

WEEK TWO
Mon Sept 21, 2009
Tues Sept 22, 2009

**INTRODUCTION TO SYMBOLIC INTERACTION:
GEORGE HERBERT MEAD**

LECTURE OUTLINE

**PART ONE: THEORETICAL APPROACH OF SYMBOLIC
INTERACTIONISM**

- 1. Pragmatism as a Theoretical Perspective: George Herbert Mead**
- 2. Four Central Ideas of Pragmatism**

PART TWO: GEORGE HERBERT MEAD: MAIN CONCEPTS

- 1. Self**
- 2. Social Objects**
- 3. Social Acts**
- 4. Social Problems**
- 5. Communication through significant gestures and language**
- 6. Conclusion to Part Two**

**PART THREE: SUMMARY OF THE SEVEN BASIC LESSONS
LEARNED FROM MEAD**

Question of the Week

How does Mead conceptualize the relationship between the individual and society?

How does society “get into” individuals?

How many selves does an individual have?

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**INTRODUCTION TO SYMBOLIC INTERACTION: GEORGE
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DETAILED LECTURE NOTES

**PART 1: THEORETICAL APPROACH OF SYMBOLIC
INTERACTION**

1. PRAGMATISM AS A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

George Herbert Mead (1863-1931)

Biography:

An American philosopher at the University of Chicago.

Founded the area of social science called "Pragmatism" in philosophy

- developed a theoretical perspective we call "Symbolic Interactionism" (term coined by Herbert Blumer in the 1960s)

Other notables include William James, Charles Peirce, William Thomas, Charles Cooley, John Dewey.

Recent notables include: Everett Hughes, Howard Becker, Blanche Geer, Anselm Strauss, Carl Couch, John Lofland, Norman Denzin.

Pragmatism:

Charon talks about the 3 influences on Mead's thinking: philosophy of pragmatism, the evolutionary theories of Darwin, and the school called "Behaviourism" in psychology

- of these, the only one you have to know is Pragmatism
- Mead developed his ideas from the philosophical tradition called "pragmatism"
- Mead called his study the "philosophy of social action"

le why do people do what they do

- this meant that his main focus was on the process sociologists now call “socialization” (then called acculturation)
- ie How does personality develop in everyday life? How do we explain individual behaviour? What is the relationship between what individuals do and the society in which they live?

2. Four Central Ideas of Pragmatism

1. Humans define and do not respond.

Pragmatists examine the individual's relationship to the environment, contrasting it with other animals.

What distinguishes us from animals? Ability to symbolize, think.

Pragmatists interested in how this process takes place.

2. Humans believe that which is useful to them.

Knowledge is judged by how useful it is in defining the situations we are in.

We only remember that which is useful to us. Otherwise, discard the rest. Why? Because we remember that which we can successfully apply.

3. Humans see and define objects according to their use.

Pragmatism tries to explain how we actually see objects in the environment.

Why do we notice certain things and not others? Because things in situations are defined according to the use they have for us at the time.

4. Humans can be understood primarily by focusing on what they do.

Pragmatists tell us that to study humans we must start with their actions. Why? Because they believe that it is what people do in situations that is important. We can only understand why, how, where etc people are doing what they are doing IF we begin to document WHAT they are doing.

EG: I experience myself through other's responses to me (looking glass self), just as I experience myself through the resistance of objects

When we write self = self/other with objects

2. SOCIAL OBJECTS

What is a Social Object?

- a) a physical entity eg: chairs, cars, doors, floors
- b) an idea, a thought, a mental construct
- c) other people

Why is the self different from other objects?

Because it can be an object to itself, meaning it can look at itself and examine its actions (reflection)

From our very first moment, by virtue of our humanness (our ability to symbolize and attach meanings/reflections to gestures and signs and our ability to empathize), we are selves acting toward objects.

Research Question: Do day old infants have selves? Can they interact with others? Can they take the role of the other towards themselves?

Answer: There is no point discussing whether or not an infant has a self when s/he is born. From the moment s/he begins interacting with others (herself/himself or an actual other person), about an object, s/he has a self.

The self then emerges and changes in the process of interaction.

In Sum:

The self is always emerging. It is not a fixed entity.

The self emerges in situations (act/object = situation) in the process of acting.

3. SOCIAL ACTS

Definition: social acts are the basis for social interaction

: self/other – object = social act

STAGES OF THE ACT

Remember Mead's stages of the act: selection, manipulation, evaluation

The self is actively involved in each of these stages of the act, doing something with objects.

Stage One: Selection of Objects

The self/other selects out objects to pay attention to.

Stage Two: Manipulation of Objects

The self/other does something with these objects. Mentally or physically manipulates them.

Stage Three: Evaluation of Objects

The self/other makes an evaluation or a final gesture toward these objects.

EG: Walking down the street and “see” a homeless person

4. SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Most social action is habitual, takes place without us thinking about it.

EG: Driving a car to school = a habitual social action until a problem arises

Someone drives through the red light. We slam on the brakes, stop and think what to do. Habitual action is halted.

Mead says that it is only when a problem arises about an object that we stop and think or reflect.

Most of our behaviour is habitual. We get dressed, drive cars, do various activities we call school and work, without thinking reflectively about them.

However, if a problem arises – we cannot find our clothes, cannot think of the answer to a question in class – then we have a **halt in action** and we think and reflect about the object until we come up with some new way of acting.

Problem solving = reflective thinking = we actively interact with objects to get the halted action moving again

5. COMMUNICATION THROUGH SIGNIFICANT GESTURES AND LANGUAGE

For Mead , the self is a social, situated process.

To be social means that the individual is able to call out in herself/himself the same responses that s/he makes from other members of her/his group.

An individual can revise their responses, assume their perspectives and share their understandings.

Mead did not suggest there was a mysterious mechanism or gadget whereby individuals are able to TROTS. This is a uniquely human capacity.

Mead did, however, note the **significance of language** as an essential element in this process of self-awareness.

Purpose of Language? Helps individuals speak to themselves in the ways that others might speak to us.

Provides a commonly shared system of communication, a useful and necessary set of tools

When Does Language Begin? With babies with their gestures

What is a Gesture? An action toward oneself or others

When and How do Gestures Become Significant? When they take on social meanings, that is, meanings shared and understood by all

What is the relationship of language to gestures? Language emerges from gestures and provides a much larger commonly understood system of communication.

The self is relatively inexperienced at birth. As the child experiences continued and varied social interactions, its horizons or repertoires of shared understandings widen accordingly.

6. SOME IMPLICATIONS OF MEAD'S THEORY FOR OUR STUDY OF SOCIETY

What can we conclude about Mead's theory of the act?

Social Feedback is essential component of self-definition. For Cooley, this insight led him to develop the notion of the "looking-glass self". For Mead, this insight led him to stress the significance of TROTS. For example, the famous Zimbardo prison experiment is an example of how quickly one's self-image changes. If you play a role long enough, you begin to define yourself this way.

What Sources Provide Social Feedback?

Parents and Children: – a child's view of herself reflects how she thinks her parents view her. High self-esteem will develop if the child has a history of success and competence at home, has parental acceptance, set up structures and controls to limit the kinds of activities the child will engage in

Reference Groups: a reference group is any group which helps us define one or more of our social roles and which helps us evaluate ourselves or form attitudes

PART THREE: SEVEN BASIC LESSONS LEARNED FROM MEAD

1. Human experience is not random; it is socially organized.

Mead said that:

(a)the content and organization of self reflect the participation of individuals in society

ie: society is not coherent as there are lots of roles, social networks, social groups, institutions that overlap, conflict, complement one another

(b)interaction and social structure underlie and define individuality

ie: individual experience is shaped by just what relationships, networks, groups, institutions etc they enter or leave AND how these structures relate to one another

(c)individuals have multiple positions within the social structures of society

ie: what happens to people is strongly affected by their locations in social structures

- the significant fact about social structures is that they define boundaries (permeable/ impermeable) which means they either **act as barriers to or facilitators of interaction**
- Note: Most studies document the barrier/facilitator function of institutions, rules, groups..

2. Social life is constructed.

- the forms and content (the social structures and culture) of social life are social constructions

ie: the products of the collective activities of individuals as they together devise solutions to the problems they confront in their daily lives

EG:Adolescence: a social invention that is linked to the surplus of labour and the development of formal education

EG: gender = socially constructed categories

EG: the “family” = definitions have altered as new forms have emerged

3. Individuals are active agents.

- individuals are active agents who act on and alter the (social and non-social) environment, which impinges on them
-
- what role does structure take in shaping individual behaviour?

4. The world is a symbolized world.

- ***“If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas and Thomas, 1928).***
- Means that individual definitions and interpretations are consequential for how they construct their behaviour
- This sentence tells us the significance of the subjective and the symbolic in social life
- Tells us a substantive lesson: that the world to which people react and on which they act is a symbolized world, a world specified by meanings attached to the objects comprising
- Tells us a methodological lesson: the point of view of the participants in social interaction must enter accounts or descriptions of their behaviour

5. The significance of self.

What does it mean to have a self?

For Mead, this means to respond reflexively to oneself, to respond to oneself as an object

- **TROTS = take the role of the other towards oneself**
 - Means that individuals define themselves as participants in social relationships which is partly made up of the responses of others
 - definition of self shows both self-control and social control
- = takes into consideration the fact that society impacts on people AND people impact on society**

EG: sometimes individuals behave in ways that simply reflect demands of situations they find themselves in. Sometimes they do not.

How many selves does one individual have?

“Persons have as many social selves as there are groups of others who respond to them” (William James, 1890) .

- in this definition, self = a constellation of multiple identities, meaning internalized expectations for behaviour attached to the roles they play in social relationships.

6. The person as constrained and free.

Interactionists think there is both constraint and freedom in personal and social life.

EG: “Few Choices” study of married employed women who are “free” to choose ways to juggle work and home demands within the confines of limited alternatives.

= means that individuals are free to exercise choice but constrained in range of choices available

Research Question should be: What expands or contracts the alternatives open to people?

7. The limits to determinism in accounts of social behaviour.

- individuals are both free and constrained
- what can we say about causes of behaviour (determinants)
- interactionists don't talk about causes but about probabilities
- this allows them to consider emergent or new elements to arise in a study