Symbolic interactionism as a theoretical perspective for multiple method research

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Introduction
A challenge facing nurse researchers is developing theory that explains the complex array of phenomena that influence human health. Clarity regarding these phenomena is necessary to provide substantive grounding for practice. Many researchers have been socialized into the natural science research model and have pursued the development of theory using quantitative methods. As the body of nursing knowledge expanded, the commitment in nursing to a holistic view of human health prompted some to use interpretive paradigms, typically involving qualitative methods.

Debate about the nature of quantitative and qualitative methods has permeated the nursing literature for nearly two decades (Duffy 1985). This debate created boundaries between the two methodologies which may be more artificial than real (Dzurec & Abraham 1993, Morse & Field 1995). If one of the basic aims of nursing science is theory development, then a principal concern for researchers is how to develop theory. Quantitative and qualitative methods bring different strengths to theory development (Carr 1994). Combining methods within a single study to investigate the same phenomenon may serve to increase the depth and breadth of knowledge about human health by offsetting the biases inherent in each method.
Strategies to assist researchers with the technical aspects of combining quantitative and qualitative methods are increasingly evident in the literature (Foster 1997, Morgan 1998). However, tensions may arise in multiple method designs because of differing epistemological assumptions. Researchers who choose multiple method designs cannot ignore theoretical perspectives underlying the methods and need to address these differing assumptions (Moccia 1988). If the development of nursing knowledge is to proceed in a scholarly fashion, a theoretical perspective is required that will assist in the organization and interpretation of theory from both the quantitative and qualitative components of multiple method research.

The purpose of this paper is to present symbolic interactionism as a theoretical perspective for multiple method research designs with the aim of expanding the dialogue about new methodologies. Symbolic interactionism is a well-known perspective for qualitative inquiry (Morse & Field 1995), however, its assumptions are compatible with quantitative methods (Meltzer et al. 1975). Aside from the single variant of symbolic interactionism associated with grounded theory (Lowenberg 1993, Morse & Field 1995) limited information on the rich and diverse perspective of symbolic interactionism is available in the nursing literature. In proposing symbolic interactionism as a theoretical perspective, we do not suggest the primacy of this perspective over others. However, symbolic interactionism is a foundational perspective that could be integrated with other theoretical frameworks in multiple method designs.

**Intellectual heritage**

Social problems arising out of industrialization and urbanisation of the early 20th century stimulated scholars of the era to develop a distinct theoretical perspective for systematic study of human social behaviour. This perspective, later labelled symbolic interactionism, has its roots in social psychology (Meltzer et al. 1975). Among the intellectual antecedents of symbolic interactionism were the ideas of the 18th century Scottish moralists and of some of the 19th century German idealists (LaRossa & Reitzes 1993). The moralists expanded the concepts of 'I' and 'me' providing the foundations for the evolution of symbolic interactionist thought related to the 'mind' and 'self' as social products. From the idealists, symbolic interactionists have drawn the view that people construct their world based on individual perceptions of that world. Symbolic interactionists hold that individuals structure the external world by their perceptions and interpretations of what they conceive that world to be. That is to say, the world exists separate and apart from the individual's perception of it, but it is the individual's perception of the natural world in which he or she exists that influence behaviour (Blumer 1969). The tenets of symbolic interactionism are based on the belief that humans should be regarded in the context of their environment.

Symbolic interactionism was also influenced by Darwin's theory of evolution which reinforced the idea that the environment is dynamic and that all behaviour is determined by adaptation to the environment (Charon 1995). Symbolic interactionists derived from evolutionary theory the idea that each individual and his/her environment are inextricably linked through reciprocal relationships. Ideas and behaviours are distinctive processes that are constantly changing depending on how the individual interprets the world. However, these changes occur within the constraints established by the characteristics of the individual and the environment and as such humans are nondeterministic, yet predictable in some ways.

Understanding people in terms of their overt and covert 'minded' behaviour is an important idea for symbolic interactionism drawn from the behaviourists (Charon 1995). The understanding of covert human behaviour in terms of definition, interpretation and meaning differentiates the symbolic interaction perspective from that of behaviourists who focus on measurement of observable behaviours.

By far the strongest influence for the symbolic interaction perspective was early 20th century pragmatists (Meltzer et al. 1975, Charon 1995). Pragmatists hold the view that the meaning of objects resides in the behaviour directed toward them and not in the objects themselves. That is, knowledge of the world is acquired by active interpretation of the meaning of objects. Truth is fluid for the pragmatists. Knowledge is being continuously applied to new situations and is judged by its usefulness. Among pragmatists, such as James, Dewey, Cooley and Mead, knowledge of an ultimate truth is impossible and of little practical value because the use of things has greater value than the knowledge of things.

The ideas of 'instinct', 'habit' and 'self' developed by William James (1842–1910) were especially relevant to the symbolic interaction approach. James maintained that human instinct was plastic and modified or inhibited by socially learned habits (Meltzer et al. 1975). Habits arise from past experience and influence instincts. James suggested that individuals derive a sense of 'social self' by imagining the reactions of others to them. He suggested that 'a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their mind [italics original]' (Meltzer et al. 1975, p. 6). James conceptualized the 'social self' as a key part of self,
whereas Charles Cooley (1864–1929), who built on James’ work, saw the ‘social self’ to be the whole ‘self’. Cooley differentiated the ‘mind’ and ‘self’. Simply stated, the ‘mind’ is action that directs the use of symbols toward ‘self’ (Charon 1995). Perhaps the most important contribution by Cooley was his emphasis on ‘sympathetic introspection’ (Meltzer et al. 1975, p. 10). He encouraged his students not to settle for mere observations of external behaviour, but to endeavor to tap the meanings and definitions held by people. Indications that Cooley foresaw interactionism as a perspective through which human behaviour could be studied and understood is apparent in his writings and those of his teaching colleague at the University of Chicago, John Dewey.

Although Dewey (1859–1952) was considered a psychologist and philosopher, he believed philosophizing held little practical value in aiding people to meet the demands of daily life (Meltzer et al. 1975). He focused on creating solutions to everyday problems in society using symbolic interactionism to explain behaviour. Dewey contended that symbolism expressed in language was the element that differentiated humans from other species and that linguistic communication made human society possible. Thus, the foundations were laid for the symbolic interaction perspective.

**Early interactionists**

George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) is credited with aggregating and refining antecedent foundational work into a unique approach to the understanding of human behaviour (Blumer 1969, Meltzer et al. 1975, Charon 1995). A professor of philosophy at the University of Chicago, Mead refined the concepts of the ‘mind’ and the ‘self’. He claimed that the mind is a result of an exchange of social acts, language being the most complex social act in which people engage. Mead differentiated the ‘self’ into a spontaneous ‘I’ and a socially determined ‘me’. The ‘I’ is the initial impulsive tendency in individuals, whereas the ‘me’ represents the expectations of others. The ‘self’ is seen as a process of interaction between the ‘I’ and the ‘me’. Although Mead expounded on and taught the precepts of symbolic interactionism to his students at the University of Chicago for nearly 40 years, he published little in the area of symbolic interactionism. It was not until after his death in 1931 that Mead’s lecture notes on symbolic interactionism were synthesized into a theoretical system and published by his best known student, Herbert Blumer.

Blumer (1900–86) is credited with interpreting Mead’s work and coining the term ‘symbolic interactionism’ in 1937 (Meltzer et al. 1975, Charon 1995). Blumer’s work reflects his efforts to present symbolic interactionism as an alternative to the uncritical behaviourism and the extreme positivism of the structural-functional approaches, both common in sociology during that era. While many scholars think of symbolic interactionism as a unitary approach to understanding behaviour, several variant perspectives have been identified (Meltzer et al. 1975). The two most prominent variants of symbolic interactionism are the Chicago and Iowa schools of thought. The two schools are presented separately to clarify differences, although methodological boundaries between them are indiscrète and many areas of overlap are acknowledged (Harvey 1987).

**Schools of thought**

The basic assumptions of symbolic interactionism conceptualized by Mead and elaborated by Blumer have developed into what is known as the classical or Chicago school of interactionism (Meltzer et al. 1975). Blumer (1969) emphasized the interpretive process in the construction of meaning of the richness and variety of social experience as it was lived however, he suggested exploratory inquiry is not limited to any particular set of techniques. He focused on intimately understanding the participant’s world and turned to Mead’s discussion of the ‘I’ and ‘me’ to understand the dynamic and processual nature of human behaviour. The emphasis on sympathetic introspection warranted the use of life histories, autobiographies, case studies, diaries, letters, interviews, focus groups and participant observation to produce theories grounded in empirical data (Blumer 1969). The relevancy of theory is determined by a continual return to evidence.

The Iowa school developed under the guidance of Manford Kuhn (1911–63) at the University of Iowa (Meltzer et al. 1975). Kuhn, strongly influenced by logical positivism, advocated a more structured approach to symbolic interactionism. While Blumer attempted to make sense out of society by increasing the understanding of already past events, Kuhn focused on building testable, predictive explanations of universal social behaviour (Kuhn 1964). Kuhn contended that the ideas of symbolic interactionism could be defined and tested using empirical methods. While the Chicago school emphasized a more dynamic and process orientated characteristic of ‘self’ that is continually re-negotiated in interaction with others, Kuhn saw the ‘self’ as a pattern of relatively stable attitudes that are a result of social roles. Data collection methods in the Iowa School include quasi-experimental designs, statistical analyses, secondary analysis of survey data, ethnomet hodological approaches, questionnaires, schedules, tests and laboratory procedures. After
Kuhn’s death, the Iowa school played a lesser role in symbolic interactionism until Couch and colleagues embarked on their work. They extended Kuhn’s work and advocated the use of a third party standpoint to understand human social behavior (Fine 1993, Diekma et al. 1996). These theorists focused on the idea of an external observer, rather than a participant observer, in data collection and acknowledged the importance of universal principles of human life. Thus, it is evident that the two most prominent variants of symbolic interactionism attribute their history and underlying assumptions to common origins but different methods are used to generate knowledge.

**Assumptions of symbolic interactionism**

Three basic assumptions underpin symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969). First, people, individually and collectively, act on the basis of the meanings that things have for them. That is, people do not respond directly to things but attach meaning to the things and act on the basis of meaning. Underlying this assumption is the presupposition that the world exists separate and apart from the individual, but that the world is interpreted through the use of symbols (language) in the process of interaction. People then act on the basis of the meaning that is derived from symbolic interaction.

Second, meaning arises in the process of interaction among individuals (Blumer 1969). Meaning for an individual emerges out of the ways in which other individuals act to define things. Symbolic interactionists assume that individuals are able to act because they have agreed on the meanings attached to things in their environment.

Third, meanings are assigned and modified through an interpretive process that is ever changing, subject to redefinition, relocation and realignments (Blumer 1969). Symbolic interactionists take a nondeterministic view of the individual and assume that there is freedom of choice in human behavior, albeit that choice is constrained by societal and cultural norms. People have the cognitive capacity for abstract and reflective thinking that enables the development of the symbolic use of language and gestures for the creation and communication of meanings that produces a common response in interaction with others. This kind of thinking allows the individual to place objects and events in time, create imaginary phenomena and learn without directly encountering the things to be learned. Through selection and interpretation of stimuli, people form new meanings and new ways to respond and thus are active in shaping their own future through the process of interpreting meaning.

Perhaps the most important tenet of symbolic interactionism is the idea that the individual and the context in which that individual exists are inseparable. Truth is tentative and never absolute because meaning changes depending on the context for the individual. Theoretical questions about the nature of being are best understood through individual interpretation of reality in a social context. The focus of research is on the nature of individual and collective social interaction. Coming to know entails searching for ways to understand the meaning of a situation from the perspective of the individual and societal groups. As such, the social world exists as a creation of human interactions. Society consists of individuals involved in interaction within larger networks of other individuals and groups. The processual nature of society is emphasized with the recognition that reciprocal social interaction influences behaviour and the character of society.

Thus, symbolic interaction provides a theoretical perspective for studying how individuals interpret objects and other people in their lives and how this process of interpretation leads to behaviour in specific situations. Symbolic interactionism has tremendous potential to increase the understanding of human health behaviours by complementing other theoretical perspectives currently used in nursing. The assumptions underlying symbolic interactionism have profound implications for the design of multiple method studies. Close attention to these assumptions will determine whether or not the study will be clearly focused and thus be most likely to contribute significantly to the development of nursing knowledge.

**Implication for nursing theory development**

Within the symbolic interactionist perspective, nursing research is located in the natural world of human behaviour and social life. Theory development involves exploration and formulation of propositions about the relationships among categories of data, building these propositions into theoretical schemes and then inspecting and testing the theoretical schemes through validation in the empirical world. Multiple method designs within the symbolic interactionism perspective allow the researcher to concurrently formulate and validate theory. To illustrate symbolic interactionism in a multiple method study, an example will be drawn from an ongoing longitudinal study of the relationship between early family environmental variables and behavioural development in children. In this study, semi-structured interviews were used to validate hypotheses and to suggest alternative hypotheses for findings generated by parent-report questionnaires about childhood behaviour.
From the symbolic interactionism perspective, it is imperative to understand what individuals know about their world and what they believe to be important. Research questions focus on how individuals interpret meanings and act in particular contexts, for contexts constrain behaviours. For example, a child may exhibit a greater frequency of behaviour problems at home or at school depending on the reasons underlying the misbehaviour. Thus, gathering data in a variety of contexts, including home and school may provide a clearer picture of the child's behaviour.

Because individuals and society are dynamic, research questions ask how meaning is attributed. Interaction is the critical link between an individual and society and becomes the focus of concern for nursing research. A concern with the point of view of the individual necessitates a consideration of both micro and macro social contexts in which action is constructed. The researcher must also attend to the past experience of the individual and the history of the group. Both locate the individual and the situation he or she confronts within time and past events. In the child behaviour example, changes in the family environment, such as parental separation or a move to a new school, often precipitate changes in behaviour. Data collected includes information about the changes in the family environment and changes in child behaviour over time.

Research questions from the symbolic interactionism perspective emphasize process rather than structure. Researchers in the symbolic interaction tradition are concerned not only with knowing the individual's point of view, but also with understanding the processes by which points of view develop. Processes are significant because symbolic interactionists view human behaviour as a dynamic process in which individuals are continuously defining and interpreting each other's acts. To understand human behaviour it is important to understand how the process of definition and interpretation redirects and transforms behaviour. For example, symbolic interactionism assists the researcher to focus on how the parent ascribes meaning to the child's behaviour within the dynamic relationships among factors such as child temperament, the quality of the parent's marital relationship and family socioeconomic status.

An understanding of the role of the observer in the research process is also important. Researchers need to examine the degree to which their conclusions are based on data volunteered by participants as in semi-structured interviews or on data, such as surveys and questionnaires, directed by a priori assumptions of the researcher. Similarly, researchers need to be aware of the impact of the presence of others on data collection. In the child behaviour study, interview and questionnaire data were collected separately for mothers and fathers, as this approach is more likely to generate personal perceptions. Thus, researchers using symbolic interactionism as a theoretical perspective for multiple method designs may include data collected through a variety of methods. Regardless of the type of data collected, the focus is on understanding the connection between the shared meanings and human health behaviour.

In the process of inquiry, researchers have an inescapable moral responsibility to be sensitive to the lives and circumstances of the people about whom they wish to learn. Research conducted within the symbolic interaction perspective is participant-centred with an emphasis on sensitivity to the lives and circumstances of individuals in a variety of social settings. Symbolic interactionists acknowledge cultural differences, but assume that individuals interpret cultural values on the basis of their goals and perceptions of the consequences of action. Members of any group that occupies a particular position in the social structure develop common mental frameworks and patterns of behaviour to deal with situations they encounter. It is assumed that in order to understand behaviour in situations such as community settings, one must know the cultural standards that form the context of behaviour, the individual's goals in that context and the individual's perceptions of the consequences of various kinds of behaviour. As such, it is incumbent upon researchers to recognize and be sensitive to the moral issues related to vulnerability of groups and to the potential impact of research on study participants. Researchers are obligated to consider their research not only as a tool for generating answers to abstract questions, but also as a process of recognition of the researcher's complementarity with respondents. Thus, researchers must recognize and be sensitive to their role in the construction of participant's meaning whether that occurs through the way questions are posed during interviews or through the wording of questions on surveys. However, any theoretical perspective is biased and limited by its very nature. While symbolic interactionism sensitizes researchers to certain assumptions, it can never fully reveal all there is to know about human health behaviour. To make wise use of symbolic interactionism, researchers must be aware of its limitations.

Criticisms of symbolic interactionism

One criticism of early interactionists was their inability to clearly articulate a systematic theory of symbolic interactionism. For decades symbolic interactionism was an oral tradition passed down through the teachings of Mead (Meltzer et al. 1975). Many of the major concepts were
imprecisely defined and employed inconsistently. It was not until 1937, when Blumer compiled the teachings and lecture notes of Mead that written explanations existed. However, some scholars continued to be particularly critical of theoretical and substantive portions of symbolic interactionism to the extent that they did not provide clear-cut procedures or techniques for enhancing research (Kuhn 1964). In rebuttal, Blumer replied that symbolic interactionism is a philosophical approach to direct examination of the empirical social world, not a method. In the past two decades, much work has been done to define key assumptions and develop theories such as identity, role-taking, context and negotiated order (LaRossa & Reitzes 1993).

Although symbolic interactionists would not deny that free-willed behaviours occur within societal and cultural constraints, critics suggest that symbolic interactionism does not focus adequate attention on social structure (Kuhn 1964, Meltzer et al. 1975). However, interactionists have developed concepts that connect individual behaviour within micro and macro level societal structures (LaRossa & Reitzes 1993). Critics of symbolic interactionism suggest that emotional and unconscious elements in human behaviour are under-emphasized (Meltzer et al. 1975). Similarly, cognitive processes of coming to know are not well understood. Although, symbolic interactionism does provide a mechanism with which to explore emotions (the spontaneous 'I'), past research has focused primarily on cognitive and social factors that influence behaviours. Recently there has been a renewed effort among researchers in the symbolic interaction tradition to explore consequences of emotional experience and affect control (Fine 1993).

Symbolic interactionism focuses on the nature of social interaction. Nursing is not exclusively a social science. If nurse scholars advocate a holistic approach to understanding human health behaviour, then research perspectives used in nursing ought to incorporate all relevant domains including psychological and biological, as well as social domains. Symbolic interactionism is a theoretical perspective that can provide important insight into human health behaviour, but as it stands, it is insufficient to fully develop the body of nursing knowledge. Perhaps the expansion of holistic interactionism alluded to by Magnusson (1998) may increase the usefulness of this theoretical perspective for nursing. A holistic approach views individuals as active, willful parts of an integrated, complex and dynamic ecological system. Within a holistic approach, the biological, psychological and behavioural characteristics of the individual are taken into consideration along with ongoing processes of interaction within the physical, social and cultural aspects of the individual’s environment.

Finally, use of symbolic interactionism as a theoretical perspective does not solve the technical problem of primacy of methods in multiple method designs. Based on the goals of the study, the researcher must still reach a decision about the priority and sequencing of methods. In response to the criticisms outlined above, symbolic interactionism has evolved and been strengthened. The assumptions of symbolic interactionism have gained increasing clarity and concepts such as identity, role, social interaction and context, have been refined (LaRossa & Reitzes 1993). Considerable theoretical work has been directed toward bridging the connections between human health behaviour and the larger social context.

**Conclusions**

Symbolic interactionism offers a way to end the perceived incongruence between qualitative and quantitative methodologies by offering a theoretical perspective that embraces both approaches. For researchers who use multiple method designs, symbolic interactionism provides a theoretical perspective for conceptually clear and soundly implemented research about human health behaviour. The use of symbolic interactionism as a theoretical perspective for multiple method designs in nursing research offers the hope of a richer, fuller understanding of nursing and of the individuals who are the recipients of nursing care.

**References**


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