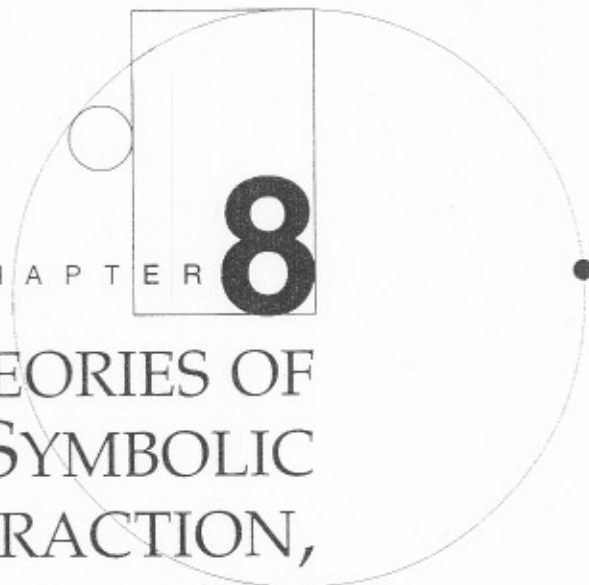


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CHAPTER 8

THEORIES OF
SYMBOLIC
INTERACTION,
DRAMATISM,
AND NARRATIVE

The theories discussed in Chapters 8 and 9 take quite a turn from the cognitive theories discussed in the previous two chapters. For the scholars in the interactional tradition, communication and meaning are unabashedly social, and cognitive explanations are seen as secondary at best.¹ For these theorists, meaning is created and sustained by interaction in the social group. Interaction establishes, maintains, and changes certain conventions—roles, norms, rules, and meanings—within a social group or culture, and these conventions in turn define the reality of the culture itself.

We discuss this group of theories in two chapters. This chapter covers the foundational literature in symbolic interactionism and closely related ideas on dramatism and narrative. Chapter 9 examines theories of the social construction of reality, rules, and culture. There is also an affinity between this genre and some of the interpretive theories addressed in Chapter 10.

 **SYMBOLIC
INTERACTIONISM**

Symbolic interactionism is characterized by certain ideas about communication and society. Barbara Ballis Lal summarizes these:²

1. People make decisions and act in accordance with their subjective understandings of the situations in which they find themselves.

1 For an overview of social approaches, see Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz (ed.), *Social Approaches to Communication* (New York: Guilford, 1995). See also the forum on social approaches in *Communication Theory*, vol. 2 (May 1992): 131-177; and vol. 2 (November 1992): 329-356.

2 Barbara Ballis Lal, "Symbolic Interaction Theories," *American Behavioral Scientist* 38 (1995): 421-441. See also Joel M. Charon, *Symbolic Interactionism: An Introduction, an Interpretation, an Integration* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1992); Larry T. Reynolds, *Interactionism: Exposition and Critique* (Dix Hills, NY: General Hall, 1990); Jerome G. Manis and Bernard N. Meltzer (eds.), *Symbolic Interaction* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1978). For continuing coverage of SI, see the ongoing editions of the journal *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*.

2. Social life consists of interaction processes rather than structures and is therefore constantly changing.
3. People understand their experience through the meanings found in the symbols of their primary groups, and language is an essential part of social life.
4. The world is made up of social objects that are named and have socially determined meanings.
5. People's actions are based on their interpretations, in which the relevant objects and actions in the situation are taken into account and defined.
6. One's self is a significant object and like all social objects is defined through social interaction with others.

According to symbolic interactionism, then, you are always attempting to achieve goals by interacting with other people. Your experience is shaped by the meanings that are created by using symbols when communicating in groups.

Early interactionism was divided into two schools.³ The Chicago School, led primarily by Herbert Blumer, continued the work of George Herbert Mead. Blumer believed above all that the study of humans could not be conducted in the same manner as the study of things. Researchers should try to empathize with the subject, enter his or her experience, and attempt to understand the value of each person. Blumer and his followers avoided quantitative and scientific approaches and stressed life histories, autobiographies, case studies, diaries, letters, and nondirective interviews. Blumer particularly emphasized the importance of participant observation in the study of communication. Further, the Chicago tradition saw people as creative, innovative, and free to define each situation in unpredictable ways. Self and society were viewed as process, not structure; to freeze the process would be to lose the essence of social relationships.

The second tradition, the Iowa School, took a more scientific approach. Manford Kuhn and

Carl Couch, its leaders, believed that interactionist concepts could be operationalized. Although Kuhn accepted the basic tenets of symbolic interactionism, he argued that objective methods are more fruitful than the "soft" methods employed by Blumer. As we will see later in the chapter, Kuhn was responsible for a well-known measurement technique called the Twenty Statements Test.⁴

The basic ideas of these early schools of interaction live on today and have been adopted by many social scientists. Yet symbolic interactionism has changed significantly since its early years, as Gary Fine suggests.⁵ It has expanded by adopting insights from other theoretical areas and has increasingly contributed to the work of other areas of social science.

Today, according to Fine, symbolic interactionism has incorporated the study of how groups coordinate their actions, how emotions are understood and controlled, how reality is constructed, how self is created, how large social structures get established, and how public policy can be influenced.

In this chapter we concentrate on classical symbolic interactionism, the basic ideas of the movement, and the theoretical extensions most recognized in the communication field—those of Erving Goffman and Kenneth Burke. We begin here with the Chicago School and the work of Mead and Blumer.

The Chicago School

George Herbert Mead is usually viewed as the primary originator of the movement, and his work certainly forms the core of the Chicago

3 Bernard N. Meltzer and John W. Petras, "The Chicago and Iowa Schools of Symbolic Interactionism," in *Human Nature and Collective Behavior*, ed. T. Shibutani (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970).

4 Meltzer and Petras, "Chicago and Iowa Schools."

5 Gary Alan Fine, "The Sad Demise, Mysterious Disappearance, and Glorious Triumph of Symbolic Interactionism," *Annual Review of Sociology* 19 (1993): 61–87.

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School.⁶ Herbert Blumer, Mead's foremost apostle, invented the term *symbolic interactionism*, an expression Mead himself never used. Blumer refers to this label as "a somewhat barbaric neologism that I coined in an offhand way. . . . The term somehow caught on."⁷

The three cardinal concepts in Mead's theory, captured in the title of his best-known work, are society, self, and mind. These categories are different aspects of the same general process, the *social act*. The social act is an umbrella concept under which nearly all other psychological and social processes fall. The act is a complete unit of conduct that cannot be analyzed into specific subparts. An act may be short and simple, such as tying a shoe, or it may be long and complicated like the fulfillment of a life plan. Acts relate to one another and are built up throughout a lifetime. Acts begin with an impulse; they involve perception and assignment of meaning, mental rehearsal, weighing of alternatives, and consummation.

In its most basic form, a social act involves a three-part relationship: an initial gesture from one individual, a response to that gesture by another, and a result. The result is the communicators' meaning for the act. Meaning does not reside solely in any one of these things but in the triadic relationship of all three.⁸

In a holdup, for example, the robber indicates to the victim what is intended. The victim responds by giving money or belongings, and in the initial gesture and response, the defined result (a holdup) has occurred. Even individual acts, such as a solitary walk, are interactional because they are based on gestures and responses that occurred many times in the past and continue in the mind of the individual. One never takes a walk by oneself without relying on meanings and actions learned in social interaction with others.

The *joint action* of a group of people, such as marriage, trade, war, or church worship, consists of an *interlinkage* of smaller interactions. Blumer notes that in an advanced society the largest portion of group action consists of highly recurrent, stable patterns that possess common and estab-

lished meanings for their participants. Because of the frequency of such patterns and the stability of their meanings, scholars have tended to treat them as structures, forgetting their origins in interaction. Blumer warns us not to forget that new situations present problems requiring adjustment and redefinition.

Even in highly repetitious group patterns, nothing is permanent. Each case must begin anew with individual action. No matter how solid a group action appears to be, it is still rooted in individual human choices: "It is the social process in group life that creates and upholds the rules, not the rules that create and uphold group life."⁹

Interlinkages may be pervasive, extended, and connected through complicated networks. Distant actors may be interlinked ultimately in diverse ways, but contrary to popular thinking, "a network or an institution does not function automatically because of some inner dynamics or system requirements: it functions because people at different points do something, and what they do is a result of how they define the situation in which they are called on to act."¹⁰

With this idea of social acts in mind, then, let us look more closely at the first facet of Meadian

6 Mead's primary work in symbolic interactionism is *Mind, Self, and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934). For a general discussion of the history, influence, and methods of the Chicago School, see Jesse G. Delia, "Communication Research: A History," in *Handbook of Communication Science*, eds. C. R. Berger and S. H. Chaffee (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1987), pp. 30–37. For outstanding secondary sources on Mead and the Chicago School, see Everett M. Rogers, *A History of Communication Study: A Biographical Approach* (New York: Free Press, 1994), pp. 137–202; Bernard N. Meltzer, "Mead's Social Psychology," in *Symbolic Interactionism*, eds. J. G. Manis and B. N. Meltzer (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1972), pp. 4–22; Charles Morris, "George H. Mead as Social Psychologist and Social Philosopher" (Introduction), in *Mind, Self, and Society*; and C. David Johnson and J. Stephen Picou, "The Foundations of Symbolic Interactionism Reconsidered," in *Micro-Sociological Theory: Perspectives on Sociological Theory*, vol. 2, eds. H. J. Helle and S. N. Eisenstadt (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1985), pp. 54–70.

7 Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969), p. 1.

8 Wayne Woodward, "Triadic Communication as Transactional Participation," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 13 (1996): 155–174.

9 Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism*, p. 19.

10 Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism*, p. 19.

analysis—society. *Society*, or group life, consists of the cooperative behaviors of society's members. Human cooperation requires that we understand others' intentions, which also entails figuring out what you and others will do in the future. Thus, cooperation consists of "reading" other people's actions and intentions and responding in an appropriate way.

Meaning is an important outcome of communication. Your meanings are the result of interaction with others. So, for example, although you may never have heard of a "toilet telephone," prison inmates know it well; they have learned that they can communicate by listening to voices traveling through the sewer pipes in the prison.

Further, we use meanings when we interpret the happenings around us. Interpretation is like an internal conversation: "The actor selects, checks, suspends, regroups, and transforms the meanings in light of the situation in which he is placed and the direction of his actions."¹¹

Clearly, we could not communicate without sharing the meaning of the symbols we use. Mead calls a gesture with shared meaning a *significant symbol*. Society is made possible by significant symbols. Because of the ability to vocalize symbols, we literally can hear ourselves and thus can respond to the self as others respond to us. We can imagine what it is like to receive our own messages, and we can empathize with the listener and take the listener's role, mentally completing the other's response. Society, then, consists of a network of social interactions in which participants assign meaning to their own and others' actions by the use of symbols.¹² Even the various institutions of society are built up by the interactions of people involved in those institutions.

Consider the court system in the United States as an example. The courts are nothing more than the interactions among judges, juries, attorneys, witnesses, clerks, reporters, and others who use language to interact with one another. *Court* has no meaning apart from the interpretations of the actions of those involved in it. The same can be said for school, church, government, industry, and any other segment of society.

This interplay between responding to others and responding to self is an important concept in Mead's theory, and it provides a good transition to his second concept—the *self*.¹³ You have a self because you can respond to yourself as an object. You sometimes react favorably to yourself and feel pride, happiness, and encouragement. You sometimes become angry or disgusted with yourself. The primary way you come to see yourself as others see you is through *role taking* or assuming the perspective of others, and this is what leads you to have a self-concept.

Another term for self-concept is *generalized other*, a kind of composite perspective from which you see yourself. The generalized other is your overall perception of the way others see you. You have learned this self-picture from years of symbolic interaction with other people in your life. *Significant others*, the people closest to you, are especially important because their reactions have been very influential in your life.

Consider, for example, the self-image of adolescents. As a result of their interactions with significant others such as parents, siblings, and peers, teenagers come to view themselves as they think others have viewed them. They come to take on the persona that has been reflected to them in their many interactions with other people. As they behave in ways that affirm this image, it is strengthened, and others respond accordingly in a cyclical fashion. So, for example, if a young person feels socially inept, he or she may withdraw, further reinforcing the image of being inadequate.

The self has two facets, each serving an essential function. The *I* is the impulsive, unorganized, undirected, unpredictable part of you. The *me* is the generalized other, made up of the organized and consistent patterns shared with others. Ev-

11 Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism*, p. 5.

12 For a thoughtful discussion of the social nature of symbols, see Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz, "A Social Account of Symbols," in *Beyond the Symbol Model: Reflections on the Representational Nature of Language*, ed. John Stewart (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), pp. 257–278.

13 For a probing discussion of self within this tradition, see Norbert Wiley, *The Semiotic Self* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

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ery act begins with an impulse from the *I* and quickly becomes controlled by the *me*. The *I* is the driving force in action, whereas the *me* provides direction and guidance. Mead used the concept of *me* to explain your socially acceptable and adaptive behavior and the *I* to explain your creative, unpredictable impulses.

For example, many people will deliberately change their life's situation in order to alter their own self-concept. Here, the *I* moves the person to change in ways that the *me* would not permit. Such a change might have occurred, for example, when you went to college. Many high school students decide that they will use college to establish a new *me* by associating with a new group of significant others and by establishing a new generalized other. This is what people mean when they say that they got a new start.

Your ability to use significant symbols to respond to yourself makes thinking possible. Thinking is Mead's third concept, which he calls *mind*. The mind is not a thing, but a process. It is nothing more than interacting with yourself. This ability, which develops along with the self, is crucial to human life, for it is part of every act. *Minding* involves hesitating (postponing overt action) while you interpret the situation. Here you think through the situation and plan future actions. You imagine various outcomes and select and test possible alternatives.

People possess significant symbols that allow them to name objects. You always define an object in terms of how you might act toward it. A seascape is a seascape when you value looking at it. A glass of lemonade is a drink when you conceive of drinking it (or not drinking it). Objects become the objects they are through the individual's symbolic minding process; when the individual envisions new or different actions toward an object, the object is changed.

For Blumer, objects are of three types—physical (things), social (people), and abstract (ideas). People define objects differently, depending on how they act toward those objects. A police officer may mean one thing to the residents of an inner-city ghetto and something else to the inhabitants of a posh residential area; the different

interactions among the residents of these two vastly different communities will determine different meanings.

A fascinating study of marijuana use by Howard Becker illustrates the concept of social object very well.¹⁴ Becker found that users learn at least three things through interaction with other users. The first is to smoke the drug properly. Virtually everyone Becker talked to said that they had trouble getting high at first until others showed them how to do it. Second, smokers must learn to define the sensation produced by the drug as a "high." In other words, the individual learns to discriminate the effects of marijuana and to associate these with smoking. Becker claims that this association does not happen automatically and must be learned through social interaction with other users. In fact, some experienced users reported that novices were absolutely stoned and didn't know it until they were taught to identify the feeling. Finally, users must learn to define the effects as pleasant and desirable. Again, this is not automatic; many beginners do not find the effects pleasant at all until they are told that they should consider them so.

Here, we see that marijuana is a social object. Its meanings are created in the process of interaction. How people think about the drug (mind) is determined by those meanings, and the assumptions of the group (society) are also a product of interaction. Although Becker does not report information about self-concept specifically, it is easy to see that part of the self may also be defined in terms of interactions in the marijuana-smoking community.

The Iowa School

Manford Kuhn and his students, although maintaining basic interactionist principles, take two new steps not previously seen in the old-line theory. The first is to make the concept of self more concrete; the second, which makes the first possible, is the use of quantitative research. In

14 Howard Becker, "Becoming a Marijuana User," *American Journal of Sociology* 59 (1953): 235–242.

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this latter area, the Iowa and Chicago schools part company. Blumer strongly criticizes the trend in the behavioral sciences to operationalize; Kuhn makes a point to do just that! As a result Kuhn's work moves more toward microscopic analysis than does the traditional Chicago approach.¹⁵

Kuhn's theoretical premises are consistent with Mead's thought. Kuhn conceives of the basis of all action as symbolic interaction. The child is socialized through interaction with others in the society into which he or she is born. The person has meaning for and thereby deals with objects in the environment through social interaction. To Kuhn, the naming of an object is important, for naming is a way of conveying the object's meaning. Kuhn agrees with his Chicago colleagues that the individual is not a passive reactor but an active planner. He reinforces the view that individuals undertake self-conversations as part of the process of acting. Kuhn also stresses the importance of language in thinking and communicating.

Like Mead and Blumer, Kuhn discusses the importance of objects in the actor's world. The *object* can be any aspect of the person's reality: a thing, a quality, an event, or a state of affairs. The only requirement for something to become an object is that the person name it, represent it symbolically. Reality for people is the totality of their social objects, which are always socially defined.

A second concept important to Kuhn is the *plan of action*, a person's total behavior pattern toward a given object. *Attitudes*, or verbal statements that indicate the values toward which action will be directed, guide the plan. Because attitudes are verbal statements, they too can be observed and measured. Going to college involves a plan of action, actually a host of plans, guided by a set of attitudes about what you want to get out of college. You might be guided, for ex-

ample, by positive attitudes toward money, career, and personal success.

A third concept important to Kuhn is the *orientational other*, someone who has been particularly influential in a person's life. This term is essentially synonymous with *significant other*, as used by Mead. These individuals possess four qualities. First, they are people to whom the individual is emotionally and psychologically committed. Second, they are the ones who provide the person with general vocabulary, central concepts, and categories. Third, they provide the individual with the basic distinction between self and others, including one's perceived role differentiation. Fourth, the orientational others' communications continually sustain the individual's self-concept. Orientational others may be in the present or past; they may be present or absent. The important idea behind the concept is that the individual comes to see the world through interaction with particular other persons who have touched one's life in important ways.

Finally, we come to Kuhn's most important concept—the *self*. Kuhn's theory and method revolve around self, and it is in this area that Kuhn most dramatically extends symbolic interactionist thinking. The self-conception, the individual's plans of action toward the self, consists of one's identities, interests and aversions, goals, ideologies, and self-evaluations. Such self-conceptions are anchoring attitudes, for they act as one's most common frame of reference for judging other objects. All subsequent plans of action stem primarily from the self-concept.

Kuhn is responsible for a technique known as the *Twenty Statements Self-Attitudes Test* (TST) for measuring various aspects of the self. If you were to take the TST, you would be confronted with twenty blank spaces preceded by the following simple instructions:

There are twenty numbered blanks on the page below. Please write twenty answers to the simple question, "Who am I?" in the blanks. Just give twenty different answers to this question. Answer as if you were giving the answers to yourself, not to somebody else. Write the answers in the order that they occur to you.

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DRAMATIC NARRATIVE

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15 Like many of the interactionists, Kuhn never published a truly unified work. The closest may be C. A. Hickman and Manfred Kuhn, *Individuals, Groups, and Economic Behavior* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1956). See also Charles Tucker, "Some Methodological Problems of Kuhn's Self Theory," *Sociological Quarterly* 7 (1966): 345-358.

Don't worry about logic or "importance." Go along fairly fast, for time is limited.¹⁶

There are a number of ways to analyze the responses from this test, each tapping a different aspect of the self. Two of these are the ordering variable and the locus variable. The *ordering variable* is the relative salience of identifications the individual possesses. It is observable in the order of statements listed on the form. For example, if the person lists "Baptist" a great deal higher than "father," the researcher may conclude that the person identifies more readily with religious affiliation than with family affiliation. The *locus variable* is the extent to which the subject in a general way tends to identify with consensual groupings such as "American" rather than idiosyncratic, subjective qualities such as "strong."

In scoring the self-attitude test, you can place statements in one of two categories. A statement is *consensual* if it consists of a discrete group or class identification, such as student, woman, husband, Baptist, from Chicago, premedical student, daughter, oldest child, engineering student. Other statements are not descriptions of commonly agreed-on categories. Examples of *subconsensual* responses are happy, bored, pretty, good student, too heavy, good wife, interesting. The number of statements in the consensual group is the individual's locus score.

Symbolic interactionism has certainly been an influential force in social theories of communication. We turn now to several related theories.

DRAMATISM AND NARRATIVE

Dramatism and narrative are two closely associated movements that fit well under the interactionist umbrella. Theories of dramatism and narrative deal with stories, which are one of the most important ways people use symbols and create meaning. *Dramatism* is distinguished by its heavy reliance on a theatrical metaphor, and *narrative* is characterized by its use of story sequence.

The dramaturgical movement is closely aligned with symbolic interactionism and has been heavily influenced by it. The dramaturgists see people as actors on a metaphorical stage playing out roles. Bruce Gronbeck sketches the basic idea of dramatism, as shown in Figure 8.1.¹⁷ Here action is seen as performance, or the use of symbols to present a story or script to interpreters. In the process of performance, meanings and actions are produced within a scene, or sociocultural context.

Several theorists might be termed *dramaturgical*, but dramaturgical theory lacks the unity required to be called a school. This section reviews the work of two very different dramaturgical theories—the landmark symbol theory of Kenneth Burke and the influential role theory of Erving Goffman.

An increasingly popular approach to communication is the narrative paradigm, which is akin to dramatism and consistent with the tenets of symbolic interactionism. Narrative theories focus on the ways people structure reality by telling stories. The story is not only a way of organizing a message but is also a common, some say universal, format for structuring interaction itself.¹⁸ Howard Kamler expresses the importance of stories in this passage:

Any communication is a sharing of stories. Most stories seem to cry out to be shared. And getting shared is perhaps the most profound function of stories. Stories are the stuff of communication. And the sharing of them is what transforms persons into communal beings. In trading our stories back and forth for inspection, agreement, disagreement, we are involved in the activity of making ourselves members of a community. Public story trade is at the heart of the social miracle about persons.¹⁹

16 Tucker, "Some Methodological Problems," p. 308.

17 Adapted from Bruce E. Gronbeck, "Dramaturgical Theory and Criticism: The State of the Art (or Science?)," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 44 (1980): 317.

18 Narrative is a popular topic in literature and in communication. See, for example, W. J. T. Mitchell (ed.), *On Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Howard Kamler, *Communication: Sharing Our Stories of Experience* (Seattle: Psychological Press, 1983); Didier Coste, *Narrative as Communication* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

19 Kamler, *Communication*, p. 49.

Burke sees the act as the basic concept in dramatism. His view of human action is consistent with that of Mead, Blumer, and Kuhn. Specifically, Burke distinguishes between action and motion. *Action* consists of purposeful, voluntary behaviors; *motions* are nonpurposeful, nonmeaningful ones. Objects and animals possess motion, but only human beings have action.

Burke views the individual as a biological and neurological being, distinguished by symbol-using behavior, the ability to act. People are symbol-creating, symbol-using, and symbol-misusing animals. They create symbols to name things and situations; they use symbols for communication; and they often abuse symbols by misusing them to their disadvantage.

Burke's view of symbols is broad, including an array of linguistic and nonverbal elements as well. Especially intriguing for Burke is the notion that a person can symbolize symbols. One can talk about speech and can write about words. History itself is a process of writing about what people have already spoken and written in the course of events.

People filter reality through a symbolic screen. Reality is mediated through symbols. Burke agrees with Mead that language functions as the vehicle for action. Because of the social need for people to cooperate in their actions, language shapes behavior.

Language, as seen by Burke, is always emotionally loaded. No word can be neutral. As a result, your attitudes, judgments, and feelings invariably appear in the language you use. Language is by nature selective and abstract, focusing attention on particular aspects of reality at the expense of other aspects. Language is economical, but it is also ambiguous.

An overriding consideration for all of Burke's work is his concept of guilt. The term *guilt* is Burke's all-purpose word for any feeling of tension within a person—*anxiety*, *embarrassment*, *self-hatred*, *disgust*, and so forth. For Burke, *guilt* is a condition caused by symbol use. He identifies three related sources of guilt, the first of which is *the negative*. Through language people moralize. They construct myriad rules and pro-

scriptions. These rules are never entirely consistent, and in following one rule, you necessarily are breaking another, creating guilt. Religions, professions, organizations, families, and communities all have implicit rules about how to behave. We learn these throughout life and therefore judge almost any action as good or bad.

The second reason for guilt is the *principle of perfection*. People are sensitive to their failings. Humans can imagine (through language) a state of perfection. Then, by their very nature, they spend their lives striving for whatever degree of this perfection they set for themselves. Guilt arises as a result of the discrepancy between the real and the ideal. Many peace activists are motivated by this kind of guilt. For example, a speaker at a rally may say that war is a barbaric and inappropriate method of resolving conflict in the twentieth century. This speaker can imagine a world without war and is motivated to speak out because of the principle of perfection.

A third reason for guilt is the *principle of hierarchy*. In seeking order, people structure society in social pyramids or hierarchies (social ratings, social orderings), which is done with symbols. Competitions and divisions result among classes and groups in the hierarchy, and guilt results. The ethnic strife in the former Yugoslavia is a perfect example.

For Burke, guilt is the primary motive behind all action and communication. We communicate to purge our guilt. In describing communication, Burke uses several nearly synonymous terms: *persuasion*, *identification*, *consubstantiality*, *communication*, and *rhetoric*. Let us see how these concepts are integrated in his theory.

First, consubstantiality: Any object has an essence, or substance. *Substance* is the general nature, or essence, of a thing. People have substance too, and each person has a separate substance; however, the substances of any two persons always overlap to some extent. The overlap is never total, making perfect communication impossible. Whatever communication occurs between individuals is a direct function of their shared, or common, substance, called *consubstantiality*.

FIGURE 8.1

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When you and a friend are relaxing next to the swimming pool on a warm summer morning, you communicate with each other in a free and easy manner because you share meanings for the language in use. You are, so to speak, consubstantial. On the other hand, when you ask a question of a harried busboy in a Swiss restaurant, you may feel frustration because of your lack of shared meaning with this individual. To combine Mead and Burke, a significant symbol is one that allows for shared meaning through consubstantiality.

Another important term in Burke's theory is identification. As generally conceived, *identification* is similar to consubstantiality. The opposite of identification is *division*, or separateness. Division and the guilt it produces are the primary motives for communication. Through communication, identification is increased. In a spiraling fashion as identification increases, shared meaning increases, thereby improving understanding. Identification thus can be a means to persuasion and effective communication, or it can be an end in itself. Identification can be conscious or unconscious, planned or accidental.

Three overlapping sources of identification exist among people. *Material identification* results from goods, possessions, and things, like owning the same kind of car or having similar tastes in clothes. *Idealistic identification* results from shared ideas, attitudes, feelings, and values, such as being a member of the same church or political party. *Formal identification* results from the arrangement, form, or organization of an event in which both parties participate. If two people who are introduced shake hands, the conventional form of handshaking causes some identification to take place.

Identification is not an either-or occurrence but a matter of degree. Some consubstantiality will always be present merely by virtue of the shared humanness of any two persons. Identification can be great or small, and it can be increased or decreased by the actions of the communicators. Second, although any two persons will always experience some identification and some division, communication is more successful when identification is greater than division.

People of lower strata in a hierarchy often identify with persons at the top of the hierarchy, despite tremendous apparent division. This kind of identification can be seen, for example, in the mass following of a charismatic leader. Why does this happen? First, individuals perceive in others an embodiment of the perfection for which they themselves strive. Second, the mystery surrounding the charismatic person simultaneously tends to hide the division that exists. This phenomenon can be called *identification through mystification*.

Because it is so important to successful communication, people adopt certain *strategies* of identification when they interact with others. Since identification can occur in an almost unlimited number of ways, Burke does not attempt to outline all available strategies but suggests that in analyzing a rhetorical event, you should try to figure out what strategies the communicators are using.

Burke's most basic method for analyzing events is the *dramatistic pentad*. Pentad, meaning a group of five, is an analytical framework for the most efficient study of any act. The first part of the pentad is the *act*, what is done by the actor. It is a view of what the actor played, what was accomplished. The second part is the *scene*, the situation or setting in which the act was accomplished. It includes a view of the physical setting and the cultural and social milieu in which the act was carried out. The third component is the *agent*, the actor, including all that is known about the individual. The agent's substance reaches all aspects of his or her being, history, personality, demeanor, and any other contributing factors. The *agency*, the fourth component, is the means, or vehicle, the agent uses in carrying out the act. Agency may include channels of communication, devices, institutions, strategies, or messages. Fifth, the *purpose* is the reason for the act—the rhetorical goal, the hoped-for effect or result of the act.

For example, in writing a paper for your communication theory course, you, the agent, gather information and present it to the instructor (the act). Your course, your university, your library, your desk and room, the social atmosphere of

your school corner the paper itself: of purposes, including good grade.

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your school constitute the scene; the format of the paper itself is the agency. You have a variety of purposes, including, in all likelihood, getting a good grade.

David Ling shows how Burke's pentad can be used to understand a communication event.²⁴ In 1969 Edward Kennedy, a senator from Massachusetts, was involved in an automobile accident with an aide, Mary Jo Kopechne, in which he accidentally drove a car off a bridge into a pond. Kennedy escaped, but Kopechne drowned. In a remarkable address to the people of Massachusetts about a week later, he explained what happened and attempted to regain the support of the people. Ling writes that Kennedy wanted to achieve two things—to minimize his own responsibility for the accident and to make the people responsible for whether or not he would continue in office.

Kennedy's appeal on the first point describes himself (agent) as a helpless victim of the events leading to the death of the young woman (scene). He explains his own failure to report the accident (act) as a consequence of his confusion and injuries. Kennedy's depiction makes him out to be a victim of a tragic situation. Later in his speech, Kennedy essentially offered to resign if the citizens wanted him to. Here, the scene shifted to the public reaction to the accident, the agent became the people of Massachusetts, the act was their decision as to whether he should resign, the agency would be a statement of resignation, and the purpose would be to remove him from office. Ling believes this was a very effective speech. The reaction was overwhelmingly positive, and Kennedy continued in office.

Goffman's Social Approach

Erving Goffman is one of the best-known sociologists of the twentieth century.²⁵ As a symbolic interactionist of the dramaturgical tradition, Goffman analyzes human behavior with a theatrical metaphor, in which the ordinary setting is a stage and people are actors who use performances to make an impression on the audience.

Let's begin by looking at Goffman's basic framework.²⁶ He begins with the assumption

that the person must somehow make sense of events encountered in everyday life. Your interpretation of a situation is your *definition of the situation*.

In any typical situation, people tend to ask the mental question, "What is going on here?" Their answer constitutes a definition of the situation. Often the first definition is not adequate and a rereading may be necessary, as in the case of a practical joke, a mistake, or a misunderstanding. Rereading is important because we are often deceptive with one another.

One's definition of a situation can be divided into strips and frames. A *strip* is a sequence of activity such as opening the refrigerator door, removing the milk, pouring it into a glass, drinking it, and putting the glass into the dishwasher. A *frame* is a basic organizational pattern used to define the strip. The strip of activities listed above, for example, would probably be framed as "getting a snack."

Frame analysis thus consists of examining the ways experience is organized for the individual. The frame allows the person to identify and understand otherwise meaningless events, giving meaning to the ongoing activities of life. A natural framework is an unguided event of nature with which the individual must cope such as a windstorm. A social framework, on the other hand, is seen as controllable, guided by some intelligence, such as planning a meal. These two types of frameworks relate to one another because social beings act on and are in turn influenced by the natural order.

Frameworks, then, are the models we use to understand our experience, the ways we see

24 David A. Ling, "A Pentadic Analysis of Senator Edward Kennedy's Address to the People of Massachusetts, July 25, 1969," *Central States Speech Journal* 21 (1970): 81-86.

25 See the Bibliography for a listing of Goffman's works.

26 Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974). See also Jef Verhoeven, "Goffman's Frame Analysis and Modern Micro-Sociological Paradigms," in *Micro-Sociological Theory: Perspectives on Sociological Theory*, vol. 2, eds. H. J. Helle and S. N. Eisenstadt (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1985), pp. 71-100; Stuart J. Sigman, *A Perspective on Social Communication* (Lexington, MA: Lexington, 1987), pp. 41-56; Spencer Cahill, "Erving Goffman," in *Symbolic Interactionism: An Introduction, an Interpretation, an Integration*, ed. Joel M. Charon (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1992), pp. 185-200.

things as fitting together into some coherent whole. A *primary framework* is a basic organizational unit such as conversing, eating, and dressing, but primary frames can be transformed or altered into *secondary frameworks*. Here the basic organizational principles of a primary frame are used to meet different ends. A game, for example, is a secondary framework modeled after the primary framework of a fight or competition. A large portion of our frameworks are not primary at all, though they are modeled after primary ones. Examples include plays, deceptions, experiments, and other fabrications. Ordinary life is filled with secondary frameworks.

Communication activities, like all activities, are viewed in the context of frame analysis. A *face engagement*, or *encounter*, occurs when people interact with one another in a focused way.²⁷ In a face engagement, you have a single focus of attention and a perceived mutual activity. In unfocused interaction in a public place, you acknowledge the presence of another person without paying much attention. This happens, for example, when you are standing in line at a bus stop. In such an unfocused situation, you may be accessible for an encounter that could begin when another passenger strikes up a conversation. Once an engagement begins, a mutual contract exists to continue the engagement to some kind of termination. Face engagements are both verbal and nonverbal, and the cues exhibited are important in signifying the nature of the relationship as well as a mutual definition of the situation.

People in face engagements take turns presenting dramas to one another. Storytelling, or recounting past events, impresses the listener by dramatic portrayal:

I am suggesting that often what talkers undertake to do is not to provide information to a recipient but to present dramas to an audience. Indeed, it seems that we spend most of our time not engaged in giving information but in giving shows. And observe, this theatricality is not based on mere displays of feelings or faked exhibitions of spontaneity or anything else by way of the huffing and puffing we might derogate by calling theatrical. The parallel between

stage and conversation is much, much deeper than that. The point is that ordinarily when an individual says something, he is not saying it as a bold statement of fact on his own behalf. He is recounting. He is running through a strip of already determined events for the engagement of his listeners.²⁸

In engaging others, you present a particular character to the audience. Like a stage actor, you present a character in a particular role, and your audience normally accepts the characterization.²⁹ Goffman believes that the self is literally determined by these dramatizations. Here is how he explains the self:

A correctly staged and performed scene leads the audience to impute a self to a performed character, but this imputation—this self—is a product of a scene that comes off, and is not a cause of it. The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited.³⁰

You have only to think about the many situations in which you project a certain image of yourself. It is doubtful that you behave the same way with your best friend as you do with your parents, and it is unlikely that the self you present to a professor is the same one you present at a party. In most of the situations in which you participate, you decide on a role and enact it.

In attempting to define a situation, you go through a two-part process—first, you get information about the other people in the situation and, second, you give information about yourself. This process of exchanging information en-

27 On the nature of face-to-face interaction, see Erving Goffman, *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1961); *Behavior in Public Places* (New York: Free Press, 1963); *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967); and *Relations in Public* (New York: Basic, 1971).

28 Goffman, *Frame*, p. 508.

29 The best sources on self-presentation are Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959); and *Relations in Public*.

30 Goffman, *Presentation*, pp. 252–253.

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ables people to know what is expected of them. Usually, this exchange occurs indirectly through observing the behavior of others and structuring your own behavior to elicit impressions in others. *Self-presentation* is very much a matter of *impression management*:

He may wish them to think highly of him, or to think that he thinks highly of them, or to perceive how in fact he feels toward them or to obtain no clear-cut impression; he may wish to insure sufficient harmony so that the interaction can be sustained, or to defraud, get rid of, confuse, mislead, antagonize, or insult them.³¹

Predicaments are especially interesting. Suppose you get blamed for something. You can respond in a number of ways—you can give excuses, justifications, apologies, and more. For example, in making an excuse, you might say that you didn't mean to do it, that you did not realize what would happen, or that you couldn't help it. Justifications include appeals to a higher authority, self-defense, loyalty, or some other set of values.³²

Because all participants in a situation project images, an overall definition of the situation emerges. This general definition is normally rather unified. Once the definition is set, moral pressure is created to maintain it by suppressing contradictions and doubts. A person may add to the projections but never contradict the image initially set. The very organization of society is based on this principle.

Bormann's Convergence Theory

Convergence theory, often known as *fantasy-theme analysis*, is based on Robert Bales's research on small-group communication discussed later in Chapter 13.³³ Bales found that at moments of tension, groups will often become dramatic and share stories, or *fantasy themes*, to reduce the stress. Ernest Bormann applied this idea to rhetorical action in society at large.³⁴ Much of individuals' images of reality consists of narratives of how things are believed to be. These stories are created in symbolic interaction within small

groups, and they are chained out from person to person and group to group.

Fantasy themes are part of larger dramas that are longer, more complicated stories called rhetorical visions. A *rhetorical vision* is essentially a view of how things have been, are, or will be. Rhetorical visions structure our sense of reality in areas that we cannot experience directly but can only know by symbolic reproduction. Consequently, such visions give us an image of things in the past, in the future, or in faraway places; in large measure these visions form the assumptions on which a group's knowledge is based.

In the corporate world, for example, plans are almost always designed to generate profit. In a limited marketplace, not all competitors will be profitable, so you would expect corporate planners to live in a world filled with competition-oriented rhetorical visions, and they would tell stories that express this vision.

Fantasy themes, and even the larger rhetorical visions, consist of *dramatis personae* (characters), a plot line, a scene, and sanctioning agents. The *characters* can be heroes, villains, and other supporting players. The *plot line* is the action or development of the story. The *scene* is the setting, including location, properties, and sociocultural milieu. Finally, the *sanctioning agent* is a source that legitimizes the story. This source may be an authority who lends credibility to the story or authorizes its telling, a common belief in God or

31 Goffman, *Presentation*, p. 3.

32 For a well-developed discussion of impression management in predicaments, see J. T. Tedeschi and M. Reiss, "Verbal Strategies in Impression Management," in *The Psychology of Ordinary Explanations of Social Behavior*, ed. C. Antaki (New York: Academic, 1981), pp. 271-309.

33 Robert F. Bales, *Personality and Interpersonal Behavior* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1970).

34 Bormann's major works on fantasy-theme analysis are *Communication Theory* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1980), pp. 184-190; *The Force of Fantasy: Restoring the American Dream* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985); "Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision: The Rhetorical Criticism of Social Reality," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 58 (1972): 396-407; and "Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision: Ten Years Later," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 68 (1982): 288-305; Ernest G. Bormann, John F. Cragan, and Donald C. Shields, "An Expansion of the Rhetorical Vision Component of the Symbolic Convergence Theory: The Cold War Paradigm Case," *Communication Monographs* 63 (1996): 1-28. See also John F. Cragan and Donald C. Shields, *Applied Communication Research: A Dramatic Approach* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland, 1981); John F. Cragan and Donald C. Shields, *Symbolic Theories*, pp. 29-48.

another sanctioning ideal like justice or democracy, or a situation or event that makes telling the story seem appropriate.

Imagine a group of executives gathering for a high-level meeting. Just before the meeting gets going, at the beginning, and at various points during the meeting, members will share experiences and stories—fantasy themes—that bring the group together. Some of these will be stories heard again and again. Each will have a cast of characters, a plot, a scene, and sanctioning agents. In many cases the sanctioning agent will be the company itself.

Rhetorical visions are never told in their entirety but are built up piecemeal by sharing associated fantasy themes. To grasp the entire vision, one must attend to the fantasy themes because these comprise the content of conversation in groups of people when the vision is being created and chained out. You can recognize a fantasy theme because it is repeated again and again. In fact, some themes are so frequently discussed and so well known within a particular group or community that the members no longer tell the whole episode, but abbreviate it by presenting just a "trigger" or *in-cue*. This is precisely what happens with an inside joke. An executive might say, for example, "Yeah, that's just like the *Frasier* episode!" and everyone will laugh, knowing just what she is referring to. Fantasy themes that develop to this point of familiarity are known as *fantasy types*—stock situations told over and over within a group.

As people come to share fantasy themes, the resulting rhetorical vision pulls them together and gives them a sense of identification with a shared reality. In this process, people converge or come to hold a common image as they share their fantasy themes. In fact, shared rhetorical visions—and especially the use of fantasy types—can be taken as evidence that convergence has occurred.

As rhetorical visions get established through the sharing of fantasy themes within a limited group, they fulfill a *consciousness-creating* function. They make people more aware of a certain way of seeing things. This happens because the

elements of rhetorical visions at this stage are novel and have explanatory power, and yet they can also attract attention and build consciousness because they imitate former ways of seeing things that look familiar.

Once consciousness is created among early adherents to a rhetorical vision, the consciousness can be disseminated, as more and more people are converted through *consciousness-raising* communication. There seems to be a critical mass of adherence at which widespread dissemination of the rhetorical vision takes place. After this happens, the rhetorical vision begins to fulfill a *consciousness-sustaining* function. Here the fantasy themes serve to maintain commitment.

Clearly, fantasy themes are an important ingredient in persuasion. Public communicators—in speeches, articles, books, films, and other media—often tap into the audience's predominant fantasy themes. Public communication can also add to or modify the rhetorical vision by amplifying, changing, or adding fantasy themes.

Karen Foss and Stephen Littlejohn's critique of *The Day After*—a television movie about a nuclear war that played in 1983 at the height of public concern over the nuclear arms buildup—shows how this process works.³⁵ These researchers asked about eighty people to write descriptions of what they thought a nuclear war would be like. They then compared these personal statements with the fantasy themes in the film and discovered a close association between the two.

The film was watched by a huge television audience, and it appears that it was effective in using a rhetorical vision shared with that audience. Foss and Littlejohn believe that the deep structure of the vision is irony, which consists primarily of the inconsistency of being both a detached observer and an involved participant in the nuclear-attack drama. This kind of irony is typical of the visions presented by films because films draw you in as a participant, but they also rely on you to be an observing and detached audience.

35 Karen A. Foss and Stephen W. Littlejohn, "The Day After: Rhetorical Vision in an Ironic Frame," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 3 (1986): 317-336.

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36 Walter R. Fish a *Philosophy of Reas South Carolina Pr Community,* in *W Science Discourse,* e 1992), pp. 199-218; *Theories,* pp. 91-108
37 Fisher, *Humor*

Fisher's Theory of Narrative

Perhaps the most comprehensive narrative theory in the communication field is that of Walter Fisher.³⁶ Fisher believes that human rationality in all its forms is based essentially on narrative. Consequently, communication in all its forms can be understood as narrative.

Traditionally, narration, or storytelling, has been viewed as a different genre from argumentation. Arguments were viewed as rational, whereas stories were viewed as nonrational. Argument has been viewed customarily as a set of premises and conclusions based on specialized rules.

In disagreement with this traditional view, Fisher believes that narrative also involves rationality. Narrative can incorporate traditional rationality, but it goes beyond this to include other forms of rationality not often recognized. In other words, reasoning is more diverse than either technical or rhetorical argument recognizes, and the narrative paradigm encompasses a broader variety of types of rationality. Fisher summarizes:

[In narrative] no form of discourse is privileged over others because its form is predominantly argumentative. No matter how strictly a case is argued—scientifically, philosophically, or legally—it will always be a story, an interpretation of some aspect of the world that is historically and culturally grounded and shaped by human personality.³⁷

Persuasion occurs when people see good reasons for adopting a point of view. Good reasons can be presented in the form of traditional reasoning, or they can be presented in other ways. In the narrative paradigm, positive values constitute good reasons to accept a claim, no matter what form is used to express it. For example, if

you want to persuade a friend to attend an animal rights rally, you might outline a number of reasons why animals need to be protected. If your friend accepts the values in the argument, he will probably go to the rally. Many people, however, are not persuaded by formal arguments like this one, so as an alternative, you might choose to tell the story of the abuse of beagles in a research lab. Again, if your friend accepts the values in the story, he will probably decide to go along. For many people the story would be more powerful than a list of reasons presented in traditional style.

What is narration? For Fisher, narration is more than traditional fictional stories and includes any verbal or nonverbal account that has a sequence of events to which listeners assign meaning. The narrative paradigm *describes* what people do when they communicate; it does not *dictate* what they should do, as does traditional argument learned in debate courses.

This does not mean all stories are equally effective. Some stories are better than others, and people do not need special knowledge or skill to tell the difference. Two criteria are used to establish the quality of a narrative—coherence and fidelity. *Coherence* is the degree to which a story makes sense, the extent to which it has meaning. Coherence is measured by the organization and structure of the story: A coherent story is well told. Coherence involves three kinds of consistency. The first is internal consistency, which Fisher calls *argumentative coherence* or *structural coherence*. This is the degree to which the parts of the story "hang together." The second type is external consistency, which Fisher calls *material coherence*, the congruence between this story and other stories, the degree to which the story seems complete in terms of the events previously learned from other sources. Finally, *characterological coherence* has to do with the believability of the characters in the story, both the narrators and the actors. What kind of choices do these characters make, and what kind of values do they espouse?

You know the difference between a well-told story and one that is confusing. You can tell when a story makes sense, when it is organized

36 Walter R. Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1987); see also "Narration, Reason, and Community," in *Writing the Social Text: Poetics and Politics in Social Science Discourse*, ed. Richard Harvey Brown (New York: Aldine, 1992), pp. 199–218; John F. Cragan and Donald C. Shields, *Symbolic Theories*, pp. 91–106.

37 Fisher, *Human Communication*, p. 49.

in a way that makes you pay attention and appreciate the art in the telling. But coherence is not everything. Indeed, a well-told story may still fail to persuade. It must also have fidelity.

Fidelity is the truthfulness or reliability of the story. A story has fidelity if it seems to ring true to the listener. A story with fidelity presents a "logic of good reasons," or a set of values that are taken as good reasons by the listener. Here, one judges five aspects of the narrative. First, the story is a tale of values. Second, these values are appropriate for the moral of the story, the decisions being made by characters, or the thesis communicated by the discourse. Third, the values are perceived to have positive consequences in the lives of people. Fourth, the values in the story are consistent with people's own experience. Fifth, the values are part of an ideal vision for human conduct.

Fisher uses Jonathan Shell's book *The Fate of the Earth* as an example. This book about the nuclear-weapons buildup was widely read in the early 1980s. It argued that the weapons race must stop and be reversed. Fisher states that the book was highly respected because it met the standards of coherence and fidelity. In other words, it was a well-told story that rang true to many people. It included a set of values that seemed especially relevant at that point in the history of the world. Experts refuted the book on technical grounds, but these technical arguments did not have the fidelity necessary to win public sentiment.

Because it is universal, narrative is liberating and empowering. It does not limit argumentation to those who have special skill or knowledge because everyone intuitively knows how to use and evaluate narrative. Unlike traditional argument, then, narrative is an egalitarian form. The lawyer arguing in court with traditional logic uses a kind of narrative, just as does a grandmother telling her grandchild about life during the Great Depression.

The general public will tend to evaluate arguments of all types in terms of narrative forms, making the narrative criteria of coherence and fidelity more effective in winning adherents than traditional logical criteria. This is the case because in its appeal to all the faculties, including

reason, emotion, sensation, imagination, and values, narration more nearly captures the experience of the average person than does formal discourse, which is designed to appeal to a narrow range of specialized rationality. In addition, narrative ability is cultural knowledge and does not have to be learned in logic classes and law school. Finally, narration creates an identification among people and appeals to the public on an indirect, subconscious level.

For these reasons, narrative is especially powerful in public moral argument. A public moral argument deals with basic questions of good and bad, life and death, ideas about personhood, and how to live a life. It is aimed at all of society, not at small groups or individual communities. Some of the chief public moral arguments of our own time relate to abortion, the right to life, and reproductive choice; war and peace; women's rights; public education; church and state; and many others. Fisher believes that in public moral arguments, the rules of good narrative will win out over the rules of traditional argument. When expert argument is pitted against common narrative, the rhetoric of the experts will fail because it will not stand up to the coherence and fidelity expected by the public.

COMMENTARY AND CRITIQUE

The theories in this chapter see communication as the thread with which the fabric of society is held together. A culture's reality is defined in terms of its meanings, which arise from interaction within social groups. Individuals' meanings for words and symbols, objects, stories, and roles are determined by the ways symbols are used to define objects and people in actual communication situations. Action, then, is a product of the meanings that arise from interaction. Figure 8.2 summarizes the basic interactional process.³⁸

Social institutions are nothing more than grand networks of interaction in which common meanings are generated. The self as an object is

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38 Charon, *Symbolic Interactionism*, p. 49.

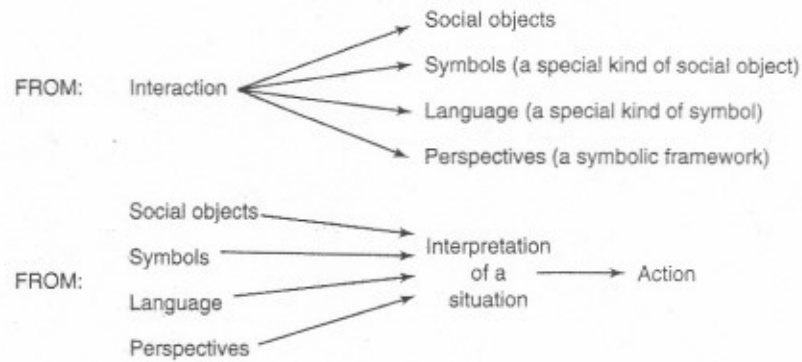


FIGURE 8.2

Interaction to Action

especially important; the self, too, is defined in terms of symbols and meanings derived from one's interaction with other people.

As people interact in society, they perform in ways that make social life much like a drama. They act within scenes, make presentations, represent characters, and tell stories. These communication activities create, sustain, and change the very nature of reality in a group or culture.

Although many specific objections have been raised against symbolic interactionism, most can be combined into four major criticisms.³⁹ First, symbolic interactionism is said to be nonempirical. That is, one cannot readily translate its concepts into observable, researchable units. Second, it is said to be overly restrictive in the variables it takes into account. Critics have charged that it ignores crucial psychological variables on one end and societal variables on the other. Third, it uses concepts in an inexact, inconsistent way. Fourth, it takes a naively cooperative view of meaning. Let us look at each of these objections more closely.

The first major criticism of symbolic interactionism has broad implications. Despite Blumer's protests to the contrary, critics maintain that in actual practice the researcher does not know what to look for in observing interactionist concepts in real life. This problem seems to stem

from the vague, intuitive claims of early interactionists. What is mind, for example? How can this concept be observed? We already have noted Kuhn's failure to operationalize interactionist concepts without giving up his assumptions about the process nature of behavior. Most basically, this criticism questions the appropriateness of symbolic interactionism to lead to a more complete understanding of everyday behavior. As such, critics believe it to be more social philosophy than theory.

John Lofland's criticism is especially biting. He claims that interactionists participate in three main activities: "doctrinaire reiteration of the master's teachings, . . . [making] slightly more specific the general imagery, . . . [and connecting] descriptive case studies and interactionism."⁴⁰

39 For reviews of specific objections to symbolic interactionism, see Michael A. Katovich and William A. Reese III, "Postmodern Thought in Symbolic Interaction: Reconstructing Social Inquiry in Light of Late-Modern Concerns," *The Sociological Quarterly* 34 (1993): 391-411. Gil Richard Musolf, "Structure, Institutions, Power, and Ideology: New Directions Within Symbolic Interactionism," *The Sociological Quarterly* 33 (1992): 171-189; Jerome G. Manis and Bernard N. Meltzer (eds.), "Appraisals of Symbolic Interactionism," *Symbolic Interaction* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1978), pp. 393-440; Bernard N. Meltzer, John Petras, and Larry Reynolds, *Symbolic Interactionism: Genesis, Varieties, and Criticism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975); Reynolds, *Interactionism*, pp. 129-180.

40 John Lofland, "Interactionist Imagery and Analytic Interruption," in *Human Nature and Collective Behavior*, ed. T. Shibutani (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970), p. 37.

As a result of this alleged failure, symbolic interactionism is not thought to be adequately heuristic, generating few testable hypotheses and little research.

Carl Couch, a leading proponent (and house critic) of the movement, points out that interactionists do engage in research but that their observations do not cast light on the theory's key concepts, making revision and elaboration difficult. Couch believes this circumstance need not be so, and his newer Iowa tradition has emerged out of a need for interactionists to do "serious sociological work."⁴¹ Given some of the more recent work done in the area, this criticism, once valid, no longer holds. It is probably a more valid critique of early interactionism.

The second major criticism is that interactionism has either ignored or downplayed important explanatory variables. Critics say it leaves out the emotions of the individual on one end and societal organization on the other. These arguments as a whole make the case that interactionism is overly restrictive in scope. To cover as much of social life as it believes it does, interactionism must take into account social structures as well as individual feelings. Again, however, if we turn to the many theories associated with interactionist thinking, whether they go by the name symbolic interactionism or not, we find that a much wider range of concepts is included. In Chapter 9, for example, we will encounter the work of theorists who deal with such concerns as the social construction of emotions, values, and morality. We will look at the process of making accounts and enacting social life. All these topics have been well researched and are included in the interactionist tradition broadly conceived.⁴²

The alleged failure of symbolic interactionism to deal with social organization is a major concern. Social organization or structure removes individual prerogative, a highly valued idea in old-style interactionism. Social structure is normally a matter of power, since some groups seem to have more influence in defining a situation than do others, but interactionists have been loath to admit this power inequality. However, the concept of power can be investigated from an

interactionist perspective, and several research programs have begun to look at power.⁴³ Again, current interactionists have taken this criticism seriously and have done a great deal of work to show the relevance of symbolic interactionism (SI) to social structure and the production of power. Much of this work has been by merging SI with cultural studies, a critical research tradition discussed in Chapter 11.⁴⁴

The third general criticism of symbolic interactionism is that its concepts are not used consistently. As a result such concepts as *I*, *me*, *self*, *role*, and others are vague. However, we must keep in mind that symbolic interactionism is not a unified theory. Rather, it is a general framework, and as we have seen, it has different versions. Therefore, although this is a valid criticism of early interactionism, it is not a fair picture of the movement today.

One inconsistency that persists in most versions of symbolic interactionism involves the problem of determinism. Most mainstream interactionists clearly teach that individuals and groups have the capacity to seek goals, to define situations in new ways, and to change. Yet the idea of the social genesis of meaning creates a kind of determinism. In other words, if the group creates meaning through interaction, the individual has little choice but to see the world in predetermined ways. Mead tried to handle this difficulty with the concept of the *I*, but this is a vague, mystical, and ill-defined concept.

41 Carl Couch, "Symbolic Interaction and Generic Sociological Principles" (paper presented at the Symposium on Symbolic Interaction, Boston, 1979).

42 Actually, much has been done in this area. See, for example, Thomas J. Scheff, *Microsociology: Discourse, Emotion, and Social Structure* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); for a summary of work on emotion, see Bernard N. Meltzer and Nancy J. Herman, "Epilogue: Human Emotions, Social Structure, and Symbolic Interactionism," in *Interactionism: Exposition and Critique*, ed. Larry T. Reynolds (Dix Hills, NY: General Hall, 1990), pp. 181-225.

43 This line of work is discussed in Peter M. Hall, "Structuring Symbolic Interaction: Communication and Power," in *Communication Yearbook 4*, ed. D. Nimmo (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1980), pp. 49-60.

44 For a summary of this work, see Musolf, "Structure, Institutions, Power, and Ideology"; and Norman K. Denzin, *Symbolic Interactionism and Cultural Studies: The Politics of Interpretation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992); Michal M. McCall and Howard S. Becker, *Symbolic Interaction and Cultural Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Meltzer and Herman, "Epilogue."

The question is how personal goals have been established. Perhaps the answer to this problem is that unintended consequences strain future action. A successful approach is a modified theory of action in more complex situations.

The fourth criticism is its naive view of individualism. Here is that in meanings, in the sort of emergent social life is evident. Yet critical theorists often reflect that are harmful to ourselves is naive views, and ourselves by opposition. In other words, emerge from cooperation.

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The question that plagues interactionism today is how people can act in accord with personal goals yet be affected by meanings that have been established through a history of interaction. Perhaps the most serious and credible answer to this problem has been forwarded by Anthony Giddens, who shows how action results in unintended consequences that return to constrain future action.⁴⁵ Many believe that Giddens has successfully reconciled structural, deterministic approaches with interactionist ones in a unified theory of social life. Giddens's theory is covered in more detail in Chapter 13.

The fourth objection to symbolic interactionism is its naive reliance on a basically cooperative view of meaning and self.⁴⁶ The problem here is that in classical symbolic interactionism, meanings, including the concept of the self, just sort of emerge effortlessly from interaction, and social life is essentially a cooperative endeavor. Yet critical theorists show that powerful groups often reflect views of certain persons in ways that are harmful and demeaning. How we see ourselves is not always defined by these negative views, and in fact, people often define themselves by opposing what others say about them. In other words, our conceptions of self often emerge from conflict and manipulation, not cooperation.

Indeed, theorists like Goffman say that people often manipulate situations in a variety of ways to present views of self that may be in opposition to customary ways of seeing things. This is possible because no one image of self emerges from a lifetime of interaction. Because we can define the self in so many ways, we can define ourselves in a variety of antithetical ways.

This view has not been lost on interactionists. In fact, interactionists themselves have done much to broaden the view of self, meaning, and action in social life.

The critical response to dramatism and narrative has been copious and spirited, and it is not possible to review all of these viewpoints.⁴⁷ Gronbeck summarizes the critique against dramaturgy.⁴⁸ Dramatism is not a unified theory. It still remains basically an "interest group" or coa-

lition of theories that share a metaphor rather than any particular set of theoretical terms or principles. The theories chosen for this chapter illustrate this lack of coherence in the movement.

Burke's is the grandest and perhaps the most elaborate of the four theories covered here. This breadth and complexity has elicited both praise and blame. Some believe that it has opened vistas of great import; others believe that Burke's lack of focus has led to interminable confusion, if not exhaustion. For example, John Stewart addresses Burke's apparent confusion in regard to the symbol model.⁴⁹

Stewart's thesis is that we cannot separate symbols from things, but that reality itself may be by the use of language in everyday communication. According to Stewart, Burke is ambivalent on this issue. He seems to acknowledge the importance of language in the construction of reality, yet his works are filled with the idea that symbols somehow represent a world apart. This is an interesting point because Burke has been so often identified with symbolic interactionism, which itself opposes the very symbol model that Stewart finds indefensible.

As another recent example, James Chesebro has argued that Burke's system is overly limited and needs revision to remain fresh in today's multicultural thinking.⁵⁰ Specifically, he worries

45 See, for example, Anthony Giddens, *New Rules of Sociological Method* (New York: Basic, 1976).

46 This view is explored in some depth by Katovich and Reese, "Postmodern Thought."

47 For a summary of criticisms of Burke, see Foss, Foss, and Trapp, *Contemporary Perspectives*, pp. 199-203. For criticism of Goffman, see Stephen W. Littlejohn, *Theories of Human Communication*, 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1983), pp. 180-181; and Randall Collins, "Erving Goffman and the Development of Modern Social Theory," in *The View from Goffman*, ed. J. Ditton (New York: St. Martin's, 1980), pp. 170-209. For criticism of Bormann, see Bormann, "Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision: Ten Years Later," and G. P. Mohrmann, "An Essay on Fantasy Theme Criticism," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 68 (1982): 109-132. A critique and response to Fisher's work are Robert C. Rowland, "On Limiting the Narrative Paradigm: Three Case Studies," *Communication Monographs* 56 (1989): 39-54; and Walter R. Fisher, "Clarifying the Narrative Paradigm," *Communication Monographs* 56 (1989): 55-58.

48 Gronbeck, "Dramaturgical Theory."

49 John Stewart, *Language as Articulate Contact* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), pp. 197-228.

50 James W. Chesebro, "Extending the Burkeian System: A Response to Tompkins and Cheney," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 80 (1994): 83-90.

that Burke offers a rather single-minded model for viewing human knowledge, a model that is inappropriately reliant on language and inappropriate for many cultures.

Of the four theories covered here, Goffman's ideas are perhaps least theoretical in that they are scattered and hard to assemble into a single rubric. His numerous writings are insightful and interesting but hard to integrate. He rarely uses the same vocabulary twice and, until the end of his career, seemed more interested in pointing out idiosyncratic observations than in making a general statement. Fortunately, his final work *Frame Analysis* provides an overall scheme that can be used to integrate a lifetime of work.

Bormann's theory is perhaps the most clearly focused of the dramaturgical and narrative theories presented in this chapter. It, too, has received both praise and blame. Bormann and his associates also put a good deal of work into clarifying and elaborating the vocabulary of fantasy-theme analysis. Bormann's work—and that of his critics and adherents—fulfills one of Gronbeck's suggestions: that the field of communication elaborate, clarify, and develop the concepts and terms of narrative.

The narrative paradigm has been useful. Indeed, telling stories and sharing rhetorical visions is a common, perhaps universal, human activity. The function of stories in communication and persuasion is therefore a significant area of study. Both Bormann and Fisher advance our knowledge of narrative by suggesting some of the elements of this dimension of communica-

tion. Both have proved useful in the actual examination of discourse.

Considerable controversy still exists about the place of narrative in communication. Critiques of symbolic convergence theory, for example, have been wide ranging. The theory has been criticized for failure to clarify basic assumptions; the inappropriateness of applying a small-group phenomenon to public, mass audiences; overreliance on the subjective observations of the researcher rather than the categories of the theory; and the theory's lack of a fresh perspective. These objections, of course, have not gone unanswered, and Bormann and his colleagues have responded that much of this criticism is polemical and unsubstantiated.⁵¹

Fisher's narrative paradigm has been criticized in similar ways. Robert Rowland, for example, has suggested that although narrative is a powerful dimension of much communication, it cannot be said to characterize all communication.⁵² Fisher answers that his brand of narrative indeed underlies all communication and is especially important in persuasion.⁵³ For Fisher, narrative is more a dimension than a type of communication.

In the following chapter, we extend this discussion by pursuing the social construction of reality and cultural variations of meaning.

51 Ernest G. Bormann, John F. Cragan, and Donald C. Shields, "In Defense of Symbolic Convergence Theory: A Look at the Theory and Its Criticisms After Two Decades," *Communication Theory* 4 (1994): 259-294.

52 Rowland, "On Limiting the Narrative Paradigm."

53 Fisher, "Clarifying the Narrative Paradigm."

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 THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

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