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Learning Outcomes

- Summarize symbolic interactionism
- Apply symbolic interactionism

Sociological Paradigm #3: Symbolic Interactionist Theory

Symbolic interactionism is a micro-level theory that focuses on meanings attached to human interaction, both verbal and non-verbal, and to symbols. Communication—the exchange of meaning through language and symbols—is believed to be the way in which people make sense of their social worlds.

Charles Horton Cooley introduced the **looking-glass self** (1902) to describe how a person's self of self grows out of interactions with others, and he proposed a threefold process for this development: 1) we see how others react to us, 2) we interpret that reaction (typically as positive or negative) and 3) we develop a sense of self based on those interpretations. “Looking-glass” is an archaic term for a mirror, so Cooley theorized that we “see” ourselves when we interact with others.

George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) is considered a founder of symbolic interactionism, though he never published his work on this subject (LaRossa and Reitzes 1993). Mead's student, Herbert Blumer, actually coined the term “symbolic interactionism” and outlined these basic premises: humans interact with things based on meanings ascribed to those things; the ascribed meaning of things comes from our interactions with others and society; the meanings of things are interpreted by a person when dealing with things in specific circumstances (Blumer 1969). This sounds close to Cooley's looking-glass self, but Mead's contribution was really to the development of self, especially in childhood, which we'll discuss in more detail when we address theories of socialization. If you love books, for example, a symbolic interactionist might propose that you learned that books are good or important in the interactions you had with family, friends, school, or church; maybe your family had a special reading time each week, getting your library card was treated as a special event, or bedtime stories were associated with warmth and comfort.



Figure 1. In symbolic interactionism, people actively shape their social world. This image shows janitorial workers on strike in Santa Monica, California. A symbolic interactionist would be interested in the interactions between these protestors and the messages they communicate.

Social scientists who apply symbolic-interactionist thinking look for patterns of interaction between individuals. Their studies often involve observation of one-on-one interactions. For example, while a conflict theorist studying a political protest might focus on class difference, a symbolic interactionist would be more interested in how individuals in the protesting group interact, as well as the signs and symbols protesters use to communicate their message and to negotiate and thus develop shared meanings.

The focus on the importance of interaction in building a society led sociologists like Erving Goffman (1922–1982) to develop a technique called **dramaturgical analysis**. Goffman used theater as an analogy for social interaction and recognized that people's interactions showed patterns of cultural "scripts." Since it can be unclear what part a person may play in a given situation, as we all occupy multiple roles in a given day (i.e., student, friend, son/ daughter, employee, etc.), one has to improvise his or her role as the situation unfolds (Goffman 1958).

Studies that use the symbolic interactionist perspective are more likely to use qualitative research methods, such as in-depth interviews or participant observation, because they seek to understand the symbolic worlds in which research subjects live.

Constructivism is an extension of symbolic interaction theory which proposes that reality is what humans cognitively construct it to be. We develop social constructs based on interactions with others, and those constructs that last over time are those that have meanings which are widely agreed-upon or generally accepted by most within the society.

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WAtch It

The main tenets of symbolic interactionism are explained in the following video.

[Video Link](#)

Criticism

Research done from this perspective is often scrutinized because of the difficulty of remaining objective. Others criticize the extremely narrow focus on symbolic interaction. Proponents, of course, consider this one of its greatest strengths and generally use research methods that will allow extended observation and/or substantive interviews to provide depth rather than breadth. Interactionists are also criticized for not paying enough attention to social institutions and structural constraints. For example, the interactions between a police officer and a black man are different than the interactions between a police officer and a white man. Addressing systemic inequalities within the criminal justice system, including pervasive racism, is essential for an interactionist understanding of face-to-face interactions.

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Glossary

constructivism: an extension of symbolic interaction theory which proposes that reality is what humans cognitively construct it to be
dramaturgical analysis: a technique sociologists use in which they view society through the metaphor of theatrical performance, including role improvisation
looking-glass self: concept that the development of self occurs through interactions with others, based on our understanding of how others perceive us
symbolic interactionism: a theoretical perspective through which scholars examine the relationship of individuals within their society by studying their communication (language and symbols)

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