

Chapter 1

Symbolic Interactionism Theory

KEY TERMS

symbols	rituals
interaction	roles
gestures	salience
social norms	identity

TRUE/FALSE QUESTIONS

- (True) 1. Symbolic Interactionism provides the means by which to study social interactions in a scientific fashion.
- (False) 2. The “I” part of the self is those learned roles that are determined by interactions with others.
- (True) 3. *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* by William Isaac Thomas and Florian Znaniecki was one of the first books to state that the family has a role in the socialization process.
- (False) 4. According to this assumption, *as people come into contact with different things and experiences, they interpret what is being learned*, people are reactors who passively respond to surroundings.
- (True) 5. Meaning is learned and processed through our social interactions.
- (True) 6. Observations, interviews, interactions with others, and ethnographies are all examples of good data collection methodologies for symbolic interactionism theory application.
- (True) 7. We learn about meaning through interaction with others.
- (True) 8. People interpret what is being learned as they come in contact with new things.
- (True) 9. Humans will always reflect on what they experience and use this as a guide for future behavior.
- (True) 10. People learn the rules and values of society through everyday interaction within that culture.
- (False) 11. Infants are born with predetermined ideas about who they are.

(False) 12. As long as you have a strong sense of self, it does not matter what others around you think, according to this theory.

(True) 13. The culture in which you live will affect the way you behave.

(True) 14. Those things that are most important to us are said to be most salient.

(False) 15. A social norm is a nonverbal communication during which an act represents something else.

MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS

1. A key contribution of the early pragmatic philosophers of symbolic interactionism was:

- a. The belief that the world was always changing.
- b. That social structure is constantly changing and developing.
- c. That meaning is derived from interactions with objects.
- d. **All of the above.**

2. What major historical/societal event took place during the rise of symbolic interactionism?

- a. World War I
- b. **The Industrial Revolution**
- c. The Sexual Revolution
- d. The American Revolution

3. During the Industrial Revolution, many Americans felt “as though they had little or no control over their lives... and society” (Smith & Hamon 2016). Symbolic Interactionism proposed that:

- a. People are not victims of a predetermined course in history.
- b. Communication and interactions can change how things happen in society.
- c. **Both A and B are correct.**
- d. None of the above.

4. George Herbert Mead’s contributions to symbolic interactionism focused on the development of the sense of self. The second stage, the *game stage*, is characterized by:

- a. Using gestures to practice behaviors associated with different roles.
- b. Taking on the perspective of another person.
- c. **Taking on the perspective of multiple people, simultaneously.**
- d. Anticipating how one’s behaviors affect not only our immediate environment, but also our society.

5. In the vignette provided at the beginning of the chapter, which concept best describes how Thanh’s perfect evening at the party and his wife Keiko’s worst night of her life coincide?

- a. **Thomas Theorem**
- b. Looking-glass self
- c. Self-concept
- d. Symbols

6. Who was the first person to use the term *symbolic interactionism*?
- a. George Herbert Mead
 - b. Charles Horton Cooley
 - c. William Isaac Thomas
 - d. Herbert Blumer**
7. Which is NOT an overarching theme of symbolic interactionism?
- a. The world as a static structure.**
 - b. Meaning is a central element of human behavior.
 - c. The self.
 - d. The role of culture in social interactions
8. The capacity of people to step outside of themselves and treat themselves as an object in their own environment, to describe themselves and to act toward themselves, Mead called
- a. the mind.
 - b. the self.**
 - c. the definition of the situation.
 - d. the looking glass self.
 - e. the "I."
9. What did Cooley call the internalized image of ourselves which is a reflection of others' appraisals of us?
- a. the mind
 - b. the self
 - c. the definition of the situation
 - d. the looking glass self**
 - e. the "I"
10. Charles Horton Cooley developed which term to describe the process that happens when individuals think about how they appear to others, make a judgment about what the other person thinks about them, and then incorporates those ideas into their own concept of self?
- a. generalized other
 - b. definition of the situation
 - c. looking-glass self**
 - d. social norm
11. Which of the following propositions about symbolic interaction is TRUE?
- a. People will react to something according to the meaning that the thing has for them.
 - b. We learn about meaning through interactions with others.
 - c. As people come into contact with different things and experiences, they interpret what is being learned.
 - d. People learn the rules and values of society through everyday interactions within that culture.
 - e. All of the above are true.**

12. According to Smith and Hamon, which of the following is TRUE about symbolic interaction?
- a. Gestures are expectations about how to act in a given situation.
 - b. **Salience suggests that the more important a role is to us, the more time we invest in this role.**
 - c. Symbols are the product of social interaction and always have the same meaning across situations.
 - d. Strict discipline is the best way of learning about the rules and values of a culture.
13. According to Smith and Hamon, which of the following is an overarching assumption/theme of symbolic interaction?
- a. The nature of humans is that they are self-oriented.
 - b. People learn values from innate connections with the physical environment (e.g., nature, trees, sky).
 - c. **Humans learn about meaning through their social interactions.**
 - d. Infants are born with predetermined ideas about who they are.
14. Which of the following is a contemporary critique of symbolic interaction theory?
- a. **Key concepts are confusing, difficult to define and difficult to test.**
 - b. This is a linear model trying to explain complex families and situations.
 - c. Symbolic interaction gives too much attention to the importance of emotions and the role of the unconscious.
 - d. Symbolic interaction places too much emphasis on the ability of individuals to create their own realities and doesn't pay enough attention to the fact that we live in a world that we do not create ourselves.
15. According to symbolic interaction theory, the stress generated within a person when he/she cannot comply or has difficulty complying with a role or set of roles is considered to be
- a. role overload.
 - b. role strain.
 - c. **role incongruity.**
 - d. role enactment.
 - e. none of the above.
16. According to symbolic interaction theory, the more important a role is to us, the greater its
- a. **salience.**
 - b. gestures.
 - c. social norms.
 - d. none of the above
17. Which person is most recognized of all of those who have influenced symbolic interactionism?
- a. **George Herbert Mead**
 - b. Charles Horton Cooley
 - c. William Isaac Thomas
 - d. Herbert Blumer

18. During which stage of play can children understand what each person's role in the family is, including their own, according to George Herbert Mead?

- a. play stage
- b. **game stage**
- c. generalized other
- d. symbolic stage

19. William Issac Thomas coined which phrase below which means that in order to understand human behavior you have to also understand the subjective perspectives of the people involved in the interaction?

- a. generalized other
- b. looking-glass self
- c. **definition of the situation**
- d. Thomas theorem

20. According to George Herbert Mean, which part of the self is involved in the spontaneous acts we engage in which are not predictable or stable?

- a. **I**
- b. Me
- c. Superego
- d. Id

MATCHING QUESTIONS

Match the term or concept with its appropriate definition.

- | | | |
|------|------------------|--|
| (d.) | 1. Symbol during | a. a type of nonverbal communication which an act represents something else |
| (f.) | 2. Interaction | b. a set of social norms for a specific situation |
| (a.) | 3. Gesture | c. level of importance |
| (e.) | 4. Social Norm | d. anything that has meaning |
| (g.) | 5. Ritual | e. expectations about how to act in a given situation |
| (b.) | 6. Role | f. social behavior between two or more people during which some type of communication occurs |
| (c.) | 7. Salience | |
| (i.) | 8. Identity | |

- for
- with
 - g. social norms for how families interact each other, including which symbols and gestures are appropriate
 - h. reflecting on past experiences as a guide future behavior
 - i. the culmination of the roles that are most important to us

SUGGESTED TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION/ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Bring an object with you to class such as a tennis ball. Ask students to tell you what it is. Then ask “how do you know what it is, or what do you do with it?” A tennis ball is a symbol of something, which varies based on how it is described to be used. For example, it can be used to play the sport of tennis, to put on the bottom of a walker so it glides more smoothly across the floor, as a toy for a dog, or as an indicator of how far to pull your car into the garage when it hangs from the garage ceiling. You can also use gestures to show how you use it. Finally, our interactions with others tells us more about it and what it means.
2. The “looking glass self” is a great class discussion topic. Show a video clip from the show “Say Yes to the Dress” and talk about how the looking glass is shown. For example, it is common in this show for a bride to love the dress she is wearing when seeing it alone in the dressing room, and then hate it after listening to her family and friends say why they do not like it. Have students come up with examples on their own.
3. Have students discuss why two people who are experiencing the same event can have very different interpretations about how the event is going.
4. Use examples of childhood games to describe the development of the “self” according to Mead.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES OR HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENTS

Toward an Understanding of One's Self-Concept (see Handout 1.1 and Handout 1.2)

Principal scholars of symbolic interactionism like George Herbert Mead and Charles Horton Cooley, focused their research on the self. Perhaps most notable is Mead's clarification of the "I" and "me" selves and Cooley's "the looking-glass self." These exercises will help students to think about how they view themselves, while also incorporating the perceptions of other's views of self.

My Ideal Husband/ My Ideal Wife, Hammond, R. J., & Bearnson, B. (2003). *The marriages and families activity workbook*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing.

A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words (see Handout 1.3)

Exploring Family Theories

Appendix 1

Symbolic Interactionism Theory

Handout 1.1

Toward an Understanding of One's Self-Concept

PURPOSE

Principal scholars of symbolic interactionism like George Herbert Mead and Charles Horton Cooley, focused their research on the self. Perhaps most notable is Mead's clarification of the "I" and "me" selves and Cooley's "the looking-glass self." These exercises will help students to think about how they view themselves, while also incorporating the perceptions of other's views of self.

GOALS

Upon completion of this exercise:

1. Students will develop a greater understanding of themselves.
2. Students will develop a greater understanding of others' perceptions of self.
3. Students will determine which roles, attributes and characteristics are most salient to them.

OBJECTIVES

1. Students will make a list of ten different words or phrases that define themselves. [#1,3]
2. Students will prioritize (by eliminating) their most valued personal attributes. [#1,3]
3. Students will discuss the exercise with a neighboring student. [#2]
4. Students will design a logo that depicts who the student is. [#1]
5. Students will analyze student perceptions of themselves via a written personal response. [# 1, 2]

MATERIALS

Part 1

Exploring Self-Concept Worksheet (Handout 1.2; one per student)

Part 2

8.5" x 11" US Letter size plain white paper (one per student)

Colored pencils, colored markers, and/or crayons (enough for each student to have several)

Clear Tape

Small Envelopes (one per student)

Halved index cards (enough for students to have one per total number of students in classroom)

INSTRUCTIONS TO STUDENTS

Experiential Exercise: Part I

1. At the top of the handout ('Exploring self-concept'), write ten different words or phrases that define you. You may include roles you have, attributes you possess, characteristics about yourself, or perceived qualities that others feel you have that you feel best describe who you are. Answer honestly and thoughtfully.
2. Once you have finished writing your ten defining words or phrases, partner with a neighboring student and share the information you wrote. Discuss: Why did you choose these ten words or phrases to describe yourself? Was it easy to come up with ten roles, attributes, characteristics, or qualities?
3. Now, eliminate five of the attributes from your list of ten. Cross off your list the five things that you would choose to eliminate.
4. Once you have finished crossing off five of your ten words or phrases, discuss with the same neighboring student why you chose to eliminate the five that you did. Why did you keep the remaining five? How did it feel to limit yourself to five words or phrases?
5. Finally, narrow down your list of five to *one* item. What is the *one* aspect that you would choose to keep?
6. Share with your partner the one remaining defining item. How did you go about making the decision to choose this one aspect of yourself over the others? Why did you choose this one item?

Experiential Exercise: Part 2

(Note to instructors: *This portion of the exercise works best when students in the class know each other at least on a first-name basis.*)

1. On a separate sheet of paper, design a logo, license plate or bumper sticker that depicts who you are. Put your name only on the back of your sheet lightly in pencil.

- *Allow students 10 minutes to complete their design.*
- *While students are working on their logos, hang the envelopes around the room using the tape.*
- *Students will hand in their logos to you, and you will hang the logos above the envelopes.*

2. When you have completed your logo, please bring your design to me. I will give you blank slips of paper equal to the number of students in the class. You will use these slips to guess which design belongs to which class member by writing each student's name on a slip of paper and inserting it in the envelope corresponding to the respective design.

- *Once you have received all of the designs, hang them randomly around the classroom above the envelopes.*
- *Instruct students to begin placing their slips into the envelopes.*
- *After all students have finished guessing to whom each design belongs, you will examine the contents of each envelope and reveal who the class associated with the artwork and then identify the actual artist.*

3. In writing, respond to these questions on your own:

Were you surprised about the choices others made for you? If so, why?

What did you learn from this exercise about the image other people have of you?

Adapted from "Toward an Understanding of One's Self-Concept: An Experiential Exercise" by Beverly A. Heimann and Khush K. Pittenger of Ashland University. (1998). *Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning*, 25.

Handout 1.2

Exploring Self-Concept Worksheet

INSTRUCTIONS

Write ten different words or phrases that define you. You may include roles you have, attributes you possess, characteristics about yourself, or perceived qualities that others feel you have that you feel best describe who you are. Answer honestly and thoughtfully.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

Adapted from “Toward an Understanding of One’s Self-Concept: An Experiential Exercise” by Beverly A. Heimann and Khush K. Pittenger of Ashland University. (1998). *Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning*, 25.

Handout 1.3

A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words

PURPOSE

This theory is based on the idea that meaning is a central element of human behavior, that symbols are the product of interaction, and that social norms guide behavior. This exercise will help students better understand these terms, and the role of interaction.

GOALS

Upon completion of this exercise:

1. Students will develop a greater understanding of perspective taking.
2. Students will develop a greater understanding of symbols and social norms.
3. Students will work together to reach consensus about the meaning of a picture.

MATERIALS

Pictures taken from magazines or the Internet about things that have familiar elements, but are also open to interpretation. Examples include ceremonies taking place in other cultures as depicted in *National Geographic*, a scene of a city after a natural disaster, a picture of people taking part in an activity that's familiar but out of context.

INSTRUCTIONS TO STUDENTS

1. Divide the class into pairs or small groups such that each group will get a copy of a picture to analyze. Hand each group a manila envelope with a picture in it.
2. Ask each group to come to consensus about what is happening in their picture and how they came to that decision. For example, they will look at symbols, gestures, context, and the types of interactions taking place in the picture if people are present. Give them 10-15 minutes to complete this task.
3. Once each group is finished, come back together as a class and have each group share their picture and what they think is taking place in the picture. Let the class vote on whether they agree with the decision, and discuss why they do or do not agree. Once that is done, provide the description that came with the picture for what was taking place.
3. Questions for discussion about the experience include:
 - What did you look for first in the pictures?
 - How did you decide on the meaning of the picture as a group?
 - What role did symbols play in your process?
 - What role did gestures play in your process?
 - Did you consider social norms in your conversation?

- Did you have any examples of the looking glass self as you were talking about the picture?
- Did you feel like you were continually interpreting what you saw based on your interactions and conversation with your classmates?
- Did the picture in your envelope have any meaning before you created one for it in your groups?
- Did the roles that you play influence your interpretation of the picture?
- How did you feel while participating in this exercise?