

Notes from 9/11/19

Preparatory/Imitation Stage

Children prepare for role-taking by imitating the people around them. In this stage, children mimic those around them. This is why parents of young children typically do not want you to use foul language around them. If your two-year-old can “read,” what he or she has most likely done is memorized the book that had been read to him or her.

Play Stage:

From about age two to six, children are in the play stage. During the play stage, children play pretend and do not adhere to the rules in organized games like soccer or freeze tag. Have you ever played a game with children of this age? It is far easier to just go with any “rules” they come up with during the course of the game than trying to enforce any “rules” upon them.

Game Stage:

The third stage is the game stage, which is from about age seven onwards. In this stage, children can begin to understand and adhere to the rules of games. They can begin to play more formalized games because they begin to understand other people’s perspective—or the perspective of the generalized other. In this stage, when children play pretend, they may still play house but are pretending to a mommy or a daddy independent of the one that resides in their home. The *generalized other* refers to the viewpoint of the social group at large. The child begins taking this perspective into account during this stage.

Symbolic interactionism is a micro-level theory that focuses on the relationships among individuals within a society. Communication—the exchange of meaning through language and symbols—is believed to be the way in which people make sense of their social worlds. Theorists Herman and Reynolds (1994) note that this perspective sees people as being active in shaping the social world rather than simply being acted upon.

George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) is considered a founder of symbolic interactionism though he never published his work on it (LaRossa and Reitzes 1993). Mead’s student, Herbert Blumer, coined the term “*symbolic interactionism*” and outlined these basic premises: humans interact with things based on meanings ascribed to those things; the ascribed meaning of things comes from our interactions with others and society; the meanings of things are interpreted by a person when dealing with things in specific circumstances (Blumer 1969). If you love books, for example, a symbolic interactionist might propose that you learned that books are good or important in the interactions you had with family, friends or school; maybe your family had a special reading time each week, getting your library card was treated as a special event, or bedtime stories were associated with warmth and comfort.

Social scientists who apply symbolic-interactionist thinking look for patterns of interaction between individuals. Their studies often involve observation of one-on-one interactions. For example, while a conflict theorist studying a political protest might focus on class difference, a symbolic interactionist would be more interested in how individuals in the protesting group interact, as well as the signs and symbols protesters use to communicate their message.

The focus on the importance of symbols in building a society led sociologists like Erving Goffman (1922–1982) to develop a technique called dramaturgical analysis. Goffman used theater as an analogy for social interaction and recognized that people’s interactions showed patterns of cultural “scripts.” Because it can be unclear what part a person may play in a given situation, he or she has to improvise his or her role as the situation unfolds (Goffman 1958).