Research on Social Interaction and the Micro–Macro Issue

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I consider issues in interdependence—and the micro–macro issue in particular—to be important theoretical matters for future work in language and social interaction. Social interaction research and communication theory are currently struggling with the quality of theoretical explanations. The gap between the microworld of ethnomethodologists, who focus on the moment-to-moment empirics of microlinguistic communicative interaction, and the macroworld of cultural and critical theorists, who are more concerned with pre-existing structural external constraints (e.g., "culture," "ethnicity"), is large. The problem is one of interdependence, or the relation between the microelements of language and day-to-day reality and how these coalesce and organize themselves into a whole of some sort that has structure. This structure is in turn constraining.

We simply cannot talk about a theory of interaction or any type of social bonding without considering theoretical principles of interdependence. What sociologists call the micro–macro link—the connections between the small world of individuals and immediate interactions, and the larger worlds of social structure—is one problem in theories of interdependence. Surely the work of Giddens (1984), Collins (1981), and

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Alexander, Giesen, Munch, and Smelser (1987) has been powerful, but much remains to be done in communication to deepen our understanding. In the following, I quickly explore the problem including its history and nature, followed by an exploration of linking principles (Collins, 1987) as an example of a promising conceptual tool.

In one sense, a very real empirical sense, there is no such thing as “society.” There is no such thing as “structure,” “order,” or “macrosocietal forces” that influence individuals and cultures. You cannot go observe or touch something called the state, or the middle class, or ethnicity, or a relationship. These things are only reifications or generalities inferred from individuals behaving in relation to one another. As Alexander and Giesen (1987) explained, the debate over levels of reality and the existence of a microworld and macroworld have a long history in philosophical thinking. From Plato’s theory of forms to medieval distinctions between the individual and the state, the issue of a microworld and macroworld has been a core opposition. Social scientific notions about systems, wholeness, and social reality, and political issues about the individual versus the state, are all part of the background of these controversies. This micro-macro problem is an important problem in interdependence that social interaction researchers must address.

Powerful and popular conceptual systems have been established for both microepistemologies and macroepistemologies. The positivist quest for a unified science based on atomistic principles of physics has been a very compelling and successful microposition. Additionally, Marx produced the most influential macroperspective in the social sciences by concluding that objective circumstances rule people. Contemporary debates about the relation between the individual and state are informed by this micro-macro distinction. Is the “system” responsible for the poor and jobless, or is it failed individual agency? The historical conflict between the populist Jefferson and the federalist Hamilton may be considered a micro-macro argument, one that pits “big-D” democracy (principles of freedom, rights, and the state) against “little-D” democracy (smaller daily democratic acts such as participating in community actions and voting). Daniel Goldhagen, in his book Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust (1996), challenged the explanation that inanimate social structures in Germany were responsible for the holocaust. Goldhagen argued that structural constraints (a macronotion) are never causal, and that the phenomenological reality (a micronotion) of ordinary citizens who perpetrated atrocities against the Jews had to be
taken seriously. Much of the power and controversy of his study was attributable to his analysis of how ordinary citizens behaved consciously and intentionally.

Social interaction researchers must broaden their theoretical reach by resisting the common tendency to pose the micro-macro question as an antithesis in which one is expected to choose one side or the other as a deterministic entity. We easily fall into the categorical thinking of one or the other, rather than dialectical thinking that forces attention to the "processes" of micro-macro interdependence. These antithetical theories run the gamut from maintaining that rational interpretive individuals create society by engaging in individually subjective acts of free communication, to a position that argues that completely socialized individuals simply translate structure into their microcommunicative reality. These debates continue to influence the social sciences although they are less vital in sociology and very rare in communication. Some work in organizational theory (e.g., Harrison, 1994; Hawes, 1974; Weick, 1979) is a notable exception that focuses attention on how language and social interactional processes interweave action and order to produce larger organized relations out of patterned individual behaviors and goals.

SOCIAL INTERACTION AND THE MICRO-MACRO DIALECTIC

Social interaction is at the nexus of microissues and macroissues. Yet much of the history of the study of communication (rhetoric, speaking, interpersonal and group relations) has been micro in nature. We can understand the theoretical confusion in communication studies by using the micro-macro issues as an analytic category. Work in interpersonal communication, pragmatics, much of discourse analysis, symbolic interactionism, and ethnomethodology is concerned more with people and situations and is micro in nature. Some organizational communication, media sociology, and cultural theories are less empirical and more macro. Lannonmann (1991) made an interesting similar point when he explained how so much interpersonal communication research is skewed toward individual microexperiences at the expense of any emphases of social collectives such as class and education. He argued that this is a positivist
bias that emphasizes the unitary controlling individual rather than the individual as a socially and culturally influenced entity. Although he uses different language, Lannamann was referring to the micro–macro epistemological problem.

It must be clear that the micro–macro distinction is one of scale and ratio. The distinction should be considered a continuous variable that does not lend itself to rigid categorization. However, our concern here is with language and social interaction and the problem of interdependence and the organization of people and messages. It is my contention that the important social categories and structures in a culture can and must be related to or translated into microcommunication experiences: Communication is the only empirical reality for social structures. Social concepts must be rooted in microcommunication experiences. What are some of the advantages of rigorously requiring social concepts be translated into communicative actions?

The first advantage is epistemological. The state of our knowledge about the social world is stronger to the extent that it has empirical grounding in individuals interacting in microsituations. Any category summarizing a collection of individual behaviors is translating from a microreality to a macroreality and back again. This is how researchers and lay people generate social categories of all types and levels of generality. For example, M. A. Fitzpatrick spent a large portion of her research efforts studying family “types.” One type of family is pluralistic (Fitzpatrick, Marshall, Leutwiler, & Kremar, 1996). “Pluralistic parents are committed to female equality and believe that personal preferences rather than role proscriptions should determine an individual’s behavior” (p. 385). She then went on to describe a host of attitudes and communication practices that characterize pluralistic families.

These types (e.g., pluralistic) are macrocategories that serve as a shorthand for many microcommunication behaviors. The term pluralistic is a compilation of many microcommunication experiences that are coded and translated into this term, which represents some macroreality. A term such as this can be either the result of a researcher’s efforts after observations and questionnaires, or a more amateur endeavor to describe experiences and behaviors. When a historian tags an era as the “Age of Jackson” or the “Ante-bellum South,” he or she is glossing many complex microexperiences. The advantage, then, of requiring social concepts to be fixed in microevents is that they gain their most dependable empirical expression. Often this empirical grounding is complex, difficult, and
perhaps only an approximation, but it is the best test of the macroconcept and the best place to begin a reevaluation of the macroconcept. Too little social interaction research works to link the micro and macro.

Second, communication in microsituations is where real human action takes place. As Collins (1981) explained, macrosocial shorthands
do not do anything; if they seem to indicate a continuous reality it is because the individuals that make them up repeat their microbehaviors many times, and if the "structures" change it is because the individuals who enact them change their microbehaviors. (p. 989)

People are dispersed in time and place, and social structures are cumulative representations of microexperiences. Modern media of course makes distant and asynchronous communication possible, but such communicative acts are still microsocial experiences in which individuals cognitively process messages. Therefore, a computer interaction, e-mail, listening to the radio, or retrieving a message from an answering machine are microexperiences. They take place in interactive contexts and have yet to be integrated into macrostructures.

There are various structures that language users employ to produce a coherent sense of real-time interaction, and there is little need to restate them here. Scripts, indexicality, microlinguistic features, speech acts, implicatures, story structures, and rhetorical strategies are all part of the ethnomethods communicators use to stitch together a macrocommunicative reality. What is particularly important for the theory of interdependence is that the microworld of everyday communication is the site of meaning that both produces social structure and is produced by it (Ellis, 1995). This is a key theoretical principle of Giddens (1984) that represents an important contribution to social theory.

We can visualize this microworld of language and social interaction as an enfolded order. Social structure and history enfold into the reality of individuals and act like seeds that produce an organized flowering of messages and meanings. The flowering is the world of appearances; the enfolded seed is the world that underlies appearances. The analysis of discourse and social interaction is part of this observable flowering world. This enfolded seed world contains classical social structure in the form of history, culture, and language and is accessible through the duality of structure and the duality of analysis (Giddens, 1984).

The duality of analysis is the fact that recurring patterns in the macrostructural world require methods for detecting regularities such as
mathematical and statistical models. These are necessary to detect long-term and slow-moving patterns of regularities. However, the microworld requires techniques for unearthing the quick and small movements of real-time interaction. The language of these techniques is different from traditional sociology and social psychology. It is the language of discourse and communication.

INTERACTION RITUALS AND MACROPATTERNS

Language and social interaction researchers should revitalize the term interaction ritual from Goffman (1967). The term refers to the fact that a communicative exchange depends on the motivations, resources, and language of the users. Also, these are produced out of cultural and biographical histories, stored memories, and linguistic socialization. An individual has certain cultural resources and these are derived from previous interactions, invested in present interactions, and implicated in future interactions. Moreover, there is a tremendous variety and complexity of interactions that one may engage in. Some of them are everyday and routine; others are new, creative, and distinctive. Some involve asymmetries of various types, but all of them actualize one’s membership in social networks and establish power, roles, and identity. This is true even for “para-social” relationships in which individuals cognitively interact with nonimmediate others. So some “emergence” is the result of all interactive situations. There is some emanation that results from this interlocking of actions and sentiments. It cannot be predicted, but some sound theoretical judgments are possible. This is the site of the micro–macro dialectic.

Conversation chains result in cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1991). As an individual excludes and includes different identities and relational positions, and as he or she engages in numerous symbolic exchanges with various forms of media, they store cultural capital; that is, they have a bank of things to talk about, language features, attitudes, and the like. People who successfully engage in power relationships, for example, will move into the future with the energy and confidence to enact new power relationships. Conversely, those who experience capitulation and acquiescence will initiate similar subsequent conversations and have something else “emerge.” Cultural capital consolidates numerous resources that circulate including energy, motivations, image, identity, and verbal skills.
These interaction ritual chains that circulate cultural capital can direct one’s attention to either microperspectives or macroperspectives (Collins, 1987), and I would suggest that both professional and lay observers seesaw between the two pretty regularly. A microperspective on interaction ritual chains focuses on the individual and his or her personality and psychobiography. We might notice or document an individual’s enduring nature or particular communicative skills and patterns. However, it is the interaction unit—the encounter and the ongoing interaction ritual chains—that is fundamental, and the individual’s nature or personality are abstracted from these units. When we draw conclusions and label an individual’s “personality” or “nature,” we are simply using a verbal shorthand to encapsulate and describe patterns of thinking, speaking, and behaving. Intervening at this level is what therapists, friends, and family members do in the world of interpersonal relations and their daily requirements.

However, one must aggregate these interaction chains into macropatterns (cf. Gerstein, 1987). The stratified nature of cultures separates people by groups. Yet within these groups are associational patterns based on similarity of encounters. Just as a label describing someone’s personality (e.g., friendly, aggressive, authoritarian) is an encapsulation of interactional encounters, so too are stratification terms (e.g., lower middle class, African American ethnic identity) labels for status groups that regularly converse and employ language and communication patterns that produce and reproduce group membership. The term middle class is broad and crude but conceals a narrower and more refined reality that lives in a network of communicative relationships. A group has a sense of reality and identity because of the communicative behaviors that mark membership. As Collins (1987) wrote, “if one wishes to describe accurately the condition of class consciousness, ideology, or culture across a society, the proper way to do so would be to sample the typical conversations across the landscape” (p. 201). Social interaction researchers must broaden and strengthen this concept.

I would raise a warning here about too much emphasis on conversation. Life is not only a series of chats. Certainly some theorists (e.g., Marx) argue that human behavior, including communication, is responsive to structure in the first place. Employees, minorities, and members of social classes have internalized discursively created identities and positions in networks, and these are structurally responsible for whatever symbolic capital one possesses. However, the concept of an interaction ritual chain already heeds this warning. The experience of an interactional encounter already includes
previous symbolic accumulations, which means that macrostructures and patterns are influential in these interactional encounters. Yet, we cannot simply leave it at this and assume that structure determines behavior. The reality of communicating in a role or as a member of a culturally identified group is neither simply given from structure nor fashioned arbitrarily. It is truly crafted with some struggle out of the interplay of microcultural capital and macrostructural constraints.

Personally, I would push this dialectical tension to almost radical levels by suggesting that microempirical phenomena and macrostructural phenomena are close to the same thing, but not exactly. They require theorizing. This is a somewhat more extreme position than anyone takes but one that is satisfying because it makes for a very close articulation between specific communicative interaction and culture. Social practices and culture enfold on one another such that each informs the other. What is even more important theoretically, however, is that the concept of “objective structure” is advanced in an empirical way because the social facts of communication and language are available to the social sciences. The phenomenological and emic experiences of individuals in relationships would be a variant of the etic or “outside” structural variables generated by analysts. This helps solve the problem of how a rich diversity of interactive practices emerge as a macropattern, or how a stable structural characteristic of all cultures is represented by a great variety of linguistic and interactive practices.

This unity of microsocial experiences and macrostructures is an argument with more than its share of problems but one that raises some intriguing points that theorists should pursue. One very interesting and theoretically important issue is the extent to which structure is part of anyone’s reality–gestalt. The ethnomethodologists try to claim that individuals conform to structure, and then that same structure is displayed in member social practices. Yet they do little more than claim the identity of the two, and they do little to make socio-logical and technical connections between interaction and structure. The ethnomethodologists seem to be increasingly pressured to make the connections between language user practices and various asymmetries of power, status, or other structural issues (cf. Schegloff, 1997). Recall that a language user’s reality is enfolded into his or her consciousness and may be foregrounded without verbalization. So, for example, the role of power or status in a relationship may be operating even though the individuals are not talking about power or status. This makes the indexing problem very difficult and it becomes impossible to argue that real-time action is the same as structure. This is


