

Understanding the Dialogue

■ *The Self and Messages*

- Chapter 5. Symbolic Interaction Theory 83
- Chapter 6. Coordinated Management of Meaning 99
- Chapter 7. Cognitive Dissonance Theory 119
- Chapter 8. Expectancy Violations Theory 135

■ *Relationship Development*

- Chapter 9. Uncertainty Reduction Theory 153
- Chapter 10. Social Penetration Theory 171
- Chapter 11. Social Exchange Theory 189
- Chapter 12. Relational Dialectics Theory 204
- Chapter 13. Communication Privacy Management Theory 220

■ *Groups and Organizations*

- Chapter 14. Groupthink 239
- Chapter 15. Adaptive Structuration Theory 257
- Chapter 16. Organizational Culture Theory 275
- Chapter 17. Organizational Information Theory 292

■ *The Public*

- Chapter 18. The *Rhetoric* 312
- Chapter 19. Dramatism 331
- Chapter 20. The Narrative Paradigm 345
- Chapter 21. Cultural Studies 360

■ *The Media*

- Chapter 22. Cultivation Analysis 376
- Chapter 23. Uses and Gratifications Theory 392
- Chapter 24. Spiral of Silence Theory 409
- Chapter 25. Medium Theory 425

■ *Culture and Diversity*

- Chapter 26. Face-Negotiation Theory 445
- Chapter 27. Standpoint Theory 461
- Chapter 28. Muted Group Theory 476
- Chapter 29. Communication Accommodation Theory 493

The Self and Messages

Chapter 5

Symbolic Interaction Theory
(Mead) 83

Chapter 6

Coordinated Management
of Meaning (Pearce &
Cronen) 99

Chapter 7

Cognitive Dissonance Theory
(Festinger) 119

Chapter 8

Expectancy Violations Theory
(Burgoon) 135

ACHIEVING MEANING IS INSTRUMENTAL IN OUR LIVES. We can't get too far in our conversations unless we understand the messages of others and others understand our messages. Understanding messages is what the meaning-making process is all about. Meaning, therefore, requires us to assess our own thinking about messages and also be prepared to assess how others interpret our messages. So, through our conversations with others, we gain a better sense of our self and a clearer understanding of the messages we and others send and receive.

How we process meaning is the cornerstone of our first section of theories, which we have labeled "The Self and Messages." Four theories highlight the prominent role of intra-

personal communication in meaning making. First, Symbolic Interaction Theory explores the interplay between the self and the society in which we live. Symbolic interactionists argue that people act toward other people or events on the basis of meaning they assign to them. The Coordinated Management of Meaning is also concerned with achieving meaning; however, the theory goes a bit further. It states that people will apply a personal set of rules to try to understand a social situation. Cognitive Dissonance Theory also looks at the self's ability to manage meaning and the need for people to avoid listening to views opposite their own. Expectancy Violations Theory looks specifically at what happens when someone violates our expectations. The theory suggests that we will judge a violation as either good or bad and act accordingly in the conversation.

The theories associated with the self and with messages deal with the ways people work toward gaining clarity and comprehension. Before and during conversations with

others, we process things cognitively to determine how best to achieve meaning. As you read about these theories, you will encounter a number of important topics, namely, the influence of society on attitudes, communicator credibility, decision making, conversational rules, attraction, and liking.

Symbolic Interaction Theory

Roger Thomas

Roger Thomas stared in the mirror and straightened his tie. He gave his overall look a last glance and decided that he looked as good as he could. He was a little apprehensive about the new job, but he was excited too. He had just graduated from Carlton Tech with a degree in engineering, and he had landed a terrific job in Houston. This made for a lot of changes in his life. It was a bit overwhelming. He was born and raised in central Nebraska, and he had never really been in a city bigger than Omaha until he went on his job interviews. Now he was living in Houston! It had all happened so quickly that Roger could almost feel his head spin.

Some of Roger's concern centered on the fact that he was the first person in his family to graduate from college. As far back as he could recall, his family had been farmers, and although he knew that engineering was something he loved and excelled at, he felt a little confused about how to behave off the farm and in a completely new life. It also didn't help that he was so far from home. Whenever he had felt stressed at Carlton, he had gone home to see his family. That had usually made him feel better. He remembered one day in his first year at Carlton when he felt impossibly out of place and uncomfortable. He really didn't know how to act as a college student. He went home for the weekend, and being in a familiar place with his family instantly gave him confidence. When he re-

turned to Carlton on Monday, he felt much more self-assured.

Even though his parents had not attended college themselves, they respected education and communicated this to Roger. They expressed pride in him and his accomplishments. They also told him how his younger brothers looked up to him. This gave Roger confidence in himself, and he liked the idea that he was blazing a new trail for his family. Also, whenever he visited, he appreciated his parents' qualities; they were so calm and steady. As they went about their tasks, they demonstrated the peace and harmony that Roger wanted to find in his life's work. After seeing them, he always had a renewed sense of self.

Now Roger decided he would just have to carry their image in his mind, because he had to face his new office alone. Yet, even thinking about his family made him feel a little stronger. He was smiling when he got to the office. He was greeted warmly by the office assistant, who showed him into the conference room. He waited there for the other new hires to join him. By 9:05 A.M. they were all gathered, and their boss came in to give them an orientation speech. While the boss was talking, Roger looked around at his colleagues.

There were ten new employees in all, and they could not have been more different. Roger was the youngest person in the room by at least five years. He was a bit alarmed when he realized that he must be the one with the least experience. He tried to

This theory is based on the research of **George Herbert Mead**.

calm himself down. He thought of his parents' pride in him and how his brothers looked up to him. Then he remembered his favorite teacher telling him that he was one of the best engineering students to go through Carlton. This helped Roger, and after the boss was finished speaking, he felt prepared to face the challenge of the job. During the break, he even had the confidence to begin talking to one of his new colleagues. He introduced himself and discovered that he didn't have less experience than she did. Helen Underwood explained that she had lived in a small Texas farming town, where she worked for the government. After working there for a couple of years, she decided to go back to school and get a degree. Roger was amazed

to meet someone else who came from a farming background. Helen told Roger she was really impressed that he had graduated from Carlton. She knew it had a wonderful reputation, and its intern program was supposed to be the best in the country. Roger replied that he had been really lucky to go there and had loved working at his internship, where he had learned a great deal. Helen said she was a bit nervous at starting out at this firm, and Roger smiled and nodded.

This conversation made him feel much better about the challenges that were ahead of him. Even though Helen was in her forties, they had a great deal in common, and they were in the same situation at the firm. Roger thought they would be friends.

As Roger goes through his preparations for the first day of his new job and as he speaks with his boss and his new colleagues, he is engaging in the dynamic exchange of symbols. George Herbert Mead, who is credited with originating the Theory of Symbolic Interaction, was fascinated with humans' ability to use symbols; he proposed that people act based on the symbolic meanings that arise in a given situation. In Chapter 1 we defined *symbols* as arbitrary labels or representations for phenomena. Symbols form the essence of Symbolic Interaction Theory. As its name suggests, Symbolic Interaction Theory (SI) centers on the relationship between symbols and interactions. Although Mead published very little during his academic career, after he died his students collaborated on a book based on his lectures. They titled the book *Mind, Self, and Society* (1934), and it contains the foundations of Symbolic Interaction Theory. Interestingly, the name, "Symbolic Interaction," was not a creation of Mead's. One of his students, Herbert Blumer, actually coined the term, but it was clearly Mead's work that began the theoretical movement. Blumer published his own articles on SI in a collection in 1969.

Ralph LaRossa and Donald C. Reitzes (1993) suggest that Symbolic Interaction is "essentially . . . a frame of reference for understanding how humans, in concert with one another, create symbolic worlds and how these worlds, in turn, shape human behavior" (p. 136). In this, we can see Mead's contention of the interdependency between the individual and society. In fact, SI forms a bridge between theories focusing attention on individuals and theories attending to social forces. As Kenneth J. Smith and Linda Liska Belgrave (1994) note, SI argues that society is made "real" by the interactions of individuals, who "live and work to make their social world meaningful" (p. 253). Further, in this contention we can see Mead's belief in individuals as active, reflective participants in their social context.

The ideas of SI have been very influential in communication studies. Gail McGregor (1995) employed the theory to critique gender representations in advertisements; Patricia Book (1996) examined family narrative influences on a

person's ability to communicate about death; Linda Trevino, Robert Lengel, and Richard Daft (1987) examined managers' choices of face-to-face communication, written communication, and electronic communication in the workplace using an SI framework; and Richard Daft and Karl Weick (1984) studied organizations as interpretation systems that have been influenced by symbolic interaction. Several researchers observe, however, that Symbolic Interaction is a community of theories, rather than simply one theory. Many theorists refer to the Chicago School and the Iowa School as two of the branches of SI. Let's briefly examine the history of the theory to better understand Symbolic Interaction today.

History of Symbolic Interaction Theory

The intellectual ancestors of SI were the early-twentieth-century pragmatists, such as John Dewey and William James. The pragmatists believed that reality is dynamic, which was not a popular idea at that time. In other words, they had different ontological assumptions. They advanced the notion of an emerging social structure, and they insisted that meanings were created in interaction. They were activists who saw science as a way to advance knowledge and improve society.

Symbolic Interaction had its genesis at two different universities: the University of Iowa and the University of Chicago. At Iowa, Manford Kuhn and his students were instrumental in affirming the original ideas of SI and contributed to the theory as well. Additionally, the Iowa group was advancing some new ways of looking at the self, but their approach was viewed as eccentric; thus, most of SI's principles and developments stemmed from the Chicago School.

Both George Herbert Mead and his friend John Dewey were on the faculty at the University of Chicago (although Mead never did complete his doctorate). Mead had studied both philosophy and social science, and he lectured on the ideas that form the core of the Chicago School of SI. As a popular teacher who was widely respected, Mead played a critical role in establishing the perspective of the Chicago School, which focused on an approach to social theory emphasizing the importance of communication to life and social encounters.

The two schools diverged primarily on methodology. Mead and his student Herbert Blumer contended that the study of human beings could not be conducted using the same methods as the study of other things. They advocated the use of case studies and histories and nondirective interviews. The Iowa School adopted a more quantitative approach to their studies. Kuhn believed that the concepts of SI could be operationalized, quantified, and tested. To this end, Kuhn developed a technique called the twenty-statements self-attitudes questionnaire. A research respondent taking the twenty-statements test is asked to fill in twenty blank spaces in answer to the question, Who am I? Some of Kuhn's colleagues at Iowa became disenchanted with this view of the self, and they broke away to form the "new" Iowa School. Carl Couch was one of the leaders of this new school. Couch and his associates began studying interaction behavior through videotapes of conversations, rather than simply examining information extracted from the twenty-statements test.

In addition to these main schools of Symbolic Interaction, there are many variations. Many theories that emphasize slightly different aspects of human interaction owe some debt to the central concepts of SI. For example, Social Construction, Role Theory, and Self-Theory form branches of SI. Despite the diversity in ideas, Mead's central concepts remain relatively constant in most interpretations of SI. Consequently, we will examine the basic assumptions and the key concepts that Mead outlined and Blumer elaborated.

Themes and Assumptions of Symbolic Interaction Theory

Symbolic Interaction is based on ideas about the self and its relationship to society. Because this can be interpreted very broadly, we wish to spend some time detailing the themes of the theory and, in the process, reveal the assumptions framing the theory.

Ralph LaRossa and Donald C. Reitzes (1993) have examined Symbolic Interaction Theory as it relates to the study of families. They note that seven central assumptions ground SI and that these assumptions reflect three central themes:

- the importance of meanings for human behavior
- the importance of the self-concept
- the relationship between the individual and society

The Importance of Meanings for Human Behavior

Symbolic Interaction Theory holds that individuals construct meaning through the communication process because meaning is not intrinsic to any thing. It takes interpretive construction among people to make meaning. In fact, the goal of interaction, according to SI, is to create shared meaning. This is the case because without shared meaning communication is extremely difficult, if not impossible. Imagine trying to talk to a friend if you had to explain your own idiosyncratic meaning for every word you used, and your friend had to do the same. Of course, sometimes we assume that we and our conversational partner agree on a meaning only to discover we are mistaken ("I said get ready as fast as you can." "One hour was as fast as I could get ready." "But I meant for you to be ready in 15 minutes." "You didn't say that!"), but frequently we can count on people having common meanings in a conversation. According to LaRossa and Reitzes, this theme supports three main assumptions of SI, which are taken from Herbert Blumer's (1969) work. These assumptions are as follows:

- Humans act toward others on the basis of the meanings those others have for them.
- Meaning is created in interaction between people.
- Meaning is modified through an interpretive process.

Humans Act Toward Others on the Basis of the Meanings Those Others Have for Them This assumption explains behavior as a loop of conscious thought and behavior between stimuli and the responses people exhibit to those stim-

uli. SI theorists such as Herbert Blumer were concerned with the meaning behind behavior. They looked for meaning by examining psychological and sociological explanations for behavior. Thus, as SI researchers study the behaviors of Roger Thomas (from our beginning scenario), they see him making meanings that are congruent with the social forces that shape him. For instance, Roger assigns meaning to his new work experience by applying commonly agreed upon interpretations to the things he sees. When he sees the age of his co-workers, he believes that they have more experience than he does because we often equate age with expertise.

The meanings we assign to symbols are a product of social interaction and represent our agreement to apply certain meanings to specific symbols. For example, in the United States we generally associate wedding rings with love and commitment. The ring is a symbol of a legal and emotional bond, and thus most people invest the symbol with a positive connotation. However, some people see marriage as an oppressive institution. Those people will respond negatively to wedding rings and any other symbols of what they perceive as a degrading situation. The point that SI theorists make is that the ring itself has no specific meaning; it takes on meaning as people interact and invest it with importance. Further, SI researchers are interested in the meaning that Roger attaches to his encounter with Helen (for example, he is cheered up and believes they will become friends).

Meaning Is Created in Interaction Between People Mead stresses the intersubjective basis of meaning. Meaning can exist, according to Mead, only when people share common interpretations of the symbols they exchange in interaction. Blumer (1969) explains that there are three ways of accounting for the origin of meaning. One approach regards meaning as being intrinsic to the thing. Blumer states, “Thus, a chair is clearly a chair in itself . . . the meaning emanates so to speak, from the thing and as such there is no process involved in its formation; all that is necessary is to recognize the meaning that is there in the thing” (pp. 3–4).

A second approach to the origin of meaning sees it as “brought to the thing by the person for whom the thing has meaning” (Blumer, 1969, p. 4). This position supports the popular notion that meanings are in people, not in things. In this perspective, meaning is explained by isolating the psychological elements within an individual that produce a meaning.

SI takes a third approach to meaning, seeing it as occurring between people. Meanings are “social products” or “creations that are formed in and

The Theory Chronicles

For one week, chronicle in your journal specific examples of symbols that have a shared cultural meaning at your school. Write about these shared meanings and how they contribute to a sense of identity among the students, faculty, and other school personnel.



through the defining activities of people as they interact” (Blumer, 1969, p. 5). Therefore, if Roger and Helen did not share a common language and did not agree on denotations and connotations of the symbols they exchanged, no shared meaning would result from their conversation. Further, the meanings created by Helen and Roger are unique to them and their relationship. See the Research Note for a study that examines this assumption of SI.

Meaning Is Modified Through an Interpretive Process Blumer notes that this interpretive process has two steps. First, actors point out the things that have meaning. Blumer argues that this part of the process is different from a psychological approach and consists of people engaging in communication with themselves. Thus, as Roger gets ready for work in the morning, he communicates with himself about the areas that are meaningful to him. The second step involves actors selecting, checking, and transforming the meanings in the context in which they find themselves. When Roger talks with Helen, he listens for her remarks that are relevant to the areas he has decided are meaningful. Fur-



Research Note

Innes, M. (2002). Organizational communication and the symbolic construction of police murder investigations. *British Journal of Sociology*, 53, 67–87.

This study considers how murder investigations are symbolically constructed within police organizations and in the wider public. Innes begins by noting that police officers tend to agree that their job is primarily concerned with fighting crime and, as such, it is “an essentially benign and necessary form of state power” (p. 67). He then observes that other studies have shown that this symbolic construction of police work is not completely accurate because police are more focused on maintaining social order than on fighting crime. Yet, despite these studies and an acknowledgment of this “reality,” the notion of policing continues to be symbolically constructed as crime fighting.

Innes uses symbolic interactionism, in particular the assumption that humans act toward others on the basis of the meanings those others have for them, to study “how organizations create and sustain a particular sense of meaningful reality” (p. 68). Innes observed police communication about murders in both formal (to the public) and informal (among one another) settings to determine how the police represented their organization.

He concludes that the police use a variety of communication strategies to validate their work as important, necessary, and moral. For instance, Innes observed that the police use distancing strategies such as joking among themselves in order to maintain a separation from victims and their families. Innes argues that distancing strategies provide impression management, allowing the officers to appear professional and expert. In this way, officers are seen as reassuring to those who have been traumatized and they are able to escape being traumatized themselves.

Innes asserts that his findings are consistent with a symbolic interaction framework because the crime of murder is symbolically constructed through the communication processes and strategies employed by the police and the public. Further, the organization is sustained, Innes found, through these strategies and communications that symbolically place “officers as acting on the side of good, protecting society, restoring order and achieving justice” (p. 84).

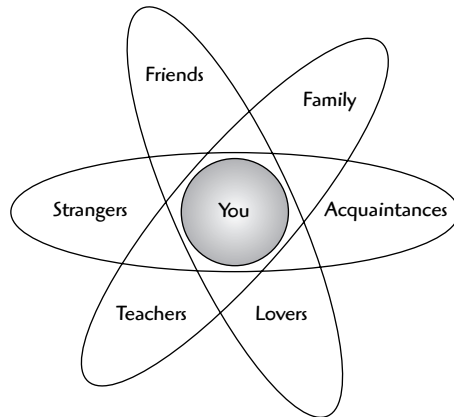


Figure 5.1
**How the Self-
Concept Develops**

ther, in his interpretation process, Roger depends on the shared social meanings that are culturally accepted. Thus, Roger and Helen are able to converse relatively easily because they both come from similar co-cultures.

The Importance of the Self-Concept

The second overall theme of SI focuses on the importance of the **self-concept**, or the relatively stable set of perceptions that people hold of themselves. When Roger (or any social actor) asks the question, Who am I? the answer relates to self-concept. The characteristics Roger acknowledges about his physical features, roles, talents, emotional states, values, social skills and limits, intellect, and so forth make up his self-concept. This notion is critical to Symbolic Interactionism. Further, SI is interested in the ways in which people develop self-concepts. SI pictures individuals with active selves, grounded in social interactions with others (see Figure 5.1). This theme suggests two additional assumptions, according to LaRossa and Reitzes (1993):

- Individuals develop self-concepts through interaction with others.
- Self-concepts provide an important motive for behavior.

self-concept
a relatively stable
set of perceptions
people hold about
themselves

Individuals Develop Self-Concepts Through Interactions with Others This assumption suggests that it is only through contact with others that we develop a sense of self. People are not born with self-concepts; they learn them through interactions. According to SI, infants have no sense of an individuated self. During the first year of life, children begin to differentiate themselves from their surroundings. This is the earliest development of the self-concept. SI contends that this process continues through the child's acquisition of language and the ability to respond to others and internalize the feedback he or she receives. Roger has a sense of self because of his contacts with his parents and his teachers and his colleagues. Their interactions with him tell him who he is. Early family researchers such as Edgar Burgess (1926) reflect this assumption when they discuss the importance of the family as a socializing institution. Further, Burgess



© 2003 The New Yorker Collection from cartoonbank.com. All Rights Reserved.

notes that children and parents might conflict over children's self-concept or image.

Self-Concepts Provide an Important Motive for Behavior The notion that beliefs, values, feelings, and assessments about the self affect behavior is a central tenet of SI. Mead argues that because human beings possess a self, they are provided with a mechanism for self-interaction. This mechanism is used to guide behavior and conduct. It is also important to note that Mead sees the self as a process, not as a structure. Having a self forces people to construct their actions and responses, rather than simply expressing them. So, for instance, if you feel great about your abilities in your communication theory course, then it is likely that you will do well in the course. In fact, it is likely that you will feel confident in all of your courses. This process is often called **self-fulfilling prophecy**, or the self-expectations that cause a person to behave in such a way that the expectations are realized. When Roger remembers his professor's praise of his engineering abilities, he is setting himself up to make a self-fulfilling prophecy about his performance at his new job.

**self-fulfilling
prophecy**

a prediction about yourself causing you to behave in such a way that it comes true

The Relationship Between the Individual and Society

The final theme pertains to the relationship between individual freedoms and social constraint. Mead and Blumer took a middle position on this question. They tried to account for both order and change in social processes. Assumptions relating to this theme include:

- People and groups are influenced by cultural and social processes.
- Social structure is worked out through social interaction.

People and Groups Are Influenced by Cultural and Social Processes This assumption recognizes that social norms constrain individual behavior. For instance, when Roger gets ready for his first day at his new job, he selects a navy suit, a white oxford shirt, and a burgundy and blue striped tie. His preferred mode of dress would be jeans and a flannel shirt, but he chooses clothing that he feels will be socially appropriate in the job context. Further, culture strongly influences the behaviors and attitudes that we value in our self-concepts. In the United States, people who see themselves as assertive are likely to be proud of this attribute and reflect favorably on their self-concept. This is the case because the United States is an individualistic culture that values assertiveness and individuality. Yet, in many Asian cultures, cooperation and community are highly valued. The collective is more important than the individual. Thus, an Asian who sees herself as assertive might feel ashamed of such a self-concept.

Mary Roffers (2002) notes that a college assignment to design a personal website was very difficult for a Hmong student in her class. The student explained that talking about one's self was not approved of in his culture and putting information about himself on the website felt inappropriate.

Social Structure Is Worked Out Through Social Interaction This assumption mediates the position taken by the previous assumption. SI challenges the view that social structure is unchanging and acknowledges that individuals can modify social situations. For example, many U.S. workplaces have instituted "casual Fridays," when the employees wear casual clothing rather than the typical, socially prescribed office wear. In this way, the participants in the interaction modify the structure and are not completely constrained by it. In other words, SI theorists believe that humans are choice makers. In our opening scenario, Roger chooses to introduce himself to Helen; he is not bound to do so by forces outside his control. In making choices, Roger exerts his individuality and demonstrates that he is not completely constrained by culture or situation.

In review, we list the themes that ground SI and the assumptions they support:

THEMES

- the importance of meanings for human behavior
- the importance of the self-concept
- the relationship between the individual and society

ASSUMPTIONS

- Humans act toward others on the basis of the meanings those others have for them.
- Meaning is created in interaction between people.

- Meaning is modified through an interpretive process.
- Individuals develop self-concepts through interaction with others.
- Self-concepts provide an important motive for behavior.
- People and groups are influenced by cultural and social processes.
- Social structure is worked out through social interaction.

Key Concepts

Earlier we stated that the book outlining Mead's thinking was titled *Mind, Self, and Society*. The title of the book reflects the three key concepts of SI. We describe each concept here, noting how other important concepts relate to these basic three. It will become clear that the three concepts overlap to some extent, a consequence of describing a theory with global terminology that can be viewed in multiple ways.

Mind

Mead defines **mind** as the ability to use symbols that have common social meanings, and Mead believes that humans must develop minds through interaction with others. Infants cannot really interact with others until they learn **language**, or a shared system of verbal and nonverbal symbols organized in patterns to express thoughts and feelings. Language depends on what Mead calls **significant symbols**, or those symbols that evoke basically the same meaning for many people. Let's use the infant as an example to illustrate the concept of significant symbols. When parents coo and talk to their baby, the infant may respond, but she does not really understand the meanings of the words her parents use. As she learns language, the infant exchanges shared or significant symbols and can anticipate the responses of others to the symbols she uses. This, according to Mead, is how consciousness develops.

By using language and interacting with others, we develop what Mead calls mind, and this enables us to create an interior setting for the society that we see operating outside us. Thus, mind can be described as the way people internalize society. Yet, mind does not just depend on society. Mead suggests that they have a reciprocal relationship. Mind reflects and creates the social world. As people learn language, they learn the social norms and cultural mores that constrain them. But they also learn ways to shape and change that social world through interaction. When children learn to talk, they may learn to say "please" and "thank you" as cultural indicators of politeness. Yet, they may also create unique, personal ways of expressing politeness, like saying "mayberry" and "yes you," that become accepted idioms within a specific relationship.

Closely related to the concept of mind is the notion of **thought**, which Mead conceives of as an inner conversation. While Roger, in our opening story, prepares for his new job, he reviews all the experiences that brought him to that time and place. He thinks about his family's example and support, he remembers a favorite teacher, and he tells himself that he will be successful at this chal-

mind

the ability to use symbols with common social meanings

language

a shared system of verbal and nonverbal symbols

significant symbols

symbols whose meaning is generally agreed upon by many people

thought

an inner conversation

lenge. Through this intrapersonal conversation, Roger sorts out the meaning of his new situation. Mead holds that without social stimulation and interaction with others, people would not be capable of holding inner conversations or sustaining thought.

According to Mead, one of the most critical activities that people accomplish through thought is **role taking**, or the ability to symbolically place oneself in an imagined self of another person. This process is also called perspective taking because it requires that one suspend one's own perspective on an experience and instead view it from the imagined perspective of another. For example, if Helen thought about Roger after their meeting and reflected on how he must have felt to be new and so much younger than most of the other employees, then she would be role taking. Whenever we try to imagine how another person might view something or when we try to behave as we think another would, we are role taking. Mead suggests that role taking is a symbolic act that can help clarify our own sense of self even as it allows us to develop the capacity for empathy with others.

role taking
the ability to put oneself in another's place

Self

Mead defines **self** as the ability to reflect on ourselves from the perspective of others. From this you can see that Mead does not believe that self comes from introspection or from simply thinking on one's own. For Mead, the self develops from a particular kind of role taking—that is, imagining how we look to another person. Borrowing a concept originated by the sociologist Charles Cooley in 1912, Mead refers to this as the **looking-glass self**, or our ability to see ourselves in the reflection of another's gaze. Cooley (1972) believes that three principles of development are associated with the looking-glass self: (1) we imagine how we appear to others, (2) we imagine their judgment of our appearance, and (3) we feel hurt or pride based on these self-feelings. A commercial for women's jeans has one character noting, "I feel beautiful when he looks at me like he did when we first met." This commercial provides an example of the looking-glass self. We learn about ourselves from the ways others treat us, view us, and label us. One of your authors once participated in the Great Bike Ride Across Iowa. She rode a three-speed bike 523 miles, from one end of the state to the other. The ride took one week, and after about three days, she felt she could not pedal a minute longer. But just as she was about to give up, a man biked up beside her and said, "You are amazing, going on this bike ride on a three-speed bike. You are just great. Keep it up." As he pedaled off, she straightened up and said to herself, "Well, I guess I am amazing. I can finish this ride!" The label the man gave her actually changed her feelings of exhaustion and made her see her accomplishments and herself differently and more positively.

self
imagining how we look to another person

looking-glass self
our ability to see ourselves as another sees us

Mead's notion of the looking-glass self implies the power that labels have on self-concept and behavior. This power represents a second type of self-fulfilling prophecy. Earlier in the chapter we spoke of self-fulfilling prophecies as being self-expectations that affect behaviors. For example, Roger tells himself repeatedly that he will succeed at his job and then engages in behaviors that are congruent with his expectations of success. In turn, these behaviors will



The Theory Connection

How does Mead's concept of the self relate to an understanding of self in Relational Dialectics Theory?

Pygmalion effect
living up to or down to another's expectations of us

likely ensure that he will succeed. By the same token, negative self-talk can create situations where predictions of failure come true. This second type of self-fulfilling prophecy produced by labels is called the **Pygmalion effect**, and it refers to the expectations of others governing one's actions.

The name comes from the myth of Pygmalion, on which the play *My Fair Lady* was based. In *My Fair Lady*, the main character, Eliza, states that the difference between an upper-class lady and a poor flower girl is not in her behavior but in how others treat her. This phenomenon was tested in a classic study by Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson (1968). In their study, Rosenthal and Jacobson told elementary school teachers that 20 percent of their students were gifted. But the names of these "gifted" students were simply drawn at random. Eight months later these students showed significantly greater gains in IQ compared to the rest of the children in the class. Rosenthal and Jacobson concluded that this was the result of teachers' expectations (and behaviors based on these expectations) toward the "gifted" children.

As Mead theorizes about self, he observes that through language, people have the ability to be both subject and object to themselves. As subject, we act, and as object, we observe ourselves acting. Mead calls the subject, or acting self, the **I** and the object, or observing self, the **Me**. The **I** is spontaneous, impulsive, and creative, whereas the **Me** is more reflective and socially aware. The **I** might want to go out and party all night, whereas the **Me** might exercise caution and acknowledge the homework assignment that should be done instead of partying. Mead sees the self as a process that integrates the **I** and the **Me**.

I
the spontaneous, impulsive, creative self
Me
the reflective, socially aware self

Society

Mead argues that interaction takes place within a dynamic social structure—culture, society, and so forth. Individuals are born into already-existing social contexts. Mead defines **society** as the web of social relationships that humans create. Individuals engage in society through behaviors that they choose actively and voluntarily. Society thus features an interlocking set of behaviors that individuals continually adjust. Society exists prior to the individual but is also created and shaped by the individual, acting in concert with others.

Society, then, is made up of individuals, and Mead talks about two specific parts of society that affect the mind and the self. Mead's notion of **particular others** refers to the individuals in society who are significant to us. These people are usually family members, friends, and work colleagues and supervisors. We

society
the web of social relationships humans create and respond to

particular others
individuals who are significant to us

Theory Application in Groups (TAG)

Devise a study that could test an idea supported by the SI framework. Decide whether your study should use quantitative or qualitative methods. Discuss the reasons for your choices.



look to particular others to get a sense of social acceptability and a sense of self. When Roger thinks of his parents' opinion of him, he is deriving a sense of self from particular others. The identity of the particular others and the context influence our sense of social acceptability and our sense of self. Often the expectations of some particular others conflict with those of others. For example, if Roger's family wants him to work hard and be successful, whereas his friends want him to party and ignore work, he will experience conflict.

The **generalized other** refers to the viewpoint of a social group or the culture as a whole. It is given to us by society, and "the attitude of the generalized other is the attitude of the whole community" (Mead, 1934, p. 154). The generalized other provides information about roles, rules, and attitudes shared by the community. The generalized other also gives us a sense of how other people react to us and of general social expectations. This sense is influential in developing a social conscience. The generalized other may help mediate conflicts generated by conflicting groups of particular others.

generalized other
the attitude of the
whole community

Critique and Closing

Symbolic Interaction Theory has been a powerful theoretical framework for over sixty years. It provides striking insights about human communication behavior 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 this chapter we 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 behavior, it neglects other important variables, and it is not falsifiable. We briefly explore these criticisms below.

Some critics complain that SI is too broad to be useful. This criticism centers on the evaluation criterion of scope. SI covers too much ground, these critics assert, to fully explain specific meaning-making processes and communication behaviors. 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

T*I*P



Theory * Into * Practice

In a 1998 article in the magazine *Vanity Fair*, Michael Jordan writes about his life and basketball career. His comments reflect a Symbolic Interactionist framework. Jordan's thoughts about the relationship between his own sense of self and the self that fans and others saw in him illustrate the concepts of SI.

Jordan comments that his fame made him feel “like a fish in a fishbowl” (p. 124). He observes that his fame caused his fans to view him differently than he saw himself. He was a husband and a father in his home, but outside he was bigger than that. Jordan describes his outside self as some character he calls MICHAEL JORDAN. He says that everyone else had a sense of who that was, leading him to try to see himself from the fans' perspective. Jordan states, “Early in my career I really couldn't get a sense of who I was from the fan's perspective. I didn't feel as famous as people said I was” (p. 126). He also speculates that his own sense of himself may have contributed to his being well received by the public. He says he thought the fans knew that he was not acting or trying to be something he wasn't. Jordan notes that he felt comfortable in the spotlight because he was just being himself. Yet, Jordan concludes that it was lonely being put on a pedestal by his fans and that was one reason he took a break from basketball after the 1992-93 season.

Source: Jordan, 1998.

TIP Follow-up

How do Mead's notions of mind, self, and society apply to Michael Jordan's situation as described above? Be specific.

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 Roger and his parents agreed that he was an excellent engineer and that he was doing a wonderful job at his new firm, that would be reality for them. Yet, it would not acknowledge the fact that Roger's boss perceived his skills as inadequate and fired him. 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. Critics observe that SI does not explain the emotional dimension of human interaction. Further, critics note that 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.

In fact, some researchers have begun applying SI to emotions with success. For instance, James Forte, Anne Barrett, and Mary Campbell (1996) used a Symbolic Interaction perspective to examine grief. Their study examined the utility of a Social Interaction perspective in assessing and intervening in a bereavement group. The authors found that SI was a useful model. Regarding self-esteem, symbolic interactionists agree that it is not a focus of the theory. But they point out that this is not a flaw in the theory; it is simply beyond the bounds of what Mead chose to investigate.

In sum, 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 that we discuss in this book, such as Dramatism, Muted Group Theory, Organizational Culture Theory, and Standpoint Theory. Thus, because Symbolic Interaction Theory has stimulated much conceptual thinking, it has accomplished much of what theories aim to do.

Discussion Starters

1. Discuss Roger Thomas's initial reactions to his new job in Houston. How do they specifically relate to his sense of self?
2. Do you believe Mead's argument that one cannot have a self without social interaction? Would a person raised by wolves have no sense of self? Explain your answers.
3. Has there been a time in your life when your sense of self changed dramatically? If so, what contributed to the change? Did it have anything to do with others in your life?
4. Do you agree with the emphasis that Mead places on language as a shared symbol system? Is it possible to interact with someone who uses a completely different language? Explain your position.
5. One of the criticisms of SI is that it puts too much emphasis on individual action and not enough emphasis on the constraints on individuals that they cannot think their way out of. What is your position on this criticism?
6. Explain the difference between the concepts self-fulfilling prophecy and Pygmalion effect. How are they similar?

Terms for Review

self-concept	significant symbols
self-fulfilling prophecy	thought
mind	role taking
language	self
looking-glass self	society

Pygmalion effect
I
Me

particular others
generalized other



Online Learning Center

Visit the Online Learning Center at www.mhhe.com/west2. Use the multiple-choice and true/false quizzes to help you prepare for exams, and the glossary, crossword puzzles, and flashcards to further your knowledge of key terms.