

Basic Concepts of Symbolic Interactionism

- I. Basic Concepts of Symbolic Interactionism
 - a. Symbols
 - i. The most important conceptual building block on which symbolic interactionists have based their analysis of human conduct is the concept of the *symbol*, or, as Mead called it, the *significant symbol*.
 1. Significant Symbol
 - a. A significant symbol is a vocal or other kind of gesture that arouses in the one using it the same response as it arouses in those to whom it is directed.
 - i. Significance
 1. As a result of the ability to employ significant symbols, human beings interact with one another on the basis of meanings. *Their responses to one another depend on the interpretation of symbols rather than merely on the enactment of responses they have been conditioned to make.* Thus, they engage in symbolic interaction.
 - ii. The Nature of Symbols
 1. Signs
 - a. A sign is something that stands for something else- that is an event or thing that takes the place or signifies some other event or thing. Smoke, for example, is a sign of fire. (This is also an example of a *natural sign*.) A sign can exist only if there is an organism capable of perceiving and responding to it.
 - i. Types of Signs
 1. Natural
 - a. Signs found only in “natural” connection with the things for which they stand. For example, smoke is a sign of fire.
 2. Conventional (also known as a *symbol*)
 - a. A conventional sign or symbol is a thing or event associated with some other thing or event, but it is produced and controlled by the very organisms that have learned to respond to it. The symbol has no natural connection with that which it stands- it does not occur “in nature,” nor is it a fixed part of the environment over which the organism has no control. Rather, it has an entirely arbitrary relationship to what it represents, a relationship that has been created by and is shared among a group of organisms. **Human language constitutes the most important and powerful set**

**of conventional signs or symbols
we can identify.**

- iii. Advantages of Symbols
 - 1. Symbols are public.
 - a. For example, when a word is uttered, it is heard by the one using it as well as by others who participate in its meaning.
 - 2. Symbols can be employed in the absence of the thing they signify.
 - a. Remember that natural signs can only occur when the things they stand for are present or occur.
- iv. The Consequences of Symbols
 - 1. The development of the capacity to use symbols is perhaps the single most important development in the evolution of the human species. Three facts are key to the impact of symbol using on human beings:
 - a. Symbols transform the very nature of the environment in which the human species lives.
 - i. Symbols transform the environment by expanding its scope both spatially and temporally.
 - 1. Animals that can respond only to natural signs are, for all practical purposes, confined to an environment that is defined by how far and fast they can travel and by the nature and acuteness of their senses. Because symbols are not tied to the actual presence of the things for which they stand, we can invoke them even when those things may be quite a distance in space and time. In doing so, symbols quite literally expand the world of humans so that it encompasses whatever they can imagine.
 - ii. Symbols also transform the human environment by making it a *named* environment.
 - 1. In the simplest sense, *names* substitute for *things*, and thus enable us to bring the external world inside our minds and manipulate it there in fairly complex but also economical ways.
 - iii. Symbols transform the environment because they make it possible to create things by creating names.
 - 1. In other words, the human environment does not consist of a finite number of things.
 - b. Symbols make possible for the behavioral dispositions, or attitudes, of one individual to be reproduced in another person.
 - i. Unlike natural signs that are inherently private, symbols, however, are by their nature public; they have meaning only because a community of speakers shares them.
 - c. Symbols make it possible for the individual to be part of the very environment to which he or she responds and thus makes possible the development of *Self*.
 - i. The distinction between the organism and its environment is fairly straightforward for animals that do not use symbols. The two are clearly separate from one another; the environment is what lies outside the individual animal, and the line of demarcation between the two is clear. The symbolic capacity introduces a strikingly new element into the relationship between organism and its environment. If organisms can create

and use symbols to designate their external environment, they can also use them to designate (to name) one another as entities in their environment. **To use a name for oneself is to acquire a *self*, to become one of the objects in the environment toward which the individual can act and, indeed, must act.** The development of *self* is as revolutionary as the symbol itself. To grasp fully the implications of symbol use for the nature of the human environment and the way human beings relate to it and to one another, we need to introduce a new concept, the *object*.

II. Objects

a. What is an Object?

- i. Human beings live in a world of objects- of symbolically designated things, ideas, people, activities, and purposes. What do symbolic interactionists mean by object? *An object is anything to which attention can be paid and toward which action can be directed.* Human beings live in a world of objects that they constantly create and recreate by symbolically designating and acting toward them. And their orientation to the objects that constitute the environment at any given time is purposive and goal oriented. Human beings fashion a world of things and stimuli into a world of objects because they act with purpose toward it. Symbolic interactionist's definition of objects has numerous important implications.

1. Objects may be both:

- a. Tangible (e.g., physical)
- b. Intangible (e.g., social).

- i. What is a *SOCIAL* object?

1. An object that comes into existence as the result of a social act. In other words, it's an object born from shared experience, understanding and meaning. An example of a social object is "love."
2. Social objects are given importance by us not through fixed biological patterns (as is the case in most other animals) but according to what others around us decide to give importance to. And each object changes for the human, not because it changes, but because people change their definition. The meaning of an object, according to Herbert Blumer, is not intrinsic to the object.

- c. Human beings live in a world of objects, not of things or stimuli.

- ii. Objects and Language

1. Language Defined

- a. Joyce O. Hertzler defines language as a culturally constructed and socially established system of standardized and conventionalized symbols, which have a specific and arbitrarily determined meaning and common usage for purpose of socially meaningful expression and for communication in a given society. Furthermore, language is made up of words, each one having meaning alone and also having meaning when combined with others in a standardized way, according to certain established rules.
2. The world of objects in and toward which we act is not created anew each time people encounter and interact with one another. Instead, each of us is born into a world of objects that already exists in the conversations of

others. This has numerous important implications with regard to language.

- a. Language is a repository of the objects that have proved important in the life of particular peoples.
- b. Language is creative of reality and not merely reproductive also because new words can be coined and defined.
- c. Language is the most powerful reality shaping set of symbols employed by human beings.

III. Acts and Social Acts

a. Acts Explained

- i. In analyzing the phases of the act, Mead meant to *call attention to the interplay between the internal processes and external manifestations exhibited in human behavior*. The individual's act does not consist merely of what may be observed by others, but also entails an internal process of control in which the individual directs conduct toward some goal or object.

1. Phases of the Act

a. Impulse

- i. An act starts with an impulse, which occurs when our existing adjustment or line of activity is disturbed. In other words, we might simply suggest that an act begins with a problem to be solved, a goal to be reached, something to be overcome by the human being in the environment.

b. Perception

- i. Here, we begin to name or designate objects and thus give our acts direction. The important point that must not be lost is that human beings define their situations. This is the second stage of the act.

c. Manipulation

- i. At this stage, we take concrete steps to reach our goal.

d. Consummation

- i. Finally, the act ends with consummation, when our original adjustment or line of activity is restored.

b. Types of Acts

i. Individual (Interaction with Self)

1. An act that involves only one individual. Thus, there exists no social component, simply a human being and an object or set of objects interacting.

ii. Social act (Interaction with Others)

1. In Mead's words, a social act is one that involves the cooperation of more than one individual, and whose object as defined by the act is a social object. (Remember that a social object is any object that comes into existence as the result of a social act).

a. Social acts and symbolic interaction

- i. In order for people to engage in social interaction, and thus complete the social object of a social act, they must first be able to interpret – *assign meaning to* – one another's acts. According to Mead, "meaning" is triadic.

c. Meaning is Triadic

- i. When an individual acts (by making a verbal exchange or gesture) he or she:

1. Indicates to the other what he or she plans to do.
2. What the other is expected to do in return.
3. What social object they are creating.

IV. Self and the Control of Behavior

- a. The human capacity to exert control over conduct- to coordinate behavior with that of others and create complex social acts and social objects- is inked to a uniquely human phenomenon, the possession of *self*.
 - i. Self as Object
 1. The evolutionary significance of naming the self was that the coordination of group activities could become more precise and flexible if each individual could imagine alternative scenarios of action. By taking self into account, as a factor in the situation, the individual is better able to control his or her own acts and better able to anticipate the outcomes of alternative acts.
 - ii. Self as Process
 1. Mead (as well as William James) used the personal pronouns “*I*” and “*Me*” to describe what we can think of as two phases of the process whereby the Self is created and recreated. The “*I*” and the “*Me*” continually alternate in ongoing conduct. This constant alternation of “*I*” and “*Me*,” of impulse and reflection, is the way human beings achieve control over their conduct. It is important to stress that the “*I*” and the “*Me*” are states of consciousness, not entities, in spite of the fact that our language leads us to speak of them as if they were things or parts of the self.
 - a. *I*
 - i. Mead intended the concept of the *I* to capture the spontaneous, immediate and impulsive aspect of conduct. The initial part of any act, whatever the source of impulse, involves an acting “subject” who is becoming aware of the environment and the objects within it toward which action must be directed.
 - b. *Me*
 - i. The individual’s awareness of his or her own initial response to a stimulus signals the beginning of the “*Me*” phase of the self. We call this the “object” phase of the self because the individual takes herself into account as an object.
 2. Significance of the “*I*” and the “*Me*”
 - a. The significance of the *I* and *Me* can be grasped by putting these terms within the general framework of the act as Mead described it. As a result of having the capacity to move from subject to object, humans not only better develop the ability to control and monitor their own behavior, but more importantly, the development of the *Self* becomes more pronounced. Thus, this is the essence of the self as process. In short, when confronted by an object, we experience the following:
 - i. “*I*” (Impulse)
 1. There is an impulse to act.
 - ii. “*Me*” (Reflective)
 1. Imagined responses to such an act.
 2. Imagined alternative actions
 - iii. Alternate back and forth from both states of consciousness
 1. Eventual resolution of the inner dialogue into some overt line of conduct.

V. Roles and the Definition of Situations

- a. Earlier, we discussed the processes involved in self-control, but that has left a major question still unexplored and unanswered: How do people successfully anticipate one another’s actions? People are able more or less to predict an individual’s behavior for two main reasons:

- i. First, at nearly every moment of our activity we know the situation of which we are a part because we generally have a ***definition of the situation***.

- 1. Definition of the Situation

- a. The concept of the definition of the situation stresses the fact that acts do not occur in an abstract, rootless, or mechanical way. Human conduct is always situated. In other words, our acts, along with the expectations and interpretations on which they are based, are rooted in our cognition of the situations, which we are a part. When we see ourselves in these situations, we are in essence using the definition of the situation as the platform on which we stand to have a view of ourselves. Two important points stand out about situations.

- i. People act on the basis of their definitions of the situations.
 - ii. Where there is no definition of a situation to start with- where people find themselves without confident knowledge of who is present or what is going on- they must first focus on establishing a definition.

- 2. Second, we know who the others are with whom we are interacting. In other words, we are aware of the varying ***roles*** that are present within a specific social setting.

- a. Roles

- i. In the conventional sociological view, a role is defined as a cluster of duties, rights, and obligations associated with a particular social position (e.g., status). The symbolic interactionist approach to role is quite different, stressing the pragmatic and creative capacities of human beings rather than their tendencies to adhere to rigid schedules of conduct. In other words, the interactionist conceives of a role as a perspective from which conduct is constructed. Three important differences exist.

- 1. Symbolic interactionists argue that participants in any social setting have a sense of its structure. That is, when a situation is defined, so that the participants know who is present and what will occur, they can cognitively structure the situation in terms of roles.
 - 2. The role is a configuration or gestalt- not a list of duties, but rather an organized set of ideas or principles that people employ in order to know how to behave.
 - 3. The role can be thought of as a resource that participants in a situation draw from in order to carry on their activities.

- b. Significance of the Combined Use of Definitions of Situations & Roles

- i. Human beings gain the capacity to anticipate or predict the actions of others with whom they are interacting.
 - ii. Human beings gain the capacity to make sense of the actions of others, even those actions we did not anticipate.

VI. Role Making & Role Taking

- a. Two concepts capture the essence of social interaction and conduct formation as they are shaped by social roles:

- i. Role Making

- 1. The process wherein the person constructs activity in a situation so that it fits the definition of the situation is consonant with the person's own role,

and meshes with the activity of others. In other words, role making becomes a self-conscious activity in which a person creatively engages in making an appropriate role performance, not a blind activity in which a script (traditional sociological definition of a role) is routinely enacted.

ii. Role Taking

1. Is the process wherein the person imaginatively occupies the role of another and looks at self and situation from that vantage point in order to engage in role making. The central idea of role taking is that the individual can imagine a situation from a perspective other than that afforded by his or her role in the situation. A role provides the person with a vantage point from which to view the situation and from which to construct one's own action. This process introduces a very important concept:

generalized other.

a. Generalized Other

- i. The *generalized other* is, like a role, a perspective that the person must imaginatively adopt in order to take into account in forming his or her own conduct. It is made up of standards, expectations, principles, norms, and ideas that are held in common by the members of a particular social group. ***In a complex society, there is not one generalized other, of course, but many.***

VII. The Place of Emotions

- a. Thus far, the discussion has only focused on the *cognitive* aspects of the self. But human behavior entails far more than the cognitive activity in which people calculate and coordinate their conduct, for people also respond *affectively* to one another in social situations.

i. What is Emotion?

1. In everyday speech, people use the term to refer to a number of feelings- such as love, hate, or anger- that they think of as being naturally or spontaneously aroused under particular conditions. Emotional experience requires self-objectification as much as any other form of human experience. Thus, to experience fear, one must not only have the sensations associated with fear, but also label those sensations as "fear." In doing so, the person experiences fear in a self-conscious way, seeing himself or herself as "afraid" by taking the perspectives of others.

Emotions have two major components:

- a. Emotions are associated with physical sensations; they are physiological responses to situations.
- b. Emotions are named, and their names shape and sometimes determine how we experience them.