CHAPTER 4
SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

Outline

I. Introduction.
   A. George Herbert Mead was an influential philosophy professor at the University of Chicago, but he never published his ideas.
   B. After his death, his students published his teachings in *Mind, Self, and Society*.
   C. Mead's chief disciple, Herbert Blumer, further developed his theory.
      1. Blumer coined the term symbolic interactionism, and claimed that communication is the most human and humanizing activity in which people are engaged.
      2. The three core principles of symbolic interactionism are concerned with meaning, language, and thought.
      3. These principles lead to conclusions about the formation of self and socialization into a larger community.

II. Meaning: The construction of social reality.
   A. First principle: Humans act toward people or things on the basis of the meanings they assign to those people or things.
   B. Once people define a situation as real, it’s very real in its consequences.

III. Language: The source of meaning.
   A. Meaning arises out of the social interaction people have with each other.
   B. Meaning is not inherent in objects.
   C. Meaning is negotiated through the use of language, hence the term symbolic interactionism.
      1. Second principle: As human beings, we have the ability to name things.
      2. Symbols, including names, are arbitrary signs.
      3. By talking with others, we ascribe meaning to words and develop a universe of discourse.
   D. Symbolic naming is the basis for society—the extent of knowing is dependent on the extent of naming.
   E. Symbolic interactionism is the way we learn to interpret the world.
      1. A symbol is a stimulus that has a learned meaning and a value for people.
      2. Our words have default assumptions.

IV. Thought: The process of taking the role of the other.
   A. Third principle: An individual’s interpretation of symbols is modified by his or her own thought process.
   B. Symbolic interactionists describe thinking as an inner conversation, or minding.
      1. Minding is a reflective pause.
      2. We naturally talk to ourselves in order to sort out meaning.
C. Whereas animals act instinctively and without deliberation, humans are hardwired for thought.
   1. Humans require social stimulation and exposure to abstract symbol systems to have conceptual thought.
   2. Language is the software that activates the mind.
D. Humans have the unique capacity to take the role of the other.

V. The self: Reflections in a looking glass.
   A. Self cannot be found through introspection, but instead through taking the role of the other and imagining how we look from the other’s perspective. This mental image is called the looking-glass self and is socially constructed.
   B. Self is a function of language.
      1. One has to be a member of a community before consciousness of self sets in.
      2. The self is always in flux.
   C. Self is an ongoing process combining the “I” and the “me.”
      1. The “I” sponsors what is novel, unpredictable, and unorganized about the self.
      2. The “me” is the image of self seen through the looking glass of other people’s reactions.

VI. Community: The socializing effect of others’ expectations.
   A. The composite mental image of others in a community, their expectations, and possible responses is referred to as the generalized other.
   B. The generalized other shapes how we think and interact within the community.
   C. The “me” is formed through continual symbolic interaction.
   D. The “me” is the organized community within the individual.

VII. A sampler of applied symbolic interaction.
   A. Creating reality.
      1. Erving Goffman develops the metaphor of social interaction as a dramaturgical performance.
      2. The impression of reality fostered by performance is fragile.
   B. Meaning-ful research.
      1. Mead advocated study through participant observation, a form of ethnography.
      2. Experimental and survey research are void of the meaning of the experience.
   C. Generalized other—the tragic potential of symbolic interaction: Negative responses can consequently reduce a person to nothing.
   D. Naming.
      1. Name-calling can be devastating because it forces us to view ourselves through a warped mirror.
      2. These grotesque images are not easily dispelled.
   E. Self-fulfilling prophecy.
      1. Each of us affects how others view themselves.
2. Our expectations evoke responses that confirm what we originally anticipated, resulting in a self-fulfilling prophecy.

F. Symbol manipulation—symbols can galvanize people into united action.

VIII. Critique: A theory too grand?
   A. Mead’s theory is hard to summarize and lacks clarity.
   B. Mead overstates his case, particularly when distinguishing humans from other animals.
   C. Nonetheless, Mead’s theory has greater breadth than any in this book.
   D. Most interpretive theorists featured in this book owe a great debt to Mead.

Key Names and Terms

George Herbert Mead
The University of Chicago philosophy professor whose teachings were synthesized into the theory called symbolic interactionism.

Symbolic Interactionism
Coined by Herbert Blumer, this term is meant to express the essence of Mead’s theory: The self is defined through the interconnection of meaning, language, and thought.

Herbert Blumer
Mead’s chief disciple, this University of California, Berkeley, professor coined the term symbolic interactionism.

Default Assumption
Douglas Hofstadter’s term for a belief inscribed in language that limits our thinking.

Minding
An inner dialogue used to test alternatives, rehearse action, and anticipate reactions before overtly responding.

Taking the Role of the Other
The process of placing yourself in another’s position and viewing the world as you believe he or she would.

Looking-Glass Self
The mental image that results from taking the role of the other.

I
The spontaneous driving force that fosters all that is novel, unpredictable, and unorganized in the self.

Me
The image of the self seen in the looking glass of other people’s reactions—the self’s generalized other.

Self
The ongoing process of combining the “I” and the “me.”

Generalized Other
The composite mental image of others in a community, their expectations, and possible responses to one’s self.

Erving Goffman
University of California, Berkeley, sociologist who developed the metaphor of social interaction as a dramaturgical performance.
Participant Observation
Advcated by Mead, this ethnographically based approach requires the researcher to adopt the stance of an interested, yet ignorant visitor who carefully notes what people say and do in order to discover how they interpret their world.

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy
The tendency for our expectations to evoke responses that confirm what we originally expected.

Symbol Manipulation
The process whereby symbols galvanize people into united action.

Principal Changes
This chapter has been edited for clarity and precision. The theoretical material remains the same.

Suggestions for Discussion

The impact of symbolic interactionism
At the outset, it’s important to note that one cannot overemphasize the influence of this theory on our specific subject of communication, as well as on the twentieth-century social sciences and the humanities in general. Closing the chapter, Griffin presents a list of theorists who owe a debt to Mead (63). Considering the extent of his impact on our field, though, it might be easier and more revealing to provide a list of the few theorists he hasn’t touched. A good indication of the enduring importance of this theory is the existence of the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction. Both communication scholars and sociologists are active in this organization.

One way to illustrate the tremendous influence of symbolic interactionism is to analyze several of the interpersonal communication textbooks used in your department with your students. In Bridges Not Walls, for example, John Stewart doesn’t explicitly reference the founder of symbolic interactionism, but he demonstrates his debt to Mead when he argues, “who we are—our identities—is built in our communicating. People come to each encounter with an identifiable ‘self,’ built through past interactions, and as we talk, we adapt ourselves to fit the topic we’re discussing and the people we’re talking with, and we are changed by what happens to us as we communicate” (30). In the tenth edition of Looking Out, Looking In (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2003), Ronald Adler and Neil Towne don’t mention Mead by name, but their discussion of self-perception is based on his framework (48-53). In Everyday Encounters: An Introduction to Interpersonal Communication (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1996), Julia T. Wood explicitly mentions Mead as she discusses “communication and the creation of the self” (51-54) and symbols (107-08). Trenholm and Jensen, as well, credit Mead and the symbolic interactionists as they build their notion of self-concept in Interpersonal Communication, (3rd edition [Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1996], 213-18). It seems to us that important interpersonal concepts such as rhetorical sensitivity, perspective taking, and self-monitoring can also be traced back to Mead’s ideas.

Mead in other classes
Often, students may have encountered symbolic interactionism concepts in previous communication classes and, rather than have the overlap go unaddressed, it is may be useful to discuss these now-commonplace ideas which were novel for Mead. A good starting place is the concept of meaning as situated in people, not things. Asking students how they might explain this concept to a young child often initiates a productive dialogue about what it means to say that meaning is not inherent but socially constructed. Explaining this apparently simplistic notion is quite challenging. It is also useful to discuss how an arbitrary symbol can take on great significance based on a socially ascribed meaning. A recent Newsweek report claimed that copies of the Koran, the Muslim holy book, had been flushed down the toilet at a prison camp, and though the story was eventually retracted, it produced global outcry and violence. The reaction was based on the belief that desecration of the manuscript was evidence of disrespect for the religion. Other religious texts (i.e. the Bible, the Torah) might produce a similar response. Challenge your students to think of objects that are important to them for symbolic reasons. This conversation can often be resumed when discussing semiotics and helps to illustrate the links between the theories.

Critique

As Griffin mentions in the Critique section for this chapter, Mead’s work suffers from a lack of clarity. When introducing this rather amorphous theory, we like to give students a fairly specific, concrete handle, something like the following: “Human realities are socially constructed through communication.” A concise formulation such as this provides students with a way to begin processing this material.

The self

Despite its current status as a reigning deity of the academy, symbolic interactionism may provide quite a challenge to some of your students. Many college-age men and women embrace a Romantic or essentialist conception of self that clashes with Mead’s fluid, malleable, “deconstructed” approach to personhood. These students, who have—unknowingly, most likely—adopted what David Darnell and Wayne Brockriede in Persons Communicating (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1976) called a “noble self” (176), may be troubled by what they may construe as the absence of a unique, individual, immutable human core. To them, symbolic interactionism seems to turn everyone into “rhetorical reflectors” (178). Some students may raise religious objections, claiming that Mead’s approach de-emphasizes what often is called the soul. If these potential challenges aren’t presented, you very well may wish to do so yourself. After all, there is a level of determinism in the interactionist orientation that deserves careful scrutiny. One method of handling the challenge, it seems to us, is to reexamine the function of the “I” element of the self. This, perhaps, is the component of the self where an element of the “noble self”—and perhaps the soul—resides. Clearly, this is a question that deserves discussion.

The self-fulfilling prophesy

Griffin’s treatment of self-fulfilling prophecy warrants further elaboration. Since he specifically references George Bernard Shaw’s Pygmalion (61), we like to introduce students to the social scientists’ version, the Pygmalion effect (see sources, below).
Default assumptions

In this day of increased gender equality, we’re curious to see how students react to Griffin’s example of the default assumption—the puzzle about the woman surgeon. Another example to consider might be the seventies pop hit “You Light Up My Life.” Through default assumptions of listeners, “you” was considered to be a reference to a person of the opposite sex and “light up” was quickly assigned a romantic meaning, but it’s our understanding that the original motivation of the song was religious. The Police’s hit song, “Every Breath You Take” may evoke a similar response. While it is often interpreted as a love song and frequently used by newlyweds as their wedding song, the writer (Sting) described the song as being about unhealthy obsession and stalking. Challenge students to come up with their own examples of default assumptions, particularly those outside the common category of gender stereotypes.

Sample Application Logs

Susan

The theatre is a world where you really do step into someone else’s shoes. You examine how the character views herself and how she is viewed by others. My theatre professor suggests some questions for studying a character—What do other people say about my character? How do other people react to my character? These questions help examine how the character is viewed by others and, thus, create the “looking-glass self.” To act the character you need to understand her “me” (the “looking-glass self”). This understanding of the character should allow the “I” to come naturally. The “I” is the spontaneous self, the source of motivation. It defies study, as when it is closely examined, it disappears.

Glinda

A ring. A class ring. A guy’s class ring. In high school it was the ultimate sign of status, whether dangling from a chain or wrapped with a quarter inch of yarn. Without ever speaking a word, a girl could tell everybody that she was loved (and trusted with expensive jewelry), that she had a protector (and how big that protector was, based, of course, on ring size—the bigger the better), the guy’s status (preferably senior), and his favorite sport (preferably football). Yes, if you had the (right) class ring, you were really somebody.

Exercises and Activities

“I am”: An exercise in the looking-glass self

You may wish to try the following exercise, which explores the connection between personal identity and the judgments of others. The class period before you discuss this chapter, ask students to write and turn in a short description of their personalities/characters. The next class, after you’ve discussed the material, ask your students to complete the following phrase with as many different endings as they are able: “My friends say I am . . .” Then return the descriptions they wrote the class before and ask them to compare the two documents. How do their own descriptions compare to those attributed to others? How would Mead account for the data they’ve supplied? What do these results tell us about the self and communication?
When Em Griffin teaches this chapter, he uses a simple fifteen-question survey to help students better understand one’s sense of self and its relationship to communication.* After the words “I am . . .” students supply fifteen terms that describe them: student, self-confident, young, timid, boisterous, and so forth. After completing their fifteen-part lists, they are asked to think about the elements as a whole. Nouns tend to indicate components of identity, and adjectives indicate components of self-esteem. You can get an idea of a person’s relative self-esteem by the ratio of positive to negative adjectives. With each term, Griffin asks students to speculate about when they began associating this word with themselves and how this association was created. With respect to the latter speculation, Griffin pushes students to ponder the role that communication played in creating the link between the student and the term. Symbolic interactionism would suggest that the link is strong, although such investigation may be difficult to conduct at the spur of the moment. After all, these associations go deep.

The significant other

Students are often interested in a discussion of the term “significant other” which has become a popular substitute for boy/girlfriend, same-sex companion, or any non-marital, romantic partner. Mead, borrowing the term from Charles Horton Cooley, used it to describe people whose opinions of us alter our own self-perceptions and distinguish them from those who are only seen as a non-specific composite (the generalized other) and do not have the same impact. It might be useful to ask students to think of who comprises their significant others using this description. Be sure to note that from a Meadian perspective, the term “significant other” did not necessarily mean a single person or exclusive distinction.

Literature and feature films

Since it is short and powerful, we recommend reading aloud and then discussing the text of “Cipher in the Snow.” It’s also interesting to discuss how—to a certain extent, at least—our treatment of that story exemplifies Mead’s approach. Because we read the piece in the context of symbolic interaction, we are influenced by concepts such as self-fulfilling prophecy and the looking-glass self, and thus we attribute the boy’s death to the negative image that is continually reflected back to him by those in his environment. Our expectations, in this sense, become a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy, and the events of his life come to mean what we perceive them to signify. If the story were told emphasizing slightly different facts in a different social context, the death might be attributed to very different causes. “Generalized other” (63), Griffin’s heading for the paragraph describing “Cipher in the Snow,” is also a useful bit of text. Why has he chosen this phrase to introduce the story? To test comprehension, ask students to rename this application of symbolic interaction in more specific, practical terms.

There are a number of feature-length films that illustrate the power of communication to shape self-concept including To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar, Billy Elliott,

The Full Monty, and Calendar Girls. The last two may be of particularly interest as both films focus on body image from non-traditional angles and the perceptual shifts that are the result of other’s feedback, illustrating—among other things—the principle of the looking-glass self.

An intriguing application of symbolic interactionism is offered by noted communication theorist William Shakespeare in Much Ado About Nothing, which is readily available on video. Sworn enemies Beatrice and Benedick fall deeply in love simply because of brief, contrived conversations they are tricked into “overhearing.” The play vividly demonstrates the power of language to create important social realities. Edmond Rostand’s Cyrano de Bergerac, which is also available on video (including creative adaptations such as Roxanne and The Truth about Cats and Dogs), demonstrates the power of language to create social realities.

For a grim look at the widespread cultural damage done by processes of communication aptly described by symbolic interactionism, we recommend Toni Morrison’s Beloved (New York: Plume/Penguin, 1988), which is featured by Griffin in his treatment of standpoint theory. For example, relatively late in the narrative, Morrison’s narrator describes the devastating effect of white perceptions about race on both African-American and white psyches:

White people believe that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. Swift unnavigable waters, swinging screaming baboons, sleeping snakes, red gums ready for their sweet white blood. . . . But it wasn’t the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (livable) place. It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them. And it grew. It spread. In, through and after life, it spread, until it invaded the whites who had made it. . . . The screaming baboon lived under their own white skin; the red gums were their own. (198-99)

Morrison’s predecessor Ralph Ellison provides one of the most powerful literary examples of the substantial effects described by symbolic interactionism in his masterful novel of dysfunctional race relations, Invisible Man (New York: Random House, 1952). The first-person narrator, an African-American male whose name is never given, uses the term “invisibility” to describe the way whites perceive him. In the following quote, notice how he renders the mirror imagery so central to symbolic interactionism:

I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me. (3)

The narrator suggests that others either don’t see him as a human being, or view him as a means toward political, social, and personal goals. Thus, his individuality or unique character is “invisible.” The narrator pushes the point even further by suggesting that many African Americans, particularly those who are complicit with the racist power structure that dominates the country at the time, also render him invisible for their own purposes. Of course his invisibility has a profound effect on his self-perception and his response to those who perpetuate his marginalized status in society. Since many students read this novel in high-
school or college literature courses, you may be able to introduce it into your discussion, or perhaps particular students may wish to pursue the novel as an individual project. Depending on the racial/ethnic composition of your class, you may wish to discuss the extent to which the narrator’s invisibility may still be felt by minorities in contemporary American society. Responses may surprise, disturb, and enlighten white students—as *Invisible Man* has for over half a century.

**Further Resources**

- Because Mead is a root, rather than a branch, of communication theory, symbolic interactionism’s influence is pervasive in our field. Recent studies that owe a heavy intellectual debt to Mead and Blumer include:

**Applied Symbolic Interactionism**

- If you or your students have an interest in the dramaturgical issues raised by Goffman, we recommend recent work in performance theory. The journal *Text and Performance Quarterly* is a good place to begin.
The Pygmalion effect

- For discussion of the Pygmalion effect and self-fulfilling prophecy, see:
Sample Examination Questions

Sample Questions are not reproduced in the online version of the Instructor's Manual.

To receive a copy of the Test Bank contact your local McGraw-Hill sales representative or email Leslie Oberhuber, Senior Marketing Manager at leslie_oberhuber@mcgraw-hill.com
Sample Questions are not reproduced in the online version of the Instructor's Manual.
Sample Questions are not reproduced in the online version of the Instructor's Manual.
Sample Questions are not reproduced in the online version of the Instructor's Manual.