

CONTEMPORARY SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY
AND THE
STUDY OF ART EDUCATION

Nancy R. Johnson
State University of New York
College at New Paltz

A popular approach to inquiry in art education is through the theoretical frameworks of psychology (Brouch and others, 1975). By choosing this approach, art educators also adopt an organic, psychological, context-free perspective on human beings. Consequently, many art educators, like many psychologists, do not take account of or examine the social context of the individuals they study (Mishler, 1979). What is more, people are studied from an objective stance by methods of observation and measurement, that is, descriptive and experimental research borrowed from the natural or physical sciences (Armstrong, 1978). Borrowed, too, with this approach, is the assumption that human behavior is similar to that of animals and bound by the same general laws that govern all natural phenomena. Thus, there is an interesting paradox that is created by adopting traditional psychological theories and methods and applying them to art education. This paradox is that art educators do not really believe that art and artistic behavior are rule-governed (Eisner, 1980) or the result of genetic programming, yet they study art and the teaching of it through theories and methods whose basic assumptions deny such a possibility. From the framework of psychology then, certain phenomena that I believe are important to the appearance of art are excluded from study. These phenomena are: social context; social beliefs and knowledge; meanings about art; that is, interpretation, social interaction, and the process of constructing knowledge about art. If, as art educators, we choose not to adopt the traditional theories, methods, assumptions, and limitations of psychology, then how can art education be studied? What other approaches may be taken to gain knowledge about human

beings and art?

The purpose of this paper is to explore some approaches to inquiry used in another discipline, that of sociology (Wells, 1978). This is not to say that sociologists have overwhelmingly abandoned the use of the structures of the natural sciences in their work in favor of other alternatives, but to recognize some mavericks in their ranks who do what sociologist, Monica Morris (1977), has called creative sociology. The approaches to theory and method to be examined here are symbolic interactionism, phenomenological sociology, and ethnomethodology. The implications of these approaches for the study of art education will also be examined.

Symbolic Interactionism

Of these three radical viewpoints in sociology, symbolic interactionism is the most accepted position. A reason for this might be the fact that it is a viewpoint that emerged in sociology in the 1920's and 30's from the thoughts and activities of several persons at the University of Chicago whereas the other viewpoints are more recent arrivals.

One of the key figures in the development of symbolic interactionism is the philosopher, George Herbert Mead (1962), who was a good friend of John Dewey. While Mead's work is not as well known or as wide-ranging as Dewey's, his ideas are quite substantive. Mead's ideas center around the concepts of a self-conscious, reflexive mind and a personality or self that is formed through social interaction. According to Mead, the self is not a static entity fixed at birth, but one that changes throughout life. This comes about through the images of the self that are reflected back to it by others with whom there is social contact, and the ability of the self to be reflexive. Reflexivity means that one can respond to one's self in the manner of another, that is, to be an object to one's self and make indications about one's surroundings. This understanding

between the self and others and the self and "me" is facilitated by gesture and language for social contact is marked by symbols and meanings which must be interpreted. Thus, in Mead's view, society is made up of individuals who adjust their actions to one another based upon the meanings they come to share. In this way, society also changes because the self is undergoing change and being reformed through social interaction.

Another key figure in this approach to sociology is Herber Blumer (1969), who coined the name "symbolic interactionism." Blumer has articulated a systematic statement of the theory and method of symbolic interactionists which is derived from Mead's ideas. He states:

The conscious life of the human being . . . is a continual flow of self-indications--notations of the things with which he deals and takes into account Instead of the individual being surrounded by an environment of pre-existing objects which play upon him and call forth his behavior, the proper picture is that he constructs his objects on the basis of his on-going activity." (1969, p. 80)

Human beings give meaning to experience, make judgements about it and arrive at decisions about their actions. They also act back upon meanings by rejecting them or transforming them based upon how the meanings were interpreted. For Blumer, the concern of sociologists should be upon catching "the process of interpretation" by which people construct their actions. To do this, he advocates that the researcher make a direct examination of the social world through role-taking.

From Blumer's viewpoint, scientific research as it is currently practiced in sociology distorts the very phenomenon in which we are all grounded and which scientists purport to study, the empirical social world. His criticism of the traditional scientific approach to research rests upon the fact that much of what passes for a research design has not been critically examined.

As Blumer puts it,

Inside of the "scientific protocol" one can operate unwittingly with false premises, erroneous problems, distorted data, spurious relations, inaccurate concepts, and unverified interpretations. There is no built-in mechanism in the protocol to test whether the premises, problems, data, relations, concepts and interpretations are sustained by the nature of the empirical world.
(1969, p. 29)

Thus, it is absolutely important that the researcher maintain a close relationship to the empirical social world, especially that segment of it that is chosen for study. One must have personal involvement, then, with the persons or life situation to be studied in order to be able to see how that situation is being interpreted by the persons who are living in it and what interactions are going on there. Science must pass the test of being empirically valid.

The form of inquiry used by symbolic interactionists is field based and methods are developed by the researcher to fit the kind of situation uncovered during an initial involvement in it. Prescribed, formula-like methods would tend to distort the phenomenon under investigation.

Phenomenological Sociology

The next radical or creative approach to sociology is phenomenological sociology. Phenomenology is the name of the philosophical investigations developed by Edmund Husserl (1970), a professor of philosophy in Germany around the turn of the century. Husserl spent most of his life examining the problem of consciousness. Phenomenology is thus an inquiry into the life of consciousness, that is, the phenomena that appear to consciousness. This involved raising questions about how this phenomena comes to consciousness, what appearance it makes, and from whence does consciousness arise. Of importance to sociology are Husserl's concepts of an intentional consciousness and the "Lebenswelt" or life world.

According to Husserl, human consciousness grasps experience with a directedness. Consciousness is not a collection of stimuli to be sorted into a template of physical responses, but it is directed and focussed upon the life-world. It is this feature of directedness, that we have consciousness of something, which Husserl refers to in the notion of an intentional consciousness. In other words, there is more to consciousness than being the eye of the mind. Physiology alone cannot provide an adequate account of human consciousness.

It was not until late in Husserl's life that he considered the implications of a consciousness situated in a life-world. Consequently, consciousness could be thought of as being constituted or built up in the process of living. Day to day activities and events are the things which make an appearance in consciousness and toward which it is directed. A consciousness that is attentive to these phenomena was described by Husserl as being in the "natural attitude." Another interesting feature of consciousness, however, is that it can transcend itself, that is, reflect upon an experience. One can bracket the events, thoughts and acts of lived experience. The validity of these things can be put aside so that they may be examined beyond the lived moment. If Husserl was alive today, it is possible that the term "instant replay" might appear in his writings. While this term may do an injustice to the meticulousness of his work, it does serve as a useful description of this idea.

The linkage of Husserl's phenomenology to sociology was brought about by another German scholar, Alfred Schutz. Schutz studied Husserl's work as well as that of the sociologist, Max Weber. Weber took the position that sociology involved the interpretation of social action (Morris, 1977, p. 13). A sociologist could gain insights about society by understanding or gaining the meaning of an act for individuals as they interacted with one another.

Schutz's contributions to sociology consist of the blending of Husserl's and Weber's ideas, and at a later point, incorporating some of the ideas of Mead and Dewey into his work. Schutz developed the notion of the life-world with such concepts as the "biographically determined situation," the "social stock of knowledge," "typifications," and "face-to-face relationships." He described the life-world as a social world into which we are all born at various times and places. We come to know the world, since it is an abstract, but empirical one, through interaction with parents, relatives, teachers and others with whom one has contact in a face-to-face relationship. Mediated through these persons is the social stock of knowledge or what one has to know in order to conduct one's self in the life-world. The social stock of knowledge is comprised of many "recipes" or collections of meaningful actions for conducting one's self. These recipes involve the typical ways of doing things like eating with a fork or stopping for a red light. Such typifications are embedded in language and provide a common structure of experience which enables one to communicate with others and adjust one's conduct to what is acceptable. By and large, typifications are taken for granted and adopted by most of us without too much thought. How many persons actually know why we eat with forks or why red is the color used to mean stop?

From the perspective of phenomenological sociology, then, a researcher's inquiry is into the phenomena of the social world (Psathas, 1973). One's purpose as a sociologist is to illuminate the taken for granted features and structures of the social world as they appear in human consciousness and to reflect upon them and criticize them. Again, as in symbolic interactionism, the method by which data is collected and analyzed depends upon the context of the phenomenon under investigation.

Ethnomethodology

The final approach to be examined in this paper is ethnomethodology. It is sometimes called "garfinkeling" because of the name of its founder, Harold Garfinkel. Garfinkel's perspective on sociology is one that combines aspects of symbolic interactionism and phenomenological sociology. The emphasis in ethnomethodology is upon finding out the methods by which people accomplish the affairs of everyday life. Put another way, ethnomethodologists are engaged in the discovery of the practical reasoning that takes place in life situations. It is not the actions of people that have significance for the ethnomethodologist, but what people say about what they are doing. As such, ethnomethodology is not concerned with large-scale surveys or the "grand theory" often found in sociology, but with the micro-analysis of ordinary events.

Topics that might be investigated from this perspective are the rituals that people engage in as they greet one another and carry on a casual conversation, the cues that one gives to others to show that a conversation could be interrupted, or the unspoken decisions that people make about the order in which they get on an elevator. The researcher in this approach conducts interviews and gathers accounts of the rules or guidelines of action from persons situated in a given context. The researcher may also behave in ways that are unexpected in order to find out what rules are being used in a situation.

Of these three viewpoints in sociology, ethnomethodology is the least structured, for as Roy Turner (1974), an ethnomethodologist, states:

'Theories' and 'methods' (in their usual sociological sense) are here regarded as socially organized and accomplished products and practices in their own right, and so regarded they are endlessly fascinating as topics. (p. 7)

Implications

These contemporary theories in sociology could be useful in the study of art education. All of them focus upon meanings, interpretations, social context,

beliefs, and interaction. What is significant is how people describe life in the world. They also describe human beings as persons who have personalities that are unique and which are not entirely manifestations of physiological processes. Human beings are seen as initiators of action and as creative agents. These premises about human beings seem to me to be ones that validate art.

Knowing about art and its teaching, then, would come about through field experience. A researcher would participate in a selected situation and examine it in many ways. One could take on the role of the participants in the situation, interview them, or make videotapes. This approach, again, resembles art in that the methods of research are varied as are the media in the visual arts. A method like a medium could be chosen for its appropriateness and its power to express. In all of these viewpoints, knowledge of an event or situation is acquired for the purpose of acting upon it, that is, to make judgments about what is found. This type of research is, again, empirically closer to what is done in the visual arts. It appears that any one of these three viewpoints in sociology provides a theoretical orientation and a methodology that is more appropriate to the study of art education than the often used traditional frameworks of psychology.

References

- Armstrong, C. Research methods and procedures for the teacher of art. Viewpoints, 1978, 6(1), 17-27.
- Blumer, H. Symbolic interactionism: perspective and method. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969.
- Brouch, V., and others. A registry of studies in art education. Studies in Art Education, 1974, 15(2), 5-70.
- Eisner, E.W. Future priorities for curriculum reform. Educational leadership, 1980, 37(6), 453-456.
- Garfinkel, H. Studies in ethnomethodology, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967.
- Husserl, E. The crisis of european sciences and transcendental phenomenology, (Tr. by D. Carr). Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970.
- Mean, G.H. Mind, self, and society. Edited by C.W. Morris. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962.
- Mishler, E. Meaning in context: is there any other kind? Harvard educational review, 1979, 49(1), 1-19.
- Morris, M.B. An excursion into creative sociology, New York: Columbia University Press, 1977.
- Psathas, G. (Ed.). Phenomenological sociology: issues and applications. New York: John Wiley, 1973.
- Schutz, A. On phenomenology and social relations, (Edited by H.R. Wagner). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970.
- Turner, R. (Ed.). Ethnomethodology. Baltimore: Penguin, 1974.
- Wells, A. (Ed.). Contemporary sociological theories. Santa Monica, Ca.: Goodyear, 1978.