

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Cohen, Ira J., *Solitary Action: Acting on Our Own in Everyday Life*. Oxford University Press. 2016, 223 pp. \$55.00 cloth (9780190258573).

S*olitary Action* by Ira Cohen contributes to the legacy of interactionist sociology and pragmatist philosophy in the United States. Cohen's purpose is to examine solitary action, which he defines as "sequences of behavior enacted by individuals with no input or interference by anyone else from one move in the sequence to the next" (5). Cohen's core argument is that solitary actors retain agency, and that their actions happen in and are generative of a context. Solitary action is not the same as solitude, since solitude does not meet Cohen's threshold for defining some human experience as action.

Cohen believes that previous experiences shape how individuals act, even when people are acting alone. In other words, he is not trying to suggest that individuals have some pre-social trait that enables solitary action. However, he claims that specific characteristics of solitary action are ignored by existing sociological theories. To examine solitary action, Cohen suggests sociological theories of interaction must be revised. *Solitary Action* is dedicated to addressing that gap.

For Cohen, the main problem with interactionist sociology is that it has overlooked solitary action. Goffman, Garfinkel, and Mead "relegated solitary behavior to the status of a trivial concern" and "left things people do by themselves out of their accounts" (11), suggests Cohen. The claim here is that these canonical authors focus on small groups, thereby neglecting analysis of solitary action. Chapter Two reviews some works of Goffman, Garfinkel, and Mead. Cohen spares no time on exegesis, moving through the writings of these authors in a mere 20 pages. He does not spend too much effort differentiating interactionist sociology from ethnomethodology either.

Chapter Three examines Cohen's three generic elements of solitary action. First, reflexivity is defined as the ability to change one's conduct based on variation in a context, even when acting alone. Borrowing a page from Garfinkel, Cohen engages with the notion of contextual reflexivity, which refers to the way sequences of action are shaped by prior conduct but at the same time remain generative

of context. Second, structuration refers to how cultural patterns and moral codes at meso and macro levels shape solitary action and in turn are reproduced by those actions. Third, the involvement of the actor refers to the emotion involved in solitary action. Here Cohen engages with American pragmatist notions of involvement and attention.

Chapter Four refers to four forms of solitary action, including what Cohen calls reflexives, peripatetics, regimens, and engrossment. He provides some anecdotal examples. Examples of reflexives are problem solving and creative and artistic practices. Examples of peripatetics (wandering behavior) include web surfing and library browsing. Engrossments include playing slots and solitaire. Regimens include school drills and musical practice.

This is a meditative book with implications for all social scientists who study human activity. Yet, as with all good books, there are limitations. First, solitary action has not been completely ignored in interactionist sociology. For example, Bob Prus has developed an account of solitary action and solitary deviance in several books over four decades of impressive and dedicated interactionist research. Prus is not cited in Cohen's *Solitary Action*. Second, the book is almost entirely theoretical. There is no primary, original empirical material such as one would find in ethnographic research such as that authored by Prus or Gary Allan Fine. Third, the claim that Mead and Goffman pay zero attention to solitary action is not convincingly argued. Fourth, Cohen's schema depends on Giddens's account of structuration, which has been heavily critiqued as an explanation of any kind of action, be it solitary or social. Moreover, the idea of structuration is not explained thoroughly in the text. It is assumed the reader will accept structuration as a plank in the argument and understand it as a concept.

Fifth, part of Cohen's approach involves bracketing off "subjective motivation" (13), which he claims does not fit well in his conceptual schema. By bracketing out subjective motivation and other aspects of the self, Cohen's conceptual schema assumes a universal subject. There is no attention paid to issues of ethnicity, class, gender or other aspects of the self that may have significant implications for understanding solitary action. Structural, cultural, social, and political conditions that enable solitary action are not part of the focus here either. Sixth, save for a mention of blue-collar work and a paragraph where Cohen argues the cruel aspect of solitary confinement is how correctional officers remove conditions for any kind of agency, the

anecdotal examples of solitary action provided would all seem to be leisure activities.

Nevertheless, Cohen's *Solitary Action* is a serious, meticulous theoretical treatise that any social scientist who studies interaction must read.

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