

Explaining the  
symbolic  
interactionist model  
sociology essay



In explaining how we evolve into truly human beings, Symbolic Interactionism concentrates on our adaptation to the social world around us, its symbols and meanings, and the need to 'read' each other. Explain the Symbolic Interactionist model.

Symbolic interactionism is one of the major theoretical perspectives in social science. It was Max Weber and George H. Mead who emphasised the importance of subjective meaning of human behaviour. Mead drew on pragmatist ideas to construct a social theory that stressed the communication of meaning through interaction. Symbolic Interactionism examines specific social phenomena's such as crime, educational underachievement and collective representations, to help explain such complex issues in a rational and relatable manor.

Interactionist's focus on the subjective features of social life, as opposed to objective and macro-structural aspects, as the theory is based on that of individual human beings, rather than society as a whole. Unlike what Behaviourist theory suggests, humans do not react automatically to 'stimuli', it is but a process of definition and interpretation. It is the active involvement of practical knowledge which separates humans from animals.

Humans are seen as 'pragmatic actors' who must adjust their behaviour (or script) to fit the appropriate actions of others. "In order to understand the action of people, it is necessary to identify their world of objects" (Blumer, 1969, p11) The actor firstly indicates objects in their environment which are regarded as meaningful and secondly, combines objects in an appropriate way and constructs symbolically. This process of adjustment is supported by

the ability to 'imaginatively rehearse' alternative lines of action prior to acting and the capability to react to one self as a symbolic object. Thus, the theory suggests humans are active participants who construct their own social world, as opposed to passive, docile objects of society (Introduction to Mead [Online] 2010). Role taking is the key means of interaction as it permits an individual to take another's perspective. Mead held that "it is the ability of the person to put himself in other people's places that gives him the cues as to what he is to do under a specific situation" (Scott, 1995, p105-106). It helps individuals perceive what actions might be to others with whom they interact. As well as taking attitudes of a specific other, individuals also reflects the attitude of the 'generalised other'. Through socialisation, it is possible to internalise an organised response so every individual is able to respond in the same way. Through the internalisation of these attitudes of the generalised other, the human mind is structured socially in order to become a valid member of society (Scott, 1995).

Erving Goffman, a prominent social theorist, discusses roles dramaturgically, using an analogy to the theatre, with human social behaviour seen as more or less well scripted and with humans as role-taking actors. Goffman elaborated Mead's work, he suggested that social life must be seen as a theatrical performance in which people give creative interpretations of their 'rules'. They also use props and scenery to support the impression of their character they seek to convey to others. Self presentations is only shown in a public setting, in the domestic world (backstage) individuals prepare for their next role. Self presentation is manipulated for the audience and self conceptions are shaped by attitudes and reactions of others. Organisational

routines are employed to repress and control individuals and lead to definite shifts in self identity.

Role making, too, is also an important mechanism of interaction. All situations are essentially vague, thus requiring individuals to create those circumstances and roles to some extent before they can act. The majority of personalities are determined by the response to appearance, speech, actions, beliefs and so on. The reflections people gain from particular impressions are influenced by an exchange of symbols. Cooley's theory of 'The Looking Glass Self' suggests that individuals develop a self image, and can assess the judgement or critique of others regarding their own appearance (Cooley's Looking Glass Self [Online] 2010).

Language plays a central role of symbolic construction, " it does not simply symbolise a situation or object which is already there in advance; it makes possible the existence or the appearance of that situation or object, for it is a part of the mechanism whereby that situation or object is created (Scott, 1995, p102) Actors interpret other people by their actions of communication and the significance is constructed through this. It therefore takes a form of a ' conversation of gestures', whereby behaviour is a direct stimulus to the behaviour of others. This behaviour becomes symbolic when it is ascribed to, this becomes basis of action. " Gestures become significant symbols when they implicitly arouse in the individual making them the same response which they explicitly arouse, or are supposed to arouse, in other individuals... to whom they are addressed" (Scott, 1995, 103) Gestures become symbols within specific groups, but each individual participates in universal gestures, which are understood by that nation. Blumer stressed <https://assignbuster.com/explaining-the-symbolic-interactionist-model-sociology-essay/>

that definitions form an accepted stock of knowledge which is acquired through socialisation. The culture in which an individual is brought up in provides guidelines of how to act in given situations, through means of language and gestures, this enables people to act alike. Actors rely on these accepted interpretations in order to maintain social relations.

Ethnomethodology is a product of symbolic interactionism, which focuses on how day-to-day experiences and how they contribute to our 'social reality'. The term was originally coined by Harold Garfinkel, who investigated this phenomenon by setting up 'breaching experiments', in which ordinary conversations were brought to a sudden close by refusing to conform to the regular pattern of speech, making those who took part in the conversation confused and even angry.

Scheff suggested consensual collective representations exist where there is agreement of a given situation. There is an infinite series of 'reprocatated understandings'. In some situations there is limited guidance, but in rapid changing circumstances, new interpretations should be arrived at, a respected/consensual agreement should be achieved. Symbolic Interactionism adopts a stance of 'methodological individualism' as the theory suggests the social process is an outcome of individual action which doesn't relate to social structures, however, it doesn't rule out collective action. Blumer argues its importance in order for social roles such as; families, friendships, businesses and political parties to function correctly. Actors still assume that social institutions remain relevant to their actions, as educational, occupational and political outlets stand on principles of consensual grounds. Any breach of the accepted norms, produced by these

outlets, will meet with a specific response, be it classed minor (usually by small groups such as friends and family) or major (by the general public) Individuals anticipate the likely reactions of others, which, in turn, constrain their actions. (Symbolic Interactionism [Online] 2010)

Criminal behaviour, like any other behaviour, is learnt through the process of interaction. Criminals have been likely to be involved in subcultures that encourage typical deviant attributes, such as theft, illegal drug taking and vandalism. Involvement in these groups may lead the individual to believe this activity is in some ways 'normal'. Individuals act in accord with their norms of small social groups, if they are not educated in ways of the larger society, this could lead to crime. Mead suggests, " a criminal is the individual who lives in a very small group and then makes depredations upon the larger community of which he is not a member. He is taking the property that belongs to others, but he himself does not belong to the community that recognizes and preserves the rights of property" (Smith, 1995, p106). Becker suggests deviance is not an attribute of an individual, but as a definition, or label which is applied, " social groups create deviance by making the rules and applying those rules to a particular behaviour" (Scott, 1995, p106). The ' audience' judge criminals by their preferred opinions, and what is classified as the norms and values of that given culture. If an individual is ' labelled' a delinquent, it may become a self-fulfilling prophecy, leading to adopt a criminal lifestyle.

Schools play a vital role in shaping the way individuals see themselves and even reality. Many Interactionists' have argued that the authoritarianism which is present in schools hinders learning and encourages autocratic

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behaviour in later life. The education system can create serious problems for students who are 'labelled', such as low academic achievers and classroom troublemakers, who are driven by low expectations of their teacher and in turn, tend to perform less well. These students may never be able to see themselves as good students and move beyond these labels. If students are made to feel like high achievers, they will act like high achievers.

The Symbolic Interactionist theory gives a huge contribution to the social world, however, it is often criticised for being overly generalisable in their research methods and somewhat unsystematic in their theories.

Interactionist's conception of social integration gives only a partial view of collective agencies. Formations of small groups such as political parties and business enterprises are recognised, but not so much explained. Social institutions for Mead and Blumer exist only in the minds of individuals, they may constrain some individual action, but only in so far as individuals take account of them and act accordingly. These objections, combined with the fairly narrow focus of research on small-group interactions and other social psychological issues, have relegated the Interactionist camp to a minority position among sociologists, although a fairly substantial minority. It is clear that the nature of human interaction cannot simply be underpinned with such a generalised view, there is no exact determinate of social life and how individuals react towards each other in relation to larger structures, only a subjective outline of what some individuals believe to be true.

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