**SOC 3120 Social Psychology**

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**Overheads Lecture 13: The Definition of the Situation:**

\* Behavior cannot be explained solely as result of social/cultural forces

\* Acts are formed on the basis of definitions of the situation.

**The Definition of the Situation:**

\* Definition of the situation is complex

\* "Situation" used differently than common sense meaning:

- spatial boundaries

- temporal boundaries

\* Not same definitions as physicists

-spatial: perspective of actual or potential participants

shared ideas

meaning emerging over time

linked in roles, acts, objects & larger social units

-temporal: emergence

present experienced in terms of past and future

present is specious: consciousness always moving

through time

meaning an emergent property of objects

\* Both kinds of location relative - not absolute: cognitive maps

\* While often routine, both may be suddenly transformed.

\* What is definition of the situation?

-one's cognitive idea of location in time/space

-constrains way we act

-what we "know" about what will happen/ who makes it happen

-rooted in role-taking and role-making, familiar objects,

and cooperating in social acts

-more or less shared by participants (may be somewhat

incongruous and still operate)

**Routine and Problematic Situations:**

\* Most conduct routine: based in relatively congruent definitions, objects, roles and activities experienced before

\* Many such actions appear:

- quite habitual

- socialized/anticipated by culture

\* More complicated than this:

- don't learn all possible definitions

- not all situations require us to apply pre-established definition

- people are confronted with unexpected/novel events

- every situation a bit different than expected

- we don't learn a fixed and closed set of definitions, but

an open system in which interpretation is necessary

- original definitions may be wrong/new meanings created

- self-conscious control of conduct becomes necessary

\* Problematic situations:

- what's problematic in situation contrasted with what's not

- some situations are themselves problematic

- may be redefined, undefined, or defined less congruently

- such reconstruction overcomes bafflement

\* Routine and problematic situations two end-points on continuum.

**Role Making and Role Taking in Routine Situations:**

\* How does role-taking occur?

\* Assumption that situations will be routine. 3 Assumptions:

1. That one's conceptions of the situation are valid;

2. That others in the situation share one's conceptions of it;

3. So long as these allow meaningful conduct to take place, there is no need to question assumptions.

\* People organize meaning thematically: relating everything to particular theme and documenting them accordingly (e.g. class)

\* Themes fit together: acts, objects, participants, setting. Elaborated over time.

\* The more situational objects/events can't be tied in, the harder people search for/ try to create meaning (e.g. self-fulfilling prophecy).

**The Cognitive Bases of Role Making and Role Taking:**

\* Must consider kinds of "knowledge" used in role taking/making

\* What people know and what they do are interdependent because:

1.People need grounds for deciding between alternative acts

2.People must be alert to alternative possibilities for their and others' acts.

\* Emotions often important in defining situations as well.

\* Phenomenological tradition specifies how knowledge informs role taking and making.

\* Basic premises:

- members of society share a common stock of knowledge

- not random

- structured body of knowledge and procedures for using it

- true in a practical sense: helps people effectively decide what to do

and to interpret what others are doing.

**Typification:**

\* People know what to expect in particular situations because they "know" various "types" of people behave in "typical" ways under particular circumstances

\* Typifications = a set of expectations and assumptions about what particular others usually, ordinarily, generally or typically do.

\* So long as others' conduct falls within the typification, others can make sense of it, and the identity and definition of the situation goes unchallenged.

\* Typification with respect to a particular role, situation, person or object organizes or catalogs knowledge of it

\* Typification proceeds on visible and auditory cues: maintained and refined over time.

\* People act on basis of typifications:

- role taking depends on

- role making may also involve desired typifications

**Probability:**

\* What people "know" organized by probability

\* Makes sense of activities of others/possible responses

\* Fills in room for interpretation not covered by typifications

**Cognitive Theories and Inferential Heuristics:**

* Inferential heuristics are rules that people use to guide interpretation in situations of uncertainty. They enable people to use typifications.
* Examples: representativeness, consistency, and economy.
* Such stereotypes can usefully speed along interaction with minimal effort, yet can also be subject to error and result in unfairness.

**Causality:**

\* We generally assume an event has a cause/ need to know to respond effectively

\* Helps make sense of events/actions (particularly problematic ones)

\* Different societies/communities operate on different causal propositions

**Means and Ends:**

\* Recipe knowledge: procedures followed to secure ends

\* Double function:

- basis for action to secure goals

- frame for interpreting/ predicting actions of others

**Normative Standards:**

\* Judgements in terms or moral appropriateness/necessity

\* Not standard sociological view that norms determinative

- attention usually more focused on social objects, goals,

making sense of situation, etc. rather than norms

- typicality, probability, causality, means and ends all

ingredients/ arise before norms considered

- norms typically enter consciousness in problematic

situations/ action uncertain or questionable

\* This approach to social norms makes them a less significant aspect of social life than ordinarily thought: merely one of several forms of knowledge employed.

**Substantive Congruency:**

\* The definition of the situation itself= a form of "knowledge" employed when we attempt to discern whether others' acts seem to be based on the same definition we hold.

\* "Substantive congruency" = condition in which various participants in a situation can regard each other’s acts as sensible

\* Reality test: "what does the situation look like from the other person's point of view?"

**Conclusion:**

\* Each above form of knowledge - or ways of knowing - come into play at various points as roles are taken and made in social situations.

\* Humans must simply know a great deal in order to interact with one another: the possibilities for misunderstanding and misinterpretation are considerable.

\* Aligning actions help bridge this gap (next class).