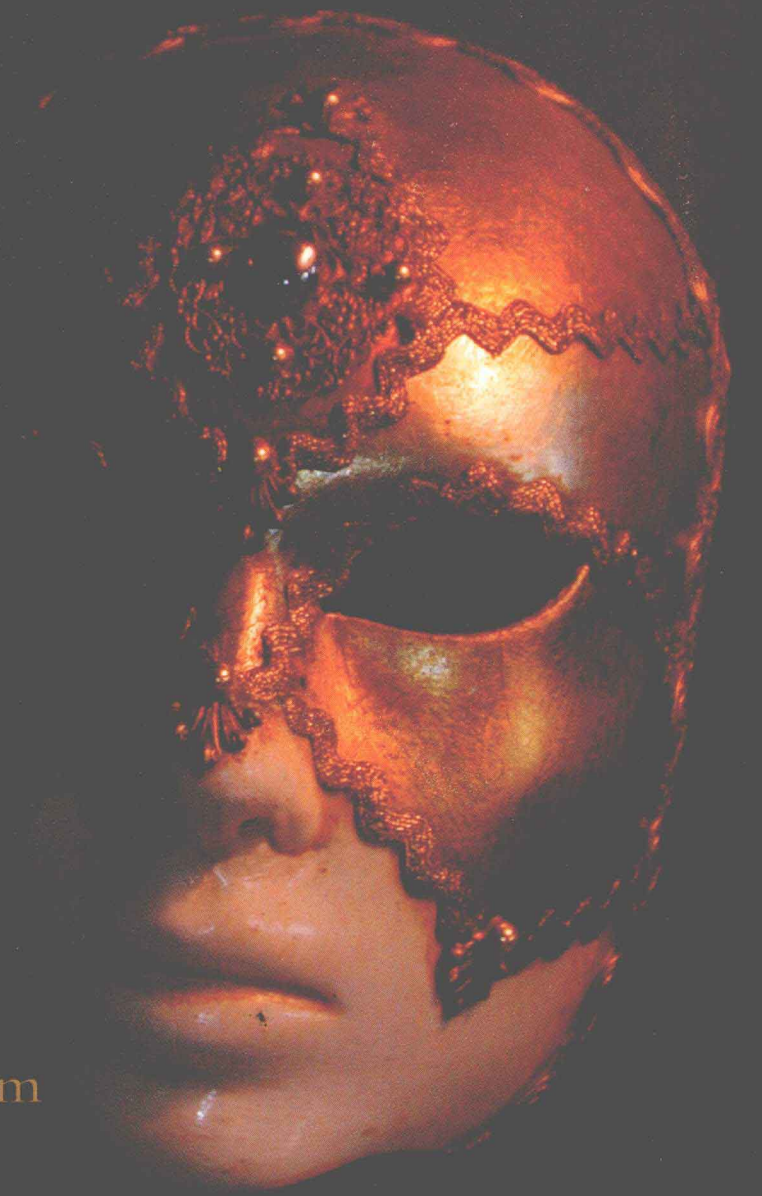
Symbols, Selves, and Social Reality

A Symbolic Interactionist Approach to Social Psychology and Sociology



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Roxbury Publishing Company
Los Angeles, California

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sandstrom, Kent L.

Symbols, selves, and social reality: A symbolic interactionist approach to social psychology and sociology/Kent L. Sandstrom, Daniel D. Martin, Gary Alan Fine.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-891487-72-8

1. Symbolic interactionism. 2. Social psychology. I. Martin, Daniel D. II. Fine, Gary Alan. III. Title.

HM499 .S26 2003

302—dc21 2002018988

CIP

SYMBOLS, SELVES, AND SOCIAL REALITY: A SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONIST APPROACH TO SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY AND SOCIOLOGY

Publisher: Claude Teweles
Managing Editor: Dawn VanDercreek
Production Editor: Jim Ballinger
Production Assistant: Stephanie Villavicencio Trkay
Copy Editor: Arlyne Lazerson
Cover Design: Marnie Kenney
Typography: SDS Design

Printed on acid-free paper in the United States of America. This book meets the standards of recycling of the Environmental Protection Agency.

ISBN 1-891487-72-8

ROXBURY PUBLISHING COMPANY
P.O. Box 491044
Los Angeles, California 90049-9044
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Email: roxbury@roxbury.net
Website: www.roxbury.net

In Appreciation

A book is always a collective creation and, as authors, we recognize how much we benefitted from the support and labor of others. We would like to thank the following colleagues for the helpful comments and suggestions they provided as reviewers: Patricia Adler (University of Colorado); Peter Adler (University of Denver); Spencer Cahill (University of South Florida); Kathy Charmaz (Sonoma State University); Martha Copp (East Tennessee State); Andrew Fontana (University of Nevada, Las Vegas); Mary J. Gallant (Rowan University); Mary Ann Groves (Manhattan College): Peter M. Hall (University of Missouri); Michael Katovich (Texas Christian University); Lyn H. Lofland (University of California, Davis); David Maines (Oakland University); Dan E. Miller (University of Dayton); Jodi O'Brien (Seattle University); Stan Saxton (deceased); David Snow (University of California, Irvine); and Angela Yancik (University of Dayton).

We also want to thank Jim Ballinger, Julie Fox, Vicki Kessler, Nate Sandstrom, Phil Sandstrom, Claude Teweles, and Lori Wiebold-Lippisch for the support and encouragement they provided to us in the writing and production of this text. ✦

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Introduction to Instructors

We have written *Symbols, Selves, and Social Reality* with the conviction that education should be a personally relevant, thought-provoking, and enjoyable endeavor—an endeavor that enables its participants to think critically and imaginatively about "reality" and to participate in the transformation of their social world. Guided by this conviction, we have designed the book to help students reflect critically on the everyday social realities they experience and to recognize how these realities are humanly created and transformed.

Our book is intended for social psychology courses within the discipline of sociology. It is designed to introduce students to the perspective of symbolic interactionism within the framework of a one-semester course.

Symbols, Selves, and Social Reality will be best utilized in courses such as "Self and Society," "Society and the Individual," "Social Psychology," "Microsociology," and "Symbolic Interactionism."

Distinctive Features of Our Text

Our book differs from other texts on symbolic interactionism in several important respects. First, it offers a more empirical focus. Competing texts feature relatively abstract delineations of the core tenets and concepts of symbolic interactionism. Our book links discussion of the central premises and concepts of symbolic interactionism more closely to pertinent research, including ethnographic studies conducted by its authors. In doing so, *Symbols, Selves, and Social Reality* provides more illustrative examples and excerpts from recent interactionist-oriented studies than other texts.

Second, our text places greater emphasis on topics that are inherently interesting to undergraduate students, such as gender- and race-related issues. For instance, in addressing the topics of socialization and self-development, the book includes an in-depth discussion of how individuals acquire and sustain gendered identities. Moreover, when discussing the processes of person perception and impression management, our book considers how and why these processes are shaped by gender- and race-related dynamics.

Third, *Symbols, Selves, and Social Reality* features an entire chapter on collective action and offers timely and engaging analyses of topics such as rumor, gossip, riots, and social movements.

Fourth, our text includes more pedagogical tools than its competitors. At the end of each chapter, we provide: (1) a summary of key points and concepts; (2) a glossary of key terms; (3) a list of suggested readings; and (4) questions for reflection and discussion.

In addition, the book features boxes that provide illustrations of points we make in the narrative. For example, our chapter on socialization includes an excerpt from an analysis of how the friendship groups of preadolescent boys serve as a staging area through which they become socialized into peer culture, learn and reinforce codes of masculinity, and develop gender identities. Also, our chapter on deviance includes boxed discussions that illustrate how lawmakers create deviance, how police officers selectively enforce laws (e.g., through racial profiling), and how stigmatizing labels promote secondary deviance.

Finally, *Symbols, Selves, and Social Reality* offers a discussion of the analytic utility of symbolic interactionism, its relevance for social policy, and its relationship to new perspectives emerging within sociology.

Concluding Thoughts for Instructors

We hope this book will be a helpful resource in offering an enriching and engaging course for your students. We believe that it conveys interactionist ideas and approaches in a way that will capture student interest. Most important, we believe the book will help you encourage students to grapple with challenging ideas and questions, to think more critically about their social worlds, and to gain greater insight into themselves and their social experiences. ✦

Chapter One

The Meaning of Symbolic Interactionism

Things are rarely as simple as they seem. Even children's play is not merely child's play. Consider Little League baseball. As anyone who has taken part in this activity can attest, Little League can be a placid, pastoral preserve in which children engage in a sweet rite of spring. On other occasions, though, Little League can be a fiery cauldron of adult emotions and rivalries. Players can become hostile, coaches manipulative, and fans abusive. The meaning of Little League, then, can vary dramatically. For some parents, Little League represents a proving ground for children they see as future all-stars. For some coaches, Little League serves as a classroom where they can teach children important life lessons, such as the value of teamwork, sportsmanship, and competition. And for some children, Little League serves simply as a place where they can learn how to play baseball and "hang out" with friends. Yet for most children, Little League comes to represent far more than a context for play; it becomes a venue for "serious" business—a business in which they learn the values and expectations of the adult world, along with the competing demands of preadolescent culture.[1]

When we think of Little League baseball, as well as other routine activities and experiences, we usually do not think of how our understandings are relative. We believe the world around us to be largely the same as our interpretations of it. We presume that we see "reality." We look at people, objects, and events and assume that their meaning and significance are easily discerned and that others will agree with us. In most cases, this assumption is not a problem. A desk is only a desk; what else could it be? A book is a book. A tree is a tree. A beautiful piece of sculpture is just that, as is a piece of garbage. This view, crucial for the conduct of our everyday lives, serves us well. Typically the things around us have a straightforward meaning.

While we rely on this belief in objective reality, this does not mean that things are always what they seem or that everyone's understandings are the same. We all know that members of different groups can see the same event or behavior in very different ways. For instance, fans cheering for one Little League team will see a pitch as a "strike," while fans of the opposing team will see it as a "ball." Similarly, one set of fans will see a close play at first base as a "hit," while the other set will see it as an "out." Because of this, we give certain people, such as umpires, the power to be arbiters of disputed or ambiguous events. Although the umpires may be as wrong in their interpretations as the fans supporting either team, we give them the power to define what *really* happened. Ultimately, social life depends on judgments about the nature of the world.

Within the field of social psychology, the perspective of symbolic interactionism has traditionally been the one most concerned with the meanings that people give to actions and events and with understanding how these meanings are constructed and negotiated. In turn, this perspective has provided the best known and most elaborately developed treatment of the connection between individual perception and social organization. It stresses that people create, negotiate, and change social meanings through the process of interaction. In the interactionist view, then, people have considerable power in shaping social reality. Through interacting with one another, they not only create meanings but also build and maintain social order.

The Origins and Development of Symbolic Interactionism

Historically, symbolic interactionism emerged out of the American philosophical tradition of **pragmatism,** an approach elaborated in the late nineteenth century in the writings of Charles S. Peirce, William James, and John Dewey. These thinkers challenged the mechanistic worldview and dualistic assumptions of classical rationalism, the philosophy that had dominated Western thought since the seventeenth century.[2] Unlike the rationalists, they saw reality as dynamic, people as active knowers, meanings as linked to social action and perspectives, and knowledge as an instrumental force that enables people to solve problems.[3]

Box 1-1
The Key Assumptions of Pragmatism

Drawing on the ideas of a broad range of scholars, including G. W. F. Hegel, Johann Fichte, David Hume, and Charles Darwin, the pragmatists developed a philosophical perspective that offered a unifying view of all facets of the human condition—mental and physical, subjective and objective, individual and social.

In formulating this philosophy, the pragmatists developed an approach that was a direct revolt against classical rationalism. This approach differed sharply from rationalism in its assumptions about (1) the nature of reality; (2) the nature of the human knower; (3) the relationship between facts, values, truth, and knowledge; and (4) the role of science. In this box we highlight the pragmatists' key ideas regarding these themes because they serve as the backdrop for the contemporary perspective of symbolic interactionism.

The Nature of Reality

The pragmatists rejected the rationalist view of "reality" as static, fixed, and one dimensional. By contrast, they conceived of reality as dynamic, unfinished, and pluralistic. As John Dewey asserted, reality "is infused with possibility"—it has multiple natures and is open to many interpretations.[i] In turn, human beings cannot meaningfully discuss a naked or uninterpreted objective reality. It is not that things in themselves are unattainable to our knowledge but rather that they can have a variety of meanings. Moreover, they do not reveal these meanings to us. What a specific thing means is problematic. Its "meaning" becomes determined in the course of its interaction with other things, particularly human beings. An object becomes meaningful as it is encountered and defined by people.

The Nature of the Knower

The pragmatists challenged the rationalists' "spectator theory of knowledge" and the dualistic separation of mind and matter underlying it. They contended that people could never observe the world passively or with complete skepticism about their own beliefs.[ii] Any attempt to do so would be self-deceptive. The pragmatists also argued that the worlds of mind and matter were not distinct; rather, they were vitally linked through human action. It is through activity that people select, measure, handle, and ultimately come to know objects in the world around them. Knowing is thus a process of "doing and making" that individuals engage in when they need to transform objects into *objects of knowledge.*[iii] This need most often arises when they encounter a problem (or felt difficulty) that interferes with their ongoing activity. Most important, as John Dewey posited, it is the human knower who establishes the "meaning" of objects through his or her practical skills, symbolic abilities, and manipulative powers. Put simply, the knower gives meanings to things based on how he or she responds to them.[iv]

The Linkage of Facts, Values, Truth, and Action

In line with their belief that people create meaning and reality, the pragmatists claimed that facts are not "out there" to be discovered by scientists or other human inquirers. Instead, scientists—like other people—actively carve facts

out of reality depending on their own interests and purposes. Thus, questions of fact cannot be raised without corresponding questions of value. Based on this observation, the pragmatists proposed that scientific inquiry and the search for truth are *moral* activities. In support of these claims, they pointed out that all judgements of truth involve a practical and evaluative judgment, that the verification of truth refers to a process of determining value, and that the criterion of truth is the realization of some kind of value.[v] In elaborating on these themes, the pragmatists argued that the truth of an idea or statement depends on its practical consequences. An idea is true (and thus "good") if it *works*—that is, if it enables people to adapt successfully to the requirements of a given situation. As William James proposed, truth "is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite assignable reasons."[vi] According to the pragmatist view, then, truth is not an absolute phenomenon. Rather, it is relative to the needs and interests of particular individuals and groups. The truth is created by people as they test out the usefulness of various ideas through their ongoing actions. Moreover, the "truth" of an idea or belief only endures as long as it allows people to adapt to their circumstances.

The Progressive Role of Science

While recognizing the relative and socially constructed nature of truth, even in scientific guise, the pragmatists believed strongly in the possibility of human progress facilitated by a scientifically informed process of social reconstruction. In contrast to the rationalists, pragmatist thinkers argued that philosophy could not and should not seek timeless, absolute truths. Instead, it should become engaged with the world and its problems, seeking and applying knowledge that would help people to improve their welfare *now*. The pragmatists did not see knowledge as something that should exist for its own sake. Rather, it should exist for the sake of doing.[vii] That is, it should allow people to solve problems and engage in creative and adaptive activity that in some way rearranged the world.[viii] In general, the pragmatists' action-oriented and instrumentalist tendencies led them to emphasize the potential applications and consequences of scientific inquiry and knowledge. They believed that science could and should enable people to address the problems they face and to take part in action that promotes the public good.[ix]

i. Dmitri N. Shalin, "Pragmatism and Social Interactionism," *American Sociological Review* 51, 1986, p. 11.

ii. Dmitri N. Shalin, "The Pragmatic Origins of Symbolic Interactionism and the Crisis of Classical Science," *Studies in Symbolic Interaction* 12, 1991, p. 226.

iii. R. W. Sleeper, *The Necessity of Pragmatism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986).

iv. Richard Bernstein, *Praxis and Action* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971).

v. John D. Goheen and John L. Mothershead, Jr., eds., *Collected Papers of C. I. Lewis* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1970), p. 280. See also H. S. Thayer, *Meaning and Action* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968).

vi. William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (New York: Longmans Green, 1907), p. 50.

vii. Dmitri N. Shalin, "Pragmatism and Social Interactionism," (Note i), p. 11.

viii. John Dewey, *John Dewey: The Early Works*, vol. 3 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1969).

ix. John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (New York: Holt, [1927] 1954); and John Dewey, *Individualism, Old and New* (New York: Capricorn Books, [1929] 1962).

Pragmatism and Sociology: The Contributions of George Herbert Mead

Pragmatist philosophy entered into sociology most directly through the writings and teachings of George Herbert Mead (1863–1931). Mead, a distinguished professor at the University of Chicago, taught a social psychology course as a member of the philosophy department. His best-known book, *Mind, Self, and Society*, emerged out of student transcriptions of lecture notes for that course. Published

in 1934, the book became a critical text in the development of symbolic interactionism.

Mead sought to translate pragmatist thought into a theory and method for the social sciences. In doing so he drew not only on the ideas of the pragmatist founders, such as Charles Peirce and William James, but also on the philosophical concepts of G. W. F. Hegel, the psychological insights of Wilhelm Wundt, the sociological analyses of Charles Horton Cooley and James Mark Baldwin, and the evolutionary theory of Charles Darwin. Mead derived his greatest inspiration, however, from the works of John Dewey, his friend and colleague at the University of Chicago. Building on Dewey's groundbreaking ideas, Mead developed a profoundly sociological account of human consciousness and behavior—an account that explained how these phenomena emerge through the processes of interaction and communication.

In articulating this account, Mead highlighted how we, as human beings, are distinct from other creatures because we have the capacity for language and thus can think, reason, communicate, and coordinate our actions with others. While these abilities rely on certain biological characteristics, Mead suggested that we have evolved in a way that has freed us from some of the constraints of other animals and allowed us to create social worlds apart from the demands of nature. Guided by this assumption of *emergence,* Mead focused his analyses on the unique character and consequences of the human capacity to use language.

Mead stressed that the symbolic nature of human behavior and communication make them distinctive. Unlike animals that respond to one another through instinctive gestures, such as growls, hisses, nips, or chirps, people communicate through exchanging symbols. When people use words or gestures that call forth the same meaning for others as they do for themselves, they use **significant symbols.**[4] According to Mead, most interactions among human beings are based on the interchange of significant symbols. As a result, these interactions require people to engage in a complex process of interpretation. When two individuals engage in a conversation, they have to make sense of each other's words and behaviors, reflecting on questions such as: What's the meaning of this situation? What does this other person want from me? What do I want from him or her? How is this person likely to act toward me? What will happen if our desires or actions clash? Will we get into a serious conflict? If we do, what consequences will this have for our future interactions? And, how will it affect my interactions with others?

In highlighting the role that language plays in human behavior, Mead offered a crucial contribution to sociological thought—a theory of the social origins of the human mind. Following John Dewey, Mead regarded the mind as an active and ongoing process, not a static structure. Through creating and exchanging significant symbols, people make and interpret meaning. They also engage in "minded" behavior. For Mead, **mind** does not refer to an inner psychic world separated from society but rather describes a *behavioral process* consisting of self-interaction and reflection based on social symbols.

Box 1-2

The Importance of the Significant Symbol

Significant symbols are important for several reasons. First, they allow us to exchange shared meanings with others and thus to communicate effectively with them. Second, they allow us to anticipate how others are likely to act in a situation and to coordinate our actions with theirs. For example, at a funeral service most Americans share the understanding that "the de-

ceased" refers to the dead person lying in a casket. They also understand that they should respond in a solemn and respectful way to "the deceased" and his or her surviving family members. These understandings enable everyone at a funeral to coordinate their actions smoothly, even in the midst of a highly emotional event.

Funeral home personnel, of course, often take the lead in showing respect for the deceased, maintaining a physical distance of two to three feet from the casket and refraining from making any corrective adjustments to the casketed body while in view of others. They also refrain from making coarse, sarcastic, or humorous comments that would challenge people's understanding that a solemn event is taking place. Overall, the funeral home staff take great care to act and talk in ways that convey esteem for the deceased and concern for grieving survivors.

When interacting with one another outside of public view, however, funeral home personnel may act toward "the deceased" in a much different way, utilizing very different significant symbols to communicate with one another and coordinate their actions. For instance, they may refer to the corpse as a "cold one" (or frozen body), a "floater" (or a body that floated to the surface after a drowning), or "Mr. Crispy" (a body recovered from a fire). They may also describe the embalming of the corpse as "pickling" and the caskets as "stuffing boxes" or "stove pipes." Through using these significant symbols, the funeral home staff can distance themselves from especially difficult aspects of the work they share, thereby reducing or relieving some of the discomfort it evokes.

Source: These examples are drawn from Charles Edgley and Ronnie Turner, "Death as Theater: A Dramaturgical Analysis of the American Funeral," *Sociology and Social Research* 60, 1976, pp. 377–392.

The social origins and dynamics of mind. Mead recognized that the emergence of the mind depends on a certain level of physiological development in the central nervous system and cerebral cortex. A mind cannot arise without a highly developed brain. Yet a highly developed brain is not sufficient to make a mind. The emergence of mind depends importantly on social factors. As human beings we develop the capacity for mind through our involvement in society, or interaction with others.[5] Through these interactions we acquire the ability to interpret and use significant symbols.

As Mead revealed, we typically develop a mind as infants because we have to adjust and adapt to a social world of organized, symbolic action—a world of rules, roles, relationships, and institutions. We must learn to use and interpret significant symbols so that we can understand this world, communicate with others, and satisfy our impulses and desires. According to Mead, we do this through the crucial process of "taking the role of the other." By placing ourselves in the position of others and looking at the world through their eyes, we learn what things mean. We come to see objects—trees, cats, students, beer, dorm rooms, ourselves—as others do and to name these objects in ways that call out the same responses in others as they do in us. Through this process we develop the capacity to think or converse with ourselves. That is, by addressing ourselves from the standpoint of others, we acquire a system of shared meanings that allows us to define things and engage in internal conversations. It is these conversations that constitute the mind.

In addition to explaining how the mind emerges through the social process of **role taking,** Mead emphasized its importance for the maintenance of society. It is through mind, the process of interacting or conversing with ourselves, that we interpret the meanings of others' words and gestures and anticipate their actions. Mind allows us to assume the perspectives of others, understand their overt and covert behaviors, imagine alternative responses to these behaviors, and fit our actions together with theirs. For instance, when seeing a family standing by their car on the shoulder of a highway and waving at passersby, we implicitly put

ourselves in their place, infer that they need help because their car has broken down, and consider different courses of action, such as pulling over to assist them. Most significantly, by using our minds in this way we effectively engage in joint and meaningful action with other individuals. This process makes society possible.

The processual and creative nature of human action. In developing his theory of mind, along with his analyses of society and selfhood, Mead emphasized a second key theme: *process*. Mead proposed that all of the key elements of human behavior—consciousness, activity, interaction, role taking, selfhood, and society—are continuously in flux, not static or fixed. Moreover, they arise out of the process of communication and become sustained and transformed through this process.

A third theme that Mead accentuated in his theory was *agency*, or free will. Mead's image of human beings differed sharply from those held by the instinctivist and behaviorist social psychologies that prevailed at the time. Mead saw people as active and creative agents who shape their own worlds and behavior. He believed that human behavior is far too complex to be explained by theories that emphasize instincts or reflexlike responses to "stimuli." Mead was particularly critical of the behaviorist explanations developed by his colleague and friend, John Watson. Watson proposed that social psychologists did not have to pay attention to the mind, or internal mental events, to understand human conduct. Instead, they needed to concentrate on what they could directly observe: overt physical behavior and the environmental stimuli associated with that behavior.

While Mead had sympathy for an approach that emphasized behavior, he thought that Watson made a critical mistake in excluding mental events or "subjective behavior." Although subjective behavior is not directly observable, Mead argued that it is essential to human conduct. Since people are symbolic creatures, they can interpret and talk about their inner experiences, such as their thoughts or desires, making them observable, if only indirectly. In elaborating this point, Mead criticized Watson (and his behaviorist allies) for focusing too narrowly on the individual. The action of individuals—not just their observable behaviors but also their internal conduct, such as thinking, assessing, and planning—must be analyzed within a social context. A person's behavior is rarely disconnected from the behavior of others. In stressing these themes Mead distinguished his own approach to human conduct, sometimes referred to as "social behaviorism," from the behaviorism of Watson and others that focused on action, ignoring internal processes. Mead illustrated how people's behavior, including the behavior of mind, arises from adaptation and adjustment to social interaction and can only be understood in relation to this interaction. Most crucially, he demonstrated how and why behaviorists failed to account for the social character of the human act. To understand the complete social act, a social psychologist must understand the dynamics of mind. Because people possess minds, they can invent, discover, initiate, and construct new realities and lines of action. They do not simply "react" to stimuli or biological impulses; rather, they are active and self-conscious *agents* who use symbols to create objects, designate meanings, define situations, and plan lines of action. In so doing, they actively construct the reality of their environment and exercise a measure of control over it.

Mead's ideas significantly extended social psychological understanding of human consciousness and behavior. Building upon pragmatist insights, Mead developed a comprehensive theory that explained human thought and conduct in sociological terms. In later chapters we will discuss Mead's ideas and contributions at greater length, particularly his accounts of the development of the self and the coordination of social action. In the following section, however, we shift our attention to how Mead's scholarly work contributed to the rise of symbolic interactionism and shaped its guiding assumptions.