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Symbolic Interactionism

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Symbolic Interactionism

Communication Context

      Interpersonal, Small Group, Cultural.

Questions It Addresses in Our Every Day Lives:

      1. How our interactions with others affect our sense of self.

      2. The importance of symbols/language to society.

      3. Where our mind and humanness comes from.

Theory in a Nutshell

      ● We acquire symbols from interactions with society/other people.

      ● Acquiring symbols allows us to develop a sense of self and a mind (we think by way of symbols).

      ● Societies exist because people are able to interact with each another through symbols.

Visualization of Symbolic Interaction Theory

                Mind

              Symbol

   Self ←→ **Society**
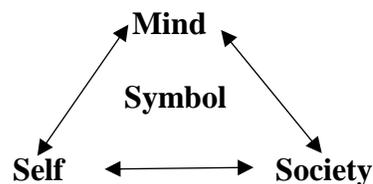
"Symbols include words and many objects, and almost all acts around others contain a symbolic element. Words are the most important symbols, making human thinking possible." Joel M. Charon (2007, p. 58).

Introduction and Overview

Let's start with a simple definition of what a symbol is. A **symbol** is a stimuli that is abstract and arbitrary to which meaning is applied. Symbols are things that are used to represent other things. The following collections of letters "arbol" "ki" "arbre" "baum" "pokok" and "shu" are symbols arbitrarily created by specific cultures to represent a particular type of organic growth that we might see—a tree. Language can be thought of as a collection of symbols that are organized according to rules to communicate. Now, think about what would happen in our world if there were no symbols and no language. DON'T READ ANY FURTHER UNTIL YOU'VE ACTUALLY THOUGHT ABOUT IT!… Your first thought might be, there's nothing left to read on this page; there would be no book, because there would be no words. There would also be no book because the people who created the book would never be able to coordinate the production of the book—they would have no way to convey ideas, no way to coordinate their activity, no way to actually even connect. As a matter of fact, they would literally have no ideas. We need symbols to coordinate, connect, and to have ideas. The importance of symbols to the development of humans both as individuals and collectives is at the heart of symbolic interaction theory. Symbolic interactionism is essentially about how the presence of symbols is fundamental to the existence of societies, our self-concepts, and our minds.

In some ways, symbolic interaction theory isn't even a theory and might be more aptly referred to as a branch of sociology or social psychology. Elements of symbolic interaction can be found in the work of many scholars going back over a hundred years. However, George Herbert Mead is usually identified as the scholar who first put all the pieces together in a comprehensive and coherent treatment of symbolic interaction. Sociologist Herbert Blumer later

crystalized and extended Mead's ideas and was the person who described the ideas as "symbolic interactionism." While Mead studied philosophy and taught in philosophy departments, his work is fundamental to sociology and social psychology. He was quite interdisciplinary in his thinking and teaching, covering a range from social psychology to the philosophy of education. However, sorting out the major premises of symbolic interactionism is challenging because his writings drift toward the philosophical, are incomplete and sketchy, and in some instances, are based on compilations from the notes his students took of his lectures (Blumer, 2004). As a result, he didn't produce what we might typically expect for fully articulated theory.

However, one important way that symbolic interactionism qualifies as a theory is that, besides standing the test of time, it has been the foundation for an enormous amount of research. Differences in the conceptualization of symbolic interaction and the focus of scholars led to the application of different methods known by the universities in which groups of like-minded scholars resided. For example, the Chicago School focused on the human role in developing the social world thus applied field studies, while the Iowa School focused on the idea of a core self and strong empirical methods.

Mead was driven by a desire to understand the relationship between individuals and societies; between a self and others. As simple as it might seem, one profound insight he had was that a *person's sense of self emerges from interaction with others (social interaction/society) and that societies emerge from interactions among people's selves*. Neither the self nor society can exist without the other. This simple premise has vast implications for human behavior and communication in particular which are explored in this chapter. In this summary of the symbolic interaction theory, the focus will be on those elements that have the most immediate application to human communication and/or have been most broadly embraced.

As you study this theory, think about why the theory is relevant and important to the study of human communication. Symbolic interactionism serves as the basis for a communication book written by Don Faules and Dennis Alexander (1978) who explained "We selected the theory of symbolic interaction because it is a communication theory of human behavior. This perspective has the capability of integrating traditional, behavioral, and humanistic approaches to the study of communication. It is our feeling that symbolic interaction not only integrates, but also highlights the significance of communication in determining human behavior (p. vii)." Another communication scholar, Julia Wood (1992) employed a similar focus in her book, *Spinning the Symbolic Web*, because "To view communication as symbolic interaction is to recognize humans as proactive beings whose control over themselves and their surroundings stems from their ability to interact with and through symbols. Our experiences, knowledge, and relationships are inevitably mediated through our symbols (p. 17)."

THEORY ELEMENTS

Some of the original terms incorporated by symbolic interactionists were generated over one hundred years ago. Language is fluid and changes over time; the terms used in symbolic interaction are no exception. We'll try not to confuse you too much, but in some instances we begin with the original terms before switching to their contemporary counterparts. In addition, while most of the same terms are still in use, in some instance their meanings have changed.

Gestures/Conversation of Gestures/Signs/(Non-Symbolic Interaction)

Some of Mead's early ideas were drawn from the theory and research related to behaviorism in psychology. Behaviorists focus on observable behaviors as responses to stimuli because of the belief that we can't actually observe what happens inside the brain/mind. They regard behaviors as automatic responses to stimuli and apply the findings from studying animal behavior to human

behavior. In applying Behaviorism Mead identified **gestures** *as unintentional acts without conscious meaning that evoke immediate and automatic responses in the observer*. For example, suppose you're walking down a sidewalk next to a friend who trips. You reach out, grab your friend, and keep him from falling. Your friend's stumble was a gesture, your response was a gesture. You didn't stop to think about what the stumble meant nor to consider your options, you simply acted. Your "gesture" (the grab) was accepted by your friend who didn't pull away; but rather, used your assistance to regain balance. Mead called such sequences of behaviors a conversation of gestures.

The term "sign" is often used now instead of gesture, with **sign** *defined as "a stimulus having a fixed single and concrete meaning regardless of context* (Dance & Larson, 1972, p. 10)." Signs indicate the presence of other stimuli; seeing wet pavement and dark cloudy skies is a sign that it has rained. Sign is a more inclusive term into which gestures fall. We become somewhat conditioned to associate a particular meaning to a given sign by exposure to the sign and what it represents. The meaning associated with a sign does not change regardless of where it occurs or who observes it. Seeing a wet sidewalk and clouds indicates rain whether observed in the United States, China, Peru, or Namibia. However, some cultures might take the rain as a sign from God to expect bountiful harvests. Such an interpretation expands the immediate and observable sign meaning to a more cognitive response that represents what Mead called a "significant gesture" or what is more broadly defined as a "symbol."

Significant Gestures/Significant Symbols/Symbols

The terms significant gestures (conscious gestures), significant symbols, and symbols were all used by Mead to reflect the unique capacity of humans to express an idea through a gesture (such as a spoken word) that has arouses the same meaning in another person. In contrast to the

notions Mead drew from behaviorism, he integrated principles from a contrasting perspective called pragmatism. Among other things, the pragmatists believe that humans do not just respond to the environment, but instead are interpreting their environment—we give meaning to what we sense. This means that besides responding to gestures, humans are able to interpret their worlds through symbols. As presented in the introduction, a **symbol** *is an abstract and arbitrary stimulus to which people place meaning*--symbols are interpreted stimuli. The notion of abstract and arbitrary reflects the fact that the symbol, in general, has no direct connection to that which it represents—it is an abstract reference to things both tangible and intangible. It is arbitrary because the assignment of a given symbol to a given stimuli is done simply at the whim of those who first introduced it. Symbols have meaning "solely by virtue of consensus among those using them," that is "… because a community of symbols users adopt the convention of using given symbols consistently (Hewitt, 1976, p. 27-8)." Symbols are created within a society or culture and those born into that society acquire them. The system of symbols used within a given group of people constitutes a language. Other animals have language as well, but their language consists of a system of signs or gestures. Interestingly, we know little about the origins of human language but we do know that no language-less tribe of humans has ever been found. This fact illustrates the universality of symbols as a defining feature of human society.

Symbols are probably the single most important quality that gives us our humanness, separating us from all other animals. Without symbols no other human creation is possible. Symbols allow us to remember and reminisce, to evaluate and plan, to coordinate, to communicate abstract thoughts, to think about the future, and to consider alternatives and outcomes. Symbols are at the heart of symbolic interactionism which is why we placed it at the

center of the visualization of the theory presented in the chapter introduction, surrounded by mind, self, and society. Symbolic interaction expert, Joel Charon (2007), wrote:

> "It is the symbol that translates the world from a physical sensed reality to a reality that can be understood, interpreted, dissected, integrated, tested. Between reality and what we see and do stands the symbol. Once we learn symbols we are in the position of understanding our environment rather than simply responding to it, and once that happens what we come to see and act on is colored by our symbols (p. 60)."

Think about some visual image that you hold in your memory—the house you grew up in, your bedroom, your family, a memorable scenic view. Now think about conveying in symbols (words) that image to another person. How successful do you think you'd be in being able to recreate in the other person's mind the same image you hold? Probably not very complete. Even with a very extensive description, the image you paint in the other's mind will never be the same as the image you have in yours.

Symbolic Interaction

The term is somewhat self-explanatory. As we acquire symbols we become empowered to interact with others using those symbols. We actually acquire symbols as a result of other people symbolically interacting with us. Communication author, Julia Wood (1992) described symbolic interaction as "…a process in which humans interact with symbols to construct meanings. Through symbolic interactions we acquire information and ideas, understand our own experiences and those of others, share feelings, and come to know other people. Without symbols none of this could happen (p. 63)." For Charon (2007), symbolic interactions are those instances where individuals decide on their actions based on taking into account other people's actions; in essence, we are constantly acting and reacting symbolically.

Symbols allow us to intentionally communicate. Symbols allow us to express and understand each other's thoughts, ideas, and feelings. As I write these words (symbols) for this textbook, I have an intention of conveying some thoughts and some information that I have learned to you the reader. I would not be able to do this without symbols. As you read these words (symbols) you are giving each little ink blot meaning, hopefully the same meaning that I intended. In this way, we engage in symbolic interaction.

However, symbolic interaction entails a lot more than simply communicating through symbols. Inherent in a symbolic interaction are two important notions: 1) we consider, interpret, and adapt to other people's acts, and 2) our symbolic interactions connect us to the society, connect the society to us, and reflect the society in which we are acting. Blumer (2004) argued that Mead saw symbolic interaction not just as a medium by which societal factors are expressed, but instead as the very basis from which a society emerges. Another way of thinking about this is to consider your own interactions relative to culture. Are you aware of how culture affects you or your partner when interacting with someone from another culture? There really isn't anything to see because culture and society exist only within symbolic interactions—YOU ENACT CULTURE. Your behavior IS culture. Besides being the basis for the development of society, symbolic interactions are the basis for the emergence of our mind and sense of self.

Mind

Imagine a newborn who is isolated from all human contact except for being fed, cleaned, and clothed, but during that time no communication takes place, no one speaks or makes any significant gestures (this is sometimes called "The Forbidden Experiment"). After eight years the child is brought out for other people to observe. How would that child act? What would that child's thoughts be? Unfortunately, such a child would be animal-like, unable to communicate

any more than your pet dog or kitten and incapable of any symbolic thought, of even recognizing his or her own self or identity. Such an example illustrates the critical importance that social interaction and the accompanying emergence into symbols has on the creation of a human mind.

The mind would not exist without society, symbols, and the self (again as the triangle graphic illustrates). While the brain is a tangible organ, the mind is the symbolic action that occurs within a person's brain—mind is not a thing but an activity. Charon (2007) wrote, "Mind is defined as all symbolic covert action toward oneself (p. 93)." The mind is covert in that we are aware or conscious of the symbolic action—of our thoughts. Such consciousness exists from the minute we wake up until we go to sleep; and even then the symbolic action doesn't necessarily stop. Action toward oneself means that we produce the thoughts or actions for our own use; they are directed to us for our own consumption. But, since they are based on symbols shared with others in our society, we can choose to share these mind actions (thoughts) with other people.

The mind connects symbols to objects which serve as the basis for assigning meaning and interpretations. Suppose you look out your window and see a large brown dog running around. Your mind connects the object (dog) to a symbol "dog" and a host of various meanings and thoughts are directed to yourself such as "Why is that dog running around loose?" "What kind of dog is that?" "Is the dog lost?" "Could that dog be harmful?" These "mind actions" or thoughts are symbolic in nature and reflect how a given symbol is associated with lots of meaning, interpretations, and thoughts. Mind actions allow us to manage the world around us because we act toward things on the basis of the symbolic meanings we associate with them. Your mind associates different meanings to "tabby cat" and "lion" which results in adopting your behavior to each in such a way as to insure your survival.

Self (Symbolic Self, Social Self, and the "I" and "Me")

Before symbolic interactionism, self was primarily viewed as a freestanding, independent entity even to the point of believing that all qualities of the self were innate. Mead saw self as an entity that exists within social interactions and as such is both a product of those interactions and player in those interactions. Again, the critical element that links self and society is symbols as enacted in social interactions. Only humans have a sense of "self" because we have symbols by which we can consider who and what we are. Our attitudes, values, beliefs which are formulated through symbols constitute part of our sense of self.

For Mead, self is used to reflect our ability to see ourselves as objects in the same way that other people see us and attribute symbols and meanings to their perceptions. Our perception of ourselves is symbolically and socially based. You are able to think about who this person is that is you by adopting other people's perceptions of you. This is a complex process since we continue to associate with other people who affect our sense of self accordingly. The self and the social are systemically linked together, each affecting the other, each changing over time, each co-dependent upon the other. Your attitudes, values, beliefs, etc. primarily represent an absorption of those occurring within your social world.

Charles Cooley introduced the phrase "looking-glass self" to reflect (pun intended) his thoughts about the nature of our social self. For Cooley (1902/1964), our looking-glass self involves three elements: imagining how we appear to other people, imagining other people's judgment of that appearance, and a self-feeling in response to that imagined judgment (e. g. pride, embarrassment).

Think about how this applies to you. You're walking through a campus building one day in casual attire (perhaps a favorite t-shirt and jeans) and a stranger introduces her or himself to

you as the president of your college or university. You introduce yourself but don't say much before saying goodbye. As you continue down the hall you run into a friend so you stop to visit for a minute. Now, how would you imagine you appeared to each person? What do you think was each person's assessment of you? How would you feel about their assessment? This process reflects Cooley's looking-glass self.

While the self is a social process, Mead also discussed the self in terms of an "I" and a "Me." The "I" "is the initial, spontaneous, unorganized aspect of human experience (Meltzer, 1978, p. 19)." On the other hand, the "Me" is referred to as the self as object or the social self. The Me arises in social interaction and is reflected in such concerns as how we look to other people, and how we compare to others. Mead considers the "I" to occur first and the "Me" to be the interpreter and evaluator of the "I." We shout in anger (the I) at a friend and later think to ourselves "Why did I behave in such a nasty manner (the Me)? Here's what Mead (1934/1962) wrote:

> The "I" of this moment is present in the "me" of the next moment. There again I cannot turn around quick enough to catch myself. I become a "me" in so far as I remember what I said. … The "I" in memory is there as the spokesman of the self of the second, or minute, or day ago. As given, it is a "me," but it is a "me" which was the "I" at the earlier time. If you ask, then, where directly in your own experience the "I" comes in, the answer is that it comes in as a historical figure. It is what you were a second ago that is the "I" of the "me." It is another "me" that has to take that role. You cannot get the immediate response of the "I" in the process (p. 174).

If that has turned your head around a little, here's how we interpret Mead's words: the "I" is present whenever we act but the moment we begin to consider the act, we are considering something that is in the past, this consideration of your own actions represents the "Me."

Society

From the symbolic interaction perspective, the essence of a society is the interaction and communication of individuals through symbols. As such, "Society arises in social interaction; it continues through social interaction; it ends without social interaction (Charon, 2007, p. 157)." Consider the last point about what happens without social interaction. Many cultures/societies faded into history because the social interactions associated with them died out—Ancient Greeks and Romans, Mayans, Incas, Persians, Vikings (except in Minnesota), and so forth. Perhaps you've participated in a school activity where you recreated a bygone culture or society, attended a church recreation of biblical times, or attended a renaissance fair where people engaged in social interactions appropriate of that time. While the costumes and artifacts help capture the feeling of a given society or time, it is the social interactions participants engage in that truly define the society that is recreated. Without communication that arises from symbolic interaction, there is no society (McCall, 2013)

Typical qualities associated with being a society include embedded patterns, relationships, and roles; diverse people linked together in joint activities over space and time; and people who interact in small social networks that exist and interact with a larger social structure (Stryker & Burke, 2000; Hewitt, 1976). All of these qualities are dependent upon symbolic interaction and symbolic self. "Society, then, is individuals interacting over time: acting with one another in mind, adjusting their acts to one another as they go along, symbolically communicating and interpreting one another's acts (Charon, 2007, p. 158)."

Notice again, that for Mead, society was a third part of our visual triangle of symbolic interaction. All of the coordination, communication, and rise of institutions that result in the development of a society are only possible because of symbols.

"…symbols create and maintain the societies within which we exist. They are used to socialize us; they make our culture possible; they are the basis for ongoing communication and cooperation; and they make possible our ability to pass down knowledge from one generation to the next (Charon, 2007, p. 61)."

For Mead, societies can't exist without self. The interaction of selves gives rise to society; however, selves emerge as a result of society. This might appear to be a conundrum, but some scholars, called structural symbolic interactionists, see society as the dominant force from which our sense of self develops. For structural symbolic interactionists the focus of study is on the current state of human affairs within societies and it is into these existing societies that people are born and develop a sense of self. The focus on society first tends to then lead more to examination of social phenomena and how those phenomena affect individuals. Regardless of the focus, remember that in symbolic interactionism "society is to be understood in terms of the individuals making it up, and individuals are to be understood in terms of the societies of which they are members (Meltzer, Petras, & Reynolds, 1975)."

Generalized Other and Roles

Mead was intrigued by the notion that as we internalize symbols from our society into our self we create a generalized other. Generalized other is our conception of the attitudes of our social community. We carry within us a view of people in general which includes how people in general view us. Our sense of self is directly related to our generalized other because we experience ourselves from both the standpoint of specific people in our social network but also

from "the generalized standpoint of the social group as a whole (Mead, 1934, p. 138)". The generalized other is part of our self—we adopt attitudes of the generalized other as part of who we are.

Communication scholar David Berlo (1960) saw generalized other as a foundation for creating expectations about how people behave and the roles they play. Those expectations and roles are then used to guide our own behaviors. For example, if you are raised in a particular religion, you might have created a religious generalized other that has an attitude of treating other people like you'd want to be treated which you also have adopted as part of your self. Roles represent an intersection among self, society, and social interactions. Our ability to create and play roles allows us to successfully adapt and interact to the role someone else is playing. A diversity of roles allows us to move from one role to another in a given situation as well as interacting effectively across different situations (Poggi & Sciortino, 2011).

Mead observed that our generalized other is one way that society extends control over us and impacts our thinking; essentially, these general internalized rules and roles of society influence, and even direct, our thoughts, decisions, and behaviors. Thus, our behavior, reactions, and interpretations are affected by our generalized other. If you are worried about showing up late for class it's probably because your generalized other holds punctuality as a value and you act according to that value. Of course you could also show up late, knowing that you are in conflict with the generalized other.

Take a moment to consider what happens in our society when a person fails to develop or follow the generalized other? Such a person would be non-conformist and perhaps a rebel. Unwilling or unable to follow social protocol or norms. Do you know such people? Do you like them or are you uncomfortable around them? The answer probably has to do with the degree to which

the person fails to follow "the generalized other." But at the extreme, such a person would probably be ostracized from the social group.

Behind the Theory

The book, *Mind, Self, and Society* which discusses many principles and concepts related to symbolic interaction, is attributed to George Herbert Mead. However, he didn't actually write any books that were published (he wrote one that was never published). Mead taught Social Psychology at the University of Chicago where he lectured without the use of notes. Two students felt Mead's lectures were so important they employed people to take verbatim notes in several courses particularly in 1927 and 1930 (Mead died of a heart attack in 1931). Those notes, along with notes of other students were combined and edited into four books, including *Mind, Self, and Society*.

How well would your class notes serve as the foundation for a textbook? Probably, like most of ours, not very well at all.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES of Symbolic Interactionism

Blumer (1969) provided a brief encapsulation of symbolic interactionism in three premises. Because of the effort to be broad, some word choices such as "things" might make it sound a little like an excerpt from Dr. Seuss. Things, as used here, are not limited to tangible goods but represents anything which evokes interpretation—a behavior, a thought, a word, as well as actual physical things.

We act toward things based on the meaning that the things have for us.

You don't treat a pencil like a bowl of cereal. Okay, so this is a rather ludicrous statement, but it reflects the principle. We learn symbols that are associated with something and associate particular meanings to those symbols. Those meanings include how we are to act toward the thing, our attitudes toward the thing, and how we might use the thing. Consider a nine-month old child who is handed her first pencil. What does she do with it? If you've ever watched a one-year old, you know the first thing is to put it into her mouth. EVERYTHING goes into the mouth. One explanation is that the mouth is the best method the baby has for exploring her world because the lips and mouth have lots of nerves, plus taste and smell. A baby's hand is not yet developed enough to manipulate and explore things reliably. But more importantly for our principle, the baby does not have a symbol for anything around her and cannot differentiate the use of things, so everything is potentially edible as well. An important aspect of the development of our humanness is that we do not directly respond to objects as objects, but instead respond to our "interpretation" of an object—the meaning the object has to us.

One of the early words that children learn is "water" ("wa-wa" for some) and with that comes an understanding of drinking water. For a child, "water" might be used to refer to any liquid or anything to drink. As the child interacts more with others and other liquids, the child learns water is different from milk and juice. The acquisition of each new word leads to more differentiated behavior toward things in our world—"mama" is differentiated from other women. If a child doesn't like apple juice and you hand her or him a cup and say "Here's some apple juice," but you've really given the child a cup of water, the child might push the cup away—acting toward the object based on the meaning that "apple juice" has for her or him. Our symbols and their meanings can distort our perception and bias our thinking and behaviors. This

is as much a principle of semantics as of symbolic interactionism but the implications on our lives is nonetheless important.

The meanings we give things arise out of our social interactions with other people.

So, where do our meanings toward things originate? As we discussed earlier about symbols, one might conjecture that meanings are innate (that we're born with the meanings) but we know that's not the case. Another explanation is that the objects we perceive have meaning and we learn the meaning from the objects—although not too many rocks have ever told us they're not meant to be thrown through windows. Another explanation is that we give meaning to things as we experience them; however, if this were the case, we would each have our own language and have very little shared meaning with other people. This is not to say that people don't develop some unique and personal interpretations. The final explanation offered by symbolic interaction is that the meaning for things comes from our social interactions with the members of a given society. The child learns from social interactions that the word "water" and that at least one function of water is drinking—parents tip a cup of water in a child's mouth while saying the word "water." Now expand this simple example, to all the things around you—objects, family, friends, values, beliefs, etcetera—the meaning for all of them came from your social interactions with other people. Once we acquire such meanings, we can then create additional meanings or combinations of meanings through the process of thought…but all thoughts start with meanings learned in our social interactions.

The meanings of things around you and of your culture are obviously affected by the people with whom you hang around. The more diverse your social interactions, the more diversity in your interpretation of things. Such diversity affects your behavior, sense of self, relationships and world view (Mussolf, 2003). In some ways the size of your social network

affects the breadth and depth of the meanings you can draw from in interpreting the world. As much as you might not like this idea, one reason colleges and universities usually have a core set of required courses is to ensure that students gain a broader perspective of the world. Imagine a civil engineer who for four years takes nothing but math and engineering courses without any courses in the arts, humanities, or social sciences. The narrowness of the engineer's education prevents the engineer from appreciating the beauty and ecology that might be impacted by building projects that involve cutting down forests, damming rivers, or building pipelines across natural habitats. Such an engineer lacks the social interactions that provide for a broader interpretation of the impact of the building projects.
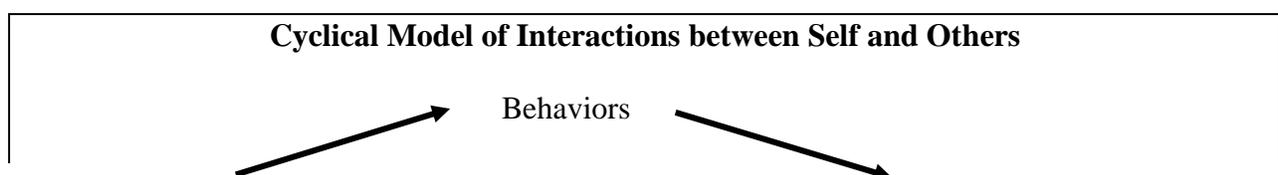
The application of meanings to the things we encounter involves an interpretive process whereby we communicate with ourselves.
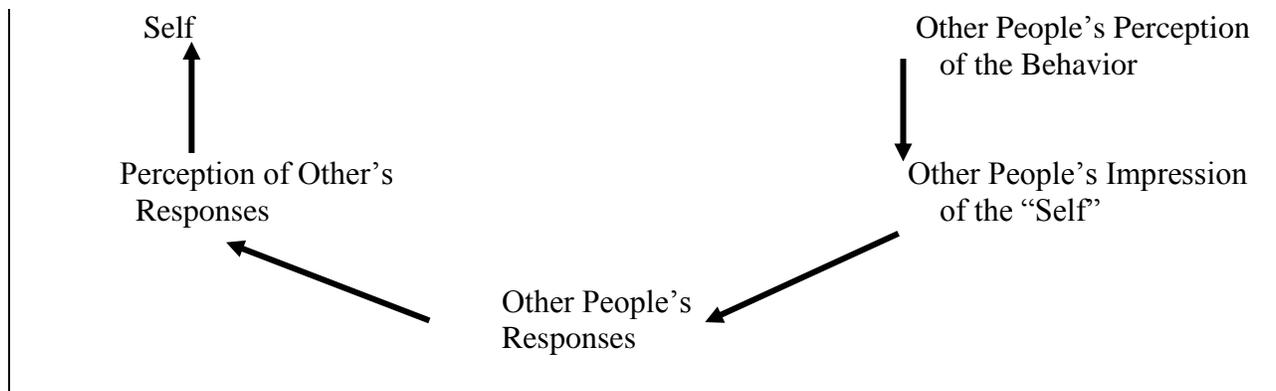
Underlying this premise is that we develop a self which can be an object of our own thoughts— we are able to "talk" to ourselves because we possesses a symbolic language. This ability to talk to ourselves comes into play when we are making sense of the world. Blumer asserts that our interaction with things involves an interpretive process that includes conversations that we have with ourselves as we sort out what is meant. Meanings are not as cut and dry as looking up what a thing means in a dictionary. Even in a dictionary, a list of different meanings is often attributed to a single word, and the reader has to determine which meaning best fits the given situation or usage. Similarly, working through which meaning applies to the things we encounter is part of this interpretive process. Blumer saw two steps to this process, the first involves people pointing out to themselves the thing that has meaning. While walking in the mall, you see lots of people and then notice a person you think you recognize. As you look at this person, you try to recall how you know him. This is the first step in the interpretive process. In the second, people

select, rearrange, discard, modify and transform meanings relevant to the situation and people's

own dispositions, directions, goals, attitudes, etc. Although not listed as a third step, Blumer

contended that this interpretive process lead to developing a line of action—a plan of what to do

or how to respond. Once you recognize the person on the mall as a person from a class you're

taking, you consider the level of your relationship, of the appropriateness of various courses of

action, saying "Hi," ignoring, or waiting to see if he acknowledges you (maybe he won't

recognize who you are). Once we have social acquired meanings and the ability to think

symbolically, our lives are filled with an interpretive process where we are constantly "talking"

to ourselves as we manage our lives.

The self develops, adapts, and is redefined through interactions with other people.

The gist of this principle is reflected in the discussion of self, society, and symbolic

interaction, but it is worth specifically identifying and discussing. As we wrote, Mead saw the

self and society interacting and influencing each other. When considering what interacting with

society means, it essentially means interacting with other humans—society exists and is enacted

by its members. As such, a person's interactions with other people result not only in the

acquisition of language (symbols), but also in the acquisition of a self. Each interaction has the

potential to modify our sense of self. As you receive positive responses because of a particular

quality or behavior, you might embrace that quality as part of your self. Similarly, negative

responses might cause you to dismiss a quality or behavior. Such responses to our behaviors

affect our sense of self and subsequent behaviors. This pattern of interaction is reflected in the

following model:

Cyclical Model of Interactions between Self and Others

Behaviors

Self

Other People's Perception
of the Behavior

Perception of Other's
Responses

Other People's Impression
of the "Self"

Other People's
Responses

This model reflects some modifications on the original model reflected in Mead's writings based on research on his propositions over the past several decades. For example, research found that a person's perception of other people's responses had more effect on self than did the actual response (Baumeister, Masicampo & Twenge, 2013). The fact that we are responding to what we perceive invites inaccuracy and distortion of actual responses. We might think we're funny but fail to notice that no one laughs when we tell a joke, which could mean we maintain a self that is in contradiction to feedback from other people. The development of our self can be based on indirect cues in which we interpret people's responses to us (laughing at our jokes confirming we are funny) or direct cues where a person provides direct appraisal of our self—your best friend tells you, "You know, you're really not very funny." Psychologist Kenneth Gergen (1971) whose work has influenced communication scholars for decades, identified the qualities of appraisers who are most likely to affect our self-concept. Appraisers influence us the most when their messages are credible (they know us well), personalized (sincere and detailed), restated over time, consistent with other appraisals, and positive.

Consider how other people have influence your development of self. What messages have you received from others that have most impacted your self-concept? To what degree did the people who influenced you have the qualities that Gergen identified?

Additional Principles

Inherent in the concepts we've just covered are several principles of symbolic interaction. Professor Emeriti, Jerome Manis and Bernard Meltzer (1978) published several editions of a collection of articles on symbolic interaction. They identified seven basic propositions of symbolic interactionism which were covered indirectly in our discussion of the core concepts and/or in Blumer's three principles. This list provides an effective encapsulation of that discussion (the seventh proposition, not listed, deals with measurement issues):

1. Distinctively human behavior and interaction are carried on through the medium of symbols and their meanings.

2. The individual becomes humanized through interaction with other persons.

3. Human society is most usefully conceived as consisting of people in interaction.

4. Human beings are active in shaping their own behavior.

5. Consciousness, or thinking, involves interaction with oneself.

6. Human beings construct their behavior in the course of its execution. (pp. 6-9).

Propositions 4 and 6 reiterate one of the foundations of symbolic interactionism that was covered in the beginning of this chapter—that humans can understand and manipulate their environments. Rather than simply reacting to a series of complex stimuli, humans can give those stimuli meaning, interpret them, predict them, and manage them, all because we have acquired symbols.

THEORY EVOLUTION, AMMENDMENT, AND CRITICISM

The previous discussion of symbolic interactionism represents a blend of both the early ideas associated with George Herbert Mead and the later perspectives associated with scholars such as Herbert Blumer, Manford Kuhn, and Erving Goffman. As such, this theory doesn't have the types of dramatic changes or adaptations found with other theories. Instead of being

discarded, replaced, or overhauled, symbolic interactionism's history reflects reinterpretation of core principles and concepts (McCall, 2013). The primary evolution and amendment of the theory is primarily in terms of its focus, application, and interpretations as reflected in the two divergent perspectives taken by the Chicago School and the Iowa School. Sociologists tend to focus on the theory as it applies to issues of society and groups while social psychologists emphasize the development of the self and social interactions. Among sociologists, SI has been criticized for failing to apply to the macro level issues of social structure, politics and history (Meltzer, Petras, & Reynolds, 1975). Among psychologists, symbolic interaction theory has been criticized for missing the micro level of issues such as emotions and the unconscious (Meltzer, Petras, & Reynolds, 1975). However, this macro-micro debate has been labeled a false dichotomy and a failure to recognize the application of symbolic interactionism at the macro level (Plummer, 2000).

From our perspective, symbolic interaction provides a strong foundation for understanding human communication as it relates to the role that symbols play in our interactions and relationships with others. Interest in symbolic interaction has resulted in extensive research, a scholarly association (Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction), and its own journal (*Symbolic Interaction*).

Two issues that both subvert and bolster symbolic interactionism are the lack of clarity about the concepts (Meltzer, 1978) and failure to create a systematic set of principles or propositions that can be said to truly constitute a theory. The concepts that Mead wrote about were not organized in a particularly systematic or integrated manner; after all, his major book, *Mind, Self, and Society*, is based on notes taken by students of Mead's social psychology course. This has resulted in many different interpretations of what Mead meant as well as the

incorporation of a variety of additional ideas into the theory by other scholars. Differences in the interpretations has led to ongoing arguments among scholars. For example, Herbert Blumer's explanation and expansion of Mead's work was derided by other scholars for misinterpreting Mead's ideas (Shalin, 2011). You should realize that what we have presented in this chapter is an attempt to organize concepts and principles in ways that make it easier for you to read and understand, but we have simplified concepts and provided our own interpretations with a communication bias.

One reason the ambiguity of the concepts and variables associated with symbolic interactionism is problematic is that it hampers the ability to assess or observe them and thus test the theory. For example, ambiguity over what constitutes "self" adds to the challenge of actually identifying and observing the "self." Thus, scholars who favor an epistemological approach to understanding the world reject a theory with concepts such as "self" that can't be observed, manipulated, and measured. Sociologist Manford Kuhn's (1954) frustration with this situation lead him and one of his students, Thomas McPartland, to develop the Twenty Statements Test (TST) (Miller, 2011). The TST simply asks respondents to list 20 responses to "Who am I?" which is sometimes modified to direct the responses to fit the researcher's' focus. The responses can be coded for such qualities as ambitions, social groups, or beliefs. Nonetheless, a problem exists among interactionists in how they define self. Definitions range from the self as multiple selves that vary with each interaction, to a unitary self that is consistent across contexts (Meltzer, Petras, & Reynolds, 1975).

However there is a plus side to the lack of clarity and structure. These qualities have led scholars to use the various elements that constitute symbolic interactionism in a ways that fit their particular interests and concerns. As such, there are few, if any, areas of human interaction

to which symbolic interaction has not been applied. For example, the 2003 Handbook of
Symbolic Interactionism includes review articles that cover such topics as economy, politics,
families, the military, deviance, gender, childhood, and mass media.

Consider for a moment how symbolic interaction concepts and principles apply to the role that
mass media has on you. What is the relationship between mass media and society? In what
ways does mass media affect your sense of self? How is mass media affected by people? How
is your mind and your corresponding interpretation of the world around you affected by mass
media? To what degree do you control what you take from mass media? In answering these
questions, you might have concluded that mass media is part of society, which means that
everything we've written about society applies to mass media. Mass media affects your sense of
self and your interpretations of the world, but you are the one who decides how to interpret what
you are exposed to.

Technology Box: Applying Theory to Research:? Presenting the Cyber-Self

Even your computer mediated communication and use of the Internet can be examined from the
perspective of symbolic interactionism. A sociologist who explores new media, Laura Robinson,
applied Mead's concepts on self in examining the existence of our "cyberself." She wrote:

> The cyberself is the emergent product of social interaction in which the self masters the
> ability to be both the subject and object of interaction. In this way, cyberself-ing creates
> the virtual 'I/me' couplet. Online, the homepage allows the 'I' to present the self to the
> cyberother; in fact, the very construction of the homepage presumes the expectation of
> the virtual 'generalized other' (p. 104).

Drawing from Erving Goffman (1959), she discusses how information is "given" by us to others through our text messages and also how information is "given off" by other cues (usually non-verbal or gestural in face-to-face interactions). She points out how when we get an email from a person we don't know who claims to be a university student ("given" information), we might be skeptical about that claim if their email address is yahoo.com instead of university.edu ("given off" information). What kinds of "given off" information do you pick up on from text, email, or Facebook?

RELATED THEORIES

The number of theories that have been derived from symbolic interactionism are almost innumerable. When symbolic interaction has been applied to specific contexts or questions, new theories evolve. For example, the application of SI to an examination of the challenges of nurses changing roles led to the development of transitions theory (Ok, 2011). Rather than trying to enumerate and describe these theories, we will discuss a couple in general terms to demonstrate how the theory has been utilized.

Many times the theories born from symbolic interactionism focus on expanding one concept or principle, such as roles. Mead discussed the notion of role-taking as it related to individuals having a sense of themselves and others then acting accordingly. Role theories and role-taking theories have developed, exploring everything from how children acquire roles through their play (playing at being a mother, teacher, cook, builder, magician, etc.) to how adults enact appropriate roles relative to a given situation. The ability to effectively develop

role-taking skills is considered an important aspect of child development. One of your authors drew upon Mead's writings on generalized other in developing his social decentering theory—a theory that describes the process by which a person takes into consideration another person's dispositions (thoughts, feelings, attitudes, experiences, etc.) (Redmond, 1995). One process we use to make this assessment of another person is to apply and compare his or her dispositions to our generalized other (our views of people in general).

Variations in role theories is reflected in the very way roles are defined by scholars. Roles are viewed as norms of behavior associated with a goal, as patterns of behaviors (like the role in a play), or as a set of expected behaviors associated with a given position (Biddle, 1986). Ralph Turner's role theory places role-taking and interaction at its core, with the premise that we consider cues from the person with whom we are interacting and use those cues to understand the role the other person is playing. By considering the other's role we can then adjust our behavior to create effective collaborations (Turner, 2013). For example, if you pick up cues from a teacher that she is laid back, an easy grader, and not very demanding, you consider the "role" she is playing and adapt your behaviors (enact the appropriate role) to create collaboration. On the other hand if you pick up cues that a teacher is a hardnosed, demanding taskmaster, you are hopefully wise enough to adapt your role accordingly. As this example illustrates, roles normally come in complementary pairs where one role is defined in relationship to another—teacher-student; husband-wife; doctor-patient; boyfriend-girlfriend (Bates & Harvey, 1975). According to Turner's (2001) theory, roles are cultural resources that are actually not clearly spelled out but people act as if they are. We engage in a process of role-making in which we continually construct and modify our roles while interacting with other people and their roles.

Related to role theory is identity theory which "seeks to explain why, where choice is possible, one role-related behavior choice is made rather than another (Stryker, p. 227)." In essence, why have you chosen the role of student over the other roles you might have chosen. Our identity is dependent upon the roles we choose to play. Identity theories focus on the interplay between our sense of self and society. Sociologist Sheldon Stryker (2000) was particularly interested in how social structures impact self and how self affects social behavior. Stryker's identity theory begins with the premise that we have as many identities as we do social groups or organizations in which we play a role or occupy a position. However, we hold some identities to be more important, which leads us to engage in some role behaviors more than others (Stryker, 2001).

Think about the degree to which your own sense of self or identity is linked to the roles you play. What are the roles that you take on? What factors have led you to choose the roles you play over other possible roles? To what degree are they internal factors (individual or psychological) and to what degree are they external factors (social structure, cultural, etc.)? These are the kinds of questions identity theory seeks to answer.

APPLICATION TO EVERY DAY COMMUNICATION

Quickly think about three qualities that describe you. The mere fact that you can think of ways to describe yourself is one of the fundamental notions of symbolic interactionism—the symbolic self. While, subtle, we act toward ourselves (self-esteem) based on the meanings we give the qualities we see in ourselves. Now think about three qualities that your mom, dad, or other relative would use to describe you. Being able to consider how others see you is also the product of symbolic interactionism. To what degree were the qualities you saw in yourself similar or different from how others see you? Can you link both the similarities and differences

to the notion from symbolic interaction that your sense of self is the product of your interactions with others? Your ability to even consider the questions we've written here reflects the proposition that our thinking involves interaction with ourselves—we create and react to our own thoughts.

So, what is the practical use of all this information about symbolic interaction? For one, you might be able to better understand how you came to be who you are. Think about the interactions and relationships you've had in your life time and how they have impacted the development of your self, both in positive and negative ways. Recognize that your interactions are also affecting others' senses of self. The meaning you assign to the labels you give people based on their race, age, sex, ethnicity, and relationship to you (friend, brother, teacher, boss) affects your behavior and treatment of those people. Changing your meanings will change your behavior.

The other significant aspect of symbolic interactionism is society and its impact on self and mind. Your thoughts and behaviors are directly affected by the society (or societies) in which you participate. Knowledge of your society is also knowledge about yourself. However, how you think and behave also affects the society. In 2004, Massachusetts became the first state to allow same-sex marriage and other states continue to follow suit. The society is changing because of the interactions among its members. In this way, self can be seen to impact society. Obviously, neither you nor society remain the same, since you continue to interact with many people throughout your lifetime, each potentially changing your self and society.

THEORY SUMMARY

Theory Elements

- People display unintentional behaviors which are called gestures or signs which have meaning fixed and concrete meanings regardless of when or where the occur.

- Humans have the unique capacity to express ideas such that the meaning assigned by one person is the same as the meaning in another called symbols. Symbols are abstract and arbitrary.

- Symbols are probably the single most important quality that gives us our humanness; without symbols no other human creation is possible.

- We interact with each other, acquire information and ideas, share feelings and get to know each other because of our symbolic interactions.

- Symbols allow us to consider, interpret and adapt to other people's acts and they also connect us to society.

- The mind would not exist without society, symbols, and the self (again as the triangle graphic illustrates).

- Mead saw self as an entity that exists within social interactions and as such is both a product of those interactions and player in those interactions.

- The essence of a society is the interaction and communication of individuals through symbols and society is continued through symbolic interactions.

- We carry within us a view of people in general which includes how people in general view us called the generalized other.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

1. *We act toward things based on the meaning that the things have for us.*

2. *The meanings we give things arise out of our social interactions with other people.*

3. *The application of meanings to the things we encounter involves an interpretive process whereby we communicate with ourselves.*

4. *The self develops, adapts, and is redefined through interactions with other people.*

Additional Principles

- Six additional principles have been proposed including that we become humanized through interaction, consciousness or thinking involves interaction with oneself, and we construct behavior as it occurs.

THEORY EVOLUTION, AMMENDMENT, AND CRITICISM

- The primary evolution and amendment of the theory is primarily in terms of its focus, application, and interpretations.

- SI has been criticized for failing to apply to the macro level issues of social structure, politics and history; and for missing the micro level of issues such as emotions and the unconscious.

- Other criticisms include a lack of clarity about the concepts and a failure to create a systematic set of principles or propositions that can be said to truly constitute a theory.

- Despite or perhaps even because of the lack of precision in the theory, there are few if any areas of human interaction to which symbolic interaction has not been applied

RELATED THEORIES

- The number of theories that have been derived from symbolic interactionism are almost innumerable; application to specific contexts or questions leads to new theories.

- Role theories and role-taking theories have developed that explore everything from how children acquire roles through their play to how adults enact appropriate roles relative to a given situation.

- Identity theory which "seeks to explain why, where choice is possible, one role-related behavior choice is made rather than another.

APPLICATION TO EVERY DAY COMMUNICATION

- Your ability to think of ways to describe yourself demonstrates one of the fundamental notions of symbolic interactionism—the symbolic self.

- Your ability to even consider the questions in this chapter reflects the proposition that thinking involves interaction with ourselves—you create and react to your own thoughts.

- Understanding SI can you help you better understand how you came to be who you are.

- Your thoughts and behaviors are directly affected by the society (or societies) in which you participate. Knowledge of your society is also knowledge about yourself.

FOR REVIEW

Key Terms

Gestures	Conversations of gestures
Signs	Non-symbolic interaction
Significant gestures (conscious gestures)	Significant symbols
Symbols	Symbolic interaction
Mind	Self (symbolic self/social self)
"I" and "me"	Society
Generalized other	Roles
Role theory	Identity theory

Questions for Review

1. Briefly describe the relationship between self and society.

2. Describe how gestures and symbols differ.

3. Define symbolic interaction.

4. Discuss the relationships among brain, mind, and symbols.

5. Explain how "I" relates to "Me."

6. How does generalized other impact our communication with other people?

7. Explain the principle "We act toward things based on the meaning that the things have for us."

8. Identify five things that occur because of humans being symbolic.

9. What is role theory?

10. Briefly explain two criticisms levied against symbolic interactionism.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

1. Video Challenge: Consider a movie you've recently seen that you really liked. Identify any ways that the concepts or principles of symbolic interaction might have been illustrated (for example, how a person's self-concept was affected by other people). In groups of four or five students, share your movies and observations and see if your classmates agree with each other's observations.

2. Symbolic Interaction in Context. Symbolic interaction has been applied to a variety of contexts. In groups of two or three students, explore how symbolic interactionism applies to the following: family, politics, business, and religion. To which does it seem to fit most easily? Why? To which is it hardest to apply? Why?

3. Society and Self: In groups of three or four students, identify three things in society that you believe changed or are changing during your lifetime. Identify the interactions between people that can be linked to bringing about these changes. How

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