

What Is Real?

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In his book *The Te of Piglet*, Benjamin Hoff (1992) recounts the following narratives, based on the writings of Chinese Taoist philosophers:

A man noticed that his axe was missing. Then he saw the neighbor's son pass by. The boy looked like a thief, walked like a thief, behaved like a thief. Later that day, the man found his axe where he had left it the day before. The next time he saw the neighbor's son, the boy looked, walked, and behaved like an honest, ordinary boy.

A man dug a well by the side of the road. For years afterward, grateful travelers talked of the Wonderful Well. But one night, a man fell into it and drowned. After that, people avoided the Dreadful Well. Later it was discovered that the victim was a drunken thief who had left the road to avoid being captured by the night patrol—only to fall into the Justice-Dispensing Well. (p. 172)

What sort of reality do these tales illustrate? Does the essence of the neighbor boy or the nature of the well change? Or do people's perceptions change? Consider occasions when your perceptions of someone or something may have been influenced by your own momentary experiences. Is it possible that reality depends on how you look at something? How much does your point of view depend on your own interests?

Consider further: A group of employees from a local business gathers every night after work to share drinks and conversation. They express dissatisfaction with the conditions of their job and the unethical behavior of their employer. Several of them recall occasions of being mistreated or harassed. As the evening progresses, they become emboldened by this sharing of experience and some of them even threaten to confront the boss. The next day, life resumes as usual at work. The employees all go about their jobs with competence. In the presence of the boss, everyone is quiet and respectful. The status quo prevails. Think about the difference between these people's late-night and workday activities. What is the source of the disparity between the behaviors in each setting? Are these people being any more or less truthful in either situation? Why do we often remain silent in the face of injustice? What compels people to actively speak out and talk back to power?

People's reactions to the world depend on how they define the situation. The definition of the situation can differ from moment to moment, depending on what the person is inclined to see. Someone's actions may appear perfectly reasonable in one situation and completely unreasonable in another. Indeed,

a great deal of human behavior appears unreasonable and illogical if viewed out of context.

In 1956, anthropologist Horace Miner published a study of a peculiar people of North America called the Nacirema. Miner was especially interested in the culture's obsession with a daily body ritual that was typically performed in secret and required a special room or "shrine" and substantial medicines and potions:

While each family has at least one such shrine, the rituals associated with it are not family ceremonies but are private and secret. The rites are normally only discussed with children, and then only during the period when they are being initiated into these mysteries. I was able, however, to establish sufficient rapport with the natives to examine these shrines and to have the rituals described to me.

The focal point of the shrine is a box or chest which is built into the wall. In this chest are kept the many charms and magical potions without which no native believes he could live. These preparations are secured from a variety of specialized practitioners. The most powerful of these are the medicine men, whose assistance must be rewarded with substantial gifts. However, the medicine men do not provide the curative potions for their clients, but decide what the ingredients should be and then write them down in an ancient and secret language. This writing is understood only by the medicine men and by the herbalists who, for another gift, provide the required charm.

. . . . Beneath the charm-box is a small font. Each day every member of the family, in succession, enters the shrine room, bows his head before the charm-box, mingles different sorts of holy water in the font, and proceeds with a brief rite of ablution. The holy waters are secured from the Water Temple of the community, where the priests conduct elaborate ceremonies to make the liquid ritually pure. (pp. 503–504)

Miner was particularly fascinated with the "mouth rituals" of the Nacirema. He notes:

In the hierarchy of magical practitioners, and below the medicine men in prestige, are specialists whose designation is best translated "holy-mouth-men." The Nacirema have an almost pathological horror of and fascination with the mouth, the condition of which is believed to have a supernatural influence on all social relationships. Were it not for the rituals of the mouth, they believe that their teeth would fall out, their gums bleed, their jaws shrink, their friends desert them, and their lovers reject them. They also believe that a strong relationship exists between oral and moral characteristics. For example, there is a ritual

ablution of the mouth for children which is supposed to improve their moral fiber.

The daily body ritual performed by everyone includes a mouth-rite. Despite the fact that these people are so punctilious about care of the mouth, this rite involves a practice which strikes the uninitiated stranger as revolting. It was reported to me that the ritual consists of inserting a small bundle of [bristles] into the mouth, along with certain magical powders, and then moving the bundle in a highly formalized series of gestures. (p. 504)

The astute reader eventually realizes that Nacirema is “American” spelled backward and that the odd rituals that Miner is describing are everyday bathroom practices such as teeth brushing. (How many of us have been threatened with that moral enhancing “ritual ablution of the mouth” for children, otherwise known as having your mouth washed out with soap?)

Miner’s intent is to parody the tendency to think of our own practices and beliefs as natural and normal and the routines of other groups and cultures as peculiar and perhaps even revolting. Even the language we use to describe everyday cultural patterns reflects a familiarity that we often take for granted. “Mouth-rite” and “holy-mouth-men” convey very different impressions than “teeth-brushing” and “dentist.” We are *embedded* in our own cultural beliefs and practices to such an extent that it’s often difficult to see how arbitrary or bizarre these practices might seem from the outside. This book is a social psychological exploration of this cultural embeddedness (what will later be referred to as cultural “mindlessness”) and its consequences for understanding ourselves and others.

Social psychology is the study of the relationship between the individual and the rules and patterns that constitute society. Most sociologists and psychologists agree that human behavior is shaped to some extent by physiological, biological, neurological, and even metaphysical processes that are beyond the scope of social psychology. However, social psychologists emphasize that the majority of the activities people engage in and encounter in others on a day-to-day basis constitute *social* behavior—behavior that is both influenced by and expressed through social interaction. Some of the questions that social psychologists ask are these:

- How does a person become “socialized”?
- What are the implications of human socialization for the transmission of culture?
- How does human action contribute to the production and reproduction of cultural and social institutions?

Underlying these questions is another: How do we know things? The attempt to answer this question is called *epistemology*.

How Do We Know? *Epistemology*

It is the theory that determines what we can observe.

—Albert Einstein

How do we “know” things? How do we discover “truth”? *Epistemology* is the study of how we know things. Different groups and cultures have different ways of determining truth: faith, tradition, and science are some examples. Science is a dominant way of knowing in contemporary Western societies. Can the methods of science uncover the “real” truth? Sociologist Earl Babbie (1986) suggests that “truth” is a matter of agreement based on shared rules of what is real. This holds for scientific claims of truth as well as for superstitious beliefs. According to Babbie, everyone, even scientists, interpret information based on preexisting ideas. This subjectivity is a fact of human experience. Scientists deal with their own subjectivity by creating rules for observation and by using explicit theoretical starting points. In other words, there is no “objective” truth; truth is a matter of “intersubjective” agreement about what is being observed and how to observe it.

For example, for a long time, scientists believed in a universal “truth” and sought the underlying natural patterns that would reveal this truth. The metaphor that guided their inquiries was that of a watch or clock: They saw the universe as a grand watch ticking merrily away. The scientist’s job was to take it apart piece by piece in order to figure out how this amazing machine worked. It’s probably no historical accident that this perspective developed alongside the rise of industrial mechanization in the 18th and 19th centuries.

In the 20th century, however, physicists, including Werner Heisenberg and Albert Einstein, began to question the possibility of a universal, objective “truth.” They observed that different experiments designed to address the same question yielded different results depending on how the question was asked. For example, when light was hypothesized to be composed of waves, the experiments produced a pattern that suggested it was waves. But when light was hypothesized to be made up of particles, the tests revealed a pattern of particles. Was it possible that light was both wave and particle, both energy and matter, at the same time? Heisenberg concluded that the experimental process itself interacts with reality, that there is no completely objective stance from which to view truth (Biggs & Peat, 1984). That is, scientists shape the outcome to some extent by their interaction with the phenomenon. Even scientific interpretations are based on preexisting perspectives and grounded in particular cultures of inquiry with rules for what to observe and how to make sense of it.

“Realness”

All cultural beliefs and practices include rules about what is “real” and what is “not real.” These rules are often taken for granted, and usually we follow them without being aware of them. These rules are not necessarily based on logic or sensory

perception. The study of culture and behavior involves figuring out these rules and making them explicit. This book is about how human beings learn and conform to cultural rules of reality in various situations. These rules enable us to organize and to make sense of our experiences and to share our understanding with others.

When people interact with one another, they do so according to shared cultural rules. The result of this interaction is a set of meaningful patterns that we think of as society. It is important to note that these rules are constructed by human beings and that they are meaningful only within a specific social context. In other words, behavior is contextually meaningful. Taken out of context, many behaviors appear contradictory, silly, or even immoral. For instance, how is it that you know to modulate your voice to a whisper in certain spaces; how is it that you know the difference between when to hug and when to shake hands in a social situation? Why is “making fun of someone” funny in some settings and cruel in others? Where do we draw the line—or, more importantly, how do we know what the line is? How do people know what to expect and what to do in different contexts, especially in situations that may appear contradictory? How do we learn the rules, lines, and boundaries of reality? The ability to distinguish between contexts and to behave in accordance with social expectations is a defining feature of humanness. It is also the main subject of this book.

Well-trained social scientists understand that social reality is constantly shifting; they know that we impose cultural rules and work collectively to maintain these rules, which gives them the appearance of permanence and “naturalness.” Social scientists also strive to become disciplined observers of cultural life by continuously questioning and examining taken-for-granted beliefs that bias or limit our perspectives: in other words, we try to practice what we preach.

Reality Is Achieved Through Symbolic Interaction

The production of meaningful realities occurs through human interaction. In other words, we *practice* social reality every time we interact with others. Human culture is achieved through interactions among individuals who share highly complex, richly nuanced definitions of themselves and the situations in which they participate. We *learn* to be human, and our learning depends on and is achieved through interactions with other humans. The basis for meaningful human behavior is in our capacity for language—not just definitions and grammar, but also metaphor. Consider, for example, a computer that is directed to translate the sentence “The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak” into Russian. The computer has the necessary vocabulary and grammar to make this translation, but it translates the phrase as “The vodka is good but the meat is rotten.” The computer provides a literal translation, but the translation does not convey the intended meaning of the phrase (Scheff, 1990). One of the most remarkable aspects of human behavior is our ability to learn, share, and create nuanced, metaphorical meaning. This nuanced comprehension is what enables us to engage in very complex behavior and to know the difference between various

cultural rules and contexts—for instance, the difference between a “holy-mouth-man” and a “dentist.”

The focus in this book is on how we learn these cultural rules and the ways in which we practice them through our everyday interactions. According to many social psychologists, these interactions form the basis of human existence. The aim is to demonstrate how humans learn to participate in culture and ultimately to produce and reproduce themselves and their various cultures. We will explore a number of questions: What cognitive and emotive capacities are necessary for people to be able to engage in meaningful social interaction? How is social behavior affected by a disruption of these processes? How do interactional dynamics shape our behavior and our sense of who we are and what we can do? How do these processes contribute to the production of culture? How is it possible that, through our own behavior, we may be perpetuating cultural systems that we oppose ideologically (e.g., racism)? The general aim is to explore the social foundations of mind, self, and culture. The framework for this exploration is a theoretical perspective known as symbolic interactionism.

Symbolic Interactionism

There are several forms of social psychology. This book is written according to a subfield of social psychology known as *symbolic interactionism*. Each of the many approaches to the study of human social behavior has strengths and limitations, and I encourage you to become familiar with them. Through many years of teaching and study, I have come to appreciate symbolic interactionism as a perspective that offers one of the most useful frameworks for understanding human behavior in a social context. In other words, this perspective provides excellent tools for understanding the complexity of our own behavior.

For instance, have you ever wondered why you feel so strongly about something in one situation and completely different in another, or why your self-esteem seems to blossom in some circumstances and shrivel in others? The symbolic interactionist perspective provides the tools for understanding how we can simultaneously have what seems to be a stable personality and also be constantly shifting in our experiences, values, and points of view. At the social level, symbolic interactionism provides a framework for understanding how society can also seem to be both stable and constantly in flux. Most importantly, this perspective invites us to wake up to the ways in which we ourselves create and perpetuate social routines that may or may not be good for us. In short, symbolic interactionism portrays humans as active co-creators in both individual and social experience. To the extent that we can become aware of these processes, we will be better equipped to participate in our own liberation.

Three points are noteworthy regarding symbolic interactionism in contrast to other social-psychological perspectives:

1. Symbolic interactionism gives primacy to the social situation over individual psychology. In other words, behavior is assumed to be organized primarily in response to social factors.

2. The focus of study is on observable behavior, but the cause of this behavior is assumed to be nonobservable processes of individual interpretation. In other words, behavior is based on subjective interpretation of the social environment instead of being a direct response to objective stimuli.
3. Symbolic interactionism uses *interpretive* methodologies. The researcher attempts to take the perspective of the subject and to interpret the context in which the behavior takes place. In other words, the researcher tries to “look over the shoulder” of the subject or group of interest. The methods used to gather information about human relations include fieldwork, interviews, and participant observation. The aim is to understand how humans see and enact their own beliefs and ideals and to trace the implications of these beliefs and actions.

The organization of this book is intended to provide you with a tool kit for understanding self and society. These tools or topics include language and self-awareness, symbolic communication and socialization, self-development, interaction with others, and the production of social life. I use the metaphor of *production* to illustrate that social life is something we create together. The first basic tenet of symbolic interactionism is that society is socially constructed. What this means is that, through our engagement with others, we are constantly generating cultural meaning and rules. Each section of this book will explore one or more aspects of this process.

Conclusion: So, What's Real?

What is reality anyway? Nothin' but a collective hunch.

—Jane Wagner (1986),
The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe

According to the symbolic interactionist perspective, truth and reality are determined by the context in which they are practiced. Does this mean that anything goes? Far from it. Reality may differ across social groups, but within each group, a taken-for-granted system of knowledge establishes boundaries about what is real, true, and right. A central line of inquiry in symbolic interactionism is uncovering what these boundaries consist of and how groups and cultures produce and reproduce their systems of knowledge through their interactions. For instance, symbolic interactionists have noted that people in modern Western cultures act as if their reality is based on a “natural” truth (things are the way they are because nature intended them to be that way). Other cultures might have a faith-based reality (things are the way they are because a transcendent god intends them to be that way). These realities include complex, culturally specific rules for how one can know things. Thus, people in one society may

believe in the existence of germs that cause illness. They may invest considerable resources to develop the technology necessary to “see” and “control” these germs. In another culture, people may invest similar resources to perfect ceremonies and rituals to “see” and “communicate with” the spirits that control health and well-being.

Cultural rules about what is real are often contradictory, as well. It is fascinating to observe human behavior and culture to see the ways in which seemingly contradictory systems of reality exist side by side. For instance, in the United States, systems of rationality and Christianity often coexist, despite some apparent conflicts. Even so, contradictory belief systems have rules for navigating the contradictions. For example, it is considered normal for the president of the United States to use phrases such as “one nation under God” in speeches. But if the president were to claim a leadership philosophy based on “visions” received from God, people might question the president’s ability. Similarly, citing your religious beliefs as a basis for not dating someone is considered reasonable, but these same beliefs are unacceptable as a reason for not paying taxes. Knowing which cultural rules apply in specific contexts is considered “common sense” or “what everybody knows.”

In place of the question “What is real?” try asking: “What are some of the beliefs and practices that make up commonsense realities? What are the implications and consequences of these realities? How do different realities depict the world and the place of humans in it?” These questions remind us to scrutinize our own rules of interaction and their implications for self and society. To do so, we must step out of our cultural embeddedness and make the “taken for granted” explicit. One of the major strengths of the symbolic interactionist perspective is that it encourages us to see how we ourselves are authors and actors in the human story and, ideally, to take responsibility for the scripts we produce and the parts we play.

At the same time, this perspective also teaches us the tenacity of cultural rules for shaping individual lives and for creating and recreating differences and hierarchies among people. Beliefs and practices about power, authority, and morality may be cultural in origin, but they are real in their consequences. Paradoxically, those who hold the most cultural power are sometimes the least aware of their privilege or the ways in which taken-for-granted interactional practices work to their favor. For example, employers are much less likely than employees to be aware of unfair working conditions. The status quo prevails, not because employees are cowardly or content with unjust conditions but because conventional workplace beliefs and practices are likely to result in punishment (e.g., dismissal from the job) if they speak up. Typically, employers are socialized to perceive such action as “insubordinate” and are trained to “reduce conflict” by getting rid of “troublemakers.” Symbolic interactionism provides a perspective for analyzing the larger cultural context that gives rise to and supports these sorts of beliefs and practices and for understanding how, even when we’re theoretically opposed to such practices, we may end up reinforcing them through our behavior.

Organization of the Book

The basic components for understanding self and society are *symbols*, *the social self*, *interaction*, and *social patterns*. The materials in this book are organized to present a picture of society as the product of human interactions, based on the use of shared social symbols that are incorporated into human conduct through cognitive-emotive processes. In other words, self-development is a process of learning cultural scripts for who we can be, what we can do, and what is important and desirable. These scripts reflect a preexisting social structure. As we learn them and engage in interactions with one another, we enact, reproduce, and potentially change this structure.

Part I introduces some of these basic components and explores the general idea of socially constructed realities.

In Part II, the focus is on the ways our thoughts and feelings reflect cultural learning and values as well as distinct, private, personal experiences. For symbolic interactionists, the key to this puzzle is the *symbol*, an abstract representation of something that may or may not exist in a tangible form. For example, *table* is the symbolic representation of a class of objects constructed from hard substances and designed to serve certain purposes. *Guilt* symbolizes a feeling that you are probably familiar with, but it has no actual, physical referent. Complex combinations of symbols used for communication are known as *language*. Through language, humans are able to identify meaningful symbols, understand cultural expectations, and incorporate these expectations into conscious, reflexive behavior. Language is the encyclopedia and the map of human culture. Also, it is through language that humans generate, preserve, and alter social structure.

The focus of Part III is the process of socialization, or the way in which humans learn social rules and routines and cultural values. One of the questions that drives the discussion in this section is how different people with relatively similar backgrounds and experiences come to have different ideas and expectations and to behave in different ways. The concept of *reference groups* provides a useful and intriguing answer to this question and illustrates the ways in which people organize and evaluate their own behavior in terms of the expectations of specific groups or their ideas of groups.

The focus of Part IV is the social self. The first emphasis is on the way in which we learn, through our capacity for language, to recognize our own actions as aspects of an entity we call “self.” The second emphasis is on the interactional or social aspects of self development: Through our interactions with others, we learn to attach meaning to our own behavior, feelings, and thoughts and to assemble this meaning into a coherent pattern that becomes a stable self. This section also explores some of the ways in which our self-image is shaped and influenced by our social contexts, including history and computer-mediated environments.

The topic of Part V is social interaction. Social relationships, such as love and power, are given meaning and come to life when they are acted out by members

of a social group. These patterns are discernible in the encounters of everyday life, such as conversations. Basic interaction requires people to project an image of what part they wish to play, what part they want others to play, and how they intend to define the situation. For an interaction to proceed smoothly, the actors must agree on a definition of the situation and perform it together. Even arguments, as we will discuss, hold to a particular definition of the situation (“this is a fight”) and follow specific rules of interaction. In addition to defining situations, people negotiate how they will define themselves and others.

The social construction of reality is the focus of Part VI. In this section, we begin to synthesize ideas and concepts from the previous sections to develop a theory of the production and reproduction of social realities. The key point of this section is that realities are social constructs that exist through shared expectations about how the world is organized. These realities are quite fragile, because they depend on the participation of people who are socialized to comprehend and perform patterns and rituals that follow highly structured (but often unrecognized) rules of interaction. Ironically, these implicit rules can be made explicit by violating them and forcing interaction to a confused halt. We discuss several “violations” as a way of demonstrating how to “see” the rules of interaction. An important question in this section is why certain patterns of reality endure so well, given that they are based on such fragile dynamics.

The epilogue is an essay on the implications of this material for living a meaningful life. Once we wake up to the mindless patterns of everyday routine, how do we practice staying awake and remain connected to ourselves and others in a meaningful, liberated way? And how do we grapple with multiple perspectives and contradictions? Social life is dynamic and complex, and our understanding of who we are and of what is meaningful is forged by our wrestling with everyday contradictions.

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