

for other people by camouflaging our flaws. At the same time, we want people to view our actions as just how we naturally are, rather than have them think of us as being intentionally manipulative and calculating. What motives explain how we emphasize different aspects of social life?

Some people also do more than miss the forest for the trees. Instead, they do everything they can to avoid even seeing the forest at all. The simplicity of one-dimensional explanations has a straightforward appeal. They make social order and explanations unproblematic and people often prefer to hear what they want rather than to dissect issues. Can you think of a time when you urged people to think of a bigger picture and they resisted your arguments? As an example, think of how the calf guy might respond if you told him that lacking big calves might not be his cure-all. Why do many people tend to respond with such hostility to explanations that can counter their expectations?

This book explores how social expectations connect to specific social roles and institutions. Symbolic interactionists study the processes by which people create social meaning, how such meaning is self-referential (meaning how people see themselves as self-conscious images out there), and how people relate to each other. We present ways to understand the motives for people's actions and to understand how those motives for acting become powerful enough to influence behavior. We also hope to encourage people to better understand their own actions. In our view, sociology is not a storehouse of facts and formulas that people should apply mechanically to human problems. Instead, sociology offers tools for examining reality and the human condition.

We are confident that the ideas in this book are powerful tools for critical thinking. The ability to think analytically is important when we live in a world brimming with ideological movements whose leaders want to impose their own versions of utopias on the rest of us. There are also many professional reformers who underestimate the magnitude of their task and think the world yields to goodness easily. We think that the insights of sociology and social psychology are tremendously useful in helping individuals to appraise social situations in complex ways. An ideal that people should think deeply and independently about human behavior, and problems of human behavior, seems like a good idea to us. That is our book's goal and we very much hope that you will enjoy reading it.

CHAPTER

1

Introducing Social Psychology
and Symbolic Interactionism

*What's in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet.*

These lines—spoken from Juliet's balcony in William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*—encapsulate the great power that names have in social life. Taken at face value, the names that we use to categorize people, objects, and beliefs appear to be mere labels of convenience. Thinking more deeply, however, it is easy to see that names have profound consequences for what people can, must, or must not do. Because Juliet, a member of the Capulet family, and Romeo, a Montague, are members of feuding families, they are forbidden from loving one another. Juliet urges Romeo, "O be some other name," knowing that if only Romeo were not a Montague, and she not a Capulet, they would be the same individuals but they could now marry. Juliet's melancholic words speak to the power inherent in the names that surround us, from the traditional importance placed on "continuing the family name" to the stickiness of nicknames. This book analyzes the wide range and impact of such psychological, social, and symbolic influences in our everyday lives.

Two distinct names—*social psychology* and *symbolic interactionism*—categorize both this book's subject matter and our scholarly orientations. Social psychology positions this book's content within a diverse body of research and theory that spans the disciplines of sociology and psychology. Symbolic interactionism situates the authors within a particular tradition of sociological theory and research. The first task in developing a symbolic interactionist social psychology is to explore the origins and implications of these names. We begin by differentiating symbolic interactionism from other perspectives in social psychology, and we then offer a systematic statement of its major tenets.

What Is Social Psychology?

Both psychologists and sociologists use the term *social psychology* to designate a field of specialization in their disciplines. The shared custody of this term began in 1908, when two books were published, each with social psychology in its title. One, written by the psychologist William McDougall, argued for studying the “native basis of the mind” in order to understand how society acts on those innate characteristics in human beings.¹ Like other scholars of that era, McDougall emphasized the concept of inherent instincts, and encouraged discovering the “innate tendencies of thought and action” that characterize human beings. The other book, by sociologist Edward A. Ross, prioritized explaining social forces and processes that come into existence because human beings associate with one another. Ross felt, for example, that the nature and structure of the individual mind alone could not explain why fads and fashions spread. Ross foregrounds a sociological approach by focusing on how human association creates behavioral processes that are cumulative, and whose study cannot be reduced to analyzing individuals in isolation.²

McDougall and Ross identify themes that still matter in social psychology. Psychologists, of course, acknowledge that social and cultural forces shape the environment within which basic psychological processes such as learning, cognition, or emotion occur. However, social psychologists make an individual the key unit of analysis. Sociologists, on the other hand, want to describe and explain patterns of conduct among larger aggregates of people—groups, communities, social classes, and even whole societies. Without denying the importance of individual instincts and other processes that operate at the individual level, sociological social psychologists prioritize the products of human association and make society the beginning point of their analysis.

Psychologist Gordon Allport defined social psychology as the “attempt to understand and explain how the thought, feeling, and behavior of individuals are influenced by the actual, imagined, or implied presence of others.”³ Studies of conformity, for example, explore how social groups shape the thoughts and actions of individuals. In Solomon Asch’s historical experiments, subjects demonstrate social conformity by intentionally misjudging the relative lengths of lines. Asch’s experiment used hidden collaborators who deliberately judged longer lines to be shorter in an effort to pressure a lone person to conform to a majority’s erroneous opinions, which they did.⁴ Likewise, in Stanley Milgram’s studies of obedience, Milgram demonstrated that he could induce individuals to obey directions to inflict apparent harm on others, just for the sake of an experiment. Milgram created laboratory conditions wherein subjects administered what they believed were painful electric shocks to other human subjects, even over a victim’s strong protests and vocal expressions of pain. The shocks were not real, of course, but the experiment was staged convincingly to create the impression that they were.⁵ Milgram created a social situation that demonstrated that social pressures can cause sane, normally gentle people to engage in surprisingly brutal behaviors. In other words, a social situation can create brutal conformity in decent people; acts of brutality cannot just be explained as the work of sadistic individuals. Situations and individual dispositions must both be considered. Milgram’s study, conducted in the 1950s in the aftermath of World War II and the Holocaust, is not a historical relic. Jerry Burger recently replicated Milgram’s study, and using a modified experimental procedure, showed that people today are willing to administer painful shocks at about the same rate as they did in Milgram’s study.⁶

More recently, psychological social psychologists have studied the cognitive processes that shape individual behavior in social settings.⁷ In order to act, human beings must have considerable organized knowledge of themselves and of the social world. To explain what they do, therefore, social psychologists must study how people acquire, store, retrieve, and utilize this knowledge. As we note later in this chapter, the concept of the *schema*—an organized set of cognitions about a person, role, or situation—helps in this task. We humans do not meticulously catalog bits and pieces of information about others with whom we interact, about ourselves, or about the situations we encounter. Rather, we form schemas—composite pictures—that shape what we see, experience, and remember. People are apt to see homosexuals, for example, not as individuals in all their variety, but as representatives of a type—“homosexual”—and to act toward them as if these characteristics and behaviors represent them all. Such schemas—in everyday language we call them *stereotypes*—shape our actions in significant ways. In a sense, how we use schemas suggests that Juliet’s assertion is erroneous: A rose by any other name may not smell as sweet to us.

The sociological approach to social psychology focuses on the social world itself rather than on the individual.⁸ We examine social structure, culture, social roles, groups, organizations, and collective behavior as environments and levels of reality in their own right. Sociologists use concepts similar to ones that psychologists use—what cognitive social psychologists call a “schema” the sociologist is apt to call a “typification”—but with different purposes. For example, the psychologist is interested in how individuals use a “homosexual” schema to organize their understandings and actions toward that group, whereas sociologists are interested additionally in how a “homosexual” typification originates, is maintained, and functions to impose particular relationships between members of the gay and straight communities.

In our view, we gain nothing by arguing about which approach is better or which discipline has a prior claim on using a particular term. Psychologists and sociologists are not Capulets and Montagues, and their respective offspring are free to marry or not as they choose. The two disciplines are, nonetheless, two separate families, each with its own ideas about how to pursue the task of studying and explaining human conduct.

Our goal here is to present and develop a symbolic interactionist approach to social psychology. Symbolic interactionism is a general sociological perspective, and its theories and research extend beyond social psychology. Indeed, the basic concepts and theoretical insights of symbolic interactionism that we present here are important to sociology as a whole and not just social psychology. Sociologists take a distinctive view of the relationship between the person and the social world. Sociologists state that society is the source of human knowledge, language, skills, orientations, and motives. Individuals are born into and shaped by a society that will persist long after they are dead. While they are products of that society and its culture, that same society owes its existence and continuity to the conduct of its members. Neither “society” nor “culture” actually does anything, for both are abstractions. Only people act, and by acting, they create and perpetuate their society and its culture.⁹

This paradoxical relationship between an individual and society leads to some difficult questions: *How* does the individual acquire from a society the capacity to be an active, functioning member? Indeed, *what* does the individual acquire—what skills, knowledge, ideas, and beliefs? The social act of learning is crucial. While fundamental biologically

programmed drives are the most important factor underlying human behaviors, an orderly and persevering society is guaranteed not only by biological programming alone, but also by what we learn as social beings. More than instinct guides individuals. They must rely on society and culture for their survival.

The simple assertion that culture primarily shapes behavior, however, begs the question of how cultural influences work. Human sexuality, for example, is part of our biological programming, yet it is profoundly influenced by culture. Human beings find a great variety of things—female breasts, male biceps, the size of genitalia, feet, spanking, leather clothing—sexually arousing. They engage in sexual activity in a variety of places—bedrooms, beaches, public restrooms, and in front of cameras. They have phone sex, virtual sex, and sex using the Internet to control mechanical sexual toys remotely, a practice known as “teledildonics.” We have created a culture and commercial world of sex products that is so seemingly infinite that it is now a rich subject of parody, as in the example of *www.furnitureporn.com*, a Web site that features furniture pieces set next to each other in “pornographic” poses. Culture brings about this variety, not human nature. But how does culture shape these human sexual preferences and conduct? How does culture govern anything that human beings do?

Sociologists have adopted a variety of views regarding how society and culture explain actual conduct. In one view, which some criticize as *overdetermined*, culture and social structure dictate conduct so overwhelmingly that the question of what individuals actually think is moot. People perform the same tasks over and over again; the social situations and relationships in which people find themselves are pretty much the same from one day to the next; and cultures provide ready-made ways of behaving. As a result, explaining how culture and society actually shape conduct is less interesting and important than explaining the origins and persistence of cultural patterns and social structures. In other words, rather than study how people comply with norms or even whether they agree on what a given norm is, we are to assume that people blindly follow norms. In this perspective, we consider how norms emerge while taking their influence for granted.

This structural perspective has many attractive features. Human social life is highly repetitive, and we can transcend the details of individual behavior and its formation to see patterns and regularities. For example, the concept of social class references the fact that societies are divisible into segments whose members have a similar position in the division of labor, comparable education and incomes, and similar views of themselves and their places in the world. One social class, for example, might consist of small business owners, another of service workers, and another of corporate managers. In each case, the similarities are likely to be greater among the members of these classes than between the members of different classes. Class is a structural concept; its focus is on the patterned and repetitive conduct and social relationships that can be observed within and between various groups in a society at any given point in history. Moreover, although society ultimately depends on the conduct of individuals, their actions and interactions typically have consequences that they do not foresee or recognize. The everyday actions of people as they work, eat and drink, play, make love, socialize, vote, take walks, and attend meetings seem powerfully influenced by social class. Their actions maintain familiar patterns of behavior and they pass these patterns on to succeeding generations, who, in enacting these patterns, re-create the structures of social class.

Although it is crucial to study the reproduction of these social and cultural patterns, limiting attention to this analytic level has drawbacks. We should avoid accepting sweeping

generalizing statements of what is “real” as taken-for-granted truths. First, even though social life is highly repetitive, it is not completely so, for patterns change over time, sometimes slowly and at other times, dramatically and quickly. Contemporary men and women in Canada or the United States, for example, inherit social roles and images of one another that were created during the nineteenth century but that have been periodically modified since. Although a small minority of people might still believe that women lack the political or intellectual skills to run for high political office, and that their talents and moral obligations should confine them to home and family, a majority of people, as evidenced in Sarah Palin’s and Hillary Clinton’s appeals in the American election process in 2008, now reject those beliefs. While criticisms of aspects of their candidacies may have veered into sexism, no group argued that sex alone was a valid basis for excluding either candidate from serious consideration by voters. The emergence of feminist movements and the economic facts of contemporary life have caused what were once perceived as unquestioned practices rooted in human nature, to now seem antiquated. Patterns that once seemed entrenched have changed—absolute seeming norms have been altered, redefined, rejected, and replaced. A structural approach is poorly suited to considering how norms evolve from a bottom-up perspective, such as examining how groups of individuals change society.

A second limitation of strictly focusing on patterns and regularities is that social arrangements are often matters of conflict and controversy and involve widespread disagreement. Assuming that people see all norms and compliance with them in uniform ways is erroneous. The contemporary United States, for example, is rife with battles over cultural values between very religiously conservative people and a majority whose orientation is more secular. Whether the issue is abortion, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) issuing an obscenity fine for Janet Jackson’s “wardrobe malfunction,” the place of religion in public life, or the legality of gay marriage, fundamental disagreements over values are everywhere. To grasp how a society works and the place of individuals within it, we cannot just study a dominant secular pattern. We also have to examine the tension between the secular and the socially and religiously conservative resistance to the secular. What distinct interpretations of the world does each side associate with their deeply held views of what is absolutely “true?” Culture and conduct are in flux. We must look at them as shaped by the efforts of people who work within, and sometimes against, an inherited culture and existing social arrangements. People are not thoroughly and passively socialized to accept and reproduce culture and society, for under many circumstances they resist and rebel, finding ways to escape from the patterns of conduct that others urge them to follow. People are not merely agents of an existing social order. They are also active agents who create and change that order. Women did not just receive the vote. They fought for enfranchisement.

Many sociologists eschew concentrating on social structure and culture alone. They recognize the necessity for basic theories of action that account for how people actually form their conduct in everyday life in relation to cultural influences, and also for explaining how individual actions can sustain and/or modify those influences. The main task of sociological social psychology is to create such a theory of action. Its job is to examine the details of action and interaction, to show how society and culture influence people and also how their everyday actions both sustain and change these larger realities. To do so, the social psychologist concentrates on topics like socialization, the nature of the self and identity, and the actual formation of conduct in everyday life. Symbolic interactionism is

centrally concerned with these topics, which have also preoccupied sociological social psychologists. Examining these issues—chief among them how the individual and the society are linked—are central to this book.

What Is Symbolic Interactionism?

Symbolic interactionism is a distinctively American sociological perspective with roots in the philosophy of *pragmatism*.¹⁰ This philosophical tradition, identified with such scholars as Charles S. Peirce, William James, John Dewey, and George Herbert Mead, views living things as attempting to make practical adjustments to their surroundings. As philosophers, they are interested in fundamental questions of philosophy: What is truth? What is good? What is knowledge? How do we acquire knowledge? How do we know that we know the truth? In seeking answers to these questions, they argue that an idea's truth or a statement's meaning depends on its practical consequences. An idea, they say, is true if it works. Pragmatists see all living creatures as attempting to meet the demands of their environments in practical ways. They think that knowledge must always confront practical tests of usefulness, a view that emphasizes the consequences of ideas rather than their logical elegance or internal consistency.

Pragmatists see living things as probing and testing their environments. Truth is, therefore, not absolute, but is always relative to the needs and interests of organisms. An idea—for example, the idea that the sun rises in the east—is “true” if it leads to empirical predictions that help people adjust to the requirements and circumstances of their world. Questions of how members of a species know and interact with their environment are, for pragmatists, matters of great moment, not merely peripheral concerns. Knowing and acting, in the pragmatist's view, are intimately linked. We act on the basis of our ideas about the world. The reality of the world is not merely something that is “out there” waiting to be discovered by us, but is actively created as we act in and toward the world.

Philosophical pragmatism is an important forerunner of symbolic interactionism. Contemporary symbolic interactionism reflects the influence of Mead, Dewey, Peirce, and James, and various symbolic interactionists trace their ideas to one or another of these figures. However, George Herbert Mead is recognized as the single intellectual ancestor that all interactionists must honor. His theory of mind, directly or indirectly, profoundly shaped and continues to shape the work of symbolic interactionists. Mead's work comes to us primarily through his students at the University of Chicago, who assembled notes on his courses in social psychology into a book, *Mind, Self, and Society*, after his death in 1931.¹¹

Mead's theory of mind attempts to account for the origins and development of human intelligence. He links mind and conduct, and shows that the origins of human mind lie in human society. For Mead, mind, body, and conduct are inseparable aspects of a process of evolution that has produced a unique human life form. All organisms come into existence and persist (or fail to persist) in interaction with their environments. Their physical structures and their capacities to act are created under specific environmental conditions. Organisms are not just passive receptors of stimuli that emanate from their surroundings. Each organism has a set of capacities to respond to its world. Bees, for example, are sensitive to the angle of light coming from the sun and use this knowledge in locating and returning to food sources. Humans are sensitive to the nuances of language

and employ this capacity in everything they do. Such capacities have evolved over long periods of time as environmental conditions have changed and evolutionary adaptations have developed. An organism's capacities to respond to the environment help to make the environment what it is. The human child who learns how to react to a parental “no” is acting on his or her parents, obeying their demands in order to influence their acts, and thus secure personal needs for nurture or praise, every bit as much as he or she is being acted on by the parents.

In Mead's time, many social scientists explained human mind and conduct as being solely the result of instincts. If people cared for their children, resisted change, or sought novel experiences, social scientists argued that they did so because they were programmed with particular maternal, conservative, or novelty-seeking instincts. Mead argued that too much cultural diversity, novelty, and complexity exist for instincts to be a satisfactory explanation of human conduct. Thus, Mead rejected an instinctivist approach and the psychological theory that was the prevailing wisdom of the time. In doing so, he opened up new avenues for symbolic interactionist thinking.

Mead also criticized behaviorism, which insisted that the true path to explaining human behavior (or any animal behavior) lay in paying strict attention only to what the scientists could directly observe—both behavior and environmental events (stimuli) associated with the behavior. They emphasized that behavior was learned, and they sought to uncover the laws that governed learning behavioral responses to environmental stimuli. The behaviorists shunned any concept of mind. They stated that what is essential in conduct is not what people think they are doing but what they observably do and how they are rewarded for doing it. Mental events—thoughts, ideas and images—were for them mostly irrelevant because, they believed, such events are unobservable.

Mead felt that behaviorists are right to emphasize behavior, but he also thought that internal, mental events are crucial in explaining human conduct. Contrary to Watson, Mead argued that mental events are a form of behavior that can be observed. Human beings talk about inner experiences and in so doing, they make them observable. Moreover, behaviorism has far too individual a focus for Mead's taste. Although it is true that it is the individual who behaves, individual behavior is rarely disconnected from the acts of others. Human behavior is socially coordinated, often in very complex ways over extended periods of time, and any explanation of behavior that fails to take this fact into account is doomed from the start. Most individual acts are a part of more complex, socially coordinated activities involving several people. Shaking hands, for example, is not merely a bit of behavior in which one person extends a hand in response to the stimulus of the extended hand of another, but it is also a socially coordinated act in which the past experiences and future hopes of two individuals, as well as established social conventions, are important. Shaking hands to seal a business agreement differs from shaking hands in a situation where one of the individuals hoped for a kiss. To only assess the individual's part of an action within a more extensive social act is an attempt to explain far less than what we can and must explain in order to understand conduct. It was Mead's genius that he explained the nature and origins of human intelligence—the mind—that could deal with inner experience and simultaneously account for the social nature of human life. Although a full account of his theory and its application in contemporary symbolic interactionism is presented in Chapter 2 of this book, we sketch a brief outline of Mead's contributions here.

Many living things other than humans exist in association with others of their own kind and are affected by these associations. Other mammals vary in their gregariousness, for example, but all have at least some forms of association with one another, whether as members of a herd or of a small band of primates whose social organization and interdependence are more complex. Mead argued, however, that the basis for human interaction differs substantially from that of other animals, including our primate cousins. Among other animals, interaction takes a form that Mead called the "conversation of gestures." Each individual, in beginning an act, engages in overt and visible actions that can be detected by others and serve as stimuli to their responses. A dog, beginning a fight with another dog, bares its teeth and assumes an aggressive stance; its physical gestures are stimuli that key an aggressive response from the other. Interaction, thus, proceeds between the animals, with the control of each dog's behavior effectively in the hands of the other.

Humans are different. First, the most important gestures for people are lingual. Humans are animals that possess language and whose conduct occurs in a world of words. We are attuned to the overt bodily movements of others and also to a complex set of vocalizations that precede and accompany their acts and our own. Second, these vocal gestures—acts of speech—have the unique property of arousing in the one using them nearly the same response as they arouse in the others to whom they are directed. They are, in Mead's words, "significant symbols." Shouting the word "Fire!" in a public place, for example, does not merely elicit a flight response from those present. The word creates, both in the crowd and in the one who shouts it, a certain attitude—a readiness to act in a particular way, images of conduct appropriate to the situation, plans of action. Creating a common attitude in both the symbol-user and symbol-hearer makes the individual's control of his or her own conduct possible. For example, anticipating the possibility of people panicking if we hastily start screaming "Fire," we may decide instead to attempt to warn people in a subdued way, improving the chances for safe evacuation. Anticipating how other people might react influences our thoughts and conduct.

The significant symbol provides humans with a form of control over their own conduct that other animals lack: self-consciousness. Our capacity to use symbols in imagining how other people will respond to our actions allows us to be conscious of ourselves. We can think of ourselves in the third person—as objects out there in the social world. We can name ourselves, think about ourselves, talk to ourselves, imagine ourselves acting in various ways, love or hate ourselves, and feel proud or ashamed of ourselves; in short, we can act toward ourselves in all the ways we can act toward others. In this way, people have a motivating inner life that helps explain our external actions.

Mead's account of human behavior, mind, and self is a significant milestone in human self-understanding. His theory stresses explaining human conduct in scientific terms based on scientific observation. Simultaneously, he emphasizes inner experiences as being capable of observation, because we can report and communicate our private experiences and feelings to others using significant symbols. Mead's theory recognizes the sociability of human beings and puts the human experience of self on center stage. Human beings are conceived as creatures whose evolution has provided a capacity for self-control. Chapter 2 of this book builds on these basic ideas, developing a conceptual framework for a symbolic interactionist social psychology. To embark on this task, the remainder of this chapter develops a general overview of contemporary symbolic interactionism, first by identifying its major points of similarity to, and difference from other theoretical perspectives, and then by stating its major tenets.

Other Theoretical Approaches

Social psychologists have developed many approaches to understanding the link between society and conduct. Learning theory, psychoanalytic theory, exchange theory, phenomenology, ethnomethodology, social cognition theory, social constructionist theory, and post-modern theory are all part of contemporary social psychology, and all have impacted contemporary symbolic interactionism.

Learning Theory

John Watson's thinking provided the foundations for a school of psychological thought that is variously known as behaviorism, learning theory, or, in its more explicitly social psychological form, *social learning theory*.¹² Behaviorists typically refuse to consider "mental" and "subjective" phenomena as being observable. Instead they choose to emphasize direct measurement and observation of behaviors and environmental events. The basic ideas of behaviorism are familiar to students who have studied psychology and know something about classical (or respondent) conditioning and operant conditioning. Classical conditioning is often illustrated by referring to the work of the Russian psychologist Ivan Pavlov, who demonstrated that a response, such as a dog's salivating in the presence of food, could also be elicited by an unrelated stimulus, like the sound of a bell, as long as the bell was rung each time the food was presented to a hungry dog. After a certain number of trials in which food and a bell were presented together, the bell alone begins to produce the salivation response. This response is involuntary (the dog has no control over it), but the dog can associate it with a stimulus other than the one (food) that usually elicits it.

Operant conditioning focuses on more voluntary behavior—behavior that an organism controls and can produce in order to yield certain effects. In this form of conditioning, for which the psychologist B. F. Skinner is the chief architect of ideas, the stimulus follows the response. That is, some behavior (such as a pigeon pecking on a certain spot on its cage) is followed by a specific event (such as a kernel of corn being released into the cage). If the organism values the event (stimulus), the behavior is more likely to be repeated in the future. Under these conditions we would say that the behavior is positively reinforced.

How do principles of classical and operant conditioning provide a basis for social psychology? The governing idea is that an individual's environment, including other human beings with whom interactions occur, is the source of stimuli—both those that trigger classical, involuntary responses, and those that serve as positive and negative reinforcement, or as a punishment for voluntary activities. Thus, one might say that a child learns a repertory of behavior from his or her parents, who reinforce or punish the child's behaviors. The child learns to brush his or her teeth, or say "Thank you," for example, because he or she is positively reinforced for doing so and perhaps punished for not doing so. An important extension of learning theory is the observation that learning in social contexts is often vicarious: By observing the behavior of others and the rewards their actions earn, we learn what they learn without going through any trial and error ourselves. The child learns that he or she will receive praise for being polite to adults when he or she observes other children experience this reinforcement. The child can then enact the behavior, get the reinforcement, and thus experience model learning. This theory of social learning

expands the basic ideas of learning theory and adapts them to the realities of social life as we observe it: People learn by systematic observation and imitation and not simply by blind trial and error.

Symbolic interactionists find much that is appealing in this perspective. Behaviorists, like symbolic interactionists, emphasize studying actual and observable behavior. Their perspective views learning as an important process, and symbolic interactionists agree that people learn their repertory of conduct. Moreover, there is much in the behaviorists' ideas about operant conditioning that symbolic interactionists like. The idea that a future stimulus (the reward associated with an activity) can control a behavior is an important one, for it is a way of conceiving behavior as being goal-oriented. Much of what people do seems designed to produce some desired future effect.

But in the eyes of symbolic interactionists, classical behaviorism also has some serious flaws. Although both classical and operant conditioning can be found in human behavior, the symbolic interactionist also seeks evidence of processes that are not observed in other animals. The interactionist would say, for example, that people are aware of conditioned responses, whether they are respondent or operant. We can—and typically do—become aware of the relationship of present conduct to future events. Indeed, much of what we do is intended to influence what will happen to us in the future, whether in the next moment or the next year. Self-awareness and reflection is crucial to intentional behavior; for a person's capacity to be conscious of his or her own present and future actions makes it possible for these actions to be controlled. Becoming aware of the relationship between what I do at this moment and some future event is the first step in acquiring the capacity to control that response. The ability to govern my own behavior to secure goals depends on my capacity to imagine myself acting in multiple ways so that I can choose effective acts.

Moreover, although contemporary behaviorism conceives the social environment as an important source of stimuli, it still tends toward a microscopic view of behavior in which the complexities and real significance of that environment are ignored. Think of our earlier example of a child learning that politeness and obedience produce such rewards as praise and affection. To apply behaviorism in a very strict manner, one has to assume that the child—whether gradually on a trial-and-error basis or more quickly and vicariously—learns to behave in ways that produce the desired results. Symbolic interactionists argue that there is more to the process of learning than the reinforcement of specific acts. People seem to be guided not merely by rewards, but also by more general ideas of how their own conduct should dovetail with the conduct of others. Although in the earliest stages of our experience, these ideas may be fairly concrete ("If I eat all my food, my mother will be happy with me"), they gradually become more complex and abstract as the person ages. Our conduct comes to be guided more by general principles than by discrete reactions to concrete situations.

For the symbolic interactionist, an individual develops an awareness, not just of the specific behavior that will produce a particular result in a given situation, but more generally of one's place in the life of the group as a whole. One knows that he or she might get called on to play various roles, that the roles one enacts must somehow mesh with the roles of others, and that one must control one's own acts so that they fit in with the acts of other people. Thus, the interactionist conception of how people learn conduct is more global, complex, social, and dynamic than the simple learning model suggests.

Psychoanalytic Theory

Few social psychologists work explicitly from a *psychoanalytic perspective*, but Sigmund Freud and his intellectual followers have had an impact on the social sciences as a whole and also on our everyday, commonsense ideas about psychology.¹³ Freudian theory has a distinct view of both the nature of society, and of the development and vicissitudes of the individual personality. Freud regarded the individual and society as being in conflict with one another. Freud's conception of personality divides it into three components. The *id* is the source of the individual's drives, instincts, and behavioral energy. The forces that move behavior—such as sexuality or aggression—are biological and universal and exceedingly powerful. These drives are a central force with which the individual and society must contend. The *id*, for example, is the source of both the sexual drive and images of sexual activities or partners that will satisfy that drive.

The second component of personality is the *ego*, which is a kind of operating mechanism that searches in the external world for opportunities to meet the organism's needs. The ego lives in the real world; that is, it confronts the external world and attempts to secure objects that will actually satisfy the person's drives. In a sense, the ego is driven by the *id*, for it attempts to accomplish what the *id* wants. In doing so, the ego must also cope with the third component of personality, the *superego*. The *superego* is the internalization of society and culture in the individual—many people refer to the *superego* as being "society's conscience." The *superego* represents what society stands for, as opposed to what the *id* wants, and it is as powerful and demanding a force as the latter. The *superego* represents morality, perfection, and the socially necessary as against the unremitting biological imperatives of the *id*. The ego can thus be thought of as the negotiator or manager that is caught between these two powerful forces, which are in conflict with one another. The ego has the difficult tasks of trying to satisfy both the *id* and the *superego* simultaneously. In doing so, the ego relies on many defensive techniques (*defense mechanisms*) whose objectives are to deceive the *id* and *superego* into thinking that their imperatives are being met. One of the more common mechanisms is repression, whereby potentially dangerous ideas or wishes are pushed out of the conscious part of the mind and into the unconscious. For example, if social values appraise sexuality negatively, the ego may deal with the insistent sexuality of the person by repressing it, and push sexuality out of consciousness.

Symbolic interactionists, like other sociological social psychologists, have either generally either ignored psychoanalysis or rejected it. In particular, most social psychologists reject Freud's biological and instinctual theory of motivation—they reject a depiction of human beings as seething pots of impulses that are barely contained by a thin veneer of civilization. Symbolic interactionists have felt that the relationship between society and the person is more cooperative, and that culture does not invariably battle biology. In their view, humans are animals without instincts; culture replaces the biological guidance that the human species has lost in the course of its evolution. As a result, culture guides human beings rather than restrains their antisocial impulses. If this version of events is true, much of the force of Freud's theory seems to be lost.

It is possible, however, to reject a theory of instincts and a theory of culture and biology as hopelessly pitted against one another without also rejecting some other important and valid insights that a psychoanalytic view offers. Donald Carveth argued that the instinctual basis of motivation could be rejected without discarding other aspects of Freud's

theory. Indeed, according to Carveth, the theory of instincts must be rejected in order to get to the really important insights of psychoanalysis.¹⁴ In a general sense, Freud's theories strongly caution against an oversocialized conception of human beings. Although culture does take the place of instinct, it does not automatically or mechanically dictate conduct. There is no lack of conflict between people or between the person and society, and what people do often seems unpredictable and inexplicable.

Moreover, in both psychoanalysis and symbolic interactionism, there is a basis for viewing the individual and society as in a natural state of tension with one another, although not in a constant state of war. Like Freud, symbolic interactionists say that acts have their beginnings beneath the level of consciousness. Psychoanalysis posits an unconscious with a life of which the individual is unaware and does not control. Symbolic interactionists are reluctant to adopt this conception, but they do acknowledge that people only become aware of the nature and directions of their acts after they have begun. Thus, they acknowledge that some part of mental life is unconscious. Symbolic interactionists also imbue individuals with the capacity to inhibit and redirect incipient acts—to say “no” to the impulses that arise within them, impulses that come from culture and from individual plans and purposes. The result is that the individual is no puppet of society, but is an active creature struggling for self-control, who develops plans and purposes that may run counter to what culture demands or encourages.

Exchange Theory

A third influential approach to sociological social psychology is the broad tradition known as *exchange theory*.¹⁵ Drawing on intellectual sources as diverse as behavioral psychology and microeconomics, this perspective focuses on exchanges of goods or benefits between people. Exchange theory begins with a key social fact: People have to obtain much of what they want or need from others. Not only material things, such as food or shelter, but also such social goods as status or approval can be obtained only if the individual interacts with others. The resources and skills people need often lie in the hands of others who must be induced to give them up. People are, in other words, interdependent, and the nature, extent, and consequences of this interdependence are the focus of exchange theory.

Although there are several varieties of exchange theory, underlying most approaches is a common set of ideas about the nature of human conduct and the relationships that build up among people as they exchange benefits. Linda Molm and Karen Cook¹⁶ have described three core assumptions of exchange theory, here paraphrased as follows:

- Relations develop among people within “structures of mutual dependence.”
- People act in ways that tend to increase outcomes they value or desire and to decrease outcomes they dislike.
- Over time, social relationships develop and are sustained as people develop mutually beneficial exchanges.

Taken as a whole, these core assumptions portray a social world of interdependence based on the exchange of those things that people need or want.

Exchange theory argues that interdependence is structured socially. Exchange relationships develop when social arrangements dictate that actors must secure the things they

value from one another. Exchange relationships develop between factory owners and workers, for example, because owners need workers' labor and workers need the money their labor earns in order to purchase goods. The interdependence may be unequal, where one participant is more dependent on the development of a relationship than the other. If there is a large unemployed or underemployed work force from which to hire workers, then owners are less dependent on any particular worker than workers are on owners. If jobs are plentiful and few workers exist to fill those jobs, the opposite is true. Nor must participants in an exchange be mutually dependent for everything. Workers, for example, may depend on owners for income, but they can seek other gratifications—confirmation of their worth, emotional support, and informal social contacts—elsewhere.

Exchange relationships develop in an established social world that shapes how people can depend on one another and exchange benefits. Some people have resources—money, land, tools, and knowledge—that others need, and the unequal distribution of these resources determines the conditions of social exchange. Established cultural definitions and expectations also structure relationships of dependence. In the nineteenth-century United States, for example, a popular ideal held that men ought to work outside the home to earn an income for their families and women should stay home to maintain the house, raise children, and nourish the family's emotional life. Women's rights to own and control property were restricted; men were expected to display strength and keep their emotions in check. These cultural definitions—the gender order—shaped patterns of dependence between men and women and thus also the character of exchanges between them. Men's labor at work provided the income needed to purchase the material necessities of life, and women's emotional labor provided men with a “haven in a heartless world” of occupational striving. These levels of exchange are abstract but they illustrate the basic mechanisms of exchange that these exchange theorists assume.

The basic motivational premise of exchange theory is that people act in ways that increase outcomes they value and decrease those they do not. In other words, over time, individuals will tend to do that which earns them benefits they want or need and to avoid doing those things that result in excessive costs. Consider how politicians will promise what they think will get them votes and try to avoid any positions that make voters hostile. Politicians may even lie to get votes if they value votes more than other goods—such as personal integrity or honesty—and if they can figure what lies will work best to get the most votes. Without besmirching all politicians, hardly a month goes by without a politician being condemned for being caught in a hypocritical lie. Who better to demonstrate a subterranean variant of exchange theory in politics than ex-governor of Illinois Rod Blagojevich, who allegedly attempted to trade a “golden” opportunity to appoint a senator in exchange for a variety of payoffs?

Exchange theory says nothing about what people are likely to value in any exchange, although we try to assess specifics through research. In other words, the theory predicts that if people value something, they will strive to achieve it and will tend, over time, to behave in ways that secure it. But the theory does not attempt to explain what people value—or why. Thus, the theory is somewhat less individualistic or egocentric than it seems, for individuals may value that which benefits particular others or the community as a whole and not just themselves. A child's values may favor hugs, videogames, or a bigger allowance for himself or herself, but they may also favor a happy or contented pair of parents. Or, in a worse case, the child may value parental actions that confirm the child's

image of himself or herself, even if that image is negative and the confirming actions of parents are disapproving and punishing.

Do people consciously or unconsciously select behaviors that increase valued outcomes and decrease undesirable ones? Contemporary exchange theorists argue that the process may range from largely unconscious to very conscious. Exchange theory is based partly on the precepts of learning theory. That is, over time, action and reward become linked, even if the individual is not consciously aware of the connection. The more an action is rewarded, the more it tends to be repeated. Exchange theorists, however, are generally willing to consider what behavioral psychologists are not—namely, that people may consciously and rationally calculate what will get them the things they value. Thus, a child may not consciously construct actions that earn parental disapproval and thus confirm a negative view of self. However, the student who always agrees with the professor's opinions may do so in a calculated effort to earn the professor's favor and thus improve the chances of a good grade. Likewise, a person may turn to the same people for help with his or her problems without being conscious of doing so. But he or she may also calculate rationally that some people will give help, whereas others will deny it.

Taken together, these first two key precepts of exchange theory—socially structured interdependence and the tendency to repeat successful actions—imply a third basic idea: Over time, social relationships between specific partners will tend to stabilize. That is, as people find dependable sources of the things they value, they will tend to return to these sources over and over again. If two people meet and begin to provide each other with companionship, approval, and aid, their relationship as friends will gradually stabilize. Each will find the other a reliable source of those valued goods; the behavior of each will, in effect, reward the behavior of the other.

The development of a stable relationship depends on the fact that exchanges are contingent, both within a particular transaction and across time. A neighbor who borrows a tool receives the benefit of using the tool. This particular transaction also establishes expectations for the future: The lender will feel comfortable borrowing a tool from the borrower in the future, and the borrower is apt to expect this act to occur. In other words, an exchange conducted in the present has implications for exchanges to be conducted in the future. Social relationships endure so long as benefits continue to be exchanged. A neighbor who borrows a tool but expresses no gratitude casts a slight shadow on the relationship—a shadow that grows and becomes darker if the pattern continues. A borrower who refuses to be a lender casts an even darker shadow. To refuse to do a favor for one who has done a favor is to interfere with the expected pattern of exchange. If a person cannot receive a benefit from someone on whom he or she has bestowed benefits, that person is apt to feel cheated, to turn to other people to supply future needs, and to refuse to provide benefits to the person who has refused to provide them. Over time, if benefits are not reciprocated, social relationships cease to exist. In their everyday lives, people regularly extend one another interpersonal credit. That is, they bestow benefits without expectation of immediate return. But when interpersonal credit limits are exceeded, people tend to act very much like Visa, MasterCard, or American Express: The card is revoked and no more purchases are allowed.

Just as water is more valuable to a thirsty person than to one who has just drunk his or her fill, so it is with other wants and needs. People can become satiated with advice, tools, approval, or money, and find each increment to their supply to be of less use. As

Molm and Cook (1995) point out, both psychological and economic principles are involved here. One of the key findings of behavioral psychology is that the more a given reward is obtained, the less valuable (i.e., the less "rewarding") each subsequent unit of that reward becomes. When the pigeon becomes satiated with corn, the behavioral outcome of pecking is less valuable and the pigeon is less likely to peck. Likewise, diminishing marginal utility is a key precept of economics. The more of a good the actor possesses, the less useful each additional unit of that good becomes, and so the less worthwhile it is to expend resources obtaining additional units.

Valued things do not diminish in value at the same rate. One can only consume so much food or drink at a time, and the average person's need for tools is likewise presumably finite. These valued things have rather particular and finite use value, and when the actor can no longer use additional quantities of them, their value diminishes. In contrast, money tends not to lose its value so quickly. The reason is that money has exchange value. That is, money is a valued thing that can always be exchanged for other valued things. The actor can exchange money for food, but when needs for foods are met, he or she can exchange money for other things as well: housing, transportation, entertainment, and almost anything else in a society in which practically everything is for sale. Prestige also has exchange value. If association with someone of high social standing is valued, then prestige is exchangeable for the things a person desires from others. Celebrities from movies and sports may make personal appearances at individual parties for a fee. MTV ran a television show about sweet 16 parties in which the children of affluent parents had lavish parties with well-known celebrity performers. In these cases, the celebrity receives money (and adulation) in exchange for conferring prestige-by-association on the party-giver and his or her guests.

Symbolic interactionists are wary of assumptions about the motivation on which exchange theory is built. Rather than positing the same motivation to all cases, such as the inclination to maximize gains and minimize losses, symbolic interactionists examine what people say about their motives and the real contexts of social interaction in which they make exchanges. Instead of assuming that conduct is propelled by a single set of meanings, symbolic interactionists study the meanings people actually produce. Exchange theory may capture the meanings that people create within contemporary capitalist society, but this does not mean that people do or must produce such meanings at all times and in all places. To capture this complexity is a goal of symbolic interactionism.

Phenomenology and Ethnomethodology

Two other perspectives are closely related to one another: Phenomenology and ethnomethodology¹⁷ deal more directly and explicitly with the meaning of human conduct than either learning theory or exchange theory. *Phenomenology* is a philosophical perspective whose founder was the German philosopher Edmund Husserl. As an approach to sociology and social psychology, its ideas have been adapted in the work of Alfred Schutz and Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann. Phenomenological sociology takes the subjective standpoint of individual actors as the central focus of attention. Unlike a more "objective" approach that views the social world as a reality that exists independently of any individual's perception of it, phenomenology posits reality as constituted by people's view of it. In other words, there is not a single, objective social reality that can be analyzed in the same

manner that a scientist might analyze physical reality. Instead, there are multiple realities. Pushed to an extreme, one might say that there are as many social realities as there are perspectives from which to view them. A phenomenological approach asserts that it is impossible to say that there is some objective reality called "American society" or "the Smith family" whose existence is so clear and straightforward that it can be literally described and explained. "The Smith family" is a different reality to each of its members, as it is to a variety of outsiders who come into contact with and perceive this family. To John Smith it may be a source of pride and satisfaction; to his wife the family may be a chafing set of restrictions; to the children the family may be a haven from a cruel world of teachers and peers. The family is a different reality to each member and to different outsiders, from neighbors, relatives, co-workers and different "friends of the family." The phenomenologist accounts for human conduct by attempting to "get within" and describe the subjective perspectives of people, on the premise that one can only understand and account for what people do by understanding the reality they perceive and act toward. A tradition that prioritizes what Max Weber labeled as "Verstehen," the need to value the subjective understandings of people in research, is a touchstone of symbolic interactionism and other interpretive sociological theories such as phenomenology and ethnomethodology.

Ethnomethodology is a variant of phenomenology. Like phenomenologists, ethnomethodologists are interested in the perspectives of actors, and how they view and act in their world as they see it. Ethnomethodologists are primarily concerned with the methods that people use to produce meaning. Ethnomethodologists assert that meaning lies in the accounts that people give of their experiences and interactions with others. These accounts are verbalizations, and they attempt to introduce order, sense, rationality, and predictability into the social world. For example, an ethnomethodologist might study how people are diagnosed as schizophrenic. The ethnomethodologist does not assume that there is some real disease called schizophrenia, or that its diagnosis is simply a matter of applying medical knowledge to ferret out the category of illness to which a given patient belongs. Instead, the ethnomethodologist suspends judgment on such questions and focuses on how the psychiatrist explains the diagnosis—the specific behaviors that he or she says are important, the rules he or she invokes to justify calling that behavior schizophrenic.

Underlying this approach is the belief that people are constantly engaged in a process of creating sense—making it appear that their behavior is correct or appropriate, that they are being sensible and normal human beings doing things in the usual way. This perspective argues that culture does not provide a specific set of rules that guide people in their everyday behavior, instead it provides the resources—including rules—that people can make use of in creating the illusion of normality and meaning in their everyday lives. Pursued to an extreme, ethnomethodology appears to take no interest at all in what people do, nor in explaining why people do what they do, but concerns itself only with how people make sense of what they do.

Ethnomethodologists place considerable emphasis on the detailed analysis of conversation. Given their perspective on the creation of social order, talk is of great importance. As people engage in conversations, they bring various resources to bear on their task of creating order. Moreover, they do so in very structured, regular ways. Conversations exhibit regular patterns of turn taking, for example, and frequently involve paired utterances, such as questions and answers or requests and refusals. Moreover, it is in mundane, everyday conversations that important social categories and distinctions are brought to life. If

gender and social class are important ways in which people categorize one another, for example, they must be employed and reproduced in people's talk.¹⁸ When a man calls a waitress "honey," or when men are accustomed to interrupting women speaking, or when people mimic ethnic accents, then sociological sensemaking is reinforcing broad gender, race and class dynamics in mundane, everyday conversation.

Symbolic interactionists find some features of phenomenology and ethnomethodology to be interesting and useful additions, and we will discuss some of these later in this book. Yet we do not consider these perspectives to be an adequate basis for a comprehensive social psychology. Although symbolic interactionism, like phenomenology, views a person's distinct perspective and perceptions as very important, symbolic interactionism avoids the extreme subjectivity into which phenomenology is prone to fall. Symbolic interactionists argue that people act on the basis of meanings, so that one's actions in a particular situation depend on the way that situation is perceived. If I believe the world is a hostile and dangerous place, I will interpret the actions of others in accordance with my belief and act accordingly. All the same, the world external to the individual does not simply become what the individual thinks it is. My view could be paranoid, and my actions may even cause other people to dislike me and to act in ways that confirm my paranoia, but the perceptions other people have of what I *really* should be paranoid about do not necessarily accord with mine. Someone worried about alien abductions might see a world full of extraterrestrial threats, but that does not mean that other people agree that they, for example, should cover their heads with tin foil to safeguard their thoughts and avoid driving on lonely country roads at night. The world, as an individual paranoid sees it, is different, and the paranoid's actions have different meanings for them than others would attribute to those actions. There is an external world that confronts and constrains the individual regardless of how he or she perceives or wants to perceive reality.

The major contribution of ethnomethodology is the insight that people construct meaning and sensibility through their conversations. Although symbolic interactionists emphasize the meanings that people share as they interact with one another, it is easy to overemphasize the extent to which meanings are fully and genuinely shared. Ethnomethodology emphasizes that shared meaning is often an illusion and not an actuality, that people have ways to convince themselves that they agree with one another, or that they share the same motives when, in fact, they do not. Beyond this insight, which is incorporated in this book, ethnomethodology is too limited in its scope to constitute an adequate foundation for social psychology as a whole. By reducing everything to the question of how people create meaning, it ignores such important matters as how people actually decide to act in particular ways, how interaction influences conduct, and how selves are formed. By paying attention only to what people say, ethnomethodology ignores a great variety of actions other than speech actions. Social psychology is necessarily concerned with all forms of conduct, not just talk. There is also an external world that acts upon us, regardless of how we want to make sense of it.

Social Cognition

Social cognition has been developed mainly by psychologists and is currently the leading approach to social psychology in their discipline. Nevertheless, this approach addresses questions of importance to sociology and some of its basic ideas are strikingly similar

to—or at least compatible with—those of symbolic interactionism. As its name implies, *social cognition* focuses on knowledge—its content, organization, creation, and processing. What do people know about themselves and the social world? How is this knowledge organized? How does it get created? How is it processed or manipulated in order to solve problems or achieve other individual objectives? The theory of social cognition is not very much concerned with behavior; “what people do and why they do it” is not the central question. Nor do practitioners of social cognition focus much on emotions or on how people feel about themselves or others. In the social science trinity of thoughts, feelings, and actions, the emphasis in social cognition is almost exclusively on thoughts.

Although social cognition resists easy summary, its major ideas can be stated as follows:¹⁹

- People are “cognitive misers” who develop cognitive structures that enable them to process the vast amounts of incoming information about themselves and others efficiently.
- Structures assist cognitive processes, such as paying attention, remembering, and making social inferences.
- Structures and processes are socially formed and socially consequential.

These ideas illustrate a theoretical perspective that is not much concerned with an overall portrayal of the nature of the social world but that instead prefers to focus on the ways its members process information about it.

Social cognition theory postulates that the individual in the social world is constantly receiving far more information about others (and about the self) than he or she can process. Visual inspection may inform people about the age, gender, race, occupation, social class, or other characteristics of different people. People have wrinkles or gray hair, dress as men or women, have light or dark skin, and wear the uniforms of physicians or telephone workers. Likewise, their words and deeds are sources of information about them, their intentions, their interpretations of a situation, and their attitudes toward one another. People speak in the measured words of a college professor or in the slang of the street; they act toward others with sympathy, hostility, or indifference; they seem calm or anxious; they offer praise or criticism.

This potentially confusing jumbled mound of information, according to social cognition theory, must somehow be structured and processed if the individual is to know how to respond to it. In organizing information, human beings are miserly. That is, they attempt to be economical in their efforts to grasp and process information. They take shortcuts, assuming, for example, that someone with white hair is old (as opposed to prematurely gray) or that a person wearing a dress is female (and is not cross-dressing). They must take shortcuts because the alternative—inspecting the many details of the other’s behavior or appearance—would make it impossible to act. Imagine how difficult it would be even to say hello to another person if one had to sift through the mass of information that the person presents in order to decide on the appropriate thing to say and how to say it.

The major concept invoked by social cognition theorists to explain how people organize or structure cognitions is the concept of the schema. *Schemas*, according to sociologist Judith Howard,²⁰ “are abstract cognitive structures that represent organized knowledge about a given concept or type of stimulus.” The schemas that individuals

develop and hold contain information about an object, ideas about the relationships among various cognitions of the object, and examples of the object. Schemas can focus on specific other people, situations, types of people, social roles, social groups, specific events, and even the self. Thus, a given individual might have schemas about a spouse, disciplining the children, office parties, workaholics, supervisors, fellow nurses, the war against terrorism, and self.

A schema is a kind of “picture” of any of these things. Parts of this picture are quite abstract: An individual’s schema for a supervisor might include such abstract traits as superior knowledge and wisdom, willingness to listen, and capacity to make quick decisions. It may include negative and positive traits—for instance, insufficient knowledge, stubbornness, and indecisiveness. Other parts of a schema are more concrete, involving images of physical appearance, strength, clothing, or other material things. Thus, the schema for a corporate lawyer might include an expensive pinstriped suit, well-tailored shirts, and costly shoes, as well as such traits as intelligence, self-confidence, and the ability to articulate a strong position on behalf of a client.

A schema functions as a loosely organized theory that people use to make sense of their world, predict the behavior of others, and decide on their own course of action. People use personalized schemas to make sense of the behavior of specific other people, such as friends or spouses. They use role schemas to accomplish the same ends with respect to others whom they do not know personally but with whose role they are familiar. They use event schemas to grasp expected series of events in such routine situations as sitting in a college classroom or attending a wedding or funeral. They use self-schemas to make sense of and predict their own behavior, attributing traits, strengths, and weaknesses to themselves much in the same way they do to others. Particularly with respect to role schemas, people maintain the schema and make it more concrete by keeping in mind one or more exemplars of that schema. Thus, a favorite athlete might be the exemplar of one’s athlete role schema, providing a concrete illustration of the more abstract traits that make up one’s schema.

How do these cognitive structures aid in the processing of information about self and others? They do so first by shaping the individual’s attention to stimuli, helping to determine what will be salient and thus receive attention and what will be ignored. Second, schemas are critical in the organization and functioning of memory. Third, schemas influence the way people make inferences about themselves and the social world.

The various schemas that people carry with them provide the background against which we perceive particular stimuli. A person’s schema for a friend, for example, shapes one’s responses to the friend’s behavior because it defines what is normal or expected from that friend. If the schema constructs the friend as caring, gentle, and even-tempered, then conduct that violates the schema will be quite noticeable. If the friend acts in a way that seems indifferent, rude, or angry, those stimuli will be noticed. Similarly, if an event schema for a family dinner contains expectations of silence while eating, conversation will be perceived as an unwanted intrusion. Schemas thus provide the ground against which the figure of behavior is perceived.

The selection of stimuli as salient and, therefore, needing attention and response is not done consciously. That is, individuals are not engaged in a process of consciously selecting a schema and then consciously selecting the stimuli to which they will attend. Indeed, the “cognitive miser” view of cognition rests in part on an assumption that people could not

act if they had to select schemas and stimuli in a conscious way. Instead, schemas operate in the background and the selection of stimuli is done preconsciously. The individual is not consciously aware, in other words, of the processes that cause him or her to notice that another person's behavior is out of keeping with a person or event schema. The individual is aware that something is unusual about the other's behavior but is not aware of the cognitive processing that leads to that awareness.

Behavior is highly dependent on memory—on the retrieval and activation of information that has been previously secured and stored. People know how to interact with their friends—what to say and do—because they have stored memories of their friends. They know their food preferences, the music they cannot stand to hear, and the others with whom they like to spend time. People know how to behave at a wedding or a Bar Mitzvah because they have information, stored in a schema for those events that they could retrieve and use as a basis for acting appropriately in the situation.

Cognitive schemas are also crucial to the retrieval of information. The schemas that organize the perception of those events shape memories of particular events. In other words, what an individual remembers about an event he or she has witnessed depends in part on the schema the person applied to it. Imagine that a person witnesses a crime—say, a mugging at night on a streetcorner—and organizes his or her perception of the event as a crime committed by an African American. In doing so, the individual may invoke social group schemas about African Americans as well as more particular schemas; say from media sources about black criminals. It is likely that the person's subsequent memories of the event will emphasize those aspects related to these schemas. He or she might remember the race of the mugger but not the victim, for example, or remember the victim as white when he or she was actually black. Group and event schemas might even supply remembered details that were not actually observed. The person might remember the perpetrator's clothing, for example, a black ski mask and leather gloves—not because those objects were observed, but because they are part of the person's schema for crimes typical of African Americans. What a witness to a crime scene remembers is in part a function of what he or she thought was occurring and not necessarily of what actually took place. Much of the approach to cognition perceives individuals as faulty processors of information because they use “inferential heuristics” that lead them to misperceive reality because of perceptual shortcuts that they take, often as a result of being cognitive misers.²¹

The structures and processes of social cognition are intensely social. Although individuals use them, their origins typically lie in the social world and in individual experience. Individuals form schemas, but they do so out of materials a social world provides and not exclusively on the basis of their own cognitive efforts. Schemas enable the individual to function in the social world in part because they are shared and used collectively in social interaction, not just in individual isolation.

The foregoing points are especially significant to sociologists who have worked within and favor a social cognition approach. For the sociologist, an important question to be asked is where schemas come from and how they apply in social situations. Clearly, the locus of the schema is within the individual mind—where else could it be? However, people build their schemas on the basis of shared experience with others, knowledge gained from others, and using ideas that are widely shared. Thus, an event schema that views street crime as predominantly involving black perpetrators assaulting or robbing white victims is both factually wrong and widely shared. In spite of the fact that black-on-black

crimes far outnumber black-on-white crimes, event schemas emphasizing the latter persist. Initially, Americans widely viewed the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing as the act of Arab terrorists because of a schema of who is supposed to commit those crimes; the perpetrators were eventually found to be homegrown members of an American private militia group. How and why do we seem so certain in knowledge that is biased? Efforts to answer questions such as this take us beyond the fairly narrow limits of social cognition conceived by psychologists.

Many of the ideas developed within this approach fit well within an interactionist perspective. Indeed, for several concepts in social cognition—role schemas and event schemas, for example—there are parallel or equivalent concepts developed by symbolic interactionists. Indeed, students of social cognition have independently (though belatedly) discovered ideas interactionists have used for decades. At the same time, there are important differences. Symbolic interactionists are interested in actions and feelings and not only in cognitive processes. That is, they study what people actually do and how their emotions enter into their actions. Symbolic interactionists also much more commonly study thoughts, feelings, and actions in the real situations of everyday life rather than in the laboratory.

Social Constructionism

After the publication of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* in 1967 (see Note 8), a new phrase, “social construction,” came into widespread use and exerted a strong influence on the social sciences. The *social constructionism* that their book helped spawn, however, is less an organized theoretical perspective on the human world and more a set of questions that researchers ask about phenomena that interest them. As the philosopher Ian Hacking argues,²² the constructionist perspective rests on a characteristic attitude toward the social world. Social constructionists look at existing social patterns or forms of behavior and try to show how they might have developed differently. Whether the phenomenon in question is juvenile delinquency, depression, child abuse, or even the concepts of physics, constructionists argue that the “reality” people see when they look at such phenomena is socially constructed. That is, they argue, the phenomenon is not an inevitable product of the laws of nature but is instead a human creation. Whereas common sense tells us that depression and quarks are facts of nature, constructionists argue that they are human products. Social scientists do social constructionist analyses because they want to reveal the social origins of what is commonly seen as “natural” rather than “social,” a part of a given “reality” rather than a human creation.

What does constructionist analysis look like? The analysis of depression from their perspective provides a useful illustration. From a constructionist perspective, people generally take for granted that this mental illness is a medical problem to be treated by specialists in behavioral health (a term now often used in place of mental health). In other words, depression is the province of psychologists and psychiatrists, who use a variety of treatments, all founded on the notion that depression is a physiological illness. The constructionist argues that the contemporary conception of depression as an illness is widely assumed to be true because it has captured “reality.” Therefore, the social origins of the idea of depression should be highlighted because they are less visible to people, including the diagnosed, their healers, and various relevant social circles and

communities. In the constructionist view, depression is not an inevitable fact of human biology or psychology. There are alternative ways of defining or conceiving the phenomenon—that is, the behavioral or mental experiences or symptoms of depression—and some of them may be better than our existing conceptions. Moreover, the multitude of folk beliefs, medical practices, scientific findings, diagnostic categories, and the like that comprise “depression” have bad consequences. They expose people to antidepressant drugs whose long-term effects are unknown. Drugs make it cheaper for the managed-care system to prescribe pills rather than explore the psychological and especially the social origins of human problems. Psychotherapists treat patients at arm’s length and pharmaceutical companies are enriched.

A variety of fields and topics have attracted the attention of social constructionists: quarks, madness, child abuse, weapons research, geology, and anthropology. Andrew Pickering²³ takes a strong constructionist stance in his book *Constructing Quarks*, arguing that even the discoveries of physicists are not inevitable products of the nature of things, but instead reflect the state of scientific knowledge and the questions scientists ask and can answer at particular times. Not surprisingly, physicists reacted with outrage to the idea that their theories and research could have led them to any other conclusions than the ones they reached. Sociological studies of child abuse have demonstrated how this phenomenon emerged as a social problem around 1961 and examined how the activities and claims of particular groups shaped its social definition.²⁴ Child abuse activists, again not surprisingly, also have reacted with some anger to suggestions that their conceptions of child abuse and the “facts” they propound may not be as real as they claim. The issue at hand is not whether child abuse is real, but when acting violently towards children became identified as abuse and a social problem. Unfortunately, this violence has been a consistent historical reality—it is the societal reaction to this violence that has changed in identifying this violence now as a social problem called “child abuse.”

Whether a particular phenomenon is or is not “real” frequently becomes an issue in debates about the social constructionist approach. Natural scientists, not to mention most ordinary people, believe there is a “real world” and that science can discover solid and immutable facts about it. Quarks exist, and with the right ideas and techniques, they can be discovered. Constructionists say no: Quarks come into being as answers to the questions we raise about the physical world, as do phenomena such as depression or child abuse. As questions change or as the means of answering them become exhausted or new ones are invented, “reality” changes. Physics (and everything else), say constructionists, could have come out otherwise, had it asked different questions, developed other techniques, or been influenced by other historical circumstances.

How does the constructionist view of things relate to symbolic interactionism? From an interactionist perspective, human acts sculpt “reality” from “materials”—ideas, things, methods, knowledge—that people find as they seek to solve problems that confront them. Some of these materials people have already created, though they may not recognize their authorship when they find them. Other materials are not humanly created and lie beyond our control—or at least are out of our control at certain times. We respond to them on the basis of our ideas about them, but they do not respond to us on the basis of our ideas about them. What we sculpt this “reality” to be is probing and tentative, partial and incomplete, useful for some purposes but not others. Human beings doggedly pursue “reality,” which refuses to sit or stay on command.

To go back to the example of depression, a symbolic interactionist might say—in partial agreement with constructionists—that a still-evolving body of ideas and practices has created something we now call “depression.” The “materials” out of which past and contemporary people have sculpted the phenomenon of depression come to us from many sources: religious beliefs and concepts, the theories and practices of psychiatry and psychopharmacology, popular ideas about why people are sad and why they have the right to be happy. A variety of individuals and social groups—sufferers, healers, insurance companies, do-gooders, and government regulators—have created the concept of depression. Some symbolic interactionists would go further and argue that the sculpting and the sculptors encounter not just materials that other humans have created and foisted on the present, but that now and then they strike a hard place that does not so readily yield to their sculpted ideas about it. Therapists and their patients talk and talk and talk to no avail, but a few weeks of Prozac alters the serotonin reuptake process in ways not well understood that suddenly makes therapy effective. Sometimes, individuals know how happy they ought to be and know they are not, and discover they never can be, no matter what therapy they are given.²⁵

Social constructionists and symbolic interactionists alike argue that it makes no sense to say that depression is “real” or “not real.” It does make sense to say that people have carved out the idea of depression as they have sought to cope with what appears to be a widespread human affliction. Human actions have created a set of ideas and practices, and some of these practices work some of the time, some work at other times, and some never do but persist nonetheless. The “reality” that psychopharmacology is beginning to carve out is gaining favor over the “reality” inherited from religion or psychiatry, for a host of reasons: Pills work as well as or better than talk, pills are cheaper, and taking pills and getting well is a major cultural script for illness and recovery. But it also makes sense to say that the “reality” carved out by those who treat depression with medication is itself incomplete and will remain so, however much psychiatrists take umbrage at this idea. Theories of how serotonin and other neurotransmitters affect what we call “depression” also encounter obstacles, in part because the socially constructed category of “depression” may combine a number of different problems in the brain. This is why, in fact, many students of so-called depression have concluded that it is not one disease but several, and that treating depression is the wrong way to conceive of and treat the affliction. Perhaps the most useful illness categories might be derived from various drugs and their effects. By this light, one would not be depressed, but rather one would have the disease that Prozac, Xanax, or Klonopin treats.²⁶

Postmodernism

An influential perspective that has recently shaped the scholarly environment, not only for symbolic interactionism and social psychology, but also for most other perspectives and disciplines, is postmodernism.²⁷ This diverse and sometimes elusive set of ideas emerged from European philosophy and social theory starting in the 1960s. Its view of what the human world is like is accompanied by a strong critique of social science (including symbolic interactionism) as a way of producing knowledge. Though this perspective is difficult to summarize, some account of it is nevertheless necessary to understand contemporary symbolic interactionism.

Postmodernism is a broad effort to challenge the assumptions, theories, and methods that the social sciences take for granted. Its critique rests partly on the belief that the human world after World War II has been drastically transformed. Mass communications and the development of a culture of consumption, for example, have transformed everyday life. People are overwhelmed by such modern technologies as the computer, iPods, Blackberries, and cell phones. They have become obsessed with consumption, not (as they think) because they really want or need or will use the things they crave, but in order to assure themselves of their own reality and social worth. They live, according to French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, amidst a "hyperreality," having lost the capacity to distinguish between what is real and what is an illusion. Symbols, Baudrillard says, no longer stand for things, but only for other symbols. Postmodernists assert that the world had changed so greatly by the late twentieth century that social science became incapable of understanding it or communicating its understanding in ways that make sense to people.

Symbolic interactionism postulates a self-conscious individual who perceives situations, makes choices, and acts. In contrast, postmodernism views the active, deciding individual not as a reality that any theory must contend with, but rather as an illusion. It is a product of ideology—of our ideas about the social world and our belief in the individual. In other words, we—meaning symbolic interactionists and other social scientists as well as ordinary people—believe in the deciding and acting individual not because such a thing exists, but because our systems of ideas force us to believe in this kind of being. Postmodernists hold that the self, which is an object of great importance to symbolic interactionists, to other social psychologists, and to the modern culture that produced these disciplines, has disappeared—if, indeed, it ever really existed. To put it another way, the postmodern critique accepts the proposition, discussed earlier, that the individual is a social product but not the corresponding idea that society is a human product. In the contemporary world, this illusion is not only untrue but also irrelevant. That is, the idea of an autonomous and independent self—the term postmodernists often use is "the subject"—just cannot account for the way people live and experience themselves in the contemporary world.

One of the changes that most preoccupies postmodernists—and they view it positively—is the decline of what they call grand narratives. A grand narrative is any overarching account or story that seeks to explain the nature of the world or of human experience in sweeping and singular terms. A belief in progress—the idea that human history moves inexorably toward greater knowledge and power and better living conditions—constitutes a grand narrative. The theology of Judaism that sees the scope of human history leading to the advent of a messiah, and the theology of Christianity that states that the messiah has already come and we are awaiting his return are examples of grand narratives. Science itself—the conviction that human beings can know their world and assemble a comprehensive and true picture of it—is likewise a grand or master narrative. Such narratives direct us to perceive and believe in certain "facts"—that contemporary people live longer and better lives, for example, or that salvation requires the acceptance of Jesus Christ. But these so-called facts are significant—indeed, we only see them as facts—because we already believe in the truth of the theory on which they are based. Believing in progress leads us to see certain "facts"—such as people leading longer, healthier lives—and we then take those "facts" as evidence for the theory that has produced them.

For postmodernists, all narratives are essentially equal. That is, there is no basis for deciding that one narrative is true and the others are false. In their words, one narrative

should not be "privileged" over any other. This attitude applies as much to scientific knowledge as it does to other forms. Hence, the grand narrative of evolution should be accorded no special place, nor should that of any particular religious tradition. Each claim to "truth," postmodernists argue, reflects what the German philosopher Nietzsche called the "will to power." Knowledge is not neutral, in this view, but always a source of power over others. To claim to speak "the truth" is to assert power, and typically claims by one group or another to know "the truth" conceal the goals and interests of such groups. The "truth" of religion or the "truth" of science, in other words, represents not just a desire for power in society but also the concealment of the interests of religion or science in holding power.

Claims to possess the truth conceal the interests of their claimants because they are embedded in what postmodernists call "discourse." Broadly speaking, the concept of discourse refers to characteristic ways of conceiving, speaking, and writing about things. We can think of science—or, for that matter, symbolic interactionism—as a discourse that entails a set of terms and concepts, ways of seeing and thinking about the world, propositions and ideas, and—perhaps most important—texts. The discourse of symbolic interactionism, for example, has produced such texts as George Herbert Mead's *Mind, Self, and Society* and Herbert Blumer's *Symbolic Interactionism*. These texts embody the interactionist way of seeing, speaking, and writing about the social world. Such texts always conceal an ideology, a set of beliefs that are not based on any empirical evidence, but only on the interests and preferences of people holding them.

Symbolic interactionists do share some suppositions with postmodernists, including the conviction that knowledge is relative; the belief that to understand narratives, we must "situate" them in the social contexts that produce them; and the understanding that discourses shape our views of reality and are not merely reflections of reality. Based on pragmatism, symbolic interactionism conceives of knowledge not as fixed and final, but as always evolving and changing, a response to the need to solve problems and overcome obstacles rather than a socially neutral quest for objective truth. Moreover, the postmodernist view that the self is an artifact of our ways of thinking about the social world to some extent mirrors the symbolic interactionist view of the self as an ongoing, mutable product of social interaction rather than a fixed entity. For interactionists, the self is not a structure located solely within the individual person but arises and exists in a social space that person shares with others. It is, in a basic sense, always something in the process of being created rather than something that gets created and then simply exists as an unchanging and invariant entity.

However there are also major points of difference between postmodernism and symbolic interactionism. First, interactionists argue that the self is an acting subject and a product of discourse. Postmodernism inclines toward a view of the person as nothing more or less than an artifact of modern discourses, whether those of religion or social science or consumer capitalism. If we see the individual person as making decisions or resisting social constraints, it is because our discourse and our ideologies force us to see things this way. In truth, postmodernists say, people do not create discourses; rather, discourses create people. Interactionists say, no, the person is not merely a fiction constructed by discourse but an active and creative constructor of that discourse. People confront obstacles and problems, they survey their circumstances, they consider alternatives, and they act to overcome these obstacles and solve problems. In doing so, they exercise creativity and do not merely speak the lines that discourse hands them.

Second, interactionists believe there is an empirical world that resists human actions. Interactionists grant that human ideas about the reality of this empirical world are inevitably imperfect and incomplete. In that sense, as social constructionists argue, "reality" is socially constructed, and there will never be a full or final knowledge of that reality, because as human interests and problems change, the "reality" they construct will change. Nonetheless, the empirical world is not merely a social construction founded on discourse. Problems do not disappear when we try to think them away. Religions that promise a better life in the hereafter nonetheless have followers in this world who have to be fed, clothed, and housed. Indeed, religions that seek to hasten the hereafter by encouraging their members to martyrdom or suicide end up with dead members but with no evidence that the hereafter exists. There is, in other words, an obdurate, resisting empirical world that does not roll over and play dead in the face of human constructions of it.

Symbolic interactionists do not claim to possess the absolute truth, nor do they think such a thing exists. Indeed, symbolic interactionists often argue that the postmodernist critique of the modern quest for absolute truth and morality represents a rather belated discovery of something pragmatists discovered a century ago. At the same time, many interactionists grant that postmodernism has developed some useful ideas and that its critique is worth attending to despite its decidedly extreme conclusions.

Major Tenets of Symbolic Interactionism

So, what is the essence of symbolic interactionism? Although there is more than one version of symbolic interactionism, most symbolic interactionists subscribe to the following general principles:²⁸

- The task of social psychology is to develop a theory of action.

Like all sociologists, interactionists are interested in patterned regularities of human social life. Human conduct is social and cannot be explained merely as the result of idiosyncratic individual efforts. The fact is that our conduct does have a great deal of regularity; it is, as sociologists say, socially structured. But symbolic interactionists also believe that patterns and regularities cannot be fully grasped without understanding the social processes that create them. The regularities of social class or gender, for example, do not persist of their own accord or through sheer inertia but because human beings actively construct conduct in particular ways.

- Conduct depends on the creation and maintenance of meaning.

Unlike behavioral psychologists, who see meaning as either nonexistent or irrelevant, symbolic interactionists say that conduct is predicated on meaning. Unlike many sociologists who believe that culture and society dictate meanings to people, interactionists see meaning as variable and emergent. Meaning arises and is transformed as people define and act in situations; it is not merely handed down unchanged by culture. This emphasis on meaning "means" several things.

First, that people act with plans and purposes—that when they get in the car or speak words of love to someone, they do so with purposes in mind. Human conduct is directed

toward objects and always looks toward some goal or purpose. People do not always pursue their purposes single-mindedly once they set their conduct in motion, for they are often deflected from their intended paths by obstacles or more appealing objects. Nor are people conscious of their purposes or of how they will attain them at every moment, for much of what they do depends on habit. When I get in the car to go to the store, I do not have to think constantly of the store or of the techniques of automobile driving I have learned. Habit takes over many tasks. I may sometimes speak words of love out of habit, not really intending what I am saying.

Second, the interactionist approach emphasizes that "meaning" and "intention" are two sides of the same coin. For symbolic interactionists, meaning lies in intentions and actions, and not in some ethereal realm of pure meanings or interpretations. Meaning is found in conduct, both in conduct that is overt and therefore visible to others, and in plans and purposes that are formulated and verbalized only silently and are not observed by others. Our conduct is meaningful because it is fundamentally purposeful; it can be purposeful because it rests on meaning.

Third, symbolic interactionists stress the possibility of meaning being transformed, and they recognize individual as well as shared meanings. Clearly, human beings are restricted to certain kinds of meaning by the words they learn, for words represent the objects they can imagine. People cannot act toward that which they cannot name. But symbolic interactionists say not only that humans live in a named world but also that naming is an activity that is central to the way they approach the world. People have the capacity to think of new ways to act by inventing new objects—new names. Although they may not do so frequently, they have the capacity to do so, and this guarantees that sometimes they will do so. Faced with novel situations or obstacles to conduct under way, human beings think of alternative goals and alternative methods. Thus, the meanings that inform how we act are never fixed or final, but emerge and change as we go about our affairs. These meanings—the objects of our actions—are personal as well as social, for human beings easily learn to pursue goals that are inimical to the goals that others pursue.

- Conduct is self-referential.

The individual human being is both an acting subject and an object in his or her own experience. Unlike other animals, who regard the world from the center of their own being, but can never themselves be fully a part of the picture, human beings have self-consciousness. They act toward themselves with purpose much as they act toward the external world with purpose. They take themselves—their feelings, their interests, their images of self—into account as they act.

The self is a valued and crucial human object, a major source of the purposes that people bring to their environment. Human beings do not merely wish to act in concert with others to secure the things they are taught by culture to value, but they also wish to find a sense of security and place—a sense of social identity—by integration into group life. They do not merely take themselves into account as they act, but also want to develop and sustain coherent images of themselves. They also want to attach a positive value to the self, to regard themselves favorably, to maintain and enhance their self-esteem.

Consciousness of self thus confers not only the capacity to exert control over conduct, but also to make the self an important focus of conduct. Human beings are capable of

very precise social coordination, and can consider their own acts from the vantage point of the group as a whole and thus imagine the consequences of their acts for others. But they are also capable of considerable self-absorption and of putting their own interests before those of others. One can attain a coherent self and maintain self-esteem by cheerful cooperation with the organized life of a community, but one can also obtain these ends through more individualistic means.

- People form conduct as they interact with one another.

Psychologists, particularly the learning theorists, typically emphasize the individual's history of rewards and reinforcements as a way of explaining individual conduct. Many sociologists emphasize the determining effects of roles, norms, social class, and other aspects of our membership in society. The former often seem to depict a human being imprisoned within his or her own previous patterns of action and reward; the latter seem to depict an individual fully shaped and determined by society and culture. Without denying the importance of either individual histories of reward or of social and cultural variables, symbolic interactionists emphasize that conduct is formed in real time as people form plans and purposes, take themselves into account, and interact with one another.

Most human acts, interactionists think, are not individual acts but social acts, requiring the coordinated efforts of several individuals. Although individual capabilities affect the ability of individuals to perform their parts in social life, the actual performance of such actions as shaking hands or delivering a lecture is sustained not just by individual skills but also by their maintenance in a social setting. The audience is as important to the lecturer as his or her own speaking skills—a disinterested audience can flatten even the liveliest speaker. Although society hands down models for the social acts that we perform, these acts do not persist by themselves, but only because interacting people use their understandings of these acts as templates to reproduce them. A handshake exists not only in a name or an idea but also in the actual pressing of one sweaty palm to another.

Symbolic interactionists thus regard the actual outcomes of any given episode of social interaction as potentially novel. Most of the time, we human beings shake hands or deliver or hear lectures in a routine fashion. It is unusual for a social encounter to follow a truly novel course, but not impossible. Human beings do encounter situations they have not faced before; they find one obstacle or another blocks their paths; they misunderstand one another, failing to define situations as others do. In these and a variety of other ways, routine situations can become novel. People must find new meanings—new purposes and new methods—and they must reach into their stock of individual skills and socially acquired knowledge for general principles that can help them deal with novel situations. Thus, skills learned in other contexts are generalized as people encounter problematic situations; roles that cannot be performed in the routine way are performed in new ways.

- Culture shapes and constrains conduct, but it is also the product of conduct.

In common with other sociologists, symbolic interactionists emphasize the prior existence and impact of society and culture. We humans are born into an already existing society and culture, and we are quickly swept into its flow. We are surrounded by others who define reality for us, showing us the objects in their world and in some ways requiring us

to make them our own. The child, for example, learns that there is a God, or that there are many Gods, and that one must tread carefully in his, her, or their presence.

We human beings however do not have to reproduce the society and culture that we inherit, and sometimes we do not. Regardless of what is at issue—belief in the powers of the Gods, or that to drink cold beer is important, or that we should be faithful to a spouse—the persistence of a belief or social practice rests on individual and collective action. Society is not a self-perpetuating, autonomous system of roles or social relationships. Rather, as Herbert Blumer said, society consists of people interacting with one another. Culture is not an invariant set of lessons from the past but an environment in which we all live, an environment composed of objects whose persistence depends on our continuing to take them into account, even as our survival depends on coming to terms with them.

Endnotes

1. William McDougall, *Introduction to Social Psychology* (London: Methuen, 1908).
2. Edward A. Ross, *Social Psychology* (New York: Macmillan, 1908).
3. See Gordon W. Allport, "The Historical Background of Modern Social Psychology," in *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, vol. 1, ed. Gardner Lindzey and Elliot Aronson (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1968), pp. 1–80.
4. Solomon Asch, "Effects of Group Pressure upon the Modification and Distortion of Judgments," in *Groups, Leadership, and Men*, ed. H. Guetzkow (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Press, 1951), pp. 177–190.
5. Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974). See the documentary film Milgram made of these experiments if you want to see how the experiment in general (recommended) and how authentic the shocks appear to be.
6. See Jerry Burger, "Replicating Milgram: Would People Still Obey Today?" *American Psychologist*, 64 (2009): 1–11.
7. See Susan J. Fiske and Shelley E. Taylor, *Social Cognition*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1991).
8. For a survey of sociological social psychology, see *Sociological Perspectives on Social Psychology*, ed. Karen S. Cook, Gary Alan Fine, and James S. House (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1995). This book is the successor to an earlier book with similar goals; see *Social Psychology: Sociological Perspectives*, ed. Morris Rosenberg and Ralph H. Turner (New York: Basic Books, 1981).
9. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann discuss this issue as the dialectic of individual and society: "Society

is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man is a social product." See their *Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1967).

10. The literature on pragmatism and symbolic interactionism is vast. For a review and analysis, see Dmitri N. Shalin, "Pragmatism and Social Interactionism," *American Sociological Review* 51 (February 1986): 9–29. For a discussion of Mead as a social reformer in the political context of his time, see Shalin, "G. H. Mead, Socialism, and the Progressive Agenda," *American Journal of Sociology* 93 (January 1988): 913–951. For other views of Mead and his ideas, see the commemorative issue on Mead in *Symbolic Interaction* 4 (Fall 1981) and another issue of *Symbolic Interaction* 12 (Spring 1989). Those interested in the relationship between pragmatism and critical theory should see "Special Feature: Habermas, Pragmatism, and Critical Theory" in *Symbolic Interaction* 15 (Fall 1992). For a historical review of Chicago sociology, see Berenice M. Fisher and Anselm L. Strauss, "Interactionism," in *A History of Sociological Analysis*, ed. Tom Bottomore and Robert A. Nisbet (New York: Basic, 1978), Chapter 12. For an excellent discussion of pragmatism and sociological theory, see Hans Joas, *Pragmatism and Social Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). See also by Joas, *The Creativity of Action* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). For a review of developments in symbolic interaction, see Gary Alan Fine, "The Sad Demise, Mysterious Disappearance, and Glorious Triumph of Symbolic Interactionism," *Annual Review of Sociology* 19 (1993): 61–87; for a discussion of the emergence of a new "Chicago School," see *A Second Chicago School: The Development of a Postwar American Sociology*, ed. Gary