

# Symbolic Interactionist Sociology and Onomastics\*

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## Abstract

This study demonstrates that personal names present an excellent opportunity for symbolic interaction sociologists to engage in research devoted to determining the nature and structure of their key variable, meaning. Using the technique of multidimensional scaling, ten men's names are mapped in 3- and 4 dimensional space. The four dimensions are identified as Character, Maturity, Sociability and Virility. The three dimensions are identified as Activity, Evaluation and Potency combined with Age. Both solutions are acceptable using standard criteria. Nicknames are shown to be a composite of the other dimensions, rather than a separate dimension.

## La Sociologie "Symbolic Interaction" et les Onomastiques

Cette étude nous montre que les noms des personnes présentent une bonne occasion pour les sociologistes de "symbolic interactionism" pour faire des recherches au sujet de la nature et la structure de leur principale variable, la signification. Avec la technique de "multidimensional scaling," dix noms masculins sont fixés sur des cartes de 3- et 4- dimensions. Les soubriquets sont trouvés d'être composés des autres dimensions, au lieu d'une dimension isolée.

As this special issue of *Names* demonstrates, scholars from many fields have been attracted to onomastics. Some investigators have worked on the etymological origins of names, some on the varying popularity of names, and some on religious and other cultural aspects of names. For symbolic interactionist sociologists, the interest in onomastics is primarily in the meanings of names.

Symbolic interaction theory is rooted in G.H. Mead's (1934) conviction that human behavior is governed by its symbolic nature. For Mead the meanings of linguistic symbols are arbitrary, conventional, learned and shared. For symbolic interactionists, this means that we can act toward an object (including another person) only after we have made an interpretation of it; the definition or label we give an object tells us how to behave toward it. If we do not have a name for something, we do not know how to interact with it because the meaning of an object is the telescoped or incipient action it implies (Rose, 1962). Meanings are behavioral and are learned through interaction with others and with objects in the environment. Through socialization, the child learns labels, names (including those for himself), and relationships.

Human behavior for symbolic interactionists becomes symbol manipulation, as Blumer (1969:21) points out, "putting out lines of action" toward objects in the world. Douglas points out (1973:172ff.) that the world is absurd and composed entirely of potentially meaningful symbols which may be defined rather than stimuli which must be responded to. It seems likely that these meanings are generated in the mind in the manner Chomsky (1965) uses to describe purely linguistic meanings.

Chomsky (1965:30-33) describes what he calls the Language Acquisition Device (LAD), an innate mechanism which processes data from the environment according to a set of rules. These innate rules, quite general at the outset, become progressively more refined as the individual processes more data. This is the generativity about which Chomsky speaks: the data already processed assume the form of rules which determine (generate) the processing of future data. Most of an individual's language becomes shared language because it is based on similar data and generated from what begins as an innate set of rules. It seems likely that just as a linguistic grammar is generated in the mind, using data (often of a quite sketchy nature) obtained from experience, so is behavior, or perhaps a social grammar, generated in the mind from experiential data or social interaction. Chomsky (1965:50) suggests this, when he says that "the *faculté de langage* is only one of the faculties of the mind."

It seems possible to conceptualize the human socialization process as being based on an innate mechanism consisting of a set of rules which allows the individual to acquire social knowledge, probably in the form of meanings and rules (or relationships) for behavior. Most of an individual's meanings become shared meanings, derived through interaction as Blumer (1969) describes, and generated in the mind, as Mead (1934) implies.

The purpose of this article is to describe a symbolic interactionist investigation of the meanings of ten names. The background for the study will be described below, followed by a description of the approach to the study and discussions of the results and conclusions.

## BACKGROUND

Symbolic interactionist research has largely concentrated on participant observation techniques of social groups and processes, with investigation of meaning largely confined to the behavioral situation, as Stone and Farberman's anthology (1981) exemplifies. Schellenberg (1978:120) has pointed out that Mead's

empirical referents . . . were usually not made very clear. Translating Mead's ideas into the research of social psychology has frequently been difficult to achieve because of the general nature of his analysis.

Insofar as social psychology is to be a science, our basic question becomes: What is to be observed? What are the key structures to focus on for empirical study? Mead himself does not give us much help here. He was a philosopher rather than a scientist, and his general emphasis was upon process, not structure. What then are the best tools for capturing the essence of the social process? There are no obvious answers here that have the consensus of symbolic interactionists (59).

Some of the interesting questions for symbolic interactionism seem to be: How is a definition generated? Why do some people seem to invest more of an idiosyncratic element to meanings than others (the double-deviant, i.e., the person labelled "deviant" whose behavior changes toward the norm rather than remaining deviant, as the non-recidivist ex-convict)? On what factors is the generation of meanings dependent? Is the system a multivalued one? How many dimensions of meaning are there? Do these dimensions change from situation to situation or are they constant? Are some dimensions universal and some specific to a certain class of symbols?

In evaluating these questions, one seemed most basic: How do we know if a person accepts the meaning (label) which others have given him or her? That is, do we know whether he defined himself in a manner consonant with others' definitions of him? Or does his definition of himself differ from ours? It does not seem likely, for example, that all people in prison or in a Soviet gulag define themselves as "bad," although they are so defined by the agents of their society or presumably they would not be in prison.

Personal names have been chosen for this study as a type of label or meaning. Personal names offer the advantage of being easily changed and manipulated by the bearer, so that one can readily discern whether a person has accepted his label. It seems likely that everyone has available to them various names for use if their own do not fit, so that lack of a well-accepted nickname or shortname is not a problem. One can always become "Fatty," "Sissy," or "Ike." Furthermore, a person can define himself differently according to varying situations, ranging from use of titles to the use of nicknames, pet names or endearments. By his very use of a name, we can know that he accepts it, and he can tell us the circumstances in which he uses each variant.

With its emphasis on language, meaning and labels, symbolic interactionism would seem to demand the inclusion of onomastics, and to some degree, has done so. Stone (Gross and Stone, 1981: 118–9), for example,

has referred to names and misnaming as sources of embarrassment, and points out that, "Names . . . mark people off from one another." He also points out that, "the identities put forward by men are often *titles*; by women, often *names*." No research into these topics from the symbolic interaction framework, other than Stone's observations, seems to exist.

Personal names have been the objects of other sociological study, and the evidence seems clear that names do function as meaningful, non-trivial objects of study and are stereotyped labels. Rossi (1965) found that names given children are related to position in the class structure, with certain names and nametypes more likely to occur in middle-class or lower-class families. Winick (1968) and Darden (1969) show that name choices vary with social change. Winick's data are concerned with the "unisex" and "desexualization" process, and Darden investigated changing name patterns in southern Louisiana during the time of the shift from the universal use of French to the use of English in the area. Jahoda (1954) discussed the relationship between the day names of the Ashanti and the presumed personality consequences of these names. Lawson (1971; 1973; and 1980) has been able to construct models of the meanings of names for both males and females.

### THE MEASUREMENT OF MEANING

Meaning is a crucial variable for symbolic interactionism, but the important question has become how to measure it. Weber's *verstehen* approach, intuitive subjective understanding, is conceded to be necessary, but leads to participant observation, rather than to quantitative measurement. Osgood, Suci and Tannenbaum (1957) have perhaps come the closest to measuring meaning with the semantic differential. As they and Lawson (1971; 1973; 1980) have demonstrated, the semantic differential has versatility in application, is less time-consuming to administer and analyze than other methods, requires less than total immersion in a social world on the part of the researcher, and has easily interpreted results.

In spite of these advantages as a measure of meaning, the semantic differential has two shortcomings: (1) the level of measurement which results is ordinal at best, raising questions about those statistics which require the metric assumption (but see Labovitz, 1970). (2) There is doubt that the outcome of the semantic differential, usually in the form of profiles, is isomorphic to the human mind and cognitive structures or schemata (see Lawson, 1971; 1973; 1980, for some interesting variations using non-parametric analysis techniques). The data, however, can be

used in the form of D-scores as input for another analytic technique, multidimensional scaling, which may take care of these shortcomings.

### APPROACH TO THE STUDY

The techniques of multidimensional scaling (MDS) developed by Coombs (1964), Shepard (1962a; 1962b), Torgerson (Young and Torgerson, 1967) and others, depend on the idea of shared meanings (see Carroll, 1972, for a discussion of individual differences and multidimensional scaling, called INDSCAL). Most of these techniques take non-metric data, such as that generated by the semantic differential, and transform them into metric output in the form of maps. Napior (1972:168) describes this process:

Nonmetric multidimensional scaling programs, in attempting to reproduce the rank order rather than the value of the input, require only ordinal information about the original distances; nevertheless, the solutions obtained have essentially the same scale properties as configurations obtained by metric methods . . .

Factor analysis has often been used successfully to analyze semantic differential data. MDS techniques, however, offer advantages over factor analysis, in that "solutions can achieve great compression of the data without severe distortion" (Napior, 1972:172), and in the visualizability which results from this compression. MDS usually results in solutions of fewer dimensions, although the number of dimensions is itself a variable. The product of the MDS procedure is a set of maps whose mathematical relationships are more than that of a graphic aid to presentation; the maps show points which yield intuitively meaningful information about the relationships and distances between points. These maps are assumed by many (Napior, 1972) to be isomorphic to those generated in the human mind.

As in factor analysis, the researcher must still decide on the number of factors or dimensions acceptable for the solution, but there are additional criteria which can be used in MDS. These are not discussed here because of space constraints, but are discussed in Darden and Robinson (1976).

MDS is well-suited to the study of symbols as shared meanings. One important question generated from the symbolic interaction perspective which seems amenable to investigation of personal names using MDS is whether such shared meanings are structured by dimensions (i.e., mapped) and if so, what these dimensions are. If a concept as abstract as a man's first name can be shown to have a certain amount of shared meaning, a first step toward investigating some of the questions discussed above will have been taken. This study, then, investigates whether there may be (1) universal dimensions along which all symbols are defined or

located, or (2) variable dimensions, specific to certain kinds of stimuli, responsive to cultural or subcultural variations. Another question of interest is the relationship of the nickname to the name.

## METHOD

Respondents for the study were 83 introductory sociology students at the University of Georgia. Sixty-three per cent ( $n = 52$ ) were female, 57% ( $n = 48$ ) had lived most of their lives in Georgia, and 73% ( $n = 61$ ) had either urban or suburban backgrounds. Ninety-one per cent ( $n = 76$ ) were white. Only 10% ( $n = 8$ ) had one of the test names. Data were obtained from a series of semantic differential scales. Twenty bipolar adjectives were used which pretesting had indicated were, if not definitive of male names, at least sufficient. These are listed in Table 1. Ten male names<sup>1</sup> were used; the names were chosen to represent a variety of rather common names and nicknames and some which are less common.

Modified Euclidian distances were computed among all name centroids, and these served as "derived dissimilarities" for the MDS procedure.

Table 1  
*Mean Semantic Differential Values for Each Name*

Bipolar Adjectives	Names									
	Bill	Bruce	Charlie	John	Kevin	Lance	Lou	Matthew	Scott	William
1. Painful-Pleasurable.	4.69	4.23	5.17	5.05	4.35	4.43	4.01	5.17	4.84	4.88
2. Common-Noble.	2.65	3.93	3.11	3.53	4.16	4.99	3.42	5.37	4.16	4.54
3. Perfect-Imperfect.	4.14	4.17	4.28	3.64	4.12	3.66	4.48	3.04	3.73	3.37
4. Shallow-Deep.	3.88	4.16	3.57	4.57	4.24	4.35	3.66	5.22	4.06	4.95
5. Hot-Cold.	3.95	4.00	3.71	3.80	3.94	3.65	4.10	3.37	3.55	3.71
6. Unsociable-Sociable.	5.39	4.72	5.74	5.07	4.54	4.77	4.65	4.98	5.19	4.84
7. Emotional-Unemotional.	3.63	3.67	3.23	3.64	3.64	3.59	3.63	3.25	3.37	3.59
8. Colorful-Colorless.	3.91	3.66	3.08	3.57	3.82	3.23	4.01	3.14	3.37	3.49
9. Fast-Slow.	3.43	3.72	3.77	3.39	4.01	3.17	4.27	3.33	3.24	3.58
10. Urban-Rural.	3.81	3.18	4.33	3.29	3.23	3.07	4.01	3.48	3.29	3.42
11. Simple-Complex.	3.17	4.19	3.13	4.16	4.10	4.69	3.12	4.80	4.02	4.60
12. Masculine-Feminine.	2.04	3.01	2.49	2.10	3.05	2.64	3.30	2.67	2.41	2.57
13. Soft-Tough.	5.04	4.28	4.72	4.92	4.19	4.54	4.40	4.28	4.70	4.58
14. Youthful-Mature.	4.14	4.17	3.49	4.81	3.43	4.55	4.28	4.95	3.73	4.78
15. Sophisticated-Naive.	3.89	3.70	4.43	3.28	4.10	3.18	4.50	3.35	3.72	2.95
16. Active-Passive.	3.01	3.63	2.61	3.05	3.57	3.19	3.80	3.22	2.96	3.27
17. Strong-Weak.	2.86	3.43	2.91	2.87	3.72	2.98	3.48	2.99	3.02	2.94
18. Ornate-Plain.	4.95	4.17	4.83	4.36	4.07	3.39	4.81	3.83	3.86	3.72
19. Dull-Exciting.	4.17	4.08	4.60	4.37	3.96	4.77	3.78	4.65	4.60	4.51
20. Remote-Friendly.	5.40	4.65	5.58	4.94	4.53	4.52	4.72	4.86	5.18	4.83

<sup>1</sup>Female names were not used because of the evidence (Allen, et al., 1941) which suggests that female names are seen in a completely different light. Males, for example, prefer common names and often exhibit behavioral difficulties when given unusual names. Females seem to thrive on unusual names. See also Ellis and Beechley (1954).

ture (see Green and Rao, 1972: 19–20). Semantic differential mean scores (which range from a value of 1 for the first adjective to 7 for the second adjective) for each name on each bipolar scale are presented in Table 1.

## RESULTS

Solutions were obtained for 1-, 2-, 3-, and 4-dimensional space (not shown). Pretest factor analysis indicated that a four-factor solution was appropriate. The Kruskal stress value (see Kruskal, 1964; Darden and Robinson, 1976) for the four-dimensional solution indicates a good fit with the data; and the Shepard Diagram also indicates an acceptable fit (see Darden and Robinson, 1976). Visualizability for the four-dimensional solution is somewhat low, but this solution presents an acceptable configuration.

For purposes of identifying the dimensions in each of the solutions, the mean scores from the semantic differential data were correlated with the varimax rotated configuration scores resulting from the scaling procedure. Table 2 was constructed from these correlations and shows the

Table 2  
*Correlation Coefficients Between Semantic Differential  
Mean Scores and Varimax Rotated Configurations*

First Adjective of the Pair	Four Dimensions				Three Dimensions		
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3
Painful	.02	-.17	.52	-.46	-.36	-.36	.46
Common	-.89	-.17	.20	-.52	-.81	-.03	-.37
Perfect	.59	.49	.02	.62	.77	.42	.21
Shallow	-.70	-.52	-.26	-.46	-.70	-.31	-.50
Hot	.45	-.11	-.35	.68	.73	.25	-.25
Unsociable	.64	.02	.67	.18	.16	-.28	.77
Unemotional	.10	-.30	-.61	.23	.24	-.10	-.55
Colorful	.25	.01	-.44	.72	.66	.27	-.45
Fast	.11	.36	-.06	.86	.69	.61	-.16
Urban	.61	.16	.68	.56	.70	.08	.57
Simple	-.79	-.35	-.38	-.67	-.89	-.24	-.48
Masculine	-.40	.34	-.34	.49	.18	.63	-.44
Soft	.73	-.34	.43	.17	.24	-.62	.55
Youthful	-.26	-.88	-.16	.24	-.30	-.66	-.41
Sophisticated	.40	.70	.28	.71	.72	.67	.35
Active	-.38	-.01	-.68	.52	.21	.40	-.80
Strong	-.35	.54	-.51	.54	.23	.81	-.49
Ornate	.75	.20	.29	.69	.87	.18	.32
Dull	-.18	-.24	.43	-.85	-.71	-.53	.43
Remote	.71	-.13	.62	.31	.35	-.19	.70

adjectives most highly correlated with each of the dimensions in the four- and three-dimensional solutions. Dimension 1 of the four-dimensional solution, for example, correlates highly with the loadings on eight of the semantic differential scales, and accounting for signs in the correlations, yields Noble, Deep, Complex, Ornate, Friendly, Soft, Perfect, and Urban. This dimension appears as the Character dimension on the basis of its composition. The other three dimensions suggest Maturity, Sociability, and Virility, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3  
Scales Most Highly Correlated with Each Dimension:  
Three- and Four-Dimensional Solutions

Four-Dimensional Solution Dimensions				Three-Dimensional Solution Dimensions		
1	2	3	4	1	2	3
Character	Maturity	Sociability	Virility	Evaluation	Potency & Maturity	Activity
Noble	Youthful	Sociable	Fast	Noble	Strong	Sociable
Deep	Sophisticated	Active	Exciting	Perfect	Masculine	Active
Complex	Deep	Friendly	Sophisticated	Ornate	Youthful	Friendly
Ornate	Strong	Urban	Ornate	Deep	Sophisticated	
Friendly		Emotional	Colorful	Cold	Fast	
Soft		Pleasurable	Noble	Complex		
Perfect		Strong	Perfect			
Urban			Hot			
			Urban			
			Complex			
			Active			
			Strong			

The four-dimensional solution is acceptable, although visualizability and parsimony are low. There is some preliminary supporting evidence for a three-dimensional solution, since Lawson (1971; 1973) found a three-factor solution using the semantic differential and D-scores to account for over 90% of his variance.

For the three-dimensional solution, the Kruskal stress factor is still (but barely) within tolerable limits. Other criteria (see Darden and Robinson, 1976) also indicate an acceptable fit with the data. Looking again at Table 2, the three dimensions suggest Osgood's three dimensions, as Lawson found, with some confounding: Activity, Evaluation, and Potency combined with Age.

The two- and one-dimensional configurations do not present acceptable solutions.



## ANALYSIS

The tentative nature of these findings must be stressed. The data seem to support the notion that the meanings of symbols are structured in cognitive maps which are shared by many people and have identifiable dimensions. From the nature of the identifications of the dimensions of these maps, these dimensions seem to vary in both number and kind. Burton (1972) found that occupation names are perceived in terms of three dimensions: Dependence, Prestige, and Skill. Rappoport and Fillenbaum (1972) found that colors are mapped in very much the same pattern as the color wheel. The representations and dimensions of these investigators do not, however, seem to be relevant to personal names. Neither do the dimensions found in our study suggest occupation names or colors.

One of the purposes of this study was the investigation of the relationship between names and nicknames. Some have suggested that this relationship is probably in the form of a continuum going from formal name to nickname. If there were such a dimension, these ten names should be arranged on one of the dimensions with the informal names (Charlie, Bill and Lou) at one end, the formal names (William, Matthew and John) at the other, and the less formal names (Kevin, Scott, Lance and Bruce) perhaps arrayed in between. Some of the dimensions do approach this configuration, although not perfectly, but they appear to be better explained by the other identifications. Figure 1 shows a way of mapping the nicknames. Figure 1 shows the map of dimensions 1 ("character") and 2 ("maturity") obtained from the four-dimensional solution. Superimposed on the map are two circles which enclose the nicknames (circle A) and the less formal names (circle B). In this way, nicknames appear to be not a separate dimension but a composite of the other dimensions; that is, the name/nickname dimension may not be orthogonal to the others. This seems to be an important finding which suggests the existences of different levels of structure in the mind, such as Chomsky (1965) described with his deep and surface structure. This idea, of course, calls for a great deal of cross- and intracultural testing.

Nicknames serve in American culture as mechanisms of social control. This function seems to be accomplished through nicknames which redefine a person by relocating him in relation to us, usually bringing him closer to us, or lowering him, so that we can deal with him at a comfortable level. It may well be that the same is true for other cultures, as Antoun (1968) shows for an Arab village and that relocation is defined along different axes according to cultural values. Repeated testing is necessary to verify these ideas.

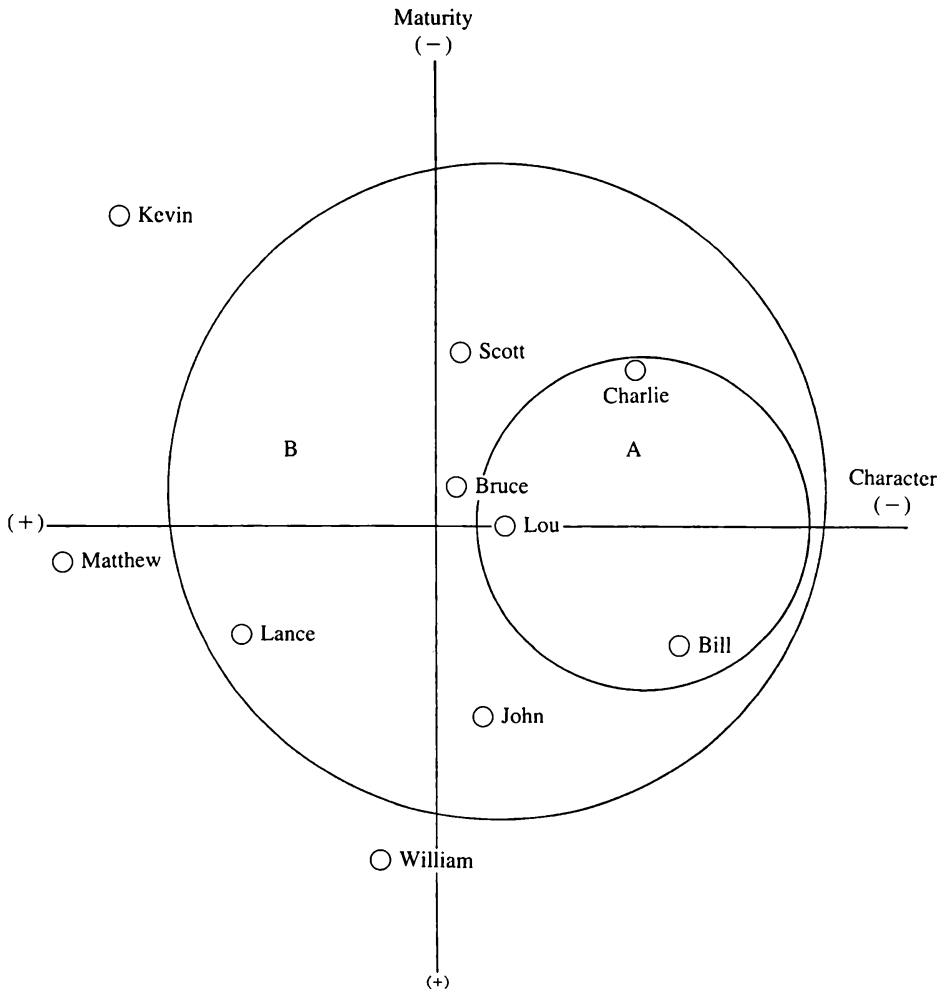


Figure 1: Map of Dimension 1 (Character) and Dimension 2 (Maturity). Circle A contains the least formal names (nicknames), and Circle B shows the more formal names. Outside of the circles lie the most formal names.

Repeated testing may also serve as a measure of social change, when used perhaps with the same groups over time. For example, it is evident that contemporary American society is different from that of a century ago in the kinds of names given infants. What is less evident is the nature of the dimensions of meaning underlying the names chosen at different periods of history. Are fads in naming simply choices at different points along the mapping continua, or do the maps change, too? Measuring the dimensions of meaning of names and of many other phenomena may prove to be a reliable indicator of social change.

## CONCLUSIONS

This investigation has shown that personal names present an excellent object for symbolic interactionist research to determine the nature and structure of meaning. It has also shown that the study of personal names can easily be rooted in a social psychological theory which presents readily derived relationships and interesting questions.

Acceptable solutions for mapping the ten male names used here have been found in both three- and four-dimensional configurations. The four dimensions are identified as Character, Maturity, Sociability, and Virility. The three dimensions are identified as Activity, Evaluation and Potency combined with Age. The nickname dimension has been found to be orthogonal to the other dimensions, rather than a separate dimension. The orthogonality of the nickname — formal name dimension may be due to the function of the nickname, which seems to serve to lower a person socially, so that he can be dealt with comfortably. As names are structured on three or four cognitive dimensions, we may lower a person on any of these dimensions, or on a combination of dimensions. For purposes of exploring this idea, further study could be devoted to studying nicknames in the social contexts of their use to discover their function in interaction.

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