“Interactionism insists on being a humble theory, not claiming too much and not dealing with major abstractions and false dualisms. Indeed the real task of an interactionist is simply to look at social life as people ‘do things together’; its core interests lie in the doing of ethnographies and in the intimate familiarity with ongoing social... worlds. It is a hands-on ‘down-to-earth’ empirical approach... In general, the tradition is one steeped in the exploration and inspection of data.”

— Ken Plummer (2003)

“The symbolic interactionist point of view requires you to take into account more things than almost any other perspective. At least, it disposes you to do your research in such a way that if anything is obviously (or not so obviously) affecting the phenomenon you want to understand, you’ll be free to take advantage of finding that out. This distinguishes it from other kinds of research which, for either theoretical or technical reasons, limit your view of what’s relevant so that you just don’t see those other factors which might be important.”

— Howard S. Becker (1970)

“Few other social science approaches have made so deep and explicit a commitment to complex questions. Interactionists should not stop asking those questions. Quite the contrary, to remove that complexity—to simplify interactionism—would destroy its essence.”

— Kevin Mihata (2002)

“Symbolic Interactionism is like crack for graduate students. Give them the first hit for free and then make them work for it.”

—Kerry Ferris (2013)

**Summary**

This course covers selected topics related to symbolic interactionism. Students will read and discuss sociological journal articles and chapters on these topics, read and give two book précis, write a paper related to the course material, and give a presentation of this paper to the class.

Objectives for students include (1) increasing their knowledge about the symbolic interactionist perspective and about its substantive contributions; (2) improving their skills of reading, analyzing and evaluating sociological research; and (3) stimulating their thinking about their own research.
Grading

The course grade will be derived from five components.

1. Class participation (20%)
   Students are expected to read the assigned core readings each week and contribute to class discussion.

2. Leading discussion (20%)
   Discussion of each core reading assignment (journal article or book chapter) will be led by a student. This student is responsible for developing a list of discussion questions, which will be submitted to the instructor.

3. Book précis (20%)
   Each student will prepare two précis of books connected to a week’s topic. The written précis will consist of a one-page summary of the book. The student will also give an oral synopsis of each book and answer questions about it.

4. Paper (30%)
   Each student will write a paper related to the course. The paper need not be publishable, but should show potential for revision into a journal article, conference paper, dissertation chapter or some other scholarly product. Students should consult with the instructor about their paper.

5. Paper presentation (10%)
   Students will give a conference-style presentation of their paper to the class.

About the Readings

The course pack of readings is available on-line through Iowa State’s Blackboard system. There are three types of readings in the course pack:

   Core readings (red): Each week we will discuss four to six core readings. All students are expected to have read these readings before class and each reading will be assigned to a student who will lead the discussion on it. The majority of these articles are empirical.

   Background readings (orange): Some weeks I have assigned one or two background readings, several of which are chapters from the Handbook of Symbolic Interactionism (2003). These are recommended for putting the core readings into a larger perspective.

   Bonus readings (green): Each topic has a number of bonus readings. These include (1) theoretical (rather than empirical) articles on the topic, (2) additional empirical articles on the topic, and (3) additional articles by the authors of the core readings. These bonus readings should provide a starting place for additional reading on each topic. Some of the topics have a more developed set of bonus readings than others. I may add additional bonus readings during the course of the semester.

In selecting the readings, I have attempted to provide you with examples of excellent interactionist research on a number of interesting topics. I also have attempted to introduce you to different groups of interactionists. First, many of the readings are by leading interactionists, i.e., SI sociologists whose research has had a major impact on the perspective and the discipline. Second, many of the readings are by young interactionists, i.e., SI sociologists who have received their Ph.Ds. in the past 15 years. Around a fifth of the core readings resulted from thesis or
dissertation research conducted by these young interactionists. I highlight these publications because they are potential exemplars for the work that you are capable of. Last (but not least), I have made an attempt to include articles whose authors are able to join us in class. Of the 13 days we’ll be discussing articles, we will have an author present for seven of those.

In addition to the articles associated with the main course topics, I have included a number of other readings in the course pack: (1) a number of essays by interactionists on the discipline of sociology, (2) articles from a special issue of Symbolic Interactionism that consists of essays by winners of the SSSI’s George Herbert Mead Career Award accompanied by responses by other interactionists, and (3) the Great Debates, three significant exchanges about the meaning of SI. Two other folders in the coursepack contain collections of articles also found elsewhere in the pack: (1) papers that were republished in Herbert Blumer’s Symbolic Interaction and (2) papers that won the SSSI’s Herbert Blumer Award for best graduate student paper (see appendix B).

**Academic Integrity**

Speaking and acting truthfully are skills acquired through practice. These skills are indispensable for successfully living and working with other people. If you practice dishonesty, you will endanger all of your relationships. You will be a bad spouse, a bad parent, a bad employee and a bad citizen.

Participating in academic life is an important opportunity to practice truthfulness since dishonesty is incompatible with and abhorrent to the purposes of the university. Therefore, students in this course are expected to adhere to the highest standards of academic honesty.

**Sociology Code of Ethics for Human Relations**

The Department of Sociology is committed to providing a professional and educational environment that is free of discrimination and harassment. The department’s Code of Ethics for Human Relations and the Procedures for Filing Complaints of Discrimination or Harassment are posted on the bulletin boards on all five floors of East Hall.

**Course Outline**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Guest</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Aug. 28</td>
<td>Course Overview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Sept. 4</td>
<td>Origins and Principles (The Chicago School)</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Sept. 11</td>
<td>Goffman &amp; the Dramaturgical Perspective</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Sept. 18</td>
<td>Structural Symbolic Interactionism (Iowa &amp; Indiana Schools)</td>
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<td>5. Sept. 25</td>
<td>Self &amp; Identity</td>
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<td>6. Oct. 2</td>
<td>Emotions</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Oct. 9</td>
<td>Doing Things Together</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Oct. 16</td>
<td>Socialization</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Oct. 23</td>
<td>Inequality</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Oct. 30</td>
<td>Gender</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. Nov. 6</td>
<td>Deviance, Violence &amp; Social Control</td>
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<tr>
<td>12. Nov. 13</td>
<td>Social Problems</td>
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<tr>
<td>13. Nov. 20</td>
<td>Crowds, Behavior in Public and Social Movements</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Thanksgiving Break)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Dec. 4</td>
<td>Student Presentations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Dec. 11</td>
<td>Student Presentations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Schedule of Readings

(1) Wednesday, Aug. 28: Course Overview

“There are many reasons why someone might want to embrace symbolic interactionism, but the basic reason why social scientific scholarship ought to be based on that perspective is that it represents good science.”

— David R. Maines (2003)

Core Readings


Bonus Readings


(2) Wednesday, Sept. 4: Origins and Principles (The Chicago School)

“Go and sit in the lounges of the luxury hotels and on the doorsteps of the flophouses; sit on the Gold Coast settees and on the slum shakedowns; sit in the Orchestra Hall and in the Star and Garter Burlesk. In short, [sociologists], go get the seat of your pants dirty in real research.”

—Robert E. Park

Core Readings


Background Readings


Bonus Readings

Articles by Mead


Reflections on Mead


**Articles by Blumer**


**Reflections on Blumer**


Best, Joel. 2006. “Blumer’s Dilemma: The Critic as a Tragic Figure.” *The American Sociologist* 37(3):5-14.


**Early Articles by Howard Becker**


Interviews with and Reflections on Becker


More Articles


More Reflections on Early SI and Antecedents


46(1):64-81.

(3) Wednesday, Sept. 11: Goffman and the Dramaturgical Perspective
Faculty guest: Abdi Kusow

“Erving Goffman never, to my knowledge, labeled himself a symbolic interactionist, but if we exclude him, we exclude our soul.”

—Gary Alan Fine (1990)

Core Readings


Background Reading

Bonus Readings
More Articles by Goffman


Articles about Goffman/Dramaturgy


**Articles about Impression Management/Presentation of Self**


Schweingruber, David; Sine Anahita; and Nancy Berns. 2004. “‘Popping the Question’ When the Answer is Known: The Engagement Proposal as Performance.” Sociological Focus 37(2):143-161
Schweingruber, David; Alicia D. Cast; and Sine Anahita. 2007. “‘A Story and a Ring’: Audience Judgments about Engagement Proposals.” Sex Roles 58(3-4):165-178.


Articles about Stigma


Other Dramaturgical Articles


(4) Wednesday, Sept. 18: Structural Symbolic Interactionism (Iowa and Indiana Schools)
Guest author: Jean McGuire

“The major axis of differentiation among symbolic interactionists has been, and is, between those who emphasize social structure as a major constraint and those who do not. Other differences... in aims, styles of research, and methods tend to follow from this major differentiation.”

—Sheldon Stryker (2003)

Core Readings

Background Reading

Bonus Readings (Indiana School)


**Bonus Readings (Iowa School)**


(5) Wednesday, Sept. 25: Self and Identity

“Interactionists take seriously the proposition that human beings are creative problem solvers. We are not stuck with the world as it presents itself to us. We can evaluate our situations, mull over what to do about them, and formulate plans for changing them. We are not stuck with the way we are, either. We can shift identities as we move from one situation to another and, more dramatically, reinvent ourselves. In other words, people have selves. Symbolic interactionism is the sociological perspective that takes selves seriously.”

— David Schweingruber & Nancy Berns (2010)

Core Readings


Background Readings


Bonus Readings
Additional articles by Adlers, Anderson, Hopper & Sandstrom


**Articles on Institutional/Narrative Selves**


**Articles about Self & Illness**


**Articles about Self & Sexuality**


Other Articles about Self & Identity


(6) Wednesday, Oct. 2: Emotions
Guest author: Nancy Berns

"Why is the emotive experience of normal adults in daily life as orderly as it is? Why, generally speaking, do people feel gay at parties, sad at funerals, happy at weddings? This question leads us to examine, not conventions of appearance or outward comportment, but conventions of feeling. Conventions of feeling become surprising only when we imagine, by contrast, what totally unpatterned, unpredictable emotive life might actually be like at parties, funerals, weddings, and in the family or work life of normal adults."

—Arlie Russell Hochschild (1979)

Core Readings


Bonus Readings
Emotion Management in the Workplace


Other Articles on Emotion


(7) Wednesday, Oct. 9: Doing Things Together

“Louis Wirth used to tell my cohort of graduate students at the University of Chicago that sociology studied what was true by virtue of the fact that people everywhere lived in groups. That definition seemed trivial and still would, if its implications were not so persistently ignored. We soon learned that it was not trivial because, taken seriously, it meant that you could not take seriously a lot of other commonly accepted ideas. Seeing things as the product of people doing things together makes a lot of other views less plausible and less interesting.”

—Howard S. Becker (1986)

Core Readings


Background Readings


Bonus Readings
Additional Readings by the Core Article Authors


Articles on Negotiated/Processual Order & Social Worlds


Three Articles on Aligning Actions


Other Articles on Doing Things Together


Green, Adam Isaiah. 2011. “Playing the (Sexual) Field: The Interactional Basis of Systems of Sexual Stratification.” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 74(3):244-266.


(8) Wednesday, Oct. 16: Socialization

Core Articles


Bonus Articles
Additional Readings by the Core Article Authors


Other Articles about Socialization


Core Readings


Bonus Readings

Additional Readings Kusow, Harris, Morris & Wilkins


Articles by Embrick & Bonilla-Silva


Articles on Blumer’s Conception of Race


Other Articles about Inequality


(10) Wednesday, Oct. 30: Gender

Core Readings


Background Reading

Bonus Readings
Additional Articles by Carpenter, Padavic & Wilkins


Articles by Williams, Dellinger & Giuffre on Gender in the Workplace


**Articles by West & Colleagues Doing Gender**


**Articles on Doing/Constructing/Reproducing Masculinity/Femininity**


**Articles about Gays & Lesbians in Church**


**Articles by Gagnon & Simon on Sexual Scripts**


**Articles on Gender & Sexual Behavior**


Other Articles about Gender


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“Deviance is one of the core concepts of sociology, cutting across and being integrated into our major theories and substantive fields. When we think of deviance, we refer not only to attitudes, behavior and conditions that lie outside the margins of acceptability, but to the very norms that cast them out, to the power structures of how folkways, mores and laws are created, and to the way that social control is attempted and achieved. Deviance is involved in key processes by which social order is maintained, as affirmations and re-affirmations of collective sentiment enhance social solidarity and stability. Deviance is also critically engaged in the dynamics of social change, as ideas and behavior move around and go in and out of currency. Finally, it is central to the hierarchy of social stratification, as it enables individuals and groups to raise themselves up and strike down their adversaries.”

—Patricia A. Adler and Peter Adler (2006)

Core Readings


Bonus Readings
Additional Articles by the Core Article Authors


Copes, Heith; Andy Hochstetler; and J. Patrick Williams. 2008. “‘We Weren’t Like No Regular Dope Fiends’: Negotiating Hustler and Crackhead Identities.” *Social Problems* 55(2):254-270.


**Articles on Offenders**


Trammell, Rebecca, & Scott Chenault. 2009. “‘We Have to Take These Guys Out’: Motivations for Assaulting Incarcerated Child Molesters.” *Symbolic Interaction* 32(4):334-350.

**Articles on Criminal Careers**


**Articles on Victims**


**Articles on Policing**


Other Articles on Deviance, Violence and Social Control


(12) Wednesday, Nov. 13: Social Problems

“From our point of view, the evidence that there is, for example, a crime problem is not that there is a high rate of crime or that the rate is higher than it used to be. Rather the evidence is that there are many individuals and groups complaining about various aspects of crime—violence in the streets, burglaries in the suburbs, corruption in the police force, etc.—and the activities of the myriad agencies that are mandated to do something about these complaints. The so-called ‘crime problem’ as a social problem, like that of the ‘generation gap,’ ‘pollution,’ ‘disadvantaged child,’ and others, is generated and sustained by the activities of complaining groups and institutional responses to them.”

—Malcome Spector and John I. Kitsuse (1973)

Core Readings


Background Readings


Bonus Readings

Additional Readings by the Core Article Authors


Social Problems Theory Articles


Articles about Medicalization


Articles about Collective Memory/Reputation


Other Articles about Social Problems


(13) Wednesday, Nov. 20: Crowds, Behavior in Public and Social Movements

Core Readings

Background readings

Bonus Readings
Additional Articles by the Core Article Authors


Other Articles about Crowds and Social Movements


Additional articles in the course pack

Symbolic Interactionists on the Discipline of Sociology

Graduate School


Teaching and Textbooks


Ethnography


Other Articles about the Discipline of Sociology


Mead Award Winner Essays (SI Special Issue)


The Great Debates

Blumer vs. Bales (AJS)


Huber vs. Symbolic Interactionism (ASR)


McPhail & Rexroat vs. Blumer (ASR)


Appendix A: Suggested Books for Précis

(1) Wednesday, Aug. 28: Course Overview

(2) Wednesday, Sept. 4: Origins and Principles (The Chicago School)
Hughes, Everett C. 1958. *Men and Their Work*. (184 pp.)

(3) Wednesday, Sept. 11: Goffman and the Dramaturgical Perspective

(4) Wednesday, Sept. 18: Structural Symbolic Interactionism (Iowa and Indiana Schools)

(5) Wednesday, Sept. 25: Self and Identity

(6) Wednesday, Oct. 2: Emotions

(7) Wednesday, Oct. 9: Doing Things Together


(8) Wednesday, Oct. 16: Socialization

(9) Wednesday, Oct. 23: Inequality
Harris, Scott. 2006. The Meanings of Marital Equality. SUNY Press. (210 pp.)

(10) Wednesday, Oct. 30: Gender

(11) Wednesday, Nov. 6: Deviance, Violence and Social Control

(12) Wednesday, Nov. 13: Social Problems


(13) Wednesday, Nov. 20: Crowds, Behavior in Public and Social Movements


Appendix B: Blumer Award Winners in the Course Pack


Appendix C. Highly Cited Articles in the Course Pack (as of Nov. 2013)  
(source: Sociological Abstracts)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Journal</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Cites</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>West, Candace, and Don H. Zimmerman</td>
<td>“Doing Gender.”</td>
<td>Gender &amp; Society</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>2149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Benford, Robert D., and David Snow</td>
<td>“Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment.”</td>
<td>Annual Review of Sociology</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>1199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Corbin, Juliet, and Anselm Strauss</td>
<td>“Grounded Theory Research: Procedures, Canons and Evaluative Criteria.”</td>
<td>Qualitative Sociology</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>1152*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Becker, Howard S.</td>
<td>“Notes on the Concept of Commitment.”</td>
<td>American Journal of Sociology</td>
<td>1960</td>
<td>834</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Burke, Peter J.</td>
<td>“Identity Processes and Social Stress.”</td>
<td>American Sociological Review</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>517</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>West, Candace, and Sarah Fenstermaker</td>
<td>“Doing Difference.”</td>
<td>Gender and Society</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>443</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


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*Corbin & Strauss (1990) isn’t in the course pack (which doesn’t have a methods section), but is the only other arguably SI journal article I could find with over 1,000 citation.

The most cited article in *Symbolic Interaction* is Rebecca Erickson’s “The Importance of Authenticity for Self and Society” (1995), which has 126 citations. Only three other SI articles have over 100.