**Abstract.** This essay tracks the ways that George Herbert Meade’s influential theory, symbolic interactionism, has been used to describe communication in different arenas of human experience. Meade’s theory explains how people use symbols as a sense making tool. Symbolic Interactionism has been used to explain society, culture, psychology and relationships. The paper tracks some of the important ways that this theory has been used to explain these aspects of human life. Through an understanding of how symbols are deployed we can better reflect on how we assign meaning in order to understand our communication.

**Keywords:** Speech Theory, Human Communication, Cultural Relationships

**Tina Mazzotta.** This paper was written as part of a Theories and Principles of Human Communication class in which we learned about George Herbert Mead’s theory. This theory intrigued me greatly, and Dr. Myers and I found it very interesting to apply this theory to different aspects of communication. I felt that one of the most exciting aspects of this research experience was furthering my knowledge on one specific subject that interested me greatly. This specific research project has helped me become a better writer in the sense of putting information together in a logical and interesting manner. I hope to eventually write or edit for a magazine. In my spare time, I enjoy reading and writing, but also any sort of physical exercise, especially running. I have been involved in recreational softball teams on campus as well. Although it is not a hobby, my job at Piedmont Farm and Garden Supply has sparked my interest in gardening! Even being at my job, I get to do what I enjoy most: meeting new and different people and learning more about the area where I chose to attend college. This has been a great experience! Not only have I learned a lot, but it is great to know that there are professors at this university that recognize hard work and encourage you to present your work to others.

**Dr. W. Benjamin Myers.** Dr. Myers is an Assistant Professor of Speech and has been at USC Upstate since Fall 2007. His research areas include Speech, Ethnography, and Performance Studies. He earned a Ph.D. from Southern Illinois University and has published an article in *Qualitative Inquiry* which explores performing race and sexuality in everyday life. Dr. Myers also presents regularly at the National Communication Association and the Annual *Qualitative Inquiry Congress*. Dr. Myers is originally from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and in his spare time he enjoys spending time with his family, reading and playing poker. “**Tina’s work is a very strong literature review that does more than simply list a few places where the theory was mentioned. It explores how Symbolic Interactionism is used to address specific phenomenon. Tina has a very clear grasp on how the theory can speak to other disciplines which is always an important task for someone who works in areas outside of the ‘hard sciences’. This paper provides a clear justification that speech theory extends beyond people talking and addresses some important philosophical issues.**”
I. INTRODUCTION

Creating reality, minding, naming and a self-fulfilling prophecy are all characteristics in understanding the theory of symbolic interactionism. This interpretive theory allows us to see the world and the symbols we use within it in a whole new light and creates a new understanding of how we perceive objects while we make sense of the people that surround us. This theory is highly debated among scholars due to the ways that interaction is a social act that constantly changes. Scholars that both criticize and commend George Herbert Meade (the founder of symbolic interactionism) have applied the theory to numerous studies and very important subjects. This essay will discuss the works of different scholars and their application of symbolic interactionism in relation to society, psychology and culture as a whole.

Mead's theory attempts to account for the origins and development of human mind - or intelligence - by locating it within the process of evolution, by showing that the origins of human mind lie in human society[1]. Comparing society and symbolic interactionism is one of the most difficult and potentially argumentative aspects of the theory. The issue of pragmatism deals with a philosophical point of view that truth and meaning are measured by consequence. Many scholars such as Paul Rock acknowledge that symbolic interactionism was created on a foundation of a philosophical tradition of pragmatism, but that many aspects of Mead’s theory tend to break away and disregard actual human activity, especially the labeling aspect of the theory. Rock claims that symbolic interactionism and its followers tend to believe too much in “dualism” and “idealism” [2]. The meaning of dualism lies within the belief that the physical being of a human is separate from their intelligence. Many would disagree, such as John P. Hewitt who claims Mead avoided dualism and mainly focused on the way in which the human mind was developed and the intelligence that is created [1]. Others also tend to feel that symbolic interactionism holds a steady mirror up to society, reflecting its image back to itself. Many would even recognize that symbolic interactionism was created from the a pragmatist follower such as Mead himself. Therefore it is safe to say that “symbolic interactionism is a sociological tradition that traces its linkage to the Pragmatists” [3].

II. MEANING AND SYMBOLS

Mead explains that all objects hold a representative or symbolic value. Images of any completed act are symbolically constructed whether it is in our memory as history or something we perceive to occur in the future [4]. Duncan claims in Symbols and Social Theory that Mead more so than any other creator of pragmatism or social theory did the best job of explaining action as social. The way in which Mead explains this is through the four main stages of an act. These stages include impulse, perception, manipulation and consummation. Through these stages, Duncan states that “the social act originates in, and continues to exist through, communication”. All of these aspects of the social life revolve around our perceptions, actions, religious views and future expectations. For example, Mead thinks of the future as a public act, and because it is public, it is social. The issue of environment and the way in which events and actions occur on earth is a debatable issue as well in considering symbolic interactionism. Duncan explains that in contrast to environmentalists who determine action on the physical environment, Mead explains that the “environment of man in society is not nature, or soma, but the symbolization of these in time”.

In furthering the discussion on acts and how they are mingled within symbolic interaction, it is necessary to look at the meaning behind our actions within society. Hewitt claims in Self and Society that meaning lies within the way we behave. Meanings are not fixed or unchangeable, but are determined by how a person acts toward an object. Hewitt claims that there is a distinguishable difference between social and individual objects. A very important aspect to recognize when applying society to symbols is that people are social objects during interactions, and these objects are constructed when humans perform certain social acts. The next characteristic to understand is that social acts are evaluated by the interaction and interpretation that follows them. Although a lot of our actions are based upon habit, Hewitt argues that in difficult situations in which humans face, we use a greater sense of evaluation and interpreting. “It is in the face of such problematic occurrences that our capacity to designate and interpret is crucial to the success of our actions” [1].
III. Extensions of Symbolic Interactionism

Many believe that symbolic interactionism has lost its important role in human society and others believe that symbolic interactionism never held a strong enough point to be valid in considering human actions within society. Sheldon Stryker published an article in the Social Psychology Quarterly on the vitality and growing importance of symbolic interactionism within our society today. Stryker makes the claim that although it may have been proved that symbolic interactionism declined during the 1960’s and 70’s, that there was not enough valid evidence supporting its decline, and for the majority of the time, psychologists and sociologists completely ignored the works of Mead and other interactionists [5]. Some people such as Herbert Blumer, have tried to mend symbolic interactionism into a more functional, as well as experimentally testable theory, and critics have recognized the unnecessary need for this sort of action and the lack of purpose in rendering symbolic interactionism into a different form. Luigo Esposito and John Murphy write, “the experimental complexities that Blumer believed underlie all human group life are often transformed into standardized ‘generic’ concepts simply for the sake of methodological convenience” [9].

To say that one is interested in social psychology tells other social scientists something of one’s professional activities; to assert that one pursues social psychology from the perspective of symbolic interactionism adds another layer of meaning [1].

Another aspect of study in which scholars have applied symbolic interactionism thoroughly, is within the study of psychology. When you look at this theory as a whole, you can apply the topic of psychology easily, due to the important aspects of the human mind and behavior. For example, it was Mead’s discovery (and what we now associate very closely with his theory) that the human mind is too compound to be described only by instinct [1]. Minding is a very important characteristic of symbolic interactionism that links to psychology. John Hewitt explains how our mind and behavior all work upon actions of symbols. Mead makes it clear that through the use of language, we as humans differ from other mammals. People anticipate responses from their own individual acts and through the process of minding, can have control over their own actions. The action of minding is reflected upon a basis of consciousness. Our ability to use our conscious allows us to better understand people and react towards their actions [1]. "Mead created an account of human behavior, mind, and selfhood that became a significant milestone in human self-understanding" [1].

Scholars have also applied symbolic interaction to the identification and relation to psychological insanity. Research has shown that symbolic interactionism, more so than the labeling theory, gives a better understanding of the social aspect of insanity. Rosenburg conducted a study that recognized the defining lines of symbolic interactionism that we take in our societal roles [6]. This is where researchers found that the state of being psychotic does not occur because of an objective trait, but rather because an individual plays a part in role taking which can lead to success or failure. The author of this article claims that symbolic interactionism holds two contributions to the study of insanity: it gathers a meaning and purpose for treatment and proposes available options for therapeutic procedures [6].

While there can be many similarities between social psychology and symbolic interactionism, some may feel that there are definite distinctions between the two that tend to create a boundary that should not be crossed. For example, symbolic interactionism is based upon a plan that humans derive from their surroundings. Social psychology rather tries to eliminate alternatives as to why humans do what they do. In this sense, the study of psychology is so intense with numerous outcomes and ways of explaining human actions, that it does not exactly relate to the overall idea of symbolic interactionism [1]. Some scholars and followers of symbolic interactionism even recognize the ignorance of psychologists in the past for not recognizing the work of symbolic interactionists in their studies and printed works. Stryker writes in the Social Psychology Quarterly that some of the “most explicit and perhaps most flattering” works that reflected symbolic interactionism came from the “psychological wing of contemporary social psychology, which not fifteen years ago, disdained paying that attention” [1].

The clearer conception of culture and its relation to conduct that we need can be constructed by examining George Mead’s concepts of symbol and object [7].
IV. CULTURAL SYMBOLS

The most generalized and abundant association of symbolic interactionism on the study of our everyday lives deals with the topic of culture. So many aspects of our culture intermingle with symbolic interactionism and the way we interpret the world that surrounds us. Although cultural solutions change over time, there always seems to be a repetitive pattern of social action that creates some form of cultural solution. This, George Kubler recognizes as a series and sequence that we follow [3]. Mead declares a difference between the social symbol and the individual symbol. As far as history is concerned in considering symbolic interactionism, the social symbol is shared while the individual meaning is achieved through private thoughts and gestures of other humans. In understanding this aspect of symbolic interaction, Mead says that we can begin to see culture as “received symbols, recipes, and products that actors draw on by way of grappling in emergent meaningful ways with situational problems” [3]. Becker and McCall also discuss religion and its relation to symbolic interactionism in our culture in their book entitled, Symbolic Interactionism and Cultural Studies. They feel that if we treat religious movements as cultural movements, we will begin to give more attention to symbols and rituals within each religion in order to explain what they are and what they stand for [3].

Some people have taken symbolic interactionism and composed an entire work as to how it relates to a certain topic. In this specific case, F. Scott Christopher wrote a book based on symbolic interaction and its relation to premarital sex. Christopher poses the main characteristics of symbolic interactionism and links them to the decisions, actions and behavior involved in premarital sex. He begins to explain that we look at objects and assign meaning to them, but in many cases, certain objects take on special meanings due to when, why and how they were placed in someone’s life [8]. This then leads into the interpretation of acts and social roles within society. Christopher states that there is role taking in which people see the other’s point of view as well as the role enactment which represents the outcome. Christopher also uses Mead’s example of the generalized other and the perception of self to explain how adolescents may view their peers and evaluate the possibility of a sexual experience with a significant other [8]. “Culture is the world of objects in which human beings live” [7].

Hewitt claims that the cultural world in which we reside is strong because as humans, we act towards the objects within it. We experience culture through the use of its objects that help us reach a certain goal in life. This strongly relates to the human’s ability to have motivation. Since culture is filled with objects, we decide as humans, which objects we want to gain and the outcome that will come from the action we take in gaining that object [7]. Once again, Hewitt explains a culture in which we assign meaning to not only visible and tangible objects, but to those of feeling and emotion, in order to experience empathy within our society. One of the most important traits of symbolic interactionism lies within language and meaning. As symbolic interactionism is clearly a theory based upon communication, we need to recognize all of the times and ways in which we use communication in our culture. Communication is the basis of Mead’s symbolic interactionism and without the acknowledgment of “mind, self, and society,” we cannot evaluate this theory accurately. Many theorists have done recent studies to make a stronger connection between language and meaning [3]. Deirdre Boden explains the necessity of language in this theory in a very precise manner: “as thought becomes action through language, that conversation analysis meets symbolic interaction” [3].

V. CONCLUSIONS

Symbolic interactionism has been a highly criticized and vastly discussed theory among scholars and theorists around the United States since its creation. Mead’s interpretation of symbols and the meanings that we apply to them has not only been evaluated based upon its validity and accuracy or worthiness, but more importantly, it has been applied to so many areas of research and study. These areas of research and study have proved Mead’s ability to not only hold a strong theory worth discussing, but one worth applying to so many aspects of our everyday lives. In studying symbolic interactionism and its emphasis on the topics of society, psychology and culture within our everyday lives, one can have a greater understanding of Mead’s intentions of explaining the way in which humans behave based upon their symbolic interpretation of objects that surround us.
REFERENCES