

Seventh Edition

Self and SOCIETY

A Symbolic Interactionist Social Psychology



John P. Hewitt

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*A Symbolic Interactionist
Social Psychology*

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Preface

Preparing the Seventh Edition has made clear to me that *Self and Society* is, like all things social, a work always in creation and never completed. As in earlier revisions, I have tried to refine my discussions, introduce new ideas, excise outdated materials, polish my prose, and, in general, make the book a better exposition of the symbolic interactionist perspective.

Some of the changes in this edition are relatively minor. I have, for example, refined my discussion of exchange theory and of ethnomethodology in Chapter 1; considerably expanded my discussion of the nature of symbols in Chapter 2; clarified the reasons for discussing deviance in Chapter 6; and made explicit reference to postmodernism in my defense of pragmatism in Chapter 7. Throughout the book I have added new references where I thought they would help students and have rearranged or rewritten passages for clarity. These changes are minor in the sense that they maintain the existing structure of the book. In most cases, however, I think they will have a major impact on understanding.

Other changes are more readily apparent and deserve special comment. Early in the life of this book, I expanded it to eight chapters by dividing into two chapters a single chapter that had covered both the basic concepts of symbolic interactionism and the evolutionary setting of human conduct. My own doubts about the relative value of the chapter on evolution and biology, as well as reader comments, led me to return to the original seven-chapter structure for this edition. Chapter 2 now concentrates on the basic concepts of symbolic interactionism, with considerable added material on symbols, and does not attempt to deal with issues of evolution, the development of language, or biological determinism. Those are important topics, but I came to feel they were a distraction in this context.

Second, I have introduced the topic of emotions earlier in the book, hoping thereby to convey not only the idea that the emotions are important, but also that understanding them is a fundamental and not a marginal task of symbolic

interactionism. Basic ideas about emotions are introduced in Chapter 2; the discussion continues with references to emotions and the self in Chapter 3 and the management of emotions in Chapter 4.

Third, I have rewritten those sections of Chapter 3 that discuss identity and self-esteem. The discussion now effectively centers on identity (with more attention to everyday announcements and placements of identity) and on self-esteem (with an effort to link self-esteem to the discussion of emotions).

Fourth, I have added a new section on boundaries to Chapter 5, complementing my existing discussion of negotiation, careers, horizontal and vertical linkages, and related aspects of social coordination. Much of contemporary life and discourse centers on the maintenance or elimination of various boundaries, such as race, class, gender, and belief, and so I thought this material an important addition to a social psychological consideration of social organization.

Thanks are due to the graduate students with whom I have worked in recent years for sharpening my thinking, asking challenging questions, and making teaching worthwhile. I particularly want to thank sociology doctoral students Michael Fraser, Patricia Hanrahan, and Rhonda Singer. Leslie Beth Berger and Ulla Johansson, though not sociologists, also have earned my respect and appreciation. Thanks are also due to the reviewers whose suggestions helped shape this revision: Norman Goodman, State University of New York at Stony Brook; Nancy J. Herman, Central Michigan University; Lena Wright Myers, Ohio University; and Frank Page, University of Utah. And, of course, the staff at Allyn and Bacon have been helpful and kind in their efforts to produce this book; they have my thanks as well. They include Editor-in-Chief, Social Sciences, Karen Hanson, as well as the staff associated with this edition: Jennifer Jacobson, Annette Joseph, and free-lancer Holly Crawford.

Last, but really first, my family. My children, Elizabeth A. Hewitt and Gary L. Hewitt, on whom I have reported and whom I have thanked in successive editions of this book, are themselves now college professors teaching students and writing books. And my wife and colleague, Myrna Livingston Hewitt, is still the friend without whom I would not be who I am. To these three, I owe more than I can possibly say.

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Chapter 1

Social Psychology and Symbolic Interactionism

We human beings live in a world of names for ourselves, for others, and for our activities. These names announce who we are, what we are doing, and why we are doing it. When I call myself “professor,” for example, I invite others to identify me as that role, to interpret what I do as relevant to its requirements, and to trust that I have good “professorial” reasons for my words and deeds. The names we call ourselves also shape the identities of others and the conduct we expect from them. If I am the “professor,” the others to whom I address myself are “students,” whose actions and motives I will scrutinize to see if they are appropriate to their identity.

Two names—*social psychology* and *symbolic interactionism*—identify the author and purposes of this book. To say that one is interested in social psychology tells other social scientists something of one’s professional activities and commitments; to assert that one pursues social psychology from the perspective of symbolic interactionism adds another layer of meaning. Yet these names are ambiguous and possibly misleading. “Social psychology” labels diverse scholars and activities, and “symbolic interactionism” names a sociological perspective that can be understood in several different ways. Hence, the first task in developing a symbolic interactionist social psychology is to explore these labels, their origins, and their implications. Later in this chapter, I will compare symbolic interactionism with other perspectives in social psychology and develop a systematic statement of its major tenets.



What Is Social Psychology?

Some of the ambiguity in the term *social psychology* stems from its use in differing but partially overlapping ways in two disciplines. Psychology and sociology have shared custody of the term since 1908, when two books were published, each with *social psychology* in its title. One, written by the psychologist William McDougall, argued that in order to understand how human beings are affected by society, it is necessary to study what he called the “native basis of the mind.”¹ Like other scholars of that era, McDougall relied on the concept of *instinct*. He believed that it was necessary to discover the “innate tendencies of thought and action” that characterize human beings in order to explain the influences of society on them. The other book, by sociologist Edward A. Ross, placed more emphasis on social forces, arguing that certain processes come into existence because human beings associate with one another. Ross felt that the spread of fads and fashions, for example, cannot be explained simply by the nature and structure of the individual mind. The very fact of human association creates processes that cannot be reduced to the study of individuals.²

McDougall and Ross sounded themes that can still be heard in the work of social psychologists, for the members of each discipline are still oriented to their own traditions of theory, ways of doing research, and basic images of human behavior. Psychologists do not deny that social and cultural forces shape the environment within which such basic psychological processes as learning, cognition, or emotion take place. But their main interest is in the processes themselves rather than in their social setting. As a result, psychological social psychologists make the individual their main unit of analysis. Sociologists, on the other hand, seek to describe and explain patterns of conduct among larger aggregates of people—groups, communities, social classes, and even whole societies. Without denying the importance of the mind or of processes that operate at the individual level, sociological social psychologists give priority to human association and make society the beginning point of their analysis.

A look at the typical theoretical and research interests of psychological and sociological social psychologists will clarify the similarities and differences in their approaches. Psychologists emphasize such topics as conformity, interpersonal attraction, the attribution of causality, aggression, altruistic behavior, and attitudes and their impact on behavior. Conformity—how the group shapes the thoughts and actions of individuals—has been a favorite topic. Studies of conformity have asked, for example, under what circumstances individuals can be induced to change their opinions or to adopt a judgment they know to be wrong merely because group pressures are applied to them. In the classic experiments of Solomon Asch, subjects were induced to misjudge the relative length of lines (a task that should be a matter of objective judgment) by pressures to agree with the erroneous judgments of confederates of the experimenter. The confederates intentionally gave wrong answers in an effort to induce the real subjects to conform to their opinions.³ In his studies of obedi-

ence, Stanley Milgram found that he could readily induce people to obey directions that required them to inflict apparent harm upon others. Milgram showed that he could create laboratory conditions in which subjects would administer what they believed were electric shocks to other subjects, even over their strong protests and expressions of pain. The shocks were not real, of course, but the experiment was carefully staged to create the impression that they were.⁴

Although psychological social psychologists conduct much of their research in a social setting, they typically focus on individual behavior. They have little interest in culture or in the ways in which individual conduct is socially organized and directed. The approach is summed up in Gordon Allport's classic definition of social psychology as the "attempt to understand and explain how the thought, feeling, and behavior of *individuals* are influenced by the actual, imagined, or implied presence of others."⁵

Sociologists approach social psychology differently. Many sociological social psychologists study the same topics as psychologists—topics such as interpersonal attraction, causal attribution, and the relationship between attitudes and behavior. But they are also interested in a broader range of phenomena, including social roles, processes and contexts of socialization, justice and injustice, social movements and collective behavior, deviance and social control, self and identity, and the social psychology of such substantive topics as health, work, and social mobility.⁶ In their work in such areas, sociological social psychologists focus on the social world itself, treating social structure, culture, social roles, groups, organizations, and collective behavior not simply as environments within which individuals behave, but also as crucial levels of reality in their own right. Their ultimate goal is not to explain what individuals do and why they do it, but to understand how organized social life is possible, how it works, and how it changes over time.

The topic of *socialization*, for example, is of very great importance in sociological social psychology. But sociologists are not typically interested in how *individuals* learn what they learn, but in the content of socialization, the social contexts (groups such as the family or peers and organizations such as the school) in which it occurs, and the nature of the process as it occurs at different periods in life. A sociological study of socialization by peers during adolescence, for example, might examine the nature of the friendship bond and explore the kinds of learning that occur in this relationship. In his study of the socializing influences of friends, Gary Alan Fine discovered that the relatively egalitarian and tolerant nature of adolescent friendship provides a context in which the social skills of self-presentation and impression management can be practiced and mastered.⁷ Such studies focus on what transpires *between* people rather than within the person, and they pay considerable attention to the wider social and cultural context in which conduct occurs.

There is little to be gained by arguing about which approach to social psychology is the better one. The disciplines of psychology and sociology have both common and different goals. Sociologists can find much of value in psy-

chologists' studies of conformity, person perception, causal attribution, obedience, leadership, and the many other topics they pursue. Indeed, the interests of psychological and sociological social psychologists frequently overlap to the point where each can gain by attending to the research and theory of the other.⁸ Yet the sociologist also finds limitations in psychological social psychology. Because much of their work ignores the facts of cultural variation, psychologists are prone to create culture-bound, ethnocentric explanations of human conduct. And because they often focus on the individual in the microscopic social context of the laboratory or small group, ignoring the much larger framework of social institutions, power, and other constraints that affect human conduct, they can seem naive and inattentive with respect to issues of power, coercion, freedom, and other matters with which sociologists are concerned.

My goal in this book is to present and develop a perspective, called *symbolic interactionism*, that provides a distinctively sociological way of understanding human social conduct and group life. Although its concerns are not limited to social psychology—for it regards culture and social structure as critical phenomena—*symbolic interactionism* is centrally concerned with the issues that have preoccupied social psychologists. Among the several approaches to social psychology that sociologists have used, it is the one most identified with sociology and best suited to the needs of the discipline.

We can begin to understand the distinctive perspective of symbolic interactionism by examining the sociological view of the relationship between the person and the social world. At the heart of this relationship is a paradox.

Briefly stated, the paradox is this: Only individuals *act*. Everything else—society, culture, social structure, power, groups, organizations—is ultimately dependent on the acts of individuals. Yet individuals can act only because they acquire the capacity to do so as members of a society, which is the source of their knowledge, language, skills, orientations, and motives. Individuals are born into and shaped by a society that already exists and that will persist long after they are dead; yet that same society owes its existence and continuity to the conduct of its members.⁹

This paradoxical relationship between individual and society leads to some difficult questions: How does the individual acquire from society the capacity to be an active, functioning member? Indeed, *what* does the individual acquire—what skills, knowledge, orientations, and motives? How do the individual and cooperative acts of its socialized members create and sustain a society? How can society shape the very individuals on whose actions its existence depends, and how can it live on when its members die? How can we say that people create society if they are created by it?

Questions such as these are particularly important because, in the sociological view, biologically programmed instincts or drives have been supplanted by learning as the most important factors underlying human behavior. The human world is primarily cultural, and human conduct is shaped by the knowledge, skills, values, beliefs, and ways of living held in common by the members of

society. Thus, an orderly and persisting society is not guaranteed by our biological programming, but by what we have learned. And, by the same token, individuals are not guided by instinct, but must themselves rely upon society and culture for their own survival.

Simply to assert that behavior is culturally transmitted is not to explain how culture actually influences or shapes individual conduct. Human sexual behavior, for example, is profoundly influenced by culture. What human beings find sexually arousing, the situations in which they find it so, and the choice of others with whom to engage in sexual activity are not matters of human nature, but of cultural patterning. But *how* does culture shape human sexual attitudes and conduct? How does what we learn about sexual activity work its way into our sexual behavior?

Sociologists have adopted varied attitudes toward the problem of linking society and culture to actual conduct. Some have argued that our attention should be focused on *culture* and *social structure* rather than on conduct itself. Those who adopt this position argue that patterns of conduct are so profoundly determined by culture and social structure that the question of how these forces actually shape behavior can safely be ignored. After all, they assert, much of social life is quite routine: People perform the same tasks over and over, the situations and social relationships in which they find themselves are pretty much the same from one day to the next, and their culture essentially provides ready-made ways of behaving. As a result, explaining how culture and society actually shape conduct is less interesting and important than explaining the origins and persistence of cultural patterns and social structures.

Sociologists who adopt this point of view have developed numerous concepts designed to describe and help explain social phenomena. To take but one example, the concept of *social class* refers to the fact that societies are typically divided into segments whose members have a similar position in the division of labor, comparable education and incomes, and similar views of themselves and their place in the world. One social class, for example, might consist of small business owners, another of manual workers, another of factory owners. In each case, the similarities are likely to be greater among the members of the class than between the members of that class and those of another. *Class* is a structural concept; its focus is on the patterned and repetitive conduct and social relationships that can be observed within and between various groups in a society at any given point in history.

A structural perspective has many attractive features. Human social life is highly repetitive, and it is often necessary to look beyond the details of individual behavior and its formation in order to see patterns and regularities. Moreover, although society ultimately depends upon the conduct of individuals, their actions and interactions typically have consequences they do not foresee and frequently do not recognize. The everyday actions of people as they work, eat and drink, play, make love, socialize, vote, take walks, and attend meetings *do* seem powerfully influenced by social class, and these actions have

the cumulative effect of sustaining and reproducing class structures, even though people do not necessarily intend to do so nor recognize that they are doing so.

There are also limitations, however, in looking only at social and cultural patterns and regularities. Social life is highly repetitive, but it is not totally so, for patterns change over time, sometimes slowly and sometimes quite dramatically and quickly. The social division of labor between men and women in the contemporary United States or Canada, for example, is not the same as it was a century ago. Men and women of today inherit social roles and images of one another that were crafted during the nineteenth century but have been periodically modified since then. Although some still believe women should be confined to the domestic sphere because they lack the political or intellectual skills for public life, the majority now reject those beliefs. In part because of the women's movement, which challenged such ideas, what once seemed to many to be an eternal fact now seems antiquated; and patterns that once seemed entrenched have changed.

The fact of social change makes it difficult to regard human conduct as simply determined by existing forms of society and culture. We must look at it as shaped not only by these external forces but also by the efforts of people who work within, and sometimes *against*, an inherited culture and existing social arrangements. People are not thoroughly and passively socialized to accept and reproduce culture and society, for under many circumstances they resist and rebel, finding ways to escape from the patterns of conduct that are urged upon them. They are not merely agents of an existing social order but also active agents who create and change that order.

A great many sociologists, therefore, do not believe that they can concentrate on social structure and culture and ignore conduct. They recognize that they must have a basic *theory of action*—that is, an account of how people actually form their conduct in everyday life that can be related to the society and culture their conduct both sustains and modifies.

The main task of social psychology is to create such a theory of action. Its job is to examine the details of action and interaction, to show how people are influenced by society and culture, but also to show how their everyday actions both sustain and change these larger realities. To do so, the social psychologist must concentrate on such topics as socialization, the nature of the person, and the actual formation of conduct in everyday life. At the same time, however, culture and social structure cannot be ignored: The person is created and transformed, and everyday life takes place, within a framework provided by society and culture.

A theory of action can be based on a great variety of theoretical perspectives. The theory to be developed here—symbolic interactionism—has been influential, and often controversial, within sociology. My next task is to show in a general way how symbolic interactionists approach a theory of action that can account for the influence of society and culture on the person, but also explain how action and interaction both reproduce and change society and culture.

What Is Symbolic Interactionism?

Symbolic interactionism is a distinctively American sociological perspective whose roots lie in the philosophy of pragmatism.¹⁰ This philosophical tradition, identified with such scholars as Charles S. Peirce, William James, John Dewey, and George Herbert Mead, contains an important clue to its outlook in its name, pragmatism, the commonplace meaning of which is “practical.” Proponents of this approach to philosophy view living things as attempting to make practical adjustments to their surroundings. As philosophers, they are interested in the fundamental questions of philosophy: What is truth? What is good? What is knowledge? How do we acquire knowledge? How do we know that we know the truth? In seeking answers to these questions, they argue that the truth of an idea or the meaning of a statement is dependent on its practical consequences. An idea, they say, is true if it works. Pragmatists see all living creatures as attempting to meet the demands of their environments in practical ways. They view knowledge as continually confronting practical tests of its usefulness. The lens through which they view truth thus emphasizes the consequences of ideas rather than their logical elegance or internal consistency.

Pragmatists see living things as probing and testing their environment. Truth is, therefore, not absolute, but is always relative to the needs and interests of organisms. An idea—for example, the idea that the sun rises in the east—is “true” if it leads to empirical predictions that help people adjust to the requirements and circumstances of their world. Questions of how members of a species know and interact with their environment are, for pragmatists, matters of great moment, not merely peripheral concerns. Knowing and acting, in the pragmatist view, are intimately linked: We act on the basis of our ideas about the world. The reality of the world is not merely something that is “out there” waiting to be discovered by us, but is actively created as we act in and toward the world.

How does philosophical pragmatism relate to social psychology and symbolic interactionism? A brief overview of the work of George Herbert Mead can help answer this question and convey the general flavor of the symbolic interactionist approach to social psychology.

George Herbert Mead was a major pragmatist philosopher, although he did not become as widely known as the other pragmatists. Mead’s work covered a great deal of philosophical ground, but he is best known and remembered among social scientists for his theory of mind. This work comes to us primarily through Mead’s students at the University of Chicago, who assembled their notes on his courses in social psychology into a book, *Mind, Self, and Society*, after his death in 1931.¹¹

Mead’s theory of mind attempts to account for the origins and development of human intelligence by linking it to the process of evolution, by viewing mind and conduct as inescapably linked, and by showing that the origins of human mind lie in human society. Mead felt that human intelligence emerged from a process of evolutionary change. Moreover, he was convinced that the mind is

not a separate, disembodied entity, but an integral aspect of the *behavior* of the species. He sought to avoid the *dualistic* view of mind and body that had plagued philosophy, a view that led people to separate the physical organism from intelligence, and to imagine the latter as existing within some ethereal realm of ideas. For Mead, mind, body, and conduct are inseparable aspects of a process of evolution that has produced a uniquely human life form.

All organisms come into existence and persist (or fail to persist) in interaction with their environments. Their physical structures and their capacities to act do not exist in a vacuum, but are created under specific environmental conditions. Nor are organisms merely the passive receptors of stimuli that emanate from their surroundings. Each organism has a set of capacities to respond to its world; bees, for example, are sensitive to the angle of light coming from the sun and use this knowledge in locating and returning to food sources. Humans are sensitive to the nuances of language and employ this capacity in everything they do. Such capacities have evolved over long periods of time as environmental conditions have changed, mutations have appeared, and new structures have developed. An organism's capacities to respond to the environment help to make the environment what it is. The sun is an important part of the bee's environment, for example, because the bee has the capacity to respond to its position. And to be able to respond to the environment is also to be able to act upon it. The human child who learns how to react to the parental "no" is acting upon his or her parents, obeying their demands in order to influence their acts and thus secure personal needs for nurture or praise, every bit as much as he or she is being acted upon by the parents.

Mead found the major explanations of human mind and conduct prevalent in his day to be inadequate. On the one hand, he felt that human conduct was far too complex to be explained by instincts. Although the complex individual conduct and social coordination of the insect society—the beehive, for example—might be explained by genetically programmed (and therefore largely unlearned) forms of behavior, there is too much cultural diversity, novelty, and complexity for instincts to be a satisfactory explanation of human conduct. So, Mead rejected the instinctivist sociological and psychological theories of the time.

On the other hand, Mead also found much to criticize in *behaviorism*, whose foremost exponent was the psychologist John Watson. The behaviorists insisted that the true path to the explanation of human behavior (or any animal behavior) lay in paying strict attention only to what the scientist could *directly* observe—both behavior and environmental events (stimuli) associated with the behavior. They emphasized that behavior was learned, and they sought to uncover the laws that governed the learning of behavioral responses to environmental stimuli. The behaviorists eschewed any concept of mind, saying that what is essential in conduct is not what people think they are doing but what they observably do and how they are rewarded for doing it. Mental events—thoughts, ideas, images—are for them mostly irrelevant because, they believed, such events cannot be observed.