Reconnecting Symbolic Interactionism to Intercultural Communication Research: An Illustrative Analysis of a Japanese Student’s Intercultural Experiences

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Abstract
This article explores the potential of symbolic interactionism, a classic social theory originated by George Herbert Mead, in the contemporary studies of intercultural communication. First, I review the current theoretical status of intercultural communication research, followed by an examination of the central contentions of symbolic interactionism. Then, I suggest what kind of research perspective symbolic interactionism can bring to the studies of communication across cultures. Finally, I offer an illustrative analysis of a Japanese student’s intercultural experiences from a symbolic interactionist perspective.

Key words: intercultural communication, symbolic interactionism, communication studies, interpretive approach

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1. Current Theoretical Status of Intercultural Communication Research

The studies of intercultural communication encompass a broad spectrum. The word “intercultural communication” appears in many academic disciplines, such as linguistics, business, education, sociology, and anthropology, not to mention communication studies. Among them, the field of communication studies, especially the one developed in the U.S., represents a productive venue for the formal study of intercultural communication. The major academic associations of communication studies based in the U.S., such as National Communication Association (NCA) and International Communication Association (ICA), include established subdivisions dedicated to the studies of intercultural communication.

For these reasons, I first examine the current theoretical status of intercultural communication research within the academic field of communication studies in the U.S. Renowned intercultural communication scholars, Judith Martin and Thomas Nakayama (2006), organize the existing studies of intercultural communication according to three research traditions: social scientific tradition, interpretive tradition, and critical tradition. Martin and Nakayama argue that the field has been traditionally grounded more on social scientific tradition than on interpretive tradition or critical tradition. This was especially the case during the 1980s when scholars of the field were eager to develop social scientific (or positivistic) theories within the sub-area of intercultural communication studies as well as the field of communication studies in general. Accordingly, quite a few sophisticated social scientific intercultural communication theories have been developed. Well-known examples include Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory (Gudykunst, 1995), Communication Accommodation Theory (Gallois, Giles, Jones, Cargile, & Ota, 1995), Conversational Constraints Theory (Kim, 1995), Expectancy Violations Theory (Burgoon, 1995), Face-Negotiation Theory (Ting-Toomey, 1988; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998; Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001), and Identity Management Theory (Cupach & Imahori, 1993).

In contrast, intercultural communication scholars have produced relatively few theories grounded in the interpretive and critical traditions. Among the recognized intercultural communication theories, Cultural Identity Theory (Collier & Thomas, 1988) and Speech Codes Theory (Philipsen, 1992) reflect the interpretive tradition, while
Co-Cultural Theory (Orbe, 1998a, 1998b) emerged from the critical tradition. Perhaps, several other theories could be considered to represent the interpretive and critical traditions. Nevertheless, the number of interpretive and critical theories is much smaller than that of social scientific theories, at least within the U.S. academic circle of intercultural communication research.

Since the 1990s, however, the paradigm shift that was experienced earlier within several other subdivisions of American communication studies (e.g., organizational communication division) has begun to engulf intercultural communication researchers. The shift could be described as one from a modern paradigm to a postmodern paradigm, from the discovery of the objective truth to the understanding of subjective (intersubjective) truths, or from a belief in rationality to a trust in reflexivity. In any case, this paradigm shift urged intercultural communication scholars to be more sensitive to subjective human experiences, functions of power within sociocultural relationships, and positionality of the researcher as a living human being. In other words, intercultural communication researchers have been pushed to be more aware of the need for and the legitimacy of studies grounded on interpretive and critical traditions.

While the above discussion focused mostly on the status of the academic subdivision of intercultural communication studies in the U.S., other related research areas have generated quite a few studies of culture and communication based on interpretive and critical research traditions. Such areas include, but are not limited to, critical cultural studies, postcolonial studies, African American studies, and ethnography of communication. Studies in these areas are concerned more or less with the issues of culture and communication, and consequently are in symbiotic relationships with intercultural communication research. That is evident in the fact that Philipsen’s (1992) Speech Codes Theory was developed through his series of ethnographic work within working class and middle class communities in the U.S., and Orbe’s Co-Cultural Theory (1998a, 1998b) was the product of his critical concern for the racial tensions in the U.S.

Given this academic environment surrounding the contemporary studies of intercultural communication, perhaps we are being asked to reconsider what the term “intercultural communication” means. In the 1980s, it typically meant human inter-
actions across national cultures (e.g., communication between Japanese students and American students). Now, the scope of the word “culture” is not necessarily limited to national culture; most scholars agree that culture can emerge within any social groups, such as age group, gender group, racial group, ethnic group, school, neighborhood. Accordingly, the term “intercultural communication” has acquired a new and broad range of meanings not limited to, for instance, the communication between Japanese and Americans. As a consequence, the boundaries between intercultural communication and other related academic disciplines are now more obscure.

In this situation, it seems meaningful to revisit the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism, and explore what this classic social theory can bring to the contemporary studies of intercultural communication, especially to the interpretive studies of intercultural communication. Because symbolic interactionism has supported and been supported largely by ethnographic researchers in sociology and other related disciplines, the theoretical framework could be particularly valuable for that form of interpretive research. In essence, ethnographic interpretive studies (and interpretive studies in general to a certain degree) attempt to understand the meanings of subjective human experiences and shared social practices within a particular cultural context, while revealing the process in which social reality is constructed and reconstructed through communication among its members (Carbaugh, 1996).

Then, what exactly are the basic premises of symbolic interactionism, and how could this theoretical framework contribute to interpretive studies of intercultural communication? In the following sections, I will first explain the central arguments of symbolic interactionism, centering on Mead’s (1934) celebrated volume *Mind, Self, and Society*. Then, I will illustrate what kind of research perspective symbolic interactionism can provide for the contemporary studies of intercultural communication. Finally, I will offer an illustrative analysis of a Japanese student’s intercultural experiences from a symbolic interactionist perspective.

2. Central Contentions of Symbolic Interactionism

The social psychologist and pragmatic philosopher, George Herbert Mead, is considered the primary forerunner of symbolic interactionism. Mead wrote numerous papers during his lifetime, but did not publish a book himself. Accordingly, Mead’s
(1934) most influential monograph *Mind, Self, and Society* was edited by Charles Morris and based on stenographic records of Mead's social psychology course at the University of Chicago as well as his lecture notes and unpublished papers. The intellectual tradition of symbolic interactionism has been continuously refined by Mead's close and distant followers, such as Erving Goffman (1959), Herbert Blumer (1969), Tamotsu Shibutani (1978), and Norman Denzin (1992), among many others. Symbolic interactionism is a broad intellectual view whose interpretations vary widely. However, as the title of Mead's (1934) aforementioned classic book suggests, symbolic interactionism essentially argues that mind, self, and society are all created and recreated through symbolic human interactions.

One of the key concepts in Mead's theorization is "taking the role of the other." Mead utilizes this concept to describe the genesis of self among young children. Young children, Mead observed, tend to imitate the words and behaviors of their parents. Let us take a girl who imitates her mother as an example. Through this imitation of verbal and nonverbal gestures of her mother, the girl begins to identify herself with the perspective of her mother and observe herself from this newly acquired perspective. This process is what Mead calls "taking the role of the other." By taking the role of her mother, the girl experiences the coexistence of the subjective self that looks at herself from the mother's perspective and the objective self that is being looked at by her subjective self. Mead called the former "I" (self as subject) and the latter "me" (self as object), and argued that the girl's sense of self grows out of this reflective interaction between "I" and "me." Further, Mead suggests that mind is the capacity to enable this reflective interaction within herself. Thus, the girl's taking the role of the other allowed her mind and self to emerge. At this stage, however, the girl's construction of self is achieved primarily in relation to the mother's perspective.

The girl continues to take the roles of different others, such as her father and siblings. When she goes to school, she begins to interact with peer friends, teachers, and neighbors, and take on those roles as well. At this stage, the girl's sense of self is constructed not only in relation to the limited perspective of her mother but also in relation to the perspectives of a number of different others. The more the girl takes the roles of different others, the more she can perceive herself from multiple perspectives, and her understanding and construction of self becomes more complex. Finally,
the girl (or woman by this time) reaches the point when she takes the role of “the generalized other.” “The generalized other” is an abstraction of a group of active human beings within a community. As an adult woman, she negotiates, reconfirms, and reconstructs her self in relation to “the generalized other.” In other words, she attempts to situate herself within her social networks. Accordingly, she is considered to have been socialized into the community.

The woman usually belongs not only to a single community but also to multiple communities. These communities are called “reference groups,” which shape the woman’s perspectives (Shibutani, 1955). For example, the woman might belong to such reference groups as family, school, place of employment, and neighborhood, and each reference group provides a distinct perspective for her to observe, understand, and define her self and society. If the woman is a college professor from a white middle class family, she interprets the world in a certain way; if she is a second generation Mexican American who works as a nurse at a hospital in a working class neighborhood, she interprets the world in yet another way.

As the above example illustrates, mind and self emerge through symbolic human interactions, more specifically taking the role of the other. Correspondingly, Mead considered that society is also a construction of human communication. In fact, Mead’s concept of “generalized other” is interpreted as what we call society in a sense. Taking the role of the generalized other means taking the role of the society into which we were born. Through this process, we learn the rules, beliefs, and values of the society, and become able to function appropriately in that society; in other words, we become a member of it. However, Mead did not treat society merely as a static entity; rather, society is conceptualized as a network of active human beings who think, reflect, and interpret with their own rights. More precisely, Mead seems to consider that society possesses both subjective and objective aspects, just like self. On the one hand, society is subjective in a sense that it is a product of continuous interpretations by and communication among its members. On the other hand, society is objective because it has existed as a structure before our births; we come late to this society and become socialized into it as we grow up. This dialectic tensions between “society as subject” and “society as object” were to be explicated later in a more precise manner by two phenomenological sociologists, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966),
in their classic book *Social Construction of Reality*. Mead shares with them his understanding of society as an ever-evolving, powerful structure, which is continuously created and recreated through symbolic interactions among living human beings.

In this way, Mead argued that mind, self, and society are not prerequisites for everyday human communication, but emerged through it. This perspective has a potential to lead intercultural communication researchers to a nuanced interpretation of communicative experiences. As stated, symbolic interactionism has been supported, critiqued, and refined by a number of followers, and its scope has expanded greatly from what Mead initially conceptualized. However, the essence of symbolic interactionist perspective can be found in the aforementioned classic argument in Mead’s *Mind, Self, and Society*.

3. Symbolic Interactionism and Intercultural Communication Research

In the beginning of this article, I reviewed the current theoretical status of intercultural communication research, particularly within the American academic field of communication studies. Then, the previous section explained the central contents of symbolic interactionism based largely on Mead’s conceptualization of “taking the role of the other” in his classic text, *Mind, Self, and Society*. In this section, I will explore the connection between the two. How could symbolic interactionism contribute to the contemporary studies of intercultural communication? What kind of approach does this theoretical framework dictate?

First of all, symbolic interactionism urges intercultural communication researchers to employ direct observations and in-depth interviews as valid sources of empirical data on which advanced theorization should be based. While Mead has been considered primarily a pragmatic philosopher and social theorist, his theorization was derived from observing and reflecting on everyday social interactions surrounding him. In that sense, Mead was an inductive thinker who extracted the essence from observed empirical data and transformed it into a set of general concepts. Mead’s focus was not on dwelling in the abstract world of theories (although such an approach is surely valuable in some realms of academic activities) but on generating a theoretical framework that can help us explore and understand lived human experiences.
Mead’s commitment to direct observations and in-depth interviews has been inherited by the following researchers in the symbolic interactionist tradition (see Denzin, 1992; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Goffman, 1959, 1961, 1963; Shibutani, 1978). Therefore, symbolic interactionism leads us to conduct and refine the line of ethnographic intercultural communication research based on direct observations and in-depth interviews, similar in the spirit to the ones conducted by early intercultural communication researchers such as Edward T. Hall (1959, 1966, 1976, 1983).

Secondly, symbolic interactionism advises intercultural communication researchers to focus their scholarly attention on interpretation. Raw empirical data, gained from direct observations and in-depth interviews, achieves meaning only through the interpretation of a researcher. Symbolic interactionist researchers, as ethnographers in a broad sense, are encouraged to immerse themselves into the communicative practices within the local community under investigation, interact with its members, and constantly interpret the meanings of the observed communicative acts. The interpretation continues as the researchers go back to their offices and write research papers away from the research field. At the same time, the researchers must remember that the local community members themselves make sense of their communicative acts through continuous interpretations. As discussed earlier, symbolic interactionism posits that the senses of self and social reality are the creations of human communication and interpretation. Therefore, if we wish to understand how people understand themselves and the world surrounding them in the process of intercultural communication, we should pay close attention to how they interpret their own communicative experiences, and interpret those interpretations by the research participants. A deep understanding of intercultural experiences can be attained through these double interpretations (i.e., interpretation of interpretation) because, as Mead stated, self and society exist only within human symbolic interactions.

Finally, related to the second point, symbolic interactionism attempts to situate intercultural communication research within a specific cultural context. The theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism can be most influential when conducting field studies, case studies, and studies of particular situated discourses because the meanings of lived experiences are considered to be created and recreated within those venues of human symbolic interactions. Therefore, most applied symbolic interac-
Symbolic interactionist research has taken the form of ethnographic field studies or situated discourse analyses. For instance, Erving Goffman (1959, 1961, 1963), conducted fieldwork in such social contexts as restaurants, mental institutions, and the places of everyday social gatherings. Goffman closely observed the social interactions and carefully listened to the conversations in everyday life because he believed that human beings mutually define and negotiate their senses of self (or self-identities) in daily communication. Herbert Blumer (1969), a sociologist who organized many of Mead's underdeveloped theories into a book and coined the term *symbolic interactionism* to name this academic tradition, used the word "joint action" (p. 70) to explain the capacity of active human beings to collectively define the meanings of the situation in which they are engaged. Following symbolic interactionism, intercultural communication researchers are encouraged to explore the meanings of lived human experiences within particular verbal and nonverbal context.

This section suggested the theoretical perspective and research approach that symbolic interactionism could offer to the current study of intercultural communication. Symbolic interactionism emphasizes the data derived typically from direct observations and in-depth interviews. In addition, the central focus of symbolic interactionist research should lie on interpretation, both on the part of the researcher and on the part of the research participants. Further, symbolic interactionism is considered most effective in analyzing communicative phenomena within a particular context in such forms as ethnographic fieldwork and situated discourse analysis. As such, symbolic interactionism provides intercultural communication researchers with a unique perspective in capturing the dynamic processes in which living human beings collaboratively create and recreate self-identity and social reality through constant communication.

4. An Illustrative Analysis from a Symbolic Interactionist Perspective

Having examined the potential contribution of symbolic interactionism to intercultural communication research, this section offers a brief analysis of a Japanese student's intercultural experiences from a symbolic interactionist perspective. In the early summer of 2005, I conducted in-depth interviews with Japanese graduate stu-
dents at a U.S. university to understand the nature of their intercultural experiences. From those interviews, I draw on the interviews with Ellie, a female graduate student, and attempt to interpret her experiences using the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism. As discussed, in-depth interviews represent valid sources of empirical data for symbolic interactionist research.

Ellie was a female graduate student in her early 20s, majoring in Education at a U.S. Midwestern university. She developed her interest in learning English as a high school student during a homestay with a family in Canada. Ellie remembers being depressed and frustrated by her lack of communicative English skills at that time, but at the same time excited about living in a foreign environment and interacting with people from different cultures. Her interest in English led her to major in English Language and Culture as an undergraduate in Japan. In her sophomore year, Ellie came to study at the university identified in this study on a fifteen-week study abroad program. By immersing herself in the college culture of the U.S., she became further fascinated by the challenges and learning opportunities provided by study abroad experiences. She continued studying English and eventually returned to the university as a master's student in education while enrolled in the university ESL program to further refine her language skills.

Two terms in the program provided Ellie with numerous opportunities to interact with other international students from a variety of regions in the world. Ellie recalled meeting international students from such countries as South Korea, China, Turkey, Puerto Rico, Iran, India, Kenya, and Ethiopia, some of which she had not previously been familiar with. She was extremely happy to be able to meet them and stated that making friends with other international students was "one of the best things since I came to the U.S., my treasure." Ellie expressed her appreciation for a close friend from China as follows:

I became friends with a Chinese girl in the ESL program, with a girl from mainland China, not from Hong Kong. For a class project, she wrote about the Nanjing Massacre [a wartime atrocity committed by the Imperial Japanese Army in and around Nanking in 1937]. She got angry at me and said, "At that time, Japan did all of those bad things." But, despite that, we became friends on a personal level. I understood that she had learned about those issues in China and proba-
bly did not like Japan very much. But if she was there as a person, she was my good friend. Since I met her, I have learned that many Chinese think those things. But it is great that we can still become friends. I really think that it is a great thing.

While Japan has adopted numerous cultural inventions (e.g., Chinese characters, Confucianism, a variety of social institutions) from China throughout its history, the two neighboring countries also share bitter historical memories, among them the Nanking Massacre. Typically, many young Japanese students are not very aware of the historical issues between the two countries, while Chinese students have internalized the Chinese interpretation of historical events. The differences in historical awareness and interpretation have occasionally resulted in political conflicts between Japan and China at the governmental level. Likewise, the tension resulting from the Nanking issue had a negative impact on the women's relationship initially. Regardless of the political tension, Ellie and the Chinese student were able to become friends at a personal level. Ellie's understanding of her Chinese friend's historical perspective resulted in a deeper personal friendship, and in turn, the personal friendship allowed Ellie to deepen her understanding of that area of Chinese historical values.

Similar to the situation between Japan and China, the political relationship between Japan and South Korea has occasionally experienced tensions resulting from the Japanese occupation of the Korean peninsula during World War II. The governments of Japan and South Korea have long argued over an island in the ocean between the two countries and the "correct" interpretation of shared histories. As in the case with the Chinese, many young Japanese typically lack awareness of these historical contentions, while young South Koreans have learned the South Korean interpretation of the history intensively through formal education. As a consequence, Japanese and South Korean youths feel the different weights of their shared history. Within this context, Ellie gained entry into the close interpersonal network of South Korean students at the university by means of her South Korean boyfriend, Ralph. Ellie recalled:

Ralph brought me to different places where South Koreans gathered. They were always together. I was surprised. They got together every weekend and drank
together. I felt like South Koreans got together only with South Koreans and excluded others. I was surprised. I did not understand the language, so I did not understand the honorific words. But, as I was with Ralph, I began to figure it out and got amazed by it. Although I was the only Japanese, I was expected to follow the South Korean cultural rules. I was told, “You should greet your elders.” Ralph was living with a roommate who was much older than him. When I was cooking with Ralph, he said, “Go and call him. Ask him if he will eat with us.” I had to respect seniority. It was very interesting. I realized the depth of the Korean language and began to learn it.... I was surprised at first, but I learned a lot about South Korea. South Korea became a very close country.

Ellie sometimes sensed that some South Koreans, especially the young females, did not welcome her presence in their close ethnic circle. However, she maintained her patience and motivation to learn. At the same time, Ralph and other Koreans from the group sought to introduce Ellie into their cultural space, and as a result, she gradually internalized the South Korean way of communicating. Through intercultural interactions at a personal level, Ellie began to feel closer to culturally different others. She stated:

I learned about many different countries. I understand the world news totally differently now. I have many South Korean friends. So, if I hear, “Something happened in South Korea,” it is not a foreign matter to me. If I hear about anti-Japanese sentiments in China or South Korea, I feel bad. Those issues were foreign matters to me before. Now, I learned many things from my friends. When I hear the news, I think “Oh, this is about that.” Many countries have become very close to me.

The above was a description of Ellie’s intercultural experiences in the U.S. reconstructed from the audio tape recordings and transcribed texts of the in-depth interviews with her as well as my direct observations of her intercultural interactions. How can symbolic interactionism assist us to interpret Ellie’s experiences? One of the major concepts developed by Mead (1934) was “taking the role of the other.” Mead argued that human beings acquire senses of self and social reality through taking the roles of different others. Accordingly, we can understand that Ellie was taking the roles of the others, in this case, culturally different others, and by doing so, making
sense of her self and social reality.

During her stay in the U.S., Ellie had abundant opportunities to directly interact with other international students. Out of curiosity and necessity, Ellie strived to understand thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and values of those international students. Through these struggles, Ellie came to identify with those international students and began to look at herself, to a certain degree, from their perspectives. This process parallels the one in which a young girl takes the role of her mother and experiences the emergence of "I" (self as subject) and "me" (self as object), discussed in the earlier section. By taking the roles of the international students, Ellie experienced the interaction between the subjective self that looks at herself from the international students' perspectives and the objective self that is being looked at by her subjective self. Intercultural communication in the U.S. allowed Ellie to reflect on herself from perspectives that she had never taken while she was in Japan.

This reflective interaction between "I" and "me" seem to have influenced Ellie's self-identity. During the interviews, Ellie (as well as other Japanese students with whom I interviewed) stated, "intercultural experiences in the U.S. changed me." This comment is not surprising from a symbolic interactionist perspective. A sense of self is created and recreated through daily interactions, involving taking the role of the other. Because Ellie came to interact with Chinese and South Korean friends on a daily basis, and took the roles of those culturally different others, it is natural that her self-identity was recreated through those interactions. In this sense, one of the major impacts of intercultural communication can be found in its influence on self-identity. Intercultural communication allows us not only to explore other cultures but also to reflect on our self-identity.

At the same time, Mead contended that society, or more precisely social reality, was a product of human symbolic interactions. While she was in Japan, Ellie belonged to several social groups (e.g., her family, network of friends, neighborhood, and school), and Ellie's ongoing communication with other group members produced a sense of reality for each of those social groups. Ellie and her family members communicated with each other, for instance, and that communication produced a shared sense of reality for her family. What Ellie believed to be real in each social context was a creation of her communication with others within that particular con-
text.

In a similar manner, Ellie's interactions with others in Japan led her to a certain understanding of other countries, such as China and South Korea. Symbolic interactionism suggests that Ellie knew a reality (not the reality) of China while she was in Japan, and that reality was a creation of Ellie's communication with others in Japan. The reality of China that Ellie believed to be true was only one of many social realities that could possibly be created for that country. Furthermore, Ellie's version of reality was created largely based on information from mass media and formal education in Japan, not based on direct interactions with Chinese. Regardless of depth and intensity, Ellie learned Chinese history at school and watched news about China on television, and discussed those issues with teachers, friends, and family members. Those interactions enabled Ellie and her social group members to bring together the fragmentary pieces of information, interpret them, and create a certain understanding of China.

After coming to the U.S., however, Ellie gained opportunities to directly interact with Chinese students as well as other international students. Each of the Chinese students had his/her understanding of social reality in China while Ellie had her own understanding of it. The intercultural interactions between Ellie and the Chinese student described above is an example of a situation in which each person brought what they believed to be real about China and negotiated their differing views in the process of reaching a shared understanding. This attempt is not always successful, as we know from the fact that many instances of intercultural encounters end in miscommunication. Nevertheless, Ellie at least had an opportunity to get a glimpse of what the Chinese students believed to be real about China, and that experience most certainly enriched Ellie's understanding of China and its people. In this sense, intercultural communication helped Ellie and the Chinese student to collaboratively create a shared understanding about China to a certain degree.

Certainly, the shared understanding achieved by Ellie and her Chinese friend would not represent the "correct" understanding of China. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, there is no such thing as "the correct understanding" in the first place. What we can achieve is an interpretation of something based on a certain perspective derived from our interactions within a social group to which we belong. Therefore, we
should understand that communication between Ellie and her Chinese friend allowed them to interpret the current situation in China and a variety of discourses surrounding China from a certain perspective, and consequently to reach one shared interpretation (among many) of Chinese social reality. Although the above discussion focused on Ellie’s interactions with the Chinese student, the similar processes can be observed in her interactions with South Korean students and other international students. In each of those interactions, Ellie and other international students communicated with each other, and recreated some forms of shared understandings of South Korea, Japan, and other countries.

5. Concluding Remarks

This article attempted to explore the potential of applying symbolic interactionism to the studies of communication across cultures. Through this attempt, I did not intend to claim that symbolic interactionism is the best theoretical framework for intercultural communication research. Yet, I believe that this academic tradition could bring a distinctive perspective to achieve a deeper understanding of lived intercultural experiences. A research perspective provided by symbolic interactionism could be described as journalistic in a sense. Most symbolic interactionist researchers have been committed to understand current pressing social problems. They visit the fields, observe the scenes, and listen to the voices of real people. They interpret the empirical data and present the interpretation in a form of ethnographic report. The research product resembles an in-depth documentary report. However, as a scholarly endeavor, symbolic interactionist research could also offer deeper insight into the research phenomena founded upon the accumulation of knowledge.

Every morning, newspapers bring us stories about a variety of social problems: illegal immigrants, ethnic conflicts, global warming, spread of HIV/AIDS, and social inequality, to name a few. If we consider that culture is created within any social group through symbolic interactions among its members, most of these kinds of social problems could represent topics of intercultural communication research. Symbolic interactionism could be a powerful theoretical framework to help us grapple with those imminent problems of intercultural communication and reach a valid (yet not absolute) interpretation of those issues of social significance.
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Notes
An earlier version of this article was presented on November 16, 2006, at the 92nd annual convention of the National Communication Association in San Antonio, Texas. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments in refining this essay.

1) The interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed in Japanese with approval from each participant and from the Institutional Review Board at the university. I translated the quoted portions of the transcripts from Japanese to English. Back translation by two trusted bilinguals of Japanese and English confirmed the validity of the translation. Pseudonyms are employed to protect the privacy of the participant and the individuals mentioned by the participants.

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