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EC SO4001: Understanding Society

Symbolic Interactionism 2023

Trawsnewid Addysg; Trawsnewid Bywydau
Transforming Education; Transforming Lives



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Three main perspectives in sociology:

Structural Functionalism

- Societal Behaviours
- Patterns of Behaviour
- Macro-Level

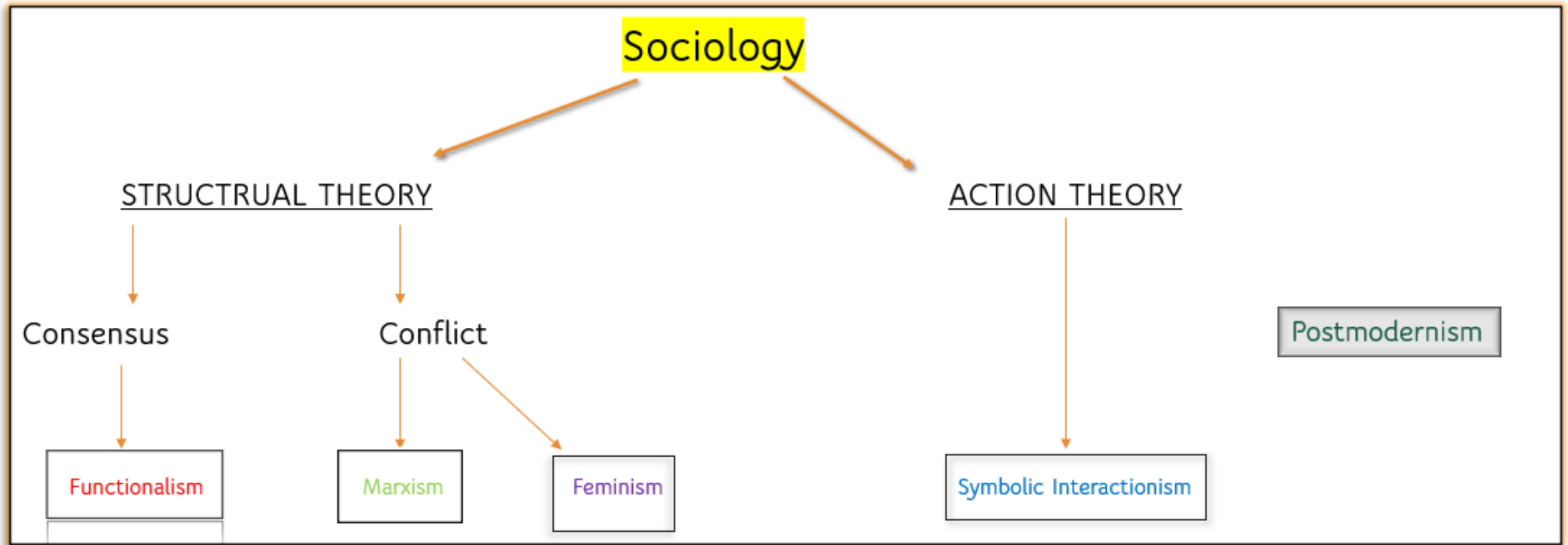
Symbolic Interactionism

- Reality through interaction
- Social Interaction in specific situations
- Micro-Level

Social Conflict

- Unequal society generating conflict and change
- Dominant Vs. Disadvantaged
- Macro-Level

Sociological Perspectives



Symbolic Interactionism is a micro-level perspective

How is meaning constructed?



How society is constructed

How is identity constructed?

- Humans create the social environment and are shaped by it
- The individual and society are intertwined

Social Interactionism is interested in:

- The way that people interact through symbols:
 - Words
 - Gestures
 - Rules
 - Roles
- The symbolic interaction perspective is based on how humans develop a complex set of symbols to give meaning to the world

(LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993).

Key Theories and Concepts



Max Weber (1864-1920)

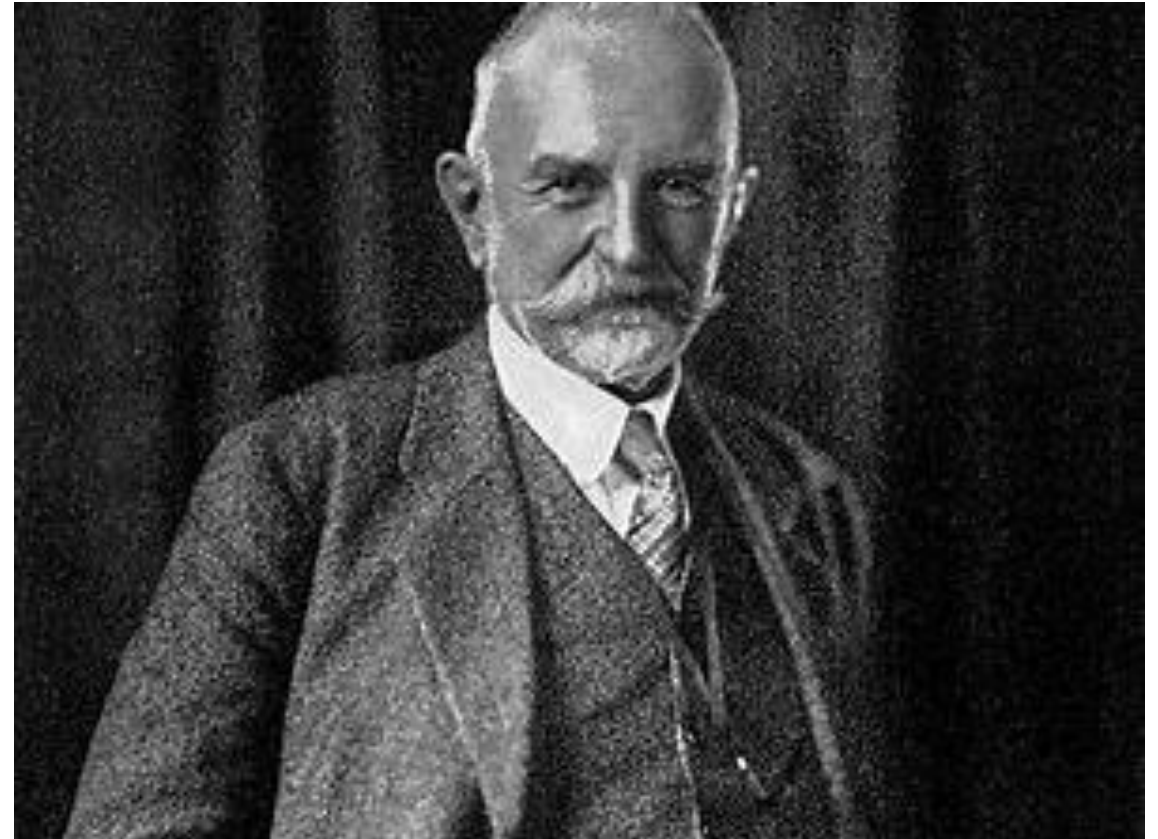
- Wasn't a symbolic interactionist, but was influential
- He moved the focus from the macro to the micro
- Marx and Durkheim saw social change at the macro level (e.g., economics)
- Weber saw social change at the micro level (e.g., how people engaged with the world / ideas)
- Think the Protestant Work Ethic (people's religious beliefs/ideas shaped the success of capitalism)
- He 'opened the door' to Symbolic Interactionism

The looking-glass self

- Charles Horton Cooley coined this in 1902
- Refers to how our sense of self is developed through interactions with others
- It is a 3-step process:
 - We see how others react to us
 - We interpret their reaction
 - We develop our sense of self accordingly

George Herbert Mead (1863-1931)

- Believed the interactions we have are important to help us understand ourselves
- Interested in knowing who the 'self' is in the social world
- Our interactions as children help us shape our understanding of the social world
- Mead "insists that the self should not be located in self-consciousness but in social interactions" (Carrreira de Silva, 2007, p. 48)
- We do this by putting ourselves in the position of others (an individual or social group)



Childhood and the Self

- The Preparatory Stage
 - Children copy and imitate others in their environment
- The Play Stage
 - Children learn the role of others through pretending to be someone else (mum/dad/doctor/astronaut etc)
 - Children learn to become the subject and the object
 - Imaginary friends
- The Game Stage
 - Child takes the role of others (e.g., team sports)
 - But also follows the rules of the games
 - This helps create the “generalized other”

(Carrerira de Silva, 2007)



The Generalized Other

- A child's ability to see him/herself from the point of view of groups of others
- The attitude of the generalized other is the attitude of the larger community.
- The generalized other is how we become connected to society.
- It allows us to imagine what is expected of us and we adjust our behaviours
- BUT there is not one generalized other: different social groups will have different generalized others

(Carrerira de Silva, 2007)

"This provides the basis for a cooperative action in society. Individuals will become aware of what is expected of them and will tend to modify their actions accordingly. They will be conscious of the general attitudes of the community and judge and evaluate themselves in terms of this generalised other...In this way, Mead argued, conduct is regulated in terms of the expectations and attitudes of others"

(Haralambos and Holborn, 2013, p. 979)



Symbols



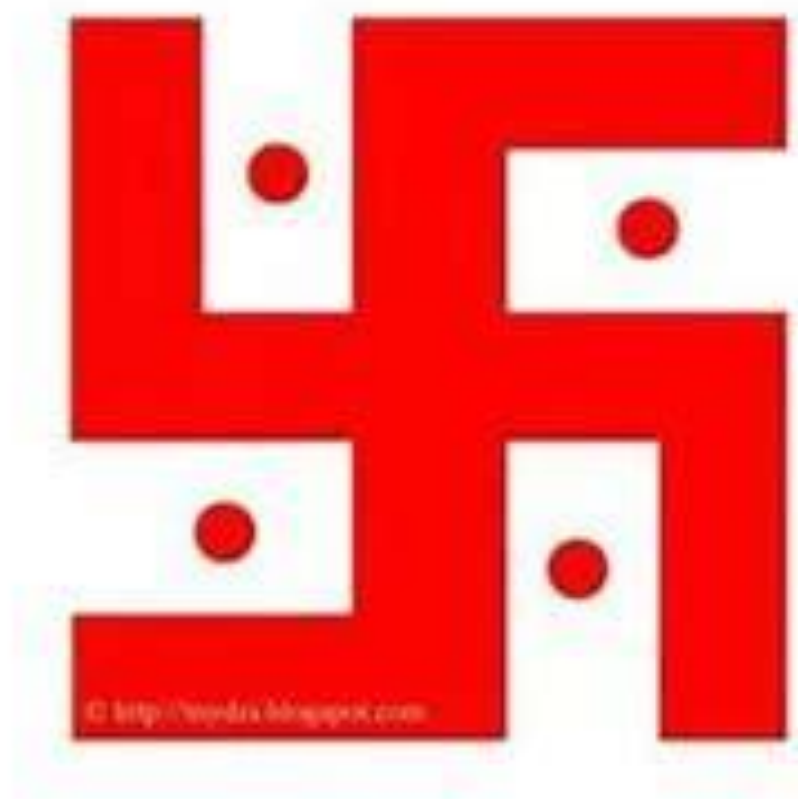
Humans interact through symbols

Language and the response to the symbol are more important than the symbol itself

Symbols allow us to act meaningfully in our social environment

It is not the object that counts, but the way it is perceived

Therefore, “humans construct and live within a world of meaning” (Haralambos and Holborn, 2013, p. 978)





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Role-taking



We must share the meanings of symbols for society to function



Symbols can only take us so far



For interaction to take place, we must interpret the meanings of others



Mead called this 'role-taking': take on the role of another person by imagining the position of the other person



i.e., if someone is crying, we may imagine why (their meaning and intention), interpret it and respond, the other (crying) person then takes the role of the other person, interprets it and so on.



"human interaction can be seen as a continuous process of interpretation, with each taking the role of the other" (Haralambos and Holborn, 2013, p. 978)

Our sense of self: the “I” and the “me”

We can inhabit multiple identities and ways of interacting

“Me” – your social self / what society perceives you to be. Informed by our interactions with others

“I” – our response to the social self. Reflects on the “me”

e.g., The “me” says: *“I have to go to university”* but the “I” thinks: *“I could get into debt”*

The “I” and the “me” can compete over who we are

When the two aspects are synchronised (social self and self perception), you’ll be well balanced

Herbert Blumer (1900-1987)

- Coined the phrase “Symbolic Interactionism”
- The 3 main ideas of symbolic interactionism:
 1. We act toward people and things based on the meanings we interpret from them.
 2. Those meanings are the product of social interaction between people.
 3. Meaning-making and understanding is an ongoing interpretive process, during which the initial meaning might remain the same, evolve slightly, or change radically.



An example...

- We act on the meaning we give things
- We give meaning to something based on our interactions.
 - The same thing can have different meanings for different people
- The meaning we give something can change over time



Erving Goffman (1922 -1982)

- A Canadian sociologist
- He wrote two important sociological texts:
 - “The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life”
 - “Stigma”



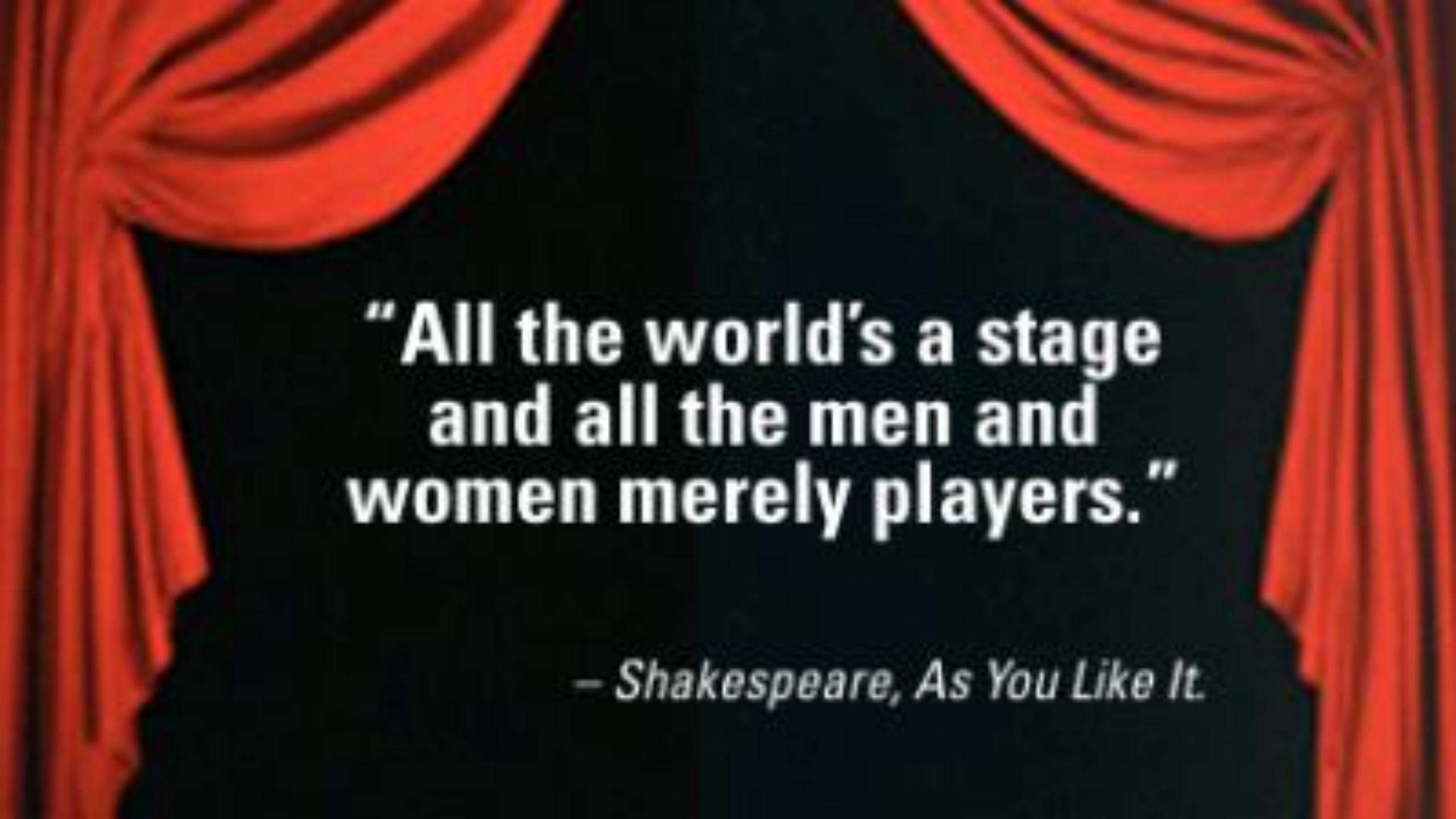
The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (Goffman, 1959)

- How we interact with people in different social settings
- Goffman uses the analogy of a theatre – known as “Dramaturgical Theory”
- This looks at how we perform in everyday life (in multiple roles)
- The world / society is like a stage, in our interactions we are like actors, creating society in terms of our response to other actors
- We have a “frontstage” and “backstage” in everyday life
- Frontstage – how we present ourselves in public
- Backstage – how are in private / when we’re relaxing / feeling we don’t have to “perform” / or rehearsing for next frontstage performance

For example...

- Goffman uses the example of waiters at a restaurant
- The waiter who takes your order is performing the “frontstage” self, e.g., being polite, helpful
- The waiter in the kitchen is their “backstage” self, e.g., complaining about the rude customer





**"All the world's a stage
and all the men and
women merely players."**

– Shakespeare, As You Like It.

Stigma (1963)

- Is the creation of conflict between social groups through interaction
- Stigma occurs when individual is given an attribute which is disliked by society (physical, character, tribal)
- Stigma as something intrinsic but something society has placed on us
- It is not the fault of the individual but certain behaviours are out of place in society
- "A stigma, then, is really a special kind of relationship between attribute and stereotype" (Goffman, 1963, p. 4)
- "By definition, of course, we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human" (Goffman, 1963, p. 5)

Applying Symbolic Interactionism to society

- Crime & Deviancy

Crime and deviancy



- Howard Becker and "Labelling Theory" in his book "Outsiders" (1963)
- Becker's argues deviancy is not inherent but its socially constructed by society
- Labels are given by dominant groups – those who hold social and political power who decide what its "right" and "wrong"
- Society is in conflict between the rule makers vs. the rule breakers
- Labelling needs an audience to work: How are the audience watching / understanding the conflict?
- Becker believed labels can create a "self-fulfilling prophecy"
- Becker introduced "moral panic": society takes small scale instances and scales up the danger
- Moral panic works through societal institutions (e.g., media)

Howard Becker

- Howard Becker would argue “there is no such thing as a deviant act.”
 - An act only becomes deviant when others perceive and define it as such” (Haralambos and Holborn, 2013, p. 362)
- Street fights
- Drug taking

Symbolic Interactionists would ask...

- What affect would being labelled 'deviant' have on someone's behaviour?
- What are the interactions like between the individual and other social actors (teachers, parents, police, judges, social workers, etc.)
- What would the effect on their behaviour be when defined as a criminal/mentally ill etc.
- What are the meanings each actor brings to their interactions?

As a group, critique Symbolic Interactionism

- What are its positives?
- What are its drawbacks?

Some criticisms of Symbolic Interactionism

- It's been criticised for focusing on the individual and not the social setting
- Neglects historical and societal framework
- Baert and Silva (2010) argue Mead sees society as too consensual
- Fails to explain why standardised behaviour exists
- Fails to explain the origins of meanings (e.g., Marxists would argue meanings generated in interactions would be influenced by class difference)

(Haralambos and Holborn, 2013, pp. 980-981)

Overview

- Micro approach
- Interpretivist
- Explores for we understand the world through people (our interactions)
- Is interested in meanings and language

Some key words

Symbols

Interactions

Meaning

Frontstage

Backstage

Dramaturgical

Stigma

Labelling

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