

Equality as a Social Construction

The goal of this book is to conceptualize a “radical” way of studying equality in social life: an interactionist, interpretive approach. The book is not “radical” in the sense of espousing an explicit political position, but because it attempts to go to the “root” of equality, to understand how and why equality and inequality are experienced features of the world.

My thesis is that equality is not an independent, objective, or self-evident characteristic but is a socially constructed phenomenon. By (1) synthesizing the theoretical perspectives of Herbert Blumer, Alfred Schutz, Harold Garfinkel, and John Dewey, (2) critically reviewing and analyzing a portion of the literature on equality, and (3) conducting a focused inquiry on the issue of equality, my book challenges conventional understandings of equality and attempts to demonstrate the utility of an interactionist approach to the subject.

TRADITIONAL AND INTERACTIONIST APPROACHES TO STUDYING EQUALITY

Generally, sociological treatment of the concept “equality” has taken four forms. First, sociologists have attempted to conceptualize and operationalize equality in a clear, logical, and rational manner. Such efforts are based on the reasonable belief that the quality of their work on equality depends upon whether the concept is carefully defined and measured. Second, sociologists have attempted to determine whether (or to what degree) equality exists in a situation, and to identify those factors that

promote or inhibit equality. The central goal here has been to discover what variables are requisite to equal or unequal states of affairs. Third, sociologists have tried to identify the beneficial and malignant effects that result from the presence of equality and inequality. Almost always, inequality is found to be associated with numerous negative consequences. Fourth and finally, sociologists have recommended various courses of social reform in order to ameliorate inequalities and their negative effects. This last approach to the topic of equality is reflected in the phrase "Inequality and Social Policy," the theme of the 1998 Annual Meetings of the American Sociological Association.

This brief typology of the sociological treatment of equality may not be an entirely exhaustive one; however, it accurately characterizes the vast majority of work on this subject. Indeed, considering the prominent role that equality plays in sociology, the typology may also reflect sociology as a whole. As Cancian (1995) has noted, much sociological work in recent decades has been devoted to the moral tasks of discovering and reducing inequality, wherever inequality may be found.

In pointing out the centrality of equality in the field of sociology, I want to show that there is still, remarkably, an immense and untapped line of inquiry that remains to be pursued. It is my contention that sociologists have not yet developed a symbolic interactionist (Blumer 1969), social constructionist (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Garfinkel 1967) approach to studying equality. In what follows, I hope to demonstrate that contention and illustrate the manner in which an interactionist or constructionist approach might proceed.

The Neglect of Interactionism

None of the traditional approaches to equality that I listed is distinctly interactionist. On each and every count, interactionism requires a different stance.

Symbolic interactionism contradicts the first form of analysis because it requires that sociologists give priority not to their own formal definitions and operationalizations of equality but to the meanings and measurements of equality that emerge and are actually used by people in the course of their everyday lives. If the goal of one's research is to understand and explain the behavior of human beings, then the first task should be to investigate the meaning things have *for them*, because it is on the basis of those meanings only that they will act (Blumer 1969, p.

2). Sociologists' definitions and measurements of equality may be completely foreign to the people they study, especially if no attempt is made to acquire an intimate familiarity with the lives of those people.

Interactionism contradicts the second and third forms of analysis because it eschews a deterministic approach to social life that would view equality as a definitive independent or dependent variable (Blumer 1969, ch. 7). The difference between traditional and interactionist approaches here is subtle yet vast. It is the difference between making notions of equality *the basis* of one's research and making such notions *the subject* of one's research (cf. Zimmerman and Pollner 1970). The former approach tends to take for granted what the latter investigates—the interpretive practices that bring equality into being.

Finally, while interactionism is certainly not against social reform, this perspective does imply that efforts to promote a just world must be accompanied by an awareness of how inequality is reflexively constituted by those who seek to “discover” and “reduce” it. This “de-reification” (cf. Berger and Luckmann 1966) of equality both clarifies and complicates the process of deliberate social change.

Neglect by Interactionists

Traditional sociologists are not alone in their neglect of interactionist principles when studying equality. Interactionists themselves have not systematically investigated this topic from their own point of view. Occasionally, interactionists do make passing references to “equality” as a subject amenable to their approach. However, they have not committed themselves to the kind of sustained, rigorous, and comparative inquiry that might lead, say, to a grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) of equality *as an interpretation*. In the 1960s, for example, Howard Becker (1973, p. 130) briefly described equality as a vague notion that is difficult to relate to concrete behavior. In the early 1980s, Berger and Kellner (1981, p. 170) called for studies of the “ever-changing meanings” of equality. More recently, well-known interactionists have argued that there are “a diversity of alignments to American values” like equality (Strauss 1995, p. 11), and that sociologists need to recognize that they do not possess “an authoritative definition of justice” (Best 2004, p. 158).

Bold claims like these are striking and provocative. However, they are also extremely underdeveloped. Despite the appeal of investigating the diverse meanings of such an interesting and ubiquitous concept as

equality, interactionists have not followed up on the leads offered by these passing references. Those interactionists who do extended research and theorizing about equality tend to do so from “naturalist” or “conventional” perspectives (as I show in chapters 3 and 6). Given the important role that notions of equality play in social science research, political discourse, and everyday life, perhaps it is time to remedy that neglect. This book attempts to articulate a more comprehensive theoretical framework for future studies of “the social construction of equality,” the interpretive practices by which people define situations as equal or unequal.

I believe the heading “the social construction of equality” could serve as a general rubric for bringing together a number of distinct approaches united by their focus on the interpretive aspects of equality in social life. Studies collected under this rubric need not limit their theoretical base solely to traditional interactionism and its pragmatic heritage of James, Dewey, and Mead. Complementary insights can and should be drawn from related constructionist traditions. Consequently, in the first three sections of this chapter, I will attempt to inform and inspire research on the socially constructed nature of equality by incorporating key ideas not only from (1) the symbolic interactionism of Herbert Blumer (1969), but also (2) the social phenomenology of Alfred Schutz (1964) and (3) the ethnomethodology of Harold Garfinkel (1967).

Although it may be possible to treat the social construction of equality as if it were a “purely” technical or theoretical interest, studies in this area can be shown to have serious implications for issues of social reform. Equality is, after all, an extremely popular moral ideal. In a fourth section of this chapter, then, I will draw upon John Dewey’s (1989) ethical theory to show how interactionist research in this area might be used to assist efforts to promote a just society.

SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM AND EQUALITY

Herbert Blumer, it is well known, first coined the phrase “symbolic interaction” (Blumer 1937) and became the most influential advocate of the perspective. Over a period of six decades he clearly, consistently, and persuasively articulated an alternative to traditional deterministic sociologies. Following his teacher, G. H. Mead (1934), Blumer conceived of human beings as *minded* creatures who actively construct meaningful worlds of objects in the course of their interactions with each other. Blumer also went beyond Mead by articulating the methodological

implications of a sociology that adopts this perspective. His writings still repay a close reading, at least as a very useful starting point.

Blumer's Basic Premises

My explication and application of Blumer will focus on his succinct formulation of interactionism's three fundamental premises (1969, p. 2). I will do so, however, through a slightly indirect route. I will begin by naming and numbering what I see as his most provocative assertion, but one that is not made explicit in his list. I would like to call it the zero premise (rather than the "fourth" premise), because it underlies each of the others. This premise simply says: *The meaning of things is not inherent*. This notion is central to Blumer's thinking, as references to it can be found throughout his book (e.g., 1969, pp. 3, 4, 11, 12, 68–69). However, the main reason I would like to accentuate it is because I believe it can provide the basis and impetus for studying the social construction of equality. There is good reason to think so. The zero premise has already borne fruit in hundreds of interactionist studies, especially in the fields of deviance and social problems. Clearly, these two traditions of constructionist research grew out of the insight that the meaning of things is not intrinsic to them (cf. Goode 1994, p. 100; Schneider 1985, p. 226). Becker's famous book on deviance, for example, begins with the oft-cited observation that no act is inherently deviant (1973, p. 9). Deviance is not inscribed in certain behaviors; it arises from the way groups create and apply rules to those behaviors. Similarly, constructionist work in the field of social problems is built on the assumption that no conditions are automatically problematic for a society (Blumer 1971; Spector and Kitsuse 1977). Instead, social problems are contingent on the process of collective definition that brings them into being.

The claim that the meaning of things is not inherent often seems shocking or silly to some. Common sense may suggest, in the manner of realism, that "of course" a chair is just a chair, or a cow a cow. Blumer, however, argues that the meaning of such things is not self-evident. Things do not speak for themselves. It is entirely possible for the "same" object to be interpreted very differently by different people: "To one with no experience with the use of chairs the object would appear with a different meaning, such as a strange weapon" (Blumer 1969, p. 69). Even where there is superficial agreement (e.g., that an animal is a "cow"), such agreement may belie vast divergences in perspective. A cow

would likely mean very different things for a butcher, a vegetarian, a Hindu, and an executive at McDonald's. The zero premise can thus be justified quickly if one merely imagines the various purposes and perspectives that different groups might bring to a single object.

With this discussion in mind, I turn to Blumer's original three premises and their import for studying equality. Clearly, the notion that meaning is not inherent is reflected in each of them. It is reflected in Blumer's first premise by the words "for them": *Human beings act toward things on the basis of the meaning things have for them* (Blumer 1969, p. 2). If the first premise merely read, "Human beings act toward things on the basis of the meaning things have," it would be much more open to a realist rather than constructionist reading. The "for them" is more consistent with Blumer's view of meaning as perspectival and not inherent. Blumer's first premise also goes beyond (what I have called) the zero premise, however. It indicates the central place meaning holds in human behavior. That is, meaning is not a minor or irrelevant concern, but is at the very heart of what people do. A simple "stimulus"—noticing someone eating a hamburger, for example—may elicit a variety of reactions, depending on the meaning that event holds for its observer. It may be defined as an "unremarkable event," "a cruel and unnecessary act," "sacrilege," or "another satisfied customer." Meaning will be a crucial component of the observer's response to seeing someone eat a hamburger. The methodological implication is that "one has to get inside the defining process of the actor in order to understand his [or her] action" (Blumer 1969, p. 16).

Blumer's second premise is also concerned with meaning. It is, in fact, a direct response to what I have listed as the zero premise. Since meaning is not inherent, yet human beings live in worlds of meaningful objects, an obvious question arises: Where does meaning come from? Blumer argues in this premise that the source of meaning is human interaction: *The meaning of things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows* (Blumer 1969, p. 2). Human beings learn from each other the significance of things. People learn, for example, that a chair is something to be sat in, or that a cow is a sacred animal, from the communities into which they are born. As Blumer puts it, "The meaning of a thing for a person grows out of the ways in which other persons act toward the person with regard to the thing" (Blumer 1969, p. 4). Such socialization is not merely a childhood process. Everyday interaction with significant others tends to confirm what people already know and helps them make sense of new, ambigu-

ous situations. It is not unheard of, for example, for adults to decide to convert to vegetarianism and change their view of those who eat meat.

Thus, although we learn the meaning of things from others, those meanings are never fully or finally settled. This suggests another key idea of symbolic interactionism—the central role of self-interaction, or thought. To assume that the meaning of things is essentially automatic amounts to cultural determinism, an indirect way of making meaning inherent (Blumer 1969, p. 5). Blumer's third premise avoids this pitfall by emphasizing the importance of a reflective self: *These meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he [or she] encounters* (Blumer 1969, p. 2). This premise asserts that people are in fact *active*. They think. They point things out to themselves through self-interaction. They must do so because at any given moment there are millions of stimuli to which they might attend (James 1890, p. 402). People are selective with their attention because they couldn't possibly respond to their whole environment at once. To return to my earlier example, whether and how a chair is relevant is contingent on the ongoing behavior of the actor. In certain situations, a chair may be deliberately sat on. In others, it may be deemed a valuable commodity or source of firewood. In still others, it may be a barely noticed shape in the background. Human beings, one might say, fashion their own environments according to the various projects they pursue and perspectives they take (Mead 1934, pp. 278, 333).

To summarize, Blumer's three premises, including the "zero premise" implicit in them, portray human beings as living in worlds of meaningful objects that are always "under construction." His premises thus place human action and interpretation at the center of the sociological stage. The job for interactionists is to investigate the usefulness of these premises for understanding human behavior. I believe that the subject of equality is an important topic with which such studies can be conducted.

Interactionism on Equality

The four premises I have just discussed can be used to generate four parallel premises for studying the social construction of equality. In particular, the insight contained in the zero premise should provide a provocative starting point for the development of a distinctly interactionist approach to equality. The zero premise, when applied to the topic of equality, suggests that we entertain the "preposterous" notion that no

situation—no trade, marriage, gender, economic system, race, species, and so on—is inherently equal or unequal. The quality of equality does not exist independently, absolutely, or objectively in any given state of affairs. The zero premise for studying the social construction of equality is simply this: *Nothing is inherently equal or unequal.*

To many, this will appear to be a shocking or ridiculous claim. It is in fact diametrically opposed to the stance that sociologists and the general public alike have traditionally taken toward this topic. Typically, people take the meaning and existence of equality for granted. Equality is “reified,” or treated as residing in the “nature of things” (see Berger and Luckmann 1966, p. 89, on reification). By regarding equality as a preexistent fact rather than an interpretation, sociologists and the general public routinely ignore the contingent, definitional processes that bring it into being. Consequently, the concept of equality operates as an unquestioned resource in frequent discussions over such issues as the causes, effects, and extent of various social inequalities.

A symbolic interactionist approach, in contrast, would sidestep debates over, say, what factors inhibit an equal marriage or whether one “race” is somehow inferior to another. It would focus attention instead on the interpretive processes by which *any* situation comes to be labeled in those terms, for assertions of equality will always depend on the purposes and perspectives of the people who make them. Interactionism suggests that equality and inequality can be profitably understood as labels applied to situations rather than self-evident, universal characteristics inscribed in the nature of things.

If equality does not inhere in any given situation, then one cannot assume that all people “see” equality in the same way. Indeed, one cannot safely assume even that equality will arise as a relevant concern in any particular situation. This leads directly into my application of Blumer’s first premise to the topic of equality. I believe the first premise for studying the social construction of equality should be the following: *People act on the basis of their perceptions of equality, if and when equality is a relevant concern for them.* Most human beings are probably not as concerned with equality as sociologists are, but when the issue does arise, interactionism predicts that people will act on the basis of their understanding of what equality means. People may of course act in a variety of ways—for example, they may express satisfaction with or approval of congenial inequalities (such as rewarding superior performance or “excellence”) or they may express outrage and pursue remedies for problematic inequalities—but such expressions will occur with refer-

ence to the particular understandings of equality to which the actors themselves are oriented.

An interactionist approach to research on equality in social life would thus respect and study the various ways people interpret and act toward “equal” and “unequal” situations. This does not mean that “it is forbidden” for sociologists to construct their own “objective” definitions of equality—“objective,” that is, from the perspective of a particular community of researchers. But researchers should take care not to ignore the actual lived experience of the people whose behavior they hope to understand. To that end, the *primary* concern of an interactionist approach to equality should be the meanings and measurements of equality around which members of society orient their actions.

So far I have only discussed *what* people know about equality. I have not mentioned *how* people know what they know. In other words, not only the substance but the source of “equality meanings” are amenable to interactionist analysis. Paralleling Blumer once again, the second premise of a constructionist approach to equality can be stated briefly: *Equal and unequal situations are defined as such in the course of interaction.* An interactionist approach thus directs our attention to what people’s understandings of equality actually are as well as to how those understandings are formed. Regarding the latter, interactionism suggests that the things considered equal or unequal are defined as such by people as they relate to one another. People may learn as children, for example, that it is appropriate to kill and eat animals but not human beings. By watching what people do and listening to what they say, children are socialized to believe that animals are morally unequal to human beings. Much of this socialization is of course implicit. People’s actions may intentionally or unintentionally “operate to define the thing for the person” (Blumer 1969, pp. 4–5). However, such socialization may also be explicit, as when a child is told in so many words that inferior human beings can be identified by the color of their skin.

As with Blumer’s second premise of interactionism, my second premise should not imply that socialization is merely a childhood process that establishes the meaning of things once and for all. Perspectives on equality can shift and change drastically over the course of one’s life, especially as one acquires new affiliations with new reference groups. Moral entrepreneurs (Becker 1973), in addition, can play an important role in “raising consciousness” about new or ignored equalities and inequalities. “Generational inequality” is one social problem that has recently been “discovered,” amid concerns about the kind

of environmental and fiscal difficulties that an older generation can bequeath to a younger one. Getting others to see an inequality like this one, and to see it as a social problem, involves a process of socialization.

Like Blumer's third premise, the final premise of the social construction of equality accentuates the fact that, although people may be "raised" to define certain things as equal or unequal, people are best conceived as *using* those perspectives rather than blindly following them. It reads: *The meaning of equality is modified by, or handled through, an active, interpretive process.* This last premise does not deny the usefulness of identifying general cultural and subcultural differences in perceptions of equality. However, it does encourage researchers to attend to "what is taken into account and assessed in the actual situations in which behavior is formed" (Blumer 1969, p. 89). Cultural rules about equality will always contain some ambiguity that must be "remedied" by people (cf. Dewey 1988, p. 74; Garfinkel 1967). Active, minded human beings must always decide just when and how beliefs about equality actually apply. Vague prescriptions like "friends should be treated as equals" must be related in a creative way to the intricate complexities of daily life (Harris 1997).

In short, my Blumerian principles for studying the social construction of equality suggest that sociologists treat equality as a trait ascribed to situations, as something people act toward based on the perspectives they develop and use in the course of their interactions with each other. These premises implore sociologists to respect and study the definitional processes by which people identify equal and unequal situations as such. Fortunately, interactionist research will not need to "start from scratch." Work by phenomenological and ethnomethodological sociologists can also provide insightful leads for inquiry, as I hope to show in the next two sections.

PHENOMENOLOGY AND EQUALITY

Probably the most important resource available for the development of an interactionist approach to equality is Alfred Schutz's (1964) paper "Equality and the Meaning Structure of the Social World," a rich analysis of the concept of equality as it operates in the commonsense thinking of social groups. As a phenomenologist, Schutz is acutely aware of the interpretive ambiguity that pervades social life. His writings in general are thus in many ways complementary to symbolic interactionism, as

others have noted (e.g., Flaherty 1987, p. 154; Prus 1996, p. 87). During the many years since Schutz originally published his paper on equality (Schutz 1957), interactionists have neglected its valuable insights.¹ In what follows, I will extract what I believe are the most useful ideas that can be gained from reading Schutz's discussion of this topic. Because his analysis is built on his larger phenomenological approach, I must first review two of his more basic concepts.

Schutz on Typification and Relevance

According to Schutz (1973, pp. 7–10), a fundamental feature of all socialized human beings is that they experience everyday life in the mode of typicality. The various things people notice are not perceived as merely one new and unique phenomenon after another, but as *types*—as instances of “desks,” “dogs,” “teachers,” “birthday parties,” “having fun,” and so on. Though each manifestation of an object or situation can be shown to have unique features, the validity of the labels people use is rarely questioned. Generally, it suffices to refer to something as, say, a “desk,” even though each appearance of that object differs from other things called “desk” and from itself on other occasions. Unless motivated by a special reason, human beings tend to take for granted the adequacy of the meaning and applicability of the labels they give things.

An interesting aspect of the relationship between types and their referents is (what I call) its non-exclusivity. Any pairing of type-to-object can be adulterated, for at least two reasons. First, typological labels can be—indeed, are meant to be—applied to other manifestations of the “same” thing. To typify is, after all, to say “*this* is another instance of *that* phenomenon.” Second, and more important, the “same” typified object can always be redescribed by subjecting it to further typification. Any strip of reality can be cast in numerous (potentially infinite) different lights. A married couple, for example, may characterize a pile of clothes simply as “the laundry.” However, it is also possible that the couple will typify the clothes as “flammable,” “made of cotton,” “store bought,” “factory made,” “imported,” “old,” “cheap,” “durable,” “work clothes,” “dyed,” “embarrassing,” “a big job,” “physical objects,” “atoms and molecules,” and so on.

How is it that the same thing (“a pile of clothes”) can be typified in so many different ways? Schutz says that the manner in which typification occurs depends on our interests, on what is deemed *relevant* to our ongoing at action. In his words,

All types are relational terms carrying, to borrow from mathematics, a subscript referring to the purpose for the sake of which the type has been formed. And this purpose is nothing but the theoretical or practical problem which, as a consequence of our situationally determined interest, has emerged as questionable from the unquestioned background of the world just taken for granted. (1964, p. 234)

Thus, during a discussion of household chores, a pile of clothes may in fact be labeled “dirty laundry.” Alternatively, if the discussion were about leaving flammable things near the fireplace, the clothes might be characterized as “a fire hazard.” The pile of clothes—if noticed at all—may be typified in a multitude of ways depending on the problem at hand.

Schutz makes it clear that types tend not to be employed in an isolated manner but in conjunction with other related types and subtypes. For instance (to push my banal example even further), consider the practice of distinguishing “white” clothes from “dark” ones or perhaps “delicates” from “durables” when washing the dirty laundry. A series of types thus frequently converges around a common (“well-circumscribed”) problem, constituting what Schutz calls a “domain of relevance.”

The well circumscribed problem can be said to be the locus of all possible types that can be formed for the sake of its solution, that is, of all problem-relevant types. We may also say that all of these types pertain, by the very fact of their reference to the same problem, to the same *domain of relevance*. (1964, p. 235; emphasis in original)

Of course, as Schutz notes, how “well circumscribed” a problem may be is always an open question. Every problem has potentially infinite inner and outer horizons of unexplored meanings and implications. Inwardly, one might further refine the problem of “doing the laundry” by distinguishing between things that are worn (e.g., clothes) from things that are not worn (e.g., towels and rags). Outwardly, one might frame “doing the laundry” as merely one part of a larger set of concerns, such as “practicing good hygiene” or “doing housework.”

In sum, Schutz shows how the world people take for granted is given intelligible shape by the sets of typifications they use to accomplish their practical activities. The world does not by itself determine which of its “aspects” will be relevant, and just how. Clearly, typification and domains of relevance are such fundamental aspects of social life that Schutz’s understanding of them has implications for all areas of sociolog-

ical inquiry. These two concepts, however, are especially applicable to the subject of equality, as I illustrate next.

Schutz on Equality

The utility of Schutz's treatment of typification and domains of relevance begins to become evident when one considers the way people refer to various kinds of equality and inequality, such as marital, economic, and legal. The terms equality and inequality always seem to be accompanied—explicitly or implicitly—by a qualifier of some kind. To be meaningful, it appears, equality must be related to *some particular area of interest*. Moreover, these domains of relevance will tend to contain a series of types that are thought to constitute equality. For example, if the problem at hand is to compare the wealth of two people, one might do so by examining their “income,” “investments,” and “possessions.”

Using the concepts of typification and domains of relevance in this manner, Schutz makes a number of significant claims. For the sake of clarity, I would like to list and examine these as four succinct propositions. The first proposition I can extract from Schutz is: *All typification involves equalization (but not equality)*. As I noted earlier, Schutz argues that to typify is to say “Here is another instance of [X].” Typification involves singling out an object of attention and declaring it “the same” as certain other things. To call an animal a “dog,” Schutz explains, is thus in some sense to declare it equivalent or “equal” to other phenomena belonging to that category.

By recognizing Rover as a dog and calling him so, I have disregarded what makes Rover the unique and individual dog he means to me. . . . In so far as Rover is just a dog, he is deemed to be equal to all other dogs. . . . [Therefore,] all typification consists in the equalization of traits relevant to the particular purpose at hand. (Schutz 1964, p. 234)

In this limited sense, all typification can be described as a process of “equalization,” the positing of a certain “sameness.” But Schutz also believes that equalization by typification is separable from occasions when people determine equality by comparing various factors, such as IQ or grade point average. The terms equality and inequality are not used to merely to posit sameness and difference, but to compare a finite number of “goods” and “bads”—positive and negative aspects of people,

relationships, or situations (see chapter 2). Two “pinch hitters” are made “the same” by typifying them as such; their respective batting averages, however, may be equal or unequal, depending on their respective records (e.g., hits, strikeouts, walks, etc.).

Schutz proposes to focus on instances where equality or inequality is posited based on the comparison of such elements:

In order to avoid semantic confusion it might be better to call all objects, facts, events, persons, [and] traits, falling in the same type and so pertaining to the same domain of relevance, *homogeneous*. . . We propose to reserve the terms equality and inequality for the relationship of elements pertaining to the same domain of relevance. (1964, p. 239)

Thus, in Schutz’s terminology, two undergraduates are made homogeneous when typified as “freshmen.” They become equal or unequal if someone evaluates them on the basis of their grade point averages or their scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test.

The example of comparing undergraduates is also helpful for understanding Schutz’s second proposition: *Equality is determined by criteria that are specific to a particular domain of relevance*. Or, in his words,

Height cannot be measured against wealth, nor can both be measured against freedom. Only within . . . domains of relevances can degrees of merit and excellence be distinguished. Moreover, that which is comparable in terms of the system of one domain is not comparable in terms of other systems, and for this reason the application of yardsticks not pertaining to the same domain of relevances leads to logical or axiological (moral) inconsistencies. (Schutz 1964, p. 240)

For Schutz, then, GPA and SAT scores constitute separate domains of relevance for comparing students because different measurement procedures are used to stratify students. While GPA is determined by compiling one set of typified components (i.e., the letter grades of “A,” “B,” “C,” “D,” and “F”), SAT scores are measured by another (i.e., “right” and “wrong” answers to a list of questions).

Schutz’s second proposition does not deny that people can and *do* make comparisons that take into account different domains of relevance. College administrators, for example, use GPA and SAT scores *together* when deciding which applicants are “the most promising students.” Additionally, it is very likely that administrators will not only take both

GPA and SAT scores into account, but will consider one score to be more important than the other. Thus, not only are the elements within domains comparable, but the different domains themselves can be weighed one against the other. Schutz notes this in (what I will call) his third proposition: *Domains of relevance are ranked hierarchically* (Schutz 1964, p. 241). The fourth proposition I can extract from Schutz is directly related to the third. Since domains of relevance are cultural products, Schutz simultaneously suggests the following: *Domains of relevance are ranked differently by different groups* (Schutz 1964, p. 241). We might expect to find, for example, that administrators favor the SAT over GPA when determining scholarly potential, because it is “a standardized measure.” Students, on the other hand, might view GPA as the more important indicator of their abilities, since the SAT is only a three-hour test, while grades “represent years of hard work.” Each group might choose to weigh the two domains differently if they both had a vote in the admissions process.

Implications of Schutz

At first glance, Schutz’s propositions each contain a high degree of plausibility. Each deserves careful examination and critique. Given the near complete neglect of Schutz’s paper on equality, all of his intriguing ideas on the subject remain an untapped source of interactionist research questions. Perhaps the most striking implications I can derive from Schutz’s work are methodological: If sociologists want to understand the role “equality” actually plays in people’s lives, they must respect and study

- The various domains of relevance with which people may be concerned.
- The various ways that different people may rank those domains of relevance.
- The various kinds of typifications that people may use within diverse domains of relevance.

Conventional sociological approaches to studying equality have not been attentive to the implications I have drawn from Schutz’s paper. Nor are traditional approaches especially compatible with Schutz’s perspective. An interactionist approach, however, could incorporate and develop many of Schutz’s ideas into a striking new research program.

ETHNOMETHODOLOGY AND EQUALITY

Originating with the work of Harold Garfinkel (1967), ethnomethodology is a third sociological tradition that can provide a wealth of insights and inspiration for future constructionist research on the subject of equality. Garfinkel drew heavily on the phenomenology of Husserl and Schutz, but he went much further by demonstrating and advocating a detailed, empirical study of people's everyday reality-making practices. In particular, *ethno-methodology* focuses on *people's-methods* for sustaining and enacting a sense of social order, wherever that order may be found. Garfinkel recommends that we investigate *all* "social facts" as the ongoing situated accomplishments of people. Ethnomethodology's relentless attention to the local, ad hoc, definitional efforts of people thus makes it a valuable resource (or strategy) for studying the social construction of equality. In what follows, I will attempt to illustrate how an ethnomethodological understanding of language use can help us to gain access to how people "see" or experience equality in everyday life.

The Reflexive and Indexical Properties of Language Use

If, following Schutz, all "things" can be typified in potentially limitless ways, then it becomes apparent that our use of language has a "reflexive" character. We do not passively "report" about a self-subsistent reality. Whenever we discuss and describe things, we are reflexively creating the matter that we are talking about. To return to my earlier example, how we characterize a pile of clothes is not a process of observing an obvious, self-evident trait. Observation is not automatic. It is a creative act in which we construct an intelligible sense of reality out of a multitude of possible senses. The nature of any situation we inhabit thus depends reflexively on our very own procedures for understanding it. Simply put, reflexivity means "To describe a situation is to constitute it" (Coulon 1995, p. 23).

The reflexivity of language use is, however, only one-half of the dialectical relationship between our words and the contexts in which they are embedded. The other half is indexicality. Descriptions are not only reflexive in that they are context-shaping, they are indexical in that their meaning is context-dependent (Heritage 1984, pp. 140, 242). Indexicality refers to the fact that "the understandability of any utterance, rather than being fixed by some abstract definition, depends

upon the circumstances in which it appears” (Maynard and Clayman 1991, p. 397).

A simple way to begin to illustrate the pervasive role that indexicality plays in social life is to consider the variety of meanings that can pertain to a simple word like “ball.” In its singular or plural form, the word “ball” can mean (among other things)

- a formal dance
- a good time
- a part of one’s foot
- a collection of string
- to form or gather up into a spherical shape
- a football
- a baseball
- a baseball that is pitched outside the strike zone
- to be intelligent, aware, or competent
- testicles
- to have sex
- to be bold or “macho”

Despite the variety of meanings this word can have, somehow we comprehend sentences like “She’s a great worker, she’s really on the ball” and “Pass me the ball!” Amid the flow of the spoken or written discourse, people somehow discover what sense of “ball” is being invoked at the time.² Communication thus involves much more than the exchange of self-subsistent linguistic signs, when individuals are required only to mentally access the precise, complete definitions of the words that they speak, read, or hear. Even in the dictionary, words can have many possible definitions. Rather, the recognizable sense of our concepts depends on “the socially organized occasions of their use” (Garfinkel 1967, pp. 3–4). Their meanings consist of what individuals do with or make of them. (A sarcastic tone, for example, can actually reverse the usual meaning of a term.)

How is it possible that the statement “I’m having a ball!” can be considered an intelligible thing to say? To consider the procedures by which people make passable sense of such a sentence is to encounter the kind of phenomena in which ethnomethodologists are interested. Garfinkel in fact refers to ethnomethodology as “the investigation of the rational properties of indexical expressions and other practical actions *as contingent ongoing accomplishments of organized artful practices of everyday life*” (Garfinkel 1967, p. 11; emphasis added).

Ethnomethodology on Equality

How does the reflexivity and indexicality of language use relate to the study of equality? It should be clear. The concept of reflexivity indicates that equality does not “speak for itself.” It does not demand people’s attention on its own. Assertions of equality invoke that quality as an important concern, rather than an as-yet-to-be-explored topic. Equality is *made* a salient feature of settings by the actions of people. Reflexivity indicates that when states of affairs are recognized as equal or unequal, that recognition is an *accomplishment*. Ethnomethodology directs us to recognize and investigate the various ways that accomplishment takes place (Garfinkel 1967, pp. 9–10).

The concept of indexicality, in turn, indicates that we should recognize and investigate the local, contextual meanings that are achieved through people’s creative application of the term “equality.” The definition of equality is not determined by what the dictionary says about it. From an ethnomethodological perspective, even the most rigorous, formal definitions of equality will *always* possess ambiguity and incompleteness (Garfinkel and Sacks 1970). There is thus no single “equality,” but “equality-in-this-context” and “equality-in-that-context.” The concept of “marital equality,” for example, will probably mean very different things when it is used in a sociology course, a church sermon, and a divorce trial. The academic, religious, and legal settings may provide completely different issues and resources through which the notion of marital equality can be construed.

Consider, in the interests of clarity, a hypothetical example. Imagine you (the reader) and I are casually eating lunch in a restaurant. Next, suppose I notice a married couple sitting at a table, and say, “Now that seems like a relationship based on equality.” In this instance, my utterance and the context it describes become co-constitutive. My words give some sense to the scene around us, while you search that scene for evidence of the meaning of my words. (Did the husband refrain from presumptuously ordering for his wife? Or do the spouses possess the same level of attractiveness, personality, and intelligence? Are they both listening attentively to each other without offering heavy-handed advice? What is meant by my utterance?) My description and the scene it describes are each meaningless without the other; moreover, their connection is not automatic or self-evident. It takes work on our part to bring the account and the scene into meaningful relation, to breathe intelligibility into each of them. Of course,

it is also possible that in the context of a casual lunch the “real” meaning of my statement may make no difference to you, leaving you content to “gratuitously concur” (Lieberman 1980) or to “let it pass” (Garfinkel in Heritage [1984], p. 124).

Future ethnomethodological research could examine the reflexive and indexical nature of the social construction of equality as it takes place in social situations. Such studies would be attentive to people’s experienced sense of equality, rather than presuming a stable or idealized meaning for that term. To do an ethnomethodology of equality is to study equality *in use*. The challenge is to find contexts in which people regularly employ the concept “equality” as a part of their everyday routines (or else one could encourage them to do so in the context of a research interview).

DEWEY ON MORALITY, EQUALITY, AND SOCIAL REFORM

A typical interactionist review would probably end at this point. I have already brought three constructionist traditions to bear on my topic, laying (I hope) the theoretical groundwork for researching equality in a new and innovative way. My discussion thus far has been primarily intellectual—an exercise in constructionist sociology with the goal of improving my field’s “understanding” of social life. There are, however, some obvious and important questions one could ask about my project: Why do it? What good could come of it? What benefit or harm may result if other sociologists join me in studying the social construction of equality? All these questions urge me to address the moral—rather than merely intellectual—implications of my argument.

Perhaps the best way to approach the “ethics” of studying the social construction of equality is through the work of John Dewey. Dewey is a forerunner of symbolic interactionism, but his writings on moral theory have been neglected by interactionists in favor of his “purely” social-scientific ideas. This neglect is strange, given that Dewey was profoundly concerned with morality, even in works ostensibly on social psychology (e.g., Dewey 1983). In this fourth section, I will attempt to draw on Dewey to explain the positive role that studies of the social construction of equality could play in the pursuit of a just society.

Dewey on Moral Theory

Dewey’s conception of morality hinges on a distinction between two types of moral conduct: customary and reflective. Customary morality,

he says, “places the standard and rules of conduct in ancestral habit” while reflective morality “appeals to conscience, reason, or to some principle which includes thought” (Dewey 1989, p. 162). Individuals abide by customary morality when they unquestioningly conform to the traditions and values of their social group. Right and wrong conduct are taken-for-granted aspects of social life, as people merely apply the received wisdom of their culture. Reflective morality, on the other hand, occurs when one is perplexed (“*What is the correct thing to do?*”) and must take an active role in deciding on a solution. Reflection is likely to arise when one has reason to doubt the legitimacy or applicability of one’s inherited traditions (e.g., in novel situations, in cases involving contradictory customary precepts, or when diverse cultures meet).

It is important to note that for Dewey the distinction between customary and reflective morality is not a sharp one. Instead, he says the difference between the two forms of moral judgment is “relative,” not “absolute” (Dewey 1989, p. 162). Blind conformity to customary dictates is impossible because it takes at least *some* thought to select and apply the appropriate traditional standards. Similarly, any notion of “pure reflection” is also problematic. It is not Descartes’s isolated ego but the community that supplies perspectives through which people are able to define reality (Dewey 1929, ch. 5; Mead 1934). Individuals *can* think creatively and critically, but only by using the tools (language, values, etc.) they have inherited from custom.

Still, even though the difference between customary and reflective morality is not “hard and fast,” the distinction is a useful one for Dewey. He definitely favors the reflective side of the customary reflective spectrum. Strict adherence to customary codes represents stagnation to Dewey. Instead, his vision for humanity is of ceaseless progressive activity, the remaking of society in an increasingly democratic and purposeful manner. He advocates experimentalism, rather than dogmatism, for science *and* for morality (Dewey 1929, pp. 353–54). From Dewey’s perspective, attempts to establish absolute moral doctrines would be like constructing scientific theories that could never be tested or criticized. Moral prescriptions should be open to examination and revision, just as scientific theories are. Dewey’s vision thus requires that the reliance on fixed beliefs give way to *tolerance*, the “positive willingness to permit reflection and inquiry to go on in the faith that the truly right will be rendered more secure through questioning and discussion, while things which have endured merely from custom will be amended or done away with” (Dewey 1989, p. 231).

Dewey does not claim that the process of collaboratively reflecting on, discussing, and testing out moral beliefs will eventually yield flawless solutions to moral problems. In fact, he suggests we give up the quest for absolute certainty (Dewey 1988). There is no independent, rock solid foundation on which we can “finally” build a perfect code of conduct, one forever beyond criticism. But human beings *can* attempt to intelligently and collaboratively construct workable solutions to felt social problems. In the face of material and cultural conflicts, people can choose to attempt to “harmonize” as many competing interests and values as possible. Intelligent reconstruction seems at least as viable as other methods of moral problem solving, such as relying on established doctrines, on authority, or on whim (Dewey 1929, pp. 353–54).

Dewey on Equality

Dewey is well aware that moral concepts like equality are vague and multivocal. Everybody may agree that “people should be treated justly,” he notes, but disagree over which situations are actually “just” (Dewey 1989, pp. 177–78). He decries the common tendency to treat conceptual distinctions, such as equal/unequal, as if they were inherent in things. Our “clefts and bunches” should not be assumed to “represent fixed separations and collections *in rerum natura*,” he says; they do not mark “things in themselves” (Dewey 1983, p. 92). Instead, Dewey argues, scientific and moral concepts are more properly understood as instruments for negotiating reality rather than as mirrors of reality. Words are tools, and they should be treated as such. That entails removing them from their pedestals and submitting them to inspection; it does not mean banishing them as failures if they provide something less than absolute certainty (Dewey 1983, p. 168).

Dewey’s view of concepts as tools brings me to the role that studies of the social construction of equality can play in people’s efforts to bring about a “just” or “good” social order. The main function such studies can perform is to clarify the kinds of interpretive variability and ambiguity that are likely to arise any time a problematic situation is framed around the notion of equality. Studies in the social construction of equality can make people aware of a wide range of considerations that are likely to be relevant any time that equality is employed as a scientific concept or moral ideal. Sociologists can identify and describe differences in perspectives on equality and recommend that such differences be

taken into account as a significant factor in the cooperative resolution of moral problems.³

The anger people experience when faced with an apparent inequality is a strong motivation for social action. Adopting Dewey's perspective, however, requires that such emotions should also inspire an examination of the (often implicit) criteria that give rise to them.⁴ On what basis is one outraged? What underlying assumptions make it feasible to characterize the situation as one of inequality? Do others involved in the situation perceive it differently? What other moral principles, besides equality, might also apply? How do these alternative principles and perspectives coincide or conflict with one's initial response?

For Dewey, moral judgment is less arbitrary and more intelligent—in short, “better”—to the degree to which such matters are considered:

To give way without thought to a kindly feeling is easy; to suppress it is easy for many persons; the difficult but needed thing to do is to retain it in all its pristine intensity while directing it, as a precondition of action, into channels of thought. A union of benevolent impulse and intelligent reflection is the interest most likely to result in conduct that is good. (Dewey 1989, p. 298)

Studies in the social construction of equality may present us with a similar “difficult but needed” challenge: to take seriously the interpretive aspects of equality as we try to co-construct a just social world.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have attempted to outline the theoretical assumptions of a radical approach to studying equality: a social constructionist perspective with strong ties to the sociological and philosophical traditions of symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, ethnomethodology, and pragmatism. The goal of this approach is *not* to think up new and improved definitions of equality, to treat equality as yet another causal variable, or to advocate a preconceived policy for achieving equality. Instead, the central preoccupation is to discover how *people* define states of affairs as equal or unequal, and to study the role those definitions play in ongoing interaction. The findings of such research should not only prove interesting and enlightening, but could potentially aid the reflective resolution of problematic inequalities.

I have used the phrase “the social construction of equality” as a way to integrate the perspectives of Blumer, Schutz, Garfinkel, and Dewey and apply them to the topic of equality in everyday life. In doing so, I have highlighted the complementarity of these scholars’ work. By neglecting discrepancies, I do not mean to imply that no differences can be found in the thought of these figures (e.g., see Psathas 1980). However, I believe that at a fundamental level Blumer, Schutz, Garfinkel, and Dewey all share a deeply held commitment: to respect and understand the experiences and viewpoints of “others.” That common commitment makes it possible to draw eclectically from each scholar to develop what could be an intriguing and useful program of research—as I hope to illustrate over the course of this book.