

# Through the Looking Glass: Reexamining Symbolic Interactionism's Past and Forecasting its Future



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Symbolic interactionism is a theoretical framework with origins in sociology that addresses the manner in which individuals create relationships and a shared social world via language and symbolic gestures. Involving both theoretical propositions and methodological practices, social scientists use the “interactionist” framework to understand joint action and how individuals interpret and define their experiences. Focusing on social processes that occur in small groups and dyadic settings, scholars who work in the interactionist tradition have produced an extensive literature that helps us understand a variety of microlevel social phenomena and the nature of group life. Because of its efficacy in explaining the relationship between individuals and groups, symbolic interactionism is particularly useful for understanding family dynamics.

Herbert Blumer (1937) coined the term “symbolic interactionism” in the 1930s during his tenure at the University of Chicago. Unsatisfied with the prevalent social-scientific paradigms of his era that viewed society as an objective, external force that constrains and shapes individuals (i.e., Talcott Parsons’ *structural functionalism*; Parsons, 1949, 2005 [1951]), Blumer’s interactionist perspective viewed individuals as agentic and central in constructing their social world. Departing from sociological theories that provided “over-socialized” explanations of individuals and groups, Blumer emphasized the agency of individuals. Specifically, he proposed that humans act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them, that the meaning of such things is derived from or arises out of the

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social interactions one shares with others, and that such meanings are handled in and modified through an interpretive process used by individuals in dealing with things they encounter (Blumer, 1969). These tenets represent the basic orientation of symbolic interactionism, which emphasizes how *meaning* and *interpretation* influence joint social action, rather than how social systems impose on actors. As such, symbolic interactionism is not simply a social psychological or sociological framework for understanding the nature of human action; it is a general theory that seeks to explain the reflexive relationship between the individual and society, and the ways in which individuals negotiate and enact roles within families. As a concept and social institution, the family is both a static and dynamic entity. Symbolic interactionism helps untangle this paradox, providing explanations for both the stability and change of family life.

In this chapter, we review symbolic interactionism and discuss how the framework has influenced a large body of empirical studies, particularly in family science. We first discuss the origins and historical development of the perspective, discuss its core assumptions and interrelated concepts, and address its main challenges and limitations. We then survey research that has contributed to family science. Lastly, we discuss future directions of the perspective.

## Precursors to Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism has roots in the ideas of the Scottish moralist and American pragmatist philosophers. Emphasizing empiricism and induction rather than the logical and deductive reasoning that characterized much of Enlightenment thought, Scottish moralists such as David Hume, Adam Ferguson, and Adam Smith believed that any understanding of the human condition must be derived from observing individuals and common experiences in social life (Shott, 1976; Stryker, 1980). For the Scottish moralist philosophers, reason as the prime motivator of human behavior held less relevance than common sense, beliefs, instincts, and habits. Aligned with this view, individuals are not *born* human; humanity rather *derives* from society. Treating society as a matrix from which the human mind acquires intelligence and moral sentiments, the Scottish moralists were among the earliest to conceive society as a central entity of importance in understanding the nature of the individual (Shott, 1976). From this perspective, there can be no conception of the self (or the individual) without considering its attachment to greater society.

Symbolic interactionism also has roots in American pragmatism and the work of John Dewey, Charles Sanders Peirce, and William James (among others). For the pragmatist philosophers, in particular James, biologically deterministic theories that were popular during the nineteenth century were insufficient for understanding human beings, for such models focused on *instinct* while ignoring the significance of *symbols* and *habits* that characterize human life. This focus on symbolic communication—and particularly habitual action—represented a departure from explanations of the individual that were rooted in *biology* to one rooted in *society* (Stryker,

1980). Consciousness and the “self” were central concepts of interest for the pragmatist philosophers, and particularly the manner in which self and society are interrelated.

Sheldon Stryker, originator of what has come to be known as *structural symbolic interactionism* (we discuss this perspective later), cited three reasons why James and the pragmatist philosophers were so influential for the interactionist perspective (Stryker, 1890, pp. 22–23). First, James was among the first to recognize that the self emerges from an *empirical source*. This “source” equates to the sum total of one’s relationships with others, a notion James emphasized when he stated that a “man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their mind” (James, 1890, p. 294). Second, James noted the *multifaceted nature of the self*—that the self is a product of a complex and “heterogeneously organized” society. Third, James noted that individuals *seek recognition from others* and that an individual’s self-esteem reflects comparisons to others and is a ratio of one’s *success* (an objective representation of others’ recognitions) to one’s *pretensions* (a subjective notion of one’s aspirations). James was one of the first to emphasize how social connections influence self-worth. These ideas, centering on the notion that consciousness and the self develop from interactions with others, greatly influenced social scientists in the twentieth century.

## Foundations of Symbolic Interactionism

Other influential figures in symbolic interactionism include philosophers and sociologists from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, such as Charles Horton Cooley, Ralph Linton, George Herbert Mead, Georg Simmel, W. I. Thomas, Herbert Blumer, and Max Weber. All of these men influenced the development of symbolic interactionism to varying degrees, but much of interactionist thought aligns closely with the work of Cooley, Mead, and Blumer, who developed more intricate and sophisticated theories on the relationship between self and society that together provided the foundation for symbolic interactionism.

Counter to prevailing perspectives of the nineteenth century that posited society to be a reality *sui generis* and an objective, constraining force that exists outside individuals (Durkheim, 1982; Spencer, 2003 [1898]), Charles Horton Cooley (1902) saw society as nothing more than a matrix of individual ideas; thus, society equates to the *imagination* people have of one another. Originally an instructor of political economics, Cooley became the first professor to teach sociology at the University of Michigan. Cooley was particularly concerned with the trends he saw emerging as a result of the industrial revolution, namely, the increase in individualism and the decline in emphasis on family and neighborhood. His desire to reclaim these “traditional” values and his reaction against the push for individualism shaped much of his thinking about the importance of socialization, group membership, and the views of others in the development and enactment of self, as well as maintaining the “moral unity” of society (ASA, 2020).

Two of Cooley's ideas in particular provided a foundation for symbolic interactionism. First, Cooley saw the "self" as a *looking glass self*, a conception of the self as socially constructed and involving three constituents: (1) an individual's *perception* of how they appear to others, (2) an individual's *judgment* of that perception in positive or negative terms, and (3) a subsequent *feeling* of "pride" or "mortification" based on this judgment (Cooley, 1998 [1902]). Second, Cooley emphasized that the *mental* and *subjective* are paramount to social scientists and that a science of society must involve the *interpretation* of individuals' mental states and subjective views. Symbolic interactionism adopted these ideas, with perception, interpretation, and meaning being central to explaining the operation of social processes.

George Herbert Mead was an American philosopher and contemporary of Cooley. Mead provided a more complete and systematic theory for understanding the relationship between the self and society, and his ideas—more than any others—are the underpinnings of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). Departing from traditional philosophical notions that conceived consciousness as an innate phenomenon, Mead understood consciousness (or the *mind*) as developing out of the social interactions that individuals experience across their life course. For Mead, there is no a priori consciousness; group life is the essential condition for the emergence of consciousness. Pragmatism, social behaviorism, and evolutionary theory influenced Mead's ideas on the relationship between the individual and society.

Blumer, who coined the term "symbolic interactionism," contributed largely through his summary, formalization, and extension of Mead's ideas. Blumer's perspective begins with Mead's notion that individuals have a *self* that provides "a mechanism of self-interaction with which to meet the world—a mechanism that is used in forming and guiding...conduct" (1969, p. 62). Mead saw the self as a *social* self, arising via interactions with others, and capable of being both the *subject* (the "I") and *object* (the "me") of one's actions. He also noted that human social action takes the form of *symbolic interaction*, a state of communication and social relation in which each actor in a setting interprets one another's behavior and acts toward the other based on such interpretations. Mead's (and Blumer's) ideas on the reflexive relationship between self and others are central in symbolic interactionism. To understand human social (or joint) action, one must consider the manner in which such action is negotiated and interpreted by individuals in the given social setting in which such action takes place. According to Blumer, this interplay among selves, acts, and objects together explains the operation of "society."

It also is important to view Blumer and his ideas in sociohistorical context: his work spanned the Great Depression, World War II, and the Korean War while at the University of Chicago; he left for the University of California Berkeley after an academic (and politically far more conservative) "rival" took over as chair of his Chicago department; and he was involved with radical politics and anarchists during the 1950s and 1960s (Wiley, 2014). Certainly, the political, personal, and professional intersected with Blumer.

Overall, symbolic interactionism consists of Blumer's reworking and synthesizing of the work of Cooley and Mead (Carter & Fuller, 2015). However, the symbolic

interactionist perspective has evolved into a multiplicity of sub-theories and frameworks. In the 1960s, two primary schools of thought divided symbolic interactionism: the Iowa school (associated with Kuhn, 1964) and the Chicago school (associated with Blumer, 1962, 1969). The Iowa school focused on stable structural influences on individual meaning-making (a top-down approach, known as *role taking*) and quantitative research methods that could empirically test theoretical hypotheses. Conversely, the Chicago school tended to emphasize qualitative methods and the process of meaning-making by individuals as being responsible for the creation of social norms (a bottom-up approach, called *role making*). Although many have called for movement beyond these distinct schools (and movement has occurred), their existence is important to consider when examining the impact and use of symbolic interactionism in family science. Broadly speaking, more family science research has followed the Iowa school's structural and quantitative focus, whereas social psychology and sociology have followed the Chicago school.

A third school of symbolic interactionist thought developed in the mid to late twentieth century, associated primarily with sociologist Sheldon Stryker (1968; Stryker & Burke, 2000) and referred to as the Indiana school. Like Kuhn and Blumer, Stryker focused on fleshing out the "frame" of Mead's more abstract symbolic interactionism by developing testable hypotheses and operationalizable constructs that quantitative methods could empirically investigate (Stryker, 2008, p. 17). Also like Kuhn, Stryker emphasized the importance of social structures in leading individuals to create meaning, but Stryker focused specifically on the importance and function of social roles (discussed more below).

Beyond the three schools of symbolic interactionist thought spanning sociology, social psychology, and family science, two variants of symbolic interactionism also have emerged over time: the *structural approach* and the *interactional approach*. Although some aspects of these variants align well with the three schools, it is worth briefly discussing each approach.

The structural approach is most easily aligned with the Indiana school and primarily is associated with the work of Sheldon Stryker (1968, 1980), although others associated with the structural approach include Ivan Nye, Wesley Burr and colleagues, Peter Burke, and Jan Stets. The primary tenet of the structural approach is that much of individuals' lives involve *role taking*. Occupying a social position (often referred to as a *status* or *role*, e.g., "mother") necessitates internalizing a set of stable social norms and expectations for that role (e.g., being a nurturing caregiver), which the individual then uses to make meaning of situations and to guide their behavior within that role. Role expectations, as explained by Goffman's "dramaturgical approach" (1974) are seen as "scripts... passed down to the actors from society, which *precede the individual*" (emphasis in original; White et al., 2019, p. 90). Generally, the structural approach to symbolic interactionism views society as a *patterned* and *stable* entity.

The interactional approach proposes the opposite: that individuals mostly engage in *role making*, and that family or societal patterns develop through interactions between individuals and their contexts (White et al., 2019). Most associated with Ralph Turner and his book *Family Interaction* (1970), the interactional approach

views societies as being constructed by their individual members and as guiding individual behavior only at a very broad level. Thus, the interactional approach views society as *fluid* and in *flux*.

Much like the different schools, these two variants have been highly critical of one another. Structuralists allege that interactionists allocate too much power to individuals and fail to explain how stable social structures exist and influence individuals and families. Interactionists accuse structuralists of failing to give enough agency to individuals and of being unable to account for adaptation and change. However, over time, interactional approaches have ventured into the realm of structuralism, and structuralists have begun to account for the influence of interactions. The work of Peter Burke (particularly his cybernetic model of identity control; 1991, 1997) introduces a dyadic interaction between individuals into the process of role taking. In the 1980s, Turner and colleagues (Turner, 1980; Turner & Colomy, 1987) made more general statements about families and social aggregates rather than particular patterns within individual families or contexts. As such, scholars are recognizing the truth in both perspectives, exploring the ways individuals both internalize *and* construct roles.

These varied approaches mean that symbolic interactionism is more a cluster of (sometimes opposing) frameworks than a singular entity. Although all of its original schools and approaches were housed in sociology departments, over time its usage has evolved in a number of fields (see more on this below) and thus the framework itself has evolved in a number of directions, including within family science. Family science, as an interdisciplinary field with strong roots in sociology and social psychology and with scholars who often utilize a both/and approach to understanding families (e.g., it is both nature and nurture, the individual and their environment), is particularly well-suited to the task of accommodating competing perspectives.

## Core Assumptions and Interrelated Concepts

Though multiple variants of symbolic interactionism exist, the idea of *meaning* is central to all of them. Symbolic interactionists see individuals as active participants who do not merely observe the situations in which they find themselves, but who interpret and use *signs* and *symbols* that are present in such situations to construct meaning (see Table 1 for a list of key constructs and definitions). This notion is captured in Thomas and Thomas's (1928) famous dictum, that "What humans define as real has real consequences" (p. 572), which underscores both the agency of individuals in the meaning-making process and the flexible nature of "reality" within the interactionist tradition. What is "real" to any individual depends on how they interpret a situation, and that interpretation thereafter guides their behavioral response. For example, how a child reacts in response to a gift from their father will depend upon what the gift symbolizes to the child – what it *means*. Is the gift some art supplies that the child really wanted, or a soccer ball because the father wants his child to be involved in sports? Answers to such questions will result in different

**Table 1** Key constructs in symbolic interactionism. Throughout this table, this sample interaction will be used to exemplify the different constructs: An adolescent calls his parents to tell them he is having dinner at a friend's house

Construct	Definition and examples
<p><b>Self</b>  <i>Looking glass self, I, Me, Generalized other</i></p>	<p>An individual's symbolic representation of themselves as someone who acted upon something (<i>I</i>) and which is acted upon (<i>me</i>)</p> <p>Here, the behavior was calling his parents to tell them he is having dinner elsewhere. His "self" would account for both the fact that he made the phone call (the I, someone who acted) and how he thinks others will view and react to his call (the Me, someone who is acted upon)</p> <p>Implicit in the Me are the understandings that both calling and the content of the call will elicit reactions in the parents (the parents could view the phone call as being respectful by letting them know his plans or could view it as disrespectful because he did not ask permission) and with his friend (will the friend view him positively for calling his parents to tell them, or negatively, thinking he shouldn't have to tell them what he's doing)</p> <p>He is aware of both <i>specific others</i> (what his friend will think of him) and his idea of the <i>generalized other</i> (what other people generally think of people who call their parents and who have dinner with friends instead of family)</p>
<p><b>Signs/symbols</b></p>	<p><i>Signs</i> are things that represent or stand for something else, and <i>symbols</i> are words, gestures, or objects that have shared meaning within a culture. In both cases, the shared meaning of the sign or symbol is created through social interactions</p> <p>The behavior of "calling his parents" could signify:          That having dinner together is a typical routine in his family, and so exceptions to this practice require notice          A social norm that, in families, it is considerate to let family members know of changes in plans that could impact their own plans (e.g., when or what to make for dinner)          That he considers himself an adult who can make his own plans without parental permission</p>
<p><b>Meaning</b></p>	<p>The interpretation an individual assigns to a behavior, situation, or interaction based on the signs and symbols that are perceived. <i>Meanings must be shared across individuals in order to have a successful interaction</i></p> <p>Families might differ in expecting that you should call your parents about a change in plans, that family members eat dinner together, or that an adolescent should ask permission rather than simply notifying parents</p> <p>Within a family, these expectations might differ between parents and the adolescent</p> <p>A disconnect in any of these meanings will negatively influence the interaction</p>
<p><b>Socialization</b></p>	<p>The process by which society imbues individuals with the symbols, meanings, and beliefs inherent to that society</p> <p>Over the course of his childhood, the adolescent likely was taught that the family generally eats dinner together and that changes in plans should be communicated to other family members</p>

(continued)

**Table 1** (continued)

Construct	Definition and examples
<b>Role:</b> <i>Expectations, clarity, strain, overload, taking, making</i>	The places occupied by individuals in the social structure; the self in context Here, the adolescent occupies two roles, perhaps with competing needs: son and friend
<b>Identity</b> <i>Identity verification, self-enhancement, self-verification, salience, commitment, centrality</i>	The self in role; how individuals define themselves as a result of occupying particular social categories He might feel that “good sons” call their parents; therefore, he is a good son for calling his parents Similarly, he might feel that a “good friend” accepts invitations to dinner, and so he is a good friend His parents might feel that a “good son” would choose dinner with family over friends and see his action as a “bad son”

constructions of the meaning of the gift and consequently, different emotional and behavioral responses by the child, which in turn shape future father-child interactions.

For human beings to successfully interact and communicate, symbols must have some degree of *shared meaning* across individuals. A strong focus of Mead’s and others’ work has been how a society socializes its members regarding the systems and patterns of symbolic meanings held by that society. Another focus for symbolic interactionists is how meanings can be constructed and adapted during interactions to fit specific contexts or situations. Words come and go over time, and existing words can evolve in meaning. Dictionaries routinely publish lists of new words that are added to the “official” lexicon, providing one instance of how shared meaning is constructed first through individual interactions and an accumulation of usage, and then brought to a societal level for greater recognition and formalization. Problems arise when someone does not use a word or behavior to communicate the agreed-upon meaning, when meaning is not universally shared, or when the meaning differs across contexts or cultures.

Another key concept in symbolic interactionism is the idea of the *self*. Cooley (1902) first introduced the concept of self through his idea of the “looking glass self,” or how we believe we look to others, as if viewing ourselves in a mirror. Mead expanded the concept of self to include what he termed the *I* (the self as “knower,” or person who does things; subject) and the *me* (the “known” self, or person who was acted on/who was observed doing things; object). It is by viewing ourselves as objects that we can take on the perspectives of important others. Mead then expanded these specific other referents to the *generalized other*, or how we use specific others to form more general beliefs about how “society” would judge us and our behaviors.

This leads to the idea of *roles*, which the different variants of symbolic interactionism have used in numerous ways, perhaps because the term did not originate with the framework. Despite its centrality to the framework, Mead (1934) did little to define the concept of roles, simply putting in a footnote that it meant to “‘put himself in the place of,’ the other individuals implicated with him in given social situations” (p. 141n). Mead understood roles to be the societal expectations



associated with occupying particular social positions or situations. As noted, Stryker and Burke focused largely on these processes of role taking and role making. Stryker (1968; Stryker & Burke, 2000) has been concerned primarily with the ways in which society guides the formation of self, or what he terms *identities* (the “self in role”). Burke elaborated upon Stryker’s work to focus on how identities inform behavior, and how behavioral feedback from others, in turn, provides feedback to the person about their identity.

The numerous variants and sub-theories of symbolic interactionism make it challenging to provide an exhaustive discussion of all of its constructs; the constructs and assumptions we describe above represent the core beliefs common to most, if not all, interactionist variants.

## Research Using Symbolic Interactionism

Research in the interactionist tradition has addressed a wide variety of social processes. As many have noted, summarizing work that can be classified as symbolic interactionist in nature is difficult, as any attempt to present an exhaustive summary will at best be partial and selective (Carter & Fuller, 2016; Hall, 2003; Plummer, 1996). This difficulty arises for two reasons: first, because of the sheer number of theoretical and empirical studies that have emerged over the decades, and second, due to the vast array of themes symbolic interactionists have addressed in prior work. Therefore, here we first include studies that are classic symbolic interactionist works and next examine a selection of contemporary studies on family life.

### *Classic Studies in Symbolic Interactionism*

Studies conducted by Rosengren (1961), Glaser and Strauss (1964), Daniels (1972), and Becker (1953) are considered seminal examples of symbolic interactionist research. Rosengren examined the nature of self-meanings in those who are emotionally disturbed. In revealing how external social forces and the perception of others’ views cause self-meanings to change over time, Rosengren provided a blueprint for how to design a research study aimed at measuring symbolic interactionist concepts as well as a method for empirically testing the ideas of George Herbert Mead. Glaser and Strauss’ study of hospital life showed how nurses create a controlled atmosphere of positivity for terminal patients in order to ensure that patients maintain a positive outlook, even when death is imminent. Daniels studied the military (during the height of the Vietnam conflict) and suggested that psychiatric diagnoses of veterans are socially constructed since diagnoses of mental illness are dependent on both patients’ symptoms and doctors’ awareness of the consequences of a specific diagnostic label for the patient. And in one of the oldest studies to use symbolic interactionism, Becker’s marijuana study revealed how “getting high” is a

social rather than physiological phenomenon, and how role behaviors are socialized and acquired through social interactions.

More generally, studies that utilize an interactionist framework have appeared in cultural studies (Becker, 1982), and in literature aligned with feminism (Deegan & Hill, 1987), Marxism (Schwalbe, 1986), ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967; Scott & Lyman, 1968), phenomenology (Schutz, 1962), pragmatism (Plummer, 1996), and even postmodernism (Sandstrom & Fine, 2003). Even a brief review of the literature shows that symbolic interactionism appeals to a wide range of scholarship and philosophical perspectives. Symbolic interactionism commonly informs research on the self, identity, social roles, and the body (Burke & Stets, 2009; MacKinnon, 1994). It also is a popular perspective in literature that addresses social problems (Best, 2003), collective behavior and social movements (McPhail, 1991; Stryker et al., 2000), deviance (Conrad & Schneider, 1980), and emotions (Hochschild, 1979, 2003 [1983]). Also included is research that applies symbolic interactionism to understand the family, which is the next focus of our review.

### *Symbolic Interactionist Studies of the Family*

An extensive literature uses symbolic interactionism as a perspective for understanding the family. Indeed, the family unit was one of the first areas of inquiry for symbolic interactionists, with Stryker (1959, 1968) examining why family members have different levels of commitment to their family roles, and how varying levels of commitment influence role behavior. Stryker's (1980) answer to his now famous question, "Why, on a free afternoon, do some people play golf with friends while others take their children to the zoo?"—that family members choose one role behavior over another depending on their commitment to their role identities—has influenced an entire research program under the label of "identity theory" (Burke & Stets, 2009; Serpe & Stryker, 2011; Stets & Serpe, 2016).

While Stryker's work provides an example of early symbolic interactionist work on the family, many credit Ernest Burgess with first applying a symbolic interactionist perspective to the study of families (Stryker, 1964). In 1926, Burgess published "The family as a unity of interacting personalities," proposing an application of symbolic interactionist ideas to family science, which strongly influenced family research in the decades that followed (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). Burgess's conceptualization was unique in that he viewed "the family" as existing "not in any legal conception, nor in any formal contract, but in the interaction of its members" (1926, p. 5). He also viewed these interactions as ever dynamic and evolving, such that individuals were mutually influential to and interdependent with one another.

As noted by LaRossa and Reitzes (1993), perhaps the most lasting of Burgess's contributions to symbolic interactionism and family science were the propositions that (1) the family is a social group and its form and structure are influenced by societal structures and institutions and (2) perceptions of self and others motivate behavior and guide individuals' interpretations of the behaviors of others (1926).

Other important figures in the history of symbolic interactionism in family science include Willard Waller (whose studies of dating and divorce were some of the first studies on the role of conflict and power in family interactions; Waller, 1937, 1938) and Reuben Hill, who published a second edition of Waller's book *The Family* (1951) after Waller's death. Hill shifted the focus of the book away from a largely qualitative approach regarding conflict and process to a more quantitative and developmental perspective with a greater focus on family crises and the importance of the ways in which families define difficult situations (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). As he noted, "Not infrequently families with resources adequate to meet the hardships of sickness or job loss crack under stress because they define such hardship as insurmountable" (1951, p. 462).

More contemporary research has used the interactionist perspective to understand a variety of social processes relating to marriage, parenthood, and family structure, with much recent research addressing changing family roles and the challenges that face modern families. For example, studies have used symbolic interactionism to explore stepmothers' construction of a sense of belonging (Murtorinne-Lahtinen & Jokinen, 2020), the identity construction of donor-conceived offspring (Harrigan et al., 2015), and the ways in which women's fertility perceptions predict changes in life satisfaction (Greil et al., 2019). Studies also have explored the diversity of families and how family members negotiate family rituals, rules, and norms (e.g., Glass, 2014). Others have used symbolic interactionism to understand family pathologies, including substance misuse (e.g., Bermudez et al., 2017; Katovich & Rosenthal Vaughan, 2016).

Studies applying symbolic interactionism to families are truly interdisciplinary, extending to such diverse fields as marketing and social work. For example, Parkinson et al. (2016) used symbolic interactionism to understand how the addition of an infant into the family structure affects consumer decision-making and the couple process in jointly negotiating feeding practices (along with influences such as the media). From a social work perspective, Hollingsworth (1999) used an interactionist framework to show how African American families are defined by a unique and distinct cultural heritage as a way to explain why many in the African American community are opposed to transracial adoption.

Despite its origins in sociology, family science has enthusiastically adopted symbolic interactionism as "one of its own" theories, including it as a core family theory from the earliest theory handbooks. Its foci on meaning-making, the importance of significant others in the development of identities, and socialization processes have made family science a natural fit for research in the interactionist tradition. In fact, Cook and Douglas (1998) asserted that "[f]amily relationships provide the most valid context for studying a key hypothesis of symbolic interaction theory (SIT), that how one is perceived by significant others determines one's view of the self" (p. 299). Family scientists have investigated processes and meaning-making among diverse individuals and families, from transnational families to families with members with disabilities to LGBTQ families, as well as those with multiple intersecting identities.

Although symbolic interactionism contains no explicit focus on culture, nor is it a critical theory in the same vein as feminist or critical race theories, its emphasis on the importance of societal construction of roles and individual meaning-making has allowed it to be flexible, and perhaps the most flexible of all of the historical “core” family theories when addressing numerous forms and aspects of family diversity (although its ability to address power differences remains somewhat weak, which we discuss more below). Its implicit assumptions of change and diversity in individuals and societies likely have contributed to its longevity and continued relevance in family science and other fields, where other theories have foundered, been reinvented, or fallen out of fashion. However, it is not without weakness, which we now discuss.

## Critiques and Limitations of Symbolic Interactionism

Although symbolic interactionism has been and continues to be a productive and well-utilized perspective, it is not without limitations, and perhaps its loudest critics historically have come from symbolic interactionist scholars themselves. As noted previously, the different schools of thought tended to compete with one another rather than attempting to integrate their varied perspectives and assumptions, conducting their research separately and rarely, if ever, collaborating. The philosophical battles over qualitative vs. quantitative methods and top-down or bottom-up approaches have been waged on various fronts for years and only recently have attempts at integration been made, particularly with the growth in mixed methods research. However, Stryker recently stated that “[a]ccording to Mead... both persons (humans with minds and selves) and society are created through social process; each is constitutive of the other, and neither has ontological priority. Society emerges out of interaction and shapes self, but self shapes interaction, playing back on society” (2008, p. 17). So, it seems that such a reciprocal view of the relationship between self and society has always existed in symbolic interactionism, with the different schools merely choosing to emphasize one or the other.

Beyond the opposing views of the self and its creation endemic to symbolic interactionism, a number of other critiques have been lobbied. Perhaps the biggest critique of symbolic interactionism has been that it lacks the necessary components to be a formal theory (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). Although it offers a useful lens with which to view family and other social interactions, and although some of its sub-theories have been quite successful in delineating clear propositions (e.g., Burr et al., 1979; Stryker, 1968, 1980), symbolic interactionism itself lacks a set of formal theoretical propositions. The validity of this criticism depends upon how one views the work of Stryker. Many view Stryker as creating a sub-theory, identity theory, within the framework of symbolic interactionism. Others view Stryker’s work as a school of symbolic interactionism in and of itself. Stryker himself argued that Mead’s work “constituted a conceptual/theoretical frame, not a theory per se” (2008, p. 16), and, like Kuhn and Blumer, he set out to provide what he saw as

missing. The dilemma of how to classify identity theory, and the contradictory views contained within symbolic interactionism, raises the question of whether *any* attempt to articulate formal propositions for symbolic interactionism could be other than a sub-theory of the larger framework.

Several additional critiques and limitations of symbolic interactionism likely arise from its historical origins during a time when diversity and systemic inequality remained largely unexamined by the predominantly upper class, White men who were doing the theorizing. First, a lack of consideration has been given to power and structural diversity as well as inequalities that are present within social groups (Adamsons, 2010; Stryker, 2008). Mead's construct of the *generalized other* assumes a relatively monolithic view, which ignores structural differences in the degree of influence certain "others" might have relative to less powerful "others." In families as well as in society overall, the power held by two individuals in an interaction is rarely exactly equal, so this omission is an important deficit. However, some feel that scholars have addressed this limitation. For example, Stryker (1980) discussed the ways in which structural characteristics such as gender, age, socioeconomic status, and race/ethnicity influence interactions and symbolic interpretations. Therefore, the groundwork appears to have been laid for such consideration. And, as noted above, the mechanisms for accounting for diversity have existed from its earliest days; it has been largely a problem regarding their utilization.

Similar to above, Mead also assumed a singular "self," which fails to account for behaviors such as code-switching that occur within the same individual across differing sociocultural contexts (e.g., individuals belonging to a cultural or ethnic minority speaking and behaving differently when among members of their own group than with members of the majority group). Such a singular self would speak little to the phenomenon of "passing" (seeking to be identified by others as a member of a particular favored group, while, unbeknownst to those others, possessing membership in another, less favored group). For example, civil rights leader Walter Francis White had a multiracial background with predominantly White grandparents. He identified as Black, serving as the head of the NAACP for almost 25 years until his death (1931–1955); however, he often "passed" as White due to having blond hair and blue eyes, at one point even almost joining the KKK, allowing him greater access to investigate lynchings and race riots in the American South. Such instances of multiple and sometimes conflicting selves are difficult to reconcile with a unified sense of self as proposed originally by Mead.

Generally speaking, there is an undercurrent of "normativity" that flows throughout symbolic interactionism, with a relatively unspoken goal of maintenance of social stability and the status quo. However, within symbolic interactionism, historically little to no attention has been paid to whether these social norms and expectations are worth replicating and socializing into new generations, or the ways in which particular groups and individuals are systematically disadvantaged by such continued socialization. Newer theories such as queer theory and critical race theory (see chapters "[Queer Theory](#)" and "[Critical Race Theory: Historical Roots, Contemporary Use, and Its Contributions to Understanding Latinx Immigrant Families](#)" in this volume) have done a better job of centering such concerns, and it

is encouraging that more recent research using symbolic interactionism has begun exploring the experiences of marginalized individuals and groups (see more below).

Additionally, some accuse symbolic interactionism of committing the “subjective fallacy”—overstating the importance of individuals’ definitions of a situation while failing to account for the existence and importance of objective realities. As noted by Goffman, “Whether you organize a theater or an aircraft factory, you need to find places for cars to park and coats to be checked, and these had better be real places, which, incidentally, had better carry real insurance against theft” (1974, p. 1). LaRossa and Reitzes emphasized further that “definitions of situations can have consequences, but so too can the situations themselves” (1993, p. 155). It is worthwhile, therefore, for symbolic interactionists to realize the limits of subjective perceptions.

Ideally, limitations become the impetus for future theoretical growth. Therefore, we now consider future directions of the perspective. Here we discuss recently emerging trends, emphases, and extensions of symbolic interactionism, focusing on new areas of family life that need addressing. We also examine how symbolic interactionists are employing new methodologies in their studies of the family and discuss the perspective’s future prospects.

## **The Growing Edge: Current and Future Directions of Symbolic Interactionism**

### *Emerging Areas and Fields of Research*

Symbolic interactionism has been a theoretical mainstay in family science and sociology; in recent years, its appeal has been “discovered” in numerous other fields. Here we highlight uses of the framework in other fields, and how these could be useful for family scientists.

**LGBTQ+ Studies** Numerous studies have been conducted in recent years using a symbolic interactionist lens to analyze the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals and the views of others toward LGBTQ+ individuals. For example, Herrera (2018) utilized both a poststructuralist and a symbolic interactionist lens to analyze the use of #lesbian on Instagram as a way of both creating and affirming a supportive community and also emphasizing the existence of power structures that lead those with minority identities to label themselves. Family scholars using an interactionist lens could draw further upon the experiences of gender and sexual minority individuals and their families, including the ways in which the LGBTQ+ community has “queered” the definition of family to include families of choice, as well as their sometimes conflicted relationships with their biological families of origin.

**Education** In the field of education, research has used an interactionist lens to examine how “nontraditional” members of academic communities construct mean-

ing about their roles. Lewis (2017) conducted an analysis with undergraduate students majoring in the humanities at a university that highly emphasized STEM majors. She introduced the ideas of “voluntary stigma” and “stigma allure” to explain why individuals sometimes choose identities which come with social costs attached in order to be authentic and true to themselves. The ideas of voluntary stigma and stigmatized identities have numerous potential applications in the study of families who are “nontraditional” (e.g., undocumented parents, age-discrepant marriages).

**Nutrition** Work in obesity prevention has begun to recognize the importance of beliefs and the importance of meanings around food and physical activity decisions. Combining the fields of social work and nutrition, Helton et al. (2016) explored the ways in which foster parents strategized to encourage healthy food habits in their foster children. Interestingly, this study was the only one reviewed here that used a mixed methods approach, rather than a strictly qualitative approach, showing the enduring influence of the Chicago school.

**Disability Studies** Finally, the use of symbolic interactionism is becoming more visible in the field of disability studies. In a particularly creative study by Hughes (2016), symbolic interactionism was used as the basis for intervention. Hughes explored the ways that premises and propositions from symbolic interactionism can aid individuals with Asperger’s syndrome in more accurately interpreting the non-verbal signs and symbols communicated by others, by emphasizing the notion of the “Me.” Again, a greater interactionist focus on individuals with disabilities will help family scientists understand the experiences of more diverse families.

### *Untapped Directions*

There are a number of directions that family-focused symbolic interactionist research has not yet followed but that would be of immense value. Perhaps the most influential would be shifting the focus from individual meaning-making back to examining the roles of social structures as guides for individual identity and behavior. As noted above, interactionists have done little to examine structural differences in power, opportunities, oppression, and (dis)advantage, despite it being well-situated to do so. Using an interactionist lens to examine the processes of socializing individuals into White supremacist, misogynist, heterosexist, and other beliefs that contribute to systemic as well as individually enacted discrimination and oppression would be invaluable in providing ways to dismantle and work against such processes and toward emancipation and equality. Family scientists could examine the societal and systemic forces at work in structural racism and the ways these shape individuals’ roles, expectations, and interpretations of situations and interactions, including differences in access to roles (e.g., female vs. male CEOs). In a highly individualistic society such as the USA, it can be easy to misattribute things like

“resilience” or “success” as individual traits or as a result of individual efforts (or a lack thereof) and to ignore the critical influence of social structures on individuals; symbolic interactionism was specifically designed to address such structural influences and constraints.

## *Methods*

Methods used in symbolic interactionist research have included everything from self-report surveys to observations to interviews, even experimental and quasi-experimental methods. Symbolic interactionists have employed ethnographic methods and content analyses to understand meanings of texts and narratives and to understand interaction processes during face-to-face encounters (Carter & Montes Alvarado, 2018). Although interactional and systemic components always have been implicit within symbolic interactionism, early research utilizing the perspective was largely individual in its focus and methods. However, Burke’s (1991, 1997) work on the identity verification process expanded the framework to include an explicitly dyadic perspective, and recent developments in dyadic research methodologies and statistical abilities have expanded the use of dyadic perspectives in symbolic interactionist research. Dyadic research is particularly important when studying families, as it is central to understanding the functioning of couples, the behavior of co-parents, and the nature of parent-child relationships and sibling dynamics, among others.

As noted earlier, much of the work using symbolic interactionism (particularly outside of family science) has been qualitative nature, with the notable exception of work using identity theory. Historically, qualitative research strategies have been associated with the Chicago school of symbolic interactionism and the field of sociology; quantitative methods have been more associated with the Iowa school (the Indiana school has employed both methodologies, though much of its research has been quantitative) and family science. As such, family sociologists could benefit from more quantitative methodologies, and family scientists would be well-served by embracing symbolic interactionism’s qualitative “roots.”

In this chapter, we have discussed the background and development of symbolic interactionism as a framework and how scholars employ the symbolic interactionist perspective to understand families. Symbolic interactionism has stood the test of time and continues to offer much to those interested in studying family dynamics, by helping scholars both conceptualize and empirically observe the myriad social processes at work in family structures. The meaning of “family” will continue to evolve over time, most recently with challenges to the binary nature of gender and related social movements to challenge what should be considered familial. Even as we redefine family and the norms for family life continue to evolve, symbolic interactionism will remain a robust theoretical perspective for understanding families.



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