Symbolic Interactionism
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The 20th century philosopher George Herbert Mead began the idea of Symbolic Interactionism. This is a theory which states humans interpret actions into meanings through communication that is made possible by words, gestures, and other symbols. Although Mead laid the foundations for a new theory, many critiques arose due to deficiencies. The three main criticisms that will be examined are the vagueness and over-generalizations of Mead’s work, his inaccurate discernment between animals and humans through language, and the impact media now has on human interaction.

We are able to communicate and understand each other by the use of language which establishes our relationships with other human beings. Mead never published a theory on his ideas. However, his former students compiled a manuscript from his lectures and the few papers Mead wrote. Before Mead’s theory came along, philosophers and scientists focused on the reasoning behind behavior of humans instead of the interaction and meaning created between humans. As human beings, we begin to create and place meaning into our actions depending on our relationships with others.

The three premises that Symbolic Interactionism are based on are meaning, language, and thought (Blumer 2). According to Blumer, one of Mead’s former students who coined the theory’s name, humans create different meanings and symbols that define relationships which are easily misunderstood through language (2). As an example, the term “good friend” can represent various meanings for many different people. The way we behave in our relationships towards other people are centered on the significance of meaning we assign through symbols. Language is the core of how humans interact with each other and becomes very complex, so the way we define what language means to us is by using cues or symbols. We use language to define our meaning when we’re
interacting in different situations with other people. Language is a tool that can be used to clarify and put meaning into our relationships when we’re interacting with each other. Thought is a process we use to create symbols through language and communicate with each other. We are able to see different points of view, play out our roles, and define ourselves and engage in Symbolic Interactionism when all three premises function together. Over time, many philosophers and sociologists have continued adding and building on this theory.

Mead made many contributions to the field of understanding human behavior and communication, yet many scholars have criticized Mead’s ambiguous and vague concepts. Manford H. Kuhn has written that the ambiguity and contradictions of Mead and his ideas are so “evanescent and shifting that it is obviously a practical impossibility to obtain any possible determinate-antecedents to make usable or testable predictions” (73). When Mead’s ideas were published by his students, the most significant contribution was the fact that the “oral tradition” that had held sway was over. Previous to Mead’s works being interpreted and written down, these emerging ideas were passed along in an oral tradition through lecture and notes that students took in classes taught by Mead and led to even more ambiguous and vague interpretations of Mead’s dissertation and lectures. When Mead’s ideas were finally written down by his students and scholarly peers, it afforded opportunity for scrutinizing and examination, which resulted in a deeper understanding of Mead’s work.

With this understanding came the realization that there were some gaps and inconsistencies in Mead’s theories. Kuhn states that the many sub-theories of symbolic interaction result from Mead’s “dark, inscrutable complexities too difficult to understand
as long as the orientation remained largely in the oral tradition” (Farberman et al 72). Mead’s concepts were often vague and more intuitive in their meaning rather than concrete.

Jerome Manis and Bernard Metzler state that one of the main problems of Mead’s theory is that Mead fails to explain some of his key ideas, such as whether or not the idea of impulses is biological or socially derived. Manis and Metzler also criticize Mead’s failure to state clearly the difference between the “I” of the self and the “Me.” He simply refers to the “I” as the not-Me aspect of the self rather than explaining in detail what he means as the “I” (19). Both Manis and Metzler state that Mead’s “posthumous works sometimes carry conflicting particulars” (18). Clearly the fact that Mead never wrote down his own theory in a scholarly report has left his protégés to inherit the problematic study and understanding of his work. It was based on an intuitive formulation rather than on empirical, testable formulas, and this has created further misinterpretation and many sub-theories of Mead’s work.

A study conducted by Jonathan Turner also addresses Mead’s vagueness in expanding his concepts. Turner suggests “perhaps as a consequence of Mead’s (1934) view of mind and thinking as internalized conversation, Symbolic Interactionist theory and research have a tendency to conceptualize self as a linguistic construct” (507). This linguistic construct means self-concept only derives through the function of language, by interacting with others and seeing the self by imagining how we look to another person (Mead 59). Turner’s studies showed that self is often a vague sense of who we are that may not be able to be explained in words, not just a linguistic and cognitive construct (508). Turner also expanded Mead’s looking-glass concept as full of implicit and explicit
cognitions, since some emotions can be translated into words, others can be slightly perceived, and still others are beyond the realm of consciousness (508).

Another criticism against Mead’s theory was distinguishing humans from animals on the basis of language and self concept. Mead distinguished humans and animals by emphasizing humans’ capability of language as a tool for self-concept, yet the separate studies conducted by Irvine and Turner show the inadequacy of Mead’s disparity. Turner argues that great apes are able to distinguish themselves as objects in their environment by looking in a mirror and recognizing themselves, an ability which Mead only attributed to humans (511). The key emotional experiences Turner highlights are shame, guilt, and alienation, which result from self-awareness. Although Mead recognized animals as having social interactions involving a “conversation of gestures,” he failed to include instinctual and primitive gestures like when a cat hisses at its enemy (Irvine 4).

Mead also held that animals’ social behavior held no meaning and the conversation of gestures was “insignificant because it allegedly has only one meaning” (Irvine 4). The one meaning was for goal-directed behavior such as finding a mate or obtaining food. This suggests that no behavior was purely social. Irvine references a study of cats which proves they exchange behaviors in a social and instinctual way through Symbolic Interaction (4). Another study observing cats proves that animals can take on the roles of others, define situations, choose a course of action and retain memories of past events (Irvine 4). With more studies conducted, the gap between humans and nonhumans cannot be defined by Mead’s vague language model of self-concept.
When Mead and other scholars of his time were beginning to construct this theory in the 1920’s, the world was very different than it is now. This drastic difference is another criticism to Mead’s theory of Symbolic Interactionism. According to scholars Lynch and McConatha, societies focused attention on human to human interaction and were unaffected by media, advertising, and computers (89). Today, most societies live in a media-filled world, full of new technology that has changed the ways of basic communication.

A major component of Symbolic Interactionism is that we form our self based on our perceptions and relations with other human beings in society. According to Mead, the self is subject to continual modification and improvement (Lynch and McConatha 89). Lynch and McConatha state that society is impacted by media from the very first years of adolescence (91). Instead of recreational activities with other children, an ever-increasing number of kids get their perceptions and ideas of society by watching television. In television and advertising, value and profit are the main objectives (Lynch and McConatha 92). With that in mind, society is influenced by the values and norms that are established by consumer-driven corporations. Identities change to conform to the ways things should be, which is based not on human to human interaction as Mead thought, but based on media to human interaction.

Mead’s idea of the theory said that, “much of human behavior is determined not by the objective facts of a situation, but by the meanings people ascribe to it” (Lynch and McConatha 89). However, that is not the case now because technology is the large objective component of communication. Operations now can continue devoid of people being right next to each other in work, shopping, and entertainment. Without the face to
face interaction however, symbols and meanings can be altered while in transition without much room on the table for clarification. With technology being a substantial part of the current environment, theorists need to alter the Symbolic Interactionism theory in order to incorporate the idea that it significantly plays a role in the way people view themselves and others (Lynch and McConatha 92).

Although ambiguous, ethnocentric, and outdated with today’s media-driven society, Mead’s theory of Symbolic Interactionism opened the door to many social sciences to begin reviewing the meaning and interaction that is created between people through language. As communication is continually evolving, scholars continue to expand on this theory in sociology, psychology and interpersonal communication and will continue to do so in the future.
Works Cited


Griffin, Em. *A First Look at Communication Theory*. 2003, 55-64.


