UNIT 5 INTERPRETIVE SOCIOLOGY*

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5.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you should be able to:
- Discuss the meaning and nature of Interpretive Sociology;
- Know the key differences between Interpretive Sociology and Positivism;
- Describe Max Weber’s contribution to the approach;
- Acquaint with other branches of Interpretive Sociology; and
- Identify the limits of Interpretive Sociology.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit is divided into five sections. In brief, section 3 gives a general picture meaning and nature of interpretive sociology. Section 4 lists the major differences between positivism or positivist sociology and interpretivism or interpretive sociology. Section 5 discusses the contribution of Max Weber to the field of interpretive sociology, and finally, section 6 gives an overall sketch of the branches of interpretive sociology; with an overview of the thinkers, their central ideas and some of their important works. It concludes with a discussion on the limitations of this approach and finally concludes with a summary of the key ideas.

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5.2 MEANING AND DEFINITION

Interpretive sociology focuses on the meanings people attach to their social world. It shows that reality is constructed by people themselves in their daily lives. Since sociology was founded as a discipline in the 19th century by the French philosopher Auguste Comte, the study of society has developed in several different ways. The early rise of sociology was deeply rooted in positivist philosophy favoured by Comte, which relied on scientific methods and techniques to study society. Interpretive sociology developed as an alternative to positivism.

Interpretive Sociology can be defined as the study of society that focuses on discovering the meanings that people attach to their social world. In sociology, the study of interpretive sociology, occupies central importance. This can also be loosely defined as ‘understanding’, rooted in the concept *Verstehen* (German term which means ‘empathic understanding of human behaviour’). It is an approach that centres the importance of meaning and action when studying social behaviour and interactions. This approach diverges from positivistic sociology by recognizing that the subjective experiences, beliefs, and behaviour of people are intrinsic aspects of what we observe or in other words there is no such thing as a purely objective phenomenon. In simple words, this approach tells us that in order to study and understand society and social phenomena, we must ‘enter or step into the shoes of the other’ and nothing can be understood from the outside. Let us look at the following example in order to understand this concept and thereby this approach in a better and easier way. Look at Box 1 for an example.

**Box-1**

*Interpretive sociology employs rational understanding of motivations. Max Weber (1978) suggested that we understand ‘the chopping of wood’ or ‘aiming of a gun’ in terms of motive. We know that the woodchopper is working for a wage; for his own use or possibly is doing it for recreation. But he might also be working through a fit of rage (an irrational case). Similarly we understand the motive of a person aiming a gun if we know that he has been commanded to shoot as a member of a firing squad, that he is fighting against an enemy, or that he is doing it for revenge (Weber, 1978: 8-9).*

**Activity 1**

Read carefully the example in BOX 1 on the central idea of *verstehen*. Discuss with your friends or family members about this and see if you can draw similar examples from your everyday life. Compare your notes, if possible, with notes of other students at your Study Centre.

5.3 DIFFERENCES BETWEEN POSITIVIST AND INTERPRETIVE SOCIOLOGY

Positivist and interpretive sociology have their own and unique standards for observing and drawing conclusions about human behaviour in a social context. Let us look at some of the differences between them in the following table:
**Table 5.1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positivist</th>
<th>Interpretive</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. The concept of positivism was developed by the French sociologists Auguste Comte and Emile Durkheim, modelled along natural or rational sciences- physics or chemistry.</td>
<td>Interpretive sociology was initiated by German sociologist Max Weber and developed by Georg Simmel and others.</td>
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<td>2. Positivist sociology aims to understand social institutions by relying on observation and knowledge or facts.</td>
<td>Interpretive sociology aims to understand the meaning behind actions through the subject’s position within a system of meanings</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Positivist sociology sees an objective reality ‘out there’.</td>
<td>Interpretive sociology sees reality as being constructed by people according to their own understanding of the phenomenon.</td>
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<td>4. Positivist sociology makes use of quantitative methods and data.</td>
<td>Interpretive sociology relies on qualitative methods and data.</td>
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**5.4 ORIGINS OF INTERPRETIVE SOCIOLOGY**

**5.4.1 Max Weber**

The origins of this approach lie in the contributions of the early twentieth century German Sociologist, Max Weber (1864-1920). Weber’s rich legacy of sociological writings includes works on sociology of religion as well as on society, economics, politics and government. Some of the notable ones are *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904), *The Religion of India: the Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism* (1958) and *Economy and Society* (1978). He wrote extensively on many subjects but focused on developing an interpretive sociology of social action and of power and domination (Aron, 1967; Bendix, 1960). Another major concern of Weber was the process of rationalisation in modern society and the relationship of the various religions of the world with this process. His approach to sociology can be seen as an attempt to compromise with positivism and its aims to create a scientific sociology (Bilton et al., 1981). Weber defined sociology as a “science which attempts the interpretive understanding of social action in order thereby to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effects” (Weber, 1964: 88). Here social action needs to be understood as reciprocally oriented action which is intentional, meaningful and symbolic. In contemporary sociology, we can say that the term refers to as interaction.

As we have discussed earlier in this unit, Weber introduced a key methodological concept called *verstehen* which means comprehending or understanding on the level of meaning. Weber believed that this aspect lent an advantage to the social sciences over the natural sciences. While, in the natural sciences we can only observe and generalize; in social sciences, we can understand the actions and
comprehend the subjective intentions of the actors also (Abraham, 2015: 17). As a result, it makes for a scientific study of social behaviour in two ways: on one hand, it allows us to directly observe and understand the meaning of actions. On the other hand, it facilitates an understanding of the underlying motive. When a chemist studies the properties of a particular substance, he does so from the outside. When a sociologist tries to understand human society and culture, he approaches it as an insider, or a participant. Being human, the social scientist has access to the motives and feelings of his or her subject matter. Social scientists can understand human action by probing the subjective meanings that actors attach to their own behaviour as well as that of others. Sociological understanding is thus qualitatively different from that of other (natural) sciences.

Weber points out that a natural scientist understands natural phenomena from the outside. But by using the method of *verstehen*, the sociologist should be able to and should visualise the motivations of the actor by trying to interpret feelings through the understanding of the situation. We can understand that Weber’s contribution to this approach was supreme as he attempted to fuse the concept of social action with scientific sociological explanation. And this was only possible through the use of *verstehen* (interpretive understanding). This is the process by which the sociologist attempts to gain access to the meaning of action for the actor. For Weber, action is defined as subjectively meaningful human behaviour. He also emphasizes on the ‘motive’ present in the mind of the actor as the ‘cause’ of the act.

Weber argued that the overall objective of the social sciences was to develop an ‘interpretive understanding of social action’. Since the central concern of the social sciences was with social action and since human actions necessarily involved subjective meanings, the methods of enquiry of social science also had to be different from the methods of natural science. For Weber, ‘social action’ included all human behaviour that was meaningful, that is, action to which actors attached a meaning. In studying social action the sociologist’s task was to recover the meanings attributed by the actor. To accomplish this task the sociologist had to put themselves in the actor’s place, and imagine what these meanings were or could have been, known as an empathetic understanding.

Raymond Aron (1967) discusses the same with the following example: one can understand why the driver stops in front of a red light; He or She does not need to observe how often drivers regularly stop before red lights in order to understand why they do it. This is because the subjective meaning of the actions of others is often immediately comprehensive in daily life (Aron, 1971: 191). It was precisely for these reasons that Weber argued, the overall objective of the social sciences was to develop an ‘interpretive understanding of social action’. He wanted to develop and express that these sciences were thus very different from the natural sciences, which aimed to discover the objective ‘laws of nature’ governing the physical world. He also believed that the primary concern of social sciences was with social action, which involved subjective meanings. Thus, the methods of social sciences also had to differ from those of the natural sciences.

Weber also wanted to establish an alternative approach (to positivism) as it would focus on understanding subjective experience and not be merely based on observation or adherence to facts. As a result, the perceived facts that are inherent to the positivist observational method can take on an entirely new meaning from
the perspectives of different individuals. Weber persistently emphasized the role of interpretation in the cultural and social sciences. He also underlined that, social scientists should never be content to just understand the ‘rules’ of a society but they must ‘interpret’ and ‘explain’ the actions and beliefs of social agents.

Another key contributor to this approach has been Georg Simmel, who was a contemporary of Max Weber. He was a very popular early sociologist and has also been recognized as a major developer of interpretive sociology. Weber and Simmel both recognized that the positivistic approach was not able to capture all social phenomena, nor was it able to fully explain why all social phenomena occur.

**Check Your Progress**

1) Describe in about two lines what is meant by *verstehen*.

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2) List three differences between positivist sociology and interpretive sociology?

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3) Discuss in about five lines Max Weber’s contribution to interpretive sociology.

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5.5 **BRANCHES OF INTERPRETIVE SOCIOLOGY**

Interpretive approach has given rise to diverse theoretical traditions of sociology under the general category of social constructionist approach. Some of the prominent ones are symbolic interactionism, dramaturgy, phenomenology and ethnomethodology. The notion of the social construction of reality lies at the heart of symbolic interactionist perspective Anthony Giddens describes the study of everyday life as telling us how humans can act creatively to shape reality and that social behaviour is guided to some extent by forces such as roles, norms and shared expectations. He further tells us that individuals perceive reality differently according to their backgrounds, interests and motivations. In other
words, reality is not fixed or static – it is created through human interactions. (Giddens, 2006: 130).

Wallace and Wolf suggest (1995: 183-184) that the forerunners and direct contributors to the symbolic interactionist perspective include Georg Simmel and Robert Park; However, Max Weber’s contribution and emphasis on the importance of *Verstehen* (interpretive understanding or subjective meaning) for understanding social life was most important. It also demonstrated Weber’s ability to bridge ‘macro’ and ‘micro’ perspectives. In the following sub-sections, brief overviews of the interactionist perspectives will be discussed, in order to understand how and why these theoretical traditions are integral to interpretive sociology. Let us begin with symbolic interactionism.

5.5.1 Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism has been one of the most significant sociological perspectives from North America. It traces its roots to the philosopher George Herbert Mead. The sociologists who developed this perspective further include Herbert Blumer and Erving Goffman. George Herbert Mead is known as the founding father of this perspective; although the perspective was named and popularized by his student, Herbert Blumer. While the symbolic interaction perspective is generally associated with Mead, it was Herbert Blumer who took Mead’s ideas and developed them into a more systematic sociological approach. Blumer coined the term symbolic interactionism. Blumerian symbolic interactionism is often referred to as the ‘Chicago School of Symbolic Interactionism’.

Some of the main features include study of interactions, interpretation of action and the social construction of the self. M Francis Abraham (2015) contends that Symbolic interactionism is a “social-psychological perspective that is particularly relevant to sociology. Instead of dealing with abstract social structures, or concrete forms of individual behaviour, symbolic interactionism focuses on the nature of interaction, the patterns of social action and social relationship” (Abraham, 2015: 36).

5.5.1.1 The Contributions of George Herbert Mead

According to George Herbert Mead socialisation depends upon the child’s understanding of others’ views as important in her/his life. Mead (1972) stresses upon two stages in the development of the self: the stages of ‘play’ and the

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**Box-2**

**Example of Mead’s development of ‘Self’**:

*Children’s play gradually develops from simple imitation to difficult games where a child of four or five years old will enact the role of an adult. For example, children are often found imitating the classroom situation where one becomes the teacher, the others become students and they enact a classroom teaching session. Most children locally refer to this play as ‘Teacher-Teacher’.*

*Another similar act of play is that of ‘Doctor-Patient’ where children imitate the role of a doctor, nurse and patient and try to enact a situation where a patient goes to the doctor for treatment.*
‘game’ are important in the development of the self. Most importantly, both the stages are dependent on interaction patterns. Mead says that, in the ‘play’ stage, the child simply assumes one role after another of persons and animals that have in some way or other entered into its life. However, in the game stage, one has become all of the others implicated in the common activity—must have within one’s self the whole organised activity in order to successfully play one’s own part. The person here has not merely assumed the role of a specific other, but of any other participating in the common activity; he has generalised the attitude of role-taking (Mead, 1972: xxiv).

In doing so, Mead introduced the concepts of ‘generalised other’ and ‘significant other’. ‘Generalised other’ can be understood as those rules and values of the culture of a particular group in which the child is engaged. By understanding the ‘generalised other’ the child is able to understand what kind of manners is expected as well as valued in any social setting. ‘Significant other’ consists of those persons who are of importance in the child’s life and affect her/his understanding of self along with the child’s emotions and behaviours. Hence, while Mead lays the foundations of symbolic interactionism, his student, Herbert Blumer popularized the perspective. Let us look at his contributions in detail in the following paragraphs.

5.5.1.2 The contributions of Herbert Blumer

Herbert Blumer (1969) suggests that symbolic interactionism is based on three main premises. First of all, it is based on the premise that human beings act towards things on the basis of meanings that those things or objects have for them. Such things may include physical objects such as trees or chairs; or human beings such as friends or enemies; or even institutions such as school or a government building. The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from the social interaction that one has with one’s fellows. The third premise is that these meanings are modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters (Blumer, 1969: 2). Hence, symbolic interactionism views meaning as having a different source than those held by the two dominant views just considered. Instead, it sees meaning as arising in the process of interaction between people.

To summarise, the core of Blumer’s approach can be captured in his three propositions: first, humans act toward people and things based upon the meanings that they have given to those people or things. Second, language gives humans a means by which to negotiate meaning through symbols. Third, thought modifies each individual’s interpretation of symbols. Thus people define situations in different ways depending on their life experiences and perspectives. This means that for symbolic interactionists, interpretation becomes the key.

Hence, Blumer contends that we are indebted to George Herbert Mead for the most penetrating analysis of social interaction. While Mead identifies two forms or levels of social interaction in human society which he refers to as ‘the conversation of gestures’ and ‘the use of significant symbols’; Blumer understands these terms as ‘non-symbolic interaction’ and ‘symbolic interaction’. Blumer further says that ‘non-symbolic interaction’ takes place when one responds directly to the action of another without interpreting that action; whereas, ‘symbolic interaction’ involves interpretation of the action. Let us understand
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this with the help of an example. Blumer suggests that, ‘non-symbolic interaction’
is observed in reflex responses, for instance in the case of a boxer who
automatically raises his arm to parry a blow. However, if the boxer were
reflectively to identify the forthcoming blow from his opponent as a feint designed
to trap him, he would be engaging in symbolic interaction (Blumer, 1969: 8-9).
Thus, more importantly, and bringing back Weber, we can understand that the
significance of symbolic interactionism lies in the fact that, it involves reflection
and interpretation of the action.

5.5.2 Dramaturgy

Apart from Blumer’s popularising of the symbolic interactionist approach,
another major contributor to this perspective was Erving Goffman. He made a
distinctive contribution by popularising a particular type of interactionist method
known as the dramaturgical approach. The dramaturgical approach also derives
from the interpretive approach and it compares the everyday life to the setting
of a drama – a theatre or a stage. M Francis Abraham attests that, “The
dramaturgical approach is the study of social interaction as though participants
are actors in a play in a theatre....hence; social behaviour becomes analogous to
theatrical drama (Abraham, 2015: 98).

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>During a class or an examination, we may feel the need to project a serious image; however, at a party, it may seem important to look relaxed and not appear serious in order to please others.</td>
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This approach, popularised by Goffman is based on the following premises. Just as actors act in front of us and present to us certain visuals or images, we individuals also like to present certain qualities of our personalities in front of the outside world; while we like to hide some of them.

The example (Box-3) suggests that Goffman’s primary focus has been to understand the process of impression management. Hence, individuals not only present themselves to each other in a presentable manner, but also attempt to manage the image they present. This aspect gives an important dimension to dramaturgy. That is, it assumes that ‘all the world is a stage’ and that people manage their acts in face to face interactions. In a way, it also gives a complex dimension to the action perspective. If we are to understand the meanings of actions as Weber postulated, it would be necessary to deeply and subjectively involve ourselves during interactions, in order to gauge whether an individual is engaging in the act of impression management.

Hence, Bilton et al., (1981) suggest that the symbolic interactionist perspective as an action perspective has been widely influential especially in the study of small-scale interaction, personality development and deviant behaviour. The work of Mead stresses the social construction of the self to the exclusion of the biological and instinctual elements. A classic study adopting this perspective is Goffman’s work Asylums (1961) in which he looks at the career and social situation of mental patients and other inmates in their respective confining institutions. Therefore, after having understood the importance of symbolic interactionism with respect to interpretive sociology, we will now look at two other approaches, phenomenology and ethnomethodology.
5.5.3 Phenomenology

Phenomenological sociology has largely developed out of the works of Alfred Schutz, who is best known for *The Phenomenology of the Social World* (1967). Schutz suggests that in the course of our action, we employ assumptions about society and how it works and we use *verstehen* in a crude way to predict the action of others. As a result, our acts are ‘meaningful’ not because we have a particular intention or motive, but because other actors interpret our action as having symbolic significance. It is said that the phenomenological perspective take the interpretive approach, initially developed by Max Weber and later on by other thinkers, to the extreme.

This perspective further says that our reality consists just of meanings; therefore the job of the sociologist is to discover the meanings of actions and behaviour and nothing else. In popularizing this approach, Schutz uses the philosophy of Edmund Husserl in order to critique Max Weber’s methodology. He does this in order to construct a radical account of the nature of social action. In Schutz’s view, Weber failed to give any real account of the way in which actions can only be constructed by drawing upon a shared set of social concepts, symbols and meanings.

Phenomenological sociology is the study of the formal structures of concrete social existence as made available in and through the analytical description of acts of intentional consciousness. The object of such an analysis is the meaningful lived world of everyday life or ‘life-world’. Bilton et al., (1981: 739-40) suggest that, symbolic interactionists acknowledged shared definitions and stressed upon symbolic communication through language. Therefore, Schutz developed this perspective in order to basically suggest that, we individuals act successfully only when all share the same set of meanings. Thus, in many ways we can understand this approach as a departure from the conventional model of interpretive sociology.

Just like Weber, Schutz believed that social research differs from research in the physical sciences and that people engage in making sense of the world. In interacting with other fellows, we are seeking to make sense of their sense-making. What distinguishes the social sciences is that the social scientist assumes the position of the disinterested observer. He or she is not involved in the life of those observed – their activities are not of any practical interest, but only of cognitive interest. Here, shared meanings and common knowledge gains importance as opposed to the Weberian model, wherein only individual subjective experiences were given primary significance.

5.5.4 Ethnomethodology

In this final sub-section, we will discuss the ethnomethodological approach. Although the term ethnomethodology appears long and confusing, once we break the term into two, the meaning becomes very simple. The term ethnomethodology was coined by Harold Garfinkel who is best known for his work *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (1967). ‘Ethno’ refers to the stock of common sense knowledge available to members of society; ‘methodology’ refers to the strategies which actors use in different settings to make their meanings understandable. Ethnomethodology is a perspective within sociology which focuses on the way people make sense of their everyday world. In this regard, Garfinkel attests that,
“Ethnomethodological studies analyze everyday activities as members’ methods for making those same activities visibly rational and reportable for all practical purposes” (Garfinkel, 1967: vii).

People are seen as rational actors, but employ practical reasoning rather than formal logic to make sense of and function in society. It refers to the analysis of the ways in which we actively make sense of what others mean by what they say and do. Much of our everyday interaction occurs through informal conversations with others. Garfinkel analysed these conversations. He showed how these conversations are based on shared understandings and knowledge. He refers to these shared understandings and knowledge as ‘background expectancies’. The theory argues that human society is entirely dependent on these methods of achieving and displaying understanding.

Although this approach was developed by Garfinkel, it is based on Schutz’s phenomenological reconstruction of Max Weber’s interpretive sociology. Bilton et al., (1981) have attested that, ethnomethodologists work from Schutz’s claim that the social world is produced and reproduced by the practical actions of actors, on the basis of taken for granted assumptions. Thus, most importantly, ethnomethodology has its roots in the fusion of symbolic interactionism and phenomenology.

Check Your Progress 2

i) Describe in about two lines what is meant by dramaturgy.

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ii) List three key features of symbolic interactionism.

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iii) Discuss in about three lines Alfred Schutz’s contribution to phenomenology.

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5.6 LIMITATIONS OF INTERPRETIVE SOCIOLOGY

Interpretive sociology has various limitations. The major ones are:

- It is possible that observation may be influenced by personal bias.
- Direct observation also requires prior knowledge of the culture being studied.
- It assumes that people in society consider their actions to be rational, which may not always be the case.
- It also has been regarded as an inadequate account of action since it remains excessively individualistic.

5.7 LET US SUM UP

Interpretive theory is more accepting of free will and sees human behaviour as the outcome of the subjective interpretation of the environment. Interpretive theory focuses on the actor’s definition of the situation in which they act. Although symbolic interactionism traces its origins to Max Weber’s assertion that individuals act according to their interpretation of the meaning of their world, the American philosopher George Herbert Mead introduced this perspective to American sociology. Symbolic interactionism is a major framework of sociological theory. This perspective relies on the symbolic meaning that people develop and rely upon in the process of social interaction. The notion of the social construction of reality lies at the heart of symbolic interactionist perspective.

MODEL ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

i) Describe in about two lines what is meant by *verstehen*.

**Answer:** Verstehen can be defined as ‘understanding’. It is a German term which means ‘empathic understanding of human behaviour’. It is an approach that centres the importance of meaning and action when studying social trends and problems.

ii) List three differences between positivist sociology and interpretive sociology.

**Answer:** The concept of positivism was developed by the French sociologists Auguste Comte and Emile Durkheim, modelled along natural or rational sciences- physics or chemistry. Whereas, interpretive sociology developed through the work of German sociologist Max Weber.

Positivist sociology aims to understand social institutions by relying on observation and knowledge or facts. On the other hand, interpretive sociology aims to understand the meaning behind actions through the subject’s unique point of view.

Positivist sociology sees an objective reality ‘out there’. Whereas, interpretive sociology sees reality as being constructed by people.
iii) Discuss in about five lines Max Weber’s contribution to interpretive sociology.

**Answer:** Weber believed that interpretive sociology or understanding lent an advantage to the social sciences over the natural sciences. He also points out that a natural scientist understands natural phenomena from the outside. But by using the method of **verstehen**, the sociologist can be able to and should visualise the motivations of the actor by trying to interpret feelings and the understanding of the situation. We can understand that Weber’s contribution to this approach was supreme as he attempted to fuse the concept of social action with scientific sociological explanation. And this was only possible through the use of **verstehen**.

**Check Your Progress 2**

i) Describe in about two lines what is meant by dramaturgy.

**Answer:** Popularised by Erving Goffman, this approach is based on the following premise that, just as actors act in front of us and present to us certain visuals or images, we individuals also like to present certain qualities of our personalities in front of the outside world; while we like to hide some of them.

ii) List three key features of symbolic interactionism.

**Answer:** While the symbolic interaction perspective is generally associated with George Herbert Mead, it was Herbert Blumer who took Mead’s ideas and developed them into a more systematic sociological approach.

Instead of dealing with abstract social structures, or concrete forms of individual behaviour, symbolic interactionism focuses on the nature of interaction, the patterns of social action and social relationship.

For symbolic interactionists, interpretation becomes the key tool for analysis.

iii) Discuss in about three lines Alfred Schutz’s contribution to phenomenology.

**Answer:** Phenomenological sociology has largely developed out of the works of Alfred Schutz, who is best known for *The Phenomenology of the Social World* (1967). Schutz suggests that in the course of our action, we employ assumptions about society and how it works and we use **verstehen** in a crude way to predict the action of others. As a result, our acts are ‘meaningful’ not because we have a particular intention or motive, but because other actors interpret our action as having symbolic significance.

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**5.8 REFERENCES**


