# The SOCIAL SELF and EVERYDAY LIFE

## Understanding the World Through Symbolic Interactionism

Kathy Charmaz / Scott R. Harris / Leslie Irvine

WILEY Blackwell

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*Kathy Charmaz*
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# Preface

Symbolic Interactionism is a major theoretical and research tradition within sociology. This book provides a student-friendly introduction to that perspective, appropriate for courses on sociological social psychology (a.k.a. Self and Society, Microsociology, Social Interaction). It could also be used as a supplement in courses on Introduction to Sociology or on Social Theory. Symbolic interactionism is gaining attention in other disciplines across the globe. Colleagues from varied places and disciplines may also find that this volume provides a useful introduction to symbolic interactionism for their students. We hope our book not only extends the reach of the perspective but, moreover, sparks ideas about developing it beyond disciplinary and national borders.

We welcomed Wiley-Blackwell's invitation to write a social psychology text using the symbolic interactionist perspective with detailed excerpts from rich qualitative studies. We kept this approach in mind before and as we wrote this book. We asked ourselves: What would interest students in studying social psychology? How can teachers make concepts come alive for their students?

*The Social Self and Everyday Life* provides a means of teaching symbolic interactionist social psychology that starts where students are. Sociology students are interested in themselves and their situations, as well as in social issues. Our text involves students in familiar experiences and issues that they care about, and then shows how a symbolic interactionist perspective illuminates them. We begin each chapter with an intriguing and readable excerpt from a personal account or qualitative study. We then analyze these excerpts from an interactionist perspective, and forge connections to concepts and findings from classic and current research.

We thus offer a "gentle" introduction to symbolic interactionism. Our book focuses on those ideas we have found to be the most interesting and useful to our students. We occasionally sacrifice some breadth or depth to prioritize students' understanding and connection with the material.

*The Social Self and Everyday Life* can be seen as a kind of hybrid – combining the best features of a conventional textbook (e.g. authoritative summaries, clear definitions of key terms) with that of a reader (e.g. enticing empirical excerpts and selective attention to popular ideas).

Instructors should note that Chapters 2–11 each conclude with at least one unanalyzed excerpt for students to analyze on their own (i.e. individually or in class discussions). These concluding excerpts could provide the basis for assignments and/or class discussions.

## Respecting the Classics while Embracing Recent Research

Many significant works in symbolic interactionism – such as those by Howard Becker, Charles Cooley, Erving Goffman, Arlie Hochschild, George Herbert Mead, and many others – were written in the last century. Such work is valuable for instructors who want to expose students to important theoretical insights, methodological strategies, and empirical findings.

Sometimes, however, students challenge professors who assign or even discuss books and articles that were published in the last century. Understandably, students wonder if instructors have chosen the most "up to date" or "cutting edge" material to cover in class. When pressed with such questions, we raise one or more of the following points.

Students need to keep in mind that many factors shape an instructor's decision to focus on a particular author, idea, or reading. While timeliness is one criterion to consider, it is not the only one. Instructors and textbook authors may consider several other factors. Is the research interesting enough to hold the attention of a large percentage of the students in the class? Is the research understandable? Will most of the students be able to comprehend an author's theory, methods, and findings? Is the research representative of a general field of scholarship? Is the research influential and important? Are an author's findings or concepts relevant across decades if not centuries or millennia?

Thus, it is almost certainly an error to focus on "new vs. old" as the sole or even primary standard for assessing an idea or a piece of research. Newer is not necessarily better. A relatively recent publication date is not a sufficient measure of quality or utility. In this textbook, as in our classrooms, we try to satisfy as many of the above criteria as possible (among other considerations), when selecting concepts and pieces of research to discuss. In short, we try to respect the classics while also embracing compelling new research.

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# 1

# An Invitation to Learn about Self, Situation, and Society

"This past winter, Sara Fader, a 37-year-old social media consultant in Brooklyn who has generalized anxiety disorder, texted a friend in Oregon about an imprending visit, and when a quick response failed to materialize, she posted on Twitter to her 16,000-plus followers, 'I don't hear from my friend for a day – my thought, they don't want to be my friend anymore,' she wrote, appending the hashtag #ThisIsWhatAnxietyFeelsLike." (Williams 2017:1)

"One student, who has A.D.H.D, anxiety, and depression, said the pressure began building in middle school when she realized she had to be at the top of her class to get into high school honors classes, which she needed to get into Advanced Placement classes, which she needed to get into college. 'In sixth grade,' she said, 'kids were freaking out.'" (Williams 2017:2)

"In most ways, Kim looks like a well-adjusted college student. She dates her high school sweetheart and is studying psychology at a university in the Midwest. For the past five years, however, Kim has struggled with severe depression. When it was at its worst, she could not force herself to get out of bed to go to class. After hours of therapy and courses of antidepressant drugs, Kim was stable and ready to graduate; then she had a relapse. Now it will take her another year to finish college as she tries to manage her depression." (Twenge 2014:117)

"Jill, 23, describes her overachieving family as 'a recipe for quiet terror.' Although she's done well in school, 'always, always before those grades come out, I struggle under the weight of a cloud of fear and depression,' she says. 'Every year I'm silently convinced that this will be the one – this time I'll actually screw it all up. It's a scary way to live.'" (Twenge 2014:131)

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Each fall, two professors at Beloit College in Wisconsin amass approximately 50 facts, events, and figures into a list describing the experiences and assumptions of students entering college for the first time.[1] This "Mindset List" began as an email circulating among faculty members, providing an amusing reminder of how students change over time and how quickly cultural references become outdated. This point is especially relevant for professors because they grow older each year but the students they teach remain (more or less) within the same age bracket. References to "Seinfeld," the popular 1990s TV sitcom, would bring on blank looks rather than the intended laughter. For professors who recall life before the invention of microwave ovens, it can be helpful to recognize that, for students, popcorn has always been made in the microwave.

Beginning with the Class of 2007, students did not know a time when computers would not fit in their backpacks. Students in the Class of 2020 grew up "connected." As "digital natives," they have "spent their entire lives surrounded by and using computers, videogames, digital music players, video cams, cell phones, and all the other toys and tools of the digital age" (Prensky 2001:1). They take a networked world for granted.

By creating composite portraits of generations of students, the Beloit College Mindset List shows how deeply the social context influences people's perspectives and experiences. Along with the social class into which we are born, and along with our race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and other social categories, the events and inventions of an era also shape our perspectives (Elder 1994). Cultural developments, such as information technology, economic trends, such as the Great Recession of 2008, and historical events, such as 9/11 influence people's thoughts, feelings, and actions.

## #ThisIsWhatAnxietyFeelsLike

The excerpts that begin this chapter describe a set of experiences not included on the Mindset List. Among young people in the United States (US) today, anxiety has become the new normal. The college years and the transition to early adulthood have long been a time when young people face many uncertainties, often without the familiar social support of families. However, research documents a dramatic change. One 2016 survey of American college students found that 62% reported experiencing "overwhelming anxiety," a 12% increase in five years (American College Health Association 2017). Another survey asks incoming college students whether they feel overwhelmed by all they had to do (Eagan et al. 2017). When the survey first included this question in 1985, 18% of students reported feeling overwhelmed. By 2016, the figure had risen to 41%.

Living with anxiety, "freaking out," and feeling constantly overwhelmed will have a profound impact on how one thinks about oneself and interacts with others. The

increase in the numbers of young people reporting anxiety and stress did not occur in a vacuum. As sociologists, we look to the larger social context for insight into this change. We also ask how this change will affect the social context.

Social psychology is a branch or subfield of sociology that focuses on the interplay between what's "out there" and what's "in here." Social psychologists address two important questions: How are people created by social order? And, in turn, how do people create the social orders that shape and mold their behavior? (Lindesmith, Strauss, and Denzin 1988:2).

As you'll see, social psychologists approach these questions about the relationship between society and individuals from different perspectives. The symbolic interactionist perspective used in this book provides a particularly useful set of tools for investigating these questions.

## Sociology, Psychology, and Social Psychology

You will find social psychology courses, and social psychologists, in departments of sociology *and* psychology. However, symbolic interactionism has its home in sociology. Of course, scholars in both fields have long been interested in studying the relationship between the mind and social behavior. In 1908, sociologist Edward Alsworth Ross wrote *Social Psychology,* and psychologist William McDougall published *Introduction to Social Psychology*. The texts differed in how much they emphasized the mind or society. McDougall grounded mental activity in biological processes and in what he referred to as "instincts." Ross, in contrast, emphasized the effects of the social world on the individual.

Psychology and sociology co-existed well at first but went their separate ways after World War II. This resulted in two social psychologies. *Psychological social psychology* examines how *intra*personal psychological processes, or those thought to exist "within" individuals, such as traits and dispositions, influence people's behavior within their social surroundings. Social psychologists working in psychology departments typically use experiments to conduct their research. *Sociological social psychology* examines *inter*personal processes, or relations between people. It emphasizes both the influence of society on individuals and how individuals influence society. Sociological social psychologists use a variety of methods in their research.

> ***Psychological social psychology tends to examine how intrapersonal psychological processes, or those thought to exist "within" individuals, such as traits and dispositions, influence people's behavior within their social surroundings.***
>
> ***Sociological social psychology tends to examine interpersonal processes, or relations between people. It emphasizes the influence of social structures such as institutions, groups, and organizations on the individual.***

## Symbolic Interactionism and Other Perspectives

Sociological social psychology has several perspectives, branches, or "faces" within it (House 1977; Smith-Lovin and Molm 2000).

One of social psychology's "faces" is the "social structure and personality" perspective, or SSP. Although SSP originates in sociology, it has much in common with psychological social psychology. Its very name reveals its hybrid nature. Its ties to psychology give it an emphasis on the importance of personality. Through its ties to sociology, SSP also recognizes the importance of the "macro" level processes that exist on a large, society-wide scale. Researchers using the SSP perspective investigate "relationships between macro-social systems or processes and individual feelings, attitudes, and behaviors" (House 1992; McLeod and Lively 2003:77).

Classic research in the SSP perspective comes from studies of the reproduction of social inequality (Kohn 1969; Kohn and Schooler 1973, 1978; Lareau 2011). This refers to how class differences are transmitted to new generations. SSP research finds that social class, as measured by occupation, influences the values people hold and pass on to their children. When children grow up and begin working, they usually seek jobs that are, for the most part, consistent with the values they learned from their parents.

For example, middle-class occupations typically require employees to make decisions, collaborate with others, ask questions of those in authority, solve problems, and innovate new ways of doing things. People who hold these jobs tend to value autonomy, or self-direction, and creativity. In contrast, the expectations of working-class jobs often include obeying orders, getting the work done, and not questioning, but respecting, those in authority. People in these jobs tend to value conformity and obedience. These class-based values influence parenting practices, or what parents teach their children, and how they teach them – a topic we revisit in Chapter 3. Working-class parents' understanding of appropriate behavior differs considerably from the understanding of parents in the middle class. In general, children of working-class parents learn that they should do what they are told, and that asking questions or seeking help from others might have negative consequences. Middle-class children develop the confidence to be self-directed, but also to reach out to others for support in reaching goals.

The values children learn prepare them for the kinds of jobs they will hold as adults. Of course, one's job prospects also depend on educational opportunities, geographic location, the state of the economy, and other factors. Nevertheless, people who have learned to value self-direction will generally seek out jobs that allow them to be self-directed at work. As values are transmitted across generations, so are class cultures. In shaping how people view the world and their place in it, social class has psychological effects (Schnittker 2007).

Although this summary simplifies a sophisticated body of research, these studies established how social structure influences individuals by "flowing through" the day-to-day experiences of work (Spenner 1988) and parenting. These studies, like many in the SSP tradition, often rely on statistical analysis of large-scale survey data that is collected longitudinally (over years or decades).

> ***The social structure and personality perspective examines the relationship between large-scale or macro-level social patterns and individual attitudes and behaviors.***

Another perspective in sociological social psychology focuses on group processes. As the name suggests, research in this perspective focuses on "how various social processes operate in groups" (Lucas 2007). The processes of interest here include power and status, among others.

To illustrate using the example of power, it might be tempting to think of power as an individual characteristic, as in "a powerful person." A person with power, such as your boss at work, can hire you, fire you, or promote you. But the boss's power doesn't come from individual traits. It comes from his or her position in the structure of the workplace. If the boss is demoted, she or he no longer has the power to hire and fire. If a new person becomes the boss, that person then acquires that power. The conditions of groups, rather than of people, generate power differences.

The same applies to status, or the respect or esteem one receives from others. A person only attains a position of status relative to others. The status one holds depends on the group context. A person who has a position of low status at work might have a high-status position on a sports team outside of work.

Researchers who use this perspective often collect data through laboratory experiments designed to simulate processes that occur among groups in everyday life. Participants are often college students recruited from classes; some volunteer, some receive payment, and others receive course credits for participating.

> ***The group processes perspective focuses on how social forces, such as power and status, affect the structure of and interactions within groups.***

The third "face" of sociological social psychology – and the one we use in this book – belongs to symbolic interactionism. In the next chapter, we describe this as a perspective that assumes that people construct selves, social worlds, and societies through interaction. The chapters that follow use symbolic interactionism to examine how people's interpretations and definitions of one another's actions guide various aspects of social life (Blumer 1969).

Sociologists have long emphasized the value of using a "sociological imagination" to reveal the ways individual biography intersects with history and social structure (Mills 1959). The sociological imagination allows people to see the relationship between personal experiences, choices, and actions and the larger society. In other words, it allows us to understand how conditions that exist "out there," such as economic changes or the development of digital technology, get "in here," shaping how we lead our lives.

Symbolic interactionists use the sociological imagination to examine the influence of the social context on people's feelings, thoughts, and actions. The perspective provides tools to explore the relationship between real, living people who think, feel, and act and the social forces that shape their thoughts, emotions, and behavior. In conducting their research, many symbolic interactionists use qualitative methods, including (but certainly not limited to) interviews and participant observation, which involves having an active membership in the group one is studying.

Look back at the excerpts that opened this chapter. Symbolic interactionism will equip you to investigate the causes and consequences of the new reality experienced by contemporary young adults. We don't mean that you will be able to understand the physiological and biological workings of anxiety and stress. We leave those explanations to mental health professionals. Rather, symbolic interactionism sheds light on the relationship of emotions of anxiety and stress to the sense of self and identity. You can use interactionism to investigate how individuals subjectively define their experiences as "anxious," "freaking out," or "quiet terror" (Harris 2015, ch. 6). You can also explore the interactional contexts that produce anxiety and stress and learn how individuals cope with or avoid these emotions (Thoits 2013).

> ***Symbolic interactionism assumes that people construct selves, social worlds, and societies through interaction.***

Our task in this book is to introduce you to symbolic interactionist social psychology through examining rich ethnographic and qualitative studies. Before we proceed, we must point out that two vibrant quantitative traditions also use symbolic interactionism: identity theory and affect control theory. Identity theorists conduct quantitative studies to explain why individuals choose one course of action when alternatives are available. Sheldon Stryker (1980, 2000) and his colleagues (Serpe 1987; Stets and Burke 2014; Stets and Serpe 2016; Stryker and Serpe 1982) developed identity theory to address how social structure constrains choices across a wide range of situations and to correct an earlier view of society as unitary yet somewhat unstable. Richard T. Serpe (1987) offers a cogent clarification and extension of how identity theory links self and social structure. Stryker's initial statement of identity theory assumed that other symbolic interactionists neglected the diverse social

structures in which people act and interact. We disagree with Stryker's criticism because some symbolic interactionists have always addressed social structure and now many do.

Identity theory emphasizes how people choose the roles they adopt. This theory assumes the self consists of multi-faceted but hierarchically organized identities. People become committed to the identities they most value, which inform their actions and aspirations (Burke 1991). Thus, identities holding greater salience to a person are likely reflected by the role he or she chooses.

> ***Identity theory emphasizes how people choose the roles they adopt and assumes the self consists of multi-faceted but hierarchically organized identities. People become committed to the identities they most value and these commitments are likely reflected in their role choices.***

Identity theorists have studied identity salience, commitment, and role choice in an impressive range of varied roles and contexts such as convicts rejecting a criminal identity (Asencio and Burke 2011), students who complete science training programs (Merolla et al. 2012) and relationships between students' moral identity and cheating (Stets and Carter 2011). For example, Jan E. Stets and Michael J. Carter (2011:198) created a test in which a person could be tempted to cheat. The authors hypothesized that student research participants with high moral identity standards would be less likely to cheat when they lacked the ability to do well on the test than those with lower identity standards. In addition to studying participants' views of their moral of identity standard, Stets and Carter also investigated participants' emotions about their test responses, including when they believed other people would see a moral discrepancy between their actual behavior and their moral identity standard. In short, the authors demonstrated that identity theory generates useful explanations and sophisticated predictions about individuals' moral identity, commitments, and actions.

A year before Stryker (1980) made his groundbreaking statement of identity theory, David R. Heise (1979) published his major explication of affect control theory. This theory addresses how people's emotions are embedded in their identities and assumptions about their situations and arise in social interaction (MacKinnon and Robinson 2014). Like identity theory, affect control theory explicitly takes social structure into account. Affect control theory assumes that people try to maintain social order. They achieve it when their interactions with others and interpretations of these interactions fit cultural expectations (shuster and Campos 2017).

> ***Affect control theory assumes that people try to maintain social order. They aim to confirm their feelings about themselves and others during their interactions and act in ways to produce appropriate emotions for the situations they are in.***

People aim to confirm their feelings about themselves and others during their interactions. Hence, they act in ways to produce appropriate emotions for the situations they are in. When their actions cannot maintain the feelings, they had earlier viewed as appropriate, they change how they define the situation. Thus, as Heise (2002) contends, these individuals' emotions indicate the relationship between their experiences and their definitions of situations.

Affect control theory unites mathematical sociology and computer applications with a symbolic interactionist perspective. In a creative application of affect control theory and its companion computer program, *Interact,* stef m. shuster and Celeste Campos-Castillo (2017) studied archival data covering the pivotal but failed 1980 Iowa Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the U.S. constitution. This amendment would give women equal rights as men. Shuster and Campos-Castillo's analysis found that pro-ERA groups used "frame resonance," a concept from the social movements literature, to depict social activists' strategy of aligning issues with ideologies. But the authors also discovered that anti-ERA groups used a contrasting strategy, what shuster and Campos call "frame dissonance." This concept reveals how anti-ERA groups invoked a new strategy to show how passing the ERA would clash with their ideologies. Through their innovative study, shuster and Compos-Castillo (i) demonstrate the explanatory power of affect control theory, (ii) show how *Interact* can be used with archival data, and (iii) contribute a compelling new concept to the social psychology of social movements.

This chapter has situated symbolic interactionism within its disciplinary and theoretical context. In doing so, we have included perspectives that are not the focus of this book. Let's turn now to a preview of the topics and concepts that we will cover in the chapters to come.

## Overview of the Book

In our classes, we have found that students learn more when we minimize our lecturing and make our illustrations as interesting and current as possible. Consequently, each chapter in this book opens with a vivid excerpt depicting ordinary experiences and concerns that you have had or may encounter.

We start with these excerpts to bridge the gap between readers' experiences and concerns and a theoretical understanding of them. We introduce symbolic interactionist concepts and show how they illuminate these "real life" experiences and concerns. Then, we let you apply symbolic interactionist concepts and use the perspective to develop your ideas through "Learn by Using" sections that conclude each chapter. We encourage you to analyze the excerpts by asking questions such as:

- What is happening here?
- How do we *know* what is happening?

- What knowledge can we gain from the excerpt about individuals and their social worlds?
- How does the excerpt reveal people's situations and social locations?
- How does the excerpt illuminate major concepts?

Throughout the book, we point out how symbolic interactionism offers the tools for *developing* concepts in addition to *applying* them. We want you to understand how social, cultural, economic, and temporal contexts shape your individual interactions and, conversely, how individual and collective actions may shape the social world. The "Learn by Using" sections allow you to practice the skills involved in using symbolic interactionism to examine your own experiences and concerns.

## Chapter Previews

Chapter 2 introduces you to the symbolic interactionist perspective and its essential concepts. It opens with an interview excerpt from Sheila Katz (Charmaz and Katz 2017) depicting one young woman's path from gang member to responsible parent and college student. The woman, who chose to be identified by the initials, "MMM," dropped out of school in seventh grade and joined a gang. She had her first child at age 15 and her second a year later. Her life consisted of partying, getting high, and hanging out. Social workers placed her children in foster care.

MMM eventually served a two-year prison sentence, during which she earned a General Education Diploma, or high school equivalency. After her release, she enrolled in a program to get off drugs, which was necessary to get her children back. She had two more babies and struggled to support her family on welfare benefits.

MMM managed to turn her life around. She completed community college and enrolled in an elite university. The interview reveals choices and actions, collective influences, self and identity, and the significance of interaction. Throughout the chapter, we emphasize how symbolic interactionist concepts account for MMM's choices and actions and the changes in self, identity, and situation that occurred. By using these concepts you may not only look at this young woman's life differently, but also begin to see your own life, and the lives of those around you, differently too.

Chapter 3 examines socialization as a lifelong process. The chapter explores the implications of varied childhood experiences for shaping selves and establishing social identities. Research on socialization used to depict children as passively soaking up the adult world in preparation for "real" life, otherwise known as "adulthood." But current symbolic interactionist research recognizes that children's lives do not consist simply of imitating adults. They

also create social worlds that revolve around other children. In Chapter 3, for example, you'll see how homeless children strive to make themselves acceptable to their peers.

Building on George Herbert Mead's analysis of the development of the self, this chapter establishes the major perspectives on socialization and situates symbolic interactionism as an alternative to theories that depict stages through which every "normal" person must purportedly progress. The chapter also explores the influence of race and class and introduces essential concepts such as primary and secondary groups. Consistent with the interactionist view of socialization as a lifelong process, the chapter also discusses how socialization occurs in adulthood and in settings outside of the family.

Chapter 4 examines the social dimensions of bodies. At first glance, this seems an unlikely topic for sociological study. After all, aren't bodies simply biological? In this chapter, we show how culture, inequality, and other social factors shape how our bodies are perceived, experienced, used, and modified – by ourselves and by those around us. Our physical selves are rooted in the eras and communities in which we live. Our perspectives on our bodies shape our identities and self-esteem. Our physical appearance even shapes the kinds of relationships we develop and the career paths we may take. Everyone experiences some form of bodily stigma – though to significantly different degrees – due to deviations from cultural ideals. We may be judged too fat or thin, too dark or light skinned, too tall or short, too hairy in some places (eyebrows, backs, legs) or insufficiently hairy in others (scalps), or inappropriately smelly in our breath, body odor, or flatulence. People develop and learn interactional strategies for hiding, disguising, and transforming their physical attributes. Sometimes individuals and groups defy or challenge bodily norms, such as when activists promote "fat acceptance" or "size acceptance" (Saguy and Riley 2005). Upon completing this chapter, you'll be convinced that our bodies are as much social as they are biological.

In Chapter 5, you will investigate how health, illness, and disability affect people's lives and their understanding of their experiences. Meanings of health, illness, and disability are varied, complex, and often contradictory. Have you thought about what health means to you and whether those you care about share your meanings? People may agree on what health means, but not agree about what being healthy entails or how much priority to give it. Like New Year's resolutions, our actions may not coincide with our beliefs and good intentions. To what extent do you believe in individual responsibility for health? What do you think society should do to protect your health and that of the community? Questions about health and responsibility evoke considerable thought when a person or family member has a serious chronic illness or disability. Illness and disability can change our views of ourselves and our relationships with others. Managing daily life can become difficult, as self-care, household tasks, family obligations, and work may all require more time and

effort than ever before. Simultaneously, when people struggle with the logistics of managing everyday life, they likely become increasingly affected by the claims and consequences of institutionalized medicine and biomedicine. Symbolic interactionism can help you understand your experience with health and illness as well as with health services and practitioners.

In Chapter 6, you'll learn about the symbolic interactionist perspective on emotion. Emotions feel like "natural" responses to certain situations, and they involve physiological processes such as heart rate, trembling hands, and dry mouth. Without denying the corporeal aspects of emotion, symbolic interactionism shows how emotions are also shaped by culture, interpretation, and social interaction. Norms, or rules, shape what we feel and how we express our feelings, and there are even sanctions for emotional deviance. Norms vary between groups and over time. In our private lives and in our jobs, we learn to manage or control emotions via theatrical strategies of "surface acting" and "deep acting." Those of you who must greet and serve customers enthusiastically – no matter how rude or disinterested they may be – should be especially drawn to this chapter's discussion of emotional labor.

Here we will summarize interactionist research on the strategies employers and employees use to create "appropriate" emotions in the workplace.

Chapter 7 examines the diverse forms and meaning of "family." It introduces the idea of the Standard North American Family, or SNAF, also known as the "nuclear" family (Smith 1993). Although SNAF is the standard by which many of us judge families, it is by no means a universal or eternal model. Polygyny (multiple wives), polyandry (multiple husbands), and other kinship practices can be found cross-culturally. Single-parent, step, foster, same-sex, childfree, and other forms of family are abundant in the United States. What meanings do people give to their own and others' family practices and interactions? Symbolic interactionism recognizes that people have the freedom to define what they mean by "family." They might, in some cases, include pets as beloved kin while excluding certain blood relatives as "strangers." However, interactionism also recognizes that freedom has limits. Upon completing this chapter, you'll have the interactionist skills to analyze familial interpretations and practices that are promoted or disparaged by pundits, politicians, parents, and others in your social world.

Chapter 8 examines how communication technologies and social media construct our social worlds and individual identities. Think for a moment about the amount of information and ideas that enters your life through your phone. Music streaming services offer an endlessly varying soundtrack for your activities. Social media transforms the meaning of "friendship." Facebook friends might also follow you on Instagram, Twitter, or other social networking sites. Wearable technologies such as Fitbit and other smart devices have created a "quantified" version of you, represented by the measurement of miles run, steps walked, or calories consumed. You can

share your goals and milestones with millions of other people. These new forms of interaction come with new obligations and opportunities that pull your attention in many different directions. This chapter invites you to consider the symbolic interactionist model of the self in light of what digital technologies make possible.

In Chapter 9, you'll see how symbolic interactionism approaches the study of issues considered social problems. The discussion emphasizes the role of interpretation when considering social problems. After all, many situations could potentially rise to the level of problems. Yet, we ignore some potentially troublesome situations entirely. We regard some as normal and acceptable. Often our attention and resources are mobilized when claimsmakers adopt frightening rhetoric – perhaps by declaring we are at "war" with crime, drugs, poverty, or even Christmas. Symbolic interactionism offers a systematic and consistent way to understand how some issues become social problems, requiring significant responses from government, the medical profession, educators, law enforcement, or other entities. After reading this chapter, you should be equipped to identify and critically examine potentially inflated claims about dire threats.

Chapter 10 considers the relationship between individuals and social institutions. Because sociologists use the word "institutions" frequently, the chapter first helps you understand how we use it. Briefly, it refers to patterned ways of doing things, which people collectively recognize as "how things are done." We use the example of work to illustrate how institutions shape people's actions and beliefs, but school is another good example of an institution with this influence. Think about some of the lessons you learned in school that had nothing whatsoever to do with reading, writing, math, history, and so on. Along with subject matter, schools also teach children the importance of following directions, arriving on time, sitting still, paying attention, and taking turns. By the end of the chapter, you'll have the tools to analyze how school, work, and other institutions influence individuals. You'll also be able to consider what happens when people challenge institutions. And, in keeping with emerging developments in social psychology, we introduce you to new ideas about how space and time shape the opportunities and obstacles people face in institutions.

Chapter 11 examines inequality, a topic that receives a lot of attention from sociologists. When you hear "inequality," you might think first of difference. On its own, however, difference does not mean that a situation is unequal. Suppose you have two friends who live in the same apartment building. One friend pays a higher rent than the other pays. Would you interpret the differing rents as a form of inequality? If you learned that one apartment had "extras" that the other lacked, you probably would not. But if you learned that people of color paid higher rent for apartments that cost their white neighbors less money, you would think otherwise. By understanding the patterns of interaction that produce and maintain inequality, symbolic interactionism can enrich your understanding of this important sociological topic (Schwalbe 2016; Schwalbe et al. 2000).

Chapter 12 concludes the book by summarizing the benefits of taking the symbolic interactionist perspective. We hope this will not be just one more thing you learned for a class and then forgot once the semester ended. Instead, symbolic interactionism can be useful and relevant for your life beyond the classroom.

## Note

1 Retrieved November 2, 2017 (https://www.beloit.edu/mindset).

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