

# SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

Authored by  
**mohammad looti**

October 13, 2025

## RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES.  
Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=44072>

## Symbolic Interactionism

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Sociology, Social Psychology, Philosophy

**Proponents:** George Herbert Mead, Herbert Blumer, Charles Horton Cooley

### 1. Core Principles

Symbolic Interactionism (SI) is a sociological and social psychological perspective that analyzes society by addressing the subjective meanings that people impose on objects, events, and behaviors. The fundamental premise of this theory, formalized by Herbert Blumer, is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that these things have for them. Unlike structural theories which emphasize the determining influence of social institutions or norms, Symbolic Interactionism foregrounds the dynamic, ongoing process of interaction and interpretation that creates social reality.

The theory posits that meaning is not inherent in objects or actions; rather, meaning is derived from and arises out of social interaction with others. When individuals communicate, they use **symbols**--such as language, gestures, and physical actions--to convey intent and information. The definition of the individual's self-perspective is continually constructed and redefined by interpreting the symbolic body language, actual words, and physical actions that other individuals present to them during social communication. This implies a highly reflexive process where the individual constantly monitors both their own actions and the reactions of others to formulate appropriate responses.

Blumer distilled the essence of Symbolic Interactionism into three core premises. Firstly, humans act toward things (including other people) based on the meanings those things have for them. Secondly, the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows. Thirdly, these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things encountered. This interpretive process involves 'taking the role of the other,' allowing the actor to imagine how others perceive their actions, thus ensuring social coordination and the negotiation of meaning in every encounter.

### 2. Historical Development

The philosophical roots of Symbolic Interactionism are traced back to the school of American Pragmatism, particularly the works of John Dewey and Charles Sanders Peirce, which emphasized the practical, contextual, and instrumental nature of knowledge and action. However, the theoretical groundwork for SI was most substantially laid by philosopher and social psychologist George Herbert Mead at the University of Chicago during the early 20th century. Mead's posthumously published work, *Mind, Self, and Society* (1934), provides the comprehensive analysis of how the human mind and self emerge from the process of social communication,

viewing the self not as a substance but as a process of interaction.

Mead's ideas were systematized and given the official name "Symbolic Interactionism" by his student, Herbert Blumer, in the 1930s. Blumer championed the perspective within the Chicago School of Sociology, arguing for a methodological approach that favored qualitative, naturalistic observation over quantitative methods, believing that only through deep immersion in the social world could researchers truly understand the subjective meanings that guide human behavior. Blumer emphasized the methodological implications, stressing that social scientists must grasp the actor's perspective to analyze social phenomena accurately.

The theory's development led to a notable divergence in the latter half of the 20th century. While the Chicago School (led by Blumer) remained committed to a non-positivist, qualitative, and interpretive approach, the Iowa/Indiana School, led by sociologists like Manford Kuhn, sought to operationalize Mead's concepts using quantitative methods. This structural Symbolic Interactionism attempted to define key concepts (such as the Self or identity) as measurable variables, leading to a long-standing methodological debate regarding the true nature and scope of the theory.

### 3. Key Concepts and Components

The Self (I and Me)

The Generalized Other

Role-Taking and Perspective

The Looking-Glass Self

Definition of the Situation

The central concept in SI is the **Self**, which Mead argued is fundamentally social. The Self is not present at birth but develops through social experience and language. Mead conceptualized the Self as having two dialectically related phases: the **I** and the **Me**. The 'I' represents the spontaneous, unorganized, and immediate reaction of the individual to others--it is the subjective self, the source of action and impulse. The 'Me' represents the internalized attitudes of others; it is the socialized self, representing society's expectations and norms that the 'I' must respond to. The social act is thus a dialogue between the 'I' and the 'Me'.

The **Generalized Other** refers to the organized community or social group that provides the individual with his or her unity of self. It represents the attitude of the entire community, and mastering this concept is crucial for mature social interaction. When an individual takes the attitude of the Generalized Other, they can anticipate the expectations of the community as a whole, enabling them to govern their actions in diverse social settings and maintain a consistent sense of identity.

**The Looking-Glass Self**, a concept pioneered by Charles Horton Cooley, describes how our sense of self is constructed based on our interpretation of how others see us. This process involves three primary elements: first, we imagine how we appear to another person; second, we imagine the judgment of that appearance by the other person; and third, we experience self-feelings (such as pride, shame, or humiliation) based on our perception of that judgment. This concept highlights that the self is perpetually dependent on, and responsive to, perceived external validation and evaluation.

The **Definition of the Situation** is a concept articulated by W.I. Thomas, closely allied with symbolic interactionism, stating that if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences. This means that subjective interpretations are crucial determinants of behavior. Before an individual acts, they must define the context, the meaning of the symbols involved, and the likely outcomes of their action. Social order is thus maintained only because individuals generally agree, or at least negotiate, on a shared definition of the situation.

#### 4. Applications and Examples

Symbolic Interactionism has been highly influential in diverse fields of sociological inquiry, providing a micro-level lens to understand phenomena traditionally studied through macro-level structures. One of the most significant applications is in the field of deviance, particularly through **Labeling Theory**. Labeling theorists argue that deviance is not inherent in an act itself, but rather a product of the societal reaction and the application of the label "deviant" by powerful groups or institutions. Once a person is publicly labeled, their interactions change, leading to a modified self-concept and potentially resulting in secondary deviance as they internalize the label.

In the sociology of health and medicine, SI is used to analyze the dynamics of the patient-physician relationship. The interactionist perspective highlights the negotiation of authority, identity, and information that occurs during clinical encounters. For instance, the illness experience is understood not merely as a biological state but as a socially constructed role. Patients must learn to manage their identity (the 'Me') in the face of a potentially stigmatizing illness, and doctors must interpret symbolic cues (body language, tone) to arrive at a shared definition of the medical situation and treatment plan.

SI is also applied extensively in the study of social problems and education. For example, the concept of the **Self-Fulfilling Prophecy**--where a false definition of a situation evokes a new behavior which makes the original false conception come true--is interactionist in nature. In educational settings, teacher expectations (a symbolic input) can profoundly influence student performance (the resulting behavior). If a teacher defines a student as 'bright' or 'troubled,' that definition alters the subsequent interaction, shaping the student's self-concept and academic trajectory.

## 5. Criticisms and Limitations

Despite its profound insights into micro-level social dynamics, Symbolic Interactionism faces several important criticisms, primarily concerning its scope and methodology. The most common critique is that SI tends to ignore larger, macro-level structures of society, such as economic systems, class, race, political power, and institutional constraints. Critics argue that by focusing exclusively on face-to-face interaction and negotiated meaning, the theory fails to account for the powerful, pre-existing inequalities and fixed social contexts that significantly limit individuals' ability to define or redefine their situations.

Methodologically, Blumer's insistence on qualitative, highly interpretive methods (like participant observation) has drawn criticism for lack of scientific rigor and replicability. The focus on subjective meaning makes generalization difficult, leading some opponents to argue that SI provides rich description but weak explanatory or predictive power. Furthermore, the theory has been criticized for being overly concerned with trivial or minor interactions, often failing to address the central, persistent conflicts and structural problems of modern society.

A further limitation often raised is that SI sometimes presents an overly rationalized view of human behavior. By emphasizing the interpretive process--the internal dialogue between the 'I' and the 'Me' and the careful calculation of meaning--the theory may neglect the role of non-rational factors, such as strong emotions, unconscious motives, and biological drives, in determining action. While the original source content mentioned Harold Garfinkel as representative of SI, it is important to note that Garfinkel's Ethnomethodology emerged partially as a critique and refinement of SI, focusing less on internal psychological interpretation and more on the shared, taken-for-granted methods people use to maintain a sense of objective reality, further complicating the boundaries of the theory.

## 6. Further Reading

[Symbolic Interactionism \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Blumer, H. \(1962\). Society as Symbolic Interaction.](#)

[Mead, G. H. \(1934\). Mind, Self, and Society.](#)

[Cooley, C. H. \(1902\). Human Nature and the Social Order.](#)