

# Contents

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<i>Acknowledgements</i>	x
<b>1 Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
Micro and Macro Social Theory	1
Interpretive Approaches	4
Micro Social Theory and Sociological Theorisation	5
Outline of the Book	7
Further Reading	11
<b>2 Chicago Sociology</b>	<b>12</b>
Introduction: Chicago School and Micro Social Theory	12
Origins: Pragmatism and Social Darwinism	12
Small and the First Generation	14
Robert Ezra Park	15
Natural Areas, Natural History, ‘Naturalism’	18
Cultural and Natural Orders	19
Immigration and Race	21
Chicagooan Studies	23
Case Study: W. I. Thomas and F. Znaniecki (1958) <i>The Polish Peasant in Europe and America</i>	25
Critique	26
Conclusion	28
Further Reading	29
<b>3 Symbolic Interactionism 1 – Origins</b>	<b>30</b>
Introduction	30
Origins	31
What is ‘Symbolic Interactionism’?	33
George Herbert Mead – His Philosophy and Social Psychology	34
The Self, Mind and Society	35
‘I’ and ‘Me’	37
Play and Game	38
Role	39
Society	39
Case Study: Time	40
The Influence of Mead’s Work	41
Critique	43

Conclusion	44
Further Reading	44
<b>4 Symbolic Interactionism 2 – Developments</b>	<b>46</b>
Introduction	46
The Development of Symbolic Interactionism	46
Herbert Blumer’s Symbolic Interactionism	47
Blumer and Mead	49
Critique of Blumer	51
Varieties of Symbolic Interactionism	53
Qualitative Research and ‘Interactionism’	53
Case Study: Deviancy Theory and Careers	55
Critique	57
New Developments	58
Conclusion	60
Further Reading	61
<b>5 Erving Goffman</b>	<b>62</b>
Introduction	62
The Origins of Goffman’s Work	62
Drama	65
The Self	67
Interaction Order	70
Co-presence	71
Ritual – Regions and Frames	72
Case Study: E. Goffman (1972) <i>Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behaviour</i>	73
Critique	75
Conclusion	77
Further Reading	78
<b>6 Phenomenology and Ethnomethodology</b>	<b>80</b>
Introduction	80
Phenomenological Sociology – Origins:	
Husserl and Schutz	80
Critique	83
Case Study: P. L. Berger and T. Luckmann (1971) <i>The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge</i>	85
Ethnomethodology – Origins	86
Members’ Methods	88
Accountability	90
Conventional Sociology	90
Ethnomethodology and ‘Misconceptions’?	92
Critique	93

Conclusion	95
Further Reading	96
<b>7 Subjective Experience, Feminism and Sociology</b>	<b>97</b>
Introduction	97
Varieties of Feminist Theory	99
Critique of Sociology	101
Experience, Reflexivity, Interdisciplinarity	102
Feminist Methodology	105
Case Study: The Family	107
Feminist Theorisation and Micro Social Theory	109
Conclusion	111
Further Reading	112
<b>8 Theoretical Developments in Micro Social Theory</b>	<b>114</b>
Introduction	114
Exchange Theory	114
Rational Choice Theory and Control Theory	116
Network Theory	120
Michel Foucault – Discourse, the Body and Discipline	121
Anthony Giddens – Structuration: Legitimation, Domination and Signification	124
Conclusion	131
Further Reading	132
<b>9 Substantive Developments in Micro Social Theory</b>	<b>134</b>
Introduction	134
Community and Place	134
Time	138
Emotions	139
Friendship and Intimate Relations	142
Narratives	148
Body	149
Conclusion	152
Further Reading	152
<b>10 Conclusion</b>	<b>154</b>
The Micro Social Theory Tradition as a ‘Cluster’	154
Action and Structure	155
Conclusion: Micro Social Theory and Sociological Imaginings	159
<i>Glossary</i>	<b>161</b>
<i>Bibliography</i>	<b>165</b>
<i>Index</i>	<b>179</b>

# 1

## Introduction

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### Micro and Macro Social Theory

In using ‘micro social theory’ in this book we are primarily dealing with its part in sociological theory while recognising various influences on such theorisation outside the discipline of sociology. Micro social theory is commonly associated with interpretive, ‘subjective’, small-scale theories – even sometimes termed ‘social psychological’ approaches to the understanding of social life with attention to agency, biography or subjectivity, social interaction and social process. Micro social theory is also often contrasted with ‘macro’ approaches within the discussion of the ‘micro–macro issue’ in sociology. In fact, it can be argued that ‘All fields of empirical enquiry face a macro/micro problem in some form’ (Barnes 2003: 339). Thus, study in a particular discipline can either start with recognition of the distinct case and its features or from a view that specific instances are merely part of a broader conglomeration. Whichever the starting point, issues arise regarding how ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ ‘things’ can be connected, how the investigation of ‘the one should be related to enquiries in fields that study the other’ and the extent to which they can be studied separately (Barnes 2003: 339).

The terms ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ are commonly used within sociological discussion – they form part of the sociological ‘language’ but nevertheless need some exploration. A short answer to the nature of their usage is that they are associated with different kinds of theory and analysis – although they can be more related than first appears:

Micro analysis or ‘microsociology’ concentrates on the more personal and immediate aspects of social interaction in daily life. Another way of saying this is that it focuses on actual face-to-face encounters between people. Macro analysis or ‘macrosociology’ focuses on the larger-scale more general features of society such as organisations, institutions and culture. As such, macro phenomena are more ‘impersonal’ since they often appear to be more remote from daily activities and personal experience such as emotions and self-identity. (Layder 1994: 1)

The distinction between ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ theory or the problem of how they may be related can be a ‘shorthand’ for a range of associated issues or important

'dualisms' in sociological theory. So, alongside the polarity of 'micro-macro' there are a number of others that have played an important role in social analysis, such as action-structure and individual-society, that it often seems to subsume or mask (see Layder 1994: 2-7; Jenks 1998; Robertson 1974; Parker 2000: 91). The distinction between micro and macro theorisation often refers to the difference of 'size' or 'level' – i.e. between society and situation. Also, usually a notion of 'structure' (commonly as institutions or as social stratification – class, gender, ethnicity, age, etc.) has been equated with the macro 'level', while 'action' has been equated with the micro 'level' (as social interaction; social situations and the activities of individuals). The former has had more 'static' connotations; the latter associated with change, choice, and social processes. In my view we can retain the micro-macro distinction while also allowing for 'structure' at both 'levels' – as part of individual and group interaction in social settings as well as in its more traditional usage.

Faced with this micro-macro issue, theorists have responded in different ways, for example, some emphasising micro analysis at a 'low level', some seeing micro phenomena as the 'building blocks' of macro phenomena or as the macro in miniature. Others have challenged the 'duality' itself (e.g. Giddens – see Chapter 8), or seem not to recognise its relevance (e.g. Foucault and postmodernist/poststructuralist writers – see Chapter 8). While yet another group argue that the distinction is important as the basis of continued theoretical debate, insight and development (see Robertson 1974; Parker 2000: 109). What is necessary, in my estimation, is for some differences to be recognised between 'social levels' – some notion of stratification – which is able to conceive in a complex, productive manner micro-macro; agency-structure; individual-society; process-stasis (and other) distinctions not as oppositions but rather each as tendencies towards polarities which intersect. Thus, in this manner, I would argue it is possible to distinguish separate 'orders' or 'elements' while also recognising interconnection. This view recognises that we can argue that there are 'dualisms' (or polarities) in social theorising between social interaction or situation and the 'wider' society, while also we can see interconnections ('a duality') between these levels. The macro and micro 'levels', I would argue, can be studied both 'in their own right' as well as operating together in a dynamic, interrelated way.

Much discussion has taken place in sociological theory regarding overcoming the 'traditional' separation between macro and micro theory. Two very influential theorists – Giddens and Foucault (discussed in Chapter 8) – have been commonly criticised by commentators for going too far in eroding the macro-micro distinction by seeing an essentially 'flat' society – without levels or 'stratification' – as witnessed, it is said, in Giddens's 'duality of structure' or Foucault's 'discursive practices'. Another charge is that their dissolution of the macro and micro distinction has led to an insufficient allowance for complexity, dynamism and sharpness in defining and relating aspects of social life (Layder 1994: 219). However, both theorists can be seen as reinterpreting the

micro view (by taking account of a notion of structure) while retaining a notion of the macro–micro interrelation. A theorist such as Goffman (Chapter 5) is of considerable interest here – and we can see the value of his work to writers such as Giddens. While not extensively analysing power, domination or institutions, he can be said to continue the classical tradition of Marx, Weber and Durkheim. They were concerned with the arena of social action while maintaining the institutional and historical reproduction of social practices (but admittedly having differing views of the action–structure relation) (Layder 1994: 217–18). Again, the view taken in this book is that we can study society at the ‘level’ of social interaction, while taking into account social structuring (for example, class and gender) in social situations, as well as retaining a sense of both micro (social situation) and macro (societal) levels.

Of course, the micro–macro distinction may seem a rather remote concern of abstract theorisation and of little pressing relevance to many researchers engaged in the daily practical intricacies of their social studies. But differing sociological approaches do carry a variety of assumptions concerning, for example, the ‘individual’ or ‘society’ and are associated with broad methodological and epistemological stances, such as how ‘reality’ is conceived. As Barnes (2003) notes, macro-sociological theorists are intent to ‘to establish the reality of the macro-objects they describe’ and combat the perils of reducing the social world to the actions of individuals, for instance, as driven by economic interest or as a fragmented, shifting and unstable mass of differing elements. The difficulty for macro sociologists is that as general phenomena, ‘macro-objects’ are more difficult to grasp, unlike individuals and situations, which can be more readily accessible (Barnes 2003: 341–2). Macro theorists, in asserting the ‘priority’ of macro phenomena, may regard certain micro theory as merely seeing society as an accumulation of calculative actions by rational actors (e.g. rational choice theory; see Chapter 8), or an outcome of many interactions in varied social situations (Barnes 2003: 342).

I would strongly argue, regarding the micro–macro ‘problem’, that a number of important points need to be made. First, as Layder argues, empirical study and theorisation together must address the issue. Secondly, the phenomena concerned are not simply antagonistic, instead, while they can still be regarded as different parts of social life, they must be seen as interconnected and mutually influential (Layder 1994: 1–2). Thirdly, differences between micro and macro analysis lie with the latter’s emphasis on ‘distributional phenomena in society as a whole’ (e.g. patterns of wealth, of gender and occupation), but these inequalities can also be understood at the micro situational level of interaction and experience (see Layder 1994: 5–6). Finally, again, a reason for the continuance of the micro–macro ‘problem’ may well be that many sociologists see the macro–micro distinction as a means of fighting off perceived attempts to reduce an understanding of the social world to individual actions or small-scale settings, such as a rational choice theory (see Chapter 8) based on individual calculations and society as their unforeseen consequence (Barnes 2003: 342).

In my view, critically, while micro–macro issues may seem far removed from social research practice (as Barnes suggests), it is not merely a problem ‘within’ but also ‘for’ theory as ‘product of human theorizing activity’ (Barnes 2003: 342). This is an issue encompassing how sociologists practise the discipline and how ‘lay’ people also make connections between different parts of their social life, including their own actions and institutions – in short, how they perceive, construct and act according to ‘micro and macro orderings’ (Barnes 2003: 342). A micro social theory as a starting point in theorisation, I would suggest, produces an essential focus for social theory by its positive contribution to an understanding of the ‘acting’ individual and the nature of social interaction. But the common criticism that micro social theory only ‘deals’ or ‘begins’ with ‘individuals’, as resting on ‘individualistic assumptions’ (i.e. ‘society is made by individuals’), is much too simplistic – as will become clear in the book. It will become apparent that there is a wider ‘social’ or ‘societal’ dimension within micro social theory.

## Interpretive Approaches

Micro social theory is commonly associated with ‘interactionism’ – an interpretive approach to social phenomena (although some other approaches will also be examined in Chapter 8) within sociological theorisation which has a very different idea of ‘science’, research practice and topics of study (than macro theory):

the general interactionist perspective sees the social world as constructed by the social actors through their vastly complex interactions in concrete situations ... Society is not a separate level of reality outside of individuals determining what they do, as structuralists argued. Society is what individuals are and what they do. (Douglas 1984: 8)

While it is possible to give some common views of interpretivist perspectives, Douglas notes that particular examples ‘differ considerably over the question of what *degree* of freedom individuals in our society have in constructing meanings and lives (Douglas 1984: 8). These ‘sub-theories’ within the broad theoretical perspective of ‘interactionism’ Douglas identifies as: ‘symbolic interactionism’ (including labelling theory, and he includes rather loosely perhaps, Erving Goffman’s ‘dramaturgical’ approach); ‘interactional conflict theory’ (subcultural theories sometimes associated with broader conflict approaches – we can also place Chicago Sociology here); and ‘sociological phenomenology’ (‘existential theory’, ‘ethnomethodology’) (see Douglas 1984: 9). Here, Douglas is using the term ‘interactionism’ very broadly and (rightly) distinguishes it from one of its constituents, ‘symbolic interactionism’: often writers confusingly use these terms interchangeably. Another source of confusion is where

‘sociological phenomenology’, as in Douglas’s usage, is too readily cast under ‘interactionism’ or even sometimes taken to be very closely associated with ‘symbolic interaction’; certainly it has had theoretical and empirical connections with ‘interactionism’ and its ‘sub-theories’, but some caution is needed in ascribing commonalities (Atkinson and Housley 2003: 36). Without going into detail on the various theories given by Douglas, we can say that we need to be as much aware of how they differ, e.g. on conceptions of the individual (‘self’, ‘member’), social interaction, social situation and ‘social structure’. In this book symbolic interactionism, Erving Goffman’s work, Chicagoan sociology, phenomenology and ethnomethodology (and some other approaches) will be addressed separately, not as all merely forms of ‘interactionism’, but as all part of micro social theory with both areas of similarity and difference.

A starting point for my examination of micro social theory is Benton and Craib’s (2001) description of the interpretive tradition as less concerned with the status of positivism (a philosophy of the natural sciences) than advocating the view that the social sciences are qualitatively different from the subject matter of the natural sciences, necessitating rather different methods (Benton and Craib 2001: 75). As outlined by Benton and Craib we can describe micro social theory as a ‘cluster’ of approaches, which are unified by a concern with the ‘*instrumental*’ notion of rationality’ (or the operation of human reason in gaining knowledge about the world). They examine the work of Weber and a number of associated interpretive approaches, including ‘phenomenological sociology’; rational choice theory, which was influenced by nineteenth-century political economic theories; and perspectives surrounding American pragmatism (Benton and Craib 2001: 75–6). For these different approaches social science examines individual action as directed to achieving goals in this world – an ‘instrumental rationality’. While rational choice theory, for instance, is very different in various respects from ‘interpretive’ interactional approaches, there is a similar model of a rational actor making decisions according to circumstances.

## Micro Social Theory and Sociological Theorisation

The micro–macro issue, it can be argued, is implicated in what sociologists do in terms of both theorisation and research, including the sociological methods and interpretation adopted. It involves the connections between ‘everyday life’, and within it ‘everyday sociological practice’, and agency/biography, the nature of social interaction and the ‘ordering’ of social situations (e.g. as interaction and structural orders). The investigation of such interconnections is not merely important for sociological development. For Giddens, the ‘sociological enterprise is now even more pivotal to the social sciences as a whole, and indeed to current intellectual culture generally, than it has ever been before’, since we currently live ‘in a world on a knife-edge between extraordinary possibility and global disaster’ (Giddens 1987b: 17). Gone, it seems, are the

optimistic social visions of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century founders of sociology, nevertheless the recent controversies within the discipline have enabled a clarification of its current and possible role. These controversies, for Giddens, cannot be understood without reference to the methodological problems in sociological practice, which has been undergoing a re-evaluation.

We can agree with Giddens that the social sciences rely on 'lay concepts' but also that they develop their own 'conceptual metalanguages' to 'grasp aspects of social institutions which are not described by agents' concepts'. As he says, the concepts and theories produced by social scientists also 'leak out' and are used by 'lay' social actors outside the disciplinary endeavours. This circularity of 'conceptual metalanguages', he says, 'deserves careful consideration, for grasping its nature leads us to a major reappraisal of the practical influence of sociology upon modern societies' (Giddens 1987b: 19). We can add that the importance of micro social theory for sociological activity, given the current era of social transformation, is its general emphasis on the subjective, interactive aspects of life, the constitution of social life in its ordinary daily round, and its interrelation with institutional orders. The scrutiny of these areas has a vital part to play in examining the impact of and responses to important social changes. Social transformation is often described at the macro levels of global institutions and associated economic and social shifts (e.g. in trade and finance, cultural homogenisation and migratory disruptions) but crucially, it is also shaped, experienced and responded to at the 'micro' level by socially active individuals and groups.

This book fits the main approach of the Traditions in Social Theory Series. Micro social theory, including interactionism, symbolic interactionism, phenomenology and ethnomethodology, can be considered a tradition in sociological theorisation. More usefully, it can be considered to be a group or 'cluster' of theorists and theories, which are usually described and assessed together (Benton and Craib 2001). This is not to argue that there are not significant differences within the 'tradition' (especially, if we add, as I do here, 'rationalistic' approaches – see Chapter 8), but generally 'micro sociologies' can be contrasted with broadly 'macro' (or 'structural') theorisation. The book gives the development of the tradition, assesses current debates and examines its contemporary importance.

In my view micro social theory has definite strengths for sociological work – despite the criticisms that can be made of a focus on the micro 'level' or of the particular 'limitations' of specific theories. It has made a very distinctive contribution both to social theory and to substantive areas (e.g. as we will see in the discussion of community and place, and friendship and intimate relations and other 'empirical fields' in Chapter 9) – and has a future value in understanding contemporary social life.

My stance is that the current and likely 'future value' of micro social theory is very much related to the illumination it gives of the 'micro' details of individuals

(e.g. the self) and their interactions as a focus for investigation and theorisation. But it also has continued importance in the way it ‘reaches out’ to the wider social world at the micro local, meso (intermediate) and macro (society) ‘scales’. Here I am not trying to advocate or generate a broad micro social theory, but there are themes drawn out in each chapter which demonstrate the continued vitality of micro social theory as an arena of study in ‘its own right’ and as interconnected with other ‘levels’. Micro social theory, very briefly, can be said to have the following relevances:

- the Chicago School’s focus on groups, social distance and ecology (Chapter 2)
- the generalised other, role and society in Mead’s work (Chapter 3)
- in the definitions of situation and of ‘settings’ of interaction further developed in symbolic interactionism (Chapter 4)
- the presentation of self, drama, ritual and game, and interaction order in Goffman’s observations (Chapter 5)
- the background of shared knowledges and accountability in the phenomenological traditions (Chapter 6)
- the traces of wider structures in experience (gender inequality) in the micro writings of feminist writers such as Dorothy Smith, or of cultural categories in post-structuralist feminist writers (Chapter 7)
- the ideas on the formation and continuance of social relations according to exchange, rational choice, control, network, disciplinary power and structuration approaches (Chapter 8)
- and finally, prominent recent substantive work has developed important themes in micro theory, such as community and place; or focused on under-developed themes in social interaction such as time; or brought forward relatively neglected theoretical areas, such as emotion and body in relation to experience (Chapter 9).

We can see the continued importance of micro social theory as not merely an ‘abstract’ pursuit of theorisation, but as connected to research on the key areas – social interaction, experience and social context – that are fundamental to daily social living.

## Outline of the Book

The chapters of this book are organised in a general chronological order to trace the developments of parts of the ‘cluster’ of theories, for instance, the origins and development of symbolic interactionism, or lines of influences between differing approaches when considering particular themes (e.g. interaction, experience). Inevitably, there are at points ‘overlaps’ between the micro theories considered.

*Chapter 2: Chicago Sociology*

This chapter outlines the work of Chicago sociology, particularly the work of R. E. Park and W. I. Thomas, which has had a wide influence on theoretical and substantive areas within sociology. It will outline the origins of the ‘Chicago School’, especially in pragmatism and Social Darwinism and its emphasis on ideas of community, social process, and ethnography and life history. The chapter includes: Introduction: Chicago School and Micro Social Theory; Origins: Pragmatism and Social Darwinism; Small and the First Generation; Robert Ezra Park; Natural Areas, Natural History, ‘Naturalism’; Cultural and Natural Orders; Immigration and Race; Chicagoan Studies; Case Study: W. I. Thomas and F. Znaniecki (1958) *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*; Critique; and Conclusion.

*Chapter 3: Symbolic Interactionism 1 – Origins*

This chapter outlines the origins, main ideas and ‘perspective’ of symbolic interactionism in the work of G. H. Mead (his social psychology and social philosophy), with specific attention to mind, self and society, and the act and social interaction. Mead’s work will be placed in the context of his pragmatic philosophy as also associated with Dewey, James and others. It will also outline the criticisms of Mead’s approach. The chapter includes: Introduction; Origins; What is ‘Symbolic Interactionism’? George Herbert Mead – His Philosophy and Social Psychology; The Self, Mind and Society; ‘I’ and ‘Me’; Play and Game; Role; Society; Case Study: Time; The Influence of Mead’s Work; Critique; and Conclusion.

*Chapter 4: Symbolic Interactionism 2 – Developments*

This chapter outlines the development and diversity of symbolic interactionism with particular reference to the work of Herbert Blumer and certain substantive areas – included here are methods and methodological issues. Questions regarding the features of the ‘social situation’ in symbolic interactionist theory, and what is neglected or underemphasised, are addressed. The chapter includes: Introduction; The Development of Symbolic Interactionism; Herbert Blumer’s Symbolic Interactionism; Blumer and Mead; Critique of Blumer; Varieties of Symbolic Interactionism; Qualitative Research and ‘Interactionism’; Case Study: Deviancy Theory and Careers; Critique; New Developments; and Conclusion.

*Chapter 5: Erving Goffman*

This chapter introduces the distinctive perspective of Erving Goffman – sometimes called ‘dramaturgy’. It will explore his ideas on the self, interaction

and society and compare them with other approaches. It will also examine Goffman's 'methodology' and ask whether he can be described as, to some extent, a 'structural' theorist. The chapter discusses Goffman's main 'metaphors' and ideas – drama, game and ritual and notions such as co-presence and interaction order. An assessment is made of his contribution to the micro–macro 'link'. The chapter includes: Introduction; The Origins of Goffman's Work; Drama; The Self; Interaction Order; Co-presence; Ritual – Regions and Frames; Case Study: E. Goffman (1972) *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behaviour*; Critique; and Conclusion.

### *Chapter 6: Phenomenology and Ethnomethodology*

This chapter outlines the origins of the phenomenological approach (e.g. Husserl). It examines the work of Schutz and main concepts, e.g. intersubjective experience, typifications, and common-sense knowledge and the development of the approach (e.g. Berger and Luckmann) in later work. The chapter introduces the main ideas of the 'ethnomethodological' approach in the work of Garfinkel – e.g. members' 'methods', accomplishment of order, accountability and meaning, indexicality – and the differences between ethnomethodology and 'conventional' sociology. The chapter includes: Introduction; Phenomenological Sociology – Origins: Husserl and Schutz; Critique; Case Study: P. L. Berger and T. Luckmann (1971) *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*; Ethnomethodology – Origins; Members' Methods; Accountability; Conventional Sociology; Ethnomethodology and 'Misconceptions?'; Critique; and Conclusion.

### *Chapter 7: Subjective Experience, Feminism and Sociology*

In this chapter the feminist contributions to the examination of the relationships between research, theory and experience within sociology will be outlined. Feminist sociology as associated with feminist methods, experience and the 'personal', reflexivity, and gender will be overviewed and assessed. The chapter includes: Introduction; Varieties of Feminist Theory; Critique of Sociology; Experience, Reflexivity, Interdisciplinarity; Feminist Methodology; Case Study: The Family; Feminist Theorisation and Micro Social Theory; and Conclusion.

### *Chapter 8: Theoretical Developments in Micro Social Theory*

This chapter reviews a range of theories which have been identified as at a 'micro level', especially those which have become increasingly prominent since the mid-1980s. The chapter includes an examination of the work of

Giddens and Foucault with reference to how they view ‘micro structure’ and the ‘making’ of the individual. Although not usually regarded as ‘micro theorists’ their influential ideas – in Giddens in terms of structure as ‘emergent’ or ‘lived’, in Foucault how knowledge/power ‘flows’ through particular contexts or institutional settings – are relevant to the micro situation. Also examined are theories that can be considered as ‘micro’ but do not fit the interpretive tradition (just as discourse and structuration theory do not) – rational choice, control theory, exchange theories and network theories. Even so, such theories could be seen to share a ‘rational’ model of the actor. The chapter includes: Introduction; Exchange Theory; Rational Choice Theory and Control Theory; Network Theory; Michel Foucault; Anthony Giddens; and Conclusion.

### *Chapter 9: Substantive Developments in Micro Social Theory*

In recent years a range of previously relatively neglected areas of theorisation and empirical study have emerged within sociology – including place, time, friendship, body and emotion. This is not to say that these areas have not been present, or not deemed important previously by some writers, but that they have become the focus of a re-evaluation and re-emphasis in sociological endeavour. These substantive areas have important consequences for micro theorisation in terms of providing a new sophistication in how traditional concerns, such as role, situation and interaction are considered. The chapter includes: Introduction; Community and Place; Time; Emotions; Friendship and Intimate Relations; Narratives; Body; and Conclusion.

### *Chapter 10: Conclusion*

The conclusion returns to the question of the micro and macro distinction in sociological theory and contrasts it with the issue of agency vs. structure. It points out the main themes arising in the book, such as the model of the actor and the conception of structure in micro social theory. It ends by emphasising the part played by the ‘sociological imagination’ – and the plea that micro theory should be also applied to the life of the micro theorist. The chapter includes: The Micro Social Theory Tradition as a ‘Cluster’; Action and Structure; and Conclusion: Micro Social Theory and Sociological Imaginings.

### *Glossary*

A range of useful definitions of terms used.

## Further Reading

A broad review of the contemporary work and influence of interactionism can be found in P. Atkinson and W. Housley, *Interactionism* (London, Sage, 2003). B. Barnes gives a quite sophisticated discussion of ‘structure and agency’, with an extensive bibliography, in his ‘The Macro/Micro Problem and the Problem of Structure and Agency’, in G. Ritzer and B. Smart (eds.), *Handbook of Social Theory* (London, Sage, 2003). Jenks and others provide a chapter-by-chapter introductory discussion of key ‘dichotomies’ in sociological theory in C. Jenks (ed.), *Core Sociological Dichotomies* (London, Sage, 1998). Layder gives an extended and ‘accessible’ examination of the relations between micro and macro social theory in D. Layder, *Understanding Social Theory* (London, Sage, 1994). R. Stones (ed.), *Key Sociological Thinkers* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 1998); G. Ritzer (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Major Contemporary Social Theorists* (Oxford, Blackwell, 2000); and A. Elliott and B. S. Turner (eds.), *Profiles in Contemporary Social Theory* (London, Sage, 2001) give detailed biographical contexts and theoretical appreciations of a number of writers featured in this book (e.g. Goffman).

# Index

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- Abbott, P. 107, 109, 143  
Abrams, P. 145–6  
Adam, B. 40–1, 138, 139  
agency 111; action and structure 155–9  
altruism 117  
*American Journal of Sociology* 14  
American Sociological Society (ASS) 16  
Anderson, N.: *The Hobo* 23  
anomie: urban life and 24  
anthropology: Chicago School and 14, 15, 42; Park and 24  
*Asylums* (Goffman) 63, 64, 69  
Atkinson, P. 47, 59; on Giddens 130–1  
Attewell, P. 88–9, 92, 95
- Baldwin, J. M. 53  
Barnes, B. 1, 3, 130, 155  
Bauman, Z. 116, 136, 147–8  
Beck, U. 116, 136  
Becker, H. S. 14, 47, 49; influences 30; symbolic interactionism 53  
behaviour: stimulus-response model 51  
Bellah, R. N. 136  
Benmayor, R. 137–8  
Bentham, J. 122  
Benton, T. 5; different approaches 157–8; feminist epistemology 102, 104; and Mead 31; rational choice theory 116–17, 118  
Berger, P. L. 9, 80, 95; *The Social Construction of Reality* (with Luckmann) 85–6; on time 138  
Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies 56  
Blau, P. M. 115–16, 120  
Blumer, H. 8; Chicago School and 13; critique of 51–3; Goffman and 62, 64; influences 41, 47; Mead and 49–52; methodology 25, 47, 51; pragmatism 59; symbolic interactionism 30, 33, 60; variable analysis 49; ‘What Is Wrong with Social Theory?’ 48  
Boas, F. 14, 15  
the body 7, 10, 159; constructions of self 151–2; Foucault on 122–4; physical co-presence 71–2; theoretical approaches 149–51  
Bourdieu, P. 78; habitus 126  
Box, S. 119  
Branaman, A. 64, 65, 66, 70, 78  
Bredemeier, H. C. 114  
British miners’ strike 136  
Burgess, E. W. 14, 23; *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* (with Park) 16; zonal model of cities 18  
Burke, K. 64  
Burkitt, I. 141; the body 150–2  
Butler, J. 108–9, 150; *Gender Trouble* 100
- Castells, M. 136  
*Causes of Delinquency* (Hirschi) 118–19  
Cavan, R. S.: *Suicide* 23  
Chicago School 8, 28–9, 158; areas of study 23–5; capitalism and 58; critique of 26–8; development of 12–15; evolutionist view 23; immigration and race studies 21–3; Mead and 41; methodology 14; relevance to micro social theory 7; symbolic interactionism and 46–7, 49  
Chodorow, N.: *The Reproduction of Mothering* 108  
Cicourel, A. V. 86

- 'The City: Suggestion for the Investigation of Human Behavior in the Urban Environment' (Park) 17–18, 19
- Clandinin, D. J. 148
- Collins, R. 66, 72
- communication: circuits of 137; informal relations 145; structuration theory 127; symbolic 36; teams 68–9 *see also* language
- community and place 7, 10, 159; early sociology 134–5; friends and neighbours 144–8; global/local 137–8; industrial action and 136; politics and inequalities 135–6; religion and 138
- Connelly, F. M. 148
- control theory 10, 118–19
- Cooley, C. H. 33, 34; Goffman and 64; symbolic interactionism and 53
- Coser, L. A. 27
- Craib, I. 5; different approaches 157–8, 159–60; emotions 141; feminist epistemology 102, 104; and Mead 31; rational choice theory 116–17, 118
- Cressey, P. G.: *The Taxi Dance Hall* 24
- crime and delinquency: control theory 118–19
- Crow, G. 117, 136
- culture: Park's cultural orders 19–21
- Denzin, N. K. 53
- determinism, environmental 26
- deviancy theory 55–7
- Dewey, J.: Chicago School and 14, 28; individuals in groups 33; Mead and 31, 41; pragmatist optimism 22; self 35; symbolic interactionism and 42, 53, 54
- difference 111; feminism and 99
- discourse: narrative and 149 *see also* Foucault, Michel
- Douglas, J. D.: symbolic interactionism 4–5
- drama: Goffman 64, 65–70
- Duncombe, J. 140–1
- Durkheim, E.: *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* 72; Goffman and 66; moral contracts 116, 118; reality 85
- economics, global 6
- Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Durkheim) 72
- Elster, J. 116
- Emerson, R. M. 116
- emotions 7, 10, 139–42, 159; concealment of 67–70; as constructions 141; control theory 119; friendship 144–8; groups and 140; marriage relationships 142–4; rational choice theory 119; tensions in modernity 142
- epistemology: feminist 102–5
- ethnographic study: interactionism 59
- ethnomethodology 9; accountability 90; Garfinkel and 86–8; indexicality 89, 91; 'members' methods' 88–9; questions and critique of 92–5; relation to sociology 90–5
- Etzioni, A. 136
- everyday life: ethnomethodology 93; families 107–9 *see also* Goffman, Erving
- evolutionary theory 31 *see also* Social Darwinism
- exchange theory 7, 10, 114–16, 158; network theory and 120
- existentialism: social reality and 85–6
- families: emotion 140–1; feminist approach 107–9; marriage relationships 142–4
- Faris, E. 41
- feminist theory 9, 158; the body and 150–1; critique of sociology 101–2; epistemology 102–5; examining family life 107–9; Foucault and 123–4; methodology 105–7; micro social theory and 109–12; questions and approaches 97–9; relevance to micro social theory 7
- Fisher, B. M. 12, 54–5

- Foucault, M. 10; the body and 122–4, 150; disciplinary power 121–4; poststructuralist questioning 121; social stratification 2–3
- Frame Analysis* (Goffman) 72
- Freedman, J. 98
- Freudian theory: feminist approaches 108
- friendship and intimate relations 10, 142, 144–8
- games: Goffman on 64, 65, 69
- The Gang* (Thrasher) 23
- Garfinkel, H. 9, 80, 83, 84; accountability 90; developing ethnomethodology 86–8; practical reasoning 88–9; *Studies in Ethnomethodology* 88–9
- Gelsthorpe, L. 103, 106
- gender: interactionism 60
- Gender Trouble* (Butler) 100
- Giddens, A. 10, 78, 136, 154; critiques of 130–1; everyday life 5–6; Goffman and 66, 71–2, 76, 77; the individual and identity 127–30; *Modernity and Self-Identity* 129; social stratification 2–3; structuration theory 124–8, 131; on theoretical fragmentation 156; *Transformation of Intimacy* 129–30; trust 116
- Gidlow, B. 95
- Glaser, B. 53
- global society 6, 137–8
- Goffman, E. 8–9, 62–79, 129, 154; action and structure 156; *Asylums* 63, 64, 69; the body 150; critique of 75–7; drama 4–5, 62, 64, 65–7; *Frame Analysis* 72; Garfinkel and 86; influences 35; influences 30, 78; interaction order 70–1, 158; *Interaction Ritual* 69, 72, 73–5; levels of social interaction 3; life and career 62–5; Mead and 49; ‘On Face-Work’ 74–5; physical co-presence 71–2; *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* 34, 63, 64, 67–70; *Relations in Public* 64; relevance to micro-social theory 7; ritual 72–5, 77; *Stigma* 63, 64; *Strategic Interaction* 64, 65; symbolic interactionism 53; ‘The Nature of the Ritual Order’ 75; ‘The Ritual Roles of the Self’ 70
- The Gold Coast and the Slum* (Zorbaugh) 24
- Goode 116
- Goodman, D. J. 93–4, 117, 120; macro and micro integration 156–7
- Gouldner, A. 27, 116
- Habermas, J. 78
- habitus 126
- Harper, W. R. 13
- Hartsock, N. 104
- Harvey, D. 137
- Heckathorn, D. D. 119
- Heritage, J. C. 90, 95
- Hindess, B. 84
- Hirschi, T.: *Causes of Delinquency* 118–19
- Hobbes, T. 118
- The Hobo* (Anderson) 23
- Hochschild, A.: *The Managed Heart* 140
- Holland, J. 98, 103, 106, 111
- Homans, G. C. 115, 120
- Housley, W. 47, 59; on Giddens 130–1
- Hughes, E. C. 14, 30, 47, 49, 78; Goffman and 64, 66; work and self 57
- Husserl, E. 9, 85, 86; phenomenology 80–1
- identity: emotions and 140; Giddens on 129–30
- The Immigrant Press and its Control* (Park) 23
- immigration/migration: Chicago School 13, 21–3; community and place 137–8; Polish in the US 25
- individuals: Giddens’s structuration theory and 127–30; mediated by society 50–1; micro–macro distinction 3; rational choice theory 116–18 *see also* self

- inequalities: 'distributional phenomena'  
3; spatial differences 135–8
- Interaction Ritual* (Goffman) 69, 72,  
73–5
- interactionism 8, 156; the Chicago  
School 26, 28; defined 4–5;  
deviancy theory 55–7; emotions  
140; relevance to micro social  
theory 7 *see also* symbolic  
interactionism
- intimacy 129–30
- Introduction to the Science of Sociology*  
(Park and Burgess) 16
- An Introduction to the Study of Society*  
(Small and Vincent) 14
- Iowa School 53
- Jackson, S. 141
- James, W.: Chicago School and 14, 28;  
Goffman and 64; Mead and 31;  
moral equivalents 20; Park and  
16; pragmatist optimism 22; the self  
35, 37; symbolic interaction and 42;  
symbolic interactionism and 47, 53
- Joas, H. 42, 44, 60
- knowledge: common-sense 82–3, 84, 92;  
feminist 99–100, 111–12; objective/  
subjective 85–6, 102–4; power and  
10; pragmatism and 54
- Kraidy, M. M. 137
- language: for concepts 6; symbolic  
behaviour 33–4; symbolic  
communication 52
- Lassman, P. 83, 84, 86, 91, 93, 95
- Layder, D. 1, 3, 71, 155
- Lengermann, P. M. 97, 102, 110, 111–12
- liberal reformism 27
- Liebllich, A. 148–9
- Luckmann, T. 9, 80, 95; *The Social  
Construction of Reality* (Berger)  
85–6; on time 138
- Luhmann, N. 116
- McKenzie, R. D.: *The Metropolitan  
Community* 24
- McNay, L. 123
- Madge, J. 28
- The Man Farthest Down* (Washington)  
16
- The Managed Heart* (Hochschild) 140
- Marsden, D. 140–1
- Marx, K. and Marxism 85; feminism  
and 99, 100
- Marx, K. and Marxism: feminism and  
110
- Matza, D. 18, 26, 56, 83, 119
- May, T. 116, 147–8
- Mead, G. H. 8; Blumer and 49–52;  
connecting link 33; critique of  
43–4; generalized other 38, 56;  
Goffman and 64, 66; 'I' and 'me'  
37–8; influence on others 13, 14,  
41–3; methodology 43; 'The  
Nature of Scientific Knowledge'  
32; pragmatism 59; reality 85;  
roles and role-taking 38–9, 43,  
158; the self 35–8, 41, 44; social  
psychology and philosophy 34–5,  
43; social structure 39–40;  
symbolic interactionism and 30,  
31, 46, 53, 54, 60; on time 40–1,  
44, 138
- Meltzer, B. N. 33, 42, 43, 44, 67, 87;  
on Goffman 75–7; on symbolic  
interactionism 57–8
- Melucci, A. 136
- Merton, R. K. 20
- methodology: Blumer 46, 48–9, 51;  
Chicago School 14; empirical  
study 3; ethnomethodology  
86–95; feminist 102, 103–4,  
105–7; Goffman's 76–7;  
interactionism 60; Mead and  
41–2, 43; narratives 148–9;  
personal documents 25;  
qualitative 53–5; Schutz's three  
principles 83; scientific 32
- The Metropolitan Community*  
(McKenzie) 24
- micro social theory: action and structure  
154–9; as a cluster of approaches  
154–5; ethnomethodology and 95;  
everyday life 5–6; feminism and  
109–12; future value of 6–7;

- micro social theory – *continued*  
 Goffman 78; and macro theory  
 1–4, 154, 155–9; recent  
 developments 114, 131–2; strengths  
 of 6; substantive fields 134, 152;  
 theoretical developments 9–10
- Mills, C. W. 160; critique of situational  
 approach 27; on Mead 37; on  
 Social Darwinism 32–3
- Modernity and Self-Identity* (Giddens)  
 129
- Molm, L. D. 114, 115
- Morgan, D. 160
- Morris, C. W. 39
- motivation: control theory 119;  
 phenomenological 83
- narratives 148–9
- naturalism 8, 26; Park's human ecology  
 18–21
- 'The Nature of the Ritual Order'  
 (Goffman) 75
- network theory 7, 10, 120–1, 146–7, 158
- Niebrugge-Brantley, J. 97, 102, 110,  
 111–12
- Oakley, A. 106, 109
- 'On Face-Work' (Goffman) 74–5
- Park, R. E. 8; critique of 26–8;  
 development of Chicago School  
 12, 14, 15; *The Immigrant Press  
 and its Control* 23; influence of  
 47; *Introduction to the Science of  
 Sociology* (with Park) 16; life and  
 career 15–18; the 'marginal man'  
 16, 18, 23; natural history/human  
 ecology 18–21, 22, 24;  
 problematic areas 55; Simmel and  
 53; 'Symbiosis and Socialization'  
 24; 'The City' 17–18, 19
- Parsons, T. 86, 95, 150;  
 ethnomethodology 87–8
- Peirce, C. S. 42; Mead and 31;  
 symbolic interactionism and 47
- Petrus, J. W. 40, 138, 139
- phenomenological sociology 5, 7, 9;  
 critique of 83–5; definition and  
 origins 80–3; realities 83;  
 scientific practice 83
- Plummer, K. 25, 33, 34, 42, 52, 55, 57,  
 59, 60; on interactionism 58
- pluralism: liberal 32
- The Polish Peasant in Europe and  
 America* (Thomas and Znaniecki)  
 8, 15, 18, 25
- Polity Reader in Social Theory* 105
- Pollner, M. 86
- positivism 5
- postcolonialism: feminism and 99
- postmodernism: feminism 100; feminist  
 103; interactionism 60
- poststructuralism 60, 121
- power 7; disciplinary 7, 158; Foucault  
 on 121–4; knowledge and 10;  
 methodology and 107; networks  
 of 137 *see also* feminist theory;  
 race and ethnicity
- pragmatism: character of knowledge  
 54; differences of 47; liberal 14;  
 Mead and 42; rational choice  
 theories 5
- The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*  
 (Goffman) 63, 64, 67–70
- race and ethnicity: Chicago School and  
 13, 25; conflict as adjustment 21  
*see also* immigration
- Ramazanoglu, C. 98, 103, 106, 107,  
 111
- rational choice theory 7, 10, 115, 131,  
 158; approach and ideas of  
 116–18, 119
- rationality: cognitive-rational approach  
 63; instrumental notion of 5;  
 symbolic interactionism 34
- reality: common-sense 102–3;  
 constructed 67; multiple 83;  
 objective/subjective 85–6
- Reckless, W. C. 24
- Reinharz, S. 107
- Relations in Public* (Goffman) 64
- religion: community and 32, 138
- The Reproduction of Mothering*  
 (Chodorow) 108
- Ricoeur, P. 149

- ritual: Goffman on 64, 65, 72–5, 77  
 ‘The Ritual Roles of the Self’ (Goffman) 70
- Ritzer, G. 93–4, 117, 120; macro and micro integration 156–7
- Roberts, B. 139, 149
- Robertson, R. 157
- Rock, P. 54, 56, 57, 83
- Rockefeller, J. D., Snr 13
- Rogers, M. F. 85, 101, 108
- roles and role-taking 158; Mead on 38–9, 43; structuration theory 128
- Royce 53
- Sacks, H. 54, 86
- Sandstrom, K. L. 53, 54, 59
- Sartre, J.-P. 85
- Schutz, A. 9, 64; critique of 83–5; Garfinkel and 87, 88, 95; influence 85; origins of phenomenology 80–3; rational choice theory 116; time 138, 139
- self: the body and 151–2; cult of 72; Goffman on 64, 67–70, 72–3, 76; Mead on 35–8, 44; work and 57
- semiotics 121
- Sennett, R. 136
- Sex and Society* (Thomas) 15
- sexuality: conduct 57; democratising relations 129–30; Foucault on 122–4
- Sharrock, W. 92, 93
- Shaw, C. 56
- Shilling, C. 150, 152
- Shils, E. 14
- Short, J. F. Jr 14
- Simmel, G. 64; formalism 19; Goffman and 66; Mead and 42; Park and 16, 53
- Skotnes, A. 137–8
- Small, A. 15, 23; Chicago School and 14; *An Introduction to the Study of Society* (with Vincent) 14
- Smith, B. 151–2
- Smith, D. 7, 23, 24, 27
- Smith, D. E. 99, 110
- Smith, M. P. 137
- The Social Construction of Reality* (with Berger and Luckmann) 85–6
- Social Darwinism 8; Chicago School and 14; Park’s natural history model 22; symbolic interactionism 31
- social exchange theory 115
- social interaction: development of self in groups 36; face-to-face 64, 74–5; ordering 70–1 *see also* interactionism
- social meaning *see* symbolic interactionism
- social order: Parsons on 87–8
- social structure: action and 154–9; ethnomethodology 93; feminist theory and 111; Mead on 39–40; mediating individuals 50–1, 52; micro–macro distinction 3; network theory 120–1; stratification 2–3
- social theory and sociology: clusters 6; dualisms of 2, 26, 124, 125, 130, 131; ethnomethodology and 90–5; feminist critique of 101–2; lay concepts and 6; thinking theoretically 159–60
- Soja, E. 137
- Solidarity movement (Poland) 136
- Source Book for Social Origins* (Thomas) 15, 16
- Sparkes, A. C. 151–2
- Stanley, L. 107
- Stigma* (Goffman) 63, 64, 69
- Strategic Interaction* (Goffman) 64, 65
- Strauss, A. I. 12, 53, 54–5; Mead and 49
- structuration theory 7, 131, 158; approach of 124–7, 124–9; individuals and identity 127–30; legitimation, domination, signification 127
- Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Garfinkel) 88–9
- subjective experience 9 *see also* phenomenological sociology
- symbolic interactionism 60–1, 156; Blumer and development of 46–53;

- symbolic interactionism – *continued*  
 Chicago School and 46–7; critique of 57–8; defined 30, 33–4, 47–8; ethnomethodology and 87; Goffman and 72; Mead and 42–3; origins of 31–4; qualitative research 53–5; recent developments 58–60; three aspects of 50; varieties of 53
- The Taxi Dance Hall* (Cressey) 24
- Thomas, W. I. 23; individuals in groups 33; influence of 47; *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (with Znaniecki) 1, 8, 18, 25; problematic areas 54–5; *Sex and Society* 15; *Source Book for Social Origins* 15, 16
- Thomson, A. 137
- Thrasher, F.: *The Gang* 23
- time 10, 159; Mead on 40–1, 44; shifting conceptions of 138–9; theme in social interaction 7
- Tong, R. 98
- Transformation of Intimacy* (Giddens) 129–30
- Turner, B. S. 150
- Turner, R. H. 49; on racial conflict 22
- urban life: anomie and 24; Burgess's zonal model 18; community and place 134–5; man's natural habitat 20–1; Park's 'marginal man' 16, 18; postmodern 137
- Vincent, G. E.: *An Introduction to the Study of Society* (with Small) 14
- Wallace, C. 107, 109
- Wallace, W. L. 116, 120
- Warner, W. L. 66
- Washington, B. T.: *The Man Farthest Down* 16
- Watson, J. 35, 36
- Weber, M. 5; rationality 117, 118, 123; reality 85; subjective understanding 81, 83
- 'What Is Wrong with Social Theory?' (Blumer) 48
- Williams, S. J. 66, 76, 140, 142
- Willmott, P. 145–6, 147
- Wirth, L. 14
- Wirth, Louis: 'Urbanism as a Way of Life' 24
- Wise, S. 107
- women: democratising relations 129–30 *see also* feminist theory
- work, self and 57
- Wright, C. 31
- Wundt, W. 34, 35
- Zeitlin, I. M. 38, 52, 75, 76, 83, 84, 116
- Znaniecki, F.: *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (with Thomas) 8, 15, 18, 25
- Zorbaugh, H. W.: *The Gold Coast and the Slum* 24
- Zukin, S. 137