Symbolic interaction theory

Symbolic Interaction Theory Symbolic Interactionism is one of the major theoretical perspectives in sociology. This perspective has a long intellectual history, beginning with the German sociologist and economist, Max Weber (1864-1920) and the American philosopher, George H. Mead (1863-1931), both of whom emphasized the subjective meaning of human behaviour, the social process, and pragmatism.   George Herbert Mead believed that symbols were the basis of individual identity and social life. In his opinion, individuals can acquire identity only through interacting with others. By doing this, we learn the language of our social lives. Since Mead regarded symbols as the foundation of both personal and social life, the theory he developed is called Symbolic Interactionism. Although Mead died before naming his theory, Herbert Blumer, a student of his, came up with the name. Blumer stated that Mead's theory consisted of three key concepts, meaning, language, and thought. The central theme of symbolic interactionism is that human life is lived in the symbolic domain. Symbols are culturally derived social objects having shared meanings that are created and maintained in social interaction. Through language and communication, symbols provide the means by which reality is constructed. Reality is primarily a social product, and all that is humanly consequential self, mind, society, culture emerges from and is dependent on symbolic interactions for its existence. Even the physical environment is relevant to human conduct mainly as it is interpreted through symbolic systems. Symbolic Interaction Theory has been a powerful theoretical framework for over sixty years. It provides striking insights about human communication behaviour in a wide variety of contexts. The theory is logical in its development, beginning with the role of

the self and progressing to an examination of the self in society. In my research I noted that the theory is heuristic, identifying its application in a variety of contexts, including media, organizational, and interpersonal. Yet, the theory is not without its critics. The major objections raised in regard to SI tend to focus on the following areas: It is too broad, it places too much emphasis on personal behaviour, it neglects other important variables, and it is not falsifiable. I will briefly explore these criticisms below. Some critics complain that SI is too broad to be useful. This criticism centres on the evaluation criterion of scope. SI covers too much ground, these critics assert, to fully explain specific meaning-making processes and communication behaviours. Related to this is the objection that the concepts that make up the theory are broadly drawn and rather vague. Additionally, due to this vagueness, SI is difficult to falsify. In response to this criticism, SI proponents explain that SI is not one unified theory; rather, it is a framework that can support many specific theories. In the more specific theories, like Role Theory, for example, the concepts are more clearly defined and are capable of falsification. A second area of criticism concerns Mead's emphasis on the power of the actor to create reality. Critics observe that this ignores the extent to which people live in a world not of their own making. SI theorists regard a situation as real if the actors define it as real. But Erving Goffman (1974) comments that this notion, although true, ignores physical reality. For instance, if I and my parents agreed that I was an excellent Chef and that I was doing a wonderful job within the hotel that would be reality for them. Yet, it would not acknowledge the fact that my boss perceived my skills as inadequate and fired me. SI theorists counter by citing that they try to tread

a middle ground between freedom of choice and external constraint. They recognize the validity of constraint, but they also emphasize the importance of shared meanings. Another area of criticism suggests that there are important concepts that SI ignores, such as emotions and self-esteem. SI does not explain the emotional dimension of human interaction. Furthermore while digging a little deeper SI discusses how we develop a self-concept, but it does not have much to say about how we evaluate ourselves. With reference to the lack of attention to the emotional aspects of human life, SI theorists respond that although Mead does not emphasize these aspects, the theory itself can accommodate emotions.   Symbolic Interaction has critics, but it still remains a heuristic, enduring theory. It supports research in multiple contexts, and it is constantly being refined and extended. Further, it is one of the leading conceptual tools for interpreting social interactions, and its core constructs provide the foundation for many other theories.