Symbolic interactionism and the myth of astructural bias: a textual defense and illustrative advice

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Abstact: Symbolic interactionism continues to be criticized from both inside and outside of interactionist circles by those who claim that the perspective does not address issues of social structure and fails to recognize constraints on human agency. In this paper we critically address these claims and defend Blumerian symbolic interactionism from three versions of the charge of astructural bias and demonstrate how the perspective accounts for social structural forces. In doing so, we make reference to the classical roots of the perspective. We conclude with an illustrative and didactic example that demonstrates how even the most micro-oriented of interactionist research can still take account of social structural issues.

Keywords: Symbolic Interactionism, Blumer, astructural bias, contextualization

Résumé: L'interactionnisme symbolique continue d'être critiqué à l'intérieur et à l'extérieur des milieux interactionnistes par ceux qui affirment que cette perspective n'aborde pas les questions de structure sociale, et qu'elle ne tient pas compte des contraintes imposées à l'agence humaine. Dans le présent document, nous abordons de façon critique ces affirmations, nous défendons l'interactionnisme symbolique de Blumer contre trois accusations semblables de biais non-structurel, et nous démontrons comment sa perspective tient compte des forces structurelles sociales. Nous faisons ainsi référence aux fondements classiques de cette perspective. Notre conclusion offre un exemple illustratif et didactique selon lequel même la recherche interactionniste la plus micro-orientée est capable de prendre en compte les enjeux structurels sociaux.

Mots-clés: Symbolic Interactionism, Blumer, biais non-structurel, contextualisation

Symbolic interactionism continues to be assailed by critics from both inside and outside of interactionist circles who claim that the perspective does not address issues of social structure and fails to recognize constraints on human agency. In particular, the Blumerian (1969a) variant of symbolic interactionism is singled out for disregarding structural forces. This charge continues to be reaffirmed in how the perspective is presented in undergraduate textbooks (Dennis and Martine 2005; Maines 1988). While some authors of these texts do cite Goffman's (1961) concept of total institutions, or state the interactionist dictum that society emerges from and gains its reality through the interactions of individuals (Steckley 2020), the overarching emphasis is on symbolic interactionism as an exclusively micro-level approach (Brym and Lie 2018; Macionis 2005).

Thus, despite the fact that there are those interactionists who do analyze macro level issues, and despite vigorous defense of Blumerian interactionism's accounting for social structure, scholars continue to call for the rejection or reform of the perspective. This charge of astructural bias takes three forms. The first is the most general and rests on the assertion that an inability to grapple with social structure is inherent in symbolic interactionist theory itself. The second version of the claim of astructural bias comes from those who contend that interactionist theory makes an important contribution to understanding social phenomena, but that it needs to be rehabilitated by combining it with insights from other perspectives, namely feminist theory, critical theories, cultural theory, and post-modernist or post-structuralist theory. The final manifestation of this charge is that there is nothing astuctural in symbolic interactionist theory itself, rather it is that interactionists themselves have overlooked or failed to account for social structural forces in their analyses.

Below we critically address these claims and defend Blumerian symbolic interactionism from the charge of astructural bias. In doing so, we make reference to the classical roots of the perspective. We conclude with an illustrative example of how interactionists can attend to structural issues through situating their findings within the social context in which they occur. While the debates over astructural bias will be familiar to many within symbolic interactionist communities, it is important to present them to a wider sociological audience for the sake of those whose only understanding of symbolic interactionism comes from secondary textbooks or through reading a narrow selection of micro oriented interactionist works.

THE CHARGE OF INHERENT ASTRUCTURAL BIAS

While the term astructural bias as applied to symbolic interactionism was first used by Reynolds and Reynolds in 1973, there are many others before and after them who have levelled this charge at symbolic inter-actionist theory (Athens 2009, 2015; Gouldner 1970; Lichtman 1970; Huber 1973; Meltzer, Petras, and Reynolds 1975; Reynolds 1993; Sjoberg, Gill, and Tan 2016) and at the Blumerian variant of the perspec-tive in particular (McPhail and Rexroat 1979; Meltzer et al. 1975; Wood and Wardell 1983; Loseke 2016). Coser's (1976: 157) early articulation of this charge covers many of the particular criticisms those making it use, writing that "critics, have asserted that this orientation prevents the understanding of social structures and their constraining characteristics or of patterns of human organization such as class hierarchies or power constellations."

In response, numerous authors, including Fine and Kleinman (1983), Fischer (1977), Hewitt (1976), Maines (2001, 1991, 1982, and 1977), and Schwalbe (2016), have cogently defended interactionism from the accusation of astructural bias. Moreover, not only do Maines (2001, 1991, 1982, 1977), and Hewitt (1976) reject the charge of astructural bias, they argue that symbolic interactionism is well suited to resolving the structure/agency paradox.

> Symbolic interactionism emphasizes process rather than structure, yet it does not ignore the latter in favor of the former; and while it frequently puts the individual in center stage rather than the society, it recognizes their mutual dependence. (Hewitt 1976: 7–8)

Thus, it is surprising that anyone reading Blumer's account of the con-nection between joint action and social organization (Fine and Tavory 2019) could come to the conclusion that symbolic interactionism "either ignores or has a faulty conception of ... social structure" (Gouldner 1970: 379). Indeed, Blumer's (1969a: 16) conception of social structure re-fers to "joint or collective action … as exemplified in the behavior of groups, institutions, organizations, and social classes." And through this concept Blumer (1966: 538) theorizes about the relationship between the individual and social structure, the nature of social constraint, and the process of social/structural change. Most notable among the champions of symbolic interactionism is Maines (1982: 270), who asserts that the study of the negotiated order in symbolic interactionism is the study of mesostructure, an assertion echoed by Fine and Tavory (2019) almost 40 years later. Prus (1996: 246) extends these arguments, writing that Blum-er's understanding of the "obdurate character of the empirical world"

refers to "four intertwined features of social life" that include constraints imposed by the "material and the social environments."

The roots of this version of the astructuaral bias charge can be traced back to those who associate symbolic interactionism with what they argue is an exclusively micro-oriented Meadian strain within it (Coser 1976; Musolf 2016a). An emphasis that obscures the classical foundations of interactionist understandings of social structure (Low 2008; Low and Bowden 2020; Smith 2017). A partial reason for this misrepresentation of the perspective is that critics fail to understand that the symbolic interactionist emphasis on process is essential to understanding social structure (McGinty 2016; Schwalbe 2016; Prus 1997). In addition, as McGinty (2016) points out, many who invoke the astructural bias charge do so because they expect to see structuralist language used while symbolic interactionists instead address social structure using different terms such as mesostructure, joint action, networks, and web of group affiliations; the interaction order, or the sum of interaction (e.g. Blumer 1969a, Fine 2014, Fine and Kleinman 1983; Fischer 1977; Goffman 1982; Schwalbe et al. 2000, Simmel in Wolff 1950).

Also at issue is Blumer's (1954a, 1956a) well acknowledged antipathy for contextless variable analyses and theories that reflect structural determinism (Dennis and Martin 2007; Ritzer 2011). Blumerian symbolic interactionism reflects the Chicago School insistence on the "specificity of situations" where the meaning of variables such as gender and class play out differentially from context to context (Dennis and Martine 2007: 290). And for Blumer (1969a: 84), theories that are structurally deterministic treat individuals in meaningful interaction as merely the "outward flow or expression of forces playing on them rather than as acts which are built up by people through their interpretation of the situations in which they are placed." However, to be anti-deterministic should not be equated with being astructural. And if one looks more broadly at the influences of classical symbolic interactionism, Simmelian insights are clearly demonstrated in Blumer's understanding of social structure (Low 2008). To illustrate, in Simmelian fashion, social structure arises through the interactions of individuals, they "form a unity, that is, a society.... For unity in the empirical sense is nothing but the interaction of elements" (Simmel 1988: 23). Likewise, Blumer (1969a) does not reduce society to the individual he understands that habitual social interaction leaves stable forms or structures that result from "joint action(s) which are repetitive and stable.... Instances of pre-established forms of joint action are so frequent and common.... apparent in the concepts of "culture" and "social order" (Blumer 1969a: 17–18).

Equally surprising is the claim that symbolic interactionism includes no notion of social constraints on action. Blumer's symbolic interactionism recognizes that pre-*established* structures are temporally prior to subsequent interaction, confronting the individual. Blumer (1969a: 85); understands that the individual "has to take into account tasks, opportunities, obstacles, means, demands, discomforts, [and] dangers." However, he goes on to write that while social structure "set[s] the conditions for" action, it does "not determine" action Blumer (1962: 146). Thus, rather than astructural, Blumer's is a particularly nuanced view of the relationship between the individual and social structure. For Blumer (1969a), social structure may confront individuals with rules of prescribed conduct, but this does not mean that they will always follow the rules and in actively resisting the normative structure they are able to change the rules.

> New situations are constantly arising within the scope of group life which are problematic and for which existing rules are inadequate.... Such areas of unprescribed conduct are just as natural ... in group life as those areas covered by pre-established ... prescriptions of joint action. (Blumer's 1969a: 18)

What Blumer (1969a: 81–82) is highlighting is the capacity of individuals to affect their world, but he never states that it will be easy or that people will always be successful in their efforts, or even that they will always try to affect change. Thus, Blumer's symbolic interactionism does not deserve the designation of "social idealism" (Lichtman 1970: 75). For Blumer, individuals are capable of changing their world but sometimes they may not want to, be able to, or know how to.

> There is a world of reality "out there" that stands over against human beings and that is capable of resisting actions toward it; this world of reality becomes known to human beings only in the form in which it is perceived by human beings; thus, this reality changes as human beings develop new perceptions of it; and the resistance of the world to perceptions of it is the test of the validity of the perceptions. (Blumer 1980: 410)

In the final analysis, Blumer (1969a) argues for a recursive view of the relationship between the individual and society and is committed to the assumption that the understanding of this relationship must start from the bottom up. He writes:

> that large-scale organization has to be seen, studied, and explained in terms of the process…. of interaction between people that is responsible for sustaining organization as well as for affecting it in other ways. (Blumer 1969a: 59).

A more specific rendering of the astructural bias charge is that the per-
spective is unsuited to grappling with power and conflict (Dennis and
Martin 2005; Musolf 2016a). Proponents of this position, including Ath-
ens (2009, 2015), argue that symbolic interactionism needs not just to
be rehabilitated but ultimately replaced with critical or "radical inter-
actionism" because it does not deal with issues of "power and domina-
tion" (Athens 2009: 387, 2015; Atkinson and Housley 2003). However,
there is no need to replace symbolic interactionism as Blumer explicitly
understands that power dynamics and instances of conflict are a funda-
mental part of human life and social relations. He writes:

> Society itself is clearly caught up in the play of power. The picture is one
> of innumerable groups and organizations relying on the exercise of power
> at innumerable points in seeking to maintain position to achieve goals, and
> to ward off threats. To show this we need only refer to the operation of
> interest groups in our society. (Blumer 1954b: 232)

Maines (2001) demonstrates that attention to social structural concerns
is not only present in how Blumer writes about the assumptions of
symbolic interactionism, but also in his own scholarly work. See, for
instance, his research and writing on industrialization (Blumer 1948,
1959a, 1965b), race relations (Blumer 1956b, 1958, 1965a), mass media
(Blumer 1959c), fashion (Blumer 1969b), collective behavior (Blumer
1950, 1959b), and social structure, power, and conflict (Blumer 1939,
1950, 1954b). As Hammersley (1989: 217) argues, concern with social
structure is evident in Blumer's (1959c) "research on films where he
refers not just to their impact but also to the mediating effects of the
character of local communities" and in his research on urbanization and
industrialization that Blumer (1959a: 17) calls "two of the most funda-
mental forces shaping modern society." And to call these works studies
of mesostructure (Maines 1982) in no way lessens them as ones that
address social structure. As Fine (2014) argues, mesostructure includes
small groups which are the lynchpins connecting the individual to lar-
ger institutional structures. Moreover, Maines and Morrione (1991: 535)
demonstrate how Blumer explicitly addresses "'macro' level social phe-
nomena" in his studies of industrialization in which he analyses the "re-
cursive" and "interdependent" relationship between the individual and
social structure.

Rehabilitating Symbolic Interactionism

The second version of the charge of the astructural bias in symbolic interactionism praises symbolic interactionism for its usefulness in understanding society and its "elasticity" as a theory; meaning that it can be "extended" (Snow 2001) or "rehabilitated" (Jackson and Scott 2010: 811) by "synthesizing" insights and concepts from other theoretical perspectives (Fine 1992: 88; Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Tavory 2018). As Pendergast and Knottnerus (1993: 183) put it, "overcoming the bias means adopting an alternative set of instructions. The good news is, the new instructions need not supplant the first, only supplement them." However, those making this type of argument forget that the use of sensitizing concepts has always been part of Blumerian symbolic interaction. To wit, a key methodological proviso of Blumer's (1969a: 40) is that we engage in a process he called "inspection" that involves the selection of extant concepts of relevance to one's analysis (Blumer 1969a: 43, 129). The difference between sensitizing concepts and rehabilitating symbolic interactionism through incorporating concepts from other theoretical perspectives is that sensitizing concepts are used provisionally, they are not grafted onto the perspective in perpetuity. Rather, they are and are "subject to test" and used in specific research contexts where they are relevant and, as Charmaz (2008: 56) asserts, the use of such concepts "does not mean abandoning" symbolic interactionism for "some other perspective or current theoretical fad."

   Other rehabilitations of symbolic interactionist assumptions involve a revision of Blumers' (1969a: 2) classic rendering of the three presuppositions of symbolic interactionism. For instance, Fine and Tavory (2019: 458) offer a detailed recasting.

> (1) "People act upon meanings while participating in distinctive communities that, in turn, depend on shared meaning," (2) "Meanings depend on continuing and self-reflexive interaction, as such interaction refracts actors' pasts, present, and anticipated futures," and (3) "Situations are linked in patterned ways. They change or further ossify as participants recognize this patterning and the structures that support these meanings."

However, their reworking reflects a difference more of degree than of kind as Blumer (1966: 535) had articulated these same assumptions in writing about the "sociological implications' of Meadian symbolic interactionism; even if they weren't foregrounded in Blumer's (1969a), classic suppositions as presented in *Symbolic Interaction: Perspective and Method*. He writes:

> Established patterns of group life exist and persist only through the con-
> tinued use of the same schemes of interpretation; [they] are maintained
> only through their continued confirmation by the defining acts of others….
> Let the interpretations that sustain them be undermined or disrupted by
> changed definitions from others and the patterns can quickly collapse.
> (Blumer's 1966: 538)

Even the findings of Reynold's dissertation research, that were later used
by Reynolds and Reynolds in making the initial charge of astructural
bias in 1973, in actuality show that it is interactionists who differ in
how they conceptualize social organization, not that Blumerian symbolic
interactionism is itself astrauctural (c.f. McGinty 2016).

More specifically, feminist theorists have argued that interactionism
needs to be paired with feminist theory in order to address the structural
issues of sex and gender (Jackson and Scott 2010; Puentes and Gough-
erty 2012). In writing about Jane Adams, Hull House, and the Chicago
School, Deegan (2016: 62) refers to Adam's "thought and practice" as
"feminist symbolic interactionism." However, to call a perspective 'fem-
inist symbolic interactionism' is to more than imply that interactionism
cannot address issues of sex and gender without the addition of feminist
theory—which is a misconception. The concept of gender is not the ex-
clusive preserve of any one theoretical perspective. For instance, Carter
and Fuller (2016) cite the many interactionists who have studied gender
including Goffman's (1976, 1977, 1979)[1] analyses of gender presenta-
tion and the depiction of gender in advertising, to more contemporary
research on masculinity.

In fact, many feminist theorists who argue that symbolic interaction-
ism needs to be rehabilitated often do so failing to recognize that they
themselves are using assumptions well established by earlier symbolic
interactionists (Jackson and Scott 2010; Sandstrom, Martin, and Fine
2006; Wiley 2016). To illustrate, never does Judith Butler (1988, 1996)
acknowledge that her theory of performativity has anything to do with
ideas developed by Erving Goffman, instead maintaining that her in-
sights are original and derive from psychoanalytic feminist theory and
literary theory (Brickell 2003). In her essay "Performative Acts and
Gender Constitution" Butler (1988) refers to Goffman once, and only
once, in her attempt to distinguish her insights from his. We say at-
tempt because how she writes about gender performance resonates with
Goffman's (1959, 1982) theory of the presentation of self, identity, and
the body in everyday life. Both see gender as socially constructed. For

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1. We are aware that there are those who argue that Goffman is not a symbolic
    interactionist (Gonos 1977), we are not among them.

Goffman (1977: 316), "toilet segregation is presented as a natural consequence of the difference between the sex-classes, when it is in fact rather a means of honouring, if not producing, this difference." In Butler's (1996: 112) words, the same idea is presented: she argues that it is through performativity and … speech acts, the "bring[ing] into being [of] that which they name," which is the "discursive mode by which ontological effects" about gender categories in society "are installed."

Our point is not that there are no differences in how Goffman and Butler theorize bodily performance, but rather that, as Brickell (2003) points out, Butler does not even acknowledge any similarities between hers and Goffman's insights, let alone give any credit to Goffman's earlier works in this area. Such arguments are flawed in that there is no intellectual shame in acknowledging resonance between one's work and another's or in building on another's theory. And building on extant theory does not mean that the theory is being rehabilitated, rather it is that it is being extended, a natural outcome of conceptual development.

REHABILITATING SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISTS

The third variation of the astructural bias is that the bias lies not in symbolic interactionist theory itself but rather in how the perspective is used by symbolic interactionists (Dingwall, Degloma, and Newmahr 2012; Fine 1993; Hall 2003; Musolf 1992; vom Lehn and Gibson 2011). For instance, Diehl and McFarland (2010: 1714) write that there is a "theoretical aversion to historical explanation that runs through microsociology." Loseke (2016: 124) tempers this charge asserting that "interactionist perspectives can, do, and *should attend more* to macro concerns" (emphasis ours). McGinty 2016 argues that whether or not a symbolic interactionist addresses social structural issues reflects their professional socialization, in particular whether or not they identify as an Iowa, Indianna, or Chicago School interactionist. However, again, this shows that there are those interactionists who fail to address social structure, not that the theory itself does not permit addressing structural issues. Furthermore, while it is true that the focus of many interactionist works is on micro concerns, there have always been those who have paid attention to social structure (Hall 1987). Indeed, Chicago school interactionism is particularly known for having done so (Charmaz 2005). Witness Park's (1915) analysis of the city which he conceptualizes cities as institutions, in other words, as the large building blocks of social structure. Following Simmel, Park (1915:578) argues that the city is an institution that is created and shaped out of the motives and meanings of the individuals

that reside within it, and "once formed, impresses itself upon them as a crude external fact and forms them." Moreover, an entire section of the collection of papers in honour of Blumer edited by Shibutani (1970) is devoted to group life and joint action, the processes that constitute society itself. And Strauss (1982:350-351), writing on the negotiated order within social organizations, makes plain that micro-level negotiatory processes are the stuff of "interorganizational linkages" which make-up "a matrix of … organizations" that is "rooted in diverse social worlds" that are "politicized arenas … characterized by discussion, debate, positional maneuvering, and inevitably also by negotiation among the participants."[2] However, Fine (1984) notes that Strauss's insights concerning the constraining effect of social structure on negotiations is "a point occasionally deemphasized by his followers."

None-the-less, more recent interactionist research is explicit in how it addresses structural concerns.[3] For example, Jacobs and Marolla's (2017) research on the reclaiming of American Indian identity explicitly ground their analysis in three levels of social structure. The institutional level where Indian identity is a matter of "federal [government] recognition," the intermediate level where social structure is made up of "localized networks of social" interaction, and the level of "proximate social structure" including "community organizations" (Jacobs and Marolla 2017:68–69). And it is through the identity work conducted within these collective contexts that new representations of Indian identity are

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2.   See also Becker et al. (1968), Strauss (1978), Strauss et al. (1963), Hall and Spencer-Hall (1982), Fine and Kleinman (1983), and Fine (1984, 1992) on organizations, social structure, and the negotiated order within institutions. To these examples we can add all of Goffman's works, in particular frame analysis (Goffman 1974); Strauss's work on the institution of medicine (Strauss 1985, Strauss et al. 1963, 1985) and the division of labour (Freidson 1976; Strauss 1985); Prus (1997, 1999) on issues of power and culture; Farberman (1975: 438) and Denzin (1977: 905) on "criminogenic market structures," and Couch (1984) on civilizations.

3.   See Schwalbe et al. (2000) who use a symbolic interactionist perspective to analyze how inequality is both produced and reproduced, McFarland et al. (2014: 1088) who have written on networks within "adolescent social structure;" (Low 2020) who has highlighted socio cultural, political, historical and biographical contexts in managing stigma; Prus (1997, 1999) on power and culture as subcultural mosaics; and Eliasoph and Lichterman (2003) who analyze how group style is developed via the interplay of individuals interacting together within a cultural framework of roles, norms, and symbolic representations. See in addition, Hall and McGinty (1997) on situating interaction within the linkages across sites and phases of activity; and Emirbyer and Mische (1998) who, in theorizing agency based on Median symbolic interactionism, discuss structural, temporal, and historical context.

socially validated, which in turn contributes to change in definitions of American Indian status at the legislative *qua* structural, level.

Contextualizing Symbolic Interactionist Research

As we have demonstrated, there is nothing in Blumerian symbolic interactionism that implies that structure and culture are not at issue in human life, nor is there anything which suggests that structure and culture cannot or should not be dealt with. Thus, symbolic interactionist theory does not need to be rehabilitated or replaced. However, notwithstanding the many symbolic interactionists who do address structure, there are many others who on the face of it do not, meaning that the third version of the astructural bias charge, that these symbolic interactionists need rehabilitation, has merit (McGinty 2016; Muslof 2016a).

    For some this rehabilitation has meant that symbolic interactionists acknowledge the temporal gap between structure and agency via "analytical bracketing," isolating which side of the coin will be dealt with in research (Archer 1988; Giddens 1979). Accordingly, some interactionists do choose to focus on the actions of individuals, but it does not follow that they are unaware that these actions take place within a social structure which at times constrains action (cf. Fine and Tavory 2019; Goffman 1961, 1963, 1974). What needs to happen is that they explicitly acknowledge that it does. For others it means analysis of interaction within communities or institutions, and for still others it means explicating the recursive relationship between the individual and society, something symbolic interactionism's pragmatist underpinnings has always allowed for (Dennis and Martin 2005, 2007; Maines 1982; Musolf 2016b; Schwalbe et al. 2000).

    What remains then for interactionists to do is to go back to fundamental Blumerian tenants to address the "necessary connections between … action structure and historical setting" including temporal contexts (Hall 1987: 2; see also Deihl and McFarland 2010; Fine and Tavory 2019; Hall and McGinty 1997). To do so interactionists need to situate their analyses within what Strauss and Corbin (1990:158) refer to as a "conditional matrix" made up of biographical context which concerns the social statuses individuals hold as well as other attributes of the person that are part of Goffman's (1963: 2) notion of social identity; the political context which addresses changes in state governance, legislation, and political ideology; the socio-cultural context, concerning social discourses and other cultural elements; and finally, the historical context in order to account for the temporal nature of social life (see also Silverman 1998).

To illustrate, below we present a case example of how (Thomson 2021), through the process of inspection and the use of sensitizing concepts (Blumer 1969a), contextualizes the findings from her doctoral research on the emotion work engaged in by group fitness instructors. In particular, she focuses on the intersection between the historical, political, biographical and sociocultural contexts in relation to the reification of the discourses of active citizenship, healthism, and active consumerism. In doing so we demonstrate how, even in the case of research focused on the most micro of micro-oriented of topics, emotion work, can none-the-less take account of social structure.

Contextualizing Emotion Work in Group Fitness Instruction

The notion of an active citizen, one who is active in regard to engagement with the state in contrast to being merely subject to the dictates of the state, is a distinction dating back to the medieval period but one that gained significant political and social currency with the emergence of discourses of neoliberalism in the West in the early 1990s (Boas and Gans-Morse 2009; Turner 1990). In this historical context the active citizen enacts socio-cultural discourses of wellness reflective of neoliberal discourses of health whereby individuals must assume responsibility for their own safety and wellbeing, including positive health outcomes (Pickard 1998). In doing so they become active consumers (Lupton 1997) who, consistent with neoliberal political discourses, are able to engage in "self-improvement" activities that align with the goals of the state in "developing and maximizing the potential of its population" (Lupton 1999: 289).

Concomitant with these discourses, this historical period ushered in an assortment of new health related occupations including "wellness experts, self-help gurus, nutritionists, life coaches" and fitness instructors into the workforce who become part of the governing regime of "healthy living" (Carter 2015:375). Fitness classes are one location where this governance plays out and where group fitness instructors embody neoliberal discourses of healthy living and, in turn, teach them to the people who take their classes. This is evident in the experiences of the group fitness instructors interviewed for this research who discussed the requirement that they follow company mandated bodily regimes. In Rachel's words:

So, the people that create our workouts, they tell us what you should eat, what you should wear, what your belief system should be. Like they tell you what a healthy lifestyle looks like in its entirety and they feed us this through Facebook, through our educational videos. (Rachel)

Embodying this healthy lifestyle is thus the product that they are selling on behalf of the gyms they work for.

And they [the gym] has an investment in that because really, the reason why they're doing that is because we are selling their product. They sell their product to us…. So, they have this small group of immaculately fit, amazing people that … literally trickle their stuff down to us who in turn trickle this down to everybody else. (Jane)

In this way neoliberal discourses of active citizenship, healthism, and active consumerism are reproduced and reinforced through the interaction between these instructors and the people who take their classes.

The pursuit of a healthy body by group fitness instructors also reveals the moral imperative that is central to the role of active consumer engaged in practicing such healthy lifestyles. A moral imperative that requires that these instructors engage in a form of emotional work that can be conceptualizes as emotional labour because it is part of the commodified services that make up group fitness instruction (Hochschild 1983, 1990). For instance, Rachel discussed the intensity of the emotional labour imposed by the companies these instructors work for.

They tell you how to sleep, how to eat, how to workout, how to act, how to have a happy attitude…. We have videos on how to connect with people, what to say to people, how to feel…. They will give you directions on every single thing in your life…. It's advice that's given to you. It's not like it's a dictatorship …. but they do tell you if you want to be our standard of what we believe you should be this is what you do. (Rachel)

The emotional weight of these discourses is gendered, weighing more heavily on the female instructors then male instructors, and even heavier on older female instructors (Hausenblas and Martin 2000). One instructor who was 56 years old described the moralizing attitude of the sociocultural discourse of "healthism" that they must contend with as they age (Carter 2015:375).

I would like to say to some of those people, 'Yeah but now put your mother in this position, how easy would it be for her?' That's what I'd like to say because that's what I am, 'the same age as your mother.' I will stop when I feel like I shouldn't be on stage anymore, either for injuries or … [if] I feel like I can't do it at a level that I'm happy with; when I feel like

> I'm not being a good role model or something, do you know what I mean?
> And that I mean age wise. (June)

June's experience reflects the intersection of two social statuses, age and gender that make up the biographical context of these informants as they manage their emotions in the socio-cultural and historical contexts of group fitness where agism and sexism persist (McHugh 2003; Sumerau and Grollman 2018). That Rachel engages in this emotional labour and that she monitors herself for the point at which her body ages out of being a 'good role' model serves to contribute to the reification of normative constructs of the fit female body (Greenleaf et al. 2006).

　　This brief case example demonstrates how symbolic interactionism allows for the analysis of the actions of individuals within the larger societal context. It also shows that sociologists need to look beyond the partial and misleading summaries of the perspective found in most introductory texts, and the pronouncements of astructural bias in the scholarly literature, and instead reacquaint themselves with Blumerian symbolic interactionism that they will find in primary sources. This will enable them to discover for themselves that the charge of astructural bias is indeed a myth. To be clear, the advice we offer here is not only directed at those engaged in research framed by symbolic interactionism or those interactionists tasked with teaching the perspective. Rather, all sociological researchers should heed the call to contextualize their findings within biographical, political, historical, and socio-cultural contexts. And all who teach or comment on symbolic interactionism need to make plain that the symbolic interactionist perspective is well suited to analysis of interaction that takes place within these contexts, including the structures and forces that arise from those interactions.

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