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Symbolic interaction is a perspective in sociology that places meaning, interaction, and human agency at the center of understanding social life. This perspective grew out of the American philosophical tradition of pragmatism, an approach developed in the late nineteenth century by Charles Peirce, William James, and John Dewey. Challenging the assumptions of classical rationalism, these thinkers regarded people as actors rather than reactors, treated “reality” as dynamic and pluralistic, linked meanings to social acts and perspectives, and viewed knowledge as a key resource for problem solving and reorganizing the world.

George Herbert Mead brought pragmatist philosophy to sociology, working its assumptions into a theory and method for the social sciences. Drawing on the ideas of the pragmatist founders, as well as the theories of Charles Horton Cooley, Charles Darwin, and Wilhelm Wundt, Mead developed a distinctly sociological account of human consciousness, selfhood, and action. He presented this perspective in a series of social psychology lectures that became the basis for his best-known book, *Mind, Self, and Society* (1934). Mead's insights impressed many of his students, notably Herbert Blumer, who later became a distinguished sociologist at the University of California at Berkeley and president of the American Sociological Association. Blumer's compilation of writings, *Symbolic Interactionism* (1969), is still widely acknowledged as the major statement of the symbolic interactionist perspective. Mead and Blumer belonged to a group of other early sociologists, including Robert Park, W. I. Thomas, and Everett Hughes, who studied related topics such as roles, selves, social definitions, and socialization. Because most of these scholars were affiliated with the University of Chicago, symbolic interactionism is often referred to as the Chicago School of Sociology, even though another variant of the perspective emerged later at the University of Iowa.

Blumer coined the label “symbolic interactionism” in 1937 while writing an essay on social psychology for a social science textbook. In that essay, Blumer emphasized how Mead's work could provide the basis for a new social psychological approach that would transcend the deterministic theories of the time. Mead is usually credited as the originator of symbolic interactionism, even though Blumer's analysis drew heavily on the ideas of other theorists and, according to some critics, differed in important respects from Mead's writings.

Blumer, along with Everett Hughes, influenced cohorts of graduate students he taught at the University of Chicago in the 1940s and early 1950s. These students, including Howard Becker, Fred Davis, Elliot Friedson, Erving Goffman, Joseph Gusfield, Helena Lopata, Tamotsu Shibutani, Gregory Stone, Anselm Strauss, and Ralph Turner, further developed the symbolic interactionist perspective and shaped a number of its subfields, such as deviance, social problems, self and identity, and collective behavior. They have since become recognized as the Second Chicago School.

Guiding Principles and Assumptions

Blumer (1969) articulated the core premises of symbolic interactionism:

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

Other related assumptions inform and guide this perspective:

1. *Human beings are unique in their ability to use symbols.* Because people rely on and use symbols, we do not usually respond to stimuli in a direct or automatic way; instead, we give meanings to stimuli and then act in relation to these meanings. Our behavior is different from that of other animals or organisms, which act through instincts or reflexes. We learn what things mean as we interact with others. In doing so, we rely heavily on language and the processes of role taking and communication it facilitates. We learn to see and respond to symbolically mediated objects—objects that have names such as water, ground, student, professor, book, and library. These objects become part of the reality we create and negotiate through interaction.
2. *People become human through interaction.* Through social interaction, we learn to use symbols, to think and make plans, to take the perspective of others, to develop a sense of self, and to participate in complex forms of communication and social organization. Interactionists do not believe that we are born human. They argue instead that we develop into human beings only through interaction with others. Interactionists acknowledge that we are born with certain kinds of biological “hardware” (e.g., a highly developed nervous system) that gives us the potential to become fully human, but they contend that involvement in society is essential for realizing this potential.
3. *People are conscious, self-reflexive beings who shape their own behavior.* The most important capacities that we develop through our involvement in social interaction are the “mind” and the “self.” By developing the capacity to see and respond to ourselves as objects, we learn to interact with ourselves, or think. As we think, we shape the meaning of objects in our world, accepting them, rejecting them, or changing them in accord with how we define and act toward them. Our behavior, then, is an interplay of social stimuli and our responses to those stimuli. In making this assertion, interactionists embrace a voluntaristic image of human behavior. They suggest that we exercise an important element of autonomy in our actions. At the same time, interactionists understand that a variety of social factors, such as language, culture, race, class, and gender, constrain our interpretations and behaviors. Thus, interactionists can be characterized as “soft determinists”; they presume that our actions are influenced but not determined by social constraints.
4. *People are purposive creatures who act in and toward situations.* For interactionists, we don’t “release” our behavior, like tension in a spring, in response to biological drives, psychological needs, or social expectations. Rather, we act *toward situations*. Our actions are based on the meaning we attribute to the situation in which we find ourselves. This “definition of the situation” emerges from our interactions with others. We determine the meaning of a situation (and our subsequent actions) by taking account of others’ intentions, actions, and expressions. We select lines of behavior that we believe will lead to our desired ends. Our predictions may be wrong; we do not necessarily act wisely or correctly. Nor do we always pursue goals in a clear-cut or single-minded way. Once we begin acting, we may encounter obstacles and contingencies that may block or distract us from our original goals and direct us toward new ones. Our actions and intentions, then, are dynamic and emergent.
5. *Society consists of people engaging in symbolic interaction.* Following Blumer, interactionists conceive of the relationship between society and the individual as both fluid and structured. This relationship is grounded in individuals’ abilities to assume each other’s perspectives (or “role take”), to adjust and coordinate their unfolding acts, and to interpret and communicate these acts. In emphasizing that society consists of people interacting symbolically, interactionists part company with psychologistic theories that see society as existing primarily “in our heads,” either in the form of reward

histories or socially shaped cognitions. Interactionists also depart from structuralists who conceive of society as an entity that exists independently of individuals, dictating our actions through imposed rules, roles, statuses, and structures. We are born into a society that frames our actions through patterns of meaning and rewards, but we also shape our identities and behaviors as we make plans, seek goals, and interact with others in specific situations. That which we call “society” and “structure” are human products, rooted in joint action. Thus, “‘society’ and ‘individual’ do not denote separable phenomena” (Cooley 1902/1964:36–37). People acquire and realize their individuality (or selfhood) through interaction and, at the same time, maintain or alter society.

6. *Emotions are central to meaning and behavior.* Since the late 1970s, interactionists have attended more to the importance of emotions in understanding social life. Although other sociologists have bracketed emotions, relegating them to the psychological or biological realm, interactionists have recognized that “social factors enter not simply before and after but *interactively* during the experience of emotion” (Hochschild 1983:211). Arlie Hochschild, Candace Clark, Spencer Cahill, Sherryl Kleinman, and other interactionists have studied feeling rules—guidelines for how we are expected to feel in particular situations—and the emotion work we do when our feelings do not measure up to situational norms. Feelings may also put our moral identities into question: Can we believe we are good people if we have feelings that violate our ideals? Groups and organizations have different cultures of emotions; participants expect members to experience particular emotions and to display them. In their research, interactionists ask not only what objects mean to participants but also how they feel about them and whether those feelings fit with or challenge the norms of the group.
7. *The social act is the fundamental unit of analysis.* Interactionists contend that the social act, or what Blumer referred to as joint action, is the central concern of sociology. A “social act” refers to behavior that in some way takes account of others and is guided by what they do; it is formulated so that it fits together with the behavior of another person, group, or social organization. It also depends on and emerges through communication and interpretation. This covers a diverse array of human action, ranging from a handshake, a kiss, a wink, and a fistfight to a lecture, a beer bash, a funeral, or a religious revival. Whenever we orient ourselves to others and their actions, regardless of whether we are trying to hurt them, help them, convert them, or destroy them, we are engaging in a social act. We align our behaviors with others, whether acting as individuals or as representatives of a group or organization.

In focusing on social acts, interactionists are not limited to examining the behavior of individuals or even small groups. They also consider the social conduct of crowds, industries, political parties, school systems, hospitals, religious cults, therapeutic organizations, occupational groups, social movements, and the mass media. Inspired by Herbert Blumer (1969), they regard the domain of sociology as “constituted precisely by the study of joint action and the collectivities that engage in joint action” (p. 17).

8. *Sociological methods should enable researchers to grasp people’s meanings.* Blumer noted that people act on the basis of the meanings we give to things. Interactionists believe it is essential to understand those meanings, seeing them from the point of view of the individuals or groups under study. To develop this insider’s view, researchers learn to empathize with—“take the role of”—the individuals or groups they are studying (Blumer 1969). In addition, interactionists observe and interact with these individuals or groups in their “natural” setting. This in-depth approach enables researchers to learn how social actors accept, defy, or reconstruct their everyday worlds.

Recent Trends and New Directions in Interactionist Analysis

Critics contend that interactionists' emphasis on how people make roles, define situations, and negotiate identities leads them to ignore or downplay how our individual behavior is constrained by social structure. Yet analysis of the link between individual agency and social structure has a long history in interactionist thought, especially in the writings of Mead, Cooley, Blumer, and Goffman. In recent years, it has become the focus of interactionist studies of social organization and collective action, power and inequality, and the nature and foundations of the self.

Social Organization and Collective Action

Symbolic interactionism addresses issues that extend beyond microsociological concerns. Even in the early years of interactionism, Herbert Blumer wrote about organizations in his studies of collective behavior, industrial relations, and race relations. As a professor at the University of Chicago, Blumer served as a labor negotiator and deeply appreciated the power of unions, corporations, and interest groups. During the past couple of decades, interactionists have addressed macrosociological issues through the concept of *mesostructure*, an intermediate level of analysis between the microstructural concerns of social psychology and the macrostructural concerns of organizational theory (Maines 1977). Mesostructure refers to the level of organization within which interaction occurs.

In examining mesostructure, interactionists analyze how power relations and social constraints play out in organizational actors' behaviors. For example, Harvey Farberman studied how the practices of used car dealers are shaped by the structure of their relationships with car manufacturers. The manufacturers impose a system of sales on the dealers that force them to operate with a small profit margin. Consequently, the dealers have to squeeze every dollar they can from their customers, exploiting them through a variety of money-making "rackets," including "charging for labor time not actually expended, billing for repairs not actually done, replacing parts unnecessarily, and using rebuilt parts but charging for new parts" (Farberman 1975:457).

Since the late 1970s, interactionists have used mesostructural analysis to study a wide array of organizations, including hospitals, churches, restaurants, court systems, the mass media, the arts, welfare agencies, scientific groups, athletic teams, educational institutions, and even civilizations. They have used concepts such as meaning, frame, network, career, metapower, and negotiated order to examine the links between "micro" and "macro" levels of social reality.

They have shown how interactions in local organizations, such as a business, emerge from and are influenced by the structural conditions in which they are embedded. For example, restaurants strive to fit into a market niche. Every owner wants to develop a strong and loyal customer base so that the restaurant will be predictably profitable. To do this, the owner must consider likely customers, their culinary desires, and how much they are willing to spend. These factors influence how much the owner or manager spends on food, how many cooks he or she hires, and how much he or she pays them. Ultimately, the restaurant as an organization depends on its customers and on the owner's need for profit. As a result, many dishwashers or "potmen" are high school students, undocumented immigrants, or individuals with developmental disabilities. In each case, the restaurant management hires those who are willing to work for minimum wage, largely because of their structural position in our society. Thus, although a restaurant is an interactional arena, it is also an organization that operates

within the structural parameters of a market economy. The dynamics of this economy shape the structure and interactions that occur within the organization (Fine 1996).

In addition to studying how people reproduce structure within the interactional arena of organizations, interactionists have turned their attention to the dynamics of collective action and social movement organizations. David Snow and his colleagues (1986) have illustrated how social movements are organized through “frames” and frame alignments that shape the outlooks and behavioral choices of participants. Members of social movements search for frameworks of meaning to answer the question, “What is going on here?” Some frames legitimate violent protest (the frame of oppression), whereas other frames (the frame of moral justice) diminish the probability of violence.

Interactionist analyses of social structure and collective action have revealed how organizational relations are shaped and reproduced by means of symbolic negotiation, thus sharing common features with smaller-scale, face-to-face negotiations. Even large-scale organizations—governments, multinational corporations, and international social movements—depend on symbolic meaning and are grounded in and sustained through patterns of interaction.

Power and Inequality

Some interactionists analyzed power and politics over 30 years ago, but others were slow in following their lead. During the past decade, interactionists have done more extensive research on political power, conflict, and negotiation, especially when examining the construction of social problems. In exploring how issues get defined as social problems, interactionist scholars have studied the interpretive, claims-making activities of social problems of entrepreneurs. Scholars have pointed out how these activities unfold in a context of competing and conflicting claims—a context in which some actors are privileged over others for various political and structural reasons.

This approach to social problems has led interactionists to analyze broader sociohistorical changes in U.S. society, such as the medicalization of deviance. Interactionists have examined how people use metaphorical images and rhetorical strategies to define certain phenomena as social problems and to build consensus that action needs to be taken to constrain the behaviors of others. Studies of social problems have enabled interactionists to integrate macrosociological questions more fully into their analyses and, in so doing, to develop the foundations for a “critical interactionist” approach to social life.

Perhaps the best example of a critical interactionism is found in the work of Michael Schwalbe, who has blended the insights of Marx and Mead in studying the labor process, identity work, and the reproduction of inequality. Recently, Schwalbe and his colleagues (2001) have identified four generic social processes through which inequalities are created and sustained. These include (1) *oppressive othering* (how powerful groups seek and sustain advantage through defining members of less powerful groups as inferior), (2) *boundary maintenance* (how dominant groups protect their economic and cultural privileges by maintaining boundaries between themselves and subordinate groups), (3) *emotion management* (how groups suppress or manage potentially destabilizing feelings, such as anger, resentment, sympathy, and despair), and (4) *subordinate adaptations* (how members of subordinate groups adapt to their unequal status and, in some cases, reproduce it). These four social processes provide links between local, everyday interactions and larger structural inequalities.

Peter Hall has integrated neo-Marxist and interactionist perspectives in analyzing power, politics, and the organization of the policy process. Hall has examined how politicians, including U.S. presidents, manage impressions and manipulate symbols to “reassure” the public, promote the public's quiescence, and discourage people's participation in the political process. In his investigations of policymaking, Hall has revealed how and why the organizational context of policy shapes and mediates the policy process.

Another variant of critical interactionism is found in analyses that blend feminist and interactionist perspectives. What distinguishes these analyses is their focus on how everyday practices sustain or disrupt gender inequalities. For example, Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987) used feminist, interactionist, and ethnomethodological insights to explain how people “do gender” through their routine conversations and interactions. West and Zimmerman highlight how people perform and reproduce gender, individually and institutionally. By showing that gender is a performance, West and Zimmerman acknowledge that people can change or undermine the gender order.

Scholars adopting a feminist interactionist approach have also analyzed power relations, studying how men exercise and maintain conversational advantage through interruptions, topic changes, and language style. In addition, they have studied the “sexual politics” that characterize family relationships, organizational life, and a wide range of face-to-face communications.

Feminist interactionism has had a large impact on the sociology of emotions. Research conducted at airlines, law firms, power plants, police departments, alternative health care clinics, and weight loss associations reveal how organizations manufacture sentiments and regulate emotional display while requiring women to engage in unrecognized and devalued work.

The Nature and Foundations of the Self

Interactionists have always emphasized the social nature and roots of the self. As Mead noted, people develop the capacity for reflexive selfhood through interacting with others. It is through interaction that we learn to take the role of others and see ourselves as social objects, much like other social objects. Moreover, it is through interaction that we experience, sustain, and transform our sense of who we are. Our sense of selfhood, then, is inextricably linked to our relationships with others. It is both a social product and a social process.

Interactionists generally agree about how the self emerges and develops, but they differ in the relative weight they accord to the structure of the self, on one hand, and the processes through which the self is created and enacted, on the other. Scholars who place emphasis on the structure of the self are sometimes referred to as “structural interactionists.” They focus on the nature and relevance of the “self-concept,” or the overarching view that an individual has of himself or herself. In analyzing the self-concept, structural interactionists highlight its contents and organization and consider how it shapes a person's behavior across different situations. They also propose that it is best to study and measure the self-concept through traditional quantitative methods (e.g., survey questionnaires or laboratory experiments).

Interactionists who emphasize the self-as-process focus on how people create and enact selves; they also assert that the self is best studied through ethnographic methods. Some of these “processual interactionists” embrace Erving Goffman's dramaturgical perspective. In this view, there is no “real” self, only a set of masks and situated performances that a person

enacts. Instead of carrying a core self from situation to situation, the person fashions a self anew in each social interaction, generating expressive cues and managing the impressions of an audience to realize desired identities and outcomes. Other processual interactionists adopt a less situational perspective on the self. They acknowledge that people bring fairly stable self-concepts to social situations while also recognizing that these self-concepts change over time. Some analysts focus on the broad changes in American culture that have produced differences in the places where people anchor their fundamental images of self. In the 1950s and 1960s, Americans had relatively enduring and consistent conceptions of self that were anchored in the social institutions to which they belonged, such as families, workplaces, churches, or schools. More recently, Americans have developed a “mutable” sense of self, anchored more in impulses than institutions and flexibly adaptive to the demands of a rapidly changing society (Turner 1976).

Although differing in the relative weight they accord to the structural and processual aspects of the self, the vast majority of interactionists acknowledge the influence of social structural factors (e.g., race, class, gender, and culture) on the development and expression of selves. Their disagreements revolve around the degree of agency that people have in addressing and negotiating these structural constraints. Even postmodern interactionists, who are less structural in orientation than many interactionists, link the expression of the self to the dynamics of late capitalist or “postmodern” societies. For example, Gergen argues that the faster pace of life and communications in postmodern societies has overwhelmed people, leaving them with selves “under siege.” Consequently, identities have become fragmented and incoherent. Under postmodern conditions, the concept of the self becomes uncertain and “the fully saturated self becomes no self at all” (Gergen 1991:7). People face a daunting challenge in building and sustaining an integrated sense of self because the social structures that surround the self are fleeting and unstable. As James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium (2000) observe, contemporary times are challenging for the self because it is being produced in a rapidly growing, widely varying, and increasingly competitive set of institutions. Self-construction has become a big business, characterized by the proliferation of institutions that make it their stock-in-trade to design and discern identities for us. Gubrium and Holstein call for interactionists to shift the focus of their analyses beyond the situational construction of selves toward the institutional production of selves. By doing so, interactionist scholars can continue to push their perspective beyond traditional social psychological concerns and toward the domains of macrosociology.

Future Prospects

Symbolic interactionism is likely to maintain an influential voice in sociology, especially through its academic journal (*Symbolic Interaction*) and its ongoing contributions to various substantive areas and theoretical debates. Given recent trends, interactionist researchers will place greater emphasis on the development of macrolevel concepts and analyses, attending not only on mesostructural phenomena but also on the construction, dynamics, and interrelations of large-scale social structures. Interactionism will become characterized by even greater theoretical and methodological diversity in the next few decades, making it necessary to abandon the old (and somewhat illusory) distinction drawn between the Chicago and Iowa Schools and to speak of interactionist sociologies rather than interactionist sociology. And symbolic interactionism may become a victim of its recent and continuing theoretical successes, hastening its “sad demise” and eventual disappearance within sociology (Fine 1993). As the concepts of interactionism become the concepts of sociology, its voice will become increasingly integrated with, and indistinguishable from, the other voices

that make up the discipline. This has already become evident in the analyses that can be found in many prominent sociological books and journal articles.

Symbolic interactionism's prospects in the twenty-first century will be determined largely by its central mission. If interactionists decide that their key mission is to continue formulating a pragmatic approach to social life—the power of symbol creation and interaction that is at the heart of the sociological imagination—then the future of interactionism will be bright. Guided by this goal, interactionists can expect to build on and extend the inroads they have gained within sociology in recent years. They can also expect their work to have a growing impact on related disciplines, such as gender studies, communication studies, cultural studies, education, and psychology.

- interactionism
- the self
- symbolic interactionism
- symbolic interaction
- Herbert Blumer
- self-concept
- restaurants

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See also

- [Blumer, Herbert](#)
- [Dramaturgy](#)
- [Goffman, Erving](#)
- [Mead, George Herbert](#)
- [Negotiated Order](#)
- [Self and Self-Concept](#)
- [Social Interaction](#)
- [Strauss, Anselm](#)

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