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Symbolic Interaction and Social Planning: Perspectives from the Early Years

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Social planning is a concept and a clarion call which has had substantial appeal for several generations of American academics and social professionals. In fact, the popularity of the idea of planning and the sheer pervasiveness of discussions on this subject have led to a number of possible different interpretations (Bailey, 1975; Braybrooke & Lindblom, 1963; Bauer, 1963; Encyclopedia, 1968; Friedmann, 1972; Kahn, 1967; Lindblom, 1980; Mayer, 1972; Mayer, Moroney & Morris, 1974; Morris, Binstock & Rein, 1967). It is possible to identify, for example, at least three distinct contemporary approaches to the basic concept and practice of social planning.

There is the indicators approach of economic planning, wherein social phenomena such as poverty, unemployment, retirement and productivity are measured within closed systems of standardized statistical indices and the nominal objective of planning is to achieve some optimal combination of increases and decreases of these indices (United Nations, 1973). This approach has, in recent years, also spawned an industry of seekers after comparable indices related to mental illness, crime, old age, educational attainment and other, similar social planning topics. The search for a statistical model to model performance of American society goes back at least to the New Deal (Bauer, 1963).

Then, there is the physical determinist approach apparent to one degree or another in city planning as well as in various approaches to combating the urban crisis, inner city blight and other urban conditions. The essence of this approach is the assumption that the physical environments in which people live their daily lives – housing streets and roadways, transportation facilities, proximity of public services and other similar physical conditions and circumstances are primary factors in what is termed “the quality of life” of groups and communities (C.f., Bailey, 1975).

A third service output approach found both in the public and independent sectors today is sometimes also called social welfare planning. It is characterized by a unique and limited interpretation of the successful completion of planning. Regardless of the input problem with which it begins, this particular form of planning can be relied upon to result in a set of recommendations for the creation of professionally and bureaucratically organized services.

Each of these approaches to social planning is an organized and politically supported reality in American public life today. Economic planning attendant to social as well as purely fiscal and monetary concerns is predominantly a national concern with some state and regional efforts. Urban planning is predominantly a municipal and metropolitan concern, although important national interests and federal agencies, particularly the Department of Housing and Urban Development are also oriented in this direction. Social welfare planning was, for several decades until the Great Society era principally voluntary, federated action in major urban centers and a relatively small number of other smaller cities.

The collective record of achievement of these diverse forms of social planning in the United States during the past two decades is by general agreement not an awe-inspiring one (Goodman, 1972). Despite the growth and proliferation of organizations and professionals claiming to do social planning, one is hard-pressed to find much convincing evidence of effective performance on the one criterion which counts most – the solution or resolution of defined social problems.

Increasing awareness of the modest achievement of efforts at what is currently termed planned social change, has generated a variety of reactions among planners and supporters of social planning. Many former academic and political supporters have simply lost interest in public and community affairs, including planning, and gone on to other pursuits. Some others have rejected gradualism and turned to political activism and self-styled radicalism. Some of the most avid supporters of social planning during the 1960s have turned cynical while the truly devoted can be heard calling for rededication and redoubling of effort. Assessments of the difficulties are many and variety. However, it appears to have occurred to relatively few people interested in planning that the basic difficulty with recent efforts at social planning may be due to a basic, thoroughgoing failure to adequately conceive of and deal with the subject matter of such planning – the complex, indeterminate and often illogical patterns of observable human behavior and human social relations.

The principal thesis of this paper is that the inadequacies of recent efforts at social planning are essential failures of theory, rather than failures of practice. Economic, land use and social welfare planners it is suggested have all shared a common unwillingness or inability to abandon commitments to an essentially utilitarian rhetoric of reasoned behavior, wherein means are matched with ends, persons are viewed as essentially self-interested and goal-directed rational problem solvers operating on schedules of goal attainment known or predictable by the planners In such formulations, relatively little room is left for caprice, fancy, inconsistency, emotion, playfulness, myth, uncertainty, personal preference or the myriad other human dimensions of real life. Small wonder in retrospect that the track record of social planning has been so bad. It is entirely believable that it could have been – and might yet be – even worse.
We are, at this juncture, faced with several discernable futures for social planning. One option is to simply abandon the idea entirely as impractical. Like human powered flight or perpetual motion, planning social relations may be an unobtainable, even undesirably, ideal. The second possibility is the more likely: the facts of bureaucratic and interest group politics make it extremely likely that the current social planning ventures alluded to above can continue to operate for the foreseeable future on the genteel fiction that some as yet unspecified good will come of it all; that in planning we may eventually learn to plan. To avoid either of these futures it would be essential for planners to become more sophisticated in the theoretical implications of human behavior; not just the behavior of their clients and “subject matters” but also of themselves. It is my contention that symbolic interactionism offers the greatest contemporary potential for achieving a useful, humane and workable theoretical approach to social planning.

Much has been published on the allegedly face-to-face biases of symbolic interactionism, its insensitivity to social conflict and other dark sides of humankind, and its essentially indeterminate, unpredictable model of the species (Hanson & Wilke, 1978; Maines, 1977). All of these factors appear at first glance to make a strong case against the usefulness of interaction theory in planning contexts. Yet to argue in this direction too vigorously can readily put one in the position of refusing to own a calendar with summer months because one doesn’t like hot weather. The utility of concepts is not the only consideration to be taken into account in planning practice if it is to be grounded in knowledge. Some question of the degree to which concepts “fit” the known facts must also be a major consideration, and I believe that such fit is one of the strongest arguments that can be made for the application of interactionist concepts to planning theory. The alleged micro bias of interactionism may be an appropriate dose of realism after years of assuming the supposed advantages and potentials of grandiose planned structural change come to naught.

I propose to examine in the remainder of this paper some of the key concepts found in the work of selected early interactionists as a partial first step toward bringing greater communication between them and social planners. My findings are modest but I believe they generally support the possibilities of the interactionist approach for social planning. In what follows I refer to aspects of the writings of John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, W.I. Thomas and related expressions by E. W. Burgess and Harry Stack Sullivan. Together, I believe one can find in the works of these intellectuals as well as in the work of several of their contemporaries in the Chicago schools of architecture, sociology and philosophy the basis for a social planning approach with substantial implications for contemporary planning practice.

**John Dewey**

It is difficult even today to fully come to terms with the written work of John Dewey. Yet it is equally difficult to escape the conclusion that much of the fabric of
contemporary social science and social practice has an essentially Deweyan cast to it. Social experimentation, kindergartens, and day care, the evaluation of social programs by their effects and consequences, and the striving for relevance by recent philosophers and scientists all can be linked to this quintessential American philosopher (Lawson, 1971; McDermott, 1973).

Most important of all, it would seem, the Deweyan problem-solving model first presented in *How We Think* (Dewey, 1910), particularly in its more extended forms of problem definition, identification of alternatives, gathering of evidence, review of alternatives, selection of preferred options and the various stages of implementation and evaluation, forms the very core of social planning practice theory (Kahn, 1969B; Mayer, 1972; Mayer, Moroney & Morris, 1974; U.N Commission, 1973).

Also, in *The Public and Its Problems* (1927), Dewey stressed the importance of discussion, consultation, persuasion and debate in democratic decision-making. Each of these has the potential to extend and deepen awareness of the problems under consideration in planning and help those engaged in social planning to deeper insight into social situations and potentialities.

To even attempt to do justice to all of Dewey's other views related to planning would require far more extensive treatment than is possible here. However, it is possible to identify certain characteristically Deweyan concepts which are particularly apt to the reformulation of planning theory called for above, and to cite a number of works by Deweyan which warrant further investigation for that purpose.

I have chosen three ideas which strike me as particularly appropriate for planning, at the same time passing by the most obvious possibilities in the repeated calls for the fusion of science and practice and the stress upon science and democracy. The first of these is the pragmatic theory of the nature of mental activity and its relation to experience dealt with not only by Dewey in his concept of creative intelligence but also by Peirce, James, Mead and more recently by Alfred Schutz and other pragmatists. A major problem with existing planning theory, it can be argued, is its Enlightenment rationalist conception of Mind as the producer of a symphony of syllogisms which together make up “rational” thought.

For example, Dewey might as well have been addressing a contemporary group of social planners when he wrote:

\[ \ldots \text{In social matters, those who claim that they are} \]
\[ \text{in possession of the one sure solution of social} \]
\[ \text{problems often set themselves up as being peculiarly} \]
\[ \text{scientific while others are floundering around in an} \]
\[ \text{‘emperical’ morass. Only recognition in both theory} \]
\[ \text{and practice that ends to be attained (ends-in-view) are of the nature of hypotheses and that hypotheses} \]
have to be formed and tested in strict correlativity with existential conditions as means, can alter current habits of dealing with social issues. (McDermott, 1973, 407)

In fact, the standard practice in planning today runs directly contrary to this advice in several respects. First of all, there is a rather naïve faith that in many social problem areas scientific research will one day reveal what Dewey calls “the one sure solution.” Also, the suggestion here that ends or goals are selected in light of means and themselves hypothetical in nature runs contrary to the approach of most planning. What this approach suggests, more than anything else, is the critical importance of the initial stage of planning operations – defining the problem – while leaving room for continued reformulations in light of on-going reality testing (Edelman, 1977). In the face of such “obviously” defined problems as poverty, inadequate housing, urban blight and aging, social planners have shown a marked unwillingness to proceed with their inquiries in the manner Dewey suggests and a marked penchant to attend principally to the au currant set of received “sure solutions”. Closer attention to the actions involved in defining the problem rather than accepting standard definitions, therefore, must be one central element in the reformulation of social planning theory.

Also apparent through Dewey as well as the other pragmatists is a sense of future that is open-ended and yet capable of offering direction to human affairs without locking them into end state utopias. Contemporary social planning practice has been essentially unable to resolve the dilemmas of ideology and utopia, but rather than facing the issue most social planning practice employs a variety of dodges and ploys to avoid entirely the question of the future. Most notable in that regard is the idea of short-term planning.

Further, planning and perhaps all of the social professions can learn much from Dewey regarding the essentially false dichotomizing of theory and practice One suspects, for example, that most practitioners would concur with Dewey that “theory separated from concrete doing and making is empty and futile.”

One can speculate, however, on whether they would hold in equal regard the remainder of the quotation:

Practice (separated from theory) then becomes an immediate seizure of opportunities and enjoyments which conditions afford without the direction which theory – knowledge and ideas – has power to supply. The problem of the relation of theory and practice is not a problem of theory alone; it is that, but it is also the most practical problem of life. For it is the question of how intelligence may inform action, and how action may bear fruit of increased insight into meaning; a
clear view of the values that are worthwhile and of the means by which they are to be made secure in experienced objects (McDermott, 1973, 595)

In its understandings of social relations, contemporary social planning is, indeed, largely “an immediate seizure of opportunities and enjoyments.” Further, this statement identifies the truly central practice issue of social planning: that of how intelligence may be employed to inform action. It is possible to speculate on this basis that far from being an organized bureaucratic program of activities as in present efforts, truly effective social planning is a quality of institutional leadership – the quality of bringing intelligence to bear upon institutional action. Thus, while some measure of power or influence may well be a necessary pre-requisite to effective planning, it can be no guarantee. Powerful planners unable to bring knowledge to bear should not be expected to differ in any appreciable way from other powerful bureaucrats.

Finally, there is it seems great potential for social planning in exploration of Dewey’s notion of experience as aesthetic. His statement on celebrations are easily trivialized into counter cultural cant about “peak experiences” McDermott, 1973, 300). However, social planning per se has been almost totally oblivious to the full range of aesthetic dimensions in the experience affected by planning. Evidence from the pea-green walls of welfare department offices and hallways to the behemoth complexes of public housing support this conclusion in the most obvious and direct ways. Far subtler and more profound ramifications about as well. For example, the denial of novel or fresh experiences in the planned environments of institutions.

In sum, social planning theorists would do well to re-read John Dewey expecting to find therein much beyond problem solving that is new and fresh as well as the old and familiar ideas.

**George Herbert Mead**

At the heart of the called-for reconstruction of social planning theory in light of symbolic interactionism is the seminal work of George H. Mead (Mead, 1934). A good many planners can be counted upon never to have heard of Mead, while others will think immediately of his “I-Me” concept and pass on. Therefore, clear and concise presentation of Mead’s perspective are the most essential elements in whatever case can be made for symbolic interaction in social planning. The interpretation of Mead’s work here generally follows the approach of Herbert Blumer that people act in situations on the basis of the meanings those situations have for them. The importance of this assumption for social planning cannot be overstated. If one is to plan for future behavior sufficiently specific and detailed information regarding both the situation (as viewed by the planners) and the points of view of the participants are essential. I will not attempt to be exhaustive here, but only to highlight certain standard interactionist concepts drawn from Mead and
concentrate upon the central significance of Mead’s formulation of personal and social reconstruction with particular reference to the third group of planners noted above.

As with Dewey’s concepts of problem-solving and intelligence, there is much to be gained for planning theory from careful consideration of Mead’s concept of Mind (Mead, 1934, 42-134). Particularly noteworthy would seem to be the processual and emergent nature of mental activity. A somewhat more complex matter to sort out are the implications for planning of Mead’s reflexive concepts of self and other – particularly with reference to the reflexive relation between “the planner” and her significant others, including client groups and client populations.

Another fundamental contribution from Mead to social planning would come from substitution of Mead’s model of meaningful action for the naïve empiricism and crude behaviorism which underlie too many planning efforts. As a start, planners could learn to distinguish between behavioral events and the meanings those events have for participants and the meanings they have for planners. Mead’s approach goes right to the heart of both the problem of social control by planners and the problem of the effectiveness of planning. What the Meadian model implies is that, far from “scripting” or in other ways directly seeking to control the behavior of real people, social planning should be aimed at anticipating the meanings that real people bring to specified situations, linking those meanings conceptually to certain situationally perceived difficulties or problems, and seeking for effective, realistic and legally and ethically justifiable ways of redefining those situations together with the participants.

In the long run, the most fruitful concepts for planning purposes may turn out to be Mead’s approaches to time and the future, which will not be dealt with here, and the concept of the generalized other (Mead, 1934, 227-336). One of the few concessions to any twentieth century social theory in the fundamentally eighteenth century Enlightenment outlook of planning theory has been the adoption of a functionalist conception of society as some organic unity binding together members of the nation’s population. This usage of “American society” as a key reference point typically accentuates the fact of common citizenship and continental proximity and ignores the “local” complexities of group affiliations, personally defined social worlds and the subtleties and nuances of the daily lives and world views of ordinary people, is commonplace in social planning discussions. Further this approach is typically accompanied by personification and anthropomorphizing of “society” (as in “society’s needs” or “society’s preferences”) the authoritarian political implications of which are only dimly perceived among social planners.

One suspects in this context that most social planners will have a devilishly difficult time coming to grips with the idea of society from the standpoint of the person inherent in Mead’s concept of the generalized other. It may appear idle pedantry to suggest to such practical people that “society” in the sense of a national
organic unity is a mythic construct of epic proportions beyond all hope of empirical verification. However, the effort should be made for several reasons.

Attempting to deal with any known social problems in terms of its implications for “society” introduces a level of unreality and a profound dilemma to planning from the very start. No living person is capable of dealing with society in this sense in anything near its potential complexities, and when simplified to understandable terms, it quickly loses its utility.

By contrast Mead’s view of “society as generalized other” both complicates and refines the use of the concept in planning. For example, planners and other social practitioners have become very adept at using certain mythical construction of the values and attitudes of society in setting standards for normal or expected behavior – often with highly questionable and even shocking results. The prospect of abandoning this approach in favor of more clearly identifying the significant others in question are not high at the moment.

However, it is possible to outline a method based on Mead to deal with some of the difficulty. By three simple operations, the planner can reduce the problem of society to empirical, manageable terms. The first operation would be to select a “reference person” – either the planner, a client, or an ideal-typical representative member of the planning team or the client group. Through a combination of empirical investigation, participant-observation and imaginative role-taking, the planner/analyst should be able to identify major elements that define the “society” involved in terms of the significant others to whom the referent person relates directly or symbolically. (Note these may be direct relations or purely role-taking or some combination.) Thus, a public welfare planner can, using this procedure identify not only welfare workers and clients but also the significant others to whom members of each of these groups customarily relate and also relate to symbolically. Thus, welfare caseworkers ordinarily have little direct interaction with state legislators individually or collectively. However, state legislators with the power of the purse are most certainly among the significant others of most welfare workers and consequently an important part of their social world.

The principal import of the generalized other for social planning, in other words, is to enforce a higher level of empirical analysis and investigation upon planning that is often the case at present. Research has shown over and over that one cannot blithely assume that persons “in the same society” – even those living next door to one another – are in any meaningful sense cohabitants of a common social world. I suspect that the mistaken observations resulting from this shared society assumption could be systematically linked with a number of the deficiencies of recent planning ventures.

A closely related element of the soil planning approach to the concept of society has been an essentially functionalist assumption that social structures control to some unstated degree the behavior of their incumbents. Because it has obvious and
predictable uses in designing intervention strategies social planners have, in short, been ready and willing to adopt what Dennis Wrong calls “the over-socialized conception of man.” In so doing, they have generated for themselves great difficulties in now allowing room for freedom of choice, individual behavioral deviations or other forms of serendipity.

By contrast, one finds in reading Mead an essential reciprocity of person and social structure:

Human society, we have insisted, does not merely stamp the pattern of its organized behavior upon any of its individual members, so that this pattern becomes likewise the pattern of the individual’s self; it also, at the same time, gives him a mind, as the means or ability of consciously conversing with himself in terms of the social attitudes which constitute the structure of his self and which embody the pattern of human society’s organized behavior as reflected in that structure. And his mind enables him to stamp the pattern of his further developing self (further developing through his mental activity) upon the structure of organization of human society, and thus in a degree to reconstruct and modify in terms of his self the general pattern of social or group behavior in terms of which his self was originally constituted (Mead, 1934, 270; italics added.)

Among the many threats and insights stemming from this approach is the novel (for planning) question of which redirection of planned change can one anticipate from those most affected by the change? There are numerous empirical examples of this such as another pathway to the concept of informal organization is explicitly recognized by formal organization researchers as the actual departures from the formal organization as a plan. Research by Anselm Strauss, et. al. has extended this notion to the very core of organizational order (Strauss, 1964). From a social behavioral standpoint, in other words, the informal organization is the natural order of social relations in such settings, and all formal organizations must be expected to come to terms with it. Similar examples of unplanned redirection of planning efforts abound and yet systematic efforts to predict or anticipate such redirections have never been explicitly recognized in social planning theory or practice.

One of the major implications of Mead for social planning of the social welfare type noted at the beginning is his direct, dialectical assault on what has been one of the longest standing and most divisive distinctions: the division of labor between reformers seeking institutional change and therapists or counselors seeking
improvements in the human condition through individual interventions. In general, these are viewed in social work and other human service fields as essentially divisive, alternative approaches to social problem solving. In Mead, however, the conclusion is inescapable that the two are not only related but aspects of the same process:

The relations between social reconstruction and self or personality reconstruction are reciprocal and internal or organic; social reconstruction by the individual members or any organized human society entails self or personality reconstruction in some degree or other by each of these individuals and vice versa; for, since their selves or personalities are constituted by their organized social relations to one another, they cannot reconstruct those selves or personalities without also reconstruction, to some extent, the given social order, which is, likewise, constituted by their organized social relations to one another. In both types of reconstruction the same fundamental material or organized social relations among human individuals is involved and is simply treated in different ways, or from different angles or points of view, in the two cases respectively; or in short, social reconstruction and self or personality reconstruction are the two sides of a single process – the process of human social evolution. (Mead, 1964, 264; italics added)

The Meadian concept of mind is similarly reciprocal for external social and internal mental events, which suggests yet another fruitful avenue for explanation and development. Some planners have been much concerned over the question of whether the planner mentally works out a plan and then sells it to clients and constituencies or merely carries out the wishes of those constituents in organizing a plan conforming to their demands. That both may be involved is a rather mundane observation and yet a practice rhetoric for expressing such reciprocity has proven elusive. This can be handled quite readily by the interactionist concept of self and its relation to significant others.

Finally, close scrutiny of the latter of Mead’s famous trilogy – society – brings into sharper focus one question which is crucial for assessing the planning relevance of his work. According to critics there is in Mead and the interactionism that grew from his work a thoroughgoing inability to recognize and adequately deal with human conflict. If this were so it truly would argue against the usefulness of Mead’s perspective since conflict, partisanship and divisiveness are routine aspects of the
work of most planning. A close reading of Mead’s comments on society, however, raises some intriguing evidence against this prevailing criticism:

The fundamental socio-physiological impulses or behavior tendencies which are common to all human individuals, which lead those individuals collectively to enter or form themselves into organized societies or social communities, and which constitute the ultimate basis of those societies or social communities, fall, from the social point of view, into two main classes: those which lead to social cooperation and those which lead to social antagonism among individuals. They can be described as those which give rise to friendly attitudes and relations and those which give rise to hostile attitudes and relations among human individuals implicated in the social situations (Mead, 1964, 268)

This is hardly the consensus view one often hears attributed to Mead. Might it be merely a fluke? A few pages further on, he continues:

A highly developed and organized human society is one in which the individual members are interrelated in a multiplicity of different intricate and complicated ways whereby they all share a number of common interests – interests in, and for the betterment of, society – and yet, on the other hand are more or less in conflict relative to numerous other interest which they possess only individually or else share with one another in small or limited groups (Mead, 1964, 265)

He also injects a Simmel-like note in differentiating ethical and broader connotations of social and anti-social tendencies:

Now it is true that the latter class of fundamental impulses or behavior in human beings are “anti-social” insofar as they would, by themselves, be destructive of all human social organization or could not, alone constitute the basis of organized human society; yet in the broadest and strictest non-ethical sense, they are obviously no less social than are the former class of such impulses or behavior tendencies. (Mead, 1964, 279)

Further, Mead makes clear in his discussion of society that accommodation of conflicting interests and growing social consensus on directions results from communication and role-taking. However, he very carefully points out that
individual interests do not have to be subsumed or merged in order for the process of accommodation to work:

A member of the community is not necessarily like other individuals because he is able to identify himself with them. He may be different. There can be a common content, common experience, without there being an identity of function. A difference of function does not preclude a common experience; it is possible for the individual to put himself in the place of the other although his function is different from the other (Mead, 1964, 279)

Indeed, were such role-taking not, in fact, possible the very idea of planning would be nonsensical.

The potential for a fruitful merger of social planning and symbolic interaction rests on the implications of the work of George H. Mead in modifying certain key planning concepts. Some of this modification is already underway, albeit largely within the rhetorical bounds of classic utilitarian political and economic terminology (Friedmann, 1972). Any effort to transcend that perspective will require some initiatives on the part of those with an interactionist point of view and with more than the casual awareness of Mead accorded most students in planning programs.

W.I. Thomas

A third early interactionist whose work contains interactionist concepts relevant to social planning theory is Willam (illiam) I(saac) Thomas, who is best known, perhaps, for his widely-quoted situational definition of reality. Things that are seen as real by individuals or groups, Thomas observed, will be real in their consequences (Thomas & Janowitz, 1966). This expression, it needs to be noted, is part of a larger fabric of Thomas’ research and thought which is far more relevant to contemporary social planning concerns than is ordinarily acknowledged. His treatment, for example, of situational analysis was influenced by early casework thought in social work, and provides a contemporary beginning point for the mediation of “reform” and “therapy” noted above.

Over and beyond situations, however, Thomas’ work on “Social Disorganization and Reorganization,” “Social Personality” and his essay “Rational Control in Social Life” all contain important suggestions of immediate significance for social planning. (Note: Copies of each of these together with Thomas’ consequentialist definition of reality noted above are all included in the collection of Thomas’ writings edited by Morris Janowitz cited above.)
For example, when writing on social reorganization Thomas is touching on what
more recent social planning theorists such as Binstock, Morris, Mayer, Rein and
Moroney, et. al. term planned social change:

The problem of social reconstruction is to create new
schemes of behavior – new rules of personal conduct and
new institutions – which will supplant or modify the old
schemes and correspond better to the changed attitudes,
that is, which will permit the latter to express themselves
in action and at the same time will regulate their active
manifestations so as not only to prevent the social group
from beginning disorganized but to increase its cohesion
by opening new fields for social cooperation (Thomas &
Janowitz, 1966, 8).

As a statement of the problem of planned social change, this statement
published in 1927 may be at least as clear and concise than many comparable later
comments.

In “Rational Control in Social Life,” Thomas identifies what remain today some
of the most essential intervention skills and problems of social practice:

While our realization that nature can be controlled only
by treating it as independent of any immediate act of our
will or reason is four centuries old, our confidence in
‘legislation’ and in ‘moral suasion’ shows that this idea is
not yet generally realized with regard to the social world
(Thomas & Janowitz, 1966, 38)

He goes on to identify “ordering and forbidding” as the oldest form of social
technique, and to equate it with primitive, magical thinking. Such ordering and
forbidding, in the guise of the formulation of authoritative social policy,
bureaucratic rules and guidelines continues to be quite possibly the most widely
used and supported intervention strategies in social planning today.

Thomas goes on:

There are two other fallacies involved to a certain extent
in social practice, although practical sociology has already
repudiated them. Th reason for their persistence in
practice is that even if the erroneousness of the old
assumption has been recognized, no new working ideas
have been put in their place. These assumptions are: (1)
that men react in the same way to the same influences
regardless of their individual or social past, and that
therefore it is possible to provoke identical behavior in
various individuals by identical means; (2) that men
develop spontaneously, without external influence
tendencies which enable them to profit in a full and
uniform way under given conditions, and therefore it is
sufficient to creat favorable or remove unfavora
cil conditions in order to give birth to or suppress given
tendencies (Thomas & Janowitz, 1966, 47)

The second of these, of course, is commonly repudiated in research on welfare
clients, aged and retarded persons, mental patients and many others. However, in
planning practice what this usually comes down to in practice is substitution of the
research-based norm for some previously adduced one Even in the face of
overwhelmingly sophisticated statistical procedures, however, planners seem
currently no more able than they were in Thomas’ time to avoid the first fallacy.

E.W. Burgess

The most explicit discussion of social planning among the group of
interactionists considered in this paper is found in E(rnest) W. Burgess’ essay
“Social Planning and the Mores.” This paper was published as the lead article in a
special (and currently unavailable) publication of the American Sociological
Association, co-edited by Burgess and Herbert Blumer2, titled Human Problems of
Social Planning. In his article Burgess examines the interplay of individualism,
democracy and humanitarianism. While the article is largely a topical discussion of
principally historical interest, Burgess’ conclusions are noteworthy in their
implications for contemporary social planning:

Three conditions seem necessary for the success of
an American type of social planning. The first of
these is that social planning proceed within the
traditional framework of a free society in which the
values of individualism and democracy are
preserved, nurtured and extended. . . The second
prerequisite for the success of an American type of
social planning is a complete and thoroughgoing
restatement of the conceptions of individualism,
democracy and humanitarianism. . . with reference
not to the pioneer period but to the realities of an
urban and technical civilization. The third
condition for the success of social planning in
America is to secure participation of specialists and
teachnicians in the undertaking, but in their proper
functioning. (Burgess & Bogue, 1974, 28)

Blumer, who is not included in this discussion, is widely regarded as the earliest sociological interpreter
of the work of George Herbert Mead within the tradition of symbolic interactionism.
The importance of these sentiments lies less in whether or not one concurs with them today than it does in their heuristic value for discussions about planning between interactionists. Judging by the literature, one suspects that current generations of interactionists are likely to react with varying degrees of amusement, bewilderment and outrage at them. However, it is also highly probably that if asked to produce a statement of the basic values underlying contemporary social planning, most planners would produce a remarkably similar list. These continue to be dominant elements in the rhetoric of public affairs to which planners are continuously exposed, and any effort to come to terms with social planning cannot dismiss them. There is, therefore, a full agenda for symbolic interactionism to reexamine these three ideas in light of existing research and theory, not with an eye toward dismissing them but rather in order to clarify, elaborate and modify their usefulness.

**Harry Stack Sullivan**

Another dimension of the potential contribution of interactionism to social planning, and a further element in the union of reform and theory noted above is found in the writings of Harry Stack Sullivan. Both Mead, a philosopher, and Sullivan, a psychiatrist, have been attributed by various sources with reformulating important aspects of the classical Freudian psychoanalytic approach to mental disturbances. Recent work of Thomas Szasz, Scheff, LeMert and many others has brought further synthesis to the social and psychoanalytic approaches which Sullivan is often credited with pioneering. Sullivan’s work in outlining an interpersonal theory of psychiatry built around situationally generated anxiety and the resultant need for what he termed “security operations” proved to be a major factor in shifting perspectives on this subject.

There is another dimension of Sullivan’s work which exists only in very sketchy form but which should be of interest to social planners. At several points in his published work, but most clearly in “Toward a Psychiatry of Peoples”, there is to be found a clearly stated mission for a socially-aware social planning:

> The thinking out of constructive, functionally coherent revisions of any of the major cultures of the world, so that the personal imperatives which derive from it – whether in the obscure, very early inculcated, patterns of conscience or the subsequently acquired, less recondite patterns of acceptable rationalizations of potent verbalisms – shall be less restrictive on understanding and more permissive of social progress; that, truly is a task to which unnumbered groups of the skillful might well apply themselves (Sullivan, 1953, 383)

Part of the contemporary network of social planning existing in the United States today is federally mandated mental health planning underwritten by the
National Institute of Mental Health. Unfortunately, like their close associates in health planning, virtually all of these current ventures have operationalized their mandate in terms of only one of the three options mentioned at the beginning above – concern for suicide rates, hospital mission rates and other mental health statistics; concern with the location and design of physical facilities and concern for creating new and additional mental health services largely overwhelm Sullivan’s suggestion for “thinking out of constructive, functionally coherent revisions”. Just as importantly mental health planning to date appears not to have come to grips in any substantial way with the challenges and possibilities posed by the growing body of sociological research – much of it done by contemporary interactionists like Glaser and Strauss, Irving Goffman and other interactionists, or with the role of social institutions on the personal imperatives of the mentally distressed. In fact, planning in this area appears in most instances to be well behind therapy and counseling.

Conclusion

It would be possible to extend this investigation a great deal further both in examining more closely the seminal concepts of those mentioned – Dewey, Mead, Thomas, Burgess and Sullivan – and in adding numerous additional names to the roster of these. Carey’s recent discussion of the Chicago School makes fascinating reading along these lines and argues for the addition of Robert Park, Louis Wirth and others (Carey, 1977). Likewise looking just outside the conventional interactionist and sociological pantheon, one can find relevant discussions relating to planning in the works of Frank Lloyd Wright and his mentor, Louis Sullivan, Jane Addams and settlement house leaders, the institutional economists, particularly John R. Commons and others.

What can we say about social planning based on this brief foray? First, we can suggest that interactionism and particularly the view of mental effort found in Mead suggests that planning is not primarily the rational problem-solving process it is presented as in existing planning theory. It is, instead, primarily effort to construct publicly meaningful action, or what Dewey terms “intelligent action.” Planners have no monopoly on right reason, and planning appears to be no more-or-less-end-oriented than dozens of other forms of human behavior. The focus on goals analysis and priorities assessment in the typical planning context can also be seen as essentially rhetorical devices of a particular type: Aimed at building rationales identifying and justifying future courses of what Mead in the interpretation of Blumer, terms “joint lines of action” and testing varying rationales for their consequences. One of the unique aspects of planning is that such testing of alternatives is, most typically an entirely imaginative, role-taking enterprise. Realistically, the question of how logical one must be in planning, or in how closely
means are connected to ends is a derivative issue rather than the central one.\(^3\) Conceivably, one could proceed in a highly irrational manner (in the standard planning sense) and still yield meaningful results.

Additional support for an interactionist perspective comes from the often-conflicting points of view with which the planner must contend. How is one to achieve a “rational” solution to a problem differently defined by several factions on a public body such as a city council or legislative body? In such situations there is undoubtedly a strong negotiated order element in planning, even at the level of defining the problem. In the conventional approaches, “rational planning” involves nothing less than achieving consensus on a single definition of the problem – either interest rates and taxes are so high that landlords cannot adequately maintain their housing, or poorly maintained housing has negative effects for tenants. However, the conventional approach to rationality appears to considerably understand human capacities for mental and verbal activity.

There is no reason that adequate planning could not proceed simultaneously with both definitions of the problem as stated, while adding a few additional elements (like declining city tax revenues and relationships between the two as it goes along (if, for instance, assessment of alternatives reveals the two definitions of the situations to be fundamentally incompatible and irreconcilable, that conclusion two becomes a part of the definition of the problem.)

Unfortunately, in contemporary social planning practice the solution is too often found in offering up simple lists of possibilities. Lists of goals and objectives, numbered serially are often confused for their heuristic value in facilitating actual planning and their rhetorical value in talking about the results of planning.

Secondly, it can be suggested based on the view of planning as the construction of publicly-meaningful action, that the rational problem-solving process of setting goals, defining problems, identifying and weighing alternative, is not a particularly adequate formulation of planning method. One may plan, for example, without ever attending to one or more of these in any degree. The essence of social planning method from an interactionist perspective involves intentional taking of the role of the generalized other in order to predict or estimate to the fullest extent possible the range of consequences resulting from a plausible action. It is the centrality (and the difficulty of adopting this posture – the viewpoint of society – which explains the fascination of planners with the organic concept and personification of society, and also with measures of social control and consensus (e.g., Thomas’ “ordering and forbidding”). Conversely, it is the interactionist recognition of the possibility of assuming the role of the generalized other – even a divided and conflicted other –

\(^3\) One of John Dewey’s early publications, “The Reflect Arc Concept in Psychology” (1896), not considered here, offers a very early “systems feedback” perspective that raises the prospect that from an ongoing social perspective ends can logically precede means.
which underlies the previous statement about planning for two differing goals simultaneously.

Finally, there is in the above materials the recognition that planning is not inherently a specialty skill, like brain surgery or macrame. At a profoundly significant level, one can conclude on the basis of reading Mead that virtually every human is capable of high levels of sophisticated planning. The difference between “professional planners” and others is principally an institutional rather than a person one. What is unique about social planning, for example, is not that it is an effort to resolve social problems by rational means. Social researchers and social philosophers also can be said to be able and willing to try that.

Beyond the purely personal capabilities possessed in varying degree by all persons, planning is principally a quality of institutional leadership. For the planner, this poses three basic alternatives: one must either become an institutional leader, go to work for one or call out and develop leadership in others. In all cases, however, it is in harnessing mind to the guidance and direction of social institutions wherein the skill and accomplishment of planning are to be found. It is also in the political and organizational isolation of social planning outside such leadership, with no particularly apparent ways of training access and acceptance to which the current deficiencies of social planning can, in part, be traced.
References


