

Symbolic Interactionism

The symbolic interaction perspective, also called symbolic interactionism, is a major framework of sociological theory. This perspective relies on the symbolic meaning that people develop and rely upon in the process of social interaction. Although symbolic interactionism traces its origins to [Max Weber's](#) assertion that individuals act according to their interpretation of the meaning of their world, the American philosopher [George Herbert Mead](#) introduced this perspective to [American sociology](#) in the 1920s.

Symbolic interaction theory analyzes society by addressing the subjective meanings that people impose on objects, events, and behaviors. Subjective meanings are given primacy because it is believed that people behave based on what they believe and not just on what is objectively true. Thus, society is thought to be socially constructed through human interpretation. People interpret one another's behavior and it is these interpretations that form the social bond. These interpretations are called the "[definition of the situation](#)." For example, why would young people smoke cigarettes even when all objective medical evidence points to the dangers of doing so? The answer is in the definition of the situation that people create. Studies find that teenagers are well informed about the risks of tobacco, but they also think that smoking is cool, that they themselves will be safe from harm, and that smoking projects a positive image to their peers. So, the symbolic meaning of smoking overrides that actual facts regarding smoking and risk.

Some fundamental aspects of our social experience and identities, like [race](#) and [gender](#), can be understood through the symbolic interactionist lens. Having no biological bases at all, both race and gender are social constructs that function based on *what we believe to be true* about people, given what they look like. We use socially constructed meanings of race and gender to help us decide who to interact with, how to do so, and to help us determine, sometimes inaccurately, the meaning of a person's words or actions.

Critics of this theory claim that symbolic interactionism neglects the macro level of social interpretation—the “big picture.” In other words, [symbolic interactionists](#) may miss the larger issues of society by focusing too closely on the “trees” rather than the “forest”. The perspective also receives criticism for slighting the influence of social forces and institutions on individual interactions. In the case of smoking, the [functionalist perspective](#) might miss the powerful role that the institution of mass media plays in shaping perceptions of smoking through advertising, and by portraying smoking in film and television. In the cases of race and gender, this perspective would not account for social forces like [systemic racism](#) or [gender discrimination](#), which strongly influence what we believe race and gender mean.