

SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM:

An Introduction,

An Interpretation,

An Integration

FIFTH EDITION

Joel M. Charon

*Moorhead State University
Moorhead, Minnesota*

*With a chapter on Erving Goffman
Written by Spencer Cahill, Skidmore College*



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The Nature of the Self

Thus far, our emphasis has been human beings coming to understand their world through interaction. We indicate objects to one another, we share meanings, we create symbols as we interact with each other. Bernard Meltzer (1972:11) points out that everything ultimately comes back to society, to interaction. In fact, Meltzer feels that George Herbert Mead's (1934) book *Mind, Self and Society* should really be entitled *Society, Self and Mind* because individuals are always born into a society, and that is what gives them such human characteristics as self and mind. Of course, this was also the point in Chapter 5: Our symbols, which are so central to what we are, arise from interaction. The human is so thoroughly social that society provides our most basic elements: symbols, self, and mind.

SELF AS A SOCIAL OBJECT

There are many views of self in philosophy and social science, and few are either clear or consistent. The term "self" is used in so many different ways in our everyday speech that it is often hard to pin down what we mean by it.

In the symbolic interactionist perspective, "self" has a very specific meaning, not perfect but very usable. As Morris Rosenberg (1979:6-8) points out, this meaning is different from so many other meanings that are popular today. For example, it does not have the same meaning as Freud's "ego." It does not mean the "real" person nor the "productive person" nor "the total person."

For the symbolic interactionist, the self is an *object* that the actor acts toward. Many—including Mead—attempt to treat the self as both object and subject, but this becomes almost a hopeless swamp, especially at an introductory level. The self should simply be understood as a *social object that the actor acts toward*. The self does *not* act as a subject; symbolic interactionists normally say that the *actor* or *person* acts, sometimes toward the environment out there, sometimes toward his or her internal environment, the "self." It is more complicated than this, but this is a good beginning for understanding.

When we say that the self is a social object, we are saying that it is anchored in our social interaction. This means, first of all, that *the individual comes to see himself or herself as a separate social object because in interaction with others he or she is pointed out and defined.* "You are Andrew," "You are a boy," "You are a big boy," "You are Mom's favorite person." "You are, in essence, Andrew, an object, a thing like the chair, the telephone, the mouse, and the doorknob." And, like all these things, it takes others in interaction to point out to Andrew that he is a separate object and to allow him to see and understand that for himself. The individual becomes an object to himself or herself because of others. "In the beginning he is quite unable to make a distinction between himself and the rest of the world" (McCall and Simmons, 1966:207). Not only does society make possible our symbols and our ability to think, but it makes possible the self.

Mead (1934) emphasizes the social origin of the self in *Mind, Self and Society*. He asks:

How can an individual get outside of himself experientially in such a way as to become an object to himself? . . . [It is through] the process of social conduct or activity in which the given person or individual is implicated. . . . The individual experiences himself as such, not directly, but only indirectly, from the particular standpoints of other individual members of the same social group . . . [he] becomes an object to himself just as other individuals are objects to him or in his experience . . . it is impossible to conceive of a self arising outside of social experience. (pp. 138-40)*

Not only does the self arise in the first place in interaction with others, but, like all social objects, *it continues to be defined and redefined in interaction.* The self is really a process like all other social objects, constantly changing as the individual interacts with others. How I view myself, how I define myself, the judgment I have of myself all are highly dependent on the social definitions I encounter throughout my life. Peter Berger (1963) refers to this view of the self as radical in the sense that the self "is no longer a solid, given entity that moves from one situation to another. It is rather a process, continuously created and recreated in each social situation that one enters . . . man is not *also* a social being, but he is social in every respect of his being that is open to empirical investigation" (p. 106). A true transcendental self, the "true, authentic person" is not assumed here. "Hey, Charlie, who are you really?" does not make sense in this context. Charlie's "true self" is what he defines as his true self at that point in his life. What we see ourselves as in the present results from our interaction with other people. Sheldon Stryker (1959) makes this point nicely:

. . . the human organism as an object takes on meaning through the behavior of those who respond to that organism. We come to know what we are

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through others' responses to us. Others supply us with a name, and they provide the meaning attached to that symbol. They categorize us in particular ways—as an infant, as a boy, et cetera. On the basis of such categorization, they expect particular behaviors from us; on the basis of these expectations, they act toward us. The manner in which they act toward us defines our “self,” we come to categorize ourselves as they categorize us, and we act in ways appropriate to their expectations . . . as the child moves into the social world he comes into contact with a variety of persons in a variety of self-relevant situations. He comes, or may come, into contact with differing expectations concerning his behavior and differing identities on which these expectations are based. Thus he has . . . a variety of perspectives from which to view and evaluate his own behavior, and he can act with reference to self as well as with reference to others. In short, the socialization process as described makes possible the appearance of objectivity. (p. 116)

Stryker concludes his description of the self with the word “objectivity.” Socialization makes possible the fact that the individual is able to get outside of himself or herself and look back at the self objectively, as an object like all the objects defined in interaction. Mead makes a very big point of this ability to get outside of oneself, to take the perspective of the other, and as we shall see in the description of the development of the self in children, it is through “taking the role of the other” that the self emerges.

STAGES OF “SELF” DEVELOPMENT

The central meaning of the social nature of the self can be appreciated with a brief review of four stages in “self” development that each individual goes through, all related to interaction with others. The first three stages are drawn from the work of Mead, and the last is suggested by Tamotsu Shibutani.

The Preparatory Stage

The earliest stage of the self is referred to as the *preparatory stage*, with an almost primitive self emerging, a presymbolic stage of self. Mead probably did not explicitly name this stage, but he implied it in various writings (Meltzer, 1972:15). The child acts as the adult does. The child imitates the others' acts toward other objects and toward himself or herself as object. The parent may push the chair and so may the child. The parent may point to the child as object, the child may also point to self. The parent may say, “Dad,” and the child may imitate “da.” But the interaction, so long as it is only imitation, lacks meaning, lacks a symbolic understanding. The person as object can really emerge only when objects take on some meaning, that is, when objects are defined with words. When Andrew realizes that he is Andrew, separate and distinct from others, someone represented with a name and described with word qualities, then a symbolic self emerges. That

is why Mead refers to this first stage as preparatory; it is purely imitation, and social objects, including the self, are not yet defined with words that have meaning.

The Play Stage

The second stage, referred to by Mead as the *play stage*, comes early in the individual's development, during the acquisition of language. For most children language comes very early and meaning arises early, really making the preparatory stage insignificant in terms of length of time. The child, learning language, is now able to label and define objects with words that have shared meaning, so objects originally acted toward because of imitation now are acted toward according to the meaning shared in interaction with others. The self is pointed out and labeled by the significant others. "Hi, Andrew!" (Hey, Andrew stands for this object: *me, myself*) "Good boy!" (Hey, *I* am good.) "Are you sleeping?" (Am *I* sleeping?) "Go play!" (She is telling *me* to play.) As others point us out to ourselves, we see ourselves. We become social objects to ourselves. Others point us out; they give us names. The "creation of self as social object is an identification of that object. . . . Identification involves naming. Once an object is named and identified a line of action can be taken toward it" (Denzin, 1972:306). Our names, as well as various pronouns and adjectives, are used to identify "me" in relation to others. *Susan, girl, baby, good, you, she, smart, pretty, slow, funny, bad, wise, American, New Yorker: That's me!*

During this play stage, the child assumes the perspective of certain *individuals*, whom Mead refers to as "significant others," those people who take on importance to the individual, those whom the individual desires to impress; they might be those he or she respects, those he or she wants acceptance from, those he or she fears, or those with whom he or she identifies. Significant others are usually role models, who "provide the patterns of behavior and conduct on which he patterns himself. It is through interaction with these role models that the child develops the ability to regulate his own behavior" (Elkin and Handel, 1972:50). For the child, role models are most likely parents but can also be other relatives, television heroes, or friends. As the child grows older, the significant other possibilities increase greatly and can be a whole number of individuals, including Socrates, Jesus, mom, wife, son, the boss, the president of the United States, Madonna, and Bart Simpson. Whoever our significant others are at any point in our lives, they are important precisely because their views of social objects are important to us, including, and especially, our view of ourselves as social objects. The concept of significant others recognizes that "not all the persons with whom one interacts have identical or even compatible perspectives, and that, therefore, in order for action to proceed, the individual must give greater weight or priority to the perspective of certain others . . . others occupy high rank on an 'importance' continuum for a given individual"

(Stryker, 1959:115). To the small child significant others are responsible for the emergence of the self; the child comes to view self as an object because of significant others. In a sense, I fail to see myself without my awareness that these significant others see me.

The reason Mead calls this second stage the *play* stage is that the child assumes the perspective of only one significant other at a time. In this stage individuals are incapable of seeing themselves from the perspective of many persons simultaneously. The child segregates the significant others, and the view of self is a segmented one. The self is a multitude of social objects, each one defined in interaction with a single other. Play refers to the fact that *group* rules are unnecessary, that the child and a single other are necessary for controls at any single point in time. The child needs to guide self, needs to see self, needs to judge self from the view of only one individual at a time in order to be successful at play. Play is an individual affair, subject to the rules of single individuals. Mead's play stage is a time when the child takes the roles of significant others—father, Superman, mother, teacher—and acts in the world as if he or she were these individuals. In taking the roles of these others the child acts toward objects in the world as they act, and that includes acting toward self as they do. This stage is the real beginning of the self as social object.

The Game Stage

The third stage is the *game* stage. The “game” represents organization and the necessity of assuming the perspectives of several others simultaneously. Cooperation and group life demand knowing one's position in relation to a complex set of others, not just single others. They demand taking on a group culture or perspective. This stage is, to Mead, the adult self, a self that incorporates all one's significant others into one “generalized other.” The self becomes more a unitary nonsegmented self, changing in interaction but not radically changing each time another significant other is encountered. The child puts together the significant others in his or her world into a whole, a “generalized other,” “them,” “society.” The self matures as our understanding of *society* matures: It is the other side of the coin. Interaction with others brings us face to face with *their* rules, *their* perspectives, and it also brings us *their* perspective of self, and the self becomes an object defined not only by the individual (play stage) but also by *them* (game stage):

The play antedates the game. For in a game there is a regulated procedure, and rules. The child must not only take the role of the other, as he does in the play, but he must assume the various roles of all the participants in the game, and govern his action accordingly. If he plays first base, it is as the one to whom the ball will be thrown from the field or from the catcher. Their organized reactions to him he has embedded in his own playing of the different positions, and this organized reaction becomes what I have called the “gener-

alized other" that accompanies and controls his conduct. And it is this generalized other in his experience which provides him with a self. (Mead, 1925:269)

The development of a generalized other by the individual is really the internalization of society as the individual has come to know it, society's rules and perspectives become the child's, and society's definition of self becomes the individual's. "In one sense socialization can be summed up by saying that what was once outside the individual comes to be inside him" (Elkin and Handel, 1972:53). Meltzer (1972) emphasizes the central significance of internalizing a generalized other:

Having achieved this generalized standpoint, the individual can conduct himself in an organized, consistent manner. He can view himself from a consistent standpoint. This means, then, that the individual can transcend the local and present expectations and definitions with which he comes in contact. An illustration of this point would be the Englishman who "dresses for dinner" in the wilds of Africa. Thus, through having a generalized other, the individual becomes emancipated from the pressures of the peculiarities of the immediate situation. He can act with a certain amount of consistency in a variety of situations because he acts in accordance with a generalized set of expectations and definitions that he has internalized. (pp. 16-17)

The Reference Group Stage

Mead does not always make it clear if the individual has just one generalized other or several. It seems that what begins as one increasingly becomes several. Tamotsu Shibutani (1955) makes this explicit, emphasizing what amounts to a fourth stage of self, the *reference group stage*, a stage that seems especially characteristic in an industrial urban "mass society."

The individual interacts with many different groups and thus comes to have several reference groups (social worlds or societies), and he or she shares a perspective, including a perspective used to define *self*, with each of them. If he or she is to continue to interact successfully with a reference group, then that perspective must, at least temporarily, become the individual's generalized other, used to see and direct the self in that group.

This notion is highly consistent with the definition of social objects discussed in Chapter 4: Social objects are defined in interaction and change in the process of interaction and as the people with whom we interact change. The self as a social object has these identical qualities. In interaction with students I define myself one way, with my family another, with sociologists another, and with male friends another. Think of your life: Your self changes as you interact with friends, family, salespeople, strangers at a party. In each case, our view of self is somewhat different, and it is always undergoing change. William James (1915) points this out nicely:

Properly speaking, *a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their mind.* To wound any one of these images is to wound him. But as the individuals who carry the images fall naturally into classes, we may practically say that he has as many different social selves as there are distinct *groups* of persons about whose opinion he cares. He generally shows a different side of himself to each of these different groups. Many a youth who is demure enough before his parents and teachers, swears and swaggers like a pirate among his "tough" young friends. We do not show ourselves to our children as to our club-companions, to our customers as to the laborers we employ, to our own masters and employers as to our intimate friends. From this there results what practically is a division of the man into several selves; and this may be a discordant splitting, as where one is afraid to let one set of his acquaintances know him as he is elsewhere; or it may be a perfectly harmonious division of labor, as where one tender to his children is stern to the soldiers or prisoners under his command. (pp. 179-80)

SELVES AS EVER-CHANGING SOCIAL OBJECTS

Let us try to bring some central ideas together here. The small child, before the language-play stage, has the beginnings of self. Then the child with language begins to assume the perspectives of significant others, then of a generalized other, and finally of several reference groups, in each case entering into a new stage of the self. The self rests on other people, both individuals and reference groups. To some extent we have several distinct selves, but because our interaction overlaps, because our significant others and reference groups probably form a relatively consistent whole, our self is not as segmented as might have been implied in this discussion.

Let us look at some examples of the social nature of the self as well as its complexity. A president of the United States may use various individuals, groups, and categories of people in defining self, including, for example, "the Republican party," "the American people," "the corporate rich," "the 1776 revolutionaries," a small group of loyal advisers, Thomas Jefferson, his or her spouse, their children, the United Nations, the World Bank, or those who died in the Vietnam War. Whoever's perspective is assumed in the definition of the president's self will be critical to how the president acts. If Ivan matters and Ivan defines the president as one who cares about human beings, then in the presence of Ivan (or even away from Ivan) the president will define his or her self as "one who cares" and will behave accordingly. It is much more complex, but we will better understand self-definition and its consequences later in this chapter. Or take the example of Felix the freshman: mom, dad, girlfriend, Ernest Hemingway, the Rolling Stones, the alienated generation, the Catholic Church, the business world, Johnny Cash, the Harvard football team—each will influence how Felix defines himself and how he acts. If it is the alienated generation that constitutes his reference group, then he will act in relation to the college authorities as a noncooperative and distant role player.

It should be emphasized that the individual may or may not use people in his or her presence as significant others or reference groups. If people in the present situation are not important, then their perspective is not important and their definition of self is also not important. They are not *significant others* or reference groups. Thus, the poor teacher is often the one whose reference group does not include the students, and the "moral" person may be the one who rejects the standards of those who are *immediately* around him or her doing things people (significant others, reference groups) elsewhere consider immoral.

THE SELF AS OBJECT

We have stated that the self is an object, a social object. It is a thing, like other things pointed out and shared in interaction. As Herbert Blumer (1962:181) emphasizes, the importance of the self as object cannot be understated: It means that the individual can *act* toward himself or herself as he or she acts toward all other people. In a sense the individual has an additional person to act toward in the situation. Because we sometimes judge other people, so we can also judge our self. Because we can talk to others, so we can also talk to our self. Because we can point things out to our self about other people, so we can actually point things out to our self about self. We can direct others, so we can direct our self. When we say that selfhood means that the person is object we mean that the actor can act toward his or her self. "The individual achieves selfhood at that point at which he first begins to act toward *himself* in more or less the same fashion in which he acts toward other people. . . . It is still he who is doing [the acting]" (McCall and Simmons, 1966:54). Blumer (1962) emphasizes the central importance of the self as object:

The key feature in Mead's analysis is that the human being has a self. This idea should not be cast aside as esoteric or glossed over as something that is obvious and hence not worthy of attention. In declaring that the human being has a self, Mead has in mind chiefly that the human being can be the object of his own actions. He can act toward himself as he might act toward others. Each of us is familiar with actions of this sort in which the human being gets angry with himself, rebuffs himself, takes pride in himself, argues with himself, tries to bolster his own courage, tells himself that he should "do this" or not "do that," sets goals for himself, makes compromises with himself, and plans what he is going to do. That the human being acts toward himself in these and countless other ways is a matter of easy empirical observation. To recognize that the human being *can act toward himself* is no mystical conjuration. (p. 181)

One way to appreciate the meaning of self as object is to consider emotions. Many other animals emotionally respond to their environment. Adrenalin flows, clenched teeth are bared, a growl is expressed. What then

distinguishes human emotion from that of other animals? It all has to do with self. It is the fact that we can look back on what we do. We can see, recognize, and understand what is taking place within us: I am angry. I am sad. I am jealous. I am in love. I am afraid. This is what is meant when we say the human actor is able to see himself or herself as object. We see what we are and what we do—we even are able to look back on how we feel.

To truly appreciate the importance of the self I am going to break down the different actions that the individual makes toward it, or the way we use it in situations. These actions fall into three general categories: (1) We talk to ourselves, (2) we see ourselves, and (3) we direct ourselves. Let us consider each of these in turn.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SELF: SELF-COMMUNICATION

The human being is an actor who is able to communicate to himself or herself. In short, the actor talks to himself or herself. The individual is both a subject (a communicator) and an object of that action (has a self to whom he or she communicates). Talking to self with symbols is what the symbolic interactionist means by thinking. Self therefore makes possible thinking, the ability to point things out to ourselves, to interpret a situation, to communicate with ourselves in all of the diverse ways we are able to communicate with all other humans. "The possession of a self," Blumer (1966) concludes, "provides the human being with a mechanism of self-interaction with which to meet the world—a mechanism that is used in forming and guiding his conduct" (p. 535). Mead (1934) points out that "the essence of the self . . . is cognitive: it lies in the internalized conversation of gestures which constitutes thinking, or in terms of which thought or reflection proceeds" (p. 173). To think is to speak to one's self, to continuously point things out, to sometimes reflect, to carry on conversation toward that social object called self in identically the same manner as one speaks to others, except that, in most cases, conversation with one's self is silent.

Without self-communication, the human would not be able to communicate symbolically with others, for it is only because the human can simultaneously give off meaning to other people and understand (through communication with self) what he or she communicates, that effective symbolic communication with others can take place. "From Mead's point of view . . . only humans can self-consciously and purposively represent to themselves that which they wish to represent to others: this, for Mead, is what it means to have a self and what it means to be human" (Elkin and Handel, 1972:50). "What is essential to [symbolic] communication," Mead (1934) states, "is that the symbol should arouse in one's self what it arouses in the other individual" (p. 149).

All other action we take toward the self depends on this first action. Self-communication, then, is really the most important action of all, because it makes all other action toward the self possible.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SELF: SELF-CONCEPT

When we communicate to the self, we analyze or define the situations we act in. We indicate to the self information about all objects in the situation: other people, tools, and the clock, for example. We also indicate to the self information about the self in the situation. The fact is that selfhood means that the individual is able to *see self in situation* and is able to consider that object as he or she acts. We look at the world in relation to self. We assess how others affect us, and how we affect them. C. Addison Hickman and Manford H. Kuhn (1956) point out that the self “anchors” us in each situation, because unlike other objects, the self is present in all situations. The self serves as the basis from which a person “makes judgments and subsequent plans of action toward the many other objects that appear in each situation” (p. 43). This is a very critical and not very much discussed point: Selfhood allows us to examine situations and how they affect us and to determine the kind of action we might take by imaginatively testing proposed action first on its effects on the self, that object we seem to know the best. When I engage in conversation I engage in a self-interaction that attempts to assess the other’s image of me and how I am acting in relation to the other. As I hold my loved one close to me I try to assess not only her activity but my own activity—if, for example my action in relation to her is appropriate, tender, or immoral. How I assess myself in each of these acts described will lead me to adjust my acts accordingly.

The human being, then, has a number of ideas *about* self, and these ideas affect what he or she does in a particular situation. Sometimes the result of self-perception is called the individual’s “self-concept.” Rosenberg (1979) describes the self-concept as the “totality of the individual’s thoughts and feelings with reference to himself [or herself] as an object” (p. ix). It is what we *see* as we look at ourselves. It is our “picture” of ourselves. To some extent this picture of self is stable over time and across situations; it is, on the other hand, somewhat situational. It is enduring and built up over time; it is also a “shifting, adjustive process of self-presentation in social interaction” (Rosenberg, 1981:594). We carry an “average tone of self-feeling,” yet the individual “has as many different social selves as there are distinct *groups* of persons about whose opinion he [or she] cares (James, 1915:294).

Self-perception or self-concept means that the individual is able to look back at self. What does the individual actually see? For analytical purposes it is common to separate self-concept into two aspects: *self-judgment* and *identity*.

Self-Judgment as an Aspect of Self-Concept

Part of what we think of ourselves involves a judgment. This is sometimes called “self-esteem.” The self is something we see and judge, evaluate, like or reject, love or hate. We may feel good as we look at ourselves; we

may feel bad. Good boy! Bad boy! Stupid! Klutz! Beautiful! Wow! Ugh! Charles Cooley (1970) emphasizes this aspect of the self in his description of "looking-glass self." He states:

As we see our face, figure, and dress in the glass, and are interested in them because they are ours, and pleased or otherwise with them according as they do or do not answer to what we should like them to be; so in imagination we perceive in another's mind some thought of our appearance, manners, aims, deeds, character, friends, and so on, and are variously affected by it.

A self-idea of this sort seems to have three principal elements: the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance; and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification. (p. 184)

"He sees that I am talking a lot. He likes that about me. I like me too." "She sees me walking toward her slowly and deliberately. She thinks I'm cool. Yes, I'm cool!" "I must appear to them to be skillful at this game. They hate me for it, for I threaten them. Maybe I shouldn't be so showy. I don't like this aspect of me!" What we think of ourselves and what we feel about ourselves, like all else about the self, result from interaction: Self-judgment is a result, to a high degree, of judgment by others. Shibutani (1961) describes the interrelationship of self-judgment and interaction in this manner:

Like other meanings, sentiments toward one-self are formed and reinforced in the regularized responses of other people. Through role-taking a proud man is able to visualize himself as an object toward which others have feelings of respect, admiration, or even awe. If others consistently address him with deference, he comes to take it for granted that he deserves such treatment. On the other hand, if someone is consistently mistreated or ridiculed, he cannot help but conclude that others despise him. If a person is always ignored, especially in situations in which others like himself are given attention, he may become convinced that he is a comparatively worthless object. Once such estimates have crystallized, they become more independent of the responses of other people. (pp. 434-35)

And it is important to reiterate that it is not all people we interact with whose perspective we assume in judgment of self, but our significant others and reference groups:

Since men are socialized creatures whose perspectives develop through communication, the criteria by which they evaluate themselves are cultural. Standards differ from one reference group to another. In the social worlds that make up American society there are an amazing variety of attributes of which people are proud or ashamed: their speaking voices, the straightness of their teeth, their ancestry, their muscular strength, their ability to fight, the number of books they have read, the number of prominent people they know, their honesty, their ability to manipulate other people, the accessories on their automobiles, or their acquaintance with exotic foods. Each person sees himself from the standpoint of the groups in which he participates, and whatever he believes will impress his audience becomes a source of pride. (Shibutani, 1961:436)

Of all the propositions derived from symbolic interactionism, this one—the relation between the judgment of others and self-judgment—has been the most empirically supported and has been the subject of the most studies. In a sense it is the easiest to study precisely because within the symbolic interactionist perspective it comes closest to a simple causal relationship in the traditional scientific sense.

Yet this causal relationship is not a simple one. On the one hand, it is not the judgments of others per se that affect our self-judgment, rather it is our perception of other people's judgments that is important. They may actually like us, but we define their acts as negative toward us. They may think of us as stupid, yet we may think they are kidding. On the other hand, even if others consistently see us in a certain way, and even if we correctly interpret that perception, we still do not necessarily accept it, because we also interact with ourselves, and whatever others say or do we can define in any way that is useful to us. We can, for example, reject the judgments of others as unfair, inaccurate, or close-minded ("They really do not know me"). Or others might continuously tell me that I am thin, intelligent, smart, ambitious; but because I do not like what I am I find it useful to label them polite, kind, and easily taken in. There are several studies that show that self-judgment and the appraisals of others do not match perfectly (Gecas, 1982:6). We select from whatever others may think of us; we interpret, ignore, exaggerate, alter whatever fits what we think about ourselves. We may even select our significant others in order to enhance or reaffirm our self-judgment, thus making self-judgment a factor in influencing what others think of us (Rosenberg, 1979).

The importance of self-judgment, of course, is in the consequences it has for the individual's behavior. Kinch (1963:482-83) relates the following story about the importance of self-judgment for action. It also underlines the central importance of interaction and its relationship to self:

A group of graduate students in a seminar in social psychology became interested in the notions implied in the interactionist approach. One evening after the seminar five of the male members of the group were discussing some of the implications of the theory and came to the realization that it might be possible to invent a situation where the "others" systematically manipulated their responses to another person, thereby changing that person's self-concept and in turn his behavior. They thought of an experiment to test the notions they were dealing with. They chose as their subject (victim) the one girl in the seminar. The subject can be described as, at best, a very plain girl who seemed to fit the stereotype (usually erroneous) that many have of graduate student females. The boys' plan was to begin in concert to respond to the girl as if she were the best-looking girl on campus. They agreed to work into it naturally so that she would not be aware of what they were up to. They drew lots to see who would be the first to date her. The loser, under the pressure of the others, asked her to go out. Although he found the situation quite unpleasant, he was a good actor and by continually saying to himself "she's beautiful, she's beautiful . . ." he got through the evening. According to the agreement it was now the second man's turn and so it went. The dates were reinforced by the

similar responses in all contacts the men had with the girl. In a matter of a few short weeks the results began to show. At first it was simply a matter of more care in her appearance; her hair was combed more often and her dresses were more neatly pressed, but before long she had been to the beauty parlor to have her hair styled, and was spending her hard-earned money on the latest fashions in women's campus wear. By the time the fourth man was taking his turn dating the young lady, the job that had once been undesirable was now quite a pleasant task. And when the last man in the conspiracy asked her out, he was informed that she was pretty well booked up for some time in the future. It seems there were more desirable males around than those "plain" graduate students. (pp. 482-83)*

This story makes clear that judgment of self is a complicated interacting process, one where other individuals influence self but also where the individual, in interaction with self, actively defines and judges self. Thus, although this woman may have at first been highly dependent on others for self-judgment, she was able to break away and become increasingly independent in relation to self.

Erving Goffman (1959:14-60) describes the situation where the individual's judgment of self is almost completely in the hands of other people who have very great control over the physical and social environment the individual is in. He calls these instances total institutions, institutions that are apart from the wider society, isolated, where for a length of time the individual's life is in an enclosed, regimented space. Prisons, mental hospitals, the army, and some religious orders are examples. Goffman describes the process by which the total institutions systematically (but not always intentionally) manipulate the individual's world so that the individual comes to redefine self—to reject or question the conceptions of self brought in from the outside, which resulted from interactions in various social worlds. One is, in a real sense, redefined at first through "a series of abasements, degradations, humiliations, and profanations of self." Isolation itself, as well as the dispossession of property and loss of one's name, contributes to the pattern. Individuals may be stripped of privacy and also of the ability to present themselves to others in the way they choose. For example, clothes, cosmetics, haircuts are all restricted. A host of other acts that the individual is forced to perform, such as the constant use of "sir," asking permission, and figuratively bowing to those in authority, all operate to bring about a "mortification of self." New self-judgments slowly replace the old ones. Gradually, any positive self-judgments depend on the authorities and on the actions they wish to support. To obey passively becomes action rewarded with praise and approval, so a positive self-judgment, as it becomes more and more dependent on authorities, is tied to obedience. This whole process depends on (1) isolation from significant others and ref-

* From "A Formalized Theory of the Self-Concept" by John W. Kinch, in *American Journal of Sociology*. By permission of The University of Chicago Press. Copyright © 1963 by The University of Chicago. All rights reserved.

erence groups outside the institution, (2) total control of the individual's environment by a few powerful individuals, and (3) constant interaction within a social world whose perspective is assumed, including perspective on self.

This model, although extreme and unusual for most of our lives, still serves to sensitize us to a multitude of situations where people do have power and do indeed manipulate self-judgments. Parents, teachers, and peers may do this to the child. Sometimes the judgments of these others are highly consistent and lead the individual to reject self totally or love self fully. More often, significant others and reference groups are inconsistent and the judgment of self is to some extent a continuously changing process. Many religious cults resemble the total institution, and some societies do on occasion: isolation of the individual, control over the environment, limited interaction with outsiders, rejection of self-judgments developed elsewhere, and assumption of the group's perspective. Most of us, however, are not controlled by anything resembling a total institution. Instead, we live in a highly complex world, where many significant others and reference groups make possible self-judgments that are not easily manipulated but where the individual actively forms them.

One more point. Self-judgment makes possible moral choice. Individuals are able to assess and monitor themselves. They can praise themselves for good behavior and censure themselves when they are bad. Self-control involves threatening and punishing self as well as congratulating and rewarding self:

Unlike the animals in the researcher's laboratory, people exert considerable control over the rewarding and punishing resources available to them. They congratulate themselves for their own characteristics and actions; they praise or abuse their own achievements; and they self-administer social and material rewards and punishments from the enormous array freely available to them (Mischel and Mischel, 1977:34).

Identity as an Aspect of Self-Concept

The self then is an object toward which we direct communication and an object we see and think about in situations. Part of this "self-conception" involves judgment; part of it also involves *identity*. We call social objects names, and this allows us to identify and classify them in a world of a multitude of social objects. So too do we give ourselves names. Our identities are simply the *names that we call ourselves*. Gregory Stone (1962:93) describes identity as the perceived social location of the individual: where one is "situated" in relation to others, who one tells the self one is, and in his or her actions in situations what one announces to others that one is.

Identities, Berger (1963) writes, are "socially bestowed, socially maintained, and socially transformed" (p. 98). Thus, defining who the self is, like

all the other actions the individual takes toward his or her self, is carried out in interaction with others. As others label me, so I come to label myself. The names given us become our names, and our names are our definitions of "who we are" in relation to those we interact with. The identities are labels used not by all others but by the reference groups and significant others of the individual. And these identities become central to us over time as our interaction reconfirms them over and over.

"Identities are meanings a person attributes to the self," wrote Peter Burke (1980). They are relational, social, placed in a context of interaction, and they "are a source of motivation" (p. 18). "I am a man! That is important to me! Like many other men I must develop male friendships that mean having fun without sexual involvement, and like other men I must date, court, and have sexual contact with women!" Needless to say, such a male identity will matter in an individual's interaction and relationships. Indeed, as Harold Garfinkel (1967:116) notes, sexual classification is especially important to all societies for dividing people and placing them into "natural" categories of male and female. The individual sense of "the real me" begins with sex identity—it is central to who we think we are. Spencer E. Cahill (1980) concisely describes how children take on this identity:

From the very first day of life the child is responded to by caregivers in terms of his or her sex. Caregivers' sexually differential responsiveness is associated with their use of sex designating terms. By the second year of life the child has incorporated these complexities of responses to his or her self and their association with sex-specific verbal labels into his or her self-conception. The child then attempts to actively confirm his or her gender identity and is influenced in these attempts by the responses of others. Through initiation, playing at gender specific roles, selection of dress and objects of play, and increased interactional experience the child becomes increasingly competent in the subtleties of gender expression. During this same period the child learns the importance of anatomical features to the confirmation of gender identity. Of course, the content of this process is dependent on cultural definitions and common sense understanding of sex and gender. (p. 133)

The central importance of identity to the individual is the subject of a great deal of theoretical and empirical work at the State University of Iowa. Much of this work has been done or inspired by Kuhn, who developed the Twenty Statements Test (TST), which simply asks the individual to answer the question *Who Am I?* with twenty statements. The answers to the question tell the researcher the central identities or self-definitions of the person (boy, Christian, Smith, student, and so forth). As one would expect, as the person identifies his or her self, there is almost always a simultaneous identification of reference group. The instructions for the TST are as follows:

There are twenty numbered blanks on the page below. Please write twenty answers to the simple question "Who am I?" in the blanks. Just give twenty different answers to this question. Answer as if you were giving the answers to

yourself, not to somebody else. Write the answers in the order that they occur to you. Don't worry about logic or "importance." Go along fairly fast, for time is limited. (Kuhn and McPartland, 1954:70)

Hickman and Kuhn (1956) describe their view of self that is operationalized by the TST:

There is nothing mystical about this self. It consists of the individual's attitudes (plans of action) toward his own mind and body, viewed as an object. We may think of it as consisting of all the answers the individual might make to the question "Who am I?" (pp. 43-44)

Probably "identity" would be more correct than "self" because the answers to the questions are core names with which the individual labels self. As Stone (1962:93) emphasizes, identities are *social locations*, and individuals will usually answer a question like "Who am I?" by identifying themselves in groups or in social categories. "I am a woman" is a valid social category in that it refers to the fact that women constitute an important reference group, that in the individual's relations with others she sees this as an important identity, and she *believes* others also regard it as such. Several hypotheses can be made on the basis of the *order* in which subjects list their identities, the degree to which the order changes over time, or the relationship between identities and such things as age, sex, social class, and marital status.

One example of how the TST was used in empirical research is a study by Richard Brooks (1969). The TST is used to measure one of the variables in the study: the degree to which one identifies with major social institutions in society. Brooks attempts to distinguish political extremists in American society. He hypothesizes that those who are committed to either political radicalism or right-wing conservatism will differ significantly in their identification with major institutions in society—identified conservatives will respond on the TST with more references to family, occupational and economic institutions, church and religious institutions, and political and civic organizations than will the radicals. Brooks found support for his hypothesis in 254 respondents. Identification with major institutions was significantly more common among the conservatives. Brooks concludes from this that conservatives view themselves *within* societal institutions, whereas radicals are more likely to view themselves as acting against or toward them.

There are different types of identities. Some are central to the individual; others are not very important and are easily changed. It is important to make this distinction. Stone, for example, distinguished three types: basic (such as age and sex), general (such as priest or father), and independent (such as part-time employee). These go from the very basic, central, difficult-to-change identities to the nonpervasive, easy to change. A more recent attempt to do the same thing is by Stryker (1980:60-62), who distinguishes

between identities according to “identity salience” and according to “identity commitment.” Salience refers to the level of importance a given identity has to many situations. Some identities are important only occasionally; others are important to the individual all the time. We must recognize that all individuals have a hierarchy of salience, with some identities being at the top and others at the bottom. My identities as sociologist, teacher, father, and husband are very salient; homeowner, golfer, union member, and author are less so. Stryker also describes “commitment,” the degree to which a certain identity matters to the individual in relation to certain other people. When I am around family, my identity as a family member is very important to me; when I am around students, I have strong commitment to the identity of professor. Some identities—sociologist, for example—have high salience to me, and among many people with whom I interact I give these identities high commitment. Other identities—tennis player, for example—have low salience but high commitment when I am with my friends on the tennis court. There are yet other identities—full professor, for example—that are not salient and that I do not give much commitment to.

Ralph Turner (1968) makes the same type of distinction. However, he refers to core identities as “role-person merger” or “real selves.” By real self Turner means that the individual believes that a given identity reflects who he or she really is: The person and the role are seen to be one and the same. Who am I? I am a man, I am a moral being, I am a Confucianist, I am a breadwinner. This is who I *really* am! Of course, Turner points out, this is not who a person really is, but who he thinks he is.

Identity is an important part of self-concept. It is who the individual thinks he or she is and who is announced to the world in word and action. It arises in interaction, it is reaffirmed in interaction, and it is changed in interaction. It is important to what we do. Not all identities matter. However, some may matter almost all the time.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SELF: SELF-CONTROL, SELF-DIRECTION

The self is an object that is open to our own direction. Objects are defined according to the line of action we take toward them, and the self in this sense is an object we are directing, influencing, and controlling. Objects out there are manipulated by us, and so it is with our own self. I direct Martha, I can control Daniel, and I influence Friska the freshman, but I can also do these things with *me*. That the individual has a self is important precisely because the individual has this ability to order self, control self, direct self. That is what we mean by “self-control,” or “self-direction.” The individual in this sense does not passively *respond* to commands but holds back action, considers options, hesitates, acts aggressively or quietly, guides acts according to a set of morals learned in other times and in other places, changes lines of action, and so on. To direct oneself is to point at oneself and give

orders. Self-control and self-direction allow us to align our action with others and therefore to do our part in any cooperative venture. Also, self-direction and self-control mean we are able to say, "*Stop!* don't you do that with those guys! You know better, *Me!*" Thus, individuality, freedom, and non-conformity as well as cooperation depend on self-direction and self-control. Action is organized and planned for a purpose: It is "elicited and directed without the presence of immediate rewards, external agents of control, or controlling conditions" (Wells and Marwell, 1976:43). The alternative to self is a passive relationship with the environment because without self-direction and self-control there is only direction and control by outside forces.

Our self-direction and self-control like all else depend on other people. Our self is pointed out by others, and our self-control is in large part guided by others. We direct/control our action according to those whose perspectives we assume in the situation we encounter, those who are in the situation, and/or those outside of it. We are thus not "free" to direct and control self in any complete sense, but we are guided by the perspectives of others. The guides to our behavior, the guides we use to determine "right" action, appropriate action, rational action, depend on the perspectives of significant others and reference groups. When Mead points out that the self and society are two sides of the same coin, he is referring to society's perspective becoming the individual's, the rules of society becoming the standards by which the individual controls his or her own action. According to Mead "the principal outcome of socialization that makes self-regulation possible is the development of the *self*" (Elkin and Handel, 1972:50). Human conscience in this sense is the assumption of a social world's perspective, and use of conscience is acceptance of this perspective as a guide for one's actions. The individual uses perspectives not to "determine response" but to converse with self, guide self, control self, and direct self. Each situation we enter is different, and each, to some extent, demands active participation by the individual in relation to self.

This quality of the self relates to the human's ability to solve problems. We can relate to problems we encounter through directing and redirecting ourselves. We work toward goals through directing ourselves toward achieving those goals. We work according to values we believe in (freedom, beauty, or the accumulation of friends or money) precisely because we are able to organize our action through direction of the self.

It is through this continuous self-direction and self-control that the *active* human begins to be a reality. Although we are dependent on others for the emergence of self, and although others are important for what the actor says to self and how the actor judges and identifies self, once the self is developed, the actor has the ability to be on his or her own to a great extent. The power "out there" is tempered by the fact that the actor comes to exercise self-control. To possess a self means that the actor is able to direct self in situations, and this is a prerequisite for freedom. We may be

free or we may not, but without self, freedom seems unthinkable. As Tom Goff (1980) describes it:

[The human being's] relationship to nature is a *self-conscious*, reflexive relationship. . . . Other animals react to stimuli: [Human beings] can, in addition, react to themselves as stimuli. . . . [This fact] is understood as the basis of the ability to inhibit overt and immediate reaction to stimuli, to think or act implicitly, or in mind, before responding overtly and intentionally to the environment. [Human beings] thereby acquire a control over their own activity and their environment which is denied to other species. (pp. 56–57)

And Blumer (1966) emphasizes exactly the same point:

With the mechanism of self-interaction the human being ceases to be a responding organism whose behavior is a product of what plays upon him from the outside, the inside, or both. Instead, he acts toward his world, interpreting what confronts him and organizing his action on the basis of the interpretation. (p. 536)*

It seems truly paradoxical that the origin of the free actor—selfhood—should be a *social* creation.

CENTRAL IDEAS ABOUT THE SELF

The self is highly complex and very important. Let us review some of the key ideas discussed so far:

1. The self is social. It arises in interaction, and it changes or remains stable due to interaction.
2. The self arises in childhood through symbolic interaction with significant others (play stage). The child develops a mature self with the development of a generalized other (game stage). With adulthood come reference groups, each influencing a different view of the self, and making the self somewhat different in each situation.
3. The meaning of the self is that the individual becomes an object to his or her own action. The actor imaginatively gets outside of his or her person and acts toward self just as others are able to act toward him or her. This process depends to a high degree on taking the role of others, both significant others and reference groups; we act toward self according to our definition of the acts of others toward us.

* Reprinted from "Sociological Implications of the Thought of George Herbert Mead" by Herbert Blumer in *The American Journal of Sociology*, by permission of The University of Chicago Press. Copyright © 1966 by The University of Chicago.

4. Much of our action with other people is symbolic communication; all of our action toward the self is symbolic communication. The basis for all selfhood is that we are able to talk to ourselves. This is what is meant here by thinking.
5. As we communicate toward self we are able to see ourselves in the situation, to recognize who we are in relation to others and vice versa, as well as to evaluate our own action in the situation. We are able to judge ourselves and to establish an identity.
6. The self is one object that exists in and is used by the individual in all situations. Actions toward self are central to our understanding of all situations.
7. Self means that the individual is able to be active in relation to the world, for self makes possible self-control and self-direction. The ability of the individual to influence the direction of his or her own action makes possible both individuality and cooperative action. It allows the individual to agree to cooperate or to refuse to conform.

THE SELF AND THE SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONIST PERSPECTIVE

Throughout this chapter the self has been shown to be tied, like everything else we discussed earlier, to interaction as diagrammed in Figure 6-1.

We have also emphasized that one's action toward self, like all other social objects, depends on one's perspective, and that this perspective comes from significant others, a generalized other, and reference groups. Figure 6-2 illustrates the *emergence* of selfhood.

As the child continues to interact, the generalized other is supplemented by various reference groups, so that for the adult the model shown in Figure 6-3 seems more accurate.

The self as defined in this chapter is something that the individual *acts toward*: We communicate with, analyze, direct, judge, and label the self. *To say that the self changes in interaction with others is to say that these acts change.* The point is that the self, as well as the symbol, is central to the development of both complex social life and human individuality (see Figure 6-4). Chapters 9 and 10 focus on human action and interaction and more fully develop the importance of the self described in this chapter.

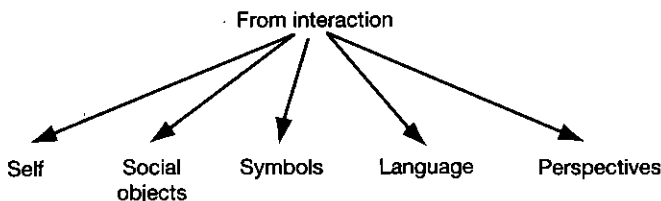


FIGURE 6-1

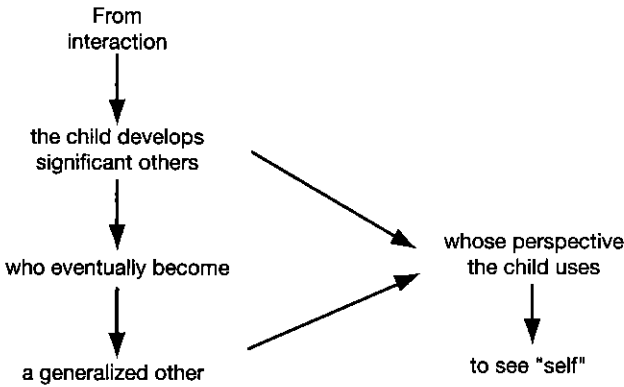


FIGURE 6-2

THE "I" AND THE "ME"

We began this chapter with a warning that the "self" is defined a number of ways in the academic world and in everyday usage. Indeed, it is so complex that even symbolic interactionists are far from perfect agreement on its definition.

Throughout this chapter the self has been treated as *object*. On this symbolic interactionists agree, and generally they agree on the various ways actors act toward self. Self as object is usually referred to as the "me." However, Mead and other symbolic interactionists also describe

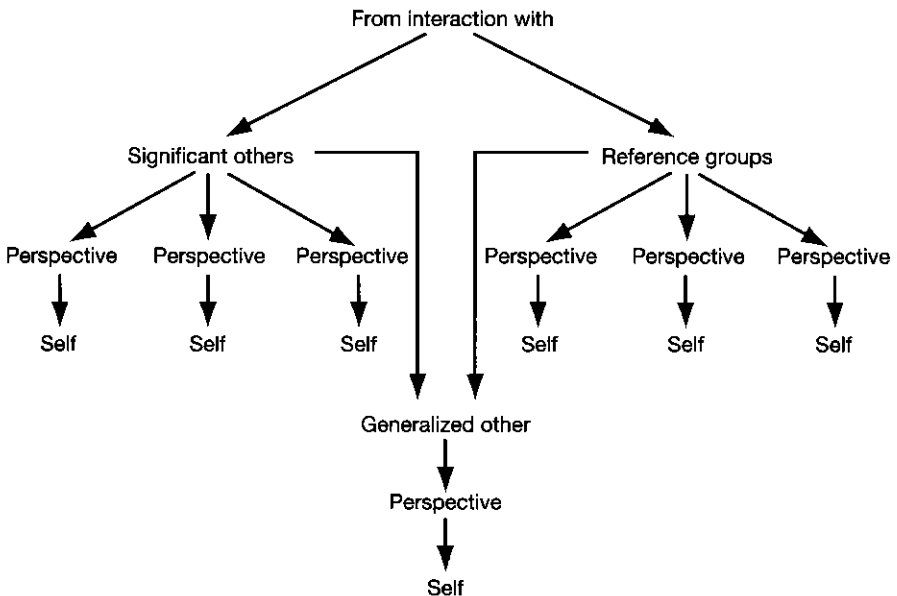


FIGURE 6-3

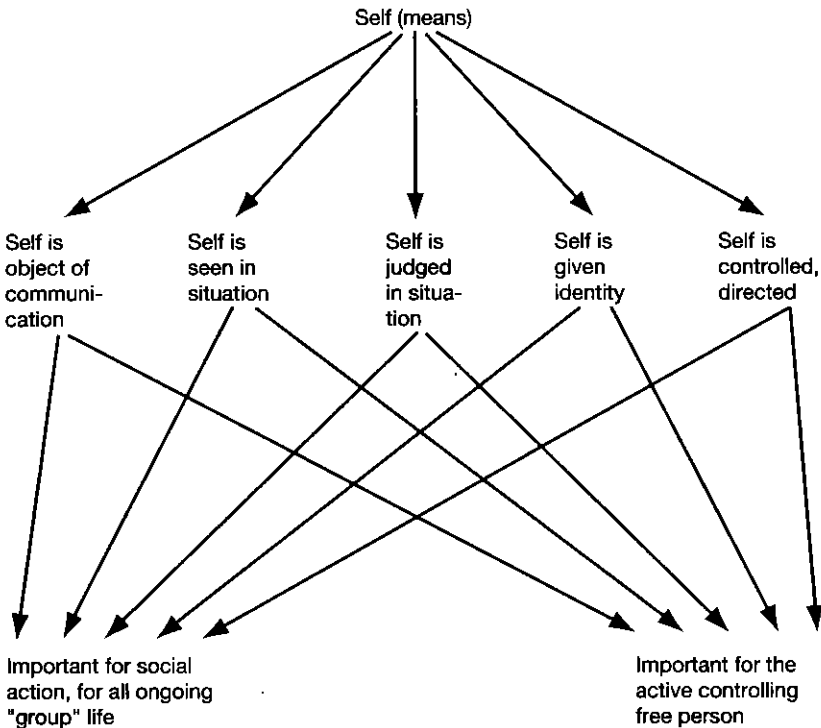


FIGURE 6-4

another aspect of the self called the “I.” This part of the self is not nearly as important as the “me” (self as object), and symbolic interactionists are far more ambiguous and inconsistent in how they define and describe the “I.”

Mead (1934) makes the distinction between the “I” and the “me” in several places, including the following:

The “I” is the response of the organism to the attitudes of the others; the “me” is the organized set of attitudes of others which one himself assumes. The attitudes of the others constitute the organized “me,” and then one reacts toward that as an “I.” (p. 175)

Here Mead is giving probably the most commonly used description of the “I.” The “I” is the individual as subject, the “me” constitutes the person as object. It is the “me” that has been described in this chapter up to now. The “me” is the social self, the object that arises in interaction, and the one that the actor communicates toward, directs, judges, identifies, and analyzes in interaction with others. “The ‘I,’ “ says Mead, “is something that is, so to speak, responding to a social situation that is within the experience of the individual” (p. 177). In this sense, the individual’s “I” is person as actor, that

aspect of the individual, as Meltzer (1972:17) points out, that gives propulsion to acts.

It would seem that this use of the "I" part of the self is almost synonymous with the term "actor." It has always been confusing to me, and I find it much better to reserve the term "actor" for the person, and the term "me" for the social self, or the self as object. Thus, it is the actor who acts in the world; the actor is constantly acting toward the "me."

Mead, however, uses the "I" in a second way, and it is much clearer and more useful this way. It is much easier to grasp and is more consistent with the description of self developed thus far. The "I" is the self which is not socially developed, the part of the self that is *impulsive, spontaneous, and unlearned*. Whereas the social self—the "me"—is controlled by the actor, the impulsive self—the "I"—leads to action which arises without immediate control. The "I" is that part of the self that causes action that is not thought about until after it occurs; it is that part of the actor that is "untouched by human hands" and sometimes even surprises the one who acts ("Did I really do that?"). People who act on impulse in many situations are acting out of something that springs within them and which often gets them into trouble. On the other hand, the actions of highly spontaneous people also spring from the "I" and can be highly creative or brave. The "I" can lead to action that is destructive or creative, but its essence is that it is not controlled by the actor when it occurs, and it is not something that is learned from social interaction. Mead is telling us that the "me" is not all there is: No matter how much we interact, no matter how much we learn to control what we do in situations, we all are to some extent impulsive and spontaneous in the situations we act in.

The "I" may sometimes be important, but by far the most emphasis in the symbolic interactionist perspective is on action resulting from "me," on the fact that humans act toward self as object, and it is such action that is the primary source of what we do in situations. Indeed, unless I note otherwise, I will use the term "self" to mean the "me," the self as object. This is consistent with most symbolic interactionists.

THE SELF AND THE MIND

The mind, to Mead (1934), is the "twin emergent of the self." They arise in interaction together. Although Mead's book *Mind, Self and Society* begins with "mind," it is probably best to "culminate rather than begin with [Mead's] understanding of mind" (Troyer, 1946:198). The mind is, in a sense, made easy to understand because Mead's concept of the mind is an integration of the concepts of symbol and self. Mind is the *symbolic action* the actor takes toward the *self*. Its nature and importance will be the subject of Chapter 7.

SUMMARY

The self, like symbols, is a social object the actor uses in situations to achieve goals. The actor acts toward objects in the outside environment; the actor is also able to act toward himself or herself as an object. By doing this, the actor is transformed; the actions we take toward self—communication, perception, and direction—change what we are in nature. We take some control away from our outside environment, and we are able to choose what we do in the world. We do not simply respond to stimuli, but act back on ourselves: discussing, evaluating, holding back, and commanding action.

The self is socially created. What better evidence is there that human beings are social beings? The “I,” discussed briefly in this chapter, is sometimes considered a part of the self, but for purposes of understanding the nature of the human being, it is far more important to recognize that it is the “me”—the actor as the object of his or her own actions—that plays far more of a role in human action.

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