The Theory

**Symbolic Interactionism** as thought of by Herbert Blumer, is the process of interaction in the formation of meanings for individuals. Blumer was a devotee of George H. Mead, and was influenced by John Dewey. Dewey insisted that human beings are best understood in relation to their environment (Society for More Creative Speech, 1996). With this as his inspiration, Herbert Blumer outlined **Symbolic Interactionism**, a study of human group life and conduct.

Blumer came up with three core principles to his theory. They are **meaning**, **language**, and **thought**. These core principles lead to conclusions about the creation of a person's self and socialization into a larger community (Griffin, 1997).

The first core principle of **meaning** states that humans act toward people and things based upon the meanings that they have given to those people or things. **Symbolic Interactionism** holds the principal of meaning as central in human behavior.

The second core principle is **language**. Language gives humans a means by which to negotiate meaning through symbols. Mead's influence on Blumer becomes apparent here because Mead believed that naming assigned meaning, thus naming was the basis for human society and the extent of knowledge. It is by engaging in speech acts with others, **symbolic interaction**, that humans come to identify meaning, or naming, and develop discourse.

The third core principle is that of **thought**. Thought modifies each individual's interpretation of symbols. Thought, based-on language, is a mental conversation or dialogue that requires role taking, or imagining different points of view.

The Case

Last week, I received an exciting e-mail from an old flame named Jeremy. Jeremy and I have been getting to know each other again through the
wonderful world of cyberspace. I like e-mail because it doesn't have the	nervous element that phone calls do. Unfortunately, it doesn't have the
personal touch of phone calls either. The biggest downfall of e-mail is that
non-verbal cues are impossible to detect, because of the simple fact that
e-mail is not verbal. It is very easy for misunderstanding to arise. Well,
Jeremy's e-mail to me on Thursday said he was coming to Boulder the
next day, and he was wondering if I wanted "to go out?" I accepted his
offer "to go out." With the help of my friends, I picked out the perfect outfit
for my date with Jeremy. The girls and I all assumed Jeremy and I would
do dinner and a movie because that is pretty much standard date practice.
The next night, Jeremy picked me up "to go out" to the bars with him and
three of his buddies. I got very angry and he couldn't figure out why. After
all, I told him we would "go out."

APPLICATION OF THEORY TO CASE

I can explain the problem between Jeremy and myself using the lens of the
three core principles of Symbolic Interactionism as outlined by Herbert
Blumer.

The first miscommunication that Jeremy and I had falls under the principal
of **meaning**. Jeremy and I acted differently toward one another because
we had different meanings of one another. Last year, Jeremy and I broke
up under the heading "we're just friends." Therefore, Jeremy assigns
"friend" as the meaning for me. For myself, however, when Jeremy and I
started talking again, I reevaluated my meaning for him as "potential
boyfriend." Jeremy was treating me like a friend, and I was treating him
like a boyfriend because we act toward people based on the meanings we
assign to them.

Our second miscommunication falls under the principle of **language**. The
symbols "do you want to go out" are very ambiguous, especially without
the luxury of non-verbal cues. After engaging in **symbolic interaction** with
my group of friends, I decided that "going out" means a romantic evening
of dinner and a movie. My girl friends asked where the two of us were
going, what I was going to wear to impress him, would we kiss on the first
date - even though it really wasn't our FIRST date, if the two of us were
going to start dating again, and other things like that. Through my
interaction with them, the language "going out" took on a specific
meaning. Apparently for Jeremy, the language "going out" took on the
specific meaning of hitting the bars for a night on the town. To put it
another way, if the extent of knowledge is naming, I name a typical date
as "going out," while Jeremy names being at the bars with friends "going
out." Because we have two different situations with the same name, we fell
upon a misunderstanding.

Our third miscommunication falls under the principal of **thought**. In my
internal dialogue, the symbols "do you want to go out" were interpreted
through my thought process based on my naming system. I read his
e-mail, talked to my friends, and assigned meaning to the language
through **symbolic interaction**. Based on that meaning from language, I had
an internal dialogue, and ended up coming to the conclusion that Jeremy
and I were going to spend some romantic time alone together. Jeremy's thought process also modified his interpretation of the language. Jeremy assigned the name of "just a friend" to me. That name was his meaning. He acted toward me based on that meaning. Through his internal dialogue, he used the language "going out" to be interpreted as time spent among friends.

While we ended up have a great time together, just the five of us, the focal point of the problem between Jeremy and myself is that each of us had different meanings with the same name which can account for our behavior.

CRITIQUE

The theory of *Symbolic Interactionism* is strong in that it provides a basis to understand the establishment of meaning. As I understand it, *Symbolic Interactionism* falls under the category of a Humanistic theory. It has creative meaning - interaction gives humans meaning. It has free will - every human has meanings which can change at any time. It has emancipation - individuals are free to find their own meaning. It has rules for interpretation meaning, language, and thought. And it uses a ethnography to find meaning.

*Symbolic Interactionism* also meets the five humanistic standards that make a good theory. There is a new understanding of the people where we get meaning. There is a clarification of values. Meaning comes from interaction, so interaction is important to human society. There is aesthetic appeal - the theory is in three, easy-to-understand parts. There is a community of agreement - Blumer's ideas are adopted by people in the academic community. And there is a reform of society - because meaning comes from interaction, interaction must not be taken for granted.

Although *Symbolic Interactionism* is a good theory by the five humanistic standards, there is a critique of the whole basis for it. While Blumer insists that the interpretive process and the context in which it is done are a vital element in the person's use of meaning and formation thereof, others view the use of meaning as simply the calling upon and application to specific situations of previously held meanings (Society for More Creative Speech, 1996). That is, a social interactionist believes that meaning arises out of the interaction between people, while a contradicting point of view a asserts that meaning is already established in a person's psychological make-up.

CONCLUSION

While it is debatable if *Symbolic Interactionism* is a good theory, or not, I find it effective in evaluating human interaction. My conflict with Jeremy is the perfect example of how different meanings can cause communication problems. While this is a fairly insignificant example, it is easy to see how larger problems can arise if the lines of communication are not open, and assumptions are made.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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