UNIT 6  SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM*

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6.0  OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to understand:

- In this Unit the student will be introduced to the school of Symbolic Interactionism that dates back to the early 20th Century but has its relevance even in the Post Modern Era;
- The classical base of the theory and the early thinkers;
- The Various Schools of Thought within this school;
- Its more recent applications; and
- Its relevance for future research.

6.1  INTRODUCTION

Sociology developed as a discipline in the early 20th Century with the predominance of the Structural School in which social behaviour was viewed as emanating from the rules and norms set by the overall social structure. Sociology, with its evolutionary and functional framework was thus a discipline with a macro perspective. Symbolic Interactionism with its roots in Behavioural Psychology of the late nineteenth century ushered in a micro perspective in contrast. Instead of viewing individuals as constrained and moulded by society and its norms, it preferred to examine how individual behaviour creates relationships and to view the individual and society relationship in reciprocal fashion. Individuals were importantly seen as both subjects and agents and not merely as objects.

The concept of social roles and statuses was supplemented by the concepts of self and consciousness. Social personhood was seen as a process and not simply as a given. Thus with symbolic interactionism, a dynamic and processual methodology was introduced into sociology as well as a notion of social psychology. Unlike Durkheim who wished to explain social facts only by social facts, the Symbolic Interactionists allowed psychological considerations to enter

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into their concepts of individual, self and society. Instead of just discussing about how society affects individual behaviour, symbolic interactionists worked up from below trying to find out how individuals make sense of the society and find meanings in what they do.

George Herbert Mead, an early twentieth century thinker, a social psychologist and philosopher, is regarded as the founder of this school of thought even though he never coined the term symbolic interaction.

6.2 GEORGE HERBERT MEAD: BASIC CONCEPTS

George Herbert Mead (b.1863) was a major American thinker and philosopher. He taught philosophy and social psychology at the University of Michigan, and never published anything in his lifetime. His book, Mind, Self, and Society: From the standpoint of a Social Behaviorist was compiled and published posthumously by his students in 1934. This book laid the foundations of the school of symbolic interactionism. His theory about the development of self and of consciousness is the bedrock on which other theories were built. The basic premises of his theory are that the self emerges, not by itself but through interaction with others. We learn to see ourselves through the eyes of others. Or, how we perceive who we are is largely influenced by what feedback we get about ourselves from those around us. Social communication thus comprises of making gestures to others that we first understand ourselves and then communicate through commonly understood symbols to others. In other words, a gesture, in the form of language or otherwise must be similarly understood by both the person making it and the person receiving it; and this shared understanding is its meaning. We thus live in a world of shared meanings. Our understanding of our own self, will also be conditioned by the response and communications about one’s self as received from others.

The most consistent of these gestures are the symbols of significance that are made significant by the important role they play in the society to which a person belongs. Significant symbols are both often repeated and universally understood. The community of actors also communicates with each other to form shared complexes of meaning. Thus a group of individuals who participate in the same society take on the combined attitudes of the others towards himself or herself and the community thus become for the person, what Mead has referred to as ‘Generalized others’. Thus even when a person is by herself, she will behave as if others were present and the behaviour will be conditioned by the universal presupposed presence of the generalised others. Like if we are sitting alone in a park or walking on the road, we will still behave according to how we are supposed to behave in response to the combined expectation of the society at large. Thus when we are addressing a person whom we even do not know, our expectations will be shaped according to this generalised other, one that is reflected within ourselves, that is in accordance with what we expect ourselves to do. In other words, most of the time, we expect others to do what we would do under that same or similar conditions.

Thus growing up the sense of self develops in two stages. In the first, the infant absorbs the responses of those close to itself. Thus its sense of self is formed by the organisation of the particular attitudes of the specific persons towards it. But
with maturity the specifics combine to form the generalised others, that is the community as a whole. However this does not mean that there is only a one way interaction of formative experience. The interaction of self and society is never completely one sided or static. If this were so then society would comprise of robots and not humans.

Thus Mead brings on the difference between ‘I’ and ‘Me’. ‘I’ is the ego, the self that is consciously self, the one we perceive as being our self as an individual. ‘Me’ is the self that is reflected by society. In our actions if we act as ‘Me’ then we are doing what society expects from us. But at one instance of time, we can also act as ‘I’. There is an ongoing conversation between the ‘I’ and the ‘Me’, when we negotiate what it is we want to do and how we do it. At times we comply, at times we manipulate and at times we rebel. When the rebellion takes the collective form of the generalised others, then society transforms itself and a different kind of conversation ensues.

6.3 THE EMERGENCE OF SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

The name was coined by Herbert Blumer of the Chicago school, following the lead given by Mead. In essence, Blumer (1969) identified four basic tenets of symbolic interactionism. These are:

1) Individual actions take place in response to the meanings that gestures or objects have for them. For example, if the sign of red means danger in any particular setting, then individuals will act accordingly.

2) All interactions take place within already defined and categorized social contexts. In other words, all social situations are already provided with meaning in terms of a shared classification that is well understood by all who share that common social setting. Like if something is sacred in a society, then all members would be already aware of it and will act accordingly.

3) These meanings emerge from the continued interactions that persons in a society have with each other and with society at large. For example a child may learn that the temple is sacred from his parents, but this particular meaning will be confirmed for him by other members of the society so that later it will become a part of the generalised system of meanings that he or she holds.

4) Meanings are not static, and new meanings may be imparted and old ones discarded as a part of social interaction with others. Like if a new object emerges that is considered sacred by some, then over time the meaning can be accepted or even rejected by more members, and a change can occur or be nipped in the bud, depending upon the circumstances.

Thus following Mead, Blumer considered individuals and society as enmeshed and not separate from each other, a point of view that was not prevalent in the Fifties. Blumer considered symbolic interaction as the particular form of interaction that can only take place between human beings as they interact according to the meanings that they impart to objects and gestures (including language). Although Mead had neither put anything in writing nor discussed
any particular methodology, Blumer was of the opinion that meanings can only be elicited through a qualitative methodology. He was particularly critical of the efficacy of positivist scientific methods for the study of social behavior. Instead he advocated for a more subjectively oriented technique for understanding what goes on inside the heads of persons and how they regulate their actions with respect to others. Thus an investigator of human behaviour must get to an in depth understanding of that behaviour and that can only be achieved by qualitative methods, what Blumer has referred to as ‘sympathetic introspection’, which requires an analyst to put himself or herself in the place of the other person to understand his or her behaviour. Since such methods require a close relationship between scholars and the subjects of study, the findings may not always tally as they are supposed to do in a scientific study. The three basic premises of symbolic interactionism as summarized by Blumer are:

1) All humans act towards other things (objects or symbols) in accordance with the meaning these objects have to them. These meanings vary according to context, both individual and collective.

2) These meanings arise out of the social interactions that one has had with other members of the society.

3) These meanings arise in an interpretative way that is they are not inherent to the object but are an outcome of the mental process by which they assume significance. For example a particular tree, stone or building may assume significance beyond their basic structure, which may be due to the historical or sacred meaning assigned to them by members of a community.

Thus interactive determinism plays a key role in this theory but the notions of human agency cannot be overlooked. For example something may be sacred to most members of a community but one person may still rebel and refuse to accept the significance. Also, since it is an interpretative process, all such significance is largely symbolic in nature.

However there were other interpretations of Mead’s work and they comprise different schools of thought than the Chicago school that Blumer established.

### 6.4 OTHER SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT

Two other important schools of thought are those of the ‘Iowa school’ and the ‘Indiana School’, represented by Manford Kuhn and Sheldon Stryker respectively. Both of them gave alternative methodologies to what had been proposed by Blumer. They were more inclined to go for positivist, quantitative methods. Kuhn attempted to use rigorous scientific testing for symbolic interactionism. From the point of view of the Iowa school, behavior is to be understood as purposive, and while it is projected to the future, it is guided by past experiences. Behaviour follows a pattern that makes it intentional, contextualized within a time frame, and open to self-correction. Methodologically the scholars who study behaviour should focus on small groups like dyads and triads that can be subjected to more strict observations. They also advocated for laboratory settings to compare controlled behaviour with that occurring in the natural setting. To facilitate scientific rigour it was also postulated that a more precise scientific vocabulary should be developed to describe the factual situation that is being studied. The development of such a terminology would help usher
Kuhn developed the ‘Twenty Statements Test’. Mead had proposed that the self emerges through social interaction. This test has twenty questions for the informant to answer, pertaining to the core query of ‘Who am I’. The answers to these questions can then be coded and a systematic analysis can reveal the manner in which an individual is assessing his or her self-conceptualisation and identities. Since the responses are given by the informant in person, they stem from a self-assessment that is in tune with the basic precincts of the symbolic interactionist school as it retains the subjectivity inherent in the theory. The personal agency will also show up as one comes across idiosyncratic responses as well as more uniform and structured ones. The researchers of this school also utilized data generated from laboratory based research to produce a considerable body of work. The major criticism directed against them was with respect to the constraints put on the responses that were structured artificially rather than being free flowing. Also the methodology was found to be reductionist and contrived.

A student of Kuhn, Carl Couch, improved upon Kuhn’s methodology, adding dynamism and time depth to the interactive data, and also extending it across space. Thus instead of the static environment of the laboratory, the data was collected from extended observations of interactions that were spread across both time and space. Some people refer to the Couch era as the New School of Iowa.

Another scholar from Indiana University, Sheldon Stryker followed Kuhn in applying a positivist methodology to symbolic interactionist analysis. He believed that social interactions crystallized into stable patterns over time to form a social structure, to the analysis of which both qualitative and quantitative methods can be applied. According to him, George Herbert Mead’s theory should only be treated as a framework for building up, what he considered a concrete theory of symbolic interactionism. He tested the propositions put forward by Mead as testable hypotheses and treated his assumptions as operationalizing variables.

Stryker’s major contribution was in his development of the concept of social roles as Structural Role Theory. This was based upon Mead’s proposal of role taking or the assumption of roles in a social interactive situation. According to Stryker, persons assume roles in social interactions by using symbolic cues as emanating from other actors that regulates their actions towards them. Thus, while interacting with another person, an individual has some expectations of reciprocal action that take into account the attitudes of others. These are built up from past experiences as well as socially provided norms that are attached to the particular statuses that are held by the actors. Thus from the roles that are attached to particular statuses, future actions can be predicted, although in a situation of social change, these will transform giving rise to new expectations and attitudes. Thus even if the norms may not change completely the nature of role performance may be different. The process of socialisation is the basis of most role expectations that are both informed by and which help to keep social norms in place, leading to structural continuity. Thus individuals understand how they must interact and reciprocate by their own understanding of the social status they occupy in that particular situation. A commonly understood normative pattern gives rise to shared expectations that both guide the actors as well as make them recreate the
roles that they are expected to play. This is the relationship that individuals have with society. Individuals thus act according to the expectations of others without having to make conscious decisions all the time. These actions become reflexive as far as they apply to known and familiar role playing situations like that between teacher and pupil, mother and child and so on. These become internalized over time as social persons develop into mature adults and ultimately become their identity, for example identities of gender, class, occupation, family etc. Thus Stryker combined the bottoms up, or micro sociological approach provided by symbolic interactionists with the macro sociological perspective of the Social Structuralist. By emphasizing the importance of social norms that are attached to social statuses that form the social structure, he demonstrated how the behaviour of the individual is conditioned by the social structure even as collectively they help to reproduce it.

6.5 ERVING GOFFMAN AND THE DRAMATURGICAL APPROACH

Erving Goffman’s contribution to symbolic interactionism in the form of the dramaturgical approach, where he views social life as a drama and social interactions as a performance by social actors, each playing a role; has been immensely popular. His books have been influential in bringing about a new perspective in the analysis of society especially in the form of social organisation and the internal working of social groups.

According to him, no social interaction is completely spontaneous, as they all evoke a prior understanding of the situation by the persons engaging in it and who bring to the situation of interaction a prejudgment of how they visualize the situation and their part in it, as well as a conception of how they expect the others to behave. Each person in this context also has a self-identity or self-perception. In other words, individuals interacting in a social situation have a ‘working consensus’ where they present that aspect of their self that works best under the circumstance. Thus it is presupposed that there are many aspects of the same social person, each fitting into the multiple roles that people usually play in society. Through our experience of living in a particular society, we are able to judge the kind of role we are expected to play in any situation along with the expectation of how others will play their roles in the same situation. Thus the initial information that a person has, by socialisation, life experience and any other means about the fellow participants, plays a crucial part in setting up of a successful interaction.

Each one of us as members of a society is familiar with the concepts of familiarity and the unknown. We are always comfortable with the known and the predictable situation and nervous about the unknown, like going to a strange place for the first time or meeting a new set of people about whom we know little.

In any situation, there is always the role of the self-conception and each one expects to be treated in congruence with what they feel they are entitled to because of whatever may be their self-perceived character like age, gender, class, academic qualification or any other. Any wrong interpretation of the situation in terms of any of the criteria as discussed may lead to a breakdown of the interaction. For example one may be wrong about how they had expected
the others to behave or wrong in terms of the role play they had set up for themselves or they may feel disappointed or hurt by the way they have been treated by others. Any break down in expectations from any side may lead to a disjointed or failed interaction.

To safeguard against potential breakdowns in social interactions, two kinds of mechanisms are put in place. These are the defensive practices and the protective practices or tact. Together they are employed to manage the impression created by a person in front of others. For example in many social gatherings stories, myths or narratives are told about untoward incidences that may have happened or could happen, to create a sense of catharsis. Individuals caught in embarrassing situations may get a reassurance that they are not alone in facing such a situation. Tact is often the qualification of being a successful hostess or a diplomat, when one has the quick sense to cover up for an embarrassing slip or faux pas.

Goffman (1956) has defined some terms that he uses in his description of social life as a drama. He defines an interaction or encounter as all interactions which occur throughout any one occasion when a given set of individuals are in one another’s continuous presence. A ‘performance’ may be defined as all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants. In a group, if we take one person as our locus, then the others become audience, observers or co-participants. For example if we are focusing on a teacher giving a lecture in a class room, then the students can be viewed as an audience. If we focus on a particular surgeon performing an operation then the other doctors, nurses and helpers become co-participants.

When a performance repeatedly follows a pre-established pattern may be called a routine or when referring to a person’s actions may be called a part. Like a policeman on duty follows a routine and a politician addressing a rally plays a part. Since most people play many roles, they play different parts on different occasions. A politician also plays the part of a husband and father when he is with his family or the part of the friend when he is with a friend.

A social role also has a series of rights and duties attached to it. However even while playing a role or discharging duties, a person may vary in the degree to which he or she may be fully convinced ideologically or rationally about the part they are playing. When a person plays a part without at all being convinced about it, like a politician may talk about peace without meaning it, the person is called a cynic. When a person is totally convinced about his or her role playing, like a mother taking care of her child, the person is sincere. Many other role playing parts may fall somewhere in between.

Most social persons put up expressive equipment suitable for the occasion that is called a ‘front’. This also means that most people tend to hide some of their real feelings or opinions or states of mind while performing a role. For example while attending an important meeting, an executive may hide the fact that she is sad at having lost a friend or a diplomat while discharging an important assignment may suppress feelings of being ill. All social interactions take place and are supposed to take place within some appropriately defined setting. For example a mourning is to take place then the setting will be quite different from that suitable for a birthday party. Similarly there is a personal front too, like dress, appearance, facial expression, manners and other aspects of the
physical effect that is produced by a person’s presence in a social encounter. One puts up a very different appearance or personal front for a job interview than while dating a friend. For any successful social interaction, there must be coherence between setting, appearance and manner. In any society, there are always pre-existing ‘fronts’ available for given statuses. For example if one is to get married, there are already existing role play available, or of one is going to attend office, there are standard ‘fronts’ available according to one’s job description.

Idealised performances are usually undertaken by those who wish to climb up the social ladder. For example, in a hierarchical society, the mannerisms and fronts of the upper strata may be emulated by the lower strata to gain in hierarchy, and they make extra effort to do things well. An industrialist at the top of the ladder may dress casually to office but a subordinate wishing to get a raise will take pains to dress impressively.

When a team effort is involved, there is a tendency to project the finished product, and hide the efforts that have gone in. For example while watching a television show, the audience never comes to know what mishaps occurred during its making. A hostess pulling off a perfect party hides all the bungling that had happened in its organisation.

Goffman had studied many organisations and social situations to come up with all the strategies and ‘front stage’ and ‘back stage’ performances that go into everyday life social encounters. He had also spread his research cross culturally to show that performances may vary according to local norms and values but the essential aspect of social life, that most of us at all times are putting up a performance and that there is a crucial discrepancy between our ‘all-too-human selves’ and our socialised selves, holds true for all societies. Impression management remains a key aspect of all social encounters, whether it be a shaman in a tribal society or a high performing business magnate in an urban society or a wife in a family or a student in a class room.

Thus Goffman’s theory brings into the one framework the concepts and findings derived from three different areas of social research; the individual personality, social interaction and society. Thus the failure of a social interaction affects all three dimensions.

Symbolic Interactionism has found relevance in a wide area of research and in the next section we shall read about some of them.

**Important Research done with Symbolic Interactionism Methods**

A classical study is that of Becker (1953) on Marijuana users, where he shows that the feelings of ‘getting high’ by the users of the drugs is dependent not on the physiological effects of the drug but the interaction of the drug user with others. The drug users feel high only if they are in the presence of others who expect that kind of reaction in them. Thus the symptoms are more of a symbolic construction than objectively real. In a more generalised context, Becker’s study shows that role behaviours are acquired and conditioned by interaction with others. Other classical studies in symbolic interactionism that are recognised even today are those by Glaser and Strauss (1964) which indicated how awareness or lack of awareness conditions social interaction. Persons who are unaware or
lacking information will interact in a different manner than those aware. They have given the example that terminally ill patients in a hospital were kept uninformed about their condition by the medical professionals to keep up their spirits and give them a chance to better pass the last days of their lives. Styker (1957) had used symbolic interaction to study family role performances. Rosengren (1961) studied changing self-images as how one understands one’s self is conditioned by how others perceive and interact with you. This was a seminal observation made George Herbert Mead, and Rosenberg, in his study of young boys who had been institutionalised showed how this hypothesis could be tested in a situation that approximated a laboratory but was at the same time a social institution in a natural setting. This study was also an indicator of the kind of research methods that could be used to study symbolic interaction in a controlled and therefore testable setting.

Inspired by these classical works, this theory has been applied by post-modern scholars as well, in recent times.

6.6 RECENT STUDIES

Important contributions have been made in the field of identity studies with the use of symbolic interactionism, where the study or roles and role performance has been linked to notions of identity. In other words how people perform is related to how they perceive themselves. Roles are thus conditioned by the perception of others towards whom the perception is directed. For example is a high expectation is put upon a person by peers, then that person will try to live up to that expectation. As demonstrated by Turner (1962), role expectations are also embedded in the social structure through the norms and expectations attached to a social status. Thus a mother will take very good care of her child, not only because she wants to but also because society expects her to.

Another area in which large numbers of works keep appearing is in the field of Affect Control. These studies show the link between emotions, identity and behaviour. When a person is emotionally aware, through disappointment or discredit, that his or her role performance has not fulfilled the cultural expectations or that they feel through similar emotions that others have not fulfilled what was expected of them. In both such conditions a realignment of self and others takes place. When things do not go according to expectations, then an effort is made towards restoration, by bringing about changes in one’s identity and also in the role performances and expectations towards others. Studies of such reorientations, of creating of social worlds are ongoing. A lot of work still connects identity and self-perceptions to motivations, emotions and performance in social situations. Thus a salient identity, whether of religion, philanthropy or political, affects the way a person will behave, in areas not even directly connected to these dimensions. Thus the fact that one is Right wing or Left wing will affect interpersonal relationships, one’s behaviour towards the environment and towards society in general.

Symbolic interactionism has also been found useful in understanding Gender and Sexuality constructs. The now classic work, ‘Doing Gender’ by West and Zimmerman (1987) shows how concepts of masculinity and femininity are constructed out of the way a person is socialised and the manner in which others in society interact with them. Thus a gendered self-image is largely a social
construct, having very little base in biology. They also showed the importance of a gendered identity in all types of social interactions, as people are almost always judged on their gender in assessing performance or in terms of role expectations. Societal resources and economic, political and organisational power allocations are almost always conditioned by gender identities forming the basis for patriarchy.

Applied research also uses symbolic interactionist methods to assess how people, both implementing and at the receiving end of policies view and assess them according to their own expectations and moral constructs about role play.

**Check Your Progress**

1) Define how you understand the concepts Social Encounter and Generalised Others

2) From whose works have the basic premises of symbolic interaction developed? Discuss.

3) Name at least two schools of Symbolic Interactionist theory and how they differ from each other.

4) What do you understand by dramaturgical approach. Who formulated it?

5) Describe how gendered identities are constructed using the symbolic interactionist approach.

6) What do you understand by ‘Back stage’ and ‘Front stage’ performance in social interactions.
7) Describe what you understand by a social role and how it is played.
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8) Can we study social change through symbolic interactionism? Discuss.
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9) How can symbolic interactionism be used in applied research?
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10) How is symbolic interactionism different from macro level social theories like structuralism and functionalism? Can these perspectives be combined?
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6.7 LET US SUM UP

To sum up at the end, in this lesson you have learnt about an important and widely used social theory and methodology. It is a theory that originated in early twentieth century but holds forte even today and has given rise to significant research both theoretical and applied. It basically connects individual to society at both the micro level of interpersonal interaction and through the use of role playing and norms providing legitimacy to social statuses, to the larger social structure. It also links the psychological self to the social self, indicating how concepts about one’s own self are conditioned by how others perceive you and what expectations they have about you. Since all communications in human society are through symbols, including language, the theory got its name as symbolic interactions.

We have also learnt about various important theories and applications of symbolic interactionism and about its relevance in contemporary social theory mainly in identity studies and applied fields like policy research.

6.8 REFERENCES


