12.3C: The Symbolic Interactionist Perspective

Symbolic interactionists view the family as a site of social reproduction where meanings are negotiated and maintained by family members.

Learning Objectives

- Analyze family rituals through the symbolic interactionist perspective

Key Points

- Symbolic interactionism is a theory that analyzes patterns of communication, interpretation, and adjustment between individuals in society. The theory is a framework for understanding how individuals interact with each other and within society through the meanings of symbols.
- Role-taking is a key mechanism that permits an individual to appreciate another person’s perspective and to understand what an action might mean to that person. Role-taking emerges at an early age through activities such as playing house.
- Symbolic interactionists explore the changing meanings attached to family. Symbolic interactionists argue that shared activities help to build emotional bonds, and that marriage and family relationships are based on negotiated meanings.
- The interactionist perspective emphasizes that families reinforce and rejuvenate bonds through symbolic rituals such as family meals and holidays.

Key Terms

- **family**: A group of people related by blood, marriage, law or custom.
• **ritual**: Rite; a repeated set of actions
• **bonds**: Ties and relationships between individuals.

Symbolic interactionism is a social theory that focuses on the analysis of patterns of communication, interpretation, and adjustment between individuals in relation to the meanings of symbols. According to the theory, an individual’s verbal and nonverbal responses are constructed in expectation of how the initial speaker will react.

This emphasis on symbols, negotiated meaning, and the construction of society as an aspect of symbolic interactionism focuses attention on the roles that people play in society. Role-taking is a key mechanism through which an individual can appreciate another person’s perspective and better understand the significance of a particular action to that person. Role-taking begins at an early age, through such activities as playing house and pretending to be different people. These activities have an improvisational quality that contrasts with, say, an actor’s scripted role-playing. In social contexts, the uncertainty of roles places the burden of role-making on the people in a given situation.

Ethnomethodology, an offshoot of symbolic interactionism, examines how people’s interactions can create the illusion of a shared social order despite a lack of mutual understanding and the presence of differing perspectives. Harold Garfinkel demonstrated this situation through so-called experiments in trust, or breaching experiments, wherein students would interrupt ordinary conversations because they refused to take for granted that they knew what the other person was saying.

### The Family

Symbolic interactionists also explore the changing meanings attached to family. They argue that shared activities help to build emotional bonds among family members, and that marriage and family relationships are based on negotiated meanings. The interactionist perspective emphasizes that families reinforce and rejuvenate bonds through symbolic mechanism rituals such as family meals and holidays.