



10 Symbolic Interactionism Examples (And Easy Definition)

By Chris Drew (PhD) / January 22, 2023

SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

The symbolic interaction theory states that the meaning we ascribe to objects, processes, ideas, concepts, and systems are subjective.

EXAMPLE

As a simple example of symbolic interactionism, the word "dog" might evoke a fuzzy, heart-warming emotion in someone who has had mostly friendly experiences with dogs. But another person, who may have been bitten or attacked by dogs, may feel fear and revulsion. The meaning ascribed to the concept of "dog" is different depending on your context.

EXPLANATION

Symbol – Something that represents an object, emotion, process, etc, in the real world. E.g. the word "dog" is a symbol for a four-legged domesticated canine, and "cow" is a symbol for a four-legged bovine.

Interaction – How the meaning of a symbol is interpreted and modified through social interaction. The Hindu villager and the American Christian may lead them to invest the word "cow" with different meanings.

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The symbolic interaction theory states that the meaning we ascribe to objects, processes, ideas, concepts, and systems are subjective. They are constructed through language, words, and communication, and differ from context to context and culture to culture.



As a simple example of symbolic interactionism, the word “dog” might evoke a fuzzy, heart-warming emotion in someone who has had mostly friendly experiences with dogs. But another person, who may have been bitten or attacked by dogs, may feel fear and revulsion. The meaning ascribed to the concept of “dog” is different depending on your context.

Symbolic interactionism is one of three core sociological paradigms (the others being conflict theory and functionalism).

Here’s another example. A mid-western American Christian might associate a cow with food. But a devout Hindu villager in India may have feelings of devotion to the cow on account of the animal being considered sacred in their religion.

So, we can see here that our understanding of the world is subjective depending on who we are and who we interact with.

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Simple Explanation Of Social Interaction Theory

There are two components of symbolic interactionism – symbol and interaction.



- **Symbol** – A symbol is something that represents an object, emotion, process, etc, in the real world. In the example above, the word “dog” is a symbol for a four-legged domesticated canine, and “cow” is a symbol for a four-legged bovine.
- **Interaction** – This refers to how the meaning of a symbol is interpreted and modified through a creative process of social interaction. In the example above the different social interactions of the Hindu villager and the mid-western American Christian in their respective social settings lead them to invest the word “cow” with different meanings.

Key theorists in the development of symbolic interaction theory have been George Herbert Mead (1863-1961), Herbert Blumer (1900-1987), and Charles Horton Cooley (1864-1929). George Herbert’s Mead book, *Mind, Self, and Society* is considered the foundational text of symbolic interactionism.

10 Examples Of Symbolic Interaction Theory



1. Flags And Nationalism

Flags have for ages been symbolic of the collective values of a society.

With the advent of modern nation-states from the 17th century onwards, flags have become potent symbols of nationalism. They evoke intense feelings of patriotism, passion, and nationalistic fervour among the citizenry.

However, such passions remain limited to the people whom the flag represents, and often, end abruptly at national borders.

In cases where bordering nations may be adversaries such as North and South Korea, Israel and Palestine, or India and Pakistan, the flag of a people living just across the national border might evoke feelings of hatred and enmity.

The differences in reactions is because of their experiences of growing up in a society in which the flag of the “enemy” is a symbol that has, through the process of social interaction, come to acquire connotations of undesirability.

Thus, the same symbol, i.e. the flag, evokes diametrically opposed emotions depending on the kind of interaction the people have had with it.

2. Learned Gender Roles

Gender roles are often performative and discursively learned. This means that children “learn” the correct way of performing masculinity

and femininity through social interactions. Interestingly, different societies have different understandings of masculinity and femininity.



So, by watching television, a child might learn that pink is a feminine color and blue is a masculine color. They might similarly learn that ballet dancing is a feminine activity while boxing is a masculine activity, or that sitting with your legs crossed is feminine while sitting with your legs spread out is masculine, and so on.

Every object (blue/pink), activity (ballet/boxing), and process (sitting) in the world becomes a symbol whose meaning is learned by the child only through interaction with society – their parents, siblings, teachers, peers, films, television, etc.

3. Learned Religious ‘Truths’

In symbolic interactionism, our social networks strongly influence our beliefs and perceptions. This is evident in religious beliefs.

If you’re born in the South in the United States, you’re far more likely to grow up believing the Christian doctrine. If you’re born in Pakistan, you’ll be more likely to believe in the Islamic doctrine.

Here, we can see that our social networks impact our perception of the concept of God, and hugely shape our entire lives.

4. Emojis



Young and old people often have very different understandings of emojis. An eggplant emoji may mean something harmless to one person, but in youth lexicon, it has a much more sinister meaning!

Emojis have become a standard language of expression in the age of mobile communication. There is an increasingly large number of emojis now available to convey a wide variety of emotional responses.

An appropriately emplaced emoji in a conversation can substitute an entire sentence's worth of textual communication.

However, for people not familiar with electronic communication, such as senior citizens, people who are illiterate, the visually challenged, or the millions of poor in developing countries who do not have access to electronic devices, an emoji does not carry any meaning.

It is simply a yellow, round symbol, whose meaning can be grasped only through an interaction with the social world of electronic communication.

5. Memes

Like emojis, memes are another cultural currency of the electronic world, albeit one that requires an even greater level of familiarity with, and immersion in, pop culture.

The communicative value of memes lies in the pop-cultural references they encapsulate. And since pop culture is fast-paced and effervescent, memes are

highly subjective – a meme that one person may find extremely witty might be incomprehensible to another.



For instance, a meme based on a popular TV show such as Game of Thrones would carry any meaning only for those who are familiar with the universe of the TV series.

To everyone else, no matter how well-read they may be, the meme would be meaningless. The symbol of the meme thus becomes meaningful only through an interaction with the universe of the TV show.

6. Language

We perceive the world through language. If certain words in certain languages carry specific connotations, we tend to internalize them and apply them to other categories.

Consider the word “black”, which in English, and many other languages, carries with it connotations of darkness, evil, undesirability, shame, and so on.

This is witnessed in expressions such as “to have a black heart” (to be evil), “to blacken someone’s face” (to humiliate someone), “black magic” (evil magic), and so on.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, such symbols present in languages shaped people’s perceptions of Africans and sustained discrimination. Sociological and linguistic theory enabled us to see through the limitations of language and better address this problem.

7. The Looking Glass Self



The sociologist Charles Horton Cooley. gave the concept of the “Looking Glass Self” which became an important concept in the symbolic interaction theory.

According to Cooley, our self-image is shaped by how we think others perceive us.

We think of other people as mirrors who reflect our self back to us. Our self is thus constructed through our interactions with society (Cooley, 1902).

For example, if we feel as if people do not like us, we may start to think less of ourselves. Similarly, if someone sees us as a criminal, we may start to see ourselves as someone who is deviant (see: [labelling theory of deviance](#)).

8. Internalized Stigma

Related to Cooley’s concept of the looking glass self is the modern psychological understanding of internalized stigma.

For instance, people who are perceived as deviants in society, may, on account of their previous interactions with others, begin to anticipate rejection and humiliation from all such possible interactions.

This can lead them to further become withdrawn, aloof, and thereby internalizing their stigma even more. (Link et al., 2015) This is similar to how [secondary deviance](#) works in society.

9. Cultural Script



A cultural script is the prevailing social narrative in which a society thinks of itself as being emplaced, and according to which it fashions its own story. Our cultural script influences how we think.

Cultural scripts vary with time and geography. No one is born with an understanding of the prevailing cultural script of their times; it is learned only through a long process of interaction with the society at large (Conway, 1998).

For instance, the dominant cultural script of 19th century Europe, a time of intense changes brought about by the industrial revolution and the European colonization of much of the world, was one of scientific rationalism, the power and the absolute truth of science and reason, and notions of western superiority based on the inherent nobleness of the European race.

We find this is in the voluminous literature of the age – from fiction to poetry to autobiographies to histories.

By comparison, today, as the world stays bitterly divided over politics and truth, the dominant cultural script would be one of postmodern, post-truth chaos and anxiety, a shaken faith in the power of science, acceptance of the existence of many possibilities of truth and reality, non-binary gender roles and sexuality, multiculturalism, and so on.

10. Marriage And Family



Even social differences in concepts of marriage and family can be explained and explored through symbolic interactionism.

For example, in Western nations in the 21st Century, our ideas of marriage are much more liberal than any other time in recent history. Families can be made up of unmarried couples who are still committed to one another; couples of the same gender; and even a single-parent family.

But in the past, and indeed in most non-Western cultures, families still often take the form of a patriarchal family, where the man is in charge and gets to make all the decisions, and the woman is often expected to stick to her gendered role in marriage as well. For more about how marriage and family are socially constructed, take a look at our article on the [types of families](#).

Bloomer's Three Tenets Of Social Interactionism

While it was George Herbert Mead who started the theory, it was Herbert Blumer who came up with the term 'symbolic interactionism'.

He also came up with what he called the three tenets of social interactionism:

- 1. We act based upon the meaning we give something** – One person may see a bear and react by running, another might react with joy. The first person gave it a meaning related to fearsomeness, the other gave it a meaning related to happiness. The two people reacted differently because they have a different perception of the bear.



2. **We give meaning to things based on our social interactions –**

Different people will have different meanings for different things, and our meanings usually come from influential people in our lives like our parents, friends, and culture. One culture may consider bears to be scary while another may consider them to be lovely.

3. **The meanings we give things can change –** If we are influenced by new people or new experiences, our meanings might change. If I were to be attacked by a bear, chances are I would then stop relating it to happiness and react more with fear than joy.

Conclusion

Symbolic interactionism is a powerful [social process theory](#) that is used for understanding the world around us.

It becomes even more relevant today as the world becomes increasingly more interconnected through the internet, allowing us to interact more often and with more people.

We witness how our interactions over [digital media](#) shape our opinions. Think of the power social media giants such as Twitter and Facebook have over shaping public opinion, even though they themselves do not “create” any information.

There is increasing concern about how social media may be subverting democratic processes, especially in third-world countries. Their power to influence entire societies comes solely from their position as platforms enabling “interactions” in which “symbols” convey meanings to participants.

[Read more Examples of Theories Here](#)



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