

## Definition of the Situation

One important figure was W. I. Thomas (1863–1947), who, along with his wife Dorothy S. Thomas, created the idea of **definition of the situation**: If people define situations as real, then those definitions are real in their consequences. This means that what really matters is the way people mentally define a situation rather than what that situation is in reality. The definition, not the reality, leads people to do certain things and not others. To illustrate with the baseball example, suppose that you are playing shortstop and you define the situation as being two out when there is really only one out. The batter hits a pop fly to you and you catch it, believing in your mind that there are three outs. As a result, you jog off the field as if the inning were over. Your definition has had real consequences: You've left the field. Other real consequences may follow: Opposition runners on the bases may run around and score unmolested, your teammates may scream at you, and your manager may bench you. In many areas of our lives, how we define a situation often matters more than the reality.

This example suggests the importance of mental processes, or the mind. The mind defines the situation and we tend to act on the basis of that definition. How the mind operates is, at least to some degree, independent of the situation in which it finds itself. This means the task of sociology is to study the mind and mental processes in order to understand how they work, which is obviously in line with Mead's thinking on the centrality of the mind (and the self).

## The Contributions of Charles Horton Cooley and Robert E. Park

Thinking about the self was enhanced by another theorist associated with the symbolic interactionism: Charles Horton Cooley (1864–1929). Cooley was most famous for his concept of the **looking-glass self**. In modern terms a looking glass is a mirror. The idea is that we form our sense of ourselves by looking in some sort of mirror. But what mirror? The mirror Cooley has in mind is the other people with whom we interact. We use others as mirrors to assess who we are and how we are doing. We look at their eyes and their body language and we listen to their words. Looking in that mirror, we determine whether we are who we want to be and whether our actions are having the desired effect. If we see what we expect to see, if people evaluate us the way we hope, if they do what we want them to do, then the mirror confirms ourselves and we continue on as we have been thinking and acting. However, if the reverse occurs, then we may need to reassess our actions and even our sense of who we are. If the looking glass continues to show us a reflection that is different from what we think

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**definition of the situation** The idea that if people define situations as real, then those definitions are real in their consequences.

**looking-glass self** The idea that we form our sense of ourselves by using others, and their reactions to us, as mirrors to assess who we are and how we are doing.

we are, then we may need to reevaluate our sense of who we are, in other words, reevaluate our self-images. The looking-glass self reflects Cooley's interest, like that of others associated with symbolic interactionism, in the mind, self, and interaction.

Another key concept associated with Cooley is the **primary group**, an intimate face-to-face group that plays a crucial role in linking the individual to the larger society. Of special importance are the primary groups of the young, mainly the family and friendship groups, within which the individual grows into a social being. It is mainly within the primary group that the looking-glass self develops and the child makes the transition from thinking mainly about himself to taking others into consideration. As a result of this transformation, the child begins to develop the capabilities that will enable him to become a contributing member of society. As Mead demonstrated in his thinking on the play and game stages, the child needs to learn to consider the expectations of specific significant others and ultimately the generalized other.

Cooley also made an important methodological contribution. Like Mead he recognized that people do not simply behave as the behaviorists had argued, but their actions are the result of the mind, the self, and a wide array of mental processes. Although the behaviorists are wedded to experimental methods that allow them to study behavior in a laboratory setting, Cooley argued for the need for sociologists to put themselves in the place of the actors they were studying (usually in the real world) in order to better understand the operation of their mental processes. Cooley called this **sympathetic introspection**—putting oneself in the places and the minds of those being studied, doing so in a way that is sympathetic to who they are and what they are thinking, and trying to understand the meanings and the motives that lie at the base of their behavior. This method is much more unscientific than the experimental method used by behaviorists, but it continues to be one of the cornerstones of the study of everyday life, at least for some sociologists.

Although sympathetic introspection covers the need to study the mind, the study of interaction, or symbolic interaction, requires a method to examine actual action and interaction in the social world. The key figure here was Robert Park (1864–1944), another thinker associated with symbolic interactionism. Park had been a reporter before becoming a sociologist, and as a reporter he was accustomed to collecting data on and observing whatever social reality he was writing about. When he became a sociologist, Park urged his students as well as colleagues to do much the same thing. In one sense, he was encouraging them

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**primary group** An intimate face-to-face group that plays a crucial role in linking the individual to the larger society. Of special importance are the primary groups of the young, mainly the family and friendship groups.

**sympathetic introspection** The methodology of putting oneself in the places and the minds of those being studied. Researchers do so in a way that is sympathetic to who others are and what they are thinking, and they try to understand the meanings and the motives that lie at the base of peoples' behavior.

## Robert E. Park

*A Biographical Vignette*



Robert Park did not follow the typical career route of an academic sociologist: college, graduate school, professorship. Instead, he led a varied career before he became a sociologist late in life. Despite his late start, Park had a profound effect on sociology in general and on theory in particular. Park's varied experiences gave him an unusual orientation to life; this view helped to shape the Chicago school, symbolic interactionism, and, ultimately, a good portion of sociology.

Park was born in Harveyville, Pennsylvania, on February 14, 1864. As a student at the University of Michigan, he was exposed to a number of great thinkers, such as John Dewey. Although he was excited by ideas, Park felt a strong need to work in the real world. Park said, "I made up my mind to go in for experience for its own sake, to gather into my soul . . . all the joys and sorrows of the world." Upon graduation, he began a career as a journalist, which gave him this real-world opportunity. He particularly liked to explore (hunting down gambling houses and opium dens). He wrote about city life in vivid detail. He would go into the field, observe and analyze, and finally write up his observations. Essentially, he was already doing the kind of research (scientific reporting) that came to be one of the hallmarks of Chicago sociology: urban ethnology using observation techniques.

Although the accurate description of social life remained one of his passions, Park grew dissatisfied with newspaper work because it did not fulfill his familial or, more important, his intellectual needs. Furthermore, it did not seem to contribute to the improvement of the world, and Park had a deep interest in social reform. In 1898, at age 34, Park left newspaper work and enrolled in the philosophy department at Harvard.

to do what has come to be known as **fieldwork**: that is, venturing into the field to observe and collect relevant data. More specifically, as a result of the urging of Park (and others), the key method of symbolic interactionists became **observation**. The attraction of being an observer is that researchers can both en-

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**fieldwork** A methodology used by symbolic interactionists and other sociologists that involves venturing into the field (the day-to-day social world) to observe and collect relevant data.

**observation** A methodology closely related to fieldwork, in which the symbolic interactionist (and other sociologists) studies the social world by observing what is transpiring in it. In the case of symbolic interactionism, this enables researchers to engage in sympathetic introspection and put themselves in the place of actors in order to understand meanings and motives and to observe the various actions that people take.

engage in sympathetic introspection and put themselves in the place of actors to try to understand their meanings and motives and observe the various actions that people take. Thus, observation was a perfect way for those associated with symbolic interactionism to study the thought processes, the actions, and the interactions of everyday life.