SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM THEORY

CD 251
Major Theorists & Concepts

• Mead: Individuals learn about themselves through interactions with others based on gestures
• Concept of self can only arise through social experience
• Gesture: Action that causes a response in another person
• “Generalized Other”: understanding the social expectations so that one can guess how others will react
• Interplay between “I” & “me”
  • “I” unpredictable spontaneous acts
  • “Me” is the social self/learned roles
Cooley: “Looking Glass Self”

• Individuals think about:
  • how they appear to others
  • make a judgment about what others think of them
  • incorporate those ideas into perception of self
    • How do you interpret other’s reactions to you?

• Most learning takes place “face to face,” especially in primary groups
  • What does “face to face” mean in the digital age?

• Families teach us about social expectations & how we excel
Thomas: “Definition of the Situation”

- Human behavior is understood by examining the subjective perspectives of the people involved

- “If people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.” (from LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993, p. 140)
Central Assumptions

- Blumer first identified the term “symbolic interactionism”

1. Meaning is important
2. Humans must have a sense of self to create meaning
3. Society influences individuals
Importance of Meaning (Blumer)

• Human beings respond to things based on their subjective meanings

• Meaning occurs through interaction between people.

• Meaning is based on experience, an interpretative process.
Reflect:

- Consider how subjective meaning influences how you interpret your experience.
- Can your group think of an example of how someone’s “definition of the situation” affected the experience?
- Can you think of a time, perhaps when you were a child or a teenager, when you interpreted your parent(s) actions in a much different way than they might have intended?
Symbols & Interaction

• Symbols are context based and products of social interaction

• Interactions are social behavior made up of communication to which one of the individuals reacts, consequently causing a change in behavior
  • Could be verbal or non-verbal
  • What are some examples of subtle messages from individuals that might alter your behavior?
Self-Concept

• People develop a sense of self through social interaction; it is not innate.

• Once developed, self-concept influences motivation.
Society

- Individuals and small groups are influenced by larger social forces.

- People develop an understanding about social structure based on their everyday social interaction.
Roles

• For the individual, roles are based on self-meaning

• Social norms for a specific situation

• Organized hierarchically by importance

• Both individual and social constructs

• What are some roles that have meaning for you?
Salience

- The more salience a role has in our lives, the more time & energy we devote to it

- A commitment to a role influences its salience
Identity

- Self-meaning determines behavior
- Behavior is based on relevance to our self-identity
Individual interacts with others.

- Learns about environment
  - Interprets environment as symbolic meaning
  - Learns about socially acceptable roles
- Decides which roles best represent the individual
- Interprets which roles are most salient
- Others continually redefine themselves based on their interactions

Interacts with others learns about environment.
Consider:

- Identify which roles you take on
- What salience do these roles have for you?
- How are they related to your self-esteem?
References
