

Understanding the Public's Health Problems: Applications of Symbolic Interaction to Public Health

Bruce Maycock, PhD, MEd¹

Abstract

Public health has typically investigated health issues using methods from the positivistic paradigm. Yet these approaches, although they are able to quantify the problem, may not be able to explain the social reasons of why the problem exists or the impact on those affected. This article will provide a brief overview of a sociological theory that provides methods and a theoretical framework that has proven useful in understanding public health problems and developing interventions.

Keywords

symbolic interaction, public health, health promotion

Introduction

Public health broadly involves population-based activity that prevents disease, promotes health, and protects from harms. Often, these actions are informed by epidemiological or clinical data. The influence of a medical perspective, the dominance of risk factors, the use of predictive behaviour change theories, randomized control trials, and predictive statistical methods are all important ways of understanding a health problem; yet sociologists have long known that forces outside an individual's direct control can affect his or her health.¹ It is necessary to understand how these forces affect individuals and communities. There will never be "health for all" unless we understand the social context in which health must exist. There is the risk that as we refine the knowledge of public health university graduates, we standardize the ways in which we know about health issues and exclude different investigative methods.

In 2008, I had the pleasure of observing Professor Walter Patrick interacting with medical students in a long house in Sabah. During this spontaneous education session, he stressed the importance of family- and community-based medicine and the need to understand the social context in which public health was being administered. This article provides examples of how the sociology of symbolic interaction has been used in the development of pragmatic, practical public health solutions that were grounded in the social reality of the individuals concerned.

¹School of Public Health, Curtin University, Perth, Western Australia, Australia

Corresponding Author:

Bruce Maycock, School of Public Health, Curtin University, GPO Box U1987, Perth, Western Australia, 6845, Australia.

Email: b.maycock@curtin.edu.au

Why Use Symbolic Interaction?

Symbolic interaction is a theoretical/analytical framework that seeks to identify and describe the world from the participant's point of view. Used as a single investigative perspective or as part of a mixed-method approach, symbolic interaction has proven useful in assisting public health practitioners to better understand a range of health issues, including drug use, prevention of HIV and sexually transmitted infections, bullying and mental health, and alcohol and tobacco use in different settings such as schools, social media, rural and urban communities, and across different nations, cultures, and subcultures.²⁻¹³

Although it is beyond the scope of this article to describe all aspects of symbolic interaction, the main assumptions that underpin the symbolic interactionist perspective are, that reality is a subjective construct, and as such, structure and meaning are socially derived through interaction.^{14,15} Symbolic interaction tries to understand the interaction of the individuals involved and herein lies its strength in relation to public health because this process requires the public health practitioner to investigate aspects such as meaning, socialization, expectation, and the internal conversations that individuals may have as they define the situation and determine their action. This interaction is characterized by the use of symbols and actions that are interpreted and defined and redefined by the individuals and responded to based on the definitions.^{15,16} As such, symbolic interaction takes the view that the meaning associated with an object is learned and that this meaning is modified during interaction. As individuals are socialized, they learn the collective understandings and patterns of conduct prevalent in the social groups and settings to which they belong.¹⁷ By interacting with others, an individual can learn the particular meanings, attitudes, and behaviors that are significant for that group.¹⁸ They can also learn common definitions of situations that allow people to act alike.¹⁵ This process of socialization is a lifelong process, with individuals being socialized by various groups and in turn acting as a socializing agent on those groups.¹⁸ The dialectical relationship between society and the individual means that through interaction, society shapes the individual and that once the self is developed, the individual through his or her ongoing interaction shapes society.^{15,19} This concept has proven useful in understanding public health issues such as drug use and how individuals move from new initiates to experienced users, through a process of socialization and interaction.^{5,20,21}

Symbolic interaction views society as an interactive process that is in a continual state of definition and redefinition.¹⁵ As such, the skills of role taking and self-indication and the process of socialization are integral for the maintenance of society.¹⁶ These concepts have been used by Crawford et al,⁷ who by seeking to understand the socialization processes and the way in which a person moves from tourist to expatriate, are hoping to engage expatriate Australians living overseas as part of a harm reduction intervention for Australian tourists.

Symbolic interaction conceptualizes an individual's self as having 2 aspects. The first is the aspect of self as an object—that is, you can view yourself as an object—the second is self as a process.¹⁹ Aspects of self can be quickly formed and once formed may be resistant to change. The following quote by a student involved in a large randomized controlled trial designed to reduce bullying shows how quickly children feel they have to live up to the expectations^{3,4}:

I'm sort of saying if you bully a kid like for three weeks straight like every day then you stop it, you look a bit weird . . . cos you've been going for so long . . . and then you just stop. Luke (aged 12)

Luke feeling weird if he stopped bullying is an example of impression management or presentation of the self.²² This concept has been useful for researchers trying to understand behavior and behavioral expectations. As part of the process of understanding the presentation of the self, Goffman²² developed a dramaturgical metaphor. The basic premise of Goffman's work was that an individual's construction of social life is full of ritual and ceremony used to manage the

impressions others receive from them. Goffman believed that this was motivated by the need to feel in control, the need for power, and the desire to gain something. The Internet is a good example of how this impression management is carried out. Using the concepts of sexual scripts used by Simon and Gagnon,²³ Brown et al² found that there were various Internet environments men engaged in and that their engagement in these settings was different to their engagement in more traditional gay spaces. One particularly useful aspect of the dramaturgical metaphor is the concept of front-and backstage performance. The front is that part of the performance that helps define the situation for the audience. The back region is where supporting or preparatory activity occurs and where any contradictions to the front performance are found. Maycock and Howat²⁴ used the dramaturgical metaphor to assist their understanding of anabolic steroid use and violence. As part of their investigation, they were able to describe front-stage performances that were common to 2 groups of anabolic steroid users who engaged in violent acts. By becoming accepted as part of the group, the researchers were also able to observe backstage activity during which the drug users expressed doubts, concerns, and personal issues that were not part of their front-stage public performance. This deeper insight was useful when developing educational information for the users.

The decision of what action to take and how to interpret the symbols is based on the “definition of the situation.”²⁵ Research by Burns et al² used the concept of the definition of the situation to gain greater understanding of the impact of a large randomized controlled trial (n = 2000) designed to reduce bullying among primary school children (up to 12 years of age). By using a specifically designed age-relevant vignette describing a gender-specific bullying scenario, the researchers found that all the students defined the situation in the same way—that is, the child who was being bullied must have done something to deserve it. For the researchers, this result was not desirable because it indicated that the intervention that had been administered to the school children had not been able to change the perception that the child who was bullied must have provoked the response. This research provides some insight into how early definitions of the situation were formed and how, once formed, how resistant they were to change. The definition of the situation extends beyond person-to-person interaction. For example, Brown et al,² in their investigation of gay men’s experiences of sexuality, risk, and HIV in Perth found that common meanings associated with venues influenced the way in which men presented themselves and the nature of the interaction that occurred. Venues often had predefined definitions that included assumptions about issues of risk and the people in the venue—for example, men attended male saunas for casual sex or to learn about the scene, and when condom use was expected. Individuals entering certain venues carried with them a set of preexisting assumptions, preconstructed ground rules, and assumed sexual scripts for each context. The meanings associated with the venues were found to be stable even if meanings associated with individuals within these venues were not always consistent. This understanding has resulted in intervention messages being specifically targeted for different venues.¹⁷

Summary and Conclusions

Symbolic interaction complements public health, in that it assists researchers and practitioners to understand why individuals behave the way they do and how behavior is changed and shaped through interaction. Symbolic interaction uses research methods that many public health practitioners would be familiar with, and although the original writings are somewhat obscured by sociological jargon, publications such as that by Charon¹⁴ present the major concepts in relatively simple terms.

The strength of the symbolic interaction perspective is that it places emphasis on interaction and acknowledges that this interaction produces changes in self, meaning, and society. The focus on the participants and the meaning that they derive from their interaction and the subsequent behavior that results is a dynamic process that the symbolic interaction perspective seeks to understand.

Using a symbolic interaction perspective can shape the way in which researchers engage with their participants. For example, the concept of self as an evolving object that is shaped by society and in which resides the attitudes of society highlights the need to examine the participants sense of self, to observe how individuals interact within their various settings and within the general community. Furthermore, it indicates the need to sample longitudinally and to sample from individuals at different times. Similarly, by examining analytical elements such as socialization and how it shapes individuals, the researcher can gain an understanding of their influencing reference groups, the social processes within those groups, and how the individual copes with their differing perspectives and expectations. The process of socializing and the potential for learned socialized behavior has significant implications for public health researchers. This can be extremely useful when the behavior is deviant because it will reveal how individuals are taught how to deal with ethical, moral, social, and legal consequences that could arise from their behavior.

Fundamental to the symbolic interaction epistemology is the recognition of the verity of the knowledge that resides at an individual level and their understanding of how things work. This epistemological position shapes the research process, and by validating and honoring, participants experience aids with their empowerment, which is consistent with the fundamental underpinning of health promotion and public health. The symbolic interaction approach provides researchers and practitioners with a way of knowing about public health issues and a way of understanding them from the perspective of the people involved.

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