

ARTICLE

The process of construction of social values: revisiting the concept of social value from the point of view of the symbolic interactionism tradition

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Abstract

In the second decade of the 21st century, great issues that challenge humanity, from wars to climate change, have been growing. The consequence of climate change, such as natural disasters, water scarcity, and pandemics, has deepened social inequalities. Many problems have persisted despite the technological, economic and social progress achieved in the last two centuries and make us reflect on how we ended up in this situation. After all, what makes sense and matters to the groups and societies that inhabit this planet? To address this issue, we chose, within American pragmatism, the symbolic interactionism tradition and the concept of social value, based on the sociological approach of social psychology, aiming to explain how the process of construction of this type of value occurs. We revisited, from the three versions of symbolic interactionism (traditional, contemporary, and structural), the concept set forth by Thomas and Znaniecki (1927, 2006). Through this theoretical integration, we propose a contemporary conceptual definition of what social value is in order to continue with the formulation of a theoretical model regarding the process of construction of social values, paving the way to understand the dynamics between the different social structures (macro) and the agency of human beings (micro) in the signification, resignification, and even abandonment of such values.

Keywords: Social value. Construction process. Symbolic Interactionism. Integration of versions. Sociological social psychology.

O processo de construção de valores sociais: revisitando o conceito de valor social do ponto de vista da tradição interacionista simbólica

Resumo

Nesta segunda década do século XXI, acumulam-se grandes questões que desafiam a humanidade, de guerras a mudanças climáticas e suas consequências, como desastres naturais, escassez de água e pandemias, o que aprofunda as desigualdades sociais. Tantos problemas que persistem, apesar do progresso tecnológico, econômico e social alcançado nos últimos dois séculos, nos levam a refletir sobre como viemos parar nesse ponto. Afinal, o que tem sentido e importa para os grupos e as sociedades que habitam este planeta? Em direção à problematização desse questionamento, elegemos, de acordo com o pragmatismo americano, a tradição interacionista simbólica e o conceito de valor social, fundamentados na vertente sociológica da psicologia social, para responder como ocorre o processo de construção desse tipo de valor. Neste texto, revisitamos, com base nas três vertentes do interacionismo simbólico (tradicional, contemporânea e estrutural), o conceito definido por Thomas e Znaniecki (1927, 2006) e, por meio dessa integração teórica, propomos uma definição conceitual contemporânea do que seja valor social para prosseguir à formulação de um modelo teórico acerca do processo de construção de valores sociais, abrindo espaço para compreender a dinâmica entre as diferentes estruturas da sociedade (macro) e a agência das pessoas (micro) na significação, na ressignificação e até no abandono desses valores.

Palavras-chave: Valor social. Processo de construção. Interacionismo simbólico. Integração de vertentes. Psicologia social sociológica.

El proceso de construcción de valores sociales: revisitando el concepto de valor social desde el punto de vista de la tradición interaccionista simbólica

Resumen

En esta segunda década del siglo XXI, se acumulan grandes cuestiones que desafían a la humanidad, desde guerras hasta cambios climáticos y sus consecuencias, tales como desastres naturales, escasez de agua y pandemias, profundizando las desigualdades sociales. Tantos problemas que persisten a pesar del progreso tecnológico, económico y social logrado en los últimos dos siglos, nos llevan a reflexionar sobre cómo hemos llegado a este punto. Después de todo, ¿qué tiene sentido e importancia para los grupos y sociedades que habitan este planeta? Para la problematización de ese cuestionamiento, elegimos, dentro del pragmatismo estadounidense, la tradición interaccionista simbólica y el concepto de valor social fundamentado en la vertiente sociológica de la psicología social, con el objetivo de responder cómo ocurre el proceso de construcción de ese tipo de valor. Revisitamos, a partir de las tres vertientes del interaccionismo simbólico (tradicional, contemporáneo y estructural), el concepto definido por Thomas y Znaniecki (1927, 2006) y, por medio de esa integración teórica, proponemos una definición conceptual contemporánea de lo que es un valor social para proceder a la formulación de un modelo teórico acerca del proceso de construcción de valores sociales, abriendo espacio para comprender la dinámica entre las diferentes estructuras de la sociedad (macro) y la agencia de personas (micro) en la significación, resignificación e incluso abandono de esos valores.

Palabras clave: Valor social. Proceso de construcción. Interaccionismo simbólico. Integración de vertientes. Psicología social sociológica.

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INTRODUCTION

In the year 2020, a terrifying scenario unfolded in all countries, facing governments, organizations and people, which we had not anticipated and for which no preparation had been made: the new coronavirus pandemic. However, diseases like COVID-19 do not burgeon spontaneously, as does distrust in science, or in democracy. How did we get to this point? In a world with plenty information, communication, social networks and different positioning, understanding how social groups establish social values, that is, what matters to them, whether objects or ideas, through the attribution of meanings (Thomas & Znaniecki, 1927, 2006), can give us clues on how to face global challenges. Such challenges run through climate changes, water scarcity, hunger, and extreme poverty, which persist despite all the technological, economic and social progress achieved in the last two centuries (George, Howard-Grenville, Joshi, & Tihanyi, 2016).

The recent worldwide phenomenon labeled The Great Resignation (A Grande Renúncia, in Portuguese), dated 2021, for example, brought about significant changes in labor relations, accelerated by the pandemic and the digital transformation in organizations (Almeida, 2022). In the US, more than 19 million workers gave up their jobs since April 2021, a record pace that has caused concern to US companies (Smet, Dowling, Mugayar-Baldocchi, & Schaninger, 2021). In Brazil, 2.9 million workers resigned among January and May 2022, a 32.5% increase compared to the same period in 2021 (Almeida, 2022). The reasons range from the preference for new ways of working (Almeida, 2022) to the yearning that employees have for investments in human aspects of work: “Workers are tired and many are in mourning. They want a new and revised sense of purpose in their work” (Smet et al., 2021, s.p.). The unprecedented number of voluntary layoffs, in connection with the current (post)pandemic, shows that people and organizations are at the core of changes that affect social values, such as labor. The objective of this theoretical essay was to investigate how the process of social values construction occurs, highlighting that such values are redefined in different times and spaces, even losing their meaning.

In the literature, the expression “social value” assumes different connotations in different fields of knowledge. In entrepreneurship, social value is taken as synonymous with social impact, that is, the return of such efforts and activities that social enterprises undertake to solve social problems (Ajitha & Sivakumar, 2017; Awuzie & McDermott, 2016; Brickson, 2007; Brieger, Bairo, Criaco, & Terjesen, 2021; Cartigny & Lord, 2017; Lashitew, van Tulder, & Muche, 2022; Narangajavana, Gonzalez-Cruz, Garrigos-Simon, & Cruz-Ros, 2016; Polonsky & Grau, 2008).

However, this article, focuses on social value in the field of sociological social psychology, within the intellectual tradition of the symbolic interactionism of the early 20th century School of Chicago. Anchored in the American pragmatist philosophy, symbolic interactionism has produced a number of contributions regarding macro–micro discussions, associating agency/structure, and, therefore, making explicit the intertwining of different levels of social analysis that support the maintenance or the change of the status quo, based on which social values are (re)(de)constructed. Although there are other theories that discuss micro-macro dichotomies (e.g.: structuration theory and institutional theory), in this article we chose symbolic interactionism to investigate the process that defines what matters for different groups and societies, since from this theory the concept of social value by Thomas and Zaniecki originated (1927, 2006) and because symbolic interactionism has continued to develop over time until the present day (Carter & Fuller, 2016; Carvalho, Borges, & Rêgo, 2010; Fine, 2005; Hall, 2003; Torregrosa, 2004), especially due to the potential of this tradition in reviewing socialization, resocialization and changes processes in opinion, behavior, expectations and social demands (Carvalho et al., 2010).

The concept of social value was first proposed in the so-called traditional version of symbolic interactionism by Thomas and Znaniecki (1927, 2006); social value has also the important reference of Herbert Mead, one of the main authors of the Chicago School. The evolution of the interactionism movement gave rise to theoretical demarcations among the researchers of this

tradition and, thus, we can find in the literature two other versions and their relevant supporters¹: Contemporary Version by Herbert Blumer and Social Structural Version by Manford Kuhn and Sheldon Stryker (Stryker, 1980).

As the concept of social value was restricted to the traditional line of symbolic interactionism and ended up falling into oblivion with the rise of a social psychology core based on cognitive processes (Álvaro & Garrido, 2017), we advocate that in order to contribute to the understanding of emerging social problems, complex and multifaceted, through the perspective of social values, an update of this concept becomes imperative. We therefore propose integration of different versions of symbolic interactionism to advance with regard to the definition of social value by Thomas and Znaniecki (1927, 2006) and to elaborate, subsequently, a theoretical model for the social values construction process based on the dynamics between the agency of people and the restrictions that are imposed by the social structures in which social actors are bound.

In order to contribute to review the concept and to propose a process for the construction of social values as a further step towards understanding the phenomena that involve the problems of the 21st century, our path begins with the presentation of the different approaches of social psychology – area of knowledge that brings together a significant part of the studies on values –, in order to place social values in the sociological aspect of symbolic interactionism. Next, we consider the contributions of the three versions of the interactionism tradition for the proposition of a social value concept and, then, for presenting and discussing the theoretical model of the social values construction process.

VALUES IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

The word “value” is present in everyday life and is used in different situations and has different meanings. As a noun, value was first recorded in the Compact Oxford English Dictionary in 1303, to refer to the fairness and equivalence of the quantity of merchandise in an exchange, and in 1398, to signify a standard of valuation (Rohan, 2000). As a verb, the use of the word value (to value) was also first recorded in the early 14th century, to describe the act of valuing a commodity (Rohan, 2000).

For Kluckhohn (1951), an American anthropologist, value is a technical term used in different areas of knowledge such as philosophy, economics, arts, sociology, psychology and anthropology, and has different meanings (Adler, 1956). Most studies on values focus on social psychology (Ros, 2001) which is divided into psychological social psychology and sociological social psychology (Álvaro & Garrido, 2017; Stryker, 1977; Torregrosa, 2004). In each of those studies we find definitions for the construct.

In psychological social psychology, values are found in individuals, that is, they are intrasubjective (Rokeach, 1973). In this sense, they are the result of cognition; therefore, they arise and are built from the inside out (Álvaro & Garrido, 2017) and are grounded in human needs.

Influential authors in psychological value studies are Rokeach (1969, 1973), Schwartz (1992, 1994, 2005) and Schwartz et al. (2012). Rokeach (1973) defines a value as “an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence” (Rokeach, 1973, p. 5). Schwartz (1994) brings up human motivations as the substantive content of values, considering them “desirable transsituational goals, varying in importance, that serve as guiding principles in the life of a person or other social entity” (Schwartz, 1994, p. 21). From an evolutionary perspective, the types of motivation are common to all individuals, in any society, differing only in terms of hierarchy (Schwartz, 1992).

¹ It should be noted that other authors discuss and/or label the different phases of the symbolic interactionist tradition differently, such as Carter and Fuller (2016), Carvalho et al. (2010) and Fine (2005). Carvalho et al. (2010) mention other members of the Chicago School who made important contributions, such as Charles Cooley and John Dewey, as well as relevant disciples of Blumer, such as Anselm Strauss and Tamotsu Shibutani, who carried forward the sociopsychological contributions made by Blumer. Many theories used symbolic interactionist ideas for their development, such as Berger and Luckman, in their well-known work *The social construction of reality*, also mentioned by Fine (2005). Carter and Fuller (2016) present the development of symbolic interactionism by dividing it into three main schools: Chicago School (Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer), Iowa School (Manford Kuhn) and Indiana School (Sheldon Stryker). Therefore, the contributions of symbolic interactionism evidently are not exhaustive considering the authors selected to compose the discussions in this article.

On the other hand, linked to sociological social psychology, researchers from the so-called School of Chicago exerted enormous influence on social studies produced in the early 20th century, through the symbolic interactionism tradition (Álvaro & Garrido, 2017) which also dealt with values. Here, however, values are called social, located in objects, due to a signification process that occurs through social interaction (Álvaro & Garrido, 2017) by which they are attributed and shared, which characterizes them as extra and intersubjective.

For symbolic interactionists, meaning is one of the most important elements in understanding human behaviour, interactions and social processes (Fine, 2005). In *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*, Blumer (1969) sets out three basic premises:

The first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them. [...] The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters (Blumer, 1969, p. 2).

Unlike the psychological aspect of social psychology, which focuses on the cognitive process, interactionists consider that meaning is produced through the process of human interaction (Mead, 1962; Blumer, 1969). Thus, the vision of society participants supported by all the symbolic interactionism approaches is that of being an agent (Stryker, 1980). Human beings are seen engaging in social interaction with themselves, through self-interaction, and with others, in order to develop a line of action according to the interpretations they build from the different situations, rather than simply issuing an automatic response (Blumer, 1969). By doing that, the agent has the ability to signify and re-signify (Blumer, 1969), even allowing a meaning to be abandoned.

During the same time as Mead (1962) and Blumer (1969) made important contributions to symbolic interactionism, other Chicago School researchers were carrying out studies focusing on social interaction and meaning, such as William I. Thomas and his collaborator Florian Znaniecki. Both presented, in the second decade of the 20th century, the concept of social value that was used as the basis for the development of our proposal.

SOCIAL VALUES

Thomas and Znaniecki (1918-1920), authors of the work entitled *The Polish peasant in Europe and America*, considered a milestone in social psychology (Álvaro & Garrido, 2017; Bulmer, 1984), in the opening chapter, called "Methodological Note", present the concept of social value, defined as "any datum having an empirical content accessible to the members of some social group and a meaning with regard to which it is or may be an object of activity" (Thomas & Znaniecki, 2006, p. 110).

In order to make the concept of social value clearer, Thomas and Znaniecki (2006) exemplify that

[...] a foodstuff, an instrument, a coin, a piece of poetry, a university, a myth, a scientific theory are social values. Each of them has a content that is sensual in the case of the foodstuff, the instrument, the coin; partly sensual, partly imaginary in the piece of poetry, whose content is constituted, not only by the written or spoken words, but also by the images which they evoke, and in the case of the university, whose content is the whole complex of men, buildings, material accessories, and images representing its activity; or, finally, only imaginary in the case of a mythical personality or a scientific theory (Thomas & Znaniecki, 2006, p. 110).

Based on the examples, a social value can take the form of something concrete or refer to something of an abstract nature, since "even a personal 'idea' can be communicated to others (Thomas & Znaniecki, 2006, p. 116) and becomes accessible and generates actions, or initiatives, in connection with it. For Thomas & Znaniecki (2006), the meanings of those values become expressed when they can be referred to their functions or purposes. The meaning of

the foodstuff is its reference to its eventual consumption; that of an instrument, its reference to the work for which it is designed; that of a coin, the possibilities of buying and selling or the pleasures of spending which it involves; that of the piece of poetry, the sentimental and intellectual reactions which it arouses; that of the university, the social activities which it performs; that of the mythical personality, the cult of which it is the object and the actions of which it is supposed to be the author; that of the scientific theory, the possibilities of control of experience by idea or action that it permits (Thomas & Znaniecki, 2006, p. 111).

Although social value is the result of social interaction, Thomas and Znaniecki (2006) point out that “[...] a social value, acting upon individual members of the group, produces a more or less different effect on every one of them; even when acting upon the same individual at various moments it does not influence him uniformly” (Thomas & Znaniecki, 2006, p. 126). Members of a certain group may react in an identical way to certain values, as they have been taught to react that way, due to the existence of social rules, but the same action in different social conditions produces different results (Thomas & Znaniecki, 2006). This is because the results of an individual activity do not depend only on the action itself, but also on the social conditions within which the action is performed. Hence, the authors end up highlighting some important points in our understanding: the dynamics of the meaning of social value over time, since new agents come to know them and act towards them, also favourably or unfavourably; the existence of regulatory structures in life of humans, in society, as in the case of the institutions assessed by Thomas & Znaniecki (2006) (e.g., families, the press and educational institutions); and, therefore, the circumscription of social values in the relationships between individuals and individual-society.

More recently, other interactionism authors have strongly debated the micro-macro issue. In this sense, a concept of contemporary social value can be proposed in the light of Structural Symbolic Interactionism, a trend strongly promoted by Sheldon Stryker.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE STRUCTURAL VERSION TO SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

Stryker (1980) made a great contribution by criticizing within the interactionism perspective, especially Blumer’s microsociological concept, systematizing the different lines present in the movement and by proposing his own version of symbolic interactionism, called structural version². This author, throughout his research trajectory, highlights the role of social structures in the process of interaction between people and in the establishment of social roles and, consequently, in the formation of identities, without neglecting human agency (Stryker, 1959, 1968, 1980, 1987, 2008).

For Stryker (2008), society exists before the appearance of new members. Therefore, social institutions precede the direct interaction between individuals and the strength of these structures is present in the regulation of this interaction. The structuralist version uses as a starting point the social structures as “patterned interactions and relationships, emphasizing the durability of such patterns, resistance to change, and capacity to reproduce themselves.” (Stryker, 2008, p. 19).

Society is seen, in the structuralist version, as being composed of organized systems of interactions and role relationships, or even “as complex mosaics of differentiated groups, communities, and institutions, cross-cut by a variety of demarcations based on class, age, gender, ethnicity, religion, etc.” (Stryker, 2008, p. 19). Stryker (2008) considers, however, that social life largely occurs not within society as a whole, but in more restricted, often local, networks. People live

[...] their lives in relatively small and specialized networks of social relationships through roles that support their participation in such networks. These small networks are nested within a hierarchy of social structures in which large social structures provide boundaries affecting the likelihood that individuals will enter into smaller social structures (Merolla, Serpe, Stryker, & Schultz, 2012, p. 151).

² We observe that, in addition to Sheldon Stryker, the structural version of symbolic interactionism includes the contributions of Kuhn, the main exponent of the Iowa School (Carter & Fuller, 2016). However, the emphasis in the article was given to Stryker, since this author deepened the discussion about the influence of social structures in the interactionist tradition, helping us to bring the macrosociological vision to the concept of social value, born within a strand predominantly microsociological of symbolic interactionism.

The structures that make up this hierarchy are of three types: i) large social structures; ii) intermediate social structures; and iii) proximate social structures (Merolla et al., 2012). The first structures concern social macro-orientation, or social categories such as ethnicity, class, gender or nation. These structures are relatively stable (over time), they serve as social boundaries and influence interpersonal behaviours, having important and direct consequences in individual life (Merolla et al., 2012). Since, serving as limits to demarcate the sets in which people are inserted (Brenner, Serpe & Stryker, 2014), they impact the development conditions of their identities (Stryker, 1959, 1968).

Intermediate social structures, in turn, are considerable sets of people in particular and delimiting contexts (e.g., neighbourhoods, schools, associations). This kind of structure is considered important, as the social limits imposed thereby increase or reduce the probability of social relationships formation. Thus, “intermediate structures, like large social structures, serve as important gatekeeping boundaries in determining which individuals have more or less access to which proximate social structures” (Merolla et al., 2012, p. 152).

In contrast, proximate social structures are smaller networks or groups with proximate people, such as families, teams, departments within larger corporate or educational structures. This type of structure represents the framework in which people generally develop their identities (Serpe & Stryker, 2011; Stryker, Serpe, & Hunt, 2005). In the structural perspective, the terms social group, social network and proximate social structure are taken as synonyms and are qualified as “small and involve interpersonal relationships rather than the relationships of organizations, institutions, total societies” (Merolla et al., 2012, p. 150).

With the contributions highlighted so far by the three versions of symbolic interactionism, we suggest below a conceptualization for social value from the articulation and integration of the ideas presented.

SOCIAL VALUE IN THE LIGHT OF TRADITIONAL, CONTEMPORARY AND STRUCTURAL VERSIONS OF SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

Thomas and Znaniecki (2006) already stated that the rules of conduct constitute “a certain number of more or less connected and harmonious systems which can be generally called social institutions” (Thomas & Znaniecki, 1927, p. 33), showing that, in addition to the direct interaction between individuals, there are social relations among members that are patterned and instituted within a group. Therefore, these representatives of the traditional version of symbolic interactionism reveal the power of social structures which Merolla et al. (2012), and more recently Brenner, Serpe and Stryker (2014) classified into large, intermediate and proximate social structures. Thus, gender and ethnicity (considered large structures) can restrict access to certain social spaces, such as universities (considered intermediate structures); in turn, a certain university makes it more or less likely that students will enter into social relationships and interactions (proximate structures) that may lead them, for example, to seek or not to pursue an academic career (Merolla et al., 2012).

In structural symbolic interactionism, the importance of social structures in the regulation of social relations and individual action is clear. On the one hand, for the structural interactionists, social life is built, open to reconstruction and to social change, as the interaction, formation, maintenance and dissolution of social groups (proximate structures) have an impact on larger structures (Stryker, 1980). On the other hand, social life is delimited by “objective characteristics of the world lived in, prior constructions, norm-based pressures from interaction partners and habits” (Serpe & Stryker, 2011, p. 232), considering that higher structures (large or intermediate) have an impact on the interaction, formation, maintenance or dissolution of social groups (Stryker, 1980). In this sense, many interactions between people only reproduce existing structures; therefore, human action does not always necessarily result in changing situations or structural reconfigurations (Serpe & Stryker, 2011).

With this, we understand that in the structural approach of symbolic interactionism, people are always contextualized in a certain space and time and belong to different proximate structures. Although they are capable of causing changes, acting alone they will hardly directly impact large social structures (social macrocategories). The same does not occur in relation to the ability that people have to influence higher social structures when articulated in social groups, which does not mean that such influence occurs in an easy way, since larger structures influence interpersonal behaviours and serve as social boundaries, having important and direct consequences on individual life (Merolla et al., 2012), as they serve as limits to demarcate social groups in which people are inserted (Brenner et al., 2014).

By identifying the existence of three types of social structures (large, intermediate and proximate structures), Merolla et al. (2012) point to a macro-micro relationship that provides the social framework in which human agency occurs. The social group present in the definition of social value by Thomas and Znaniecki (2006) can be understood as a proximate social structure, as they are “small and involve interpersonal relationships” (Merolla, et al., 2012, p. 150), which attributes meanings to things. All things, concrete and abstract, that have meaning for a particular group are considered social values (Thomas & Znaniecki, 2006). In turn, the members of a social group, or proximate structure, act in different ways in the face of what they recognize as a value (Thomas & Znaniecki, 2006).

Based on the above and on what was discussed so far, we arrive at the conceptualization of social value to be **any data with accessible empirical content** (Thomas & Znaniecki, 2006), **meaning assigned** (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1967; Thomas & Znaniecki, 2006) **and susceptible to activity** (Thomas & Znaniecki, 2006) **by agents located in proximate social structures permeated by intermediate and large social structures** (Brenner et al., 2014; Merolla et al., 2012).

THE CONSTRUCTION PROCESS OF SOCIAL VALUES

The definition of social value, based on the three interactionism versions despite indicating where social values are formed (in the proximate social structures), does not tell us how such values are built, reproduced, maintained or abandoned and the resignifications that occur in this process. However, it is possible to propose, based on the theoretical aspects already discussed, how this process takes place, as shown in Figure 1 and in the theoretical propositions that come with it.

As illustrated in Figure 1, considering the integration of the three approaches of symbolic interactionism, a given society (outermost line of the orange figure) can be represented as an organized whole that comprises: i) the three types of hierarchically classified social structures as large, intermediate and proximate (tabs in gradient shades of orange) and ii) people endowed with their individuality, power of agency and different social roles (indicated by the icons of people with coloured geometric figures). People belong to social groups (white circles) with which they interact to carry out the exercise of social life (maintaining family, marital status friendship, work, commercial relationships, etc.). This societal configuration and the relationships that occur between people (double arrows between people icons), groups (double arrows between white circles) and social structures (double arrows between tabs in gradient shades of orange) provide the framework in which social values are established.

We sustain that the process of social construction of values lies in the dynamics between the different social structures and the human agency. To better explain this statement, we elaborated four propositions that describe the process of construction of this type of values.

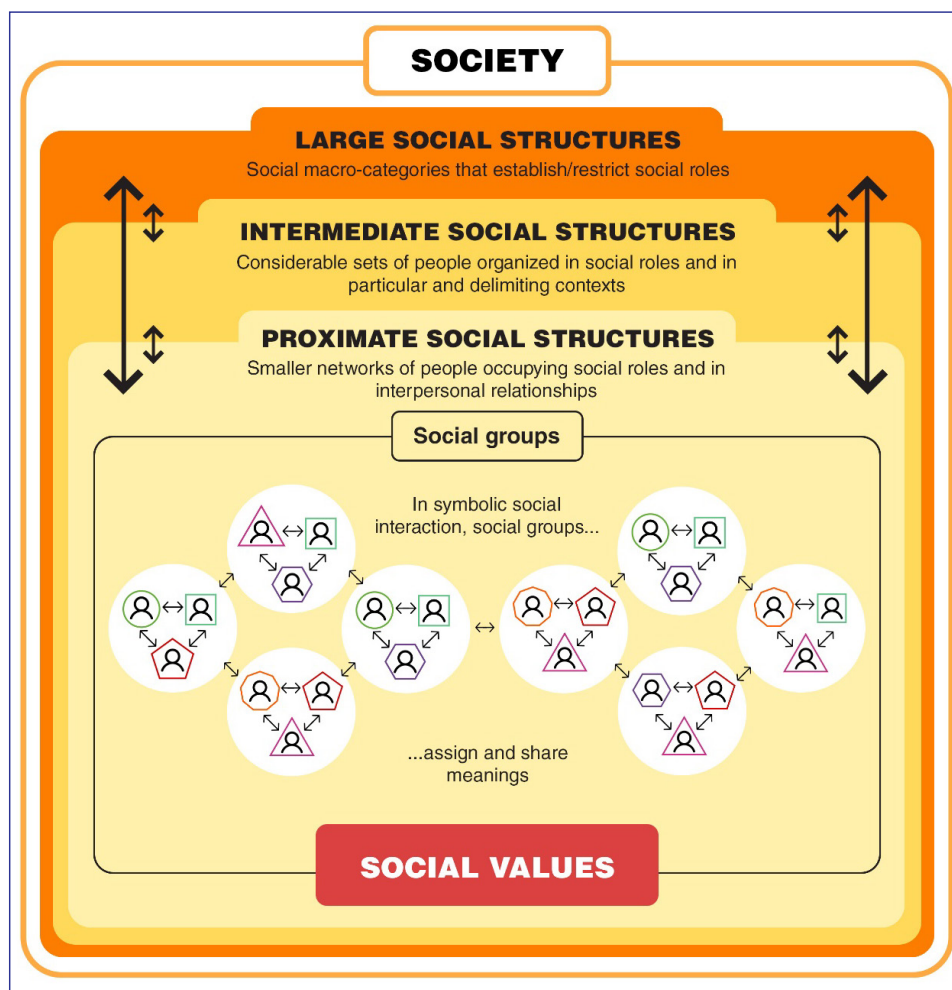
1. It is people, located in social groups (proximate structures) belonging to larger structures, who establish meanings for different “somethings”, concrete and abstract, via symbolic interaction, as they find functions for these “somethings”, which become social values for such groups.

In this proposition, we start by highlighting that the process of social construction of values begins with the direct interaction between people located in social groups, which are located at the level of proximate social structures, the type of social structure most internalized in our representation. It is people who are responsible for establishing social values in the process, since, as the interactionism assumptions of the traditional and contemporary version indicate, we are agents who carry out movement towards things that have meaning (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1962; Thomas & Znaniecki, 2006).

Since meanings are social products, that is, they are creations of human activities, through symbolic interaction in which an interactive and self-interactive process endowed with meaning occurs (Blumer, 1969); action towards things becomes guided by meanings. However, as one of the assumptions of structural interactionism indicates, a person’s belonging to certain proximate structures is influenced by higher structures (Brenner et al., 2014; Merolla et al., 2012); hence, limits are attributed to human action, which leads us to the second proposition.

2. Large social structures impact the access that people will have to certain intermediate and proximate structures, which can increase/restrict the possibilities of having contact with spaces of attribution and sharing of meanings and, therefore, with certain social values.

Figure 1
The process of social values construction



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The second proposition of our model is based on two assumptions of the structural approach of symbolic interactionism. First, we reiterate that people are situated in certain social structures that previously form a society and delimiting contexts for human action, both for existing members of that society and for new members (Brenner et al., 2014; Merolla et al., 2012; Stryker, 1980, 2008). Thus, large social structures increase/restrict people's possibilities to make contact with certain social spaces and, consequently, may limit access to knowledge of certain social values and the possibilities of activity towards them (Thomas & Znaniecki, 2006). In addition to the regulatory force of large social structures, intermediate social structures operate as a second layer of restrictions on human action, as we propose below.

3. Intermediate social structures encompass proximate social structures and may, through their representatives, disseminate the meanings of what is established, leading new members of proximate structures to act at first in the face of existing values which are reproduced by their representatives.

For this proposition, we remind that a person's belonging to certain structures is influenced by higher structures (Brenner et al., 2014; Merolla et al., 2012), such in case of the intermediate structures, in which members of social groups have positions and roles within each proximate structure they maintain social relationships with (Stryker, 1980, 2008).

With the examples provided by the structural interactionism authors (neighbourhoods, schools, associations) we can think that the intermediate social structures basically refer to any type of social organization (e.g.: companies) and it is in the organizations that people interact with each other in proximate social structures. People in the role of intermediate structures representatives, such as those who occupy formal leadership positions, which give them legitimacy, act to disseminate social values with already established meanings. People's interactions with such representatives and with themselves can lead them to the acceptance of such meanings and their reproduction over time.

Since social structures are interactions and standardized social relationships that are resistant to change and that tend to reproduce themselves (Stryker, 1980, 2008), through the hierarchical relationship that is established between intermediate structures and proximate structures, while the existing social values are not re-signified, we understand that there is a tendency to be reproduced, both in the intermediate social structures and in proximate structures. The assumptions of human agency, which provide clues about how objectified social values can be re-signified, are presented in the last proposition.

4. People belong to different social groups, whether in one or more intermediate structures, being exposed to other people who can attribute different meanings to the same social value. The process of reflection inherent to these people is capable of providing (re)interpretations and, consequently, the attribution of new meanings to existing social values, abandonment of certain values, and/or the proposition of new social values.

As social reality is complex and the world of organizations is wide and diverse, people belong to different social groups (Brenner, Serpe & Stryker, 2014; Merolla et al., 2012; Stryker, 1968). The fact that a person plays a specific role in each social group of which he/she becomes a member allows a multiplicity of interactions between people and patterns of action.

Although social relationships and human action occur contextualized, in social structures, and meanings can resist to change (Stryker, 1980, 2008), it is people who are responsible for change in the social world, they are the ones who construct meanings as a consequence of the social interaction process, and these meanings can be manipulated, resignified and even abandoned, as stated by Blumer (1969). It is in the proximate social structures (Brenner et al., 2014; Merolla et al., 2012) that people relate directly to each other and to themselves (self-reflection), interpreting and sharing meaning rather than just issuing automatic adjustment responses (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1962); thus, they can act in a similar or different way in relation to a given social value, even in an opposite way (Thomas & Znaniecki, 2006), leading to (re)interpretations (Blumer, 1969) over social values, consequently (re)signifying them or even abandoning pre-existing values, and/or constructing new ones.

Therefore, social values are both the product of agents located within proximate structures and the result of the influence of larger structures on human action. To highlight some of the expected contributions and future developments based on our theoretical proposal, we have drawn our final considerations below.

FINAL COMMENTS

Thomas and Znaniecki (1927, 2006) proposed a definition of social value originally in the early 1900s, according to the symbolic interactionism tradition. In our paper, we reviewed this definition, considering, besides the traditional version to which they belong, the contemporary version and, especially, the structural version of the symbolic interactionism, integrating the dimensions of the agency and the structure that surrounds it.

Social value is a concept that deserves to be remembered because it discusses the process of valuing things in society – both concrete and abstract – and credits this movement to social interactions, showing our responsibility in this process. A social value is something meant by people and modified by them, both in terms of the social interactions they experience in the groups of proximate relationships of which they are a part, and by the interaction with collective social agents (King, Felin & Whetten, 2009), who represent more complex social structures, which can restrict people's actions in proximate structures or be modified by them (Merolla et al., 2012).

Despite having made a differentiation among social values, classifying them into abstract and concrete values, Thomas and Znaniecki (1927, 2006) did not indicate what the construction process is behind such values; this was what we intended to do in this article. We understand that the comprehension of such a process is valuable, especially in the case of abstract values.

Concrete social values, such as the social value “food” (Thomas & Znaniecki, 1927, 2006), because they are material, carry social functions that are more easily perceived by those who use it. Regarding something conceptual, the construction process as a social value is not necessarily evident, as in the case of concepts largely debated today, like sustainability, democracy, or science, since they involve different structures and agents at different times and places, in successive processes of signification and resignification. However, we can think that even concrete social values, such as vaccines, end up running the risk of being abandoned, due to their connection with other abstract values such as science – built over centuries, but which has been suffering a negation never seen before, raising the possibility of relationships of influence in the process of (de)construction of social values.

Therefore, the next step will be to test the theoretical model suggested through empirical research, as is done with any other theory. The discussions and reflections carried out in this essay are a first effort towards understanding the social values construction processes, aiming to contribute to the field of studies on values, maintaining a dialogue more specifically with the sociological approach of social psychology and with organizational studies. We reiterate the importance of (i) looking at concepts that were sometimes developed more than a century ago, such as the case of social value, whose authors, perhaps because they were ahead of their time, were forgotten despite the creativity of their ideas; and (ii) to integrate several theories as a promising theoretical path, as we did when considering the three versions that exist within the symbolic interactionism tradition, allowing us to propose both a contemporary definition for the concept of social value, as well as clues to understand how this type of value is established, resignified and/or even abandoned by groups and societies.

We understand that bringing social processes to light makes what is implicit matter explicit, allowing the understanding of situations that seem to arise suddenly (such as the pandemic), evidencing manipulations and power games, delving into the complexity of social reality and thus clarifying how certain “somethings” become and/or cease to be important in contemporary societies.

In terms of contribution to management in a post-COVID-19 era, in which thousands of people in different countries are voluntarily giving up their jobs, in search of work that makes more sense to them (Liu, 2021; Sánchez-Vallejo, 2021), the understanding of the construction process of social values proposed can warn top management regarding the importance of paying attention to which social values have been enhanced in the organizational routine, which social values have been crumbling down, as shown by the virtual work modality during the pandemic, and the reasons behind that scenario.

Workers act in the direction of certain social values in the organizational world, even opposing some already established social values indicating the need to diagnose what needs to be transformed. Understanding the process of (de)construction of social values can provide relevant clues to carry out this transformation.

Finally, this reflection can - and should - be expanded to all social groups (proximate structures) that relate to organizations (intermediate structures), because more than ever, companies are being called upon to contribute to the societies in which they are inserted and for which they bear responsibilities.

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