A Practical Approach to Symbolic Interactionism

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**Symbolic Interactionism**

From the day we are born symbolic interaction is used to form the way we attach meaning to symbols. The theory states that young children become social by the symbols they learn and connect to certain meanings by people like whom they are surrounded (Oxford). In this research paper I will explain symbolic interactionism and how it pertains to real life events. First, background information will be given to better understand symbolic interactionism theory and how it came into existence. Second, practical applications of this theory will be discussed and positive and negative aspects of the theory will be evaluated. Lastly, there will be a summarization of the theory and practical application.

To better understand symbolic interactionism one must know the three key principles: meaning, language, and thought, “these three categories, which have permeated the writings of symbolic interactionists, are not discrete elements or our structures, but processes growing out of interaction” (Littlejohn, 84). Meaning is the way humans behave toward people and things by the symbols they associate them with. According to Carpenter, “Meaning stems from both a social and internal process, as meaning arises in the process of self-interaction in which we make indications to ourselves that help direct our actions” (Carpenter, 104). An example would be a small child riding his bike in the road. One person would associate the child as a troublemaker that does not listen to his parents. Another might think that the child’s parents are irresponsible for letting their young child alone outside. Someone else might believe that the child’s behavior is completely normal due to the fact that he/she is young and daring.
The next key principle is language. This term is used to describe the exchange of communication between two people or more. This is also the step where meaning occurs because humans associate meaning by speaking with others. For example, a rose is a flower but society assigns this particular flower with the meaning of love, passion, and beauty. The last key term helped to explain symbolic interactionism is thought. This specifies that our own thoughts interpret symbols to what we believe they mean. Understanding these three terms helps one comprehend the concept of self (Griffin, 56-57).

As humans, interacting and communicating with others brings about our self-concept, “We receive understanding of ourselves and society through symbolic interaction and the naming/labeling of objects by others and ourselves” (Carpenter, 104). Without that interaction ones self-concept would be nothing. Self is something that is always changing and growing. One also learns that “I” is the part of the human that grows and develops and “me” is viewed more as an object that others view us as. In other words one’s “me” is made up of those who we come in contact with. There is also something that is referred to as the generalized other. This is a mental image that humans refer to when analyzing how other individuals accept us (Griffin, 59).

One’s self-concept is assumed to be linked to the theory of symbolic interactionism, which states that communication and interaction between people affect our self. To be put simply, “Symbolic interaction has produced insightful accounts of human interaction in natural settings” (Huber, 274). Studies have been designed to test the probability of symbolic interactionism through the occurrence of real life application. “God as Symbolic Interactionism’s Significant Other,” was an article that studied 59
adult women and their personal relationship with the Lord. Symbolic interactionism was used to explore strengths and weaknesses within a church setting to study how it affected one’s self-concept and self-esteem. The study was taken in the Midwest of the United States and consisted of adult women ages 21-94, all of whom had different nationalities and backgrounds. Specific questions were asked to help explore the women’s self-concept and self-esteem. They were also asked to state how they viewed their self-esteem. It was this question that triggered the response that an internal concept was a source of their self-concept. One woman stated, “I could not sustain high self-esteem from external forces alone…the internal floor that’s always there helps me maintain constant self-esteem” (Carpenter, 106). God was then linked as an outside communicator that influenced their self-concept and self-esteem.

This study found that the women spoke about self-esteem as a trait that God gave them and helped them learn. They felt that it came from God, and not something that they learned through symbols of meaning from interacting with others. One lady from the study stated, “Once you know the Lord and become God-centered, you don’t rely on other people for your self-esteem” (Carpenter, 107). She also went on to explain that her self-concept is lowest when she is out of touch with God and more concerned with others around her. In contrast, when she is less concerned with people around her and more concentrated on God, her self-esteem is high. Another participant from the study stated just the opposite; her self-esteem was low because of her interaction with God. The women believed this because of her Catholic faith, and the fear of always being one step away from hell. Symbolic interactionism theory relates to both situations because an
interaction of symbolic meaning took place. Both individuals had a symbolic connection with their God but were affected in two different ways.

Similarities between the theory and application were that a majority of the women were able to learn more about themselves and about their lives. This came through the interacting and sharing of their religious and personal experiences with their God and one another. Also, it was found that some women in the study found a new wave of confidence within them. They became more outgoing, daring, and adventurous because others saw these traits in them. They began to believe in themselves through the feedback of others. In disagreement with the theory and application, it was hard to distinguish the women’s God as their “significant other” or just as an “object” (Carpenter, 104).

In conclusion the women that reported having a positive connection with God referred to their situation as a relationship. God acted as the person that they socially interacted with and received symbols of meaning from. This relationship could support symbolic interactionism theory in that our relationships impact our self-esteem and self-concept (Carpenter, 121). However, it is also important to keep in mind that our faith and trust in God grows through language, thought, and meaning.

Another situation that portrays the application of symbolic interactionism is when Sammy Sosa was caught with a corked bat. After being out of the game for three weeks due to a minor injury, Sosa was ready to hit some homeruns to catch himself up in the homerun-hitting contest. Sosa’s fans were full of anticipation and hope as he stepped up to the plate. That was the hit that ruined his career. After splitting the bat the inside cork was revealed, and Sammy Sosa was accused of breaking a Major League Baseball gold
rule. It is now up to the team of media directors to cover up the embarrassment of Sosa and the Cubs. Symbolic interactionism was used to establish, “image management” and “image negotiation” for the Cubs reputation (Domingo, 20). According to the creator of symbolic interactionism, George Herbert Mead, the media constructs symbolic messages with the intention of society to believe in the desired meaning. Therefore, it is up to the Cub’s media director to reestablish Sammy Sosa’s credibility.

To begin, a plan of action must be established for the Cubs to take a stance on their problem at hand. It is first and foremost important that the team does not overreact to Sosa’s dilemma, “The Cubs should not overestimate their crisis tactics. How the media interpret their actions matter most” (Domingo, 21). The Cubs need to instate a symbol that represents them in a positive light. Also, they need to accommodate the media because it is the media that will change their reputation. It is next essential for the Cubs to keep track of news stories and other rumors about the incident. This will help the director of media’s team clear up any confusion of outside sources when the Cubs address the public. According to Mead, the media should be the key to this situation. He would also agree that a fact sheet should be put in order and that it, “symbolically negotiates Sosa and the Cubs image with the media and the organization” (Domingo, 21). It is important that the media and public are informed of any information concerning the case. Not only does it show respect from the Cubs but also it shows their will to satisfy the public.

Symbolic interactionism theory relates to the crisis of Sammy Sosa’s corked bat because the fans and the director of media are taking place of the two people interacting. For example, the Cubs are the public interacting with a person, the “person” being the
fans. The fans need to have symbolic meaning to change their “self-esteem” or opinion of Sammy Sosa and his situation with the corked bat. The article explains it best when it states, “Through symbolic gestures such as news conferences or perhaps town hall Q&A’s, implicitly stress the fans’ integral role in shaping Major League Baseball” (Domingo, 21). In the end the Cubs took all the necessary steps of informing their public and reaching their fans. The Cubs created enough symbolic meaning that their fans chose to stand by their side and believe in Sammy Sosa and their favorite team. Although the theory may appear to be stretched to an extreme measure it still fits in the category of applying the theory to a practical situation.

“Information Technology and Community Networking: A Symbolic Interactionist Perspective on Urban Regeneration,” is another article that relates the theory of symbolic interaction to real life situations. The article is based on a distraught inner-city community that used information and communication technologies along with symbolic interactionism to reproduce the livelihood of their society.

The study sampled 19 residents from the city neighborhood. The same three questions were asked to each participant in the same exact order. The questions dealt with demographic information, action in the local community, and the revitalization of the community by information and technology (Fernback, 7). These questions ultimately revealed their personal opinions of how they view a community and how they view their own community.

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have been proven to help distraught inner-city centers reform their neighborhoods and rebuild their community. ICTs does this by improving, “functions essential to city life – transportation, economic
and cultural activity, and civic communication” (Fernback, 1). ICTs will equip the local area with the proper equipment, services, and technology that will inform and educate the troubled inner-city citizens. Symbolic interactionism is needed to show the residents of the urban city how their community can be revitalized with the services of information and communication technologies. This is shown through Lofland’s description of symbolic interactionism through actors, “actors who organize themselves and their activities in myriad forms, who symbolize not only themselves, their activities, and other actors but their physical environment as well as whose constant engagement in interaction with self, others, and environments constitute human social order (Lofland, 938).” Once the proper equipment is implemented in the neighborhoods their view of their community will ultimately change.

In this particular situation the neighborhood acts as the self and the Information Technology holds the symbolic meaning. Symbolic interactionism found that through communication the self and the material world are brought together (Fernback, 4). Due to the fact that this situation deals with human interaction and social meaning, symbolic interaction theory applies, “people behave according to the meanings they construct of social phenomena, and these meanings are continually interpreted and reinterpreted through social interaction” (Blumer, 1969). The underprivileged society views what a community is through their own interaction within their neighborhood and with one another. Information and communication technologies were able to show the neighborhood ways a community should associate and communicate with each other. These teachings were then symbolic meanings that the society learned and then associated with their new way of life.
The last article that I am going to use to apply practical application to symbolic interactionism is, “Farmers’ Rural Community Attachment: A structural Symbolic Interactionist Explanation.” The study of farmers and their attachment to their community was studied and applied to symbolic interactionism. Their dependency and involvement in their communities depended on their identities and surroundings. The farmer’s identities were then determined by their social networks and their associations (Sanner).

The study targeted five different counties in South Dakota. Over three hundred farmers and their spouses were interviewed face-to-face and asked the same sampled questions. Researchers focused on measuring participation within their community and within their family and social group. Questionnaires gave researchers insight on the following, “Farmers’ resident-identity, times they visited with family and friends, and the number of organizations in which they were involved within their local community” (Sanner, 67). It was this information that gave insight as to how symbolic interactionism affected the farmers.

Symbolic interactionism helped researchers identify, “1) the interpersonal dimension; 2) sentiment dimension; and 3) participation dimension” (Sanner, 68). Interpersonal dimension was in terms of commitment, sentiment dimension meaning the resident-identity, and lastly participation dimension is the involvement within the community and various associations. Resident-identity was then spilt up into four different categories, which were: family, local, cosmopolitan, and disinterested. Researchers found that a majority of farmers visited their family and friends only once
weekly, and that a majority of the farmers were more involved locally than any other area.

In conclusion, the face-to-face surveys gave researchers information as to how they developed their self-concept. By their interactions, or lack there of, the farmers self was developed. The study showed what type of identities these farmers had due to their community and family involvement, “Structural symbolic interactionism has contributed to our understanding of community involvement by examining the impact of social forces and interpersonal relations on an individual’s identity hierarchy” (Sanner, 87). Therefore, the resident’s identity is shaped from his/her peers, which effects their community involvement or lack of. As the theory states our interactions develop symbolic meaning, which ultimately we use to develop our self-concept.

The past four situations have all proven symbolic interactionism to be a realistic theory that can be applied to situations in everyday life. However, like all theories there is always factors that the theory has failed to take into consideration, “It does not exclude or deny the existence of phenomena such as social class, bureaucracy, social institutions, power structures, international relations, or social stratification (Maines, 235).” These issues are important to take into consideration when studying social organizations and social structure. Although, this theory does have a lot of positive aspects as well, the theory makes symbolic messages and meaning very clear and easy to understand, “symbolic interactions offers great insight into the creation of symbolic messages and their impact on the one who speaks and the one who hears” (Griffin, 64). Symbolic interactionism theory has also laid the groundwork for many other theorist and their theories.
In conclusion, one should have a better understanding of what symbolic interactionism is and how meaning, language, and thought support Mead’s theory. This research paper should have also given clear evidence as to how symbolic interactionism pertains to real life events. This step should have been discovered through the various examples presented above. Lastly, a better understanding of how symbolic interactionism has helped us create and develop our self-concept and self-image, through our interactions with those in our environment, should have been exposed.
Bibliography


