SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM:

An Introduction,

An Interpretation,

An Integration

FIFTH EDITION

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Contents

3

Symbolic Interactionism as a Perspective

INTRODUCTION: FOUR CENTRAL IDEAS

Symbolic interactionism is a perspective in social psychology that is especially relevant to the concerns of sociology. Four ideas summarize this whole perspective. First, instead of focusing on the individual and his or her personality characteristics, or on how the social structure or social situation causes individual behavior, symbolic interactionism focuses on the nature of *social interaction,* the dynamic social activities taking place among persons. In focusing on the interaction itself as the unit of study, the symbolic interactionist creates a more active image of the human being and rejects the image of the passive, determined organism. Individuals interact; societies are made up of interacting individuals. People are constantly undergoing change in interaction, and society is changing through interaction. Interaction means human beings act in relation to one another; they take one another's acts into account as they act. Interaction means that the acts of each individual are built up over time depending in part on what others do in the situation. Interaction means that individuals are not simply influenced by others; it means that actors influence one another as they go along. Hence, a more dynamic and active human being emerges, rather than an actor merely responding to others in the environment.

The second important idea is that human action not only is caused by social interaction but also results from interaction *within* the individual. Our ideas or attitudes or values do not influence what we do as much as the active process of thinking does. We act according to how we think; we act according to the way we *define the situation* we are in, and although that definition may be influenced by others with whom we interact, it is also a result of our own definition.

Third, the focus of this perspective is on *the present,* not the past. We are not controlled by what happened to us in the past; we are not simply playing out personality traits we developed early in our lives. Always, the human being is understood as acting in the present, influenced primarily by what is happening now (i.e., action is influenced by social interaction and

definition in the present situation). What we do in any given situation is primarily a result of what is going on in that situation, not of what we bring to that situation from our past, not our position in the class structure, and not some attitude we were taught long ago. The past, of course, enters into action as we recall it in the present and apply it to the situation at hand.

Finally, symbolic interactionism describes the human being as more unpredictable and *active* in his or her world than other perspectives do. Indeed, many symbolic interactionists argue that the human being is "free" to some extent in what he or she does. We all define that world we act in; part of that definition is our own; our action involves conscious choices. We direct ourselves according to choices we make, we assess our actions and those of others, and we redirect ourselves.

These ideas are not difficult to understand. You have no reason to believe them at this point, because the perspective has not yet been explained. However, they are the broad outline, and we will go back to them again and again in the chapters that follow.

GENERAL HISTORICAL BACKGROUND
OF SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

Symbolic interactionism is usually traced back to the work of George Herbert Mead (1863–1931), who was a professor of philosophy at the University of Chicago. Mead wrote many articles, but much of his influence on symbolic interactionists comes through the publishing of his lectures and notes by his students, as well as through interpretation of his work by various other sociologists, especially one of his students, Herbert Blumer.

It is not only Mead whom Blumer draws from, and who pioneered symbolic interactionism. The perspective goes back to the work of John Dewey, William James, Charles Peirce, William Thomas, and Charles Cooley, to name a few. Blumer, writing primarily in the 1950s and 1960s, integrated much of their work. Many others have drawn from these early interactionists, and the 1980s and 1990s brought new leaders to the perspective, such as Norman Denzin, Alfred Lindesmith, Anselm Strauss, Sheldon Stryker, Gary Fine, David Maines, and Carl Couch, among others. With these have emerged new directions and criticisms of Blumer's work, and the 1980s have also seen the growing importance of Erving Goffman and dramaturgical sociology, influenced by and influencing traditional symbolic interactionism.

One way of understanding the general position of the symbolic interactionist perspective is to summarize the major influences on Mead, its principal founder. (The following draws from Strauss, 1964, and Desmonde, 1957.) There were three such influences, each one being central to all the symbolic interactionists since:

1. The philosophy of pragmatism

2. The work of Charles Darwin

3. Behaviorism

Mead and Pragmatism

Mead is part of that school of philosophy known as *pragmatism*. The ideas of this school are especially important to Mead's approach to understanding the nature of truth. As we shall see, this becomes a very important foundation for the whole perspective of symbolic interactionism. Basically, four ideas are important here.

First, *what is real for us in the environment always depends on our own active intervention.* That is, knowledge about the world essentially does not impose itself on us. Things do not tell us what they are. A fish is not a fish is not a fish to the human being; instead, in looking at a fish we must engage in an interpretive process. We call it a fish, a pike, something to eat or set free or put up on our wall. Things that exist in our environment do not reveal themselves to us, nor do we simply respond to them. Instead, human beings interpret all things. We never see reality "in the raw"; nothing for humans ever "speaks for itself." Always we define the world around us.

Second, *knowledge for the human being is constantly being tried out in situations and is judged by its usefulness.* If what we already know works for us, we tend to believe it and remember it. As it no longer works we will no longer believe it and remember it. This is a simple but very important principle. Many people are familiar with the pronouncement "People see what they want to see and remember what they want to remember." This is the pragmatist's idea, too. However, what we want to remember is defined as that knowledge that we can use. We remember what works for us in the situations we encounter. Perspectives, facts, definitions, ideas—all are judged by the individual in terms of applicability. In a sense, every situation is a test for our ideas: If they work (help us achieve our goals) we keep them; otherwise, we alter them. Right now whatever we believe may or may not actually be true—in fact, it may be completely wrong. Our ideas are not judged by truth or falsehood, nor are they judged by how carefully we learned them. They work and so we use and remember them. What is learned in college may or may not stay with us, not because what was learned is true or untrue, but because we are or are not able to actually apply it to real situations and achieve our goals there.

Third, *the objects we encounter in situations are defined according to their use for us.* Not only is our knowledge judged by use, but we also see things in our environment according to their use. What things mean to us depends on how we intend to use them. The world out there is defined according to how it fulfills our needs at any given moment. We take note of that which is useful. We see our environment in relation to our goals. Any object has a multitude of uses, and it can thus be defined in a multitude of

ways. A wastebasket is "something to throw waste in," "something to use to store corn in," "something to practice our basketball skills with"—the definition depends entirely on the actor's goals in the situation. Objects do not in effect exist for the human being apart from the many uses the human has for them. And in any given situation we ignore that which we do not use.

Fourth, *understanding the human being must be inferred from what he or she does.* It is human action that social scientists can empirically observe, and from that they are then able to understand the human organism. It is from what we see people do that we come to understand society and the group. The focus of our study should not therefore be on the person (who is that individual and what are his or her qualities?), and it should not be on society (what are the important qualities of society that work on the actor?). It should, instead, be on what people *do* in their situations. What we see is action, movement by the actor toward the environment. This is what we must try to understand: How and why does the actor do what he or she does? However, this does not mean that action is simply physical. Human action is always more than physical: It is understood by the actor and the observer. We think about what we and others do; we interpret action. Therefore, thinking action must be the central part of our investigation of the human being, for it is an essential part of all that we do. If we ignore it, we miss the essence of human action.

Mead and Darwin

Mead was inspired and influenced by the work of Charles Darwin. Darwin's work, of course, helped to revolutionize the study of life through its contribution to the theory of evolution. For most scientists—natural and social—Darwin's work has had a tremendous impact. He was respected by Mead and influenced the direction that symbolic interactionism takes in studying the human being.

Darwin was a naturalist. He believed that we must try to understand the world that we live in without appealing to supernatural explanation. God may, of course, exist, but nature should be understood on its own terms, as subject to natural laws. *So too, Mead argued, should we regard the human being in naturalistic terms.* If we are free, if we are unique, if we possess qualities different from other animals, then these must be understood in natural rather than supernatural terms. Mead's whole approach to truth, self, mind, symbols, and the other quite difficult and abstract concepts in his perspective is naturalistic: It tries to understand them as part of the qualities developed by the human being as part of nature, part of our heritage in the animal kingdom.

Of course, Mead was also heavily influenced by Darwin's theory of evolution. Humans are animals, social animals, evolved from other forms, and like all other animals, they are unique. Our uniqueness can be traced not to individual, isolated qualities but to a combination of several that together form a qualitative difference, unexplainable by just the sum of the individual traits. *Human uniqueness relates to the ability to reason and to commu-*

nicate symbolically with ourselves and with others. It is difficult to isolate exactly what traits came together to make this possible, but a highly developed brain, heavy reliance on society and socialization, as well as the ability to make many subtle and sophisticated sounds seem to be very important.

The ability to reason and use symbols, according to Mead, changes the human being's relationship with nature. In a sense, this turns around evolution. The human is the only organism that is able to understand the forces working in nature, making it possible for humans to alter those forces in some cases, and certainly to adjust to them through building, inventing, discovering. This makes the human not passive in nature, but active—to some extent in control of his or her own evolution.

Darwin was also influential on Mead in his emphasis on an evolutionary, dynamic universe rather than a static one. All of nature is a process, all "things" in nature should be thought of as constantly in a state of change. To Mead and to the symbolic interactionists, *everything about the human being is considered as process, rather than as stable and fixed.* By emphasizing process, a view of human beings and society emerges that is unique in the social sciences. Symbolic interactionists contend, for example:

1. The individual is not a consistent, structured personality as much as a dynamic, changing actor, never "becoming" anything, but always "in the state of becoming," unfolding, acting. The individual is not socialized but is always in the process of being socialized; the individual is not set or fixed but constantly undergoing change in the process of interaction.

2. Society and the group are conceptualized not as something static "out there," influencing us, but entirely as an interaction process. Society is individuals in interaction, dynamic, with patterns emerging and constantly being changed or reaffirmed over time. What people call "society" and "the group" are patterns we infer from the interaction process.

3. The individual is characterized as possessing a mind and a self, but both are conceptualized as process, not as static entities. The person does not possess a mind so much as a minding process, meaning an ability to converse with self and an ability to pull out stimuli selectively from the environment, assess their significance, interpret the situation, judge the action of others and self, and so on. All of this means an active, dynamic conversation is taking place within the organism in all that he or she does.

4. The human has many selves, each related to the interaction he or she is involved with, and each constantly being changed in the process of interaction. When the symbolic interactionist argues that the individual possesses a self, he or she is really saying that the individual has selfhood, that one treats oneself as an object, and that, as with other objects, a constant redefinition is taking place in interaction with others.

5.   Truths, ideas, knowledge, perceptions, and perspectives all are conceptualized as process, being judged and changed dynamically by the organism in relation to what is being observed. People are not brainwashed and conditioned so much as constantly testing and reassessing their truths. Truth is arrived at through interaction, and it is also transformed in the process of interaction.

Mead and Behaviorism

Thus, Darwin and his biology combine with the ideas of pragmatism to form the basis of Mead's ideas. There is one more influence, however. It is the influence of those who have come to be called behaviorists in psychology.

Behaviorism influenced Mead in two ways. One was a positive influence: *Humans should be understood in terms of their behavior,* not in terms of who they are. The behaviorists believe that the only scientifically legitimate way for understanding all animals, including humans, is through their behavior.

However, Mead was more influenced in a negative way. John B. Watson, a psychologist who became one of the important founders of behaviorism in the United States, was actually a student of Mead's and Dewey's at the University of Chicago, but he rejected the pragmatists in favor of a behaviorism that ignored all behavior except that which can be seen. Minded behavior, so central to Mead and the other pragmatists, was ignored. Throughout his academic life, Mead reacted to this kind of behaviorist science, believing that without an understanding of mind, symbols, self, and so on, human behavior cannot be understood for what it is. To measure overt behavior alone without trying to understand covert, "minded" behavior was to ignore the central qualities of the human being; it was to ignore our uniqueness as a species; it was to treat humans identically with all other things in nature, as physical organisms. Mead was a behaviorist, but a social behaviorist, arguing that *as we observe overt action we must always consider what is going on in terms of definition, interpretation, meaning.*

Mead and the symbolic interactionists have their roots in pragmatism, Darwin, and behaviorism. Out of these roots has developed a rather unique perspective, one that regards the human being as an active being, a thinking, creative, self-directing, defining dynamic actor, one whose ability to use symbols, define, and alter the environment resulted in a unique being in nature.

A CONTRAST WITH OTHER PERSPECTIVES: WARRINER

Charles K. Warriner (1970: 1–13) highlights the basic themes of symbolic interactionism and contrasts them with traditional social science.

Warriner explains that whether the human has a passive or active nature has traditionally been part of society's ideology—the question of human freedom has rarely been tackled from an objective perspective. Yet the real rela-
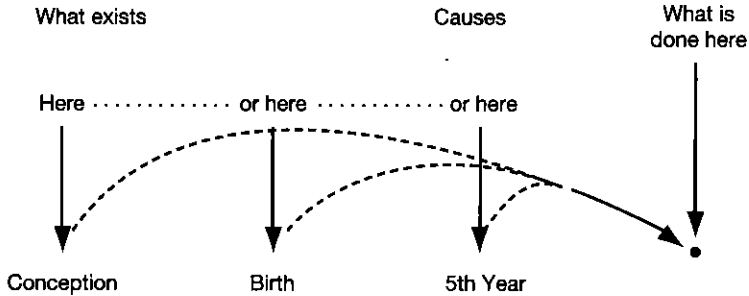
FIGURE 3-1

tion of the human being to society and society to the human being is probably "the most fundamental, the most frequently recurring" question we have dealt with, and the answer to this has had the "most extended implication" for our history. Do humans create society, or are we passively shaped by it?

Traditional social science, in its attempt to take the lead from natural science, has built the human within the walls of society. Together with the biological perspective, Warriner sees what he calls a "stable-man" view, the human having a "permanent nature," "inborn or learned." The human is born, is shaped, and, as an adult, is directed. According to stable-man views, human action is caused by human nature or nurture, the individual always acting according to earlier influences. Warriner's diagram of this sequence is shown in Figure 3-1. The cause of human behavior is found in earlier influences, and stability is assumed within the human personality. This stable-man point of view, Warriner argues, is tied to a "physicalist," "deterministic and mechanistic," nonmentalist view of the world that dominates science and philosophy.

In reaction, Warriner describes another view that he calls "the emergent-human view," which in fact is the symbolic interactionist view we are here describing. It is different from the stable-man view, emphasizing "immediate situational factors" as cause, "examining the social and 'spiritual'" characteristics of human beings, and accepting "indeterminacy and probability" in dealing with causes of human action. This theory regards the human as an

> actor rather than as a being, treats [the human being's] acts as symbolic in character rather than primarily physical, and views interaction as the basic social and psychological process from which personalities and societies emerge, through which they are expressed, and by which they are maintained as continuities. (Warriner, 1970, p. 9)

Human beings are now to be understood as social, interactional, and symbolic by their very nature. Those who see only the physical, who measure only that which is directly observable, miss the whole essence of the human being. Our uniqueness is in

the symboling process, in the capacity of [the human being] to see things not as they are but as they have been or might be in the future, in the capacity of [the human being] to use sound and marks on paper as conventional signs and thus to communicate with others, in the capacity of [the human being] through these functions to create worlds that never existed in physical reality. (Warriner, 1970: 9–10)

Warriner captures well the spirit of the perspective being described in this book.

SHIBUTANI: REFERENCE GROUPS AS PERSPECTIVES

Symbolic interactionism is unlike other perspectives in social science in its description of the human being. Warriner highlights these differences. So does the work of Tamotsu Shibutani. Shibutani (1955) highlights the symbolic interactionist approach to the human being, reality, and society in an article called "Reference Groups as Perspectives."

Shibutani, first of all, describes *perspectives* in much the same way Chapter 1 of this book describes them:

A perspective is an ordered view of one's world—what is taken for granted about the attributes of various objects, events, and human nature. It is an order of things remembered and expected as well as things actually perceived, an organized conception of what is plausible and what is possible; it constitutes the matrix through which one perceives his [or her] environment. (p. 564)

It allows us to see a dynamic changing world as "relatively stable, orderly, and predictable." It is "an outline scheme defining and guiding experience." Shibutani likens a group's perspective to culture (as Robert Redfield defines it), consisting of the "conventional understandings, manifest in act and artifact, that characterize societies." And, Shibutani continues, these understandings are the "premises of action." Perspectives/cultures are dynamic, defined through interaction, a "product of communication." The individuals guide themselves by taking on the perspectives of those with whom they interact, the societies with which they communicate.

Reference groups, to Shibutani, are simply those groups whose perspectives the individual borrows to define reality. For each individual there are several. Reference groups are groups the individual may belong to ("membership groups"), but social categories such as social class, ethnic group, community, or society may also be reference groups. Reference groups can even be future groups—for instance, philanthropists who give for "posterity" or environmentalists who are concerned with unborn generations. They can be civilizations or groups from our distant past, as evidenced by many people's interest in the ancient Greeks or the American revolutionaries or the early Christians.

Shibutani calls reference groups our "societies" or "social worlds." The individual has many societies, each one held together through commu-

nication and culture/perspectives. Our modern mass society is characterized by a multitude of these social worlds, each one sharing a perspective/culture, and each one held together through some form of interaction/communication. Sociologists are part of a social world, for example, and are held together by journals, conventions, and correspondence. The United States is a social world, held together through television, newspapers, economic and political activities, advertising, travel, and geographic mobility. African Americans constitute a social world in all probability, and they are held together, for example, through magazines, newspapers, leaders, organized groups, those who travel between communities, and shared music. Shibutani summarizes the complexity of the individual—one's many perspectives and social worlds—in the following statement:

> One of the characteristics of life in modern mass societies is simultaneous participation in a variety of social worlds. Because of the ease with which the individual may expose himself to a number of communication channels, he may lead a segmentalized life, participating successively in a number of unrelated activities. Furthermore, the particular combination of social worlds differs from person to person; this is what led Simmel to declare that each stands at that point at which a unique combination of social circles intersects. The geometric analogy is a happy one, for it enables us to conceive the numerous possibilities of combinations and the different degrees of participation in each circle. To understand what a man does, we must get at his unique perspectives—what he takes for granted and how he defines the situation—but in mass societies we must learn in addition the social world in which he is participating in a given act. (p. 567)*

Shibutani is telling us a great deal about the human being and society. Human beings identify with a number of social worlds (reference groups, societies), learn through communication (symbolic interaction) the perspectives (symbolic/conceptual frameworks, culture) of these social worlds, and use these perspectives to define or interpret situations that they encounter. Individuals also perceive the effects of their actions, reflect on the usefulness of their perspectives, and adjust them in the ongoing situation.

Shibutani tells us that human beings are social: They interact and form societies. In that interaction they come to develop a shared perspective or culture. Interaction and culture hold society together. The individual takes the culture—or perspective—and uses it to define reality. Why that perspective rather than another? The answer is both interaction and use: Continuous interaction in that society encourages us to define reality according to that perspective, and we are encouraged as long as that perspective is useful to us for achieving our goals.

In this framework, what causes what we do? Not society. Not culture or perspective. Instead, our interaction in a particular social world causes us to take on a perspective, and we then *use* that perspective to define real-

ity. The perspective acts as a guide. And what is permanent in all this? Not society. Not our continuous membership. Not interaction. Not culture or perspective. Not our definition of reality nor our action in the world. All is constantly changing over time.

ATTITUDES VERSUS PERSPECTIVES

A very important point in Shibutani's article should not be missed. The subject of his article is *perspectives*, not attitudes (which, by the way, is a central concept in other schools of social psychology). So what? What difference does it make? This again highlights the contrast between the symbolic interactionist perspective and traditional social science. Consider the following contrasts between attitudes and perspectives.

An attitude is part of the individual; it is a trait that is developed socially and carried around from situation to situation. An attitude is an internal response to an object or class of objects, usually in the external environment, such as a certain type of person. Its stimulus is the object "out there." Supposedly, the appearance of the object brings forth the response—the attitude—and the attitude will then affect behavior. The individual does not use the attitude; in a sense the attitude uses the individual— that is, the attitude causes what the individual does.

A perspective, on the other hand, is not a response to a stimulus, but a guide to definition. It is not an internal trait, but something belonging to and shared in interaction. The individual uses it; it does not cause behavior. Because the individual interacts with many others and plays many roles, he or she will have many perspectives; therefore, any given object can be defined in a number of ways and is not simply a stimulus leading to a specific response. A person I see in a situation may be an African American, a teacher, a male, an artist, a scholar, a liberal, and a member of the upper class, but what I focus on and how I act will depend on how I define the situation; and my definition, in turn, will be influenced by the perspective I use to define the situation. Any one of the individual's characteristics may or may not be important to me in that situation. For example, although I may be prejudiced against artists, that may not be an important influence on my action because I am seeing the individual as a teacher.

Another difference between attitudes and perspectives is that attitudes are usually regarded as relatively fixed and difficult to change, part of one's personality, and usually consistent with other attitudes. The image of the human is one of a consistent, whole organism, responding in situations according to his or her developed traits. An attitude encourages consistent action by the organism in a multitude of situations. *Perspectives, on the other hand, are conceptualized as dynamic and changing, guides to interpretation and then to action, undergoing change during interaction, and not necessarily consistent in the same person.* Action becomes unpredictable to a great extent; even if we

know the actor's perspectives before entering a situation, we do not know beforehand which one will be chosen by the actor, nor can we predict how it will change in interaction. And even if we know the perspective used, we still cannot know exactly how the individual will use it to define the situation.

Clearly a different type of actor is conceptualized when we use the concept "perspective" rather than "attitude." The human being interacts, uses perspectives, defines situations, acts according to the present, and is active. A more dynamic actor is perceived. Figure 3–2 shows the perspective of the human being that is slowly being developed in this book. It conceptualizes the human as more complex, contradictory, situational, and dynamic, and less predictable and passive than almost all other social-scientific perspectives considered thus far.

SUMMARY

This chapter has introduced the perspective of symbolic interactionism. It set forth a number of ideas that will interweave throughout the rest of the chapters:

1. Symbolic interactionism focuses on interaction rather than on personality or social structure. It also focuses on definition rather than response, the present rather than the past, and the human as an active rather than passive participant in the world.

2. Symbolic interactionism as a perspective was highly influenced by the work of George Herbert Mead, by the integrating work of Herbert Blumer, and by pragmatism, Darwin, and behaviorism.

3. Pragmatism, a school of philosophy of which Mead is an important part, emphasizes that the human intervenes in determining what is real, knowledge and objects are judged by the individual according to their usefulness, and humans must be understood through what they do in the world.

4. Darwin influences Mead in seeing the human as part of nature, evolved yet unique, and always changing.
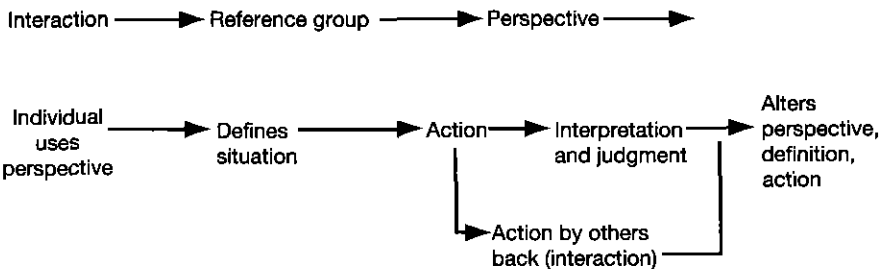

FIGURE 3–2

5. Mead, like the behaviorists, focuses on human behavior, but he goes further in calling for as full an understanding of mind behavior as of overt behavior.

6. Symbolic interactionism is a perspective that differs from the typical natural and social-scientific perspectives of the human being. Instead of describing the human being as a stable personality caused by what happened in the past (nature or nurture), the human being is "emergent," always changing as he or she deals with situations encountered. The human being is social, symbolic, and mental, rather than simply a physical entity.

7. Symbolic interactionists emphasize that human beings learn perspectives in interaction and use perspectives to define reality. Perspectives are learned, altered, transformed, and replaced in interaction. Each actor has many perspectives, each one associated with a reference group or society.

8. Humans are thought to be heavily influenced by their perspectives, which are always dynamic, guiding (not determining) influencers. Humans are much less influenced by attitudes developed in their past because they do not simply respond to their world; they define and interpret it.

9. A society is individuals in interaction, communicating, developing a common, shared perspective. The individual is not thought to be a product of society so much as an actively involved actor in its development.

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