Symbolic Interactionism

Chapter Outline

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Symbolic interactionism (Sandstrom and Kleinman, 2005) offers a wide range of interesting and important ideas, and a number of major thinkers have been associated with the approach, including George Herbert Mead, Charles Horton Cooley, W. I. Thomas, Herbert Blumer, and Erving Goffman.

The Major Historical Roots

We begin our discussion of symbolic interactionism with Mead (Shalin, 2000). The two most significant intellectual roots of Mead's work in particular, and of symbolic interactionism in general, are the philosophy of pragmatism (D. Elliot, 2007) and psychological behaviorism (Joas, 1985; Rock, 1979).

Pragmatism

Pragmatism is a wide-ranging philosophical position[1] from which we can identify several aspects that influenced Mead's developing sociological orientation (Charon, 2000; Joas, 1993). First, to pragmatists true reality does not exist "out there" in the real world; it "is actively created as we act in and toward the world" (Hewitt, 1984:8; see also Shalin, 1986). Second, people remember and base their knowledge of the world on what has proved useful to them. They are likely to alter what no longer "works." Third, people define the social and physical "objects" that they encounter in the world according to their use for them. Finally, if we want to understand actors, we must base that understanding on what people actually do in the world. Three points are critical for symbolic

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[1] See Joas (1996) for an effort to develop a theory of creative action based, at least in part, on pragmatism.

interactionism: (1) a focus on the interaction between the actor and the world, (2) a view of both the actor and the world as dynamic processes and not static structures, and (3) the great importance attributed to the actor's ability to interpret the social world.

The last point is most pronounced in the work of the philosophical pragmatist John Dewey (Jacobs, 2007b; Sjoberg et al., 1997). Dewey did not conceive of the mind as a thing or a structure but rather as a thinking process that involves a series of stages. These stages include defining objects in the social world, outlining possible modes of conduct, imagining the consequences of alternative courses of action, eliminating unlikely possibilities, and finally selecting the optimal mode of action (Sheldon Stryker, 1980). This focus on the thinking process was enormously influential in the development of symbolic interactionism.

In fact, David Lewis and Richard Smith argue that Dewey (along with William James; see Musolf, 1994) was more influential in the development of symbolic interactionism than was Mead. They go so far as to say that "Mead's work was peripheral to the mainstream of early Chicago sociology" (Lewis and Smith, 1980:xix). In making this argument, they distinguish between two branches of pragmatism—"philosophical realism" (associated with Mead) and "nominalist pragmatism" (associated with Dewey and James). In their view, symbolic interactionism was influenced more by the nominalist approach and was even inconsistent with philosophical realism. The nominalist position is that although macro-level phenomena exist, they do not have "independent and determining effects upon the consciousness of and behavior of individuals" (Lewis and Smith, 1980:24). More positively, this view "conceives of the individuals themselves as existentially free agents who accept, reject, modify, or otherwise 'define' the community's norms, roles, beliefs, and so forth, according to their own personal interests and plans of the moment" (Lewis and Smith, 1980:24). In contrast, to social realists the emphasis is on society and how it constitutes and controls individual mental processes. Rather than being free agents, actors and their cognitions and behaviors are controlled by the larger community.[2]

Given this distinction, Mead fits better into the realist camp and therefore did not mesh well with the nominalist direction taken by symbolic interactionism. The key figure in the latter development is Herbert Blumer, who, while claiming to operate with a Meadian approach, was in fact better thought of as a nominalist. Theoretically, Lewis and Smith catch the essence of their differences:

> Blumer . . . moved completely toward psychical interactionism. . . . Unlike the Meadian social behaviorist, the psychical interactionist holds that the meanings of symbols are not universal and objective; rather meanings are individual and subjective in that they are "attached" to the symbols by the receiver according to however he or she chooses to "interpret" them.
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> (Lewis and Smith, 1980:172)

Behaviorism

Buttressing the Lewis and Smith interpretation of Mead is the fact that Mead was influenced by psychological behaviorism (J. C. Baldwin, 1986, 1988a, 1988b; Mandes, 2007),

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[2] For a criticism of the distinctions made here, see D. Miller (1982b, 1985).

a perspective that also led him in a realist and an empirical direction. In fact, Mead called his basic concern *social behaviorism* to differentiate it from the *radical behaviorism* of John B. Watson (who was one of Mead's students).

Radical behaviorists of Watson's persuasion (K. Buckley, 1989) were concerned with the *observable* behaviors of individuals. Their focus was on the stimuli that elicited the responses, or behaviors, in question. They either denied or were disinclined to attribute much importance to the covert mental process that occurred between the time a stimulus was applied and the time a response was emitted. Mead recognized the importance of observable behavior, but he also felt that there were *covert* aspects of behavior that the radical behaviorists had ignored. But because he accepted the empiricism that was basic to behaviorism, Mead did not simply want to philosophize about these covert phenomena. Rather, he sought to extend the empirical science of behaviorism to them—that is, to what goes on between stimulus and response. Bernard Meltzer summarized Mead's position:

> For Mead, the unit of study is "the act," which comprises both overt and covert aspects of human action. Within the act, all the separated categories of the traditional, orthodox psychologies find a place. Attention, perception, imagination, reasoning, emotion, and so forth, are seen as parts of the act . . . the act, then, encompasses the total process involved in human activity.
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> <div align="right">(Meltzer, 1964/1978:23)</div>

Mead and the radical behaviorists also differed in their views on the relationship between human and animal behavior. Whereas radical behaviorists tended to see no difference between humans and animals, Mead argued that there was a significant, qualitative difference. The key to this difference was seen as the human possession of mental capacities that allowed people to use language between stimulus and response in order to decide how to respond.

Mead simultaneously demonstrated his debt to Watsonian behaviorism and dissociated himself from it. Mead made this clear when he said, on the one hand, that "we shall approach this latter field [social psychology] from a behavioristic point of view." On the other hand, Mead criticized Watson's position when he said, "The behaviorism which we shall make use of is *more adequate* than that of which Watson makes use" (1934/1962:2; italics added).

Charles Morris, in his introduction to *Mind, Self and Society,* enumerated three basic differences between Mead and Watson. First, Mead considered Watson's exclusive focus on behavior simplistic. In effect, he accused Watson of wrenching behavior out of its broader social context. Mead wanted to deal with behavior as a small part of the broader social world.

Second, Mead accused Watson of an unwillingness to extend behaviorism into mental processes. Watson had no sense of the actor's consciousness and mental processes, as Mead made vividly clear: "John B. Watson's attitude was that of the Queen in *Alice in Wonderland*—'Off with their heads!'—there were no such things. There was no . . . consciousness" (1934/1962:2–3). Mead contrasted his perspective with Watson's: "It is behavioristic, but unlike Watsonian behaviorism it recognizes the parts of the act which do not come to external observation" (1934/1962:8). More concretely, Mead saw his mission as extending the principles of Watsonian behaviorism to include mental processes.

Finally, because Watson rejected the mind, Mead saw him as having a passive image of the actor as puppet. Mead, on the other hand, subscribed to a much more dynamic and creative image of the actor, and it was this that made him attractive to later symbolic interactionists.

Pragmatism and behaviorism, especially in the theories of Dewey and Mead, were transmitted to many graduate students at the University of Chicago, primarily in the 1920s. These students, among them Herbert Blumer, established symbolic interactionism. Of course, other important theorists influenced these students, the most important of whom was Georg Simmel (see Chapter 5). Simmel's interest in forms of action and interaction was both compatible with and an extension of Meadian theory.

Between Reductionism and Sociologism

Blumer coined the term *symbolic interactionism* in 1937 and wrote several essays that were instrumental in its development (Morrione, 2007). Whereas Mead sought to differentiate the nascent symbolic interactionism from behaviorism, Blumer saw symbolic interactionism as being embattled on two fronts. First was the reductionist behaviorism that had worried Mead. To this was added the serious threat from larger-scale sociologistic theories, especially structural functionalism. To Blumer, behaviorism and structural functionalism both tended to focus on factors (for example, external stimuli and norms) that cause human behavior. As far as Blumer was concerned, both theories ignored the crucial process by which actors endow the forces acting on them and their own behaviors with meaning (Morrione, 1988).

To Blumer, behaviorists, with their emphasis on the impact of external stimuli on individual behavior, were clearly psychological reductionists. In addition to behaviorism, several other types of psychological reductionism troubled Blumer. For example, he criticized those who seek to explain human action by relying on conventional notions of the concept of "attitude" (Blumer, 1955/1969:94). In his view, most of those who use the concept think of an attitude as an "already organized tendency" within the actor; they tend to think of actions as being impelled by attitudes. In Blumer's view, this is very mechanistic thinking; what is important is not the attitude as an internalized tendency "but the defining process through which the actor comes to forge his act" (Blumer, 1955/1969:97). Blumer also singled out for criticism those who focus on conscious and unconscious motives. He was particularly irked by their view that actors are impelled by independent, mentalistic impulses over which they are supposed to have no control. Freudian theory, which sees actors as impelled by forces such as the id or libido, is an example of the kind of psychological theory to which Blumer was opposed. In short, Blumer was opposed to any psychological theory that ignores the process by which actors construct meaning—the fact that actors have selves and relate to themselves. Blumer's general criticisms were similar to Mead's, but he extended them beyond behaviorism to include other forms of psychological reductionism as well.

Blumer also was opposed to sociologistic theories (especially structural functionalism) that view individual behavior as being determined by large-scale external forces. In this category Blumer included theories that focus on such social-structural

and social-cultural factors as " 'social system,' 'social structure,' 'culture,' 'status posi-
tion,' 'social role,' 'custom,' 'institution,' 'collective representation,' 'social situation,'
'social norm,' and 'values'" (Blumer, 1962/1969:83). Both sociologistic theories and
psychological theories ignore the importance of meaning and the social construction
of reality:

> In both such typical psychological and sociological explanations the meanings of
> things for the human beings who are acting are either bypassed or swallowed up in
> the factors used to account for their behavior. If one declares that the given kinds
> of behavior are the result of the particular factors regarded as producing them,
> there is no need to concern oneself with the meaning of the things towards which
> human beings act.
>
> (Blumer, 1969b:3)

The Ideas of George Herbert Mead

Mead is the most important thinker in the history of symbolic interactionism (Chriss,
2005b; Joas, 2001), and his book *Mind, Self and Society* is the most important single
work in that tradition.

The Priority of the Social

In his review of *Mind, Self and Society,* Ellsworth Faris argued that "not mind and
then society; but society first and then minds arising within that society . . . would
probably have been [Mead's] preference" (cited in D. Miller, 1982a:2). Faris's inver-
sion of the title of this book reflects the widely acknowledged fact, recognized by
Mead himself, that society, or more broadly the social, is accorded priority in Mead's
analysis.

In Mead's view, traditional social psychology began with the psychology of the
individual in an effort to explain social experience; in contrast, Mead always gives
priority to the social world in understanding social experience. Mead explains his
focus in this way:

> We are not, in social psychology, building up the behavior of the social group in
> terms of the behavior of separate individuals composing it; rather, we are *starting
> out with a given social whole* of complex group activity, into which we analyze (as
> elements) the behavior of each of the separate individuals composing it. . . . We
> attempt, that is, to explain the conduct of the social group, rather than to account
> for the organized conduct of the social group in terms of the conduct of the
> separate individuals belonging to it. For social psychology, the *whole (society) is
> prior to the part (the individual),* not the part to the whole; and the part is
> explained in terms of the whole, not the whole in terms of the part or parts.
>
> (Mead, 1934/1962:7; italics added)

To Mead, the social whole precedes the individual mind both logically and temporally.
A thinking, self-conscious individual is, as we will see later, logically impossible in
Mead's theory without a prior social group. The social group comes first, and it leads
to the development of self-conscious mental states.

GEORGE HERBERT MEAD

A Biographical Sketch

Most of the important theorists discussed throughout this book achieved their greatest recognition in their lifetimes for their published work. George Herbert Mead, however, was at least as important, at least during his lifetime, for his teaching as for his writing. His words had a powerful impact on many people who were to become important sociologists in the twentieth century. As one of his students said, "Conversation was his best medium; writing was a poor second" (T. V. Smith, 1931:369). Let us have another of his students, himself a well-known sociologist—Leonard Cottrell—describe what Mead was like as a teacher:

> For me, the course with Professor Mead was a unique and unforgettable experience. . . . Professor Mead was a large, amiable-looking man who wore a magnificent mustache and a Vandyke beard. He characteristically had a benign, rather shy smile matched with a twinkle in his eyes as if he were enjoying a secret joke he was playing on the audience. . . .
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> As he lectured—always without notes—Professor Mead would manipulate the piece of chalk and watch it intently. . . . When he made a particularly subtle point in his lecture he would glance up and throw a shy, almost apologetic smile over our heads—never looking directly at anyone. His lecture flowed and we soon learned that questions or comments from the class were not welcome. Indeed, when someone was bold enough to raise a question there was a murmur of disapproval from the students. They objected to any interruption of the golden flow. . . .
>
> His expectations of students were modest. He never gave exams. The main task for each of us students was to write as learned a paper as one could. These Professor Mead read with great care, and what he thought of your paper was your grade in the course. One might suppose that students would read materials for the paper rather than attend his lectures but that was not the case. Students always came. They couldn't get enough of Mead.
>
> (Cottrell, 1980:49–50)

Mead had enormous difficulty writing, and this troubled him a great deal. "'I am vastly depressed by my inability to write what I want to'" (cited in G. Cook, 1993:xiii). However, over the years many of Mead's ideas came to be published, especially in *Mind, Self and Society* (a book based on students' notes from a course

The Act

Mead considers the act to be the most "primitive unit" in his theory (1982:27). In analyzing the act, Mead comes closest to the behaviorist's approach and focuses on stimulus

taught by Mead). This book and others of Mead's works had a powerful influence on the development of contemporary sociology, especially symbolic interactionism.

Born in South Hadley, Massachusetts, on February 27, 1863, Mead was trained mainly in philosophy and its application to social psychology. He received a bachelor's degree from Oberlin College (where his father was a professor) in 1883, and after a few years as a secondary-school teacher, surveyor for railroad companies, and private tutor, Mead began graduate study at Harvard in 1887. After a few years of study at Harvard, as well as at the universities of Leipzig and Berlin, Mead was offered an instructorship at the University of Michigan in 1891. It is interesting to note that Mead *never* received any graduate degrees. In 1894, at the invitation of John Dewey, he moved to the University of Chicago and remained there for the rest of his life.

As Mead makes clear in the following excerpt from a letter, he was heavily influenced by Dewey: "'Mr. Dewey is a man of not only great originality and profound thought but the most appreciative thinker I ever met. I have gained more from him than from any one man I ever met'" (cited in G. Cook, 1993:32). This was especially true of Mead's early work at Chicago, and he even followed Dewey into educational theory (Dewey left Chicago in 1904). However, Mead's thinking quickly diverged from Dewey's and led him in the direction of his famous social psychological theories of mind, self, and society. He began teaching a course on social psychology in 1900. In 1916–1917 it was transformed into an advanced course (the stenographic student notes from the 1928 course became the basis of *Mind, Self and Society*) that followed a course in elementary social psychology that was taught after 1919 by Ellsworth Faris of the sociology department. It was through this course that Mead had such a powerful influence on students in sociology (as well as psychology and education).

In addition to his scholarly pursuits, Mead became involved in social reform. He believed that science could be used to deal with social problems. For example, he was heavily involved as a fund raiser and policy maker at the University of Chicago Settlement House, which had been inspired by Jane Addams's Hull House. Perhaps most important, he played a key role in social research conducted by the settlement house.

Although eligible for retirement in 1928, he continued to teach at the invitation of the university and in the summer of 1930 became chair of the philosophy department. Unfortunately, he became embroiled in a bitter conflict between the department and the president of the university. This led in early 1931 to a letter of resignation from Mead written from his hospital bed. He was released from the hospital in late April, but died from heart failure the following day. Of him, John Dewey said he was "'the most original mind in philosophy in the America of the last generations'" (G. Cook, 1993:194).

and response. However, even here the stimulus does not elicit an automatic, unthinking response from the human actor. As Mead says, "We conceive of the stimulus as an occasion or opportunity for the act, not as a compulsion or a mandate" (1982:28).

Mead (1938/1972) identified four basic and interrelated stages in the act (Schmitt and Schmitt, 1996); the four stages represent an organic whole (in other words, they are dialectically interrelated). Both lower animals and humans act, and Mead is interested in the similarities, and especially the differences, between the two.

Impulse

The first stage is that of the *impulse,* which involves an "immediate sensuous stimulation" and the actor's reaction to the stimulation, the need to do something about it. Hunger is a good example of an impulse. The actor (both nonhuman and human) may respond immediately and unthinkingly to the impulse, but more likely the human actor will think about the appropriate response (for example, eat now or later). In thinking about a response, the person will consider not only the immediate situation but also past experiences and anticipated future results of the act.

Hunger may come from an inner state of the actor or may be elicited by the presence of food in the environment, or, most likely, it may arise from some combination of the two. Furthermore, the hungry person must find a way of satisfying the impulse in an environment in which food may not be immediately available or plentiful. This impulse, like all others, may be related to a problem in the environment (that is, the lack of immediately available food), a problem that must be overcome by the actor. Indeed, while an impulse such as hunger may come largely from the individual (although even here hunger can be induced by an external stimulus, and there are also social definitions of when it is appropriate to be hungry), it usually is related to the existence of a problem in the environment (for example, the lack of food). Overall, the impulse, like all other elements of Mead's theory, involves both the actor and the environment.

Perception

The second stage of the act is *perception,* in which the actor searches for, and reacts to, stimuli that relate to the impulse, in this case hunger as well as the various means available to satisfy it. People have the capacity to sense or perceive stimuli through hearing, smell, taste, and so on. Perception involves incoming stimuli, as well as the mental images they create. People do not simply respond immediately to external stimuli but rather think about, and assess, them through mental imagery. People are not simply subject to external stimulation; they also actively select characteristics of a stimulus and choose among sets of stimuli. That is, a stimulus may have several dimensions, and the actor is able to select among them. Furthermore, people usually are confronted with many different stimuli, and they have the capacity to choose which to attend to and which to ignore. Mead refuses to separate people from the objects that they perceive. It is the act of perceiving an object that makes it an object to a person; perception and object cannot be separated from (are dialectically related to) one another.

Manipulation

The third stage is *manipulation.* Once the impulse has manifested itself and the object has been perceived, the next step is manipulating the object or, more generally, taking action with regard to it. In addition to their mental advantages, people have another

advantage over lower animals. People have hands (with opposable thumbs) that allow them to manipulate objects far more subtly than can lower animals. The manipulation phase constitutes, for Mead, an important temporary pause in the process so that a response is not manifested immediately. A hungry human being sees a mushroom, but before eating it, he or she is likely to pick it up first, examine it, and perhaps check in a guidebook to see whether that particular variety is edible. The lower animal, in contrast, is likely to eat the mushroom without handling and examining it (and certainly without reading about it). The pause afforded by handling the object allows humans to contemplate various responses. In thinking about whether to eat the mushroom, both the past and the future are involved. People may think about past experiences in which they ate certain mushrooms that made them ill, and they may think about the future sickness, or even death, that might accompany eating a poisonous mushroom. The manipulation of the mushroom becomes a kind of experimental method in which the actor mentally tries out various hypotheses about what would happen if the mushroom were consumed.

Consummation

On the basis of these deliberations, the actor may decide to eat the mushroom (or not), and this constitutes the last phase of the act, *consummation,* or more generally the taking of action that satisfies the original impulse. Both humans and lower animals may consume the mushroom, but the human is less likely to eat a bad mushroom because of his or her ability to manipulate the mushroom and to think (and read) about the implications of eating it. The lower animal must rely on a trial-and-error method, and this is a less-efficient technique than the capacity of humans to think through their actions.[3] Trial-and-error in this situation is quite dangerous; as a result, it seems likely that lower animals are more prone to die from consuming poisonous mushrooms than are humans.

For ease of discussion, the four stages of the act have been separated from one another in sequential order, but Mead sees a dialectical relationship among the four stages. John C. Baldwin expresses this idea in the following way: "Although the four parts of the act sometimes *appear* to be linked in linear order, they actually interpenetrate to form one organic process: Facets of each part are present at all times from the beginning of the act to the end, such that each part affects the other" (1986:55–56). Thus, the later stages of the act may lead to the emergence of earlier stages. For example, manipulating food may lead the individual to the impulse of hunger and the perception that the individual is hungry and that food is available to satisfy the need.

Gestures

The act involves only one person, but the *social act* involves two or more persons. The *gesture* is in Mead's view the basic mechanism in the social act and in the social process more generally. As he defines them, "gestures are movements of the first

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[3] For a critique of Mead's thinking on the differences between humans and lower animals, see Alger and Alger (1997).

organism which act as specific stimuli calling forth the (socially) appropriate responses of the second organism" (Mead, 1934/1962:14; see also Mead, 1959:187). Both lower animals and humans are capable of gestures in the sense that the action of one individual mindlessly and automatically elicits a reaction by another individual. The following is Mead's famous example of a dog fight in terms of gestures:

> The act of each dog becomes the stimulus to the other dog for his response. . . . The very fact that the dog is ready to attack another becomes a stimulus to the other dog to change his own position or his own attitude. He has no sooner done this than the change of attitude in the second dog in turn causes the first dog to change his attitude.
>
> (Mead, 1934/1962:42–43)

Mead labels what is taking place in this situation a "conversation of gestures." One dog's gesture automatically elicits a gesture from the second; there are no thought processes taking place on the part of the dogs.

Humans sometimes engage in mindless conversations of gestures. Mead gives as examples many of the actions and reactions that take place in boxing and fencing matches, when one combatant adjusts "instinctively" to the actions of the second. Mead labels such unconscious actions "nonsignificant" gestures; what distinguishes humans is their ability to employ "significant" gestures, or those that require thought on the part of the actor before a reaction.

The vocal gesture is particularly important in the development of significant gestures. However, not all vocal gestures are significant. The bark of one dog to another is not significant; even some human vocal gestures (for example, a mindless grunt) may not be significant. However, it is the development of vocal gestures, especially in the form of language, that is the most important factor in making possible the distinctive development of human life: "The specialization of the human animal within this field of the gesture has been responsible, ultimately, for the origin and growth of present human society and knowledge, with all the control over nature and over the human environment which science makes possible" (Mead, 1934/1962:14).

This development is related to a distinctive characteristic of the vocal gesture. When we make a physical gesture, such as a facial grimace, we cannot see what we are doing (unless we happen to be looking in the mirror). In contrast, when we utter a vocal gesture, we hear ourselves just as others do. One result is that the vocal gesture can affect the speaker in much the same way that it affects the listeners. Another is that we are far better able to stop ourselves in vocal gestures than we are able to stop ourselves in physical gestures. In other words, we have far better control over vocal gestures than physical ones. This ability to control oneself and one's reactions is critical, as we will see, to the other distinctive capabilities of humans. More generally, "it has been the vocal gesture that has preeminently provided the medium of social organization in human society" (Mead, 1959:188).

Significant Symbols

A significant symbol is a kind of gesture, one which only humans can make. Gestures become *significant symbols* when they arouse in the individual who is making them the same kind of response (it need not be identical) they are supposed to elicit from

those to whom the gestures are addressed. Only when we have significant symbols can we truly have communication; communication in the full sense of the term is not possible among ants, bees, and so on. Physical gestures can be significant symbols, but as we have seen, they are not ideally suited to be significant symbols because people cannot easily see or hear their own physical gestures. Thus, it is vocal utterances that are most likely to become significant symbols, although not all vocalizations are such symbols. The set of vocal gestures most likely to become significant symbols is *language:* "a symbol which answers to a meaning in that experience of the first individual and which also calls out the meaning in the second individual. Where the gesture reaches that situation it has become what we call 'language.' It is now a significant symbol and it signifies a certain meaning" (Mead, 1934/1962:46). In a conversation of gestures, only the gestures themselves are communicated. However, with language the gestures and their meanings are communicated.

One of the things that language, or significant symbols more generally, does is call out the same response in the individual who is speaking that it does in others. The word *dog* or *cat* elicits the same mental image in the person uttering the word that it does in those to whom it is addressed. Another effect of language is that it stimulates the person speaking as it does others. The person yelling "fire" in a crowded theater is at least as motivated to leave the theater as are those to whom the shout is addressed. Thus, significant symbols allow people to be the stimulators of their own actions.

Adopting his pragmatist orientation, Mead also looks at the "functions" of gestures in general and of significant symbols in particular. The function of the gesture "is to make adjustment possible among the individuals implicated in any given social act with reference to the object or objects with which that act is concerned" (Mead, 1934/1962:46). Thus, an involuntary facial grimace may be made in order to prevent a child from going too close to the edge of a precipice and thereby prevent him or her from being in a potentially dangerous situation. While the nonsignificant gesture works, the "significant symbol affords far greater facilities for such adjustment and readjustment than does the nonsignificant gesture, because it calls out in the individual making it the same attitude toward it . . . and enables him to adjust his subsequent behavior to theirs in the light of that attitude" (Mead, 1934/1962:46). From a pragmatic point of view, a significant symbol works better in the social world than does a nonsignificant gesture. In other words, in communicating our displeasure to others, an angry verbal rebuke works far better than does contorted body language. The individual who is manifesting displeasure is not usually conscious of body language and therefore is unlikely to be able to adjust later actions consciously in light of how the other person reacts to the body language. In contrast, a speaker is conscious of uttering an angry rebuke and reacts to it in much the same way (and at about the same time) as the person to whom it is aimed reacts. Thus, the speaker can think about how the other person might react and can prepare his or her reaction to that reaction.

Of crucial importance in Mead's theory is another function of significant symbols—that they make the mind, mental processes, and so on, possible. It is only through significant symbols, especially language, that human *thinking* is possible (lower animals cannot think, in Mead's terms). Mead defines *thinking* as "simply an internalized or implicit conversation of the individual with himself by means of such

gestures" (1934/1962:47). Even more strongly, Mead argues: "Thinking is the same as talking to other people" (1982:155). In other words, thinking involves talking to oneself. Thus, we can see clearly here how Mead defines thinking in behaviorist terms. Conversations involve behavior (talking), and that behavior also occurs within the individual; when it does, thinking is taking place. This is not a mentalistic definition of thinking; it is decidedly behavioristic.

Significant symbols also make possible *symbolic interaction.* That is, people can interact with one another not just through gestures but also through significant symbols. This ability, of course, makes a world of difference and makes possible much more complex interaction patterns and forms of social organization than would be possible through gestures alone.

The significant symbol obviously plays a central role in Mead's thinking. In fact, David Miller (1982a:10–11) accords the significant symbol *the* central role in Mead's theory.

Mind

The mind, which is defined by Mead as a process and not a thing, as an inner conversation with one's self, is not found within the individual; it is not intracranial but is a social phenomenon (Franks, 2007). It arises and develops within the social process and is an integral part of that process. The social process precedes the mind; it is not, as many believe, a product of the mind. Thus, the mind, too, is defined functionally rather than substantively. Given these similarities to ideas such as consciousness, is there anything distinctive about the mind? We already have seen that humans have the peculiar capacity to call out in themselves the response they are seeking to elicit from others. A distinctive characteristic of the mind is the ability of the individual "to call out in himself not simply a single response of the other but the response, so to speak, of the community as a whole. That is what gives to an individual what we term 'mind.' To do anything now means a certain organized response; and if one has in himself that response, he has what we term 'mind'" (Mead, 1934/1962:267). Thus, the mind can be distinguished from other like-sounding concepts in Mead's work by its ability to respond to the overall community and put forth an organized response.

Mead also looks at the mind in another, pragmatic way. That is, the mind involves thought processes oriented toward problem solving. The real world is rife with problems, and it is the function of the mind to try to solve those problems and permit people to operate more effectively in the world.

Self

Much of Mead's thinking in general, and especially on the mind, involves his ideas on the critically important concept of the *self* (Schwalbe, 2005), basically the ability to take oneself as an object; the self is the peculiar ability to be both subject and object. As is true of all Mead's major concepts, the self presupposes a social process: communication among humans. Lower animals do not have selves, nor do human infants at birth. The self arises with development and through social activity and social

relationships. To Mead, it is impossible to imagine a self arising in the absence of social experiences. However, once a self has developed, it is possible for it to continue to exist without social contact. Thus, Robinson Crusoe developed a self while he was in civilization, and he continued to have it when he was living alone on what he thought for a while was a deserted island. In other words, he continued to have the ability to take himself as an object. Once a self is developed, people usually, but not always, manifest it. For example, the self is not involved in habitual actions or in immediate physiological experiences of pleasure or pain.

The self is dialectically related to the mind. That is, on the one hand, Mead argues that the body is not a self and becomes a self only when a mind has developed. On the other hand, the self, along with its reflexiveness, is essential to the development of the mind. Of course, it is impossible to separate mind and self, because the self is a mental process. However, even though we may think of it as a mental process, the self is a social process. In his discussion of the self, as we have seen in regard to all other mental phenomena, Mead resists the idea of lodging it in consciousness and instead embeds it in social experience and social processes. In this way, Mead seeks to give a behavioristic sense of the self: "But it is where one does respond to that which he addresses to another and where that response of his own becomes a part of his conduct, where he not only hears himself but responds to himself, talks and replies to himself as truly as the other person replies to him, that we have *behavior* in which the individuals become objects to themselves" (1934/1962:139; italics added). The self, then, is simply another aspect of the overall social process of which the individual is a part.

The general mechanism for the development of the self is reflexivity, or the ability to put ourselves unconsciously into others' places and to act as they act. As a result, people are able to examine themselves as others would examine them. As Mead says:

> It is by means of reflexiveness—the turning-back of the experience of the individual upon himself—that the whole social process is thus brought into the experience of the individuals involved in it; it is by such means, which enable the individual to take the attitude of the other toward himself, that the individual is able consciously to adjust himself to that process, and to modify the resultant process in any given social act in terms of his adjustment to it.
>
> (Mead, 1934/1962:134)

The self also allows people to take part in their conversations with others. That is, one is aware of what one is saying and as a result is able to monitor what is being said and to determine what is going to be said next.

In order to have selves, individuals must be able to get "outside themselves" so that they can evaluate themselves, so that they can become objects to themselves. To do this, people basically put themselves in the same experiential field as they put everyone else. Everyone is an important part of that experiential situation, and people must take themselves into account if they are to be able to act rationally in a given situation. Having done this, they seek to examine themselves impersonally, objectively, and without emotion.

However, people cannot experience themselves directly. They can do so only indirectly by putting themselves in the position of others and viewing themselves from that standpoint. The standpoint from which one views one's self can be that of a

particular individual or that of the social group as a whole. As Mead puts it, most generally, "It is only by taking the roles of others that we have been able to come back to ourselves" (1959:184–185).

Child Development

Mead is very interested in the genesis of the self. He sees the conversation of gestures as the background for the self, but it does not involve a self because in such a conversation the people are not taking themselves as objects. Mead traces the genesis of the self through two stages[4] in childhood development.

Play Stage   The first stage is the *play stage;* it is during this stage that children learn to take the attitude of particular others to themselves (Vail, 2007b). Although lower animals also play, only human beings "play at being someone else" (Aboulafia, 1986:9). Mead gives the example of a child playing (American) "Indian": "This means that the child has a certain set of stimuli which call out in itself the responses they would call out in others, and which answer to an Indian" (Mead, 1934/1962:150). As a result of such play, the child learns to become both subject and object and begins to become able to build a self. However, it is a limited self because the child can take only the roles of distinct and separate others. Children may play at being "mommy" and "daddy" and in the process develop the ability to evaluate themselves as their parents, and other specific individuals, do. However, they lack a more general and organized sense of themselves.

Game Stage   It is the next stage, the *game stage,* that is required if a person is to develop a self in the full sense of the term (Vail, 2007c). Whereas in the play stage the child takes the role of discrete others, in the game stage the child must take the role of everyone else involved in the game. Furthermore, these different roles must have a definite relationship to one another. In illustrating the game stage, Mead gives his famous example of a baseball (or, as he calls it, "ball nine") game:

> But in a game where a number of individuals are involved, then the child taking one role must be ready to take the role of everyone else. If he gets in a ball nine he must have the responses of each position involved in his own position. He must know what everyone else is going to do in order to carry out his own play. He has to take all of these roles. They do not all have to be present in consciousness at the same time, but at some moments he has to have three or four individuals present in his own attitude, such as the one who is going to throw the ball, the one who is going to catch it, and so on. These responses must be, in some degree, present in his own make-up. In the game, then, there is a set of responses of such others so organized that the attitude of one calls out the appropriate attitudes of the other.
>
> (Mead, 1934/1962:151)

In the play stage, children are not organized wholes because they play at a series of discrete roles. As a result, in Mead's view they lack definite personalities. However,

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[4] A first, preparatory stage involving mimicry is implied (Vail, 2007a) in Mead's work.

in the game stage,[5] such organization begins and a definite personality starts to emerge. Children begin to become able to function in organized groups and, most important, to determine what they will do within a specific group.

Generalized Other

The game stage yields one of Mead's (1959:87) best-known concepts, the *generalized other* (Vail, 2007d). The generalized other is the attitude of the entire community or, in the example of the baseball game, the attitude of the entire team. The ability to take the role of the generalized other is essential to the self: "Only in so far as he takes the attitudes of the organized social group to which he belongs toward the organized, co-operative social activity or set of such activities in which that group is engaged, does he develop a complete self " (Mead, 1934/1962:155). It is also crucial that people be able to evaluate themselves from the point of view of the generalized other and not merely from the viewpoint of discrete others. Taking the role of the generalized other, rather than that of discrete others, allows for the possibility of abstract thinking and objectivity (Mead, 1959:190). Here is the way Mead describes the full development of the self:

> So the self reaches its full development by organizing these individual attitudes of others into the organized social or group attitudes, and by thus becoming an individual reflection of the general systematic pattern of social or group behavior in which it and others are involved—a pattern which enters as a whole into the individual's experience in terms of these organized group attitudes which, through the mechanism of the central nervous system, he takes toward himself, just as he takes the individual attitudes of others.
>
> (Mead, 1934/1962:158)

In other words, to have a self, one must be a member of a community and be directed by the attitudes common to the community. While play requires only pieces of selves, the game requires a coherent self.

Not only is taking the role of the generalized other essential to the self, it also is crucial for the development of organized group activities. A group requires that individuals direct their activities in accord with the attitudes of the generalized other. The generalized other also represents Mead's familiar propensity to give priority to the social, because it is through the generalized other that the group influences the behavior of individuals.

Mead also looks at the self from a pragmatic point of view. At the individual level, the self allows the individual to be a more efficient member of the larger society. Because of the self, people are more likely to do what is expected of them in a given situation. Because people often try to live up to group expectations, they are more likely to avoid the inefficiencies that come from failing to do what the group expects. Furthermore, the self allows for greater coordination in society as a whole. Because individuals can be counted on to do what is expected of them, the group can operate more effectively.

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[5] Although Mead uses the term *games,* it is clear, as Aboulafia (1986:198) points out, that he means any system of organized responses (for example, the family).

The preceding, as well as the overall discussion of the self, might lead us to believe that Mead's actors are little more than conformists and that there is little individuality, since everyone is busy conforming to the expectations of the generalized other. But Mead is clear that each self is different from all the others. Selves share a common structure, but each self receives unique biographical articulation. In addition, it is clear that there is not simply one grand generalized other but that there are many generalized others in society, because there are many groups in society. People therefore have multiple generalized others and, as a result, multiple selves. Each person's unique set of selves makes him or her different from everyone else. Furthermore, people need not accept the community as it is; they can reform things and seek to make them better. We are able to change the community because of our capacity to think. But Mead is forced to put this issue of individual creativity in familiar, behavioristic terms: "The only way in which we can react against the disapproval of the entire community is by setting up a higher sort of community which in a certain sense out-votes the one we find . . . he may stand out by himself over against it. But to do that he has to comprehend the voices of the past and of the future. That is the only way the self can get a voice which is more than the voice of the community" (1934/1962:167–168). In other words, to stand up to the generalized other, the individual must construct a still larger generalized other, composed not only from the present but also from the past and the future, and then respond to it.

Mead identifies two aspects, or phases, of the self, which he labels the "I" and the "me" (for a critique of this distinction, see Athens, 1995). As Mead puts it, "The self is essentially a social process going on with these two distinguishable phases" (1934/1962:178). It is important to bear in mind that the "I" and the "me" are processes within the larger process of the self; they are not "things."

"I" and "Me"

The "I" is the immediate response of an individual to others. It is the incalculable, unpredictable, and creative aspect of the self. People do not know in advance what the action of the "I" will be: "But what that response will be he does not know and nobody else knows. Perhaps he will make a brilliant play or an error. The response to that situation as it appears in his immediate experience is uncertain" (Mead, 1934/1962:175). We are never totally aware of the "I," and through it we surprise ourselves with our actions. We know the "I" only after the act has been carried out. Thus, we know the "I" only in our memories. Mead lays great stress on the "I" for four reasons. First, it is a key source of novelty in the social process. Second, Mead believes that it is in the "I" that our most important values are located. Third, the "I" constitutes something that we all seek—the realization of the self. It is the "I" that permits us to develop a "definite personality." Finally, Mead sees an evolutionary process in history in which people in primitive societies are dominated more by the "me" while in modern societies there is a greater component of the "I."

The "I" gives Mead's theoretical system some much-needed dynamism and creativity. Without it, Mead's actors would be totally dominated by external and internal controls. With it, Mead is able to deal with the changes brought about not only by the great figures in history (for example, Einstein) but also by individuals on a day-to-day basis. It is the "I" that makes these changes possible. Since every personality is a mix

of "I" and "me," the great historical figures are seen as having a larger proportion of "I" than most others have. But in day-to-day situations, anyone's "I" may assert itself and lead to change in the social situation. Uniqueness is also brought into Mead's system through the biographical articulation of each individual's "I" and "me." That is, the specific exigencies of each person's life give him or her a unique mix of "I" and "me."

The "I" reacts against the "me," which is the "organized set of attitudes of others which one himself assumes" (Mead, 1934/1962:175). In other words, the "me" is the adoption of the generalized other. In contrast to the "I," people are conscious of the "me"; the "me" involves conscious responsibility. As Mead says, "The 'me' is a conventional, habitual individual" (1934/1962:197). Conformists are dominated by the "me," although everyone—whatever his or her degree of conformity—has, and must have, a substantial "me." It is through the "me" that society dominates the individual. Indeed, Mead defines the idea of *social control* as the dominance of the expression of the "me" over the expression of the "I." Later in *Mind, Self and Society,* Mead elaborates on his ideas on social control:

> Social control, as operating in terms of self-criticism, exerts itself so intimately and extensively over individual behavior or conduct, serving to integrate the individual and his actions with reference to the organized social process of experience and behavior in which he is implicated. . . . Social control over individual behavior or conduct operates by virtue of the social origin and basis of such [self-] criticism. That is to say, self-criticism is essentially social criticism, and behavior controlled socially. Hence social control, so far from tending to crush out the human individual or to obliterate his self-conscious individuality, is, on the contrary, actually constitutive of and inextricably associated with that individuality.
>
> (Mead, 1934/1962:255)

Mead also looks at the "I" and the "me" in pragmatic terms. The "me" allows the individual to live comfortably in the social world, while the "I" makes change in society possible. Society gets enough conformity to allow it to function, and it gets a steady infusion of new developments to prevent it from stagnating. The "I" and the "me" are thus part of the whole social process and allow both individuals and society to function more effectively.

Society

At the most general level, Mead uses the term *society* to mean the ongoing social process that precedes both the mind and the self. Given its importance in shaping the mind and self, society is clearly of central importance to Mead. At another level, society to Mead represents the organized set of responses that are taken over by the individual in the form of the "me." Thus, in this sense individuals carry society around with them, giving them the ability, through self-criticism, to control themselves. Mead also deals with the evolution of society. But Mead has relatively little to say explicitly about society, in spite of its centrality in his theoretical system. His most important contributions lie in his thoughts on mind and self. Even John C. Baldwin, who sees a much more societal (macro) component in Mead's thinking, is forced to admit: "The macro components of Mead's theoretical system are not as well developed as the micro" (1986:123).

At a more specific societal level Mead does have a number of things to say about social *institutions.* Mead broadly defines an *institution* as the "common response in the community" or "the life habits of the community" (1934/1962:261, 264; see also Mead, 1936:376). More specifically, he says that "the whole community acts toward the individual under certain circumstances in an identical way . . . there is an identical response on the part of the whole community under these conditions. We call that the formation of the institution" (Mead, 1934/1962:167). We carry this organized set of attitudes around with us, and they serve to control our actions, largely through the "me."

Education is the process by which the common habits of the community (the institution) are "internalized" in the actor. This is an essential process because, in Mead's view, people neither have selves nor are genuine members of the community until they can respond to themselves as the larger community does. To do this, people must have internalized the common attitudes of the community.

But again Mead is careful to point out that institutions need not destroy individuality or stifle creativity. Mead recognizes that there are "oppressive, stereotyped, and ultra-conservative social institutions—like the church—which by their more or less rigid and inflexible unprogressiveness crush or blot out individuality" (1934/1962:262). However, he is quick to add: "There is no necessary or inevitable reason why social institutions should be oppressive or rigidly conservative, or why they should not rather be, as many are, flexible and progressive, fostering individuality rather than discouraging it" (Mead, 1934/1962:262). To Mead, institutions should define what people ought to do only in a very broad and general sense and should allow plenty of room for individuality and creativity. Mead here demonstrates a very modern conception of social institutions as both constraining individuals *and* enabling them to be creative individuals (see Giddens, 1984). Mead was distinct from the other classical theorists in emphasizing the enabling character of society—arguably disregarding society's constraining power (Athens, 2002).

What Mead lacks in his analysis of society in general, and institutions in particular,[6] is a true macro sense of them in the way that theorists such as Marx, Weber, and Durkheim dealt with this level of analysis. This is true in spite of the fact that Mead does have a notion of *emergence* (Sawyer, 2005, 2007) in the sense that the whole is seen as more than the sum of its parts. More specifically, "Emergence involves a reorganization, but the reorganization brings in something that was not there before. The first time oxygen and hydrogen come together, water appears. Now water is a combination of hydrogen and oxygen, but water was not there before in the separate elements" (Mead, 1934/1962:198). However, Mead is much more prone to apply the idea of emergence to consciousness than to apply it to the larger society. That is, mind and self are seen as emergent from the social process. Moreover, Mead is inclined to use the term *emergence* merely to mean the coming into existence of something new or novel (D. Miller, 1973:41).

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[6] There are at least two places where Mead offers a more macro sense of society. At one point he defines *social institutions* as "organized forms of group or social activity" (Mead, 1934/1962:261). Earlier, in an argument reminiscent of Comte, he offers a view of the family as the fundamental unit within society and as the base of such larger units as the clan and the state.

Symbolic Interactionism: The Basic Principles

The heart of this chapter is a discussion of the basic principles of symbolic interaction theory. Although I try to characterize the theory in general terms, this is not easy to do, for as Paul Rock says, it has a "deliberately constructed vagueness" and a "resistance to systematisation" (1979:18–19). There are significant differences within symbolic interactionism, some of which are discussed as we proceed.

Some symbolic interactionists (Blumer, 1969a; Manis and Meltzer, 1978; A. Rose, 1962; Snow, 2001) have tried to enumerate the basic principles of the theory. These principles include the following:

1. Human beings, unlike lower animals, are endowed with the capacity for thought.
2. The capacity for thought is shaped by social interaction.
3. In social interaction people learn the meanings and the symbols that allow them to exercise their distinctively human capacity for thought.
4. Meanings and symbols allow people to carry on distinctively human action and interaction.
5. People are able to modify or alter the meanings and symbols that they use in action and interaction on the basis of their interpretation of the situation.
6. People are able to make these modifications and alterations because, in part, of their ability to interact with themselves, which allows them to examine possible courses of action, assess their relative advantages and disadvantages, and then choose one.
7. The intertwined patterns of action and interaction make up groups and societies.

Capacity for Thought

The crucial assumption that human beings possess the ability to think differentiates symbolic interactionism from its behaviorist roots. This assumption also provides the basis for the entire theoretical orientation of symbolic interactionism. Bernard Meltzer, James Petras, and Larry Reynolds stated that the assumption of the human capacity for thought is one of the major contributions of early symbolic interactionists, such as James, Dewey, Thomas, Cooley, and of course, Mead: "Individuals in human society were not seen as units that are motivated by external or internal forces beyond their control, or within the confines of a more or less fixed structure. Rather, they were viewed as reflective or interacting units which comprise the societal entity" (1975:42). The ability to think enables people to act reflectively rather than just behave unreflectively. People must often construct and guide what they do, rather than just release it.

The ability to think is embedded in the mind, but the symbolic interactionists have a somewhat unusual conception of the mind as originating in the socialization of consciousness. They distinguish it from the physiological brain. People must have brains in order to develop minds, but a brain does not inevitably produce a mind, as is clear in the case of lower animals (Troyer, 1946). Also, symbolic interactionists

do not conceive of the mind as a thing, a physical structure, but rather as a continuing process. It is a process that is itself part of the larger process of stimulus and response. The mind is related to virtually every other aspect of symbolic interactionism, including socialization, meanings, symbols, the self, interaction, and even society.

Thinking and Interaction

People possess only a general capacity for thought. This capacity must be shaped and refined in the process of social interaction. Such a view leads the symbolic interactionist to focus on a specific form of social interaction—*socialization.* The human ability to think is developed early in childhood socialization and is refined during adult socialization. Symbolic interactionists have a view of the socialization process that is different from that of most other sociologists. To symbolic interactionists, conventional sociologists are likely to see socialization as simply a process by which people learn the things that they need to survive in society (for instance, culture, role expectations). To the symbolic interactionists, socialization is a more dynamic process that allows people to develop the ability to think, to develop in distinctively human ways. Furthermore, socialization is not simply a one-way process in which the actor receives information, but is a dynamic process in which the actor shapes and adapts the information to his or her own needs (Manis and Meltzer, 1978:6).

Symbolic interactionists are, of course, interested not simply in socialization but in interaction in general, which is of "vital importance in its own right" (Blumer, 1969b:8). *Interaction* is the process in which the ability to think is both developed and expressed. All types of interaction, not just interaction during socialization, refine our ability to think. Beyond that, thinking shapes the interaction process. In most interaction, actors must take account of others and decide if and how to fit their activities to others. However, not all interaction involves thinking. The differentiation made by Blumer (following Mead) between two basic forms of social interaction is relevant here. The first, nonsymbolic interaction—Mead's conversation of gestures—does not involve thinking. The second, symbolic interaction, does require mental processes.

The importance of thinking to symbolic interactionists is reflected in their views on *objects.* Blumer differentiates among three types of objects: *physical objects,* such as a chair or a tree; *social objects,* such as a student or a mother; and *abstract objects,* such as an idea or a moral principle. Objects are seen simply as things "out there" in the real world; what is of greatest significance is the way they are defined by actors. The latter leads to the relativistic view that different objects have different meanings for different individuals: "A tree will be a different object to a botanist, a lumberman, a poet, and a home gardener" (Blumer, 1969b:11).

Individuals learn the meanings of objects during the socialization process. Most of us learn a common set of meanings, but in many cases, as with the tree mentioned above, we have different definitions of the same objects. Although this definitional view can be taken to an extreme, symbolic interactionists need not deny

the existence of objects in the real world. All they need do is point out the crucial nature of the definition of those objects as well as the possibility that actors may have different definitions of the same object. As Herbert Blumer said: "The nature of an object . . . consists of the meaning that it has for the person for whom it is an object" (1969b:11).

Learning Meanings and Symbols

Symbolic interactionists, following Mead, tend to accord causal significance to social interaction. Thus, meaning stems not from solitary mental processes but from interaction. This focus derives from Mead's pragmatism: he focused on human action and interaction, not on isolated mental processes. Symbolic interactionists have in general continued in this direction. Among other things, the central concern is not how people mentally create meanings and symbols but how they learn them during interaction in general and socialization in particular.

People learn symbols as well as meanings in social interaction. Whereas people respond to signs unthinkingly, they respond to symbols in a thoughtful manner. Signs stand for themselves (for example, the gestures of angry dogs or water to a person dying of thirst). "*Symbols are social objects used to represent* (or 'stand in for,' 'take the place of') whatever people agree they shall represent" (Charon, 1998:47). Not all social objects stand for other things, but those that do are symbols. Words, physical artifacts, and physical actions (for example, the word *boat,* a cross or a Star of David, and a clenched fist) all can be symbols. People often use symbols to communicate something about themselves: they drive Rolls-Royces, for instance, to communicate a certain style of life.

Symbolic interactionists conceive of language as a vast system of symbols. Words are symbols because they are used to stand for things. Words make all other symbols possible. Acts, objects, and other words exist and have meaning only because they have been and can be described through the use of words.

Symbols are crucial in allowing people to act in distinctively human ways. Because of the symbol, the human being "does not respond passively to a reality that imposes itself but actively creates and re-creates the world acted in" (Charon, 1998:69). In addition to this general utility, symbols in general and language in particular have a number of specific functions for the actor.

First, symbols enable people to deal with the material and social world by allowing them to name, categorize, and remember the objects they encounter there. In this way, people are able to order a world that otherwise would be confusing. Language allows people to name, categorize, and especially remember much more efficiently than they could with other kinds of symbols, such as pictorial images.

Second, symbols improve people's ability to perceive the environment. Instead of being flooded by a mass of indistinguishable stimuli, the actor can be alerted to some parts of the environment rather than others.

Third, symbols improve the ability to think. Although a set of pictorial symbols would allow a limited ability to think, language greatly expands this ability. Thinking, in these terms, can be conceived of as symbolic interaction with one's self.

Fourth, symbols greatly increase the ability to solve various problems. Lower animals must use trial-and-error, but human beings can think through symbolically a variety of alternative actions before actually taking one. This ability reduces the chance of making costly mistakes.

Fifth, the use of symbols allows actors to transcend time, space, and even their own persons. Through the use of symbols, actors can imagine what it was like to live in the past or what it might be like to live in the future. In addition, actors can transcend their own persons symbolically and imagine what the world is like from another person's point of view. This is the well-known symbolic-interactionist concept of *taking the role of the other* (D. Miller, 1981).

Sixth, symbols allow us to imagine a metaphysical reality, such as heaven or hell. Seventh, and most generally, symbols allow people to avoid being enslaved by their environment. They can be active rather than passive—that is, self-directed in what they do.

Action and Interaction

Symbolic interactionists' primary concern is with the impact of meanings and symbols on human action and interaction. Here it is useful to employ Mead's differentiation between covert and overt behavior. *Covert behavior* is the thinking process, involving symbols and meanings. *Overt behavior* is the actual behavior performed by an actor. Some overt behavior does not involve covert behavior (habitual behavior or mindless responses to external stimuli). However, most human action involves both kinds. Covert behavior is of greatest concern to symbolic interactionists, whereas overt behavior is of greatest concern to exchange theorists or to traditional behaviorists in general.

Meanings and symbols give human social action (which involves a single actor) and social interaction (which involves two or more actors engaged in mutual social action) distinctive characteristics. Social action is that in which the individuals are acting with others in mind. In other words, in undertaking an action, people simultaneously try to gauge its impact on the other actors involved. Although they often engage in mindless, habitual behavior, people have the capacity to engage in social action.

In the process of social interaction, people symbolically communicate meanings to the others involved. The others interpret those symbols and orient their responding action on the basis of their interpretation. In other words, in social interaction, actors engage in a process of mutual influence. Christopher (2001) refers to this dynamic social interaction as a "dance" that partners engage in.

Making Choices

Partly because of the ability to handle meanings and symbols, people, unlike lower animals, can make choices in the actions in which they engage. People need not accept the meanings and symbols that are imposed on them from without. On the basis of their own interpretation of the situation, "humans are capable of forming new meanings

and new lines of meaning" (Manis and Meltzer, 1978:7). Thus, to the symbolic inter-actionist, actors have at least some autonomy. They are not simply constrained or determined; they are capable of making unique and independent choices. Furthermore, they are able to develop a life that has a unique style (Perinbanayagam, 1985:53).

W. I. Thomas and Dorothy Thomas were instrumental in underscoring this creative capacity in their concept of *definition of the situation:* "If men define situ-ations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas and Thomas, 1928:572). The Thomases knew that most of our definitions of situations have been provided for us by society. In fact, they emphasized this point, identifying especially the family and the community as sources of our social definitions. However, the Thom-ases' position is distinctive for its emphasis on the possibility of "spontaneous" individual definitions of situations, which allow people to alter and modify mean-ings and symbols.

This ability of actors to make a difference is reflected in an essay by Gary Fine and Sherryl Kleinman (1983) in which they look at the phenomenon of a "social network." Instead of viewing a social network as an unconscious and/or constraining social structure, Fine and Kleinman see a network as a set of social relationships that people endow with meaning and use for personal and/or collective purposes.

The Self and the Work of Erving Goffman

The self is a concept of enormous importance to symbolic interactionists (Bruder, 1998). In fact, Rock argues that the self "constitutes the very hub of the interactionists' intellectual scheme. All other sociological processes and events revolve around that hub, taking from it their analytic meaning and organization" (1979:102). In attempting to understand this concept beyond its initial Meadian formulation, we must first under-stand the idea of the *looking-glass self* developed by Charles Horton Cooley (Franks and Gecas, 1992). Cooley defined this concept as

> a somewhat definite imagination of how one's self—that is, any idea he
> appropriates—appears in a particular mind, and the kind of self-feeling one has is
> determined by the attitude toward this attributed to that other mind. . . . So in
> imagination we perceive in another's mind some thought of our appearance,
> manners, aims, deeds, character, friends, and so on, and are variously affected by it.
> (Cooley, 1902/1964:169)

The idea of a looking-glass self can be broken down into three components. First, we imagine how we appear to others. Second, we imagine what their judgment of that appearance must be. Third, we develop some self-feeling, such as pride or mortifica-tion, as a result of our imagining others' judgments.

Cooley's concept of the looking-glass self and Mead's concept of the self were important in the development of the modern symbolic-interactionist concep-tion of the self. Blumer defined the *self* in extremely simple terms: "Nothing esoteric is meant by this expression [self]. It means merely that a human being can be an object of his own action . . . he acts toward himself and guides himself in his actions toward others on the basis of the kind of object he is to himself"
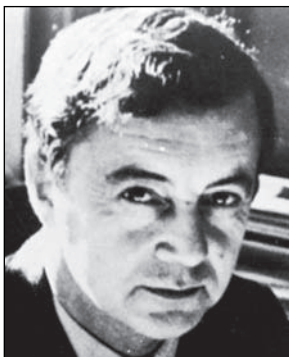
ERVING GOFFMAN

A Biographical Sketch

Erving Goffman died in 1982 at the peak of his fame. He had long been regarded as a "cult" figure in sociological theory. That status was achieved in spite of the fact that he had been a professor in the prestigious sociology department at the University of California, Berkeley, and later held an endowed chair at the Ivy League's University of Pennsylvania (Manning, 2005b; Smith, 2007).

By the 1980s he had emerged as a centrally important theorist. In fact, he had been elected president of the American Sociological Association in the year he died but was unable to give his presidential address because of advanced illness. Given Goffman's maverick status, Randall Collins says of his address: "Everyone wondered what he would do for his Presidential address: a straight, traditional presentation seemed unthinkable for Goffman with his reputation as an iconoclast . . . we got a far more dramatic message: Presidential address cancelled, Goffman dying. It was an appropriately Goffmanian way to go out" (1986b:112).

Goffman was born in Alberta, Canada, on June 11, 1922 (S. Williams, 1986). He earned his advanced degrees from the University of Chicago and is most often thought of as a member of the Chicago school and as a symbolic interactionist. However, when he was asked shortly before his death whether he was a symbolic interactionist, he replied that the label was too vague to allow him to put himself in that category (Manning, 1992). In fact, it is hard to squeeze his work into any single category. In creating his theoretical perspective, Goffman drew on many sources and created a distinctive orientation.

(1969b:12). The self is a process, not a thing (Perinbanayagam, 1985). As Blumer made clear, the self helps allow human beings to act rather than simply respond to external stimuli:

> The process [interpretation] has two distinct steps. First, the actor indicates to himself the things toward which he is acting; he has to point out in himself the things that have meaning. . . . This interaction with himself is something other than an interplay of psychological elements; it is an instance of the person engaging in a process of communicating with himself. . . . Second, by virtue of this process of communicating with himself, interpretation becomes a matter of handling meanings. The actor selects, checks, suspends, regroups, and transforms the meanings in the light of the situation in which he is placed and the direction of his action.
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> (Blumer, 1969b:5)

Although this description of interpretation underscores the part played by the self in the process of choosing how to act, Blumer has really not gone much beyond the

Collins (1986b; Williams, 1986) links Goffman more to social anthropology than to symbolic interactionism. As an undergraduate at the University of Toronto, Goffman had studied with an anthropologist, and at Chicago "his main contacts were not with Symbolic Interactionists, but with W. Lloyd Warner [an anthropologist]" (Collins, 1986b:109). In Collins's view, an examination of the citations in Goffman's early work indicates that he was influenced by social anthropologists and rarely cited symbolic interactionists, and when he did, it was to be critical of them. However, Goffman was influenced by the descriptive studies produced at Chicago and integrated their outlook with that of social anthropology to produce his distinctive perspective. Thus, whereas a symbolic interactionist would look at how people create or negotiate their self-images, Goffman was concerned with how "society . . . forces people to present a certain image of themselves . . . because it forces us to switch back and forth between many complicated roles, is also making us always somewhat untruthful, inconsistent, and dishonorable" (Collins, 1986a:107).

Despite the distinctiveness of his perspective, Goffman had a powerful influence on symbolic interactionism. In addition, it could be argued that he had a hand in shaping another sociology of everyday life, ethnomethodology. In fact, Collins sees Goffman as a key figure in the formation not only of ethnomethodology, but of conversation analysis as well: "It was Goffman who pioneered the close empirical study of everyday life, although he had done it with his bare eyes, before the days of tape recorders and video recorders" (1986b:111). (See Chapter 11 for a discussion of the relationship between ethnomethodology and conversation analysis.) In fact, a number of important ethnomethodologists (Sacks, Schegloff) studied with Goffman at Berkeley and not with the founder of ethnomethodology, Harold Garfinkel.

Given their influence on symbolic interactionism, structuralism, and ethnomethodology, Goffman's theories are likely to be influential for a long time.

early formulations of Cooley and Mead. However, other modern thinkers and researchers have refined the concept of the self.

The Work of Erving Goffman

The most important work on the self in symbolic interactionism is *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) by Erving Goffman (Dowd, 1996; Schwalbe, 1993; Travers, 1992; Tseelon, 1992). Goffman's conception of the self is deeply indebted to Mead's ideas, in particular his discussion of the tension between the "I," the spontaneous self, and the "me," social constraints within the self. This tension is mirrored in Goffman's work on what he called the "crucial discrepancy between our all-too-human selves and our socialized selves" (1959:56). The tension results from the difference between what people expect us to do and what we may want to do spontaneously. We are confronted with the demand to do what is expected of us; moreover, we are not supposed to waver. As Goffman put it, "We must not be subject to ups and downs" (1959:56). In order to

maintain a stable self-image, people perform for their social audiences. As a result of this interest in performance, Goffman focused on *dramaturgy,* or a view of social life as a series of dramatic performances akin to those performed on the stage.

Dramaturgy   Goffman's sense of the self was shaped by his dramaturgical approach (Alieva, 2008). To Goffman (as to Mead and most other symbolic interactionists), the self is

> not an organic thing that has a specific location. . . . In analyzing the self then we are drawn from its possessor, from the person who will profit or lose most by it, for he and his body merely provide the peg on which something of collaborative manufacture will be hung for a time. . . . The means of producing and maintaining selves do not reside inside the peg.
>
> (Goffman, 1959:252–253)

Goffman perceived the self not as a possession of the actor but rather as the product of the dramatic interaction between actor and audience. The self "is a dramatic effect arising . . . from a scene that is presented" (Goffman, 1959:253). Because the self is a product of dramatic interaction, it is vulnerable to disruption during the performance (Misztal, 2001). Goffman's dramaturgy is concerned with the processes by which such disturbances are prevented or dealt with. Although the bulk of his discussion focuses on these dramaturgical contingencies, Goffman pointed out that most performances are successful. The result is that in ordinary circumstances a firm self is accorded to performers, and it "appears" to emanate from the performer.

Goffman assumed that when individuals interact, they want to present a certain sense of self that will be accepted by others. However, even as they present that self, actors are aware that members of the audience can disturb their performance. For that reason actors are attuned to the need to control the audience, especially those elements of it that might be disruptive. The actors hope that the sense of self that they present to the audience will be strong enough for the audience to define the actors as the actors want them to. The actors also hope that this will cause the audience to act voluntarily as the actors want them to. Goffman characterized this central interest as "impression management." It involves techniques actors use to maintain certain impressions in the face of problems they are likely to encounter and methods they use to cope with these problems.

Following this theatrical analogy, Goffman spoke of a front stage. The *front* is that part of the performance that generally functions in rather fixed and general ways to define the situation for those who observe the performance. Within the front stage, Goffman further differentiated between the setting and the personal front. The *setting* refers to the physical scene that ordinarily must be there if the actors are to perform. Without it, the actors usually cannot perform. For example, a surgeon generally requires an operating room, a taxi driver a cab, and an ice skater ice. The *personal front* consists of those items of expressive equipment that the audience identifies with the performers and expects them to carry with them into the setting. A surgeon, for instance, is expected to dress in a medical gown, have certain instruments, and so on.

Goffman then subdivided the personal front into appearance and manner. *Appearance* includes those items that tell us the performer's social status (for instance,

the surgeon's medical gown). *Manner* tells the audience what sort of role the performer expects to play in the situation (for example, the use of physical mannerisms, demeanor). A brusque manner and a meek manner indicate quite different kinds of performances. In general, we expect appearance and manner to be consistent.

Although Goffman approached the front and other aspects of his system as a symbolic interactionist, he did discuss their structural character. For example, he argued that fronts tend to become institutionalized, and so "collective representations" arise about what is to go on in a certain front. Very often when actors take on established roles, they find particular fronts already established for such performances. The result, Goffman argued, is that fronts tend to be selected, not created. This idea conveys a much more structural image than we would receive from most symbolic interactionists.

Despite such a structural view, Goffman's most interesting insights lie in the domain of interaction. He argued that because people generally[7] try to present an idealized picture of themselves in their front-stage performances, inevitably they feel that they must hide things in their performances. First, actors may want to conceal secret pleasures (for instance, drinking alcohol) engaged in prior to the performance or in past lives (for instance, as drug addicts) that are incompatible with their performance. Second, actors may want to conceal errors that have been made in the preparation of the performance as well as steps that have been taken to correct these errors. For example, a taxi driver may seek to hide the fact that he started in the wrong direction. Third, actors may find it necessary to show only end products and to conceal the process involved in producing them. For example, professors may spend several hours preparing a lecture, but they may want to act as if they have always known the material. Fourth, it may be necessary for actors to conceal from the audience that "dirty work" was involved in the making of the end products. Dirty work may include tasks that "were physically unclean, semi-legal, cruel, and degrading in other ways" (Goffman, 1959:44). Fifth, in giving a certain performance, actors may have to let other standards slide. Finally, actors probably find it necessary to hide any insults, humiliations, or deals made so that the performance could go on. Generally, actors have a vested interest in hiding all such facts from their audience.

Another aspect of dramaturgy in the front stage is that actors often try to convey the impression that they are closer to the audience than they actually are. For example, actors may try to foster the impression that the performance in which they are engaged at the moment is their only performance or at least their most important one. To do this, actors have to be sure that their audiences are segregated so that the falsity of the performance is not discovered. Even if it is discovered, Goffman argued, the audiences themselves may try to cope with the falsity so as not to shatter their idealized image of the actor. This reveals the interactional character of performances. A successful performance depends on the involvement of all the parties. Another example of this kind of impression management is an actor's attempt to convey the idea that there is something unique about this performance as well as his or her relationship to the audience. The audience, too, wants to feel that it is the recipient of a unique performance.

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[7] But not always—see Ungar (1984) on self-mockery as a way of presenting the self.

Actors try to make sure that all the parts of any performance blend together. In some cases, a single discordant aspect can disrupt a performance. However, performances vary in the amount of consistency required. A slip by a priest on a sacred occasion would be terribly disruptive, but if a taxi driver made one wrong turn, it would not be likely to damage the overall performance greatly.

Another technique employed by performers is *mystification*. Actors often tend to mystify their performances by restricting the contact between themselves and the audience. By generating "social distance" between themselves and the audience, they try to create a sense of awe in the audience. This, in turn, keeps the audience from questioning the performance. Again Goffman pointed out that the audience is involved in this process and often itself seeks to maintain the credibility of the performance by keeping its distance from the performer.

This leads us to Goffman's interest in teams. To Goffman, as a symbolic interactionist, a focus on individual actors obscured important facts about interaction. Goffman's basic unit of analysis was thus not the individual but the team. A *team* is any set of individuals who cooperate in staging a single routine. Thus, the preceding discussion of the relationship between the performer and audience is really about teams.[8] Each member is reliant on the others, because all can disrupt the performance and all are aware that they are putting on an act. Goffman concluded that a team is a kind of "secret society."

Goffman also discussed a *back stage* where facts suppressed in the front or various kinds of informal actions may appear. A back stage is usually adjacent to the front stage, but it is also cut off from it. Performers can reliably expect no members of their front audience to appear in the back. Furthermore, they engage in various types of impression management to make sure of this. A performance is likely to become difficult when actors are unable to prevent the audience from entering the back stage. There is also a third, residual domain, the *outside,* which is neither front nor back.

No area is *always* one of these three domains. Also, a given area can occupy all three domains at different times. A professor's office is front stage when a student visits, back stage when the student leaves, and outside when the professor is at a university basketball game.

Impression Management   In general, *impression management* (P. Manning, 2005c) is oriented to guarding against a series of unexpected actions, such as unintended gestures, inopportune intrusions, and faux pas, as well as intended actions, such as making a scene. Goffman was interested in the various methods of dealing with such problems. First, there is a set of methods involving actions aimed at producing dramaturgical loyalty by, for example, fostering high in-group loyalty, preventing team members from identifying with the audience, and changing audiences periodically so that they do not become too knowledgeable about the performers. Second, Goffman

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[8] A performer and the audience are one kind of team, but Goffman also talked of a group of performers as one team and the audience as another. Interestingly, Goffman argued that a team also can be a single individual. His logic, following classic symbolic interactionism, was that an individual can be his or her own audience—can *imagine* an audience to be present.

suggested various forms of dramaturgical discipline, such as having the presence of mind to avoid slips, maintaining self-control, and managing the facial expressions and verbal tone of one's performance. Third, he identified various types of dramaturgical circumspection, such as determining in advance how a performance should go, planning for emergencies, selecting loyal teammates, selecting good audiences, being involved in small teams where dissension is less likely, making only brief appearances, preventing audience access to private information, and settling on a complete agenda to prevent unforeseen occurrences.

The audience also has a stake in successful impression management by the actor or team of actors. The audience often acts to save the show through such devices as giving great interest and attention to it, avoiding emotional outbursts, not noticing slips, and giving special consideration to a neophyte performer.

Manning points not only to the centrality of the self but also to Goffman's *cynical* view of people in this work:

> The overall tenor of *The Presentation of Self* is to a world in which people, whether individually or in groups, pursue their own ends in cynical disregard for others. . . . The view here is of the individual as a set of performance masks hiding a manipulative and cynical self.
>
> (P. Manning, 1992:44)

Manning puts forth a "two selves thesis" to describe this aspect of Goffman's thinking; that is, people have both a performance self and a hidden, cynical self.

Role Distance   Goffman (1961) was interested in the degree to which an individual embraces a given role. In his view, because of the large number of roles, few people get completely involved in any given role. *Role distance* deals with the degree to which individuals separate themselves from the roles they are in (Butera, 2008). For example, if older children ride on a merry-go-round, they are likely to be aware that they are really too old to enjoy such an experience. One way of coping with this feeling is to demonstrate distance from the role by doing it in a careless, lackadaisical way by performing seemingly dangerous acts while on the merry-go-round. In performing such acts, the older children are really explaining to the audience that they are not as immersed in the activity as small children might be or that if they are, it is because of the special things they are doing.

One of Goffman's key insights is that role distance is a function of one's social status. High-status people often manifest role distance for reasons other than those of people in low-status positions. For example, a high-status surgeon may manifest role distance in the operating room to relieve the tension of the operating team. People in low-status positions usually manifest more defensiveness in exhibiting role distance. For instance, people who clean toilets may do so in a lackadaisical and uninterested manner. They may be trying to tell their audience that they are too good for such work.

Stigma   Goffman (1963) was interested in the gap between what a person ought to be, *"virtual social identity,"* and what a person actually is, *"actual social identity."* Anyone who has a gap between these two identities is stigmatized. *Stigma* focuses

on the dramaturgical interaction between stigmatized people and normals. The nature of that interaction depends on which of the two types of stigma an individual has. In the case of *discredited* stigma, the actor assumes that the differences are known by the audience members or are evident to them (for example, a paraplegic or someone who has lost a limb). A *discreditable* stigma is one in which the differences are neither known by audience members nor perceivable by them (for example, a person who has had a colostomy or a homosexual passing as straight). For someone with a discredited stigma, the basic dramaturgical problem is managing the tension produced by the fact that people know of the problem. For someone with a discreditable stigma, the dramaturgical problem is managing information so that the problem remains unknown to the audience. (For a discussion of how the homeless deal with stigma, see Anderson, Snow, and Cress, 1994.)

Most of the text of Goffman's *Stigma* is devoted to people with obvious, often grotesque stigmas (for instance, the loss of a nose). However, as the book unfolds, the reader realizes that Goffman is really saying that we are all stigmatized at some time or other or in one setting or another. His examples include the Jew "passing" in a predominantly Christian community, the fat person in a group of people of normal weight, and the individual who has lied about his past and must be constantly sure that the audience does not learn of this deception.

Frame Analysis   In *Frame Analysis* (1974), Goffman moved away from his classic symbolic-interactionist roots and toward the study of the small-scale structures of social life (for a study employing the idea of frames, see McLean, 1998). Although he still felt that people define situations in the sense meant by W. I. Thomas, he now thought that such definitions were less important: "Defining situations as real certainly has consequences, but these may contribute very marginally to the events in progress" (Goffman, 1974:1). Furthermore, even when people define situations, they do not ordinarily create those definitions. Action is defined more by mechanical adherence to rules than through an active, creative, and negotiated process. Goffman enunciated his goal: "to try to isolate some of the basic frameworks of understanding available in our society for making sense out of events and to analyze the special vulnerabilities to which these frames of reference are subject" (1974:10).

Goffman looked beyond and behind everyday situations in a search for the structures that invisibly govern them. These are "'schemata of interpretation' that enable individuals 'to locate, perceive, identify, and label' occurrences within their life space and the world at large (Chambliss, 2005). By rendering events or occurrences meaningful, frames function to organize experience and guide action, whether individual or collective" (Snow, 1986:464). Frames are principles of organization that define our experiences. They are assumptions about what we are seeing in the social world. Without frames, our world would be little more than a number of chaotic individual and unrelated events and facts. Gonos provided other structural characteristics of frames:

> From Goffman's analyses of particular framed activities, we can derive certain
> principal characteristics of frames. A frame is not conceived as a loose, somewhat
> accidental amalgamation of elements put together over a short time-span. Rather,
> it is constituted of a set number of essential components, having a definite

arrangement and stable relations. These components are not gathered from here and there, as are the elements of a situation, but are always found together as a system. The standard components cohere and are complete. . . . Other less essential elements are present in any empirical instance and lend some of their character to the whole. . . . In all this, frames are very close in conception to "structures."

(Gonos, 1977:860)

To Gonos, frames are largely rules or laws that fix interaction. The rules are usually unconscious and ordinarily nonnegotiable. Among the rules identified by Gonos are those that define "how signs are to be 'interpreted,' how outward indications are to be related to 'selves,' and what 'experience' will accompany activity" (1980:160). Gonos concludes, "Goffman's problematic thus promotes the study not of observable interaction of 'everyday life' as such, but its eternal structure and ideology; not of situations, but of their frames" (1980:160).

One can grant frames the status of preexisting structures, especially in the larger culture, but it is also the case that interpretive, constructionist (P. Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Swatos, 2007) work is required by actors in relationship to frames. Actors must decide which frame among others is the one to be used in a given situation. Frames themselves may be transformed by actors as the need arises. Frames also may change over time rather than remaining static. This is especially the case when successful social movements arise that contest extant frames or succeed in replacing them with different ones.

According to Snow (2007), frames perform three functions in interpretive work. First, they *focus attention* on our surroundings by highlighting what is relevant or irrelevant, what is "in-frame" and what is "out-of-frame." Second, they act as *articulation mechanisms* by linking the various highlighted elements, so that a "story" is told about them, so that one set of meanings rather than another is conveyed. Third, they serve a *transformative function* through the reconstitution of the way some things are seen in relation to other things or to the actor. Snow (2007:1778–1786) concludes that "it is arguable that they [frames] are fundamental to interpretation, so much so that few, if any, utterances could be meaningfully understood apart from the way they are framed."

Philip Manning (1992:119) gives the following examples of how different frames applied to the same set of events serve to give those same events very different meaning. For example, what are we to make of the sight of a woman putting two watches in her pocket and leaving a shop without paying? Seen through the frame of a store detective, this appears to be a clear case of shoplifting. However, the legal frame leads her lawyer to see this as the act of an absentminded woman who was out shopping for gifts for her daughters. To take another example, a medical frame may lead a woman to see the actions of her gynecologist in one way, but if she uses a frame of sexuality and sexual harassment, she may see the same actions in a very different way.

Another change that Manning argues is clear in *Frame Analysis,* and that was foreshadowed in other works by Goffman, is a shift away from the cynical view of life that lay at the heart of *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life.* In fact, on the first page of *Frame Analysis,* Goffman says, "All the world is not a stage—certainly the

theater isn't entirely" (1974:1). Goffman clearly came to recognize the limitations of the theater as a metaphor for everyday life. While still useful in some ways, this metaphor conceals some aspects of life just as it illuminates others. One of the things that is concealed is the importance of ritual in everyday life. Here is the way Manning describes one of the roles played by ritual in everyday life:

> For Goffman, ritual is essential because it maintains our confidence in basic social relationships. It provides others with opportunities to affirm the legitimacy of our position in the social structure while obliging us to do the same. Ritual is a placement mechanism in which, for the most part, social inferiors affirm the higher positions of their superiors. The degree of ritual in a society reflects the legitimacy of its social structure, because the ritual respect paid to individuals is also a sign of respect for the roles they occupy.
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> (P. Manning, 1992:133)

More generally, we can say that rituals are one of the key mechanisms by which everyday life, and the social world in general, are made orderly and given solidity.

Goffman's interest in rituals brought him close to the later work of Emile Durkheim, especially *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912/1965). More generally, in accord with Durkheim's sense of social facts, Goffman came to focus on rules and see them as external constraints on social behavior. However, rules are generally only partial, indeterminate guides to conduct. Furthermore, even though people are constrained, such constraint does not rule out the possibility of individual variation, even imaginative use by individuals of those rules. As Philip Manning puts it, "For the most part, Goffman assumed that rules are primarily constraints. . . . However, at other times Goffman emphasized the limitations of the Durkheimian idea that rules are constraints governing behavior, and argued instead that we frequently ignore or abuse rules intended to limit our actions" (1992:158). In fact, in line with modern thinking, to Goffman rules could be both constraints and resources to be used by people in social interaction.

Groups and Societies

Symbolic interactionists are generally highly critical of the tendency of other sociologists to focus on macro structures. As Paul Rock says, "Interactionism discards most macro-sociological thought as an unsure and overambitious metaphysics . . . not accessible to intelligent examination" (1979:238). Dmitri Shalin points to "interactionist criticism aimed at the classical view of social order as external, atemporal, determinate at any given moment and resistant to change" (1986:14). Rock also says, "Whilst it [symbolic interactionism] does not wholly shun the idea of social structure, its stress upon activity and process relegates structural metaphors to a most minor place" (1979:50).

Blumer is in the forefront of those who are critical of this "sociological determinism [in which] the social action of people is treated as an outward flow or expression of forces playing on them rather than as acts which are built up by people through their interpretation of the situations in which they are placed" (1962/1969:84). This focus on the constraining effects of large-scale social structures leads traditional sociologists to a set of assumptions about the actor and action different from those held by symbolic interactionists. Instead of seeing actors as those who actively define their

situations, traditional sociologists tend to reduce actors to "mindless robots on the societal or aggregate level" (Manis and Meltzer, 1978:7). In an effort to stay away from determinism and a robotlike view of actors, symbolic interactionists take a very different view of large-scale social structures, a view that is ably presented by Blumer.[9]

To Blumer, society is not made up of macro structures. The essence of society is to be found in actors and action: "Human society is to be seen as consisting of acting people, and the life of the society is to be seen as consisting of their actions" (Blumer, 1962/1969:85). Human society is action; group life is a "complex of ongoing activity." However, society is not made up of an array of isolated acts. There is collective action as well, which involves "individuals fitting their lines of action to one another . . . participants making indications to one another, not merely each to himself" (Blumer, 1969b:16). This gives rise to what Mead called the *social act* and Blumer calls *joint action.*

Blumer accepted the idea of emergence—that large-scale structures emerge from micro processes (Morrione, 1988). According to Maines, "The key to understanding Blumer's treatment of large-scale organizations rests on his conception of joint action" (1988:46). A joint action is not simply the sum total of individual acts—it comes to have a character of its own. A joint action thus is not external to or coercive of actors and their actions; rather, it is created by actors and their actions. The study of joint action is, in Blumer's view, the domain of the sociologist.

From this discussion one gets the sense that the joint act is almost totally flexible—that is, that society can become almost anything the actors want it to be. However, Blumer was not prepared to go as far as that. He argued that each instance of joint action must be formed anew, but he did recognize that joint action is likely to have a "well-established and repetitive form" (Blumer, 1969b:17). Not only does most joint action recur in patterns, but Blumer also was willing to admit that such action is guided by systems of preestablished meanings, such as culture and social order.

It would appear that Blumer admitted that there are large-scale structures and that they are important. Here Blumer followed Mead (1934/1962), who admitted that such structures are very important. However, such structures have an extremely limited role in symbolic interactionism.[10] For one thing, Blumer most often argued that large-scale structures are little more than "frameworks" within which the really important aspects of social life, action and interaction, take place (1962/1969:87). Large-scale structures do set the conditions and limitations on human action, but they do not determine it. In his view, people do not act within the context of structures such as society; rather, they act in situations. Large-scale structures are important in that they shape the situations in which individuals act and supply to actors the fixed set of symbols that enable them to act.

Even when Blumer discussed such preestablished patterns, he hastened to make it clear that "areas of unprescribed conduct are just as natural, indigenous, and recurrent

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[9] Although they recognize that Blumer takes this view, Wood and Wardell (1983) argue that Mead did *not* have an "astructural bias." See also Joas (1981).

[10] Later we will discuss some more recent perspectives in symbolic interactionism that accord a greater role to large-scale structures and that argue, more specifically, that Blumer adopted such a position (Blumer, 1990; Maines, 1989a, 1989b; Maines and Morrione, 1990).

in human group life as those areas covered by preestablished and faithfully followed prescriptions of joint action" (1969b:18). Not only are there many unprescribed areas, but even in prescribed areas joint action has to be created and re-created consistently. Actors are guided by generally accepted meanings in this creation and re-creation, but they are not determined by them. They may accept them as is, but they also can make minor and even major alterations in them. In Blumer's words, "It is the social process in group life that creates and upholds the rules, not the rules that create and uphold group life" (1969b:19).

Clearly, Blumer was not inclined to accord culture independent and coercive status in his theoretical system. Nor was he about to accord this status to the extended connections of group life, or what is generally called "social structure," for example, the division of labor. "A network or an institution does not function automatically because of some inner dynamics or system requirements; it functions because people at different points do something, and what they do is a result of how they define the situation in which they are called on to act" (Blumer, 1969b:19).

Criticisms

Having analyzed the ideas of symbolic interactionism, particularly those of the Chicago school of Mead, Blumer, and Goffman, I will now enumerate some of the major criticisms of this perspective.

The first criticism is that the mainstream of symbolic interactionism has too readily given up on conventional scientific techniques. Eugene Weinstein and Judith Tanur expressed this point well: "Just because the contents of consciousness are qualitative, does not mean that their exterior expression cannot be coded, classified, even counted" (1976:105). Science and subjectivism are *not* mutually exclusive.

Second, Manford Kuhn (1964), William Kolb (1944), Bernard Meltzer, James Petras, and Larry Reynolds (1975), and many others have criticized the vagueness of essential Meadian concepts such as mind, self, I, and me. Most generally, Kuhn (1964) spoke of the ambiguities and contradictions in Mead's theory. Beyond Meadian theory, they have criticized many of the basic symbolic-interactionist concepts for being confused and imprecise and therefore incapable of providing a firm basis for theory and research. Because these concepts are imprecise, it is difficult, if not impossible, to operationalize them; the result is that testable propositions cannot be generated (Sheldon Stryker, 1980).

The third major criticism of symbolic interactionism has been of its tendency to downplay or ignore large-scale social structures. This criticism has been expressed in various ways. For example, Weinstein and Tanur argued that symbolic interactionism ignores the connectedness of outcomes to each other: "*It is the aggregated outcomes that form the linkages among episodes of interaction that are the concern of sociology qua sociology*. . . . The concept of social structure is necessary to deal with the incredible density and complexity of relations through which episodes of interaction are interconnected" (1976:106). Sheldon Stryker argued that the micro focus of symbolic interactionism serves "to minimize or deny the facts of social structure and the impact of the macro-organizational features of society on behavior" (1980:146).

Somewhat less predictable is the fourth criticism, that symbolic interactionism is not sufficiently microscopic, that it ignores the importance of factors such as the unconscious and emotions (Meltzer, Petras, and Reynolds, 1975; Sheldon Stryker, 1980). Similarly, symbolic interactionism has been criticized for ignoring psychological factors such as needs, motives, intentions, and aspirations. In their effort to deny that there are immutable forces impelling the actor to act, symbolic interactionists have focused instead on meanings, symbols, action, and interaction. They ignore psychological factors that might impel the actor, an action that parallels their neglect of the larger societal constraints on the actor. In both cases, symbolic interactionists are accused of making a "fetish" out of everyday life (Meltzer, Petras, and Reynolds, 1975:85). This focus on everyday life, in turn, leads to a marked overemphasis on the immediate situation and an "obsessive concern with the transient, episodic, and fleeting" (Meltzer, Petras, and Reynolds, 1975:85).

Toward a More Synthetic and Integrative Symbolic Interactionism

It may have been out of self-defense, but symbolic interactionism, as it evolved primarily under the stewardship of Herbert Blumer, moved in a decidedly micro direction. This micro focus stood in contrast to at least the implications of the more integrative title of George Herbert Mead's *Mind, Self and Society*. However, symbolic interactionism has entered a new, "post-Blumerian" age (G. Fine, 1990, 1992). On one front, there are efforts to reconstruct Blumerian theory and argue that it always had an interest in macro-level phenomena (discussed later in this chapter).[11] More important, there are ongoing efforts to synthesize symbolic interactionism with ideas derived from a number of other theories. This "new" symbolic interactionism has, in Gary Fine's terms, "cobbled a new theory from the shards of other theoretical approaches" (1990:136–137, 1992). Symbolic interactionism now combines indigenous insights with those from micro theories such as exchange theory, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, and phenomenology. More surprising is the integration of ideas from macro theories (for example, structural functionalism) as well as the ideas of macro theorists such as Parsons, Durkheim, Simmel, Weber, and Marx. Symbolic interactionists also are endeavoring to integrate insights from poststructuralism, postmodernism, and radical feminism. Post-Blumerian symbolic interactionism is becoming a much more synthetic perspective than it was in Blumer's heyday.

Redefining Mead

In addition to ongoing synthetic work in symbolic interactionism, there is an effort to redefine the major thinkers associated with it, especially Mead, as having more integrative orientations than is usually thought to be the case.

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[11] For a critique of efforts by symbolic interactionists to integrate macro-level phenomena, see J. Turner (1995).

As we saw earlier, despite Mead's lack of interest in macro-level phenomena, there is much in his ideas on mind, self, and society that suggests an integrated sociological theory. In this context, it is useful to look at John Baldwin's (1986) analysis of Mead. Baldwin notes the fragmentation of the social sciences in general, and sociological theory in particular, and argues that such fragmentation is serving to prevent the development of a general "unifying" sociological theory and, more generally, a science of the social world. He makes the case for the need for such a theory and for Meadian theory as a model for that theory (Baldwin, 1986:156). Although Baldwin is proposing the kind of grand synthesis that is being rejected in this postmodern era, we can welcome his effort to see a more integrative approach in Meadian theory.

Baldwin makes the case for Mead on several grounds. First, he argues that Mead's theoretical system covers the full range of social phenomena from micro to macro levels—"physiology, social psychology, language, cognition, behavior, society, social change and ecology" (Baldwin, 1986:156). Along these lines, Baldwin offers a model of Mead's theoretical orientation, as shown in Figure 10.1.

Second, Baldwin argues that not only does Mead have an integrated, micro-macro sense of the social world, he also offers "a flexible system for interweaving contributions from all schools of contemporary social science (1986:156). Thus, Mead's theory provides a base not only for micro-macro integration but for theoretical synthesis as well. Finally, Baldwin contends that Mead's "commitment to scientific methods helps ensure that data and theories on all components of the social system can be integrated in a balanced manner, with their relative importance established in an empirically defensible manner" (1986:156).
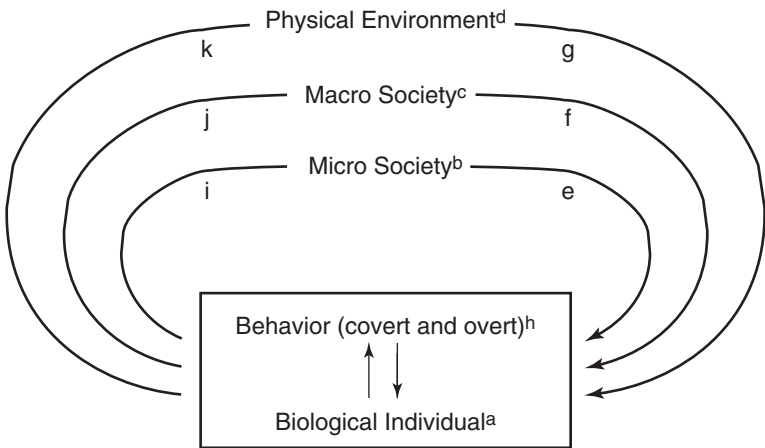
FIGURE 10.1   *An Overview of the Components of Mead's Theoretical System*

Micro-Macro Integration

Sheldon Stryker enunciated an integrative goal for symbolic interactionism: "A satisfactory theoretical framework must bridge social structure and person, must be able to move from the level of the person to that of large-scale social structure and back again. . . . There must exist a conceptual framework facilitating movement across the levels of organization and person" (1980:53). (Perinbanayagam articulated a similar goal for symbolic interactionism: "the existence of structure *and* meaning, self *and* others, the dialectic of being and emergence, leading to a dialectical interactionism" [1985:xv].) Stryker embedded his orientation in Meadian symbolic interactionism but sought to extend it to the societal level, primarily through the use of role theory:

> This version begins with Mead, but goes beyond Mead to introduce role theoretic concepts and principles, in order to adequately deal with the reciprocal impact of social person and social structure. The nexus in this reciprocal impact is interaction. It is in the context of the social process—the ongoing patterns of interaction joining individual actors—that social structure operates to constrain the conceptions of self, the definitions of the situation, and the behavioral opportunities and repertoires that bound and guide the interaction that takes place.
>
> (Sheldon Stryker, 1980:52)

Stryker developed his orientation in terms of eight general principles:

1. Human action is dependent on a named and classified world in which the names and classifications have meaning for actors. People learn through interaction with others how to classify the world, as well as how they are expected to behave toward it.
2. Among the most important things that people learn are the symbols used to designate social *positions*. A critical point here is that Stryker conceived of positions in structural terms: "the relatively stable, morphological components of social structure" (Stryker, 1980:54). Stryker also accorded *roles* central importance, conceiving of them as the shared behavioral expectations attached to social positions.
3. Stryker also recognized the importance of larger social structures, although he was inclined, like other symbolic interactionists, to conceive of them in terms of organized patterns of behavior. In addition, his discussion treated social structure as simply the "framework" within which people act. Within these structures, people name one another, that is, recognize one another as occupants of positions. In so doing, people evoke reciprocal expectations of what each is expected to do.
4. Furthermore, in acting in this context, people name not only each other but also themselves; that is, they apply positional designations to themselves. These self-designations become part of the self, internalized expectations with regard to their own behavior.
5. When interacting, people define the situation by applying names to it, to other participants, to themselves, and to particular features of the situation. These definitions are then used by the actors to organize their behavior.

6. Social behavior is not determined by social meanings, although it is constrained by them. Stryker is a strong believer in the idea of *role making.* People do not simply take roles; rather, they take an active, creative orientation to their roles.

7. Social structures also serve to limit the degree to which roles are "made" rather than just "taken" (D. Martin and Wilson, 2005). Some structures permit more creativity than others do.

8. The possibilities of role making make various social changes possible. Changes can occur in social definitions—in names, symbols, and classifications—and in the possibilities for interaction. The cumulative effect of these changes can be alterations in the larger social structures.

Although Stryker offered a useful beginning toward a more adequate symbolic interactionism, his work has a number of limitations. The most notable is that he said little about larger social structures per se. Stryker saw the need to integrate these larger structures in his work, but he recognized that a "full-fledged development of how such incorporation could proceed is beyond the scope of the present work" (1980:69). Stryker saw only a limited future role for large-scale structural variables in symbolic interactionism. He hoped ultimately to incorporate structural factors such as class, status, and power as variables constraining interaction, but he was disinclined to see symbolic interactionism deal with the interrelationships among these structural variables. Presumably, this kind of issue is to be left to other theories that focus more on large-scale social phenomena.

The Future of Symbolic Interactionism

Gary Fine (1993) offered an interesting portrait of symbolic interactionism in the 1990s. His fundamental point is that symbolic interactionism has changed dramatically in recent years. First, it has undergone considerable *fragmentation* since its heyday at the University of Chicago in the 1920s and 1930s. A great diversity of work is now included under the broad heading of symbolic interactionism. Second, symbolic interactionism has undergone *expansion* and has extended far beyond its traditional concern with micro relations (S. Harris, 2001). Third, symbolic interactionism has *incorporated* ideas from many other theoretical perspectives (Feather, 2000). Finally, the ideas of symbolic interactionists have, in turn, been *adopted* by sociologists who are focally committed to other theoretical perspectives. Further, symbolic interactionists are deeply involved in some of the major issues confronting sociological theory in the 1990s—micro-macro, agency-structure, and so on.

Thus, lines dividing symbolic interactionism and other sociological theories have blurred considerably (Maines, 2001). While symbolic interactionism will survive, it is increasingly unclear what it means to be a symbolic interactionist (and every other type of sociological theorist for that matter). Here is the way Fine puts it:

> Predicting the future is dangerous, but it is evident that the label symbolic
> interaction will abide. . . . Yet, we will find more intermarriage, more interchange,

and more interaction. Symbolic interaction will serve as a label of convenience for the future, but will it serve as a label of thought?

(G. Fine, 1993:81–82)

Throughout this book we deal with ongoing syntheses among many sociological theories. All these syntheses lead to the more general question of whether *any* of the familiar theoretical labels will describe distinctive modes of thought in the future.

Summary

This chapter begins with a brief discussion of the roots of symbolic interactionism in philosophical pragmatism (the work of John Dewey) and psychological behaviorism (the work of John B. Watson). Out of the confluence of pragmatism, behaviorism, and other influences, such as Simmelian sociology, symbolic interactionism developed at the University of Chicago in the 1920s.

The symbolic interactionism that developed stood in contrast to the psychological reductionism of behaviorism and the structural determinism of more macro-oriented sociological theories such as structural functionalism. Its distinctive orientation was toward the mental capacities of actors and their relationship to action and interaction. All this was conceived in terms of process; there was a disinclination to see the actor impelled by either internal psychological states or large-scale structural forces.

The single most important theory in symbolic interactionism is that of George Herbert Mead. Substantively, Mead's theory accorded primacy and priority to the social world. That is, it is out of the social world that consciousness, the mind, the self, and so on, emerge. The most basic unit in his social theory is the act, which includes four dialectically related stages—impulse, perception, manipulation, and consummation. A *social* act involves two or more persons, and the basic mechanism of the social act is the gesture. While lower animals and humans are capable of having a conversation of gestures, only humans can communicate the conscious meaning of their gestures. Humans are peculiarly able to create vocal gestures, and this leads to the distinctive human ability to develop and use significant symbols. Significant symbols lead to the development of language and the distinctive capacity of humans to communicate, in the full sense of the term, with one another. Significant symbols also make possible thinking, as well as symbolic interaction.

Mead looks at an array of mental processes as part of the larger social process, including reflective intelligence, consciousness, mental images, meaning, and, most generally, the mind. Humans have the distinctive capacity to carry on an inner conversation with themselves. All the mental processes are, in Mead's view, lodged not in the brain but rather in the social process.

The self is the ability to take oneself as an object. Again, the self arises within the social process. The general mechanism of the self is the ability of people to put themselves in the place of others, to act as others act and to see themselves as others see them. Mead traces the genesis of the self through the play and game stages of childhood. Especially important in the latter stage is the emergence of the generalized other. The ability to view oneself from the point of view of the community is essential

to the emergence of the self as well as of organized group activities. The self also has two phases—the "I," which is the unpredictable and creative aspect of the self, and the "me," which is the organized set of attitudes of others assumed by the actor. Social control is manifest through the "me," while the "I" is the source of innovation in society.

Mead has relatively little to say about society, which he views most generally as the ongoing social processes that precede mind and self. Mead largely lacks a macro sense of society. Institutions are defined as little more than collective habits.

Symbolic interactionism may be summarized by the following basic principles:

1. Human beings, unlike lower animals, are endowed with a capacity for thought.
2. The capacity for thought is shaped by social interaction.
3. In social interaction, people learn the meanings and symbols that allow them to exercise their distinctively human capacity for thought.
4. Meanings and symbols allow people to carry on distinctively human action and interaction.
5. People are able to modify or alter the meanings and symbols they use in action and interaction on the basis of their interpretation of the situation.
6. People are able to make these modifications and alterations because, in part, of their ability to interact with themselves, which allows them to examine possible courses of action, assess their relative advantages and disadvantages, and then choose one.
7. The intertwined patterns of action and interaction make up groups and societies.

In the context of these general principles, I seek to clarify the nature of the work of several important thinkers in the symbolic-interactionist tradition, including Charles Horton Cooley, Herbert Blumer, and, most important, Erving Goffman. I present in detail Goffman's dramaturgical analysis of the self and his related works on role distance, stigma, and frame analysis. However, I also note that Goffman's work on frames has exaggerated a tendency in his earlier work and moved further in the direction of a structuralist analysis.

We also review some of the major criticisms of symbolic interactionism, as well as two efforts to move it in more integrative and synthetic directions—the redefinition of the approach of Mead in more integrative terms and the effort by Stryker to develop an approach that better deals with macro-level phenomena. The chapter closes with one image of symbolic interactionism's future.