childhood rejoinder goes, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." But they can! Name-calling is devastating because the labels force us to view ourselves in a warped mirror. The grotesque images aren't easily dismissed.

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

One implication of the looking-glass-self hypothesis is that each of us has a significant impact on how others view themselves. That kind of interpersonal power is often referred to as *self-fulfilling prophecy*, the tendency for our expectations to evoke responses in others that confirm what we originally anticipated. The process is nicely summed up by Eliza Doolittle, a woman from the gutter in George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion,* which inspired the musical *My Fair Lady:* "The difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she's treated."[33]

Symbol Manipulation

Saul Alinsky was a product of the "Chicago School" of sociology at a time when Mead was having his greatest influence. Similar to President Barack Obama, Alinsky became a community organizer in Chicago when he finished grad school, and applied what he learned to empower the urban poor. For example, in the early 1960s he helped found The Woodlawn Organization (TWO) to oppose his alma mater's complicity in substandard neighborhood housing. He searched for a symbol that would galvanize Woodlawn residents into united action and stir the sympathies of other Chicago residents. He had previously described his technique for selecting a symbolic issue:

> You start with the people, their traditions, their prejudices, their habits, their attitudes and all of those other circumstances that make up their lives. It should always be remembered that a real organization of the people . . . must be rooted in the experiences of the people themselves.[34]

Alinsky found his symbol in the rats that infested the squalid apartments. TWO's rallying cry became "Rats as big as cats." Not only did the city start to crack down on slumlords, but for the first time Woodlawn residents gained a sense of identity, pride, and political clout.

ETHICAL REFLECTION: LEVINAS' RESPONSIVE "I"

European Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas agreed with Mead that the self is socially constructed. He stated that "without the Other, there is no 'I.'"[35] (Note that Levinas used the term "*I*" to refer to what Mead called the *self*—the "I" and the "me.") But there's a striking difference between the ways the two theorists thought this construction project takes place. Mead contended that the looking-glass self develops through the way *others respond to us;* Levinas insisted that the identity of our "I" is formed by the way *we respond to others*.

Levinas used the term *ethical echo* to designate the responsibility he believed we all have to take care of each other. That ethical echo has existed since the beginning of

human history and is summed up in the words, "I am my brother's keeper." The way each of us meets that obligation shapes our "I." Levinas said that every time we gaze at *the face of the Other,* we are reminded of our caretaking responsibility. Thus, each person's face is a signpost pointing to the panhuman ethical requirement to actively care for all people. Since the "I" finds its identity in responding to and caring for the Other, not allowing the humanity of that face to register puts our identity at risk.

Levinas was clear about the burden that comes with looking at the face of the Other:

> My world is ruptured, my contentment interrupted. I am already obligated. Here is an appeal from which there is no escape, a responsibility, a state of being hostage. It is looking into the face of the Other that reveals the call to a responsibility that is before any beginning, decision or initiative on my part. . . . I am responsible for the Other without waiting for reciprocity, [even if I were] to die for it. Reciprocity is *his* affair.[36]

Duquesne University communication ethicist Ron Arnett regards Levinas as the premier ethical voice of our time. Arnett acknowledges that urging others to adopt a responsive "I" ethical standard is not an easy sell in this postmodern age, with its quest for comfort and self-actualization.[37] Yet Levinas noted that even in his dark hours as a prisoner in a World War II German concentration camp, he found joy in embracing the human responsibility of being for the Other before oneself. To the extent that we follow Levinas' lead, Arnett suggests our interpersonal communication will be characterized more by listening than telling.[38]

CRITIQUE: SETTING THE GOLD STANDARD FOR FOUR INTERPRETIVE CRITERIA

If we view theories as "testable explanations of directly or indirectly observable social regularities, Mead's ideas are seriously flawed."[39] That's the judgment of Indiana University sociologist Sheldon Stryker, and I agree. If we treat symbolic interactionism as an objective theory that must meet scientific standards of prediction and testability, it's a poor theory. But Mead's work was highly interpretive and deserves to be evaluated on the six criteria for good interpretive theories offered in Chapter 3, "Weighing the Words."

Let's start with *clarification of values,* which Mead did exceedingly well. Drawing upon William James, John Dewey, and other pragmatists, Mead proclaimed that humans are free to make meaningful choices on how to act when facing problems. In his critique, Stryker reveals, "What fascinated me as an undergraduate and graduate student was in part the dignity accorded humans by seeing them as important determiners of their lives rather than the pure product of conditioning."[40] For example, when you entered college, you were relatively free to choose who your friends would be. Of course, this freedom and dignity are dependent upon our capacity to communicate.

Certainly Mead offered a marvelous new *understanding of people* by showing how humans socially construct their concept of self as well as the way society influences—yet doesn't dictate—that construction. We also can gain a new appreciation of human

diversity from the extensive, theory-based *ethnographic research* describing individuals in similar situations responding in strikingly different ways.

Both the theory and the theorist have more than satisfied a fourth interpretive requirement for a good theory—the emergence of a *community of agreement*. The once-radical Mead–Cooley looking-glass-self hypothesis has now become a truism in the field of sociology.[41] So too for many scholars in the communication field. The basic tenet of Barnett Pearce's coordinated management of meaning (CMM) is "Persons-in-communication co-construct their own social realities and are simultaneously shaped by the worlds they create."[42] Even if the text you use in your interpersonal communication course doesn't mention the theorist or the theory by name, you can spot Mead's pervasive influence by the way the book treats the topic of self-concept.

Symbolic interactionism doesn't meet the other two criteria for an interpretive theory nearly as well as the four discussed above. Given Mead's personal efforts to help the displaced and distressed amid urban industrialization, it's puzzling that his theory doesn't call for *reform of society*. His theory says little about power, domination, or emotion[43]—realities that a community organizer deals with every day.

As for *aesthetic appeal,* most readers of *Mind, Self, and Society* get bogged down in the baffling array of ideas that don't lend themselves to an elegant summary. There are no CliffsNotes for this one. Perhaps Mead was precise when he presented his ideas in class, but their exact meaning became blurred in the years before his students compiled the manuscript. Whatever the explanation, the theory suffers from a lack of clarity.

A final note: Symbolic interactionism may also suffer from overstatement. Mead repeatedly declared that our capacity for language—the ability to use and interpret abstract symbols—is what distinguishes humans from other animals. My former graduate assistant is the mother of a son who has a permanent peripheral nerve disorder. His eyes, ears, and other sense receptors work fine, but the messages they send get scrambled on the way to his brain. Doctors say that he is, and always will be, unable to talk or interact with others on a symbolic level. After reading an early draft of this chapter, my assistant asked, "So this means that Caleb is less than human?" Her haunting question serves as a caution to any theorist who claims to have captured the essence of humanity.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. Blumer's three core *premises of symbolic interactionism* deal with *meaning, language,* and *thinking*. According to Blumer, which comes first? Can you make a case for an alternative sequence?
2. *Social constructionists* see themselves as curious participants in a pluralistic world. Are you willing to live with uncertainty, abandon a detached perspective, and not insist on a singular view of truth so you can join them? Why or why not?
3. As Mead used the terms, are the *looking-glass self,* the *objective self,* a person's "*me,*" and the *generalized other* all referring to the same thing? Why or why not?

4. Think of a time in your life when your self-concept changed in a significant way. Do you think the shift occurred because *others viewed you differently* or because *you treated others differently?* Could Mead and Levinas both be right?

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: Jodi O'Brien (ed.), *The Production of Reality: Essays and Readings on Social Interaction,* 6th ed., Sage, Los Angeles, CA, 2017.

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Basic concepts of symbolic interactionism: John Hewitt and David Shulman, *Self and Society: A Symbolic Interactionist Social Psychology,* 11th ed., Allyn and Bacon, Boston, MA, 2011, pp. 36–81.

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Gil Musolf, "The Chicago School," pp. 91–117.

Bernard Meltzer, "Mind," pp. 253–266.

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Michael Katovich and David Maines, "Society," pp. 289–306.

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Critique: Sheldon Stryker, "From Mead to a Structural Symbolic Interactionism and Beyond," *Annual Review of Sociology,* Vol. 34, 2008, p. 18.

ENDNOTES

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2. The three premises are found in Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism,* Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1969, p. 2. I've paraphrased the principles for stylistic consistency and to avoid gender-exclusive language.
3. Gil Musolf, "The Chicago School," in Larry T. Reynolds and Nancy J. Herman-Kinney (eds.), *Handbook of Symbolic Interactionism,* AltaMira, Walnut Creek, CA, 2003, p. 93.
4. Jane Wagner, *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe,* Harper Perennial, New York, 1990, pp. 15, 18.
5. Musolf, pp. 97–98.
6. For a fascinating account of a gorilla that developed these symbolic associations with the word *kitten,* see Francine Patterson, *Koko's Kitten,* Scholastic, New York, 1985. Mead wouldn't have been troubled by the existence of an animal that can communicate hundreds of symbols in American Sign Language. He regarded the symbol-using difference between humans and other primates as one of great magnitude—a quantitative rather than a qualitative distinction.

7. Peter M. Hall, "Structuring Symbolic Interaction: Communication and Power," *Annals of the International Communication Association,* Vol. 4, 1980, pp. 49-60.
8. Jodi O'Brien, "Shared Meaning as the Basis of Humanness," in *The Production of Reality: Essays and Readings on Social Interaction,* 6th ed., Jodi O'Brien (ed.), Sage, Los Angeles, CA, 2017, p. 79.
9. Douglas Hofstadter, "Changes in Default Words and Images Engendered by Rising Consciousness," in *The Production of Reality,* 3rd ed., Jodi O'Brien and Peter Kollock (eds.), Pine Forge, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2001, p. 158.
10. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, "Metaphors We Live By," in *The Production of Reality,* 6th ed., pp. 115–116.
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19. Gregory Shepherd, "Transcendence," in *Communication as . . . Perspectives on Theory,* Gregory Shepherd, Jeffrey St. John, and Ted Striphas (eds.), Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2006, p. 24.

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21. George Herbert Mead, "The Social Self," *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods,* Vol. 10, 1913, p. 375.

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24. Shanyang Zhao, "The Digital Self: Through the Looking Glass of Telepresent Others," *Symbolic Interaction,* Vol. 28, 2005, pp. 387–405.

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26. Michael Katovich and David Mains, "Society," in *Handbook of Symbolic Interactionism,* p. 292.

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28. William Shakespeare, *As You Like It,* Act II, Scene VII, line 139, in *The Riverside Shakespeare,* G. Blakemore Evans (ed.), Houghton Mifflin, Boston, MA, 1974, p. 381.

29. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life,* Doubleday Anchor, Garden City, NY, 1959.

30. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life,* Doubleday Anchor, Garden City, NY, 1959., p. 56.

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36. Quoted in James H. Olthuis, "Face-to-Face: Ethical Asymmetry or the Symmetry of Mutuality?" in *Knowing the Otherwise,* James H. Olthuis (ed.), Fordham, New York, 1997, p. 139.

37. Arnett, p. 205.

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For self-scoring quizzes for this and all other chapters, click on Self-Help Quizzes under Theory Resources at *www.afirstlook.com*.