

# A SOCIAL WORLD PERSPECTIVE\*

Anselm Strauss, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

---

Since the early days of Chicago-style interactionism, the term “social worlds” has been used sporadically, sometimes descriptively (1, 3, 7), rarely conceptually (4, 5). The best known, though brief, discussion of social worlds as such is by Tomatsu Shibutani who, in arguing the collective and communicative aspects of reference groups, suggested four aspects of social worlds (4). Each social world is a “universe of regularized *mutual response*.” “Each is an *arena* in which there is a kind of organization.” Also each is a “*cultural area*,” its boundaries being “set neither by territory nor formal membership but by the limits of effective *communication*.” (my emphasis.)

Before following through on Shibutani’s provocative and rather overlooked discussion, I want to underline what this paper is designed to do. Primarily its purpose is to argue that a focus on, and study of, social

---

worlds might provide a means for better understanding the processes of social change. Beginning with some assertions about what I believe are some strengths and weaknesses of the interactionist tradition, I shall then outline several features of social worlds, including some of their implications. In the final pages, the main argument will be taken up again. Of course, many issues attending the idea of social worlds will be ignored or skipped over lightly, although I plan to address them in future publications.

Among the greatest strengths of the Chicago tradition, especially as developed by Thomas and Park, is its central focus on the problems of social change, with concomitant emphasis on large-scale interaction—the history of group conflict and encounter—as setting the most significant limits for social action (2). The earliest generation of interactionists tended to think that the most significant group encounters involved ethnic, racial and nationalistic groups. Their style of conceptualization was national or international in scope, although studies were also made on smaller terrain. Later generations have tended to focus on smaller territories and looked especially at professional, occupational and deviant groups while retaining the conflict-encounter aspect so characteristic of interactionism. Given the range of potentially significant group encounters in the contemporary world, the interactionist choice of encounters seems unnecessarily restrictive.

This tradition is also strongly antideterministic, emphasizing the creative potential of individuals and groups acting in the face of social limitations. Creativity is not seen as untrammelled; nevertheless, social limitations are viewed in terms of potential for human action. I concur with that tradition wholeheartedly and with the implication that sociologists need to study processes. Again, though, the range of processes thought to be significant in how people are shaped by (and *shape*) their societies seems to have been unduly narrowed.

A third theme in interactionism is found in Mead, whose views of social change and communication signify an enormous, unlimited and ceaseless proliferation of functioning groups which are not necessarily clearly bounded or tightly organized. Mead's views of society seem analytically underdeveloped (in contrast, certainly, to his social psychology) and tied to his commitment to civilizational evolution. There is no reason why we cannot view some groups as contributing to what he termed the widening scope of consciousness, while seeing that some groups do not do so. Likewise, while some proliferate and expand, other groups contract and die—even the ones we ourselves might name as progressive. The Meadian emphasis on the endless formation of universes of discourse—with which groups are coterminous—is extremely valuable, yielding a metaphor of

groups emerging, evolving, developing, splintering, disintegrating or pulling themselves together, or parts of them falling away and perhaps coalescing with segments of other groups to form new groups, in opposition, often, to the old.

In short, I am suggesting that this Meadian “fluidity” and the interactionists’ general emphases on antideterminism and group encounter at any scale or scope be worked through for its implications, rather than restricted to certain kinds of groups or processes, and certainly not restricted to “micro” or “macro” studies of these matters. I believe that one means for doing that job is to study worlds and to take “a social world perspective.”

Many worlds produce literatures or generate commentary by social scientists and, of course, aspects of many are studied by social scientists (the gay world, the world of the taxi dancer). But we have not developed a general view of social worlds as a widespread, significant phenomenon, nor have we developed a program for studying them systematically. Nor do we have an adequate appreciation of what a social world perspective might signify for classical sociological issues. There is also too little awareness of the significance for interactionism itself of social world analysis.

Now, before following through on Shibutani’s implicit directives for studying social worlds, let us look at them ostensibly, so that they do not fade into a misty nothingness, in contrast to seemingly hard realities like formal organizations with clear boundaries and known memberships. Though the idea of social worlds may refer centrally to universes of discourse, we should be careful not to confine ourselves to looking merely at forms of communication, symbolization, universes of discourses, but also examine palpable matters like activities, memberships, sites, technologies, and organizations typical of particular social worlds.

Ostensively, there are countless discernible worlds: those of opera, baseball, surfing, stamp collecting, country music, homosexuality, politics, medicine, law, mathematics, science, Catholicism. . . . Some worlds are small, others huge; some are international, others are local. Some are inseparable from given spaces; others are linked with sites but are much less spatially identifiable. Some are highly public and publicized; others are barely visible. Some are so emergent as to be barely graspable; others are well established, even well organized. Some have relatively tight boundaries; others possess permeable boundaries. Some are very hierarchical; some are less so or scarcely at all. Some are clearly class-linked, some (like baseball) run across class. But note that the activities and communications within these worlds focus differentially around mat-

ters intellectual, occupational, political, religious, artistic, sexual, recreational, scientific; that is, social worlds are characteristic of any substantive area.

One can pick up any newspaper or magazine and read of the social worlds about us. Recently an avant-guard composer and promoter, Pierre Boulez, was visiting at Stanford where a group of musicians and engineers are working on methods of great importance for his French-based group. Soon, other musicians and engineers, from everywhere, will doubtless be visiting him at his new center in Paris (also a central site in the world of contemporary music). *Science* reported that 5,000 scientists and technicians, representing a host of disciplines “from 72 countries, aided by 1000 land stations, 40 ships, 12 aircraft, and 6 satellites [recently] were engaged in a coordinated research effort, spread over 20 million square miles” in an enterprise attempting “to understand the workings of the tropical atmosphere.” In all of that, of course, organizations were involved, but so, in vital ways, were representatives of social worlds and subworlds. To quote *Science*, “overall [this] has been an impressive sample of cooperative big science at its best, an auspicious first step for the Global Atmospheric Research Program.” Similar phenomena occur in areas far distant from science or music and are present in virtually every substantive area. The customary social science perspectives and concepts of formal organizations hardly do justice to those enterprises and evolving structures.

In each social world, at least one primary *activity* (along with related clusters of activity) is strikingly evident; i.e., climbing mountains, researching, collecting. There are *sites* where activities occur: hence space and a shaped landscape are relevant. *Technology* (inherited or innovative modes of carrying out the social world’s activities) is always involved. Most worlds evolve quite complex technologies. In social worlds at their outset, there may be only temporary divisions of labor, but once under way, *organizations* inevitably evolve to further one aspect or another of the world’s activities.

These features of social worlds can be converted analytically into subprocesses; for instance, site finding, funding, protecting, competing for sites. Technological innovation, manufacturing, marketing, and the teaching of technical skills are also evident. Organizational building, extending, defending, invading, taking over, and converting also occur. The discovery and study of such subprocesses and of their relationships, including conflictful and “power” relationships, are essential parts of research into social worlds.

Two other major processual features seem inevitable and immensely consequential. First, social worlds *intersect*, and do so under a variety of conditions. Where services are needed, technology is borrowed and technical skills are taught and learned. Where other worlds impinge (as when

worldly action is questioned as harmful or illegitimate or inappropriate), alliances are deemed useful. Thus, a major analytic task is to discover such intersecting and to trace the associated processes, strategies and consequences. As examples, I mention only the discovering of seemingly relevant other worlds; of intersectional advocacy by bridging agents; and of the penetrating of subworlds by servicing agents, cover agents, and even in a certain sense by clients.

Analysis can become very complicated because of a second important process, the *segmenting* of social worlds. Most seem to dissolve, when scrutinized, into congeries of subworlds. Indeed a processual view leads quickly to the understanding that these activities result in a never-ending segmenting. Some of the contributing conditions pertain to the evolution of technology, to differential experiences within the world, to the evolution of new generations of members, to the recruitment of new kinds of members, and to the impinging of other worlds. This segmenting leads to the intersecting of *specifiable subworlds*. Intersecting, in other words, occurs usually not between global worlds but between segments. Such subworld formation signifies not only new activities, sites, technologies, and organizations, but also signifies new universes of discourse.

Intersection and segmentation imply that we are confronting a universe marked by tremendous fluidity; it won't and can't stand still. It is a universe where fragmentation, splintering, and disappearance are the mirror images of appearance, emergence, and coalescence. This is a universe where nothing is strictly determined. Its phenomena should be partly determinable via naturalistic analysis, including the phenomenon of men participating in the construction of the structures which shape their lives.

The social world perspective yields the usual interactionist vision of a universe often bafflingly amorphous. But this perspective has analytic thrust and implicit directives. Here are additional concepts and some related research questions.

At first blush, anyone who is *in* a world (or subworld) is associated with its activities. But some are thought to be (or think of themselves as being) more authentically of that world, more representative of it. *Authenticity* seems to pertain to the quality of action, as well as to judgments of which acts are more essential (6). So there are analytic questions about who decides (or which organizations decide) which members are more authentic and via what social mechanisms? Who has the "power" to authenticate? and how? and why? Do the subprocesses include sponsoring, launching, assigning, placing, licensing? Is not coaching an important subprocess pertaining to the giving of competence and sponsorship? Power features need to be spelled out but presumably include the allocating, assigning, and depriving of resources. Basic processes like segmenting cut across authenticating; thus, people will form a new subworld

because newcomers are flooding into the old one (or aren't allowed in or all the way in, like the impressionist painters). The development of new styles and canons of authenticity can be noted. Also, within the larger world, organizations or subworlds, not just persons, may compete for claimed and awarded authenticity (Harvard? The Wisconsin Department of X?). Nonauthenticating processes (like excommunication) and strategies evolve ("it's not research; it has no statistics"). Some activities and products of activities can be discounted as nonauthentic. This raises questions about near fakes, downright fakes, and production only of the "real stuff" as well as the manipulation or perspective of differential audiences and markets. Out on the symbolic margins are the arts and products which raise debates about the authentic boundaries of the social world. Is conceptual art really art? Is the trimarin really a sailboat? Some people are defenders of a world's "shape"; others wish to change the shape.

*Socialization* is associated not only with degrees and kinds of authenticity but also with how people enter and leave social worlds and subworlds. Rather than looking simply at organizational mechanisms such as recruitment, we should also be looking at how people get contacted by, encounter, rub up against, introduced to, drawn into, and hooked on social worlds. What is the role of "accident," of networks of acquaintances and friends in the hooking, explaining, wising up, plugging in, and coaching for this process? What is the part played by formal and informal coaches, scouts, and sponsors? Most socialization theory assumes *de novo* entry, but probably most social world and subworld entries involve *orbiting* processes; i.e., moving from one to another, retaining both or dropping the original, plus simultaneous memberships. Hence, there is a calculus of compatibility, neutrality, and incompatibility. This stands in relation of ease of movement, to probability of remaining, to marginality and to experienced nonauthenticity.

Within each social world, various issues are debated, negotiated, fought out, forced and manipulated by representatives of implicated subworlds. These *arenas* involve political activity but not necessarily legislative bodies and courts of law. Issues are also fought out within subworlds by their members. Representatives of other subworlds (same and other worlds) may also enter into the fray. Some of these social world issues may make front-page news, but others are known only to members or to other interested parties. Social world media are full of such partially invisible arenas. Wherever there is intersecting of worlds and subworlds, we can expect arenas to form along with their associated political processes. And can we view organizational evolution and change in terms of such processes?

As for the larger public issues (what to do about pollution or al-

coholism), there the sociologist needs to ask not only which social worlds are represented in the larger arena but also which segments of which social world. Furthermore, to *what other* (internal world) arenas is representation in this (multiple world) arena interrelated? The multiple-world issues do not get settled independently of the larger context of internal-world political activities. This phenomenon is not adequately taken into account in current theories of public opinion formation nor in political sociology.

*Organizations* are commonly viewed as relatively closed in their boundaries, and there are few good analyses of interorganizational relations. The social world perspective tells us that some organizations are relatively embedded within a social world, while others stand at intersections, indeed may have been intentionally constructed that way. The understanding of organizational evolution, change, and functioning requires an examination of relations embedded in the same or intersecting worlds. Some and possibly most organizations can be viewed as arenas wherein members of various subworlds or social worlds stake differential claims, seek differential ends, engage in contests, and make or break alliances in order to do the things they wish to do. Organizational theory which ignores these considerations is likely to sell us very short.

*Social movements* are not features merely of explicitly political or religious realms—what our sociological literature on movements is mostly about—but are features of all social worlds. There are movements, as we all recognize, in architecture, in painting, in poetry, certainly in the academic disciplines, and probably in ship building and in banking, too. Many movements, of course, spill over to engage or affect other worlds and generally result in new organizations or affect old ones. Historians and the acting natives give us ample data, but we need analyses.

Other phenomena probably can be usefully reconceptualized in terms of social worlds. Thus *fashions* flourish in every world, so their appearance and disappearance should surely be studied in relation to social world processes. The concept of *careers* needs to be expanded also. Careers are not simply organizational or occupational in character; many if not most are pursued and promoted within the context of specifiable social worlds. The cosmopolitan/local dichotomy reflects such considerations but is overly simple.

Mass-circulation magazines may either appeal to very large social worlds or to the members of multiple worlds. In contrast, the magazines of most social worlds or subworlds never reach the newsstands—or the desks of scholarly experts on the mass media. The total American readership of these world-specific magazines must be enormous, even without mentioning the readerships in other industrialized nations. Even casual scrutiny of an in-world medium suggests its many functions: giving tech-

nical tips and instructions; teaching how to minimize danger while pursuing worldly activities; promoting or giving information about sites, upcoming events, advertising various items; reporting on past events; and disseminating information and opinions about topical world issues. The readership for any social world is neither a discrete aggregate of people who never talk together about what they have read, nor is it a group of people who are passive to what they read. Indeed, the very smorgasbord coverage of subworlds suggests that readers will be highly selective and actively responsive in their reading. The social world perspective reminds us that their participants may bring active perception and judgment as well as a great deal of knowledge and even study to the events of their social worlds. Furthermore, the spectators of many events, including sports events, themselves are or have been active in such activities. They are not all strangers to it or lending a casual eye to it. They may even be "scouting the act" for cues as to how to improve their own performances.

What does this social world perspective signify not only for interactionism but also for any style of sociology that rests on some of the same assumptions and has some of the same aims? The following points pertain fairly directly to the discussion of interactionists' strengths/weaknesses touched on earlier.

1. Social worlds can be studied at any scale, from the smallest (say a local world, on local space) to the very largest (in size or geographic spread). The commitment is to study social worlds across many scales with emphasis upon worlds which are substantively different yet intersect on a broad scale with other social worlds.

2. The interactionists insist on the importance of process as central to the study of social worlds. The above pages should make it evident that it is difficult to think about worlds without considering processual issues. In fact, examination of specific worlds or subworlds tends to force one's focus on the characteristically salient processes. Thus, for exploding worlds like tennis, these include the processes attending the increased numbers of participants, the growth of spectator crowds (including those watching TV matches), the increased visibility of the world, and the management of celebrity careers. For the subworld of recombinant genetics, salient processes include both external threats as well as internal responses to that threat. The process of a recent increase in public visibility has produced a fear that external agencies will gain control over the subject matter of this subworld. The process of internal response will likely take the form of attempts to ward off or minimize external regulation. While I am not overlooking the possibility that processes can be discovered independent of a focus on social worlds, the social world perspective makes processual study virtually mandatory. As the previous

examples illustrate, it also puts processes in alignment with the structural features of the particular social worlds under scrutiny.

3. The interactionist tradition, in common with other sociology, has tended to focus on contemporary life while either avoiding history or using it as a backdrop for the analysis of ongoing organizations and processes. Indeed, the split between historical and contemporary (mainly fieldwork) research is particularly glaring in the instance of interactionism, which inherits a distinction between (and continues to keep separate) the areas of collective behavior/social movements and areas like professions/occupations and work (2). Studies of social worlds train our attention on the history of that social world; that is, what are its origins, where is it now, what changes has it undergone, and where does it seem to be moving? Is it evolving, disintegrating, splintering, collaborating, coalescing?

4. The antideterministic stance of interactionism, though not insured, is not at all threatened by a social world focus. However, we need not make hidden assumptions about whether the social worlds under study are contributing to “progress” or not. If we do wish to assume that, then we must spell out their nature and the associated criteria by which “progress” or lack of it can be judged. (I say that because much of the interactionism, and indeed sociology in general, does proceed on such hidden assumptions. When interactionists do that, they break the interactional frame—and they do this with some frequency [2].)

A consistent interactionism, with its dual emphasis upon group constraints as well as group/individual creativity, will ask appropriate questions about social worlds. These will surely include the more obvious one concerning how segments are formed and enter into collaborative new enterprise with other segments. Less obvious questions include how members of some worlds or subworlds struggle against severe social constraints. These constraints include the employment of insidious institutionalized canons of legitimacy and authority as well as the continual threat and occasional use of force, excommunication, and other coercive means.

5. I have little to suggest about the methodological thrust of social world research. However, there should be much supplementation to the interactionist reliance on fieldwork and interviewing with the focused use of historical and contemporary documentation. An understanding of the arenas within which large-scale public opinion is fought must embrace a comprehension of the elements of opinion formation within the smaller interactional worlds which form that larger arena. Our research methods must capture both levels of interaction as well as reflect its full historical development, diversity, and sweep. The social world perspective, because it asks new questions, literally demands new methods (the evolu-

tion of public opinion that led to an environmental regulatory agency illustrates this range of issues). (Cf [8])

6. This perspective also urges us to build general theory about social worlds rather than merely to aim at substantive research on particular ones. Some research, at least, should be done on the basis of emerging theory; that is, with cognizance of theoretical sampling and of the universe of others similarly working on social world phenomena. At the very least, sampling of worlds and subworlds in accordance with the Weberian idea of the historical movement should be considered. Which social worlds are likely to be viewed by later generations as the levers of history? In the 1970s, will it be genetics, high-energy physics, underwater geography-geology, computerization, or international banking? Or, should the question more properly be formulated as which levers of which histories—and whose histories—are we considering?

\*The heart of this paper was given as a keynote address to the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction, August 1976. The beginning and ending pages are new.

## REFERENCES

1. Paul G. Cressey, *The Taxi-Dance Hall*, University of Chicago Press, 1932.
2. Berenice Fisher and Anselm Strauss, "Thomas, Park and Their Successors." *Symbolic Interaction*. In press.
3. Robert Park, *Human Communities*, Free Press, Glencoe, Ill., 1952.
4. Tomatsu Shibutani, "Reference Groups as Perspectives," *American Journal of Sociology* 60 (1955): 522–529.
5. Anselm Strauss, *Mirrors and Masks*, Free Press, New York: 1958, reprinted San Francisco, Sociology Press, 1969.
6. Barbara Suczek, *The World of Greek Dancing*, doctor's thesis, Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences, University of California, San Francisco, 1977.
7. Carol A. Warren, *Identity and Community in the Gay World*, Wiley, New York, 1974.
8. Carolyn Wiener, *Drunken Power: The Politics of Alcoholism*, doctor's thesis, Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences, University of California, San Francisco, 1973.