

# [Symbolic interactionism and interpersonal communication: the connection between s...](https://assignbuster.com/symbolic-interactionism-and-interpersonal-communication-the-connection-between-symbols-in-everyday-message-exchange-and-formation-of-the-self/)

Symbolic Interactionism is a sociological theory that suggests everyone prescribes meaning to language and symbols. Those meanings are created, negotiated, sustained, and cultivated through interaction with others (Carter & Fuller, 2015). Languages and non-verbal cues are symbols, along with objects, media, and other forms of imagery, used to exchange messages (Redmond, 2015). It is through these exchanges that cultural and societal norms are echoed while also acting as a fundamental instrument in the creation of the self-concept. Without communication the self-concept is unable to actualize itself. Communication fosters the ability for individuals to decide who they are through interaction with others, as well as define the meaning interpreted from those interactions. Human beings, in an attempt to understand who they are, rely on others to act as mirrors to reflect that self-concept (Turner, 2013). Symbolic Interactionism Theory aims to make sense of the complexity of interpretation and the impact it has on who we believe we are, as well as convey the importance of the meanings we construct, assign, and exchange through verbal and non-verbal cues, subsequently using words and gestures to bring into existence a tangible understanding of who we are as individuals. The influence of the theory and its history, the theoretical applications, and more importantly, the real-world applications are irreplaceable and make a positive impact on human interaction; from communicating with a store clerk or spouse to nations global cooperation.

The theory of Symbolic Interactionism was fathered by philosopher George Herbert Mead and later expanded upon by sociologist Herbert Blumer (Redmond, 2015). The theory was a product of ground breaking academic work collectivized by philosophers and professors in what is now known as the Chicago School (Ferris & Stein, 2018). Even more influential, French philosopher August Comte is referred to as the founder of sociology. His work dates back to the first publishing of the term ‘ sociology’ in 1842 (Ferris & Stein, 2018). Without his work to build on, the Theory of Symbolic Interactionism may never have been created. The U. S., as a nation, is still considered to be in its infancy compared with other nations around the world. It is no wonder then, that in the 1920’s there was little work done in the realm of the study of society in the United States. While European academics had been examining social structures and the implications therein 80 years prior, the United States was just starting to catch up (Ferris & Stein, 2018).

Mead was a psychology professor at the University of Michigan and University of Chicago, where he later made an important connection between sociology and psychology (Ferris & Stein, 2018). In doing so he put forward the importance of language. Without it, communication and conscious awareness would be nearly impossible in the process of socialization and the concept of self. In addition, language connects the individual to society as a whole (Ferris & Stein, 2018). This was very important in expressing the intersectionality between the individual and a greater societal structure. That being said, Symbolic Interactionism Theory and the associated field of study is primarily focused on the micro-level (meaning small group or one-on one interaction) research accumulated by three different schools of emphasis, the most prominent being the Chicago School (Carter & Fuller, 2015). This form of research required being active in the community one wishes to study through interview and observation, a research method known as ethnography(Ferris & Stein, 2018).

In Blumer’s theory, as defined by Ferris and Stein in The Real World 6e (2005), the main focus of Symbolic Interactionism can be broken down into three important ideas: “ We act toward things on the basis of their meaning. Meaning is not inherent; rather they are negotiated through interaction with others. And third, meanings can be changed or modified through interaction” (p. 30). This suggests that not only is meaning important (in the sense that we assign meaning to everything, including our self-concept and identities) but people create language and other symbols to understand and express themselves. Although, the relationship is not one sided. As people interact and communicate with themselves (internally) and others (externally), they learn who they are and vice versa (Ferris & Stein, 2005). This means that people learn who they are through communication and they learn who they are to communicate. In doing so we form the larger society around us (Turner, 2013). It is a bit like the chicken and the egg metaphor. Communication through language and symbols are a constant back and forth transaction. Without one (the individual), the other (society) would not be possible (Ferris & Stein 2018). Like the codependence of the individual and society, human beings create their identity and self-concept through which their behavior is based. Their behavior likewise molds their personality and self-concept. Human behavior is the driving force and creator of society. Without the ability to communicate or interact with others, individual identity is impossible to grasp or explain, and societies or cultures would not exist.

A great example to illustrate the fundamentals of the theory and implications of self-concept is getting pulled over by a police officer for speeding. To the driver, this is a major inconvenience, as well as a stressor. To the police officer, it is not only their duty to keep the community safe, it is also putting into practice their role in society and fulfilling their job description. To the cars passing by this is a relief, both because they are not the ones under the microscope of the officer and because the act may be seen as evidence that local police are doing their due diligence to monitor unsafe traffic behaviors, keeping the community safe. As these two individuals interact, they are expressing their self-concepts and identities, while creating and acting on meaning in the symbols of language and non-verbal cues. They may even be negotiating the terms of the perceptions each are interpreting from the other. One of the actors is a civilian (who may be polite and respectful or combative) and the other as an authority figure both feared and respected (who may use their power appropriately and be polite, or use their power as a fear tactic and further the unwanted narrative that police aren’t personable or to be trusted by the public). The civilian may choose their attitude and behavior toward the officer based on positive or negative experiences from the past, ones that have a set meaning in the mind of the driver. Likewise, the officer may have had many stops that day that were negative interactions or positive ones, affecting his or her behavior toward the driver. Both parties may find that the meaning they subscribed to the language, tone of voice, body language, and basic interaction (police and civilian) can be changed through their brief moment together. The preconceived notions based on memory can shift with one good or bad interaction. This is an example of acting on something based on its meaning, the meaning being negotiated, and the possibility for that meaning to change.

The practical application and research of Symbolic Interactionism was first explored in The Chicago school. The theory of symbolic interactionism that has evolved from it expanded the type of research that was used at the time. Pioneering field work with urban ethnography changed the ability to understand the implications of society on the individual citizen (Ferris & Stein, 2018). Through hands-on fieldwork from the likes of Herbert Blumer, W. E. B. Dubois and others, the ability to understand the lives and struggles of minority and low – income individuals became more than theory and speculation. By going directly to the source and subject of theorist’s conjecture, they were able to compile concrete evidence of first-hand accounts and provide a stable foundation to confirm the hypothesis they suggest in their theory (Alexander et al., 1987). They were then able to see a pattern between the individual struggle and impactful issues on a grander social scale, such as disenfranchisement and marginalization (Jaynes et al. 2009).

Symbolic Interactionism has opened the minds and inspired the imaginations of researchers, philosophers, and sociologists alike long after the birth of the theory. From every day one-on-one interactions to larger societal effects of those interactions, the webbed connection and symbiotic relationship are seen more clearly and become more easily explainable through the lens of Symbolic Interactionism. Through the tireless efforts of August Comte, George Herbert Mead, Herbert Blumer, and the Chicago School we are now better able to understand the root of many pivotal concepts such as the self-concept, society, meaning in interaction, and most importantly, how language affects all of these things. Because of this theory the plight of disadvantaged citizen struggles has been noticed on an academic level and validated. This theory in practice can be seen every day, in every conversation, in every situation involving two or more people. Do individuals realize that interactions, the meanings, and outcomes of these interactions, as well as their effect on society as a whole are not fixed, but rather ever flowing and changing like a river, with each of us at the helm of our own ship? If said individuals are given the opportunity to study this important theory, I believe the answer would be yes. The power of our individual and societal future lay in our hands. We wield great power to mold our metaphorical rivers and steer our ships in directions that create positive changes in our lives and in the world. Some people go their whole lives without realizing it. And with that power comes great responsibility.

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