Introduction

Symbolic interactionism is a micro-level theoretical perspective in sociology that addresses the manner in which individuals create and maintain society through face-to-face, repeated, meaningful interactions. This article provides an overview of three theoretical traditions in symbolic interactionism, focusing on the work of Herbert Blumer (the Chicago School), Manford Kuhn (the Iowa School), and Sheldon Stryker (the Indiana School). A brief summary of each figure’s general perspective on symbolic interactionism is provided, followed by a discussion of the research methodology that defines and distinguishes each. The article then reviews and assesses the empirical research that has emerged from these traditions over the past decades. It concludes with a discussion of future directions symbolic interactionists should attend to in continuing to develop the field.

abstract Symbolic interactionism is a micro-level theoretical perspective in sociology that addresses the manner in which individuals create and maintain society through face-to-face, repeated, meaningful interactions. This article provides an overview of three theoretical traditions in symbolic interactionism, focusing on the work of Herbert Blumer (the Chicago School), Manford Kuhn (the Iowa School), and Sheldon Stryker (the Indiana School). A brief summary of each figure’s general perspective on symbolic interactionism is provided, followed by a discussion of the research methodology that defines and distinguishes each. The article then reviews and assesses the empirical research that has emerged from these traditions over the past decades. It concludes with a discussion of future directions symbolic interactionists should attend to in continuing to develop the field.

keywords microsociology ◆ social psychology ◆ symbolic interactionism
objects have for them; (2) interaction occurs within a particular social and cultural context in which physical and social objects (persons), as well as situations, must be defined or categorized based on individual meanings; (3) meanings emerge from interactions with other individuals and with society; and (4) meanings are continuously created and recreated through interpreting processes during interaction with others (Blum er, 1969).

In this article we examine past and present theory and research in symbolic interactionism. We first discuss three theoretical approaches within symbolic interactionism that have defined the field. Next, we review and assess the empirical research that has emerged over the past decades to show how the perspective has evolved. Lastly, we discuss the future of symbolic interactionism and identify key areas that the next generation of scholars should attend to in continuing to refine and develop symbolic interactionism as a leading sociological perspective.

Overview of theoretical approaches within symbolic interactionism

Theory and research in symbolic interactionism has developed along three main areas of emphasis, following the work of Herbert Blumer (the Chicago School), Manford Kuhn (the Iowa School), and Sheldon Stryker (the Indiana School). Herbert Blumer coined the term ‘symbolic interactionism’ and was the first to formulate Mead’s ideas into a cohesive theory with specific methodological implications for study. Kuhn and Stryker, while methodologically at odds with Blumer, share much of the same theoretical orientation as him, following Mead. Let us examine these theoretical approaches in more detail to understand how they together make up our contemporary understanding of interactionist thought.

The Chicago School

The main variant of symbolic interactionism was developed by Herbert Blumer (1969) at the University of Chicago in the 1950s. Blumer brought Mead’s philosophically-based social behaviorism to sociology, even if some have seen his conception of symbolic interactionism more resembling W.I Thomas’s (1931) notion of the ‘definition of the situation’ than what is purely found in the work of Mead (Collins, 1994). Blumer laid the groundwork for a new theoretical paradigm which in many ways challenged sociology’s accepted forms of epistemology and methodology. Blumer’s brand of symbolic interactionism has been the most influential in sociology; most interactionist scholarship is aligned to some degree with his vision.

Blumer emphasized how the self emerges from an interactive process of joint action (Denzin, 1992). Blumer, like Mead, saw individuals as engaged in ‘mind action’: humans do not ponder on themselves and their relationships to others sometimes — they constantly are engaged in mindful action where they manipulate symbols and negotiate the meaning of situations (Mead, 1934). Echoing Mead, Blumer believed that the study of human behavior must begin with human association, a notion that was not common in the viewpoint of early American sociology, which treated the individual and society as discrete entities (Meltzer and Petras, 1970).

Blumer’s symbolic interactionism centers on processes actors use to constantly create and recreate experiences from one interaction to the next. For Blumer, symbolic interactionism was simply ‘the peculiar and distinctive character of interaction as it takes place between human beings’ (Blumer, 1962: 179). In his view, social institutions exist only as individuals interact; society is not a structure but rather a continuing process where agency and indeterminateness of action is emphasized (Collins, 1994). Treating society as structured, patterned, or stable is a reification because society, like individual actors’ interactions and experiences with one another, is constantly in flux. Following Mead, Blumer’s symbolic interactionism conceives social institutions as ‘social habits’ that occur within specific situations that are common to those involved in the situation. For Blumer, meanings are intersubjective and perceived, and constantly reinterpreted among individuals. There are no meanings inherent in the people or objects which an actor confronts — actors rather place meanings upon such entities which are perceived as unique (House, 1977). Behavior is simply an actor’s idiosyncratic way of reacting to an interpretation of a situation. It is therefore not to be examined or predicted from antecedent knowledge about how actors generally respond to given situations. This is impossible since each encounter is different from others (and therefore unique). Understanding social behavior requires an interpretive perspective that examines how behavior is changing, unpredictable, and unique to each and every social encounter.

Blumer’s theoretical contention was that human behavioral patterns must be studied in forms of action, and that human group life should be studied in terms of what the participants do together in units (Blumer, 1969; Shibutani, 1988). Blumer’s orientation toward social phenomena centers on the notion of independent action; human society is distinctive because of the capacity of each member to act independently. Each person can regulate their
carter fuller symbolic interactionism

contribution so that the entire group is able to achieve goals under diverse circumstances. This viewpoint understands the agent’s role in society as free and flexible; an individual reacts on his or her own accord and without structural influence. Blumer believed that any adequate explanation of human social life must consider the autonomous contributions of each participant (Shibutani, 1988).

Blumer’s theoretical orientation toward symbolic interactionism can be summarized through three premises (Blumer, 1969): (1) human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them; (2) the meaning of things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with others; (3) meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by a person in dealing with the things they encounter. While these three premises remain for many the core tenets of symbolic interactionist thought, some have noted a need for their expansion. For example, Snow (2001) believes that symbolic interactionism is better conceived around four principles: the principle of interactive determination, the principle of symbolization, the principle of emergence, and the principle of human agency. For Snow, these broader principles connect a wider array of work to symbolic interactionism, helping scholars understand the various tensions within the perspective (Snow, 2001: 375).

Since Mead never actually put his perspective into writing and much of his work was published posthumously, a prescription for methodology within his symbolic interactionist framework was nonexistent until Blumer set out to develop an approach using Mead’s ideas. Blumer was a staunch critic of logical empiricism, and for him the idea that science was the one and only true vehicle for discovering truth was inherently flawed. For Blumer, any methodology for understanding social behavior must ‘get inside’ the individual in order to see the world as the individual perceives it. A sound methodologist must take it as given that patterns of behavior are not conducive for scientific insight as are other worldly phenomena because behavior takes place on the basis of an actor’s own particular meanings. Blumer’s methodology emphasizes intimate understanding rather than the intersubjective agreement among investigators, which is a necessary condition for scientific inquiry to have worth.

Blumer’s stance on social psychological methodology is particularly dismissive of empirically driven research designs which employ the scientific method to analyze loosely defined or standardized concepts. Blumer felt that empirically verifiable knowledge of social situations cannot be gleaned by using statistical techniques or hypothesis testing which employ such established research methodology, but rather by examining each social setting – i.e. each distinct interaction among individuals – directly. Blumer’s more subjective methodology attempts to measure and understand an actor’s experience through ‘sympathetic introspection’: the researcher takes the standpoint of the actor whose behavior he or she is studying and attempts to use the actor’s own categories in capturing the meanings for the actor during social interactions. To summarize Blumer’s methodological approach, an understanding of social life requires an understanding of the processes individuals use to interpret situations and experiences, and how they construct their actions among other individuals in society.

The Iowa and Indiana Schools

While Blumer’s work has been seen as the most comprehensive overview of Mead’s symbolic interactionist ideas, the methodological aspect of his perspective was what Blumer saw as the most appropriate approach to test Mead’s main tenets. Perhaps the absence of a methodological dictum in Mead’s symbolic interactionist approach is responsible for the varieties of techniques that have been proposed following his work. According to Blumer, qualitative methods of study are the only way to study human behavior, by rigorously defining concepts and using them to understand the nature of behavior. However, other sociologists writing in the symbolic interactionist perspective saw the study of interaction as not limited to qualitative approaches. Manford Kuhn (1964) and Sheldon Stryker (1980) are two such sociologists who utilized positivist methods in their studies of the relationship between the self and social structure.

Stemming from his work in the mid-twentieth century, Manford Kuhn’s positivism influenced a new sociological tradition termed the ‘Iowa School’ of symbolic interactionism. Kuhn sought to reconcile Mead’s framework with rigorous, scientific testing of symbolic interactionist principles. Kuhn and the Iowa School emphasized process in interaction and viewed behavior as ‘purposive, socially constructed, coordinated social acts informed by preceding events in the context of projected acts that occur’ (Katovich et al., 2003: 122).

The basic theoretical underpinning of Kuhn is summarized around four core themes (Katovich et al., 2003): the first is that social interaction can be examined through a cybernetic perspective that emphasizes intentionality, temporality, and self-correction. Second, scientists should focus their attention on dyads, triads, and small groups as these are the loci for most social behavior and interaction. Third, while social behavior can be studied in its
natural form (i.e. in naturally occurring settings) it should also be studied in a laboratory; incorporating both environments allows us to articulate behaviors and identify abstract laws for behavior which can be universally applied to actors. And fourth, social scientists must endeavor to create a more systematic and rigorous vocabulary to identify the ontological nature of sociality (i.e. operationalize concepts in a much more thorough manner than what had been previously accepted by social psychologists).

While Kuhn and those associated with the Iowa School followed a symbolic interactionist framework generally consistent with Mead, their methodological stance directly contradicts that proposed by Blumer. Rather than viewing quantitative analyses of social interaction as abstract empiricism, Kuhn asserted that the use of quantitative methods could provide systematic testing of Mead’s theoretical principles. Kuhn saw the study of the complexity of social life and of selfhood as a scientific endeavor requiring sociological analysis. He believed that social science was indeed consistent with the quantitative study of human behaviors and conceptions of the self when properly executed.

Rather than relying on subjective survey responses to assess attitudes toward the self, Kuhn developed the ‘Twenty Statements Test’ (TST). Following Mead’s work on the emergence of the self through interaction, Kuhn’s TST is based on self-disclosure of respondents in answering the question ‘Who Am I?’ on 20 numbered lines. Kuhn believed that responses to this question could provide a systematic study of an individual’s self-attitudes and organization of identities as they emerge from symbolic interaction with others. By coding these responses, a researcher may find both conventional and idiosyncratic reflections of social statuses and identities. Furthermore, since the test relies on self-report, it serves as a useful tool for discerning individual meanings without presenting them as objective facts. Kuhn and the Iowa School utilized the TST among other quantitative measures (including data collected from laboratory experiments) to attempt to predict how individuals see themselves in situations, but did not focus solely on conceptions of the self. Despite criticism of Kuhn’s techniques as being deterministic or succumbing to reductionism, the Iowa School following Kuhn’s work has contributed much to research addressing the problematic nature of coordinated social action as well as meanings as responses in interaction.

Kuhn’s student and successor Carl Couch (1984; Couch et al., 1986) continued the symbolic interactionist tradition at Iowa, applying a more pragmatic approach to the study of social phenomena and using innovative experiments to understand interactions among actors. Couch’s brand of interactionism attempted to understand individuals’ orientations toward one another across time and space, improving on the cross-sectional methodological approach that mostly defined Kuhn’s research (Herman-Kinney and Vershaeve, 2003). Couch’s role in extending symbolic interactionist knowledge has led many to differentiate the Iowa School as ‘old’ and ‘new,’ representing Kuhn’s and Couch’s respective influence during those eras.

Sheldon Stryker’s work is similar to Kuhn’s in its scope as well as in methods employed. As Blumer and Kuhn are associated with the Chicago and Iowa Schools respectively, Stryker is a sociologist from what is referred to as the ‘Indiana School’ of symbolic interactionist thought, representing theory and research generated in the mid to latter part of the twentieth century at the University of Indiana. While Mead and Blumer emphasized the fluid nature of meanings and the self in interaction, Stryker emphasized that meanings and interactions led to relatively stable patterns that create and uphold social structures. Stryker believed that symbolic interactionist ideas could and should be tested using both qualitative and quantitative methods. According to Stryker, Mead’s work can be conceived of as a ‘frame’ rather than a coherent theory with testable propositions (Stryker, 2008: 17). Stryker expanded symbolic interactionist ideas through operationalizing variables that Mead presented as general assumptions and concepts by hypothesizing and empirically testing relationships among Mead’s concepts while incorporating elements of role theory.

Stryker further expanded Mead’s concept of role-taking in order to demonstrate the structural aspect of interaction. Stryker’s work on roles treats social roles as emerging from a reciprocal influence of networks or patterns of relationships in interactions as they are shaped by various levels of social structures. Stryker defines roles as ‘expectations which are attached to [social] positions; or ‘symbolic categories [that] serve to cue behavior’ (Stryker, 1980: 57). According to Stryker, expectations of roles vary across situations and within the context of cultural or social change. In taking the attitudes of others in a situation, an individual uses ‘symbolic cues’ built from prior experiences and normative expectations of status from social positions to assess potential lines of action. In this way, roles as they are attached to positions may be analyzed as predictors of future behavior for individuals in various social categories.

As with symbolic interactionism, Stryker’s structural role theory views socialization as the process
through which individuals learn normative expectations for actions as they relate to role relationships. By building up from the person to the situation within the larger social structure, Stryker showed the reciprocity of the individual and society. In every situation, individuals identify themselves and others in the context of social structure. Individuals then reflexively apply what they perceive to be others’ identifications of them that, over time, become internalized expectations for behavior as part of the self. These internalized expectations, when accepted and enacted by individuals in various roles, become identities. In emphasizing the impact the interactionist approach to symbolic interactionism has on how roles are played in interaction, Stryker’s structural approach to symbolic interactionism is an attempt to bridge the gap between micro- and macro-sociological and social psychological theories. Stryker’s structural symbolic approach therefore provides significant theoretical insights to social roles in expanding symbolic interactionist concepts.

**Review and assessment of empirical research within the symbolic interactionist tradition**

During the twentieth century, symbolic interactionist research held a prominent place within sociology despite periods of backlash and criticism for being unscientific, apolitical, and too micro (Fine, 1993). Even though symbolic interactionism is often criticized, there is little denying that it has been as popular and influential over the past half-century as any competing sociological perspective; hundreds of books, research articles, and monographs written in its vein are evidence of this. This abundance of research has led multiple scholars to note the difficulty in summarizing advancements within the field. In previous synopses of symbolic interactionism, Hall (2003) and Plummer (1996) both noted that any attempt to summarize the field must be – by necessity – partial and selective. With the understanding that any article-length summary of the research produced within symbolic interactionism cannot be exhaustive, let us examine its substantive areas of inquiry and a few empirical studies that have defined the field.

**Classical symbolic interactionist research**

Although some may not specifically identify as a symbolic interactionist, clear traces of interactionist ideas are apparent across sociology, specifically in ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967; Scott and Lyman, 1968), dramaturgy (Goffman, 1959b), research on the family (Stryker, 1959), theories on identity and social roles (Burke and Stets, 2009; Heise, 2002; MacKinnon, 1994; Stryker and Serpe, 1982), deviance (Becker, 1953), and phenomenology (Schutz, 1962). Beyond these subfields, common areas of inquiry in symbolic interactionism include social problems (Best, 2003), cultural studies (Becker, 1982; Fine, 1996), semiotics (Manning, 2003), narratives (Reynolds and Herman-Kinney, 2003), feminism (Deegan and Hill, 1987; Thorne, 1993), neo-Marxism (Schwalbe, 1986), and postmodernism (Gergen, 1991; Lemert, 1997; Sandstrom and Fine, 2003). There have been significant developments in other areas (Hall, 2003), including a resurgence in studies on pragmatism (Joas, 1993; Maines and McCallion, 2007; Plummer, 1996; Saxton, 1993; Shalin, 1986; Strauss, 1993), work on collective behavior and social movements (Lofland, 1996; McPhail, 1991; Morris and Mueller, 1992; Snow et al., 1986; Stryker et al., 2000), further studies on deviance, mostly focusing on labeling theory and social problems (Best, 1989; Conrad and Schneider, 1980; Loseke, 1999), research on temporality (Couch, 1984; Flaherty, 1998; Maines et al., 1983; Strauss, 1993; Zerubavel, 1985), and the implementation of emotions and affect into studies on symbolic interaction (Hochschild, 1979, 2003 [1983]; Scheff, 1979; Shott, 1979).

One of the more famous examples of symbolic interactionist scholarship was provided by Glaser and Strauss (1964) in their examination of awareness contexts that influence social interaction. These scholars noted how social interactions vary by structure, awareness of members, and tactics of maintaining awareness/unawareness. For example, nurses in hospitals often must interact with patients who are terminal but unaware of the severity of their condition. Glaser and Strauss’s work showed how, in examples such as this, the knowledge of a patient’s condition is controlled and kept from the patient. Here, the awareness of impending death is constructed – and avoided – in order to maintain a patient’s positive outlook and psychological well-being.

In other classic studies, Brooks (1969) examined the relationship between the self and political ideology, revealing that how one identifies depends on their political orientation (specifically, he examined how self-views correlate with right-wing or left-wing ideologies). Stryker’s (1957) work on role-taking applied symbolic interactionist ideas to understand why family members often have differing levels of commitment to their family roles. Glaser (1956) showed how criminal behavior can best be understood using a social psychological lens.

One of the most famous interactionist studies
was provided by Becker (1953) in his work on becoming a marihuana user, where he showed how ‘feeling high’ when using marihuana is a social construction rather than a physiological, internal motivational state caused by the drug. Becker revealed that in marihuana users, feeling high requires both the presence and recognition of the drug’s symptoms – and recognition of the drug’s symptoms is constructed socially through interactions with others. Applied more broadly, Becker’s study shows how role behaviors are socialized and acquired through interactions with others. Becker’s marihuana study had a massive influence, not only for symbolic interactionists but on the field of sociology, as it challenged and widened the boundaries of what was considered acceptable for rigorous study. To this day, when students read ‘Becoming a marihuana user’ they realize how creative one can be as a researcher; Becker was instrumental in inspiring scholars to dare to examine unique, taboo, and esoteric phenomena not studied by others.

Another seminal study was conducted by Rosengren (1961), who examined the nature of self-meanings in those who are ‘emotionally disturbed.’ Here, young boys who were institutionalized were studied to identify how self-meanings change over time, specifically how self-meanings shift based on how individuals believe they are seen by others. By examining an institutional setting where the boys experienced continuous, close contact with others, Rosengren was able to study change in self-meanings more rapidly than what normally occurs in individuals. His study was important in demonstrating how Mead’s ideas could be applied in a testable environment and in revealing how to conceive a research design capable of measuring symbolic interactionist concepts. Continuing the theme of studying individuals in an institutionalized setting, Daniels (1972) revealed how psychiatric diagnoses in the military are socially constructed. Here he showed how diagnoses of mental illness are dependent not only on patients’ symptoms in institutionalized settings, but also by doctors’ awareness of the consequences that a specific diagnostic label may have for the patient.

The previously described studies by Glaser and Strauss, Becker, Daniels, et al. are revered today for their innovative genius, and for providing a foundation for how symbolic interaction theory can be applied to understand the contexts of everyday life. Perhaps more than anything, these classic studies inspired a future generation of scholars to apply symbolic interactionist theory in novel ways. Let us now examine the research trajectories that followed – or were influenced by – the classical era in symbolic interactionist research.

Dramaturgical analysis
One of the most important symbolic interactionist theorists of the classical era was Erving Goffman, though some might hesitate to classify his work as representing purely an interactionist standpoint. Regardless, interactionist themes are found throughout Goffman’s work: symbols, shared meaning, identity – all are common elements in his scholarship, which spanned multiple decades and influenced a legion of sociologists. To this day, Goffman continues to be one of the most inspirational and cited sociologists.

Goffman’s seminal book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959b) used the metaphor of a theatrical performance as a framework to describe how actors present themselves to others, and how they attempt to control others’ impressions to be seen positively. Here Goffman documented the myriad strategies actors use in face-to-face interactions to manage impressions. Other work by Goffman (1959a, 1961) examined the ‘moral career’ of mental patients and the impact of total institutions on individuals. Here he studied how individuals’ identities are altered – indeed redefined – when placed in institutionalized settings, noting the mechanisms by which people’s self-definitional meanings change when being removed from significant others and immersed in a psychiatric hospital.

Goffman’s (1963b) later work on stigma addressed how those with ‘spoiled identities’ (e.g. those with physical deformities, drug addicts, prostitutes) have difficulty in negotiating their environment due to others’ hesitation or refusal in accepting them. Goffman’s work also addressed how rituals influence social interactions (Goffman, 1967), proper etiquette for behaving in public places (Goffman, 1963a), and how actors use frames to interpret reality and organize experience (Goffman, 1974).

Cultural studies and postmodernism
Scholars have also applied symbolic interactionist thought to a variety of sociological subfields. Many have applied symbolic interactionism to cultural studies (Becker and McCall, 1993; Carey, 1989; Diawara, 1996; Giroux, 2001) and even postmodernism (Maine, 1996). Norman K Denzin’s (1983, 1985, 1991, 1992, 2008) work provides a multifaceted and inventive application of interactionist theory to these fields, incorporating ideas from poststructural theory and focusing on the politics of interpretation. For example, Denzin has applied symbolic interactionist theory to better understand alcoholism, examining the alcoholic self and the processes of an alcoholic’s recovery (Denzin, 1987, 1993). Others have also applied interactionist themes to cultural studies and/or postmodernism,
specifically regarding semiotics and narratives (Manning, 2003), qualitative research methodologies (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005), sickness and health (Charmaz, 1991), and experiences in the workplace (Fine, 1996).

**Gender, status, and power**

Many have found symbolic interactionism useful for understanding the construction of gender and sexuality. West and Zimmerman’s (1987) ‘Doing gender’ set the stage for social constructionist research on gender and sexuality. The concept of ‘doing gender’ demonstrates the socially constructed nature of masculinity and femininity as developing out of repeat- ed, patterned interaction and socialization processes. The authors contend that gender emerges through interaction, directly contradicting the normative perspective of gender as an innate state of being or individual quality. West and Zimmerman additionally expanded on Goffman’s (1976) treatment of gender displays by demonstrating the salience of gender in interaction as a master status. According to West and Zimmerman, individuals are constantly assessed for their gender performances in both interactional and institutional contexts; thus, ‘doing gender’ is unavoidable because sex category membership is attached to the allocation of power and resources across various social institutions. West and Zimmerman’s social constructionist approach to gender and sex hugely impacted sociology as well as gender and feminist studies.

In other research, Estes and Edmonds (1981) advocated for the use of symbolic interactionist ideas in policy research, suggesting that W I Thomas’s ‘definition of the situation’ could be applied to understand power relations, specifically to understand why those in higher status positions are more successful in defining situations to assert dominance. These scholars showed how interactionist theory is fruitful for policy research in (1) formulating policies through negotiation in a structural context, (2) implementing policies by emphasizing multiple interpretations of policy intent, and (3) influencing meaning for those who are objects of the policies as well as differential effects and social relationships (Estes and Edmonds, 1981: 77). Due to symbolic interactionist emphasis on meanings, the application of these concepts in policy formulation and implementation ensures that experiences and meanings of those in lower status groups are viewed as significant as those in high status groups. The authors asserted that basic (or ‘pure’) research should incorporate competing and dominant definitions of the situation and a description of how these definitions are created and maintained. These definitions include what is defined as the problem, the population defined as a ‘problem,’ and the formulation of policy to assuage the issue. Similarly, applied research using the symbolic interactionist framework should focus on processes associated with the policies and the resulting social change or inhibition of social change. Here, the symbolic interactionist emphasis on social actions and their consequences may inform researchers of key factors of policy design and the experiences and meanings actors attach to them.

In a similar vein, Candace West (1984) observed 21 patient–physician interactions during doctor visits at a family practice in the southern United States to assess status implications of interactions. West utilized already existing recordings of patient–physician interactions and transcribed and coded them for interruptions (defined as speaking over the current speaker more than a syllable away from the transition to their turn at speaking) (West, 1984: 91). Following West and Zimmerman’s (1977, 1983) studies of interruptions in cross-sex interactions, West sought to explore power dynamics between male and female physicians and their patients. While West and Zimmerman found that men talk more than women in cross-sex interactions and are more likely to interrupt the other sex, the higher status of a medical authority led physicians to interrupt patients 67% of the time. However, when looking at the sex of the physician, male physicians interrupted 68% of the time compared to female physicians who interrupted 32% of the time. While there were only four female physicians, results of the study showed that their patients interrupted as much or more than physicians. West, however, noted that the two encounters with female patients and female physicians had symmetrical interruptions. Concluding the research, the author asserted that male physicians interrupt more in order to assert dominance over patients. West suggested this contradicts prior research that found doctors to disproportionately interrupt patients without analyzing the sex of the physician and patient. West concluded by noting that research on these interactions should examine the effect of gender as a ‘master status’ that may trump other power relations such as physician status.

Schilt (2006) followed West’s work in her study of transmen’s experiences at work post-transition. Combining West and Zimmerman’s concept of ‘doing gender,’ Connell’s (1995) ‘patriarchal divide,’ and Collins’s (1991) ‘outsider-within’ concept, Schilt’s study demonstrated how gender and workplace inequality are reproduced through narratives of transmen who saw upward mobility, an increase of perceived competency, and other status privileges after transitioning to male. Other research has applied a symbolic interactionist framework to understand relationships among gender, culture,
identity, emotions, and personal change (Schrock and Padavic, 2007; Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009; Vaccaro et al., 2011).

**Self and identity**

Over the past decades many scholars have applied an interactionist framework to understand self and identity processes, specifically in the areas of role theory, affect control theory, and identity theory. Ralph Turner's (Turner, 1956, 1990; Turner and Killian, 1987) role theory emphasized role-making, or the process of creating and modifying definitions of oneself and one's roles as the orienting mechanism in interaction (Turner, 1962). He emphasized the dual nature of role relations, emphasizing that role expectations must always be understood in relation to the counter-role in which they are juxtaposed (e.g. one cannot understand the motivations or meanings of being a worker without understanding the corresponding role of manager). Turner's role theory attempted to capture not only the ways in which individuals define role expectations themselves, but also how role expectations are embedded in the social structure. His theory highlighted that the self is as much a sociological as psychological entity. Turner's role theory was a formalized system, involving a series of axiomatic propositions that addressed how roles emerge in individuals and how they relate to society (Turner, 1968).

Other symbolic interactionist work on self and identity is found in the work of scholars aligned with affect control theory, who have shown how individuals reduce uncertainty about their existence by developing a working understanding of their social worlds (Heise, 1999, 2002; MacKinnon, 1994; Robinson and Smith-Lovin, 2006). Affect control theory allows one to predict what individuals will do when others violate expectations in social situations, or specifically how individuals act to restore identities when they have been discredited, based on an individual's definition of events and the emotional reaction they have to such events. Research in affect control theory has shown that individuals construct events in order to confirm fundamental meanings regarding self and others, and how individuals use emotions as indicators for whether events are played out as expected or not. When individuals experience emotional outcomes in a situation that are different from what is expected in one's culture, a ‘deflection’ occurs, motivating the individual to restore meanings of self and situation back to the cultural standard. Affect control theory is a cumulative theory of identity, emotions, and behavior that has established an extensive research program over the past half-century, with new empirical studies being published every year (Rogers and Robinson, 2014; Rogers et al., 2014).

Those who work in identity theory have also produced an extensive program of research under the umbrella of symbolic interactionism (Burke and Stets, 2009; Serpe and Stryker, 2011). In identity theory, Mead's theories on the reflexivity of self and society are applied to understand how identities motivate behavior and emotions in social situations. Research in this vein has three main emphases that all focus on the structural nature of identities. One emphasis, stemming from the work of Stryker et al., reveals how behavior is a function of how committed and salient one's identities are in their overall identity hierarchy (Brenner et al., 2014; Merolla et al., 2012). Research in this area has examined how a salient blood donor identity predicts the frequency of giving blood (Callero and Piliavin, 1983), and how a salient religious identity influences one's time spent praying and attending religious services (Stryker and Serpe, 1982). Some of the most recent research in this area has applied structural identity theory to understand how ‘hookup scenes’ serve as opportunity structures to explore same-sex attractions, and for women, to verify bisexual, lesbian, or queer sexual identities (Rupp et al., 2014).

A second area within identity theory examines roles and how identities operate to motivate behavior during interactions (McCall and Simmons, 1978). Role identity theory has remained more theoretical than empirical, as a cumulative research program is yet to emerge within this area. A third variant of identity theory examines identities, behavior, and emotions as a process of cybernetic control (Burke, 1991). Here, individuals’ identity meanings are standards by which to compare the self to others in social situations. Individuals have a main goal of verifying identity meanings among others in the environment in order to feel positive emotions. Recent research in this area has shown how one's moral identity predicts moral behavior (Carter, 2013; Stets and Carter, 2006, 2011, 2012), how status mediates identity processes (Stets and Harrod, 2004; Stets et al., 2008), and how various cognitive and behavioral outcomes emerge for those with a criminal identity (Asencio, 2013; Asencio and Burke, 2011).

**Collective behavior and social movements**

Scholars have also applied symbolic interactionist ideas to understand collective behavior and social movements. For example, Britt and Heise's (2000) work has applied identity theory to social movements to understand how participants construct clear categories of oppressed versus oppressor, and
how a previously stigmatized identity (causing negative emotions) transforms into an identity recognized by the movement (causing positive emotions). Further, this work demonstrates how members of movements construct identities for themselves as victims of marginalization due to institutional and structural processes rather than individual deficiencies or flaws. Beyond this, this work describes the importance of the social processes of identity construction during both formal and informal interactions between members of the movement — including newsletters for prison inmates, college courses and campus organizations, cultural communities, etc.

Verta Taylor (Taylor, 2000; Taylor and Whittier, 1992) has also applied interactionist theory to better understand identity processes and emotions in social movement communities, collecting data from various self-help and identity movements such as postpartum depression movements (Taylor, 1996), movements of women convicted of infanticide during postpartum depression (Taylor and Leitz, 2010), and queer movements and global feminist political movements (Hurwitz and Taylor, 2012). Taylor and colleagues have combined affect control theory, identity theory, and social movement theory to better understand various social movements in society.

In more recent work that applies Stryker’s identity theory, Viterna (2013) examined how micro-processes of identities served as mobilizing factors for women in El Salvador during times of war. White (2010) applied a structural identity framework to understand Irish Republican activist movements and observed that over time, members entered and exited roles (identity transitions) that caused changes in the salience of their role identities (identity transformation). Members of various Irish Republican activist movements consistently joined or created factions, and over time many activists left movements in favor of family and other roles.

**Social context and the environment**

There also is research that applies symbolic interactionist ideas to understand social context and the environment. For example, Smith and Bugni (2006) proposed three ways in which symbolic interactionism and studies of the self may be useful for architecture. First, symbolic interactionism recognizes the mutual influence of physical environments and the development of the self. Second, symbolic interactionism allows researchers to study the symbolic meanings of designed environments. Third, symbolic interactionism reveals the influence of designed environments and buildings on our actions and reflexivity (Smith and Bugni, 2006: 124). Mead long ago posited that non-social objects can constitute the generalized other such that individuals may interact with the environment and behave reflexively despite the inability of objects to respond. Furthermore, William James classified the material self as part of the empirical self, which includes non-social objects and places. Along with the social self and the spiritual self, James suggested that these objects influence the development and maintenance of the self. These objects and designed environments further influence how roles are played and how status is created and maintained, such as spatial segregation by gender in office settings. The authors further suggested that symbolic interactionist concepts can be applied to better understand school environments, retirement homes, and sacred places that shape meaning and interaction with the environment.

In other work, Robinson (2007) applied symbolic interactionist ideas to understand how the self is constructed in online environments. Discounting postmodernist assertions that the online self is an attempt to shed the offline identity, Robinson cited research suggesting that role players incorporate their offline identities into their identities online. The individual becomes immersed in a new character, thus highlighting the constraint of having one identity associated with a physical body offline. Further, because many multi-user domains require users to create an identity (including a gender) before playing, offline norms permeate online identities. The bodies that players engender in their games are highly idealized versions of masculinity and femininity. Thus offline norms are reproduced in online environments, far from being completely removed from social structures and statuses of everyday reality. Robinson also applied the creation and maintenance of online and offline identities to Mead’s ‘I’ and ‘me’ concepts, where the ‘I’ consists of multiple online identities and selves while the person maintains their singular ‘me.’ Robinson further likened the emergence of the ‘cyberself’ as a product of interaction through reflexivity to the same socialization process that creates the self offline. Finally, Robinson argued for the efficacy of symbolic interactionist and dramaturgical analyses of performances in chat rooms and other online interactions, which lack the usual sensory cues (e.g. Goffman’s ‘expressions given off’), but allow for other contextual clues as to the authenticity of one’s performance. Given the technological advances in the years since Robinson’s article, more empirical research on the cyberself in the symbolic interactionist tradition would likely lead to new findings regarding interaction through digital media.

The studies described above provide examples of symbolic interactionist thought that have emerged in
both the distant and recent past. Of course, there are literally hundreds of other symbolic interactionist studies one could summarize in this article. But those addressed here provide a conception of the common work in the discipline. Let us now turn our attention to the future of symbolic interactionism.

Future directions of symbolic interactionism

Over a decade ago Sandstrom and Fine (2003) offered a set of predictions regarding the future of symbolic interactionism. The first prediction was that moving forward, symbolic interactionism would succeed in maintaining its label, familiarity, and popularity within sociology. A second prediction was that symbolic interactionism would become more characterized by diversity in theoretical and methodological applications to topics of interest, forcing the field to abandon old distinctions made by those in the Chicago and Iowa/Indiana traditions. A third prediction was that symbolic interactionists would begin to place a greater emphasis on the development of macro-level concepts and analysis aimed at understanding relationships among large-scale societal entities. A final prediction was that the continued triumphs of symbolic interactionism would likely lead to its demise, as the concepts that once were unique to those in the discipline would inevitably become more diffuse and integrated into mainstream sociology.

Looking back, it seems that some of Sandstrom and Fine’s predictions have been realized, though not all of them. The first prediction is certainly documented: symbolic interactionism continues to be a highly recognized subfield in sociology, and it continues to serve as an organizing force, both thematically in academic journals and structurally with its organizational entity, the Society for the Study for Symbolic Interactionism (SSSI). There also is evidence supporting the second prediction, though one might question whether interactionist scholarship is truly more diverse in theory and method than in the past. It also seems extreme to claim that the distinctions between traditional (Chicago School) and structural (Iowa and Indiana Schools) symbolic interactionism have diminished. Scholars might not state their orientations or alignment with one school as much as in the past, but those trained in the Blumerian tradition still tend to publish more qualitative research, while those trained in the Kuhn/Stryker tradition still tend to publish more quantitative research. It might be more appropriate to say that symbolic interactionism in the past decade has been more defined by novel research topics and areas of inquiry than by innovations in theory and method. There is evidence for this: recent articles in the journal Symbolic Interaction feature studies on coffee breaks (Stroebaek, 2013), identity construction in World of Warcraft MMO role playing gaming (Linderoth, 2012), and even the experience of those who belong to support groups aimed at coping with inflammatory bowel disease (Thompson, 2013).

To this point, Sandstrom and Fine’s third prediction is not evident to any significant degree. There have been a few isolated studies that have applied symbolic interactionist ideas to greater levels of analysis (Dennis and Martin, 2005; Salvini, 2010), but even in these studies the true level of analysis seems to be rooted more in micro-level processes than directed at the macro realm. It seems the most macro applications of symbolic interactionist thought still address social movements and collective behavior (Goodwin and Jasper, 2004; Stryker, 2008), and that much remains to be done regarding applying symbolic interactionist thought to better understanding macro-level structures and large-scale aggregates.

Regarding the final prediction, the ‘demise’ of symbolic interactionism has not occurred – at least not yet. Students of sociology still learn that symbolic interactionism is a discrete perspective/framework within sociology proper, and concepts such as Mead’s ‘I’ and ‘me’ and Cooley’s (1902) ‘looking glass self’ are still largely attributed to symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism continues to be a widely recognized subfield and perspective within sociology.

Writing about the same time as Sandstrom and Fine, Hall (2003) cited multiple areas of inquiry for future symbolic interactionists to address. The first regards interaction orders, specifically the areas of race, class, and gender. The second regards institutional analysis, where symbolic interactionists tend to turn their perspective and methodology to understand policy creation at the meso-level to better understand how behavior in organizational settings becomes institutionalized through a process of social construction over time (Estes and Edmonds’ work described above begins to answer this request). The third topic regards turning attention toward better understanding collective action across space and time. Addressing collective action seems more and more necessary as individuals’ actions in the present world are more and more directed toward future events and activities; much of the past work in symbolic interactionism has examined elements within a situation in isolation while disregarding how individuals within situations are oriented toward future interactions (Collins’s [2004] work on interaction ritual chains...
attempts to correct this problem), so considering space/time dimensional factors that connect interactions seems important. A fourth topic follows the last, and regards *spatiotemporal orders* (Friedland and Boden, 1994) where interactionists continue to observe how time and space are constructed to shape conditions, consciousness, and actions (Hall, 2003).

Let us conclude by citing a few areas beyond those mentioned by Sandstrom, Fine, and Hall that future interactionists should attend to. One area of inquiry regards relationships among the *individual, technology, and society*. The past decade has witnessed incredible advancements in communication technology, such as the emergence and ubiquity of social media, the ever increasing reliance and use of cell phones, and of course the Internet. If there ever was a time when technological innovations have redefined the manner in which interactions and shared meaning occur, it is now. More and more, virtual communication technologies are taking the place of traditional, face-to-face interactions. One can only wonder how Herbert Blumer and Erving Goffman would comment on modern means of communication! Technological developments that assist in or take the place of interactions must be a focus for symbolic interaction moving forward. And, of course, many scholars across the past decade have addressed technology and interaction beyond Robinson’s work described above (Altheide, 2004; Brickell, 2012; Fernback, 2007; Gottschalk, 2010; Williams and Copes, 2005; Yurchisin et al., 2005; Zhao, 2005).

Neuroscience is another area in sociology that symbolic interactionists should turn their attention to in future studies. Over the past decade advancements in neuroscience have caught the attention of some sociologists who study micro-level processes (Franks, 2010; Franks and Turner, 2013; Shkurko, 2012). For example, some have applied neuroscience to understand basic elements of interpersonal behavior often addressed by symbolic interactionists, specifically the areas of social cognition and mind (Franks, 2013; Hopcroft, 2013; Humphreys and Bedford, 2011; Maryanski, 2013; Shook, 2013). Others have applied neuroscience to understand familiar sociological processes, such as aggression (Bułkin and Luttrell, 2005; Mehta et al., 2013; Siever, 2008), self and identity processes (Arzy et al., 2008; Gillihan and Farah, 2005; Molnar-Szakacs and Uddin, 2013; Niemeyer, 2013), stereotyping and prejudice (Amodio and Lieberman, 2009; Brauer and Er-rafiy, 2011; Nelson, 2013), and even inequality (Davis, 2013). Neurosociology promises to be one of the cutting edge subfields in sociology, and symbolic interactionists have much to learn from (and offer to) neuroscientists as these fields continue to merge.

Lastly, we echo Sandstrom and Fine’s point that symbolic interactionists need to continue to turn attention toward the macro realm. Fine (1993) has been noting this need for decades, but few are yet to seriously address how symbolic interactionists can help understand the link between micro and macro structures. Work on micro–macro connections in recent decades can be seen in the work of Bourdieu (1977), Habermas (1984), and Giddens (1984). The theories of these well-known sociologists both implicitly and explicitly incorporate symbolic interactionist concepts to understand macro-level processes. Bourdieu’s work highlights the constraint of social structures in defining individual habitus, or dispositions, and how this produces subjective meanings as well as objective consequences and life chances. Habermas emphasizes the need for communicative action, or discourse based on mutual understanding and shared meaning in influencing political change and in creating a truly democratic society. Giddens, following the symbolic interactionist emphasis on communication, discusses the mutual reinforcement of society and the individual at the level of the interaction in his ‘structuration’ theory. These theorists successfully bridge macro- and micro-sociological concepts in a way that demonstrates the significance of interaction and meaning in producing the very structures that both enable and constrain individual behavior. The age-old sociological debate of micro versus macro theories seems to end with the synthesis of both as equally important and inseparable units of analysis within the discipline. While these theorists have been relatively successful in addressing the micro and macro, symbolic interactionists should turn their attention and offer their own perspective to better understand the link between micro- and macro-social processes.

**Conclusion**

In this essay we have discussed the three main theoretical perspectives in symbolic interactionism, surveyed and assessed the empirical studies that have emerged over the past decades, and provided recommendations for areas of inquiry to which future scholars of symbolic interactionism should attend. We have contended that the symbolic interactionist framework, despite fragmentation and expansion throughout the years, is a perspective with historical as well as contemporary significance for the field of sociology. Rather than pointing to the variety of theories and methodologies that have emerged since Mead’s work as evidence of the demise of symbolic interactionism, we posit that the diversity of
sociological work in the symbolic interactionist tradition is evidence of its utility and well-deserved endurance within the discipline. Furthermore, future directions for symbolic interactionist theories and research are constantly emerging. Because of this, we believe the future of the perspective is bright.

Annotated further reading

Blumer H (1969) *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*. Berkeley: University of California Press. In this seminal work, Blumer delineates symbolic interactionism as a distinct sociological framework. In developing the ideas of GH Mead into a set of basic propositions, Blumer’s text is perhaps the definitive source on interactionist theory and method. This work inspired a legion of scholars in the years to come after its publication, and it remains an often-cited work across sociology.

Denzin NK (1992) *Symbolic Interactionism and Cultural Studies: The Politics of Interpretation*. Malden, MA: Blackwell. In this book Denzin charts the history of symbolic interactionism, spanning a century of social thought beginning with American pragmatism and ending with postmodern and poststructuralist thought of the latter twentieth century. Denzin uses a cultural, interpretive lens and applies symbolic interactionism to understand various topics, including history, politics, and feminism.

Fine GA (1993) The sad demise, mysterious disappearance, and glorious triumph of symbolic interactionism. *Annual Review of Sociology* 19: 61–87. In this now classic essay, Fine discusses changes that occurred within symbolic interactionism in the latter part of the twentieth century. The mainstreaming of symbolic interactionist thought is discussed, and how the intellectual community of interactionists weakened over the years due to the diversity of interests within the field. Fine cites four occurrences that led to this weakening, including fragmentation, expansion, incorporation, and adoption. Fine also describes the role of symbolic interactionism in three debates within sociology, the micro/macro debate, the structure/agency debate, and the social realist/interpretivist debate. The article ends with a summary of empirical arenas in which interactions have made contributions (social coordination theory, sociology of emotions, social constructionism, self and identity theory, macro-interactionism, and policy-relevant research).

Mead GH (1934) *Mind, Self, and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. This classic work provided the inspiration for Blumer in his creation and development of symbolic interactionism. Published posthumously, *Mind, Self, and Society* is a collection of Mead’s notes and lectures that together lay the groundwork for his brand of social behaviorism. Here Mead’s classic concepts are presented, including ‘taking the role of the other,’ the self as a dichotomy of the ‘I’ and the ‘me,’ and the ‘play, game, and generalized other’ stages of development. It is required reading for any student of sociological social psychology.

Short S (1976) Society, self, and mind in moral philosophy: The Scottish Moralists as precursors of symbolic interactionism. *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 12(1): 39–46. Shott provides a concise summary of the influence of Scottish Moralist thought on symbolic interactionism. She reveals how GH Mead’s conception of the self as an internal dialogue between the ‘I’ and the ‘me’ and the notion of the ‘generalized other’ were foreshadowed by Adam Smith and others in the Scottish Moralist tradition. In addition, symbolic interactionist treatment of emotions, communication, political structures, and sympathy is compared and contrasted to the Scottish Moralists.

Stryker S (1980) *Symbolic Interactionism: A Social Structural Version*. Menlo Park, CA: Benjamin Cummings. In this book Stryker provides the framework for what has come to be known as structural symbolic interactionism. Diverging from Blumer’s notion that society is constantly changing and in flux, Stryker develops a symbolic interactionist framework that emphasizes the patterns and stable social structures that influence individuals in society. Now a classic and seminal text in its own right, Stryker’s *Symbolic Interactionism* has influenced a wide variety of contemporary research programs in sociology, including identity theory and affect control theory.

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résumé L’interactionnisme symbolique est une perspective théorique de la microsociologie qui étudie le comportement des personnes en société et les processus dynamiques d’interaction. Cet article nous donne un aperçu de trois traditions théoriques de l’interactionnisme symbolique et se concentre sur les travaux d’Herbert Blumer (l’école de Chicago), Manford Kuhn (l’école de l’Iowa) et Sheldon Stryker (l’école de l’Indiana). Un bref résumé de la perspective globale de chaque figure dans l’interactionnisme symbolique est effectué, suivie d’une discussion de la méthodologie de recherche qui définit et distingue chaque théorie. Nous faisons également une analyse pour évaluer la recherche empirique qui a émergé de ces traditions théoriques au cours des dernières décennies. Nous concluons par une discussion sur les orientations futures que doivent suivre les interactionnistes symbolique, afin de continuer à développer ce domaine.

mots-clés interactionnisme symbolique • microsociologie • la psychologie sociale

resumen El interaccionismo simbólico es una perspectiva teórica a nivel micro en sociología que estudia la manera en la que los individuos crean y mantienen una sociedad a través de repetidas interacciones cara a cara y llenas de significado. En este artículo ofrecemos una perspectiva general de las tres tradiciones teóricas en el interaccionismo simbólico, enfocándonos en el trabajo de Herbert Blumer (escuela de Chicago), Manford Kuhn (escuela de Iowa), y Sheldon Stryker (escuela de Indiana). Se ofrece un breve resumen sobre la perspectiva general del interaccionismo simbólico en cada una de estas figuras, seguido de un debate sobre la metodología investigadora que define y distingue a cada uno de ellos. A continuación se analiza y se evalúa la investigación empírica que ha surgido de estas tradiciones a lo largo de las últimas décadas. Concluimos con un debate sobre las direcciones futuras a las que los interaccionistas simbólicos deben prestar atención para continuar el desarrollo de este campo.

palabras clave interaccionismo simbólico • microsociología • psicología social