

issue of distance, Simmel argued that the value of things is a function of their distance from us. Things that are too close to us, too easy to obtain, are of no great value to us; thus, even though our lives depend on it, air is not very valuable to most of us most of the time because it is all around us and readily attainable. (Of course, air would be quite valuable if there was little of it [e.g., if pollution made it hard to breathe and dangerous to inhale] or it was hard to obtain [e.g., if one had emphysema].) Also, things that are too far from us, too difficult to obtain, are not of great value. Thus, a trek to the top of Mt. Everest is not very valuable to most of us because it is too far to travel, too difficult to climb the mountain, and too expensive to undertake such an adventure. In the end, what is most valuable to us are the things that are attainable but only with considerable effort.

SOCIAL BEHAVIORISM

Perhaps the most important theorist of everyday life in the history of sociology was George Herbert Mead (1863–1931). Although he taught in the philosophy department at the University of Chicago, Mead was a central figure in the development of an important contemporary sociological theory: symbolic interactionism. Just as all the grand theorists discussed in the previous chapter had sociologies of everyday life, Mead also had a grand theory. However, his most important contribution to the development of sociological theory lies in his sociology of everyday life.

Interestingly, while Mead focuses on thought, action, and interaction, he emphasizes the importance of starting with the group, or, more generally, with what he calls the social. Thus, analysis is to begin with the organized group and then work its way down, rather than begin with separate individuals and work one's way up to the group. Individual thought, action, and interaction are to be explained in terms of the group and not the group by individual thought and action. The whole is prior to its individual elements.

In focusing on those individual elements, Mead found it difficult to distinguish his approach from psychological behaviorism, even though he called himself a type of behaviorist: a social behaviorist. Basically, he recognized the fact of stimulus-response, but he thought there is much more to human action than that simple model. To put it simply, the mind intervenes between the application of a stimulus and the emitting of a response; people, unlike lower animals, think before they act.

The Act

Mead comes closest to psychological behaviorism in discussing the most basic element in his theoretical system—the **act**—but he does not see people as

act The basic concept in Mead's theory, involving an impulse, perception of stimuli, taking action involving the object perceived, and using the object to satisfy the initial impulse.

engaging in automatic, unthinking responses. He recognizes four separable stages in the act, but Mead, like Marx, thought dialectically, so each is related to all of the others and the act does not necessarily occur in the following sequence.

1. **Impulse.** The actor reacts to some external stimulus (hunger, a dangerous animal) and feels the need to do something about it (find food, run away).
2. **Perception.** The actor searches for and reacts to stimuli (through hearing, smell, taste, etc.) that relate to the impulse and to the ways of dealing with it. People do not simply react to stimuli; they think about them, they select among them, deciding what is important (the animal is growling) and what is unimportant (the animal has pretty eyes).
3. **Manipulation.** This involves manipulating the object once it has been perceived. This is an important phase before a response is emitted and involves two major distinctive characteristics of humans: their minds and their opposable thumbs. Thus, a hungry person can pick up a mushroom from the forest floor, examine it by rolling it around in her fingers, and think about whether it has the characteristics of a poison mushroom. In contrast, a hungry animal is likely to grab for the mushroom and eat it unthinkingly and without examining it.
4. **Consummation.** This involves taking action that satisfies the original impulse (eating the mushroom, shooting the animal). The human is more likely to be successful in consummation because of his or her ability to think through the act, while the lower animal must rely on the far less efficient and effective trial and error.

Gestures

An act involves only one person or lower animal, but both people and animals interact with others. The most primitive form of interaction involves **gestures**—movements by one party that serve as stimuli to another party. People and animals make gestures and also engage in a **conversation of gestures**: Gestures by one mindlessly elicit responding gestures from the other. In a dog fight, for

impulse First stage of the act, in which the actor reacts to some external stimulus and feels the need to do something about it.

perception Second stage of the act, in which the actor consciously searches for and reacts to stimuli that relate to the impulse and the ways of dealing with it.

manipulation Third stage of the act involving manipulating the object, once it has been perceived.

consummation Final stage of the act involving the taking of action that satisfies the original impulse.

gestures Movements by one party (person or animal) that serve as stimuli to another party.

conversation of gestures Gestures by one party that mindlessly elicit responding gestures from the other party.

example, the bared teeth of one dog might automatically cause the other dog to bare its teeth. The same thing could happen in a boxing match; the cocked fist of one fighter could lead the other to raise an arm in defense. In the case of both types of fight, the reaction is instinctive and the gestures are nonsignificant because neither party thinks about its response. Although both people and animals employ nonsignificant gestures, only people employ **significant gestures**, or those that involve thought before a response is made.

Among gestures, Mead placed great importance on vocal gestures. All vocal gestures of lower animals are nonsignificant (the bark of a dog to another dog) and some human vocal gestures may be nonsignificant (snoring). However, most human vocal gestures are significant, the most important of them involving language. This system of significant gestures is responsible for the great advances (control over nature, science) of human society.

One huge difference exists between a physical and a vocal gesture. When we make a physical gesture, we cannot see what we are doing (unless we are looking in a mirror), but when we make a vocal gesture, we can hear it in the same way as the person to whom it is aimed. Thus, it affects the speaker in much the same way it affects the hearer. Furthermore, people have far better control over vocal gestures; if they don't like what they are saying (and hearing), they can stop it or alter it in midsentence. Thus, what distinguishes people from lower animals is not only their ability to think about a response before emitting it, but to control what they do.

Significant Symbols and Language

One of the most famous ideas in Mead's conceptual arsenal, and in all of sociology, is the significant symbol. **Significant symbols** are those that arouse in the person expressing them the same kind of response (it need not be identical) that they are designed to elicit from those to whom they are addressed. Physical objects can be significant symbols, but vocal gestures, especially language, are the crucial significant symbols. In a conversation of gestures, only the gestures are communicated. In a conversation involving language, gestures (the words) and, most importantly, the meaning of those words are communicated.

Language (or, more generally, significant symbols) brings out the same response in both speaker and hearer. If I were to say the word *dog* to you, both you and I would have a similar mental image of a dog. In addition, words are likely to lead us to the same or similar action. If I yelled the word *fire* in a crowded theater, we would both be driven to want to escape the theater as

significant gestures Gestures that require thought before a response is made; only humans are capable of this.

significant symbols Symbols that arouse in the person expressing them the same kind of response (it need not be identical) as they are designed to elicit from those to whom they are addressed.

quickly as possible. Language allows people to stimulate their own actions as well as those of others.

Language also makes possible the critically important ability of people to think, to engage in mental processes. Thinking, as well as the **mind**, is simply defined as conversation that people have with themselves using language; this activity is like having a conversation with other people. Similarly, Mead believed that social processes precede mental processes; significant symbols and a language must exist for the mind to exist. The mind allows us to call out in ourselves not only the reactions of a single person (who, for example, shouts the word *fire* in a theater), but also the reactions of the entire community. Thus, if yelling *fire* is likely to save lives, we might think about the public recognition we would receive for doing so. On the other hand, if we contemplate yelling *fire* falsely, the anticipated reaction of the community (disapproval, imprisonment) might prevent us from taking such action. Furthermore, thinking of the reactions of the entire community leads us to come up with more organized responses than if we were to think about the reactions of a number of separate individuals.

The Self

Another crucial concept to Mead is the **self**, or the ability to take oneself as an object. The self and the mind are dialectically related to one another; neither can exist without the other. Thus, one cannot take oneself as an object (think about oneself) without a mind, and one cannot have a mind, have a conversation with oneself, without a self. Of course, it is really impossible to separate mind and self because the self is a mental process.

Basic to the self is **reflexivity**, or the ability to put ourselves in others' places: think as they think, act as they act. This ability enables people to examine themselves and what they do in the same way that others would examine them. We can adopt the same position toward ourselves as others adopt toward us. To do this, we must be able to get outside of ourselves, at least mentally, so that we can evaluate ourselves as others do. We have to adopt a specific standpoint toward ourselves that can either be the standpoint of a specific individual or of the social group as a whole. (This idea will be discussed later.)

Mead believes that the self emerges in two key stages in childhood. The first is the **play stage** in which the child plays at being someone else. The child might play at being Barney, or La La, or Mommy. In so doing, the child learns to become both subject (who the child is) and object (who Barney is) and begins to be

mind To Mead, the conversations that people have with themselves using language.

self The ability to take oneself as an object.

reflexivity The ability to put ourselves in others' places: think as they think, act as they act.

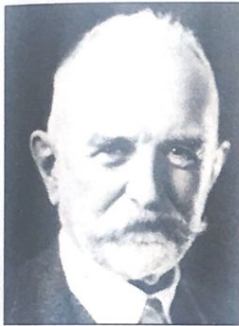
play stage The first stage in the genesis of the self, in which the child plays at being someone else.

able to build a self. However, that self is very limited because the child can only take the role of distinct and separate others (Barney, mother). In playing at being Barney or mother, the child is able to see and evaluate herself as she imagines Barney or her mother might see and evaluate her. However, the child lacks a more general and organized sense of self.

In the next stage, the **game stage**, the child begins to develop a self in the full sense of the term. Although the child takes the role of discrete others in the play stage, in the game stage she takes the role of everyone involved in the game. Each of these others plays a specific role in the overall game. Mead used the example

George Herbert Mead

A Biographical Vignette



Most of the important theorists discussed throughout this book achieved their greatest recognition in their lifetimes for their published work. George Herbert Mead, however, was as important, at least during his lifetime, for his teaching as for his writing. His words had a powerful impact on many people who were to become important sociologists in the 20th century. One of his students said, "Conversation was his best medium; writing was a poor second." Another of his students, the well-known sociologist Leonard Cottrell, describes what Mead was like as a teacher:

For me, the course with Professor Mead was a unique and unforgettable experience . . . Professor Mead was a large, amiable-looking man who wore a magnificent mustache and a Vandyke beard. He characteristically had a benign, rather shy smile matched with a twinkle in his eyes as if he were enjoying a secret joke he was playing on the audience . . .

As he lectured—always without notes—Professor Mead would manipulate the piece of chalk and watch it intently . . . When he made a particularly subtle point in his lecture, he would glance up and throw a shy, almost apologetic smile over our heads—never looking directly at anyone. His lecture flowed and we soon learned that questions or comments from the class were not welcome. Indeed, when someone was bold enough to raise a question, there was a murmur of disapproval from the students. They objected to any interruption of the golden flow . . .

His expectations of students were modest. He never gave exams. The main task for each of us students was to write as learned a paper as one could. These Professor Mead read with great care, and what he thought of your paper was your grade in the course. One might suppose that students would read materials for the paper rather than attend his lectures but that was not the case. Students always came. They couldn't get enough of Mead.

game stage The second stage in the genesis of the self: instead of taking the role of discrete others, the child takes the role of everyone involved in a game. Each of these others plays a specific role in the overall game.

of baseball, in which the child may play one role (say, pitcher), but must know what the other eight players are supposed to do and are going to expect from her. In order to be a pitcher, she must know what everyone else is to do. She need not have all the players in mind all the time, but at any given moment she may have the roles of three or four of them in mind. As a result of this ability to take on multiple roles simultaneously, children begin to be able to function in organized groups. They become able to better understand what is expected of them, what they are supposed to do, in the group. Although play requires only pieces of a self, the game requires a coherent self.

Another famous concept created by Mead is the **generalized other**. The generalized other is the attitude of the entire community or, in the example of the baseball game, the attitude of the entire team. A complete self is possible only when the child moves beyond taking the role of individual significant others and takes the role of the generalized other. It is also important for people to be able to evaluate themselves and what they are doing from the point of view of the group as a whole and not just from that of discrete individuals. The generalized other also makes possible abstract thinking and objectivity. In terms of the latter, a person develops a more objective perspective when she relies on the generalized other rather than individual others. In sum, to have a self, a person must be a member of a community and be directed by the attitudes common to the community.

All of this, especially the generalized other, might lead one to believe that Mead's actors are conformists who lack individuality. However, Mead makes it clear that each self is unique; each develops within the context of specific biographical experiences. Furthermore, there is not one generalized other, but many generalized others because there are many groups within society. Because people belong to many different groups and have many generalized others, there are a multitude of selves. Furthermore, people need not accept the community and the generalized other as they are; they can work to change them. At times they succeed, altering the community, the generalized other, and, ultimately, the selves within that community.

I and Me

The fact that there is both conformity and individuality in the self is manifest in Mead's distinction between two phases of the self—the *I* and the *me*. Although these phases sound like things or structures of the self, in reality they are viewed by Mead as processes that are part of the larger process that is the self.

The *I* is the immediate response of the self to others. It is the incalculable, unpredictable, and creative aspect of the self. People do not know in advance what the *I* will do. Thus, in the case of a baseball game, a player does not know

generalized other The attitude of the entire community or of any collectivity in which the actor is involved.

I The immediate response of the self to others; the incalculable, unpredictable, and creative aspect of the self.

in advance what will happen—a brilliant play or an error. We are never totally aware of the *I*, with the result that we sometimes surprise ourselves with our actions. Mead stresses the importance of the *I* for four reasons. First, it is the key source of novelty in the social world. Second, it is in the *I* that our most important values lie. Third, the *I* constitutes the realization of the self and we all seek to realize the self. Because of the *I* we each develop a unique personality. Finally, Mead views a long-term evolutionary process (and here the great sociologist offers a grand theory) from primitive societies where people are dominated by *me* to contemporary society where the *I* plays a much more significant role.

The *I* reacts against the *me* within the self. The **me** is basically the individual's adoption and perception of the generalized other. Unlike the *I*, people are very cognizant of the *me*; they are very conscious of what the community wants them to do. All of us have substantial *me*, but those who are conformists are dominated by the *me*. Through the *me* society controls us. The *me* allows people to function comfortably in the social world while the *I* makes it possible for society to change. Society gets enough conformity to allow it to function, and it gets a steady infusion of innovations that prevent it from growing stagnant. Both individuals and society function better because of the mix of *I* and *me*.

Symbolic Interaction

Significant symbols, especially language, also make possible **symbolic interaction** (this term led to the school of theory associated with theorists following in Mead's footsteps called **symbolic interactionism**). Humans are able to relate to one another not only through gestures but also through significant symbols. Use of these symbols makes possible much more complex human interaction patterns and forms of social organization than would be possible through gestures alone. In short, symbolic interaction makes human society more complex than that of bees or bears, neither of which can engage in symbolic interaction.

SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

Mead was the most important thinker associated with a school of social theory known as symbolic interactionism, but other thinkers linked with that theory also made important contributions to our understanding of everyday life.

me The individual's adoption and perception of the generalized other; the conformist aspect of the self.

symbolic interaction The distinctive human ability to relate to one another not only through gestures but also through significant symbols.

symbolic interactionism The school of sociology that, following Mead, focused on symbolic interaction.