

WEEK THREE
Mon Sept 28, 2009
Tues Sept 29, 2009

**INTRODUCTION TO SYMBOLIC INTERACTION: SYMBOLIC
INTERACTION, PERSPECTIVES AND REFERENCE GROUPS**

LECTURE OUTLINE

**PART 1: INTRODUCTION TO SYMBOLIC INTERACTION: MAIN
CONCEPTS**

- (A) FIVE CENTRAL IDEAS ABOUT SYMBOLIC INTERACTION**
- (B) FIVE CRITICISMS OF SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM**

**PART 2: SOCIAL MEANINGS, SOCIAL INTERACTION AND
SOCIAL ROLES**

PART 3: PERSPECTIVES

PART FOUR: REFERENCE GROUPS AS PERSPECTIVES

**PART FIVE: SUMMARY OF MAIN POINTS ABOUT SYMBOLIC
INTERACTION**

- (A) MAIN POINTS TO REMEMBER ABOUT SOCIAL
INTERACTION**
- (B) 4 SIGNIFICANT EFFECTS OF SOCIAL INTERACTION**

Questions of the Week

What are the basic concepts of Symbolic Interaction?

***What are the main points about Symbolic Interaction that you
need to remember?***

What is a reference group? Define the concept of perspective?

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DETAILED LECTURE NOTES

PART ONE: INTRODUCTION TO SYMBOLIC INTERACTION

(A) FIVE CENTRAL IDEAS OF SYMBOLIC INTERACTION

1. **SI focuses on the nature of social interaction, the dynamic social activities taking place among persons.**

- focus is on the daily actions of individuals, on what they are doing, thinking, believing, how they are influencing others, creating identities and not a focus on how individuals merely respond to their environments

2. **Individual, human action is caused not only by social interaction but also results from interaction within the individual.**

- our ideas, attitudes, values = our thinking = comes from what we interpret to be happening in the situation we are in and this is what interactionists study

3. **Individuals do not sense their environment directly but instead *define their situations* as they go along in their actions.**

- individuals define their situations as they go along – they do not accept other's definitions but instead create their own – they may be influenced by others but their thoughts are their own

4. **We are not controlled by what happened in the past.** We are not simply playing out personality traits we developed early in our lives. Our actions/behaviour is influenced by what happens in the present situation, what is happening right now.
 - concepts of social interaction, interaction with self, definition of the situation are 3 central SI concepts that illustrate this point

5. Individuals are able to **take an active part in the cause of their own action.** They are not simply “acted upon” by social forces beyond their control.
 - lots of disagreement in society about to what extent individuals are responsible for their own actions and to what extent they are victims of fate, of circumstances

EG: Poverty debates are always about this disagreement – poor people deserve what they get because they never studied in school so got bad jobs and now are poor

Versus argument that says that economic circumstances determine or cause poverty in countries and that no matter how hard people worked, they would remain poor because the jobs pay too little, food costs too much, housing is not affordable

(B) FIVE CRITICISMS OF SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

1. It is a conservative, non-critical orientation.
2. It is unscientific because it shuns the deductive method and prefers the inductive method of reasoning.
3. It pays insufficient attention to the formal or deeper processes which condition how ordinary people live their lives.
4. It lacks sufficient appreciation of the dark, demonic, subterranean side of life.
5. It is inept in its discussion of macrosociological issues, such as globalization, capitalism, and patriarchy.

PART TWO: SOCIAL MEANINGS, SOCIAL INTERACTION AND SOCIAL ROLES

1. SOCIAL MEANINGS

What is Social Interaction?

- people relate to social objects and events largely in terms of the meanings of these objects and events have for them
- rather than being fixed, meanings are constructed and reconstructed in the daily interactions of people
- as we learn to use language correctly, we can understand the attitudes attached to word and perform the behaviour others expect of us in our social roles

Characteristics of Individual “Selves”

- Mead believed that what was distinctive about individuals was that they developed “minds” and “selves” through the evolutionary process
 - that is, they could deal with problems (circumstances blocking ongoing behaviour) by manipulating symbols internally to try out alternative solutions to those problems (mind)
 - he argued that the source of mind and self was ongoing social process in which persons required others in order to construct solutions to problematic situations
 - requiring others implies that persons must take into account others through anticipating their responses to projected lines of action
- this is made possible by communication, by developing in interaction symbols with reasonably common meanings among those implicated in the on-going

EG: organized society is a never ending process of routinization or institutionalization of solutions to repetitive problems, arrived at through interaction, and subject to continuous change as new problems emerge in interaction and are confronted by participants

This Means that:

Both individuals and society are created in and through social process: each is constitutive of the other. This means that there is no individuality outside society and there is no society except through the actions of individuals.

In sum, Individuals are:

Individuals are reflective, self-conscious and self-controlling. This is made possible by participation in interaction and through communication.

The standpoint of others becomes part of self, representing social control of individual conduct. Individuals also control their own behaviour by selecting actions symbolically present in their experience. Therefore, social control makes self-control possible. How? Self plays back upon the society that shapes the self; society is thus constantly being created and recreated.

How does Mead Define Change/Novelty?

- Change is an intrinsic part of the social process, as is emergence (the appearance of new, unpredictable experience requiring creative adaptations).
- Novel solutions to problems can arise as persons alter and adapt their existing meanings and behaviour to meet unforeseen contingencies in social interaction.

SOCIAL ROLES

Definition of Social Role:

- we use the term social role to mean a mutually recognized set of behavioural expectations for a person of a particular status
- EG: mother/father are status positions within a family – people behave in these roles according to generally accepted norms and expectations and in response to others who are affected by their behaviour

How Does SI Characterize Social Roles?

- Roles are not rigid prescriptions for social contact, to be obeyed without modification; rather, interaction and the playing of roles is an interpretive process through which people modify their role performance to fit particular situations.

EG: No two people who perform the role of “mother” should/can be expected to conduct themselves in exactly the same manner

Multiple Roles

- individuals occupy many roles in a lifetime and even during a single day eg. move from the role of roommate, role to worker, role of student
- individuals also exhibit simultaneous roles eg. an individual may be middle-aged, a lawyer and black
- what are the benefits of the accumulation of roles?

What is Role Conflict?

= difficulty in meeting the obligations of multiple roles

Types of role conflict

- a) role overload
- b) role incompatibility

What is Role Overload?

- occurs when an individual's roles demand more time and effort than an individual has for them
- how do individuals deal with role overload?

2. WHERE DO WE LEARN SOCIAL ROLES? IN REFERENCE GROUPS

- people acquire individual role behaviour through their contact with others in various reference groups

Definition:

- a reference group is any group which helps us define one or more of our social roles and which helps us evaluate ourselves or form attitudes

Examples of Reference Groups:

- could be an unlimited number of reference groups, large or small, ethnic or regional, local or national, intimate or distant

How do individuals choose reference groups?

- Definition of **relative deprivation**

Functions of Reference Groups

a) Normative Function

- the reference group sets and enforces standards for the individual members
- a group functions as a normative reference group to the extent that it evaluates a person on the basis of conformity to group standards and delivers rewards and punishments based on these evaluations

EG: What will my parents/peers think of this?

b) Comparative Function

- group members use the reference group as a standard for making judgements about the self and others
- a group functions as a comparative reference group to the extent that it is used to evaluate the behaviours, attitudes, or characteristics of oneself or others

EG: How smart or attractive am I compared to my friends?

PART THREE:

PERSPECTIVES

WHAT ARE PERSPECTIVES?

Definition of perspective: a perspective is an **angle** on reality, a place where the individual stands out as he/she looks and tries to understand reality

- an angle always limits what one sees since other angles (many of which may be accurate) cannot be considered at the same time
- perspectives demonstrate that there is no possible way any individual can see all aspects of any situation simultaneously
- perspectives force us to pull out certain elements in our environment, pay attention to these and ignore others
- **perspectives act as filters** through which everything around is perceived and interpreted
- **best definition:** perspectives act as **conceptual frameworks**, cause us to make assumptions and value judgments about what we are seeing and not seeing

- reality does exist (there is something happening “out there” in the world) but we cannot know it completely or in any perfectly accurate way because we always see it through filters called perspectives

Definition of Perspective: perspectives are points of view individuals use to make sense of their world

: it is an outline scheme defining and guiding experience

: dynamic, changing guides to interpretation and then to action

: they undergo change during interaction (are influenced by what happens to us) and are therefore not entirely predictable

Do Perspectives Change Over a Lifetime?

- **YES!**
- We all undergo basic changes in our perspectives many times throughout our lives (basic tenet of what is called life course theory)
- Perspectives change from situation to situation: perspectives are situational
I.e. Situations call for different roles, which means a different perspectives

EG: Classroom situation: “*Making the Grade*” (Becker, Hughes, Strauss and Geer)

- draw Park’s pond and discuss the different perspectives that each group holds and the content of each perspective

Students think:

Instructors think:

Administration thinks:

Summary: 5 important points to remember about perspectives:

1. **Perspectives are points of view** (filters, eyeglasses, sensitizers) – that guide our perception of reality.
2. **Perspectives are conceptual frameworks** – a set of assumptions, values and beliefs used to organize our perceptions and control our behaviour.
3. **Individuals have many perspectives. Perspectives shift** as individuals change roles and move from one situation to another.
4. Every object, event or person can be understood from **multiple perspectives**. We need to gather all perspectives in order to understand what is happening, to understand how to define that person.
5. Each perspective focuses on a different set of realities so one is **not “better” or “more accurate”** than another, only different.

PART FIVE: MAIN POINTS AND THEIR EFFECTS

(A) MAIN POINTS TO REMEMBER ABOUT SOCIAL INTERACTION

SOCIAL ACTION

- = the basis for social interaction
 - = means that what the actor does involves and considers other people
 - = means that action is guided by what others do in the situation
 - = means that almost all our acts are symbolic
 - = means that the acts of each person have meaning to all those engaged in interaction (interpretation, response, counter response)
- EG:** our acts tell others who we are, what we think, our ideas, perspectives, desires, goals, strengths, dislikes, moral codes etc etc etc
- EG:** If I dress for others as well as for myself, throw a ball, stay quiet in the library = all is social action

SOCIAL OBJECTS:

How did Mead define social objects?

STAGES OF THE SOCIAL ACT:

3 stages

TAKING THE ROLE OF THE OTHER TOWARD SELF = TROTS

(sometimes called "taking others into account")

- = taking the role of the other toward oneself (TROTS)
- = means being aware of her/him, identifying her/him in some way, making some judgement or appraisal of her/him, identifying the meaning of her/his actions, trying to find out what s/he has on her/his mind, or trying to figure out what s/he intends to do

THE MEANING OF SOCIAL ACTION = THE MEANING OF SOCIAL INTERACTION

Social Interaction = means actors take one another into account, communicate and interpret one another as they go along
= means that those engaged in interaction communicate with one another and constantly interpret one another's actions by taking the perspective or role of the other
= means acts are symbolic, have meaning to all involved

Significant Gestures = basis for symbolic action
= act that has meaning to both the actor and to the other

Social Interaction Involves Role Taking = role taking is the mechanism by which symbolic communication or interaction takes place, the means by which significant gestures are communicated

Emotional Component of Role Taking:

- part of it is emotional – we not only understand the other but attempt to feel like the other = called emotional intersubjectivity (Denzin 1984)

(B) 4 SIGNIFICANT EFFECTS OF SOCIAL INTERACTION

1. SOCIAL INTERACTION FORMS OUR BASIC HUMAN QUALITIES

a) Social interaction creates the social objects we use and therefore alters our relationship with our environment.

- our ability to symbolically communicate means we constantly create meaning in our environment, actively engage with it and those in it, rather than just passively responding to it
- “Symbolic interactionism sees meanings as social products, as creations that are formed in and through the defining activities of people as they interact” (Blumer 1969: 5).

b) Social interaction creates human symbols.

- what distinguishes us from animals is not our ability to communicate (animals communicate with each other) but is our ability to communicate symbolically (to create, use and share symbols in social interaction and to agree among ourselves of the meaning of those symbols)

c) Social interaction creates and defines self.

- our sense of self develops because we role take

d) Interaction creates and influences mind.

- mind = covert symbolic action toward the self

e) Social interaction creates and influences our role-taking ability.

- role taking arises out of interaction with significant others BUT how we role take, how well we role take, how well we understand others depends on interaction

EG: In what ways is the role taking of troubled children or physically challenged children the same or different from their peers?

2. SOCIAL INTERACTION IS AN IMPORTANT CAUSE OF HUMAN ACTION

- too often social scientists rely on inherent or innate tendencies (psychological predisposition) or structural features (economics, families, schools) as explanations for what causes individual behaviour
- interactionists instead look to the interactional flow between or among people as the cause of why individuals do what they do
- interactionists try to chart the flow, path, process of interaction among individuals in a group to explain why and how they did what they did

EG: delinquent kids – not smoking dope because they had bad parenting or something horrendous happened to them 10 years ago but rather you would have to examine their peer groups, chart the decisions made daily along the way, see how individuals respond and interpret daily exchanges with others where dope is offered, smoked, refused to see how individuals **align their actions** with the others in the group and how, over time, these alignments add up to delinquent behaviour

- in the interactionist perspective, what matters most is the interaction that unfolds between individuals = understand this and you understand the delinquent behaviour
- we each bring important qualities to the situation from our past such as knowledge, self, identities, symbols, a past, a view of the future, goals, significant others, reference groups, perspectives, skills etc etc AND we use all of these as **social objects** as we define the situation, take actions towards others, interpret and respond BUT these features are not causal but instead are social objects for use, or not, in every social situation

3. SOCIAL INTERACTION SHAPES IDENTITIES

- social identity is formed through social interaction
- identities are always forming and changing because identity formation is a process
- identity formation has been described as a negotiation process which unfolds as we interact and involves doing 2 things simultaneously: continuously labeling others and attributing identities to them AND continuously announcing the identity that they think they are

4. SOCIAL INTERACTION CREATES SOCIETY

- social interaction is responsible for society because it is through interaction that society, social groups, social identities, social institutions, social patterns are formed, reaffirmed, altered
- if we give up social interaction, these patterns disappear

CONCLUSIONS:

- 1. Individuals are social symbolic actors.**
- 2. Social interaction is mutual social action that involves symbolic communication and interpretation of one another's acts.**
- 3. Social interaction creates our qualities as individuals: social objects, symbols, self, mind and our ability to take the role of the other.**
- 4. Social interaction is a cause of action.**
- 5. Social interaction shapes our identities. We create who we are through a process of negotiation that arises in social interaction.**