

## CHAPTER 1

# The Symbolic Interactionist Frame

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### THE IMAGERY, PREMISES, AND CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

This chapter reviews symbolic interactionism, a framework or perspective composed of an imagery and conceptualizations in terms of which this imagery is expressed, as well as a set of initiating premises from which questions of social psychology can be pursued. The forerunners, early formulators, and current users share in important degree elements of the framework; they also in important degree differ in their imagery of, language describing, and premises about human beings, society, the relation of society and human beings, and the nature of human action and interaction. We begin our review by discussing underlying commonalities of most who see their social psychological work as stemming from symbolic interactionism. We hold for later discussion that differentiates social psychologists sharing the underlying commonalities.\*

#### Imagery

From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, *society* is a web of communication or interaction, the reciprocal influence of persons taking each other into account as they act.

\*Inevitably, this chapter draws heavily on the authors' previous work (esp. Stryker, 1981), not departing from that work simply for the sake of being different. It reflects, however, an updating of that prior work through substantive changes in ideas, the existence of a second author, and changes in the relevant literature.

Interaction is *symbolic*, proceeding in terms of meanings persons develop in interaction itself. The environment of action and interaction of humans is symbolically defined. Persons interact using symbols developed in their interaction, and they act through the communication of these symbols. Society is a term summarizing such interaction; subparts of society designate the settings in which interaction takes place. In this image, social life is a thoroughly dynamic process. Neither society nor its subparts exist as static entities; rather, these are continuously created and recreated as persons act toward one another. Social reality is a flow of events involving multiple persons. Just as society derives from the social process, so do people: both take on meanings that emerge in and through social interaction. Since both derive from the social process, neither society nor the individual possess reality that is prior to or takes precedence over the other. Society, as a web of interaction, creates persons; but the actions of persons create, through interaction, society. Society and person are two sides of the same coin, neither existing except as they relate to one another.

The symbolic capacity of humans implies they have minds and think, they manipulate symbols internally. They can think about themselves and in so doing come to have a self both shaped by the social process and entering into the social process. Thinking occurs in the form of internal conversation making use of symbols that develop out of the social process. Mind and self arise in response to interruptions in the flow of activities—or problems—and involve formulating and selecting among possible courses of action to resolve the problems. Choice is part of the human condition, its content contained in the subjective experience of the person emerging in and through the social process. Consequently, in order to comprehend human behavior, sociology must come to terms with the subjective experience of persons studied and incorporate that experience into accounts of their behavior. Part of that subjective experience, important for choices made, is the experience of self.

This imagery contains the idea that, individually and collectively, humans are active and creative, not only responders to external environmental forces. The environments in which they act and interact are symbolic environments; the symbols attaching to human and non-human environments are produced in interaction and can be manipulated in the course of interaction; thought can be used to anticipate the effectiveness of alternatives for action intended to resolve problems; and choice among alternative courses of action is a feature of social conduct. Thus, human social behavior is at least in degree indeterminate as a matter of principle (and not incomplete knowledge), since neither the course nor the outcomes of social interaction are completely predictable from factors and conditions that precede that interaction.

### Premises\*

As Snow (2001, p. 368) observes, a wide variety of persons who see their work as symbolic interactionist accept Blumer's (1969, pp. 2–6) specification of the three basic premises or principles of the frame. This appears to be true for those who accept the methodological dicta (see below) Blumer takes as necessary implications of those premises and those who, like the authors of this chapter, do not believe his methodological dicta are necessitated by the

\*Three "versions" of the premises are provided because they differ in an important respect. For Blumer, the premises are what *define* symbolic interactionism, Stryker's premises reflect what persons presenting themselves as symbolic interactionists have in common, while Snow's cover the range of ideas in the collective work of contemporary interactionism.

premises. The three premises\* on which symbolic interactionism rests—that is, the principles that are of defining significance for the frame—are, according to Blumer: (1) human beings act toward things—physical objects, other humans, categories of humans, institutions, ideals, activities of others, and situations encountered—on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them; (2) meanings arise in the process of interaction between people, that is, the meanings of things are social products growing out of how persons act toward one another with regard to the things; and (3) the use of meanings occurs through a process of interpretation in which actors communicate with themselves, selecting, checking, regrouping, transforming, and using meanings to form and guide their actions and interactions in situations in which they find themselves.

Stryker (1988), drawing on Blumer's treatment, gives these premises a somewhat different, albeit closely related, cast. He asserts that the premises shared among symbolic interactionists are: (1) an adequate account, whether explanation or simply understanding, of human behavior must incorporate the point of view of actors engaged in the behavior; (2) social interaction—the social process in Mead's terms—is fundamental, with both self and social structure emergent from interaction; and (3) persons' *reflexivity*, their responses to themselves, link larger social processes to the interactions in which they engage.

Believing Blumer's three principles do not adequately describe the tenets of the symbolic interactionist frame because they fail to explicitly articulate ideas implicit in them, Snow (2001) suggests a broader, more inclusive set of four "cornerstone" principles that better embrace the range of work symbolic interactionists do. By going beyond identifying meaning and interpretation as the orienting concerns of symbolic interactionism, Snow contends this set is not subject to criticisms levied at Blumer's conception of the frame (e.g., by Fine, 1992; Huber, 1973; Stryker, 1988).

The first and most basic of the set is the principle of interactive determination, asserting that understanding objects of analysis (self, identities, roles, organizational practices, etc.) cannot be achieved fully by considering only qualities intrinsic to them. Rather, understanding requires that the interactional contexts ("web of relationships") in which they are embedded be considered as well. The priority accorded this principle reflects Snow's argument that it is required to fully appreciate the remaining three principles, that the meaning and implications of other principles of symbolic interactionism result importantly from the interactional contexts in which they are embedded and from which they emerge.

The remaining members of Snow's symbolic interactionist principles are symbolization, emergence, and human agency. The principle of symbolization indicates that events, conditions, artifacts, individuals, aggregations of individuals, and other features of people's environments take on meanings and become objects for persons that elicit feelings and actions. He notes that this principle is the heart of Blumer's conception of symbolic interactionism and is typically taken as the focal concern of the framework. However, he asserts, too heavy an emphasis on the generation and imputation of meanings and on related interpretive processes can give rise to two related errors: seeing symbolization as always problematic, and seeing persons as continuously involved in trying to make sense of their worlds. Both errors fail to recognize how often symbols and meanings reflect cultural and organizational contexts. Otherwise stated, Snow's assertion is that symbolization, meanings, and interpretations are often givens in interaction embedded in social and cultural structures.

Nevertheless, symbolization is often at least in degree problematic, and Snow's principle of emergence focuses attention on the side of social life in which it is. When habit does

\*Blumer terms these premises "simple," but they are complex in their implications.



<http://www.springer.com/978-0-306-47695-2>

Handbook of Social Psychology

DeLamater, J. (Ed.)

2006, XVI, 572 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-0-306-47695-2