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## **Georg Simmel: Interactionist before Symbolic Interactionism?**

Greg Smith

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### **Introduction<sup>i</sup>**

In devoting serious analytic attention to the details of everyday life, Georg Simmel (1858-1918) was sociology's original microscopist. The German philosopher became the first great figure in sociology's classical tradition to set out a distinctively interactionist conception of society. He presented an alternative to the common view of society as a supra-individual structure made up of such major institutions as work, family and kinship, religion, political life and the like. Rather, Simmel saw society as fundamentally composed of a great multitude of often fleeting, enabling and constraining interactions and associations among human beings. For Simmel (1950:11) "society certainly is not a 'substance', nothing concrete, but an *event*: it is the function of receiving and effecting the fate and development of one individual by the other". Approaching society as an event meant, according to Simmel, seeing it as a vast network of people engaged in ordinary activities such as eating meals together, bartering goods, exercising leadership in a group, exchanging letters, glancing at one another, flirting at parties, sitting silently in crowded railway carriages, keeping secrets, giving one's word to do something, mediating between conflicting parties, exercising tact and expressing gratitude.

To that distinctive interactional view of society Simmel brought to bear a coherent approach to inquiry: interactions and associations were to be analysed in terms of their 'form', the term he used to outline the contours and characteristics typically assumed by these human social configurations. The idea of form derived from Simmel's philosophical training in the German idealist tradition – from beginning to end Simmel self-identified as a philosopher – yet there was a significant and influential sociological side to his thinking that developed in the 1890s and 1900s. Simmel's sociological project was advanced in 1900 by *Philosophie des Geldes* and culminated in the 1908 publication of *Soziologie*. This volume presented the fullest statement of Simmel's formal sociology, collecting together studies on which he had worked over the previous decade and a half.

From the 1890s when his efforts to establish sociology as a special social science first attracted widespread attention internationally, to his current lionization by those working in cultural theory and cultural studies, Simmel never seems to have been out of fashion. There has also been acknowledgement, albeit uneven, of his role as a precursor of interactionism (Levine et al, 1976). Importantly for his influence on American sociology, portions of Simmel's writings became known in the English-speaking world while they were in development. Simmel's work, unlike that of his now more prominent contemporary Max Weber, was translated into English in his own lifetime. At the University of Chicago Albion W. Small, in his role as founding editor of the *American Journal of Sociology*, ensured that Simmel's sociological papers reached a wide English-speaking audience in the years up to 1910. Through much of the twentieth century a pattern of piecemeal translation into English persisted. Thus, English readers had to wait over a century to see *Soziologie* in its entirety, which finally appeared as *Sociology: Inquiries into the Construction of Social Forms* (Simmel 2009).

As the nineteenth century turned into the twentieth, the contested discipline of sociology struggled to legitimate itself within the academy. In that struggle Simmel offered both a defined field for sociological inquiry and a clear approach. For Simmel, sociology's distinctive topic matter was to be 'Vergesellschaftung' – usually translated as 'sociation', the interactions occurring between individuals<sup>ii</sup>. Its approach was to abstract sociation's 'forms' and elucidate their features. At a pivotal point in the founding of sociology, Simmel offered a lucid – if contentious – clarification of the new discipline.

The chapter begins with a sketch of the life of Georg Simmel and then proceeds to examine the claim that Simmel was an interactionist before symbolic interactionism. It then considers Simmel's formal sociology in more detail in order to establish the relevance of his reasoning for interactionist approaches, giving particular attention to Simmel's analysis of the role of knowledge in social life. The chapter continues with an outline of how Simmel's ideas are reflected in the work of two of interactionism's most gifted practitioners, Herbert Blumer (1900-1987) and Erving Goffman (1922-1982). In conclusion the continuing relevance of Simmel's sociology for interactionist analysis is suggested.

## **The Person**

Georg Simmel was born on 1 March 1858 in central Berlin, the vibrant, cosmopolitan city in which he lived and worked for all but the last four years of his life. His parents converted from Judaism and Simmel nominally embraced Protestantism. However, others defined him as a Jew

and for much of his life Simmel was a victim of the pervasive anti-Semitism present in the German university system of the time. Repeatedly he was denied a full-time appointment commensurate with his intellectual stature, publications and international reputation. For most of his career Simmel was dependent upon the fees paid by students who enrolled in his classes and a legacy left by the friend of the family who brought him up after the death of his parents. In 1886, while trying to recover money owed to his family, Simmel was shot and injured (Köhnke 1983). Fortunately, he recovered quickly. As his reputation grew in the 1890s and 1900s – George Santayana famously described Simmel as “the brightest man in Europe” (Levine et al 1976a:815) – a tenured post continued to elude him, despite obtaining the strong support of distinguished academics like Max Weber. When he did finally obtain a permanent full professorial post, it was at the border city of Strasbourg. Arriving there in 1914, Simmel was just in time to see normal academic activity curtailed by the outbreak of the First World War.

Anti-Semitism was only part of the story. Controversy followed Simmel throughout his life. He was widely regarded as a brilliant philosopher and sociologist yet also seen as a maverick intellectual, the possessor of a mind that delved into a range of topics and areas that some felt too broad for the good of his academic career. After initial studies at Berlin University in the fields of history and folk psychology, he settled on philosophy, the discipline that provided an enduring identity for his intellectual interests. However, his academic path was not straightforward. In 1881 he was awarded a doctorate by Berlin University. His thesis on the psychological and ethnological origins of music was rejected as unsatisfactory but an earlier, prize-winning essay was allowed to stand in its place. In 1885 he was finally awarded the habilitation (the higher doctorate that is a prerequisite for university teaching in Germany). At the oral defence of his thesis Simmel responded to one of his examiners in a manner that was taken as offhand and sarcastic, and he was sent home for six months “to ponder how one behaves toward worthy older scholars” (Landmann 1958: 21). Throughout his career Simmel was not afraid to challenge conventional thinking wherever it was to be found.

Simmel quickly established a reputation as a gifted lecturer at Berlin. He may have been a victim of the antisemitism infecting the German university system of his day and thus an outsider, but he enjoyed a wider intellectual impact than most tenured academics. As a “stranger in the academy” (Cosser 1965) his marginal status perhaps aided the cultivation of his perceptive observations of social life. His classes became attractions for the cultural elite of the city, as well as for large numbers of foreign and

women students, a following that did not endear Simmel to the state's educational authorities. In addition, he was not a narrow specialist. Sociology was something of a mid-career interest for Simmel whose training was in neoKantian philosophy and whose sociology reflected the application of those philosophical interests to the understanding of social life. It was this mid-career interest that led to Simmel being regarded as a precursor to interactionism.

### **Simmel as interactionist *avant la lettre***

Simmel is not widely acknowledged as a key founder of interactionism. Usually, interactionism is portrayed as growing out of America's only indigenous philosophical tradition, pragmatism, and is closely associated with sociologists and others working at the University of Chicago in the interwar years of the twentieth century. Histories of interactionism (e.g. Meltzer et al 1975; Reynolds 2003a; 2003b) often downplay Simmel's contribution as peripheral or ignore it completely. The reasons for such neglect are worth exploring because they shed light not only on the achievements and limitations of Simmel's sociology but also on the contested history of interactionism and ongoing debates about its meaning and scope.

One reason for that neglect is advanced in Paul Rock's magisterial *The Making of Symbolic Interactionism* (1979). The interactionist tradition has been chronically forgetful of its past. For a long time it was something of an oral tradition transmitted through teachers at the University of Chicago. It was suspicious of grand theories, concentrating instead on empirical sociological studies. Rock's book is one of the few histories to identify the pivotal role of Simmel in the rise of interactionism. Simmel was a significant part of the early curriculum at Chicago. At the heart of this contribution was the form-content distinction. Individuals were motivated to act through any number of purposes, drives, and desires unique to the psychology and biology of the individual. Sociology's main business lay in identifying the forms assumed by human action and discovering their general features. Rock also examined pragmatism as the second key constituent of interactionism. Knowledge was regarded by pragmatists as embedded in the world, not separate from it: "acts themselves are problem-solving processes: they are always addressed to unsettled features of a world or self that require alteration" (Rock 1979:69). In Rock's account formalism and pragmatism provide the twin foundations of interactionism.

Simmel seems to have been an interactionist before symbolic interactionism had crystallised as such. The terms need distinguishing. Symbolic interactionism (SI) was devised by Herbert Blumer in a textbook

chapter published in 1937 and elaborated in his 1969 book bearing that title. Blumer was always clear that he was giving a name and trying to elucidate the general perspective that he associated with a group of American thinkers including George H. Mead, John Dewey, William I. Thomas, Robert E. Park, William James, Charles H. Cooley, Florian Znaniecki, James Mark Baldwin, Robert Redfield and Louis Wirth. Of these figures it was Mead and the social psychology he taught for three decades at the University of Chicago that was the outstanding influence on Blumer's formulation. At the heart of symbolic interactionism were "three simple premises" (Blumer 1969a:1, 2): that people acted towards things in terms of their meanings, that these meanings arose in social interaction between people, and that meanings were interpreted by people in dealing with whatever they encounter in interaction. Blumer's conception of SI brought to centre stage social psychological questions of meaning and interpretation. But as he recognized, the tradition was older than his term for it. It was a broader tradition too, not wholly captured by Blumer's programmatic statements: Simmel, for one, was absent.

Berenice Fisher and Anselm Strauss (1978) drew attention to the "Park-Thomas" strand in what they prefer to label simply as "interactionism". The Park-Thomas strand underscored the fresh impetus Park gave to the Chicago School of sociology in its 1920s heyday, as well as the continuing impact of W. I. Thomas (who encouraged Park to come to Chicago in the first place) after Thomas' own premature departure from the University of Chicago in 1918. For Fisher and Strauss (1978:458), interactionism at Chicago was a "dual tradition" with a social psychological line emanating from Mead and amplified by Blumer (i.e. SI) and a social organizational line deriving from Park and Thomas. "Interactionism", then, is the more encompassing term, although matters are complicated by common usage and by the existence of a journal (*Symbolic Interaction*) and an organization (SSSI – Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction) that use the term SI to denote what Fisher and Strauss (and later Atkinson & Housley 2003) mean by "interactionism". This chapter follows these distinctions, reserving the term "SI" for Blumer's specific articulation.

How did Simmel's sociology become well-known to those developing interactionism in the USA? It is clear that Simmel was an early and significant figure in shaping Chicago sociology, out of which interactionism would emerge. As noted, Albion Small, in his role as editor of the Chicago-based *American Journal of Sociology*, published English translations of several of Simmel's papers as he produced them (Frisby 1991 has a detailed tracking). After the First World War, Simmel's work was primarily disseminated at Chicago by Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess. Park,

like Small and like Mead, undertook graduate education in Germany, then the world's leading university system. As the key figure in the establishment of the "Chicago School" Park was central in mediating the significance of Simmel for its broad approach to the study of urban life. He later acknowledged that "listening to the lectures of Georg Simmel, at Berlin, I received my only formal [sic] instruction in sociology" (Park, 1950: vi). The famous textbook by Park and Burgess, *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* (1969; orig. 1921), nicknamed the "Green Bible", gave considerable attention to formal sociology by including no fewer than ten extracts from Simmel -- more than from any other single author. Although the book reflected the catholic tastes of Park and Burgess, its framework was of a broadly formal character and, as Martindale (1961) observed, "when all is said and done, their hearts belonged to Simmel, for the central ideas of their sociological system were composed of processes, formally conceived" (Martindale 1961: 254; see also Matthews 1977:31, 41-50).

The ethnographic tradition begun at Chicago by Park was carried forward by Everett C. Hughes (1897-1983), whose work on the sociology of occupations and whose teaching of field work methods (Junker 1960) powerfully influenced that eminent cohort of graduate students (including many future luminaries of the interactionist tradition) that trained at Chicago in the decade following the end of World War II (Fine 1995). Closely conversant with German language and literature, Hughes was instrumental in advancing the understanding of Simmel's sociology in his roles as translator (Simmel 1949; Goffman 1971: 97n.3) and as commentator (Hughes 1955, 1965). In the period following the end of World War II Hughes became the "senior American Simmel scholar" who found in Simmel an intellectual role model that he read "not for knowledge but for inspiration" (Jaworski 1997:22, 23). Louis Wirth and Edward Shils also promoted interest in Simmel's work at Chicago in the 1930s and 1940s (Levine et al 1976a: 819; Tomasi 1998). While Simmel's influence on American sociology grew and diversified through the twentieth century (Levine et al. 1976a, 1976b; Jaworski 1997) it remained from the first a key part of the intellectual milieu of Chicago's famed sociology department. A recrudescence of interest in Simmel was evident in some of the work of the "Second Chicago School of Sociology" (Fine 1995), in particular that of Erving Goffman.

Thus there seems to be a direct line of influence from Simmel through Park and Hughes to the Chicago tradition that formed the seedbed of the interactionist perspective. Simmel's ideas were well known in Chicago circles from the turn of the century onwards. For example, George H. Mead was aware of Simmel's distinctive approach. In a sympathetic review of Simmel's

“discouragingly massive” 1900 volume, *Philosophie des Geldes*, Mead concluded that “in its aim it is sociological” (Mead 1901: 619). But it was the Simmel of the studies that were finally collected together in the 1908 volume *Soziologie* that formed the basis of his impact on interactionism. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that Simmel’s largest influence on American sociology was to open up fresh lines of conventional sociological enquiry in fields such as social distance, small groups, conflict and social exchange (see Levine et al. 1976a, 1976b). More recently Gary Jaworski (1997) suggested that Simmel’s impact American sociology was not only a matter of tracing influences and noting new fields. Focusing on the circumstances of production and the wider social and cultural contexts in which American sociology appropriated Simmel, Jaworski traced the intricate ways in which Simmel’s ideas and approaches served as sources of inspiration – not only for such key Chicago figures as Park, Hughes and Goffman, but also for major functionalist sociologists such as Merton and Parsons.

Moreover, Simmel and Chicago is not the full story of his influence on interactionist sociology. The genealogy of interactionism is also complicated by the development of variant approaches outside of Chicago. In especial contrast to Blumerian symbolic interactionism, the Iowa School pioneered by Manford Kuhn placed greater store by empirically testable propositions, conventional scientific procedures, quantitative methods and the need to acknowledge the place of social structural conditions in interactional analysis (Meltzer et al 1975:55-67; Stryker 1980). Curiously, given that Simmel’s own methodological position was some way distant from such positivistic methods, the Iowa School seemed more sympathetic to acknowledging Simmel as a precursor. The attraction of Simmel for the Iowa School was that his forms of sociation offered a theory of social structure emergent out of the diversity of actual interaction that more clearly recognised the patterning of social life than the many “descriptive” qualitatively-based studies generated by Chicago School interactionism. Although a minority variant of interactionism, the Iowa School has persisted as a productive research tradition through the millennium (Katovich et al 2003)

Simmel never visited America. American scholars read his writings and some attended his lectures in Berlin as part of their graduate training. His influence was very much textually mediated. Had Simmel visited America, he might have been struck by the similarities between his home city and the city that Park took as a “natural laboratory” for the study of social life. Others did make the comparison. After visiting Germany in October 1891, Mark Twain declared that “Berlin is the European Chicago” (cited in Jazbinsek et al., 2001: 6). The populations of both cities grew at an



enormous rate in the nineteenth century, creating European and American versions of the modern metropolis with its attendant problems and possibilities. Located in Chicago, Park and his students could scarcely have been better placed to extend and develop Simmel's insights about the distinctive outlook and mental set of the city-dweller sketched in "Metropolis" essay (Simmel 1950[1903]).

What features of Simmel's sociological thinking have been taken up by interactionism? To address this question remainder of this chapter will outline some aspects of formal sociology before reviewing the impact of Simmel on two leading interactionists, Herbert Blumer and Erving Goffman.

### **Simmel's Method and Analytic Attitude**

Simmel's novel insight was to direct his analytical gaze to the sociological significance of ordinary experiences and everyday interaction, highlighting general features of their details in ways that qualify his sociology as a strong forerunner of symbolic interactionism. Simmel contended that while it is easy to think of "society" as a structure comprising the state and the family, work and political organizations, social classes, and so on,

“...there exists an immeasurable number of less conspicuous forms of relationship and kinds of interaction. Taken singly, they appear negligible. But since in actuality they are inserted into the comprehensive and, as it were, official social formations, they alone produce society as we know it” (Simmel, 1950: 9)

If, as social science had done up until that point, attention was only given to major social formations, then it would be “impossible piece together the real life of society as we encounter it in our experience” (Simmel, 1950: 9).

Simmel then provided examples of the kinds of “interactions among the atoms of society” that his sociology was to address:

“That people look at one another and are jealous of one another; that they exchange letters or dine together; that irrespective of all tangible interests they strike one another as pleasant or unpleasant; that gratitude for altruistic acts makes for inseparable union; that one asks another man after a certain street, and that people dress and adorn themselves for one another – the whole gamut of relations that play from one person to another and that may be momentary or permanent, conscious or unconscious, ephemeral or of grave consequence (and from which these illustrations are quite casually chosen), all these incessantly tie men together. Here are the interactions

among the atoms of society. They account for all the toughness and elasticity, all the color and consistency of social life, that is so striking and yet so mysterious.” (Simmel 1950: 10)

These ordinary phenomena deserve analytic attention because they “exhibit society *in statu nascendi*” (Simmel 1959a:327) – society in the course of being produced and reproduced.

### *Form and Content*

The scope and boundaries of sociology as it emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century were not certain. Simmel addressed this issue in the very first chapter of *Soziologie* in an essay refined over the previous decade and a half. He lamented the tendency to “dump” all the historical psychological and social sciences “into one great pot labelled ‘sociology’” (Simmel 1959a:311; see also Simmel 2009: 20). No new perspective could be produced by such a procedure, only a repackaging of what already existed. To escape this unproductive state of affairs Simmel felt it necessary to advance a clear conception of the social realm and distinctive notion of sociology’s method. Taking up his associational conception of society, Simmel proposed that sociology must develop as a special social science focused specifically on the social aspects of interactions between people. Since all science is based on abstracting certain elements of the totality from a particular viewpoint, sociology must likewise proceed. It addressed the interaction between individuals (“sociation”) from a particular viewpoint, distinguishing the “forms” from the “contents” of sociation. The forms so abstracted were “structures that exist and develop outside the individual” (1959a: 312). Yet they depended for their existence on the contents of sociation that reside in the psychological dispositions and biological conditions of the individual. Examples of contents included hunger, love and religiosity: they “are not social” in themselves. But they became factors in sociation when they engender interaction, when “they transform the mere aggregation of isolated individuals into specific forms of being with and for one another” (Simmel 1959a: 315). Examples of forms included “domination and subordination, competition, imitation, division of labor, factionalism, representation, the reciprocal nature of inclusion and exclusion” (Simmel 2009: 24). The task of formal sociology was to apply the form-content distinction to instances of sociation and “systematically under a consistent scientific viewpoint” bring together descriptions of the forms of sociation. Only then would sociology cease to be a depository for all things social and emerge as a special social science with a distinctive approach to a demarcated sphere of social life, namely “what in ‘society’ really is society” (Simmel 1959a: 320)<sup>iii</sup>. This special social science was likened by Simmel to geometry, which abstracted the spatial element from material

configurations. Formal sociology similarly abstracted the forms, the structures between individuals, from the diverse contents or energies that propel individuals into interactions with others.

Simmel's analysis of dyads and triads is a good example of formal sociology in practice. Simmel explored how a two-party relationship enjoys greater closeness than a three-party relationship: "A dyad depends on each of its two elements...for its life it needs both, but for its death, only one" (Simmel 1950: 124). A dyad only consists of two relations,  $A \rightarrow B$  and  $B \rightarrow A$ , and so "each of the two feels himself confronted only by the other, not by a collectivity above him" (123). But by adding a third party a "superpersonal life" emerges. Now there are six possible relations to consider ( $A \rightarrow B$ ;  $B \rightarrow A$ ;  $A \rightarrow C$ ;  $C \rightarrow A$ ;  $B \rightarrow C$ ;  $C \rightarrow B$ ). Two parties may act as a majority towards the third, as is often the case when parents act jointly towards their child. One party may feel excluded by the other two. Or one party may try to exploit differences between the other two ("divide and rule"). Some of these generalizations represent a formalization of everyday observations ("two's company, three's a crowd"; "the enemy of my enemy is my friend"). Simmel's point is that the generalizations about dyads and triads apply irrespective of the content of particular relationship. They are equally applicable to treaties between nation states or relations between members of a family. They are generalizations about dyads and triads as forms of sociation.

### *How is Society Possible?*

Simmel brought a distinctive approach to analysing "the interactions among the atoms of society". At its simplest, it applied Immanuel Kant's philosophical distinctions between form and content to the study of society. This strategy was explicit in "How is society possible?" (Simmel 1959b). The question was expressly modelled after Kant's question, "How is nature possible?" Kant proposed that knowledge of nature was made possible by universal categories of mind (such as time, space and causality) that ordered our sense perceptions and thus made the natural world intelligible to us. In the case of society, no ordering outside agent was needed because society's constituent units, interacting individuals, are themselves aware beings who are knowledgeable about their actions. Simmel continued with a bold attempt to identify three sociological apriorities, three very general presuppositions that he considered necessary to transform an aggregate of individuals into social beings capable of routinely producing and reproducing society through ordinary interaction. Simmel asked in effect, what makes intersubjective social relations possible? Given that there are individuals, what must be presupposed a priori for the individual to be a social being? I want to suggest that, read from an interactionist vantage,

Simmel's apriorities present a set of paradoxes that lie at the heart of the interactionist analytic attitude.

Three apriori (necessary) conditions are identified (Simmel appears to acknowledge there could be more). First of all, while we assume that others have a unique individuality, our knowledge of that individuality is derived from general categories through which we typify others as workers, family members and so on. Of course these general categories are imperfect representations of the other but by supplementing and transforming these "juxtaposed fragments" we are able to form a picture of "the completeness of an individuality" (Simmel 1959b:344). Paradoxically, it is through general categories that we can come to an appreciation of individuality.

The second apriority Simmel asserts is that the individual is always something more than their relevant category and social role. Society, Simmel declares, is "a structure which consists of beings who stand inside and outside of it at the same time" (Simmel 1959b:347). From the point of view of individuals, society consists of beings who feel themselves to be "complete social entities" and "complete personal entities" (Simmel 1959b:351), each acting as a precondition of the other. Thus, a second paradox: social being depends on non-social being and vice versa.

The third apriority involves adopting the analogy of society as an "ideal structure", a kind of giant bureaucracy, composed of related positions that must be filled for the society to operate. Meanwhile the individual can be regarded as the bearer of needs and capacities that require to be expressed. How is some kind of harmony between society's needs and the needs of the individual to be achieved? The solution, Simmel suggests, is provided by the notion of vocation. The individual takes up a vocation such as mother or manager "on the basis of an inner calling, a qualification felt to be intimately personal" (Simmel 1959b:354). In this way society's need for positions to be filled is also met. The third paradox is that the individual's innermost aspirations require something social for their realization.

These three apriorities provided the necessary conditions for transforming an aggregate of individuals into social beings, whose reciprocal actions (sociation or interaction) made society possible. Simmel persistently addressed the properties individuals must bring to interaction – to categorize, to simultaneously sustain social and personal life, to enact a notion of vocation – as the basis of an answer to the question of how society was possible. The discussion throws into relief how Simmel used his studies of Kant to reap sociological dividends. Its novelty was as a solution to sociology's fundamental theoretical problem – how social order is produced – that is addressed in terms of the capacities of individuals. The solution to

the problem of order contrasts with the solutions presented by figures as diverse as Marx, Durkheim and Parsons, who each answer by pointing to different features of how societies are organized as large-scale, durable structures.

From the point of view of interactionism, Simmel's apriorities anticipated core aspects of the perspective. Broadly, the first apriority underlined the importance of how the typifications associated with social identities are negotiated in different spheres of social life (interactionist examples might include: cab drivers and their fares; marks and their coolers; the status dilemmas of Black doctors in Southern states). The second expressed a conception of self that was social but never completely compliant to social demands because individuals possess their own personal interests, ambitions and desires (deviance disavowal; role distance; the identities sustained by the mental hospital's underlife). The third apriority echoes interactionist and other sociological social psychologies' claims that "role" is the key concept linking the "individual" and "society" (Gerth & Mills 1954; Berger 1966). The three apriorities might be read also as a counterpart that other famous list of three in SI – Blumer's (1969a:2) "three simple premises".

### *Sociology of Knowledge*

The role of knowledge in social life was a theme of Simmel's that directly connects to interactionist concerns. One example is Simmel's (1950) discussion of the stranger, a social type who is a member of a society that they do not belong to initially. Traders are Simmel's paradigm case (e.g. European Jews) The stranger differs from the wanderer who comes today and goes tomorrow– the stranger is here today and stays tomorrow. Distance and nearness characterize the stranger's position, who is both inside and outside the group. The stranger enjoys a certain respect because of this marginal status e.g. is regarded as holding an objectivity that insiders lack; or the stranger may receive opinions expressed more openly than insiders would divulge to their "own". The stranger benefits society by providing objectivity and embodying fresh perspectives that insiders may not otherwise access.

The role of knowledge in social life was continued in Simmel's discussion of secrecy. Simmel observed that the first thing we need to know in any interaction is *who* is it that we are dealing with? In pursuing this basic question about identity Simmel distinguishes 'acquaintances' – where we know about the "that" of another's personality, not its "what" – from people we know more intimately. Discretion is important between acquaintances. It involves respecting whatever the acquaintance holds

secret but also “in staying away from the knowledge of all that the other does not expressly reveal to us” (Simmel 1950: 321). Thus a kind of “ideal sphere” surrounds every individual. Built into our notions of “honour” is the idea of not “coming too close” to the person. The everyday activities, personal characteristics and property of the person can be included in this not-to-be-invaded sphere.

Simmel’s attention then turns to the role of the secret in social life. A secret involves “the hiding of realities by negative or positive means” (Simmel 1950: 330). Secrecy generates a “second world” alongside the “manifest world” and is a form of sociation when persons are bound together by their secret knowledge. From a sociological point of view, Simmel reminds us, the secret is ethically neutral – admirable as well as reprehensible acts may be kept secret. The fascination of secrets for us lies in differences – as in the children’s brag, “I know something you don’t” – and a feeling of superiority (we think that what we are denied must have value). Secrecy generates a potential instability. The internal danger to secrecy is giving oneself away while the external threat to secrecy is betrayal. Tensions and power surround efforts at concealment as well as the revelation of a secret. Secrecy is a form, Simmel reminded us, which can include any content. What counts as a secret varies historically. For example, in Europe up to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, many states kept the size of their national debt a secret.

#### *The Search for Generic Properties*

Simmel’s interest in identifying the general features of forms and analyzing their properties was taken up by the interactionist studies of the second Chicago School, for example in the ways in which the concept of “career” was used as a formal concept to highlight the transitions from one status to another (see Atkinson & Housley [2003:89-116] for British examples).

Simmel’s conception of the characteristics of these forms is more in keeping with currently influential versions of the structure-agency relation. Simmel’s forms are not like Platonic essences the suggestion that Simmel presents an arid and static image of social life is one of the commoner interpretive mistakes in the critical literature. Schermer and Jary (2013) remind us that while form is a key organizing feature of Simmel’s approach, his sociological reasoning contained strong “dialectical” elements, evident in his characteristic explorations of the tensions and dualities in the forms he analyzed. Instructive here is Tenbruck’s (1959) careful analysis of the method of formal sociology and the notion of the “dignity” of the forms of sociation. By the “dignity” of forms Simmel meant first, that the forms persist irrespective of the particular individuals who enact them, who may come and go; second, that the generic characteristics of the form are

independent of their historical realization. Forms have an “objective structure” but not one that floats free of individuals’ orientations. They have “a dual character, at once superior to the actors and subject to them” (Tenbruck 1959:88).

Some commentators beginning with Durkheim (1982[1903]) complained that Simmel’s sociology did not supply a method – a set of empirical procedures – for abstracting features of the forms of sociation. Simmel himself recognized the issue and encouraged cross-cultural and historical comparison to aid the process yet acknowledged that there was an irreducible intuitive element:

“Nothing more can be attempted than the establishment of the beginning and the direction of an infinitely long road – the pretension to any systematic and definitive completeness would be, at the very least, illusory. Perfection can be obtained here by the individual student only in the subjective sense that he communicates everything he has been able to see”. (Simmel 1959a:336n.5; see also Simmel 2009:31-32n. for alternate translation).

For Durkheim (1982[1903]:180-182) the process whereby Simmel abstracted the forms did not rest upon any methodical, publically verifiable procedure but instead relied on the subjectivity, ingenuity and whimsy of Simmel himself – no basis at all for founding an empirical science. Interactionist research that follows Simmel’s lead has highlighted though not finally resolved the issue. It is evident, for example, in Eviatar Zerubavel’s (1980) conjecture, “If Simmel were a fieldworker”. (Responding to Zerubavel it is tempting to say, if he were, he would practise fieldwork like Erving Goffman). What Zerubavel calls for is the application of the formal approach to ethnographic fieldwork data. A formal approach would entail a shift from fact collection to analytical perspectives, seeking the abstraction of formal patterns not the reproduction of concrete contents. Overall the demand would be for analytical selectivity rather than comprehensive coverage of a research setting. But how would these principles be put into practice in actual studies? Opinion among interactionists has varied. Some, like Goffman (in Becker 2003) expressed scepticism about devising a robust set of rules of procedure. Others, including Becker, seem to suggest that some steps can be taken in the shape of analytic induction, or grounded theory, or analytic ethnography (Lofland 1995). These remain live questions for practising fieldworkers sympathetic to interactionism’s formal impulse towards the isolation of the generic properties of social processes.

### **Simmel and Blumer**

As noted, Blumer does not name Simmel in his account of SI's origins. Nonetheless, a persuasive case for a detailed affinity between the fundamental assumptions of Simmel's formal sociology and those of Blumer's SI has been made by Jacqueline Low (2008). She identifies similarities in their ideas about social reality, the nature of the individual-society relationship, and the nature of social action. Furthermore, in some of these areas, the affinities between Blumer's views and Simmel's are stronger than those between Blumer and his acknowledged key influence, Mead.

Both Simmel and Blumer viewed society or social reality as constituted through individuals interacting with each other. For Simmel society was an "event" or occurrence where people mutually affected each other's fate. For Blumer society was people in interaction fitting their lines of action to each other (Low 2008:328). Both Simmel and Blumer stressed the contextual determination of meaning whereas Mead placed emphasis on shared meanings in the interpretation of symbols. Simmel and Blumer also diverged from Mead in their image of social life: Mead tended to be "stuck in consensus" as Blumer put it in interview with Norbert Wiley in 1982 (Low 2008:329) while Simmel and Blumer regarded conflict as an ineluctable feature of social life.

Convergence between Simmel and Blumer and divergence from Mead was also evident in their characterizations of the relationship between the individual and society. Mead considered society temporally to precede the individual, pointing out that all individuals are born into ongoing societies. This ongoing social process was taken as a given. Simmel and Blumer in contrast maintain that structure was emergent from individual interaction and thus that structure had no temporal precedence over interaction. This position rejected a model where society was determinative of the individual's actions, which Mead sometimes tended towards. The relationship of individual to social structure was seen as recursive by both Simmel and Blumer. Forms emergent in interaction can crystallize as something external and oppressive to individuals (elaborated in Simmel's theory of the tragedy of culture). Blumer similarly emphasised the enabling and constraining aspects of social structures: situations were to be interpreted as "tasks, opportunities, obstacles, means, demands, discomforts, dangers, and the like" (Blumer 1969a:85).

Low (2008) also proposed similarities in how Simmel and Blumer see the nature of social action as fundamentally interpretive in character, in contrast to Mead's emphasis on its responsive character. Or, more correctly, Blumer stressed how interpretation intervenes between stimulus and response. This conception sits well with Simmel's suggestion that individuals in interaction are able to "correlate" their existence intelligently



with the existence of other. If Low is less than persuasive here then that is perhaps because Simmel lacked the developed theory of language, symbolism and reflexivity that was pragmatism's contribution to interactionist sociology. Nevertheless, the notion of the individual as an intelligent and knowledgeable agent was an abiding motif of Simmel's approach.

Blumer's (1968; 1969b) analyses of fashion show that he did not entirely overlook the ideas of Simmel. Blumer accepted Simmel's (1957) contentions that fashion was a social form and a general process that goes far beyond stylistic changes in clothing and adornment. There can be fashions in architecture, interior design, even medicine and scientific theory. In Blumer's (1968: 341-342) words, fashion is a "continuing pattern of change in which certain social forms enjoy temporary acceptance and respectability only to be replaced by others more abreast of the times". Building on observations made in his 1932 study of Paris fashion houses (Davis 1991:18n.1) Blumer's takes issue with Simmel's (1957[1904]) examination of fashion, which he sees as a version of "trickle down" theory. Fashion is a device whereby people occupying the higher strata of society can distinguish themselves from those in neighbouring social classes who seek to emulate their social superiors. When members of subjacent social classes adopt the fashion, it is abandoned by those higher up. Blumer accepted the possibility of class emulation but argues that it alone is insufficient to define the "fashion mechanism" as such. Instead of class differentiation Blumer proposed a theory of "collective selection". Designers, fashion house directors and buyers interact to interpret the current "collective tastes". These collective tastes develop among "people thrown into areas of common interaction and having similar runs of experience" (Blumer 1969:284). A process of collective selection then translated these tastes into fashionable styles. In Blumer's theory, processes internal to the fashion mechanism come first. The opportunity to use fashion as a marker of distinction was secondary to these processes.

While Blumer's critique of trickle-down theory and recommendation to study processes of collective selection served to stimulate investigation of range of fashion processes, using ethnographic and interactionist approaches (Davis 1992; Rubinstein 1995), Blumer's analysis represents only a partial and simplified reading of Simmel's original essay. As Davis (1991) reminds us, Simmel was also fascinated by fashion from the point of view of the fashionable individual, who in dressing fashionably could simultaneously feel special, individuated, set apart from the crowd yet also be recognized as fashionable by other fashionistas. The idea was crystallized by anthropologist Edward Sapir: "fashion is custom in the disguise of

departure from custom” (Sapir, cited in Davis 1991:7). Schermer and Jary (2013) also emphasize the multifaceted and dialectical character of Simmel’s formulation that allows for much more complex patterns of emulation and innovation than Blumer’s simple top-down interpretation. Thus, when Blumer came to use Simmel, he did so in a manner that extracted a few sociological ideas stripped out of the philosophical context that lent those ideas sophistication and subtlety.

### **Simmel and Goffman**

There is debate about whether Goffman was a symbolic interactionist. Trained at the University of Chicago in the classic years of the post-war second Chicago School, Goffman is frequently associated with symbolic interactionism. In an interview with Jef Verhoeven in 1980, Goffman stated that he found Blumer’s writings “very congenial”, agreeing that he adopted the “general Meadian framework that everybody of that period employed” (Verhoeven 2000:214; see also Helle 1998) and that Blumer’s notion of symbolic interaction was an acceptable, if rather abstract and broad approach to social action. The problem for Goffman was that the label symbolic interactionism “doesn’t signify too much”: it did not provide the guide to structural or organizational issues required by the next stage of sociological inquiry (Verhoeven 2000:214). For that next stage guidance Goffman claimed that he found Hughes, or British anthropologist A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, to be more useful sources. There seems to have been some tension or at least distance between Blumer and Goffman originating in Goffman’s student days, when he audited Blumer’s class but did not complete the course credits (Smith & Winkin 2012). For his part Blumer brought Goffman to his first teaching job at the University of California at Berkeley in 1958. Later, Blumer (1972) wrote a critical review in which he suggested that Goffman’s conception of human action was partial. All this suggests that Goffman was an interactionist though not in any strong sense a follower of Blumer’s conception of symbolic interactionism.

The work of Erving Goffman presents the clearest example of Simmel’s influence on interactionist sociology. Paul Rock once observed that “Erving Goffman may become the unacknowledged reincarnation of Georg Simmel” (1979:27). Certainly, Goffman took much from Simmel’s formal sociology. He used it to legitimate his own inquiries, stating in his first book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, that “the justification for this approach (as I take to be the justification for Simmel’s also) is that the illustrations fit together into a coherent framework that ties together bits of experience the read has already had and provides the student with a guide worth testing in case-studies of institutional social life” (1959:xii). Goffman adapted a Simmelian formal approach to uncover a multitude of forms of face-to-face

interaction. In some instances Goffman directly developed Simmel's ideas (for example: on personal space, on sociability, on the role of information in social life, on the adventure).

There are a number of similarities and complementarities between Simmel and Goffman (Smith (2000[1989])). Goffman shared with Simmel a conception of society as interaction and saw the identification of forms of social life and the description of their properties as sociology's primary task. Goffman concurred with Simmel's view that interaction was an emergent product of the activities of individuals. There was a strong formal impulse throughout Goffman's work, notably in *Stigma* where he drew upon a wide range of studies from several fields of enquiry in order to identify the "commonalities" of the situation of those "disqualified from full social acceptance" (Goffman 1963:147, Preface)

While Goffman followed in Simmel's footsteps, his sociology of the interaction order (Goffman 1983) refined formal sociology in novel ways. The interaction order was *sui generis* (Rawls 1987) and its properties could be empirically investigated. Donald Levine disputed the claim that Goffman's idea was new: "it was on the assumption of a *sui generis* interaction order that Simmel grounded his entire sociological program" (Levine 1989:114). Certainly, as the earlier discussion of the "dignity" of social forms (Tenbruck 1959) suggested, both Simmel and Goffman considered interaction as emergent from the activities of individuals. But Goffman took a further step beyond Simmel in his dissertation by considering interaction as a species of social order. As a type of social order, Goffman claimed that the communicative conduct out of which interaction was wrought was a matter of rules, expectations, moments where no rules seem to apply, ways of dealing with the breaking of rules, ways of exploiting the rules for private ends, and the like (detailed in Smith 2006:25-27). In this way Goffman's sociology must be seen as a real development of Simmel's approach since it examined the actual practices involved in sustaining a definition of the situation and through which interaction might succeed or fail (and thus require remedial work). Goffman also progressed formal sociology by constructing his analyses as explicit conceptual frameworks, a feature offering greater analytic coherence than Simmel's essayistic and dialectical approach since it more readily permitted empirical application and conceptual development.

If Smith's (2000[1989]) discussion was mainly driven by an attempt to explore the similarities and echoes between the sociologies of Simmel and Goffman, Murray S. Davis (1997) offered a portrayal of their relationship designed to highlight the different paths taken by the two. Davis maintains that the work of both Simmel and Goffman served to legitimate the study of

human experience and thus to give human beings “*more ontological weight*” (1997:386; Davis’s italics). They dealt with human experience through a qualitative, inductive methodology, building their general notions from inspection of the details of social life and the historical record. For Simmel, interaction is a broad motif of his philosophical outlook – there is interaction evident between individuals, the topic of his formal sociology, but more broadly everything in the world interacts with everything else, a theme explored in his valedictory *View of Life* (Simmel 2011). For Goffman interaction was only of interest as the topic of his studies of the interaction order. Their views of the individual were similarly contrasting. Simmel wanted to exalt the individual, to signpost the powers and potentialities of the human being who was a social being but much else besides. Goffman in contrast wanted to sociologize the individual and eradicate the personal self by uncovering new social determinants originating from the demands of the interaction order. Simmel appealed to poetic and religious temperaments – Goffman to comics and cynics.

The intriguing question for Goffman’s admirers and followers (just as it was for Simmel’s) is how can the sociology be taken forward? For some (e.g. Smith 2006:125-29) Goffman’s ideas already have a considerable afterlife, evident in the many studies of stigma, self-presentation, total institutions, civil inattention, face-work and footing that have extended and qualified Goffman’s original formulations. In addition to the scholarly contribution there is the “Goffman for everyone” (Winkin & Leeds-Hurwitz 2013:129) – the writer who offers a straightforward but sophisticated toolbox for making sense of the particulars of our everyday lives. Clearly, Goffman remains an enduringly interesting and troubling figure who can be read in numerous different ways and put to many uses (Jacobsen and Kristiansen 2015:161-180).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has explored some of the ways in which Simmel can be regarded as a proto-interactionist. The Simmelian influence on the development of interactionist sociology can be traced through its early impact on Chicago sociology. Simmel placed an interactionist conception of society at the centre of the special social science, formal sociology, which was devoted to uncovering the generic and potentially universal characteristics of interaction between individuals. In terms of topic matter, method and aims, there are clear anticipations of and convergences between Simmel’s sociology of the shape and substance of later interactionist analyses. The convergences become particularly conspicuous in aspects of Blumer’s and Goffman’s approaches. While Simmel could analyse delicate

features of social life, including topics such as intimacy, faithfulness and gratitude, his view of social life was robust and clear-sighted. Conflict, exchange, and relations of domination and subordination were central to Simmel's sociological vision. He established the centrality of these phenomena for the interactionist tradition and showed how they worked out at the level of everyday interaction.

The Simmel that has made greatest impact on the subsequent development of interactionism is the earliest Simmel known to the English-speaking world, the formal sociologist. In recent decades, however, translations have made the cultural Simmel more widely known. These writings show that Simmel was much more than sociological microscopist. Simmel's (1978[1900]; 1997) writings on money and on the "tragedy of culture" reveal a recognition of how large-scale institutional change impacts on everyday interaction. Simmel focused upon the specific modes of experience and consciousness characteristic of modernity. Simmel's (1978[1900]) novel claim was that modernity's origins were to be found in the advent of a fully monetarized economy – a claim running against the traditional society/industrial capitalism distinction seen as pivotal for so many thinkers, including Marx, Weber and Durkheim. Money, as a highly flexible form of exchange, can be divided in any number of ways, put to any number of purposes. Money, then, is pure instrumentality, completely subservient to the ends to which it is put. Anticipating some of Weber's arguments about rationalization, Simmel proposed that money as an institutionalized feature of economic exchange breeds a rational, calculating outlook influencing many other spheres of life. These writings point to potentially productive directions for interactionist analyses of contemporary cultural phenomena. The cultural Simmel is fully consistent with the formal Simmel, which sought the universal properties of forms of sociation yet which works as a method that respects particularities and actual contexts in a manner congruent with interactionist sensibilities. Simmel (1978:55) ultimately wanted to find "in each of life's details the totality of its meaning". His formal sociology and what has been called his "cultural phenomenology" (Goodstein 2002) complemented each other.

In a famous late statement Simmel envisaged that his intellectual legacy would be distributed like cash, to be used by the inheritors as they saw fit. In a kindred vein Fisher and Strauss (1978:458) suggested that the interactionist tradition might be "regarded less as a royal inheritance passed down through the generations than as a long-lived auction house" whose continuity depends more on the attractiveness of its offerings than its history. The complexity of Simmel's intellectual heritage is such that his work continues to repay reading by interactionists concerned with the

relationships of interaction and structure as well as communication, culture and identity. Thus, to borrow a phrase from Horst Jürgen Helle (2013), interactionism and interactionists still stand to benefit from “messages from Georg Simmel”.

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<sup>ii</sup> Simmel also used the term *Wechselwirkung* (“reciprocal effect”) to describe aspects of more fleeting kinds of interaction. This chapter follows Wolff (1950: lxiii) and Schermer and Jary (2013:17-18) in using sociation to cover both German terms.

<sup>iii</sup> In a late (1917) formulation, Simmel (1950:16-25) identified “general sociology” and “philosophical sociology” as distinct areas of inquiry but made it clear that “pure, or formal, sociology” was his central concern.