

Symbolic interactionism: studies of social construction assignment

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Symbolic Interactionism: Studies of Social Construction Hundreds of years before written word, theories have been made about words, the symbolism behind them, and root meanings assigned by social construction. William Shakespeare can be shown as example of this with posed questions by characters in his writings. In Romeo and Juliet, the character Juliet poses questions that reflect the symbolism of the name of her and her star-crossed lover Romeo. “ O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo.

Deny thy father and refuse thy name; or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love, and I'll no longer be a Capulet...'Tis but thy name that is my enemy;- Thou art thyself, though not a Montague. What's Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot, nor arm, nor face, nor any other part Belonging to a man. O, be some other name! What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet; So Romeo would, were he not Romeo called, retain that dear perfection which he owes. Without that title:-Romeo, doff thy name; and for that name, which is no part of thee, take all myself. The intentions of Shakespeare were not to provide understanding of symbolic interactionism and to theorize, that was not of importance. However, it is viewed important by many in the realm of social psychology, thus, this paper to summarize and describe the concept and history of symbolic interactionism, give my analysis and evaluation to the current state of symbolic interactionism, and provide future directions for symbolic interactionism. Understanding Symbolic Interactionism Social psychologist Herbert Blumer (1937) first coined the phrase “ symbolic interactionism”.

He claimed it to be a “ somewhat barbaric” new term that in an offhand way had caught on in social science communities. Blumer's first explanation <https://assignbuster.com/symbolic-interactionism-studies-of-social-construction-assignment/>

behind the concept actually took place thirty-two years later in his book *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspectives and Method*. Blumer's concept of symbolic interactionism was developed based on the works of social anthropologist George Herbert Mead, whom Blumer was a student, and his *Symbolic Interaction* theory revealed in 1922 in an article entitled *A Behavioristic Account of the Significant Symbol* from *The Journal of Philosophy*. (Blumer, 2004)

Symbolic interactionism is defined by Blumer (1969) as “ people act toward things based on the meaning those things have for them; and these meanings are derived from social interaction and modified through interpretation” (Blumer, 1969). Simply interpreted this explains why people do the things they do, and how through the use of other people's perspective's they will act. The theory is based on three basic premises of meaning, language, and thought. The first premise of symbolic interactionism is that human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them.

Blumer claims “ Such things include everything that the human being may note in his world-physical objects, such as trees or chairs; other human beings, such as friends or enemies; institutions, as a school or a government; guiding ideals, such as individual encounters in daily life. ” (Blumer, 1969, p. 3) This premise seems simple enough, humans act towards things because of their meanings. In the example of Romeo and Juliet, the love of Juliet and Romeo must be hidden because of who they are, because of their names,

Montague and Capulet, those names define who they are as people and those meanings are given by their society.

Due to the socially constructed name and meaning of enemy given, there is a sense that they cannot love, but must act as enemies. This leads to a need of understanding why this has been constructed, what is the source? Blumer explains the second premise is language; which is the source of meaning. It is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction one has with his or her associates. (Griffin, 2006) Simply stated, meaning is not inherent and preexistent in objects and is agreed on through the use of language.

Due to the first premise being too simple to differentiate symbolic interactionism from several other approaches that share this premise, the second premise actually serves as the major line of distance between other approaches and symbolic interactionism. “ There are two well-known traditional ways of accounting for the origin of meaning. One of them is to regard meaning as being intrinsic to the thing that has it, as being a natural part of the objective makeup of the thing. ” (Blumer, 1969) This shows that a chair is a chair, a cow is a cow, a cloud is a cloud, and o forth. The meaning starts from the thing. This shows that because of its social construction the object just is. This position reflects “ realism” in philosophy. Blumer’s third premise is based on the fact that “ an individual’s interpretation of symbols is modified by his or her own thought processes” (Griffin, 2006). The third premise suggests that meanings described are handled in, and modified through and interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things they encounter (Blumer, 1969).

In simple terms, it's a thought process that is handled by an individual who go through what Mead describes as minding, or inner conversation. (Griffin, 2006) The concept behind thought is the process of being able to think, reflect, and take the role of the other. This would mean to put yourself into another's place to think and reflect upon yourself. Once there is an understanding of the three main concepts of meaning, language, and thought, one can understand how these three premises lead to conclusions about the creation of a person's self as well as their socialization into community. (Griffin, 2006)

The concept of self comes from our ability to " paint our self-portrait with brush strokes that come from taking the role of the other" or simply looking at ourselves from an outside perspective (Griffin, 2006). This concept is known by interaction as the looking glass self. According to Mead, the self is an ongoing process combining the " I" and the " me. " The " I" is explained as " the spontaneous, driving force that fosters all that is novel, unpredictable, and unorganized in the self. " The " me" is described as image of self seen through the looking glass of others reaction, or seeing the self as objects. (Griffin, 2006) Looking at Romeo and Juliet, they are both generally only in contact with the members of their own families, their " me" is being formed by the views of those they surround themselves with, but once they both meet and get to know each other their perspectives and their collective view changes. Griffin summarizes community saying that there is no " me" to start with, " me" is formed through continual symbolic interaction. This is done through family, friends, and institutions. Symbolic

Interactionism Applied

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With Symbolic Interactionism's use and study is still in its infancy as compared to other more developed theories such as Social Exchange theory. Symbolic Interactionism is still found to be able to be applied in a variety of different areas of social construction and meaning creations. Symbolic interactionism enhances the study of inequalities of the self, issues of race, gender, and class, cases of extreme violence, and memory. Inequalities of the Self Anderson and Snow (2001) explored the connections of inequality and the self through an interactionist perspective.

They found that Symbolic Interactionism helps in understanding inequality by researching and informing on “ various manifestations and contexts of inequality at the micro, everyday level of social life. ” (p. 396). Through the study of symbolic interactionist theory and research, examined a range of “ symbolic and interactional manifestations” of social inequalities, consequences of being the object of “ patterned interactional affronts”, and strategies people use to negotiate interactional stigmatization in everyday life. (Anderson & Snow, 2001, p. 396)

Snow and Anderson (2001) found that pertaining to symbolic and interactional manifestations of social inequalities that for those who live at the lower end of social hierarchies that often do those people not only live with lesser life chances in terms of income, education, and health care. However, those who live at the low end of social hierarchies also endure a multitude of frequently associated characteristic features of everyday lives of socially disadvantaged people. Snow and Anderson also discuss the

consequences of these findings and the socially constructed negativities for the self.

Primarily Snow and Anderson (2001), through the research of Morris Rosenberg on self-esteem issues of children pertaining to different races as well as other researchers findings of social stigmas that one places on them, such as those found in lower social hierarchies, found they can actually manage those stigmas. This suggests that situated social encounters are the best way to find a deeper understanding of the relationship among inequality, status, and self. Finally, their research, (Anderson & Snow, 2001) turns to the management strategies of interactional stigmas.

Humans routinely and creatively take measures to reduce the prospect of status affronts and degradation or to moderate the force of their impact, and that is a reason for the direct relationship between inequality and the self differing from what other social scientists had assumed. “ Symbolic interactionists who have alerted us to the pervasiveness of everyday manifestations of inequality, have paid as much, if not more, attention to the interactional strategies and resilience of social actors in the face of stigmatizing affronts and subordination. (p. 403) Anderson and Snow (2001) find four stigma management processes that are predicted on the existence of some degree of antagonism between the members of different social classes and those who are stigmatized engage in them to deflect any potentially demeaning encounters. They conclude that symbolic interactionist theory and research provide an understanding that enriches the study of social stratification. Symbolic Interaction in Shopping

Williams (2006) researched the relevance of symbolic interactionism for understanding the labor process based on her experience working in two different toy stores. She proposes that interactions between clerks and customer reproduce social inequalities based on race, gender, and class. She uses two different experiences within her study. In her first experience at a toy store, Williams was one of four white women out of 70 other minorities, primarily African-American men and women.

In her second experience, Williams worked with a majority of urban white people, and only about 20% minority people. Williams' research is done by examining and discussing the "rules and the ropes" of working in the toy stores and what happens when these rules are not followed. (p. 460)

Williams' work rules were guided by dress code, conduct, and expected outcomes for service. In her work at what she called "Toy Warehouse" her experience and expectation of the rules varied far from those at "Diamond Toys". Williams' would experience different experience based on race and gender in both examples.

Williams' work environment was guided by what seems to be opposite expectations. Williams work at "Toy Warehouse" was guided by her relationship to the customers. For this corporation, their target audience was middle-class white women, who in this corporation, were said to hold the purchasing power, and thus, holding priority. However, her work for "Diamond Toys" was guided by the high end product they offered, because of the view that their clientele were also to be of high value. This was the guide of the corporation's rules.

This established these corporations set of values which then guided the actions of the work in these corporations. In both situations, white women were the majority of the shoppers; however; this is where the gender and race imbalance was found. Williams' points out white women were the majority customer; however, they were found to be more overly abusive as well as demanding of satisfaction. African Americans and Latinas were found to complain less often; however, when they did, they received a much lower level of satisfaction.

Through her research in these cultures, Williams found that corporations script the customer-server interaction in a way designed to appeal to the particular kinds of customers. Actual interactions between clerks and customers do not coincide with the formal culture of the company in a way that takes into account the social inequalities of race, class, and gender, and when these interactions break down, the ability to repair them depends on how the characteristics of the customer and the clerk are interpreted.

Williams (2006) concludes: symbolic interactionism is useful for understanding race, class, and gender on the shopping floor. It is an approach to analyzing the reproduction of inequalities: there is nothing inevitable about the ways that shopping interactions proceed on a daily basis. Because they are symbolically created, they can be recreated to lessen the social inequalities that they currently reproduce. " (p. 472)

Quantitative Contributions to Symbolic Interactionism Symbolic interactionism has often been mischaracterized as a perspective that rejects quantitative research.

Wilson and Ulmer (2003) argue that symbolic interactionism allows for the use of quantitative data and statistical analysis within a pragmatist epistemology and that this is actually desirable, especially when used with qualitative data. They also found that “interactionism’s methodological toolbox” can encompass statistical analysis of aggregate data on behavior, decisions, events, survey research, historical and comparative analysis, conversation and discourse analysis, quasi-experimental methods, analysis of audio and tape recordings, and ethnographic tradition. (Ulmer and Wilson, 2003, p. 32) Researchers can use quantitative data and statistical analysis without violating pragmatist ontological and epistemological positions by meeting five conditions of (1) using quantification and statistical analysis of outcomes of social processes to sensitize or lay the groundwork for qualitative study of the social processes in question themselves; (2) understanding that quantification should not be seen as synonymous with empiricism; (3) specifying that individual and joint actors, not variables, exercise agency (variables do not think or do things, people do, and we create variables to represent those things); (4) remembering that social causality lies not in variables or statistical models but in interpretive processes as people individually and jointly define situations and act within them; and (5) striving to keep the conceptual distance between the quantified measures and the phenomena measured as small as possible (maximizing validity).

Wilson and Ulmer suggest that scholars should consider Symbolic Interactionism as an outlet for high-quality quantitative research. They suggest that this empirically demonstrates the perspective’s broad

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methodological reach. In other words, more use of quantitative data and methods would enable researchers to address research topics, and do types of studies, that most people within the discipline do not associate with interactionism but to which they might significantly contribute. Self, Emotions, and Extreme Violence Turner (2007) studied the use of symbolic interactionism's emphasis on identity and self with ideas from gestalt theories, psychoanalytic theories, and interaction ritual theory.

He explains that extreme violence as the outcome of several forces: the brains capacity for humans to experience and express high intensity emotions, the experience of shame in “ institutional spheres”, the repression of shame, the intensification repressed emotions and escalation of anger, the making and blaming external targets for negative experiences, the portrayal of these targets in highly negative terms, and the charging up of positive emotions in interaction directed at inflicting harm. Turner's (2007) research also found that cultural and structural conditions, such as a person's reaction to a certain mood, can increase or decrease the likelihood that these intense emotions will emerge.

If structural conditions allow people to consistently meet expectations and receive positive sanctions across many encounters in diverse corporate units embedded in key institutional domains distributing valued resources, then individuals will commit to, and legitimize on, micro, and macro-levels of social structure and culture. If, however, what Turner refers to as “ structural conditions” consistently frustrate individuals' efforts to meet expectations and persistently impose negative sanctions in ways that attack both their

role identities and core self, then a reservoir of negative emotional energy will be created. (Turner, 2007) Studying False Memories

DeGloma (2007) uses symbolic interactionism to analyze the accounts of self-identified survivors of childhood sexual abuse and the accounts of those who reject their former memories of childhood sexual abuse. DeGloma approaches this study by raising the question of childhood sexual abuse and memory with attention to the social influences on cognition. He argues that the experiences of recovering and retracting memories involve similar social processes of remembering and storytelling. DeGloma uses first person narratives to theorize about the social influences that shape stories. He does this from the viewing of three web-sites that provide resources to survivors and raise public awareness.

DeGloma explores the influence of “ narrative environments” as well as the formal structure of the narratives. This research helped in allowing comparison to cognitive mechanisms that operate at both micro-interactional and macro-levels of analysis that deal with the how and why aspect of peoples actions because of their thoughts. (DeGloma, 2007) Evaluating Symbolic Interactionism A great number of criteria can be used in evaluating and classifying a humanistic theory as a good theory, questions that are asked of Symbolic Interactionism to determine if it is a good theory are: Does the theory clarify values? Provide a new understanding of people? Have a community of agreement surrounding it? Have aesthetic appeal? And reform society?

First, does Symbolic Interactionism clarify values? Symbolic Interactionism looks from the perspective of a third party, the looking glass self, the generalized other, and the collaboration of all the third party perspectives. The clarification of values of a person does exist; as long as these requirements are met there is a clarification of self-determined values. The values that are clarified are subjective to the individual. For example, if an individual valued beauty, symbolic interactionism through the process of naming would create an object that would carry the socially constructed acceptance of beauty. Can and does Symbolic Interactionism provide a new understanding of people?

Symbolic Interactionism can provide understanding of people. Yes, Symbolic Interactionism provides a new understanding of “ Why? ” Why do people do the things they do? Symbolic Interactionism scholars take the use of language and apply it to finding out the answer. Does this theory have a community of agreement surrounding it? Many scholars, including Griffin, have found Symbolic Interactionism to lack clarity and suffer from overstatement. Symbolic Interactionism has been a parent theory to many other related theories, so even though it is agreed that the theory is unclear and overstated, it does have a significant impact on the study of other individuals.

The question of whether Symbolic Interactionism has an aesthetic appeal is all too simple, no. It is unnecessarily long, wordy, and boring. It takes reading repeatedly to come to a base understanding of all of its encompassed concepts. It’s ideas are very novel however and can be complex without the

drawn out explanations of what Symbolic Interactionism encompasses. Since Mead, the theory's author, died before he could publish his works, his students published a collaboration of his works from their various viewpoints which could be the reason for some of the theories lack of clarity. Finally, does Symbolic Interactionism reform society in any way?

For those people that have the ability to use the looking glass self concept and the generalized other, then yes. The people with that ability are the same people that are more inclined to make changes for the better. In order for this theory to work, people need to have a special quality. It's the ability to see themselves from many different perspectives. To do this would take an understanding of the concept coordinated with the desire to create the change. Symbolic Interactionism today is rich with research goals to enhance and further the study and explanation of its core concepts. Symbolic Interactionism has been sufficiently tested through various means ranging from views of sexual stigmas to racial treatment of individuals in commercial settings.

Due to the nature that Symbolic Interactionism is based on an individual's own perceptions of being framed by the mind, as well as being critiqued as being too broad based, this leaves the area of research open for this theory to be tried in many different areas. There is no right answer as to what would be considered an appropriate context to study Symbolic Interactionism. As long as there is a symbol that can be construed by the human mind and a possible meaning put in place, symbolic interactionism has a right to be applied and looked at. The Future of Symbolic Interactionism Symbolic

Interactionism has been studied in many ways for multiple years. It is hard to say where exactly the future of symbolic interactionism may lie. With the broad range of how symbolic interactionism may be used, a scholar could plausibly use symbolic interactionism in any situation they see fit.

Any situation where someone can question why something is perceived to be the way it is has a possibility to be researched using the principles of Symbolic Interactionism. Symbolic Interactionism can be used to analyze a plethora of various current affairs. With the increase and importance of understanding diversity issues within our society, Symbolic Interactionism can be used to study multiple areas that would involve the concepts of diversity issues in society, as well as looking into the study of politics, and the effects of an individual based on his or her family history. Examples can be found in a wide area within professional organizations and personal lives.

In its most simple form, Symbolic Interactionism may be used to study how these concepts play a role in the acceptance of diverse multi-racial students at institutions such as NDSU, by racist individuals. Also, it can be studied why and how the roles of the students involved have been socially established. One can look at the multiple roles that would be present; the multi-racial student, the “ racist”, the administrations perspective of both the racists’ individuals’ actions and of the multi-racial individual, and the outsider’s perspective and how they influence the actions that are presented. Studying why the incident of a “ White-Face” skit at NDSU’s Mr.

NDSU Competition occurred in the first place and why it was viewed and taken as seriously as it was could be a remedy for those involved in solving

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the issue of diversity acceptance at institutions, just the knowledge behind why such actions occurred put forward information vital in being proactive to continuing to find a complete solution. Symbolic Interactionism can also be looked at to study current political trends. Qualitative and quantitative methods could be used to analyze voter turnout in presidential elections based upon the individuals involved as well as the statistical support behind that individual due to their political ticket affiliations. Questions that could be raised would be ask why things are viewed as they are. Will people vote on the individual candidate themselves or the party name that they have been affiliated with?

For those that would choose to vote based on the candidate themselves, how many people that vote are voting for the candidate opposite to the ticket that they themselves affiliate with. For example, Symbolic Interactionism can be used to research people who liked Barack Obama but who would vote for Hillary Clinton if she were to win the Democratic Party nomination (or vice-versa) based solely on the fact that she is affiliated with the term of democrat, the language used, that carries the “ values” of liberal, “ people based” values. Or would an individual who is affiliated with the Democratic Party vote for someone like John McCain because of the feeling that even though of an affiliation with the term of democrat they seem to fall more in line with the values of John McCain?

There are many ways that this could be taken further, even to include the issues of race, age, and even sex. Finally, Symbolic Interactionism could be used to study the effects of socially constructed dysfunctional traits within a

family setting and the effect they have on how people react to different individuals in that family. For example, dysfunctional traits of the family would be along the lines of alcohol consumption tendencies of parents and their treatment of their children and how society treats those with the knowledge of the family dysfunction. Generally, children who come from dysfunctional families have a tendency to be much less socially unaccepted by their peers because of the status of their home life.

Questions that should be considered are: How does just the association of alcoholism, or non-drinking, effect the status of a child in growing up? How does the treatment of that child vary from dysfunction to dysfunction and what specifically constructs the perspectives that others have of that child? The examples of institutional diversity, political affiliation, and dysfunctional family perspectives are only a limited amount of examples of how Symbolic Interactionism can be used today. It should be remembered that Symbolic Interactionism is a broad theory which helps in the way that it can be studied. There are certainly many more ways to use Symbolic Interactionism.

Any way in which someone can look to find a reason to answer why people act upon a situation given the meaning behind it can be answered by symbolic interactionism. Wrapping up Symbolic Interactionism Symbolic Interactionism is considered a hallmark theory when discussing communication theories. It explains why people do the things they do, and how through the use of other people's perspective's they will act. This paper explained, summarized and described the concept and history of symbolic interactionism, given my analysis and evaluation to the current state of

symbolic interactionism, and provided future directions for the study of symbolic interactionism.

Symbolic Interactionism is a broad theory that has been studied in a variety of contexts and has the potential to be utilized to this day to create continued understanding in the realm of social psychology. References

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