

G H Mead and Symbolic Interactionalism

About Mead (1863 - 1931)

G H Mead was from a fairly humble background and worked hard to achieve. He was a confident speaker but hated writing his work. He was a philosopher and educationalist, and has been very influential in the USA. He worked at Harvard and at the University of Chicago and is credited with originating the perspective known as symbolic interactionism

Symbolic interactionism

G H Mead said that:

The self is a social construction arising out of social experience.
There is no such thing as society.
Selves only exist in relationship to other people.
We view ourselves as actors in the drama of our own existence.
We operate with the concept of a 'generalised other' which form a mirror in which we can view our own behaviour.
The self is composed of 'I' and 'me'
'I' am impulsive, disorganised and animalistic.
'Me' is my vision of myself reflected in the reactions of others.
The self is reflexive and views its actions as a spectator

Problems with Interactionalism

Society and inequality do appear to exist over and above the experiences of individuals
It can be deterministic in that many view people as being the result of the actions of others.

Recent Symbolic Interactionism

Marxists and feminists have adopted the views and methods of symbolic interactionism so that it is difficult to separate 'pure' interactionism from interactionism adapted to other theories.

Be Careful

Do not confuse symbolic interactionism with phenomenological ethnomethodology. These are similar theories, but their origins in terms of ideas are actually quite different. Don't panic because of the language either!

Writers to name

Erving Goffman
Howard Becker
Aaron Cicourel

Key skill IT

Type G H Mead into any search engine and you will be taken to a number of sites. You might find that any American website will have a lot of interactionism for you to look at.

Use CD Rom such as Encarta to find out more about Mead and his work.