and who (or what) belongs to its environment. Copresence accounts for the duality of sensory perception and meaningful communication that is specifically characteristic of interaction (but not: of organizational and societal) systems. Only interaction systems can utilize perception to achieve tacit pre-communicative agreements about what the world is like. Common perceptions support participants' certainty that they are living in the same world. Perception permits the fast and simultaneous processing of information, whereas communicative suggestions must always be structured sequentially in interaction systems: participants in interaction can perceive the world simultaneously, but they can talk only one at a time.

Moreover, perception permits the indirect and nonverbal communication of gestures that can interpret, modify, emphasize, or even substitute explicit talk. Being together, lovers can sometimes understand each other without talking. Copresent interactants can pause to observe, and then resume communication about what was being observed. Perception provides a pool of information from which communications can be selected. The duality of perception and communication typical of interaction systems explains the importance of the "face" and the "body" in encounters (Giddens, 1984). The body has its own language which can only be spoken in interaction systems utilizing sensory perceptions. In this sense, common perceptions constitute the "frames" or "backgrounds" for meaningful and explicit communicative exchanges. The ethnomethodological notion of "context" (Garfinkel, 1967) refers in part to the tacit understandings and implicit agreements made possible by common perception under condition of copresence.

The "emergent" quality of interaction systems, then, depends on the duality of sensory perception and explicit communica-
tion made possible only by copresence. On the other hand, however, copresence imposes typical constraints on the systemic complexity of interactions. As opposed to organizations, for example, interaction systems can deal with only one topic at a time. The sequential organization of communicative suggestions implies that interactions often run out of time: participants have obligations outside particular encounters. Finally, unlike organizations or society, interaction systems are not complex enough to build subsystems specializing in particular tasks (e.g., conflict resolution).

Luhmann’s theory helps us understand more systematically the emergent, irreducible properties of interaction systems observed by Rawls. As realities sui generis, interaction systems must autopoietically demarcate themselves from personal systems or individuals, from other interaction systems, and from other types of social systems. These demarcations explain Goffman’s rich and detailed descriptions of encounters in a more systematic way. First, in regard to personal systems, interaction systems must be equipped to handle the unforeseeable contingencies of individual minds through drawing and maintaining systemic boundaries. Individuals can disrupt interaction through surprising innovation, misplaced and “inappropriate” behaviors, through remarks that are simply “out of place”. To suppress such possible disruption, interaction systems use embarrassment, but once embarrassing gestures or remarks have been emitted, tact is employed to treat embarrassing communications as if they had not occurred. Tact and embarrassment thus demarcate interaction from personal systems by protecting interaction from being disturbed by the unpredictability of consciousness. In this interpretive light, Goffman’s (1959) accounts of “frontstage” vs. “backstage” performances, for example, refer to self-presentations facing boundary maintenance restrictions vs. presentations “relaxing” from interactive control.

Systemic boundary maintenance also explains the importance of spatial organization of encounters (Giddens, 1984), and the “ritual” character of interactions (Collins, 1975). Through the spatial distribution of bodies and faces, interactions signal who is considered as participant or outsider. During parties, small units of interactants form “circles” to demarcate membership from non-membership; although in this case, boundaries are highly transparent. Routinized interaction systems (e.g., small groups), on the other hand, use rituals and ritual objects to identify members and out-groups. Finally, with respect to other types of social systems (organizations, society), the duality of perception and communication made possible by copresence identifies interactions and demarcates them from the environment of non-interaction systems.

This three-fold system of self-selection and boundary maintenance accounts, I would suggest, for the “emergent” and irreducible character of interaction systems. Moreover, as indicated, this three-fold system of boundary maintenance operations can probably structure the rich but highly descriptive and unsystematic microsociological material on face-to-face interactions. Most importantly, however, interaction systems are realities sui generis because only interactions are able to utilize the duality of perception and communication. To be sure, organizations and society “employ” interactions, but neither society nor organizations are interaction systems. Similarly, all interaction systems “use” individual minds, but interactions do not “consist” of individuals; just as it would be inappropriate to say that since individuals “consist” of cells, we can properly capture the meaning of “individuality” in terms of association among cells.

SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR THE MICRO-MACRO DEBATE

Rawls correctly concludes that a theory of emergent interaction orders prohibits reductionist strategies; and this is also Luhmann’s position (Luhmann, 1984). Radical microsociologies, on the other hand, argue that “translating all macrophenomena into combinations of microevents” (Collins, 1981:262) is necessary because

—only microsocial events provide “primary data” for the “ultimate empirical validation” of all sociological knowledge (Collins, 1981);
—all causal explanations must ultimately refer to individual reasons and motives (Giddens, 1984); and because
—macrostructures are best understood as “aggregates” of microevents emerging from “repetitions” of encounters in “interaction ritual chains” (Collins, 1981).

I would suggest that all these arguments supporting radical microsociological reductionisms are—at best—highly misleading. The
concepts of “individual” or “interaction” for example, are in no sense less abstract and more empirical than, say, the concept of “state” or the Watson-Crick model of DNA. The idea that microphenomena are somehow “more real” or “more empirical” than macrophenomena rests on the flawed and hence abandoned logical positivist program to ground all knowledge in the absolute certainty of sensory perceptions that tell us what reality really looks like. But sheer perception does not tell us what individuals or interactions really are; just as it does not tell us what states, revolutions, or molecules really are.

“Translating” our macro- into microconcepts does not give us a more empirical sociology, it just replaces one set of abstract concepts by another. Shakespeare’s “Romeo and Juliet” does not become more real if we translate the semantics of love and passion into statements about hormonal processes; instead, we would erase one language game and make the world a lot less interesting place to live in.

With respect to causal explanation, I do not think that we could generally improve the explanatory power of statements such as “revolutions are caused by the disorganization of states” if we had “primary data” about opening and closing rituals in conversations (between whom?); as Collins (1981) appears to suggest. Causal explanations are attempts of making sense, making sense requires particular languages appropriate for particular purposes, and I cannot see why there should be only one language: that of microsociology into which all other languages must be translated to make our accounts more empirical and causally stronger. The pragmatist theory of language and meaning (Rorty, 1979) suggests that particular language games do not differ in their capacities to mirror nature and objective reality, they only differ in their usefulness for particular descriptive and explanatory purposes. Thus, if we want to explain why particular individuals behave the way they do, we employ the semantics of reasons and intentions, but if we are interested in why revolutions occur, we employ the semantics of structure, mass movements, economic change, etc.

Finally, it seems to me that popular microsociological claims about macrostructures forming “aggregates” of “repeated” microevents and interactions (Collins, 1981; Giddens, 1984; Knorr-Cetina and Cicourel, 1981; Alexander et al, 1987) evidence rhetorical awkwardness more than a clear conception of how macrostructures can be “decomposed” into microevents. If participants repeat an interaction episode, the result is repeated, possibly routinized interaction, but not a different type of social system (e.g., an organization). Repeated interaction systems still employ the self-selection and boundary maintenance principles of interaction systems and these systems are still based on the duality of perception and communication made possible by copresence. Kinship societies repeated and routinized interactions over very long periods of time, but their organizing principles nevertheless remained close to copresence typical of (extended) interaction systems. Not surprisingly, then, Collins’ (1981) metaphor of “interaction ritual chains” creating macrostructures seems to capture best the extension of tribes and clans though marriage exchanges. Or, to use different words, how could one show that Wallerstein’s world system “aggregates” Schegloff’s conversational turn-taking sequences?

REFERENCES

INTERACTION VS. INTERACTION ORDER: REPLY TO FUCHS

ANNE WARFIELD RAWLS
Department of Philosophy, Oakland University, Rochester, Michigan

In his comment on my paper “The Interaction Order Sui Generis. Goffman’s Contribution to