

Symbolic Interaction Theory

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the symbolic interaction approach to social theory, through definition and discussion of:

1. Symbolic Interaction Theory
2. Interpretive Sociology

1. SYMBOLIC INTERACTION THEORY

The **symbolic interaction theory** states that society results from the everyday interactions and experiences of individuals. In this approach, the focus is on how meanings emerge over time through our social interactions.

All of our interactions in life create a shared, perceived reality. When familiar patterns of interaction get repeated again and again, these patterns become social structures and institutions that are considered 'natural.' These patterns, institutions, and structures--society itself, even--all have a foundation in the micro-level, everyday, day-to-day interactions.

IN CONTEXT

Suppose you're in class and your English professor comes running into the room, frantic and disheveled. His shirttail is untucked, his hair is wet, and he has one shoe on. He starts speaking frantically in Chinese, gesticulating wildly, approaching people, and speaking to them rapidly in Chinese. Would you be confused? Why is he doing this? Why didn't he come into the class and sit down like he typically does?

This represents an instructive way to understand how reality gets constructed through interaction. A pattern has developed in your interactions with this teacher so far, and he just disrupted it. The teacher disrupted your process of meaning-making, and forced you to interpret the odd situation. In this way, reality is socially constructed through interactions.

Sociologists who analyze interaction like this are using a **micro-level orientation**, which is a zoomed-in look at individuals interacting in specific situations. They're also practicing what's called interpretive sociology.



TERMS TO KNOW

Symbolic Interaction Theory

Society results from the everyday interactions and experiences of individuals.

Micro-Level Orientation

A zoomed in look at specific situations and individual interactions.

2. INTERPRETIVE SOCIOLOGY

Interpretive sociology is a way to study society that focuses on the meanings that individuals attach to their actions.

In the scenario above, with the erratically-behaving, Chinese-speaking professor, a sociologist in the room would have been observing your responses and recording your body language. Afterwards, she may have interviewed you to ascertain how you were making sense of the odd situation. She may even monitor and record her own impressions and reactions, to get a sense of what you were feeling. This is how you practice interpretive sociology.

IN CONTEXT

The easiest way to understand how symbols work to create meaning and interaction is to think of language. Think of a tree, out there in the world. Tall. Bark. Leaves. We call it a tree, for no particular reason. It's an arbitrary and agreed-upon symbol for that particular thing. Did you ever wonder how our earliest human ancestors developed language? These processes of interacting and sharing meanings and symbols are so complex, so how did they develop? How did we start, one day, calling a tree a tree?

It happens because when you're young, you learn language through interaction, through being in the world. You take that learning into the next interaction you have, and shared understandings and meanings spread about the larger group this way.

In this way, we slowly interact and create society. We create institutions when we repeat the same patterns and behaviors over and over again. These patterns of interaction that get repeated and develop into institutions seem to transcend the individual. They appear hardened and unchangeable, but in reality, society is simply repeated, micro-level social interactions.

IN CONTEXT

To understand how micro-level social interactions, when repeated, can develop into broader structures and institutions, think about the process of going to church.

When you go there, there are rules about when you need to stand up, sit down, kneel, etc. Why do we follow these rules? Because somebody decided to do it that way a long, long time ago, and these patterns were repeated again and again, resulting in the institutional process of going to church.

➦ **EXAMPLE** Why do you have turkey on Thanksgiving? Why do you bring a gift to a baby shower? In fact, why do you even have a baby shower to begin with? These are all social behaviors that started and were repeated, and now we all do them, whether we want to or not. These ingrained habits are the substance of society.



THINK ABOUT IT

Next time you're sending a routine text message to a friend, send it in all capital letters. How will your friend react? Likely, your friend won't know what to do, because the symbols used are different than what they are accustomed to.

Typically a message in all caps emphasizes something—for example, an angry expression. When placed in the context of a routine message, however, the meaning of the symbol is confusing.



TERM TO KNOW

Interpretive Sociology

A way to study society that focuses on the meanings that individuals attach to their actions.



SUMMARY

Today you learned about the **symbolic interaction theory**, which focuses on how meanings emerge over time through our social interactions. The **symbolic interaction theory** is a micro-level approach and an example of **interpretive sociology**.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.



TERMS TO KNOW

Interpretive Sociology

A way to study society that focuses on the meanings that individuals attach to their actions

Micro-Level Orientation

A zoomed in look at specific situations and individual interactions.

Symbolic Interaction Theory

Society results from the everyday interactions and experiences of individuals.