



George Mead's "I" & "Me"

Socialization > George Mead's "I" & "Me"

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social and functional Theory of Mind, which will be offered and presented through Mead's account of human origins. A conclusion is offered that describes the impact of Mead's theories and current societal practices through the sociological lens.

Overview

Background of George H. Mead

George Herbert Mead was a philosopher who has now entered the realm of "classical sociological thinkers" (Alexander, 1989, p. 37 – 39; Athens, 2007a; Joas, 1997, XI; Rhea, 1981, XIV – XI; Strauss, 1984, p. 1441 – 1443). According to John Dewey (1931), Mead was the "chief force in this country of turning psychology away from mere introspection and aligning it with biological and social facts and conceptions" (p. 311 – 312). Aside from Dewey's famed comment, Athens (2007b) wrote, "He is not only regarded as a classic figure in sociology, but also as the progenitor of 'symbolic interactionism,' a major sociological perspective that is now taught in almost every introductory sociology course" (p. 137). Professionally, Mead was a professor who served on the faculty at the University of Michigan. After this appointment, Mead subsequently served as a member of the University of Chicago's Department of Philosophy for 20 years.

Mead was directly involved with the social survey movement and the survey's role in producing improved outcomes for students in academic settings, especially in undergraduate teaching (Cook, 2007). Dedicated to the university, Mead (1915) wrote that the university is the "community organized to find out what culture is as well as to give it; to determine what is proper professional training as well as to inculcate it; to find out what is right and...wrong as well as to teach" (1915, p. 351). Mead further described the university's role is "to state and formulate research problems...and solve them; in general, to fix from moment to moment the changing meaning of life and the fitting tools for appropriating it; to be continually redefining education as well as administering it" (p. 351; 357 – 358).

Mead (1934) also recognized that institutions are the building blocks upon which society is constructed and understood that dominations impact the polity (pp. 277; 310 – 316; Athens, 2007, p. 138). The six basic institutions that Mead identified as com-

Abstract

This article provides a brief glimpse into the historical and academic background George Herbert Mead. It includes an overview of George Mead's sociological philosophies, including ways Mead defined the sociological tenets of "I" and "Me," with accompanying examples of Mead's views and additional insights. Also presented are ways George Mead's social philosophies impacts current sociological thought through various applications. Further examples will be provided into Mead's

Keywords**"I"****Internalization****"Me"****Perspective Taking****Pragmatism****Theory of Mind**

prising society, included:

- Language;
- The family;
- The economy;
- Religion;
- The polity; and
- Science.

Mead indicated that all institutions are rooted in social action, and social acts included any activity that required the efforts of two or more persons to be completed (Mead, 1932, pp. 180 – 182; 1934, pp. 8 – 11). However, he also believed that the hope and salvation of human society did not rest on these tenets, but rather on science, because Mead viewed science as having the ability to provide much needed improvements in the operation of all of the other institutions (1923, p. 264 – 266; 360 – 364).

Table 1. Darwin/Mead Origin & Social Psychological Evolution of Species

Approximation of Years	Darwin's Origin of Species	Mead's Social Psychological Origins
3.5 million years ago	Australopethicans appear – exhibiting habitual bipedal locomotion and regular tool use.	Life forms are driven to survive (at least) and flourish (at best) under changing and life threatening conditions.
2.1 million years ago	Homo genus appears – are able to "manufacture" tools.	The evolution of sentience and sociality in group life forms permits reactions to excitations in favor of the playing out of complex, organized habits.
1.5 million years ago	Homo erectus appears with upright posture. Homo erecus is able to control fire and migrate extensively throughout Africa, Europe, and Asia.	Complex life forms are able to participate in shared activities and mutual cooperation – giving rise to communication through signs, signaling, and gestures.
500,000 years ago	Archaic Homo Sapiens (Homo heidelbergensis) show dramatic increase in brain size and cognitive advances.	Taking attitudes of others – this interaction allows perspective-taking and perspective switching.
130,000 years ago	Anatomically modern Homo sapiens appear in Africa with modern brain size	Taking attitudes of group – provides conditions for reflexive social stimulation and response.
50,000 years ago	Behaviorally modern Homo sapiens evolve possessing technologically and cultural innovation.	Draw on Organized Attitudes through the use of significant symbols
11,000 years ago	Humans change from hunter-gatherers to agricultural foragers, exhibiting ethnic differences.	Reflexive Discourse emerges allowing humans to anticipate responses of others.

Adapted from Burke T. (2005). The role of abstract reference in Mead's account of human origins, Transactions of the Charles S. Pierce Society, XLI(3), 568 – 571.

Darwinian Influence

Central to Mead's work was a Neo-Darwinistic perspective on self and the operation of self within social environments. G. H. Mead "made the most ambitious and comprehensive attempt of the pragmatists to set forth a [Darwinian] theory of mind and behavior" (Thayer, 1973; Mead, 1934, 1936, 1938, 1956, 1964; Joas, 1985). Mead held the view that the social construct of human beings paralleled Darwin's view of human origins; however, Mead's social psychological story of human origins emphasized the emergence of the self-consciousness as a product of "social and physical evolution with particular emphasis on social factors and the 'social genesis' of the mind." For improved understanding, Table 1 offers a perspective parallelism between Darwin's and Mead's overview of human evolution and development.

Evolution of Communication

According to Mead, in the final stages of the account of human evolution, humans develop "self consciousness" and "individual mind." This increased evolutionary development of consciousness, allowed humans further "refinement, elaboration, and objectification" enabling humans to not only take common attitudes, but "taking the same attitudes towards oneself that the community takes" (Burke, 2005, p. 571). The starting point of Mead's analysis began with the social experience and a conversation of gestures. At this level, an organism's action acts as a catalyst for another organism to respond which in turn becomes a catalyst for the adjustment of the first organism's action.

The evolutionary breakthrough allowing the development of "individuality" enables humans to communicate and coordinate activities in the roles of "I" and "Me" (Mead, 1956, 1964).

Tomesello (1995, 1999) reported that these evolutionary processes invites individuals in a species to engage in new activities while Table 1. Darwin/Mead Origin & Social Psychological Evolution of Species providing the stabilizing capacity to engage in these new activities, which could arguably improve human interaction in society. These evolved abilities in combination with Mead's interest in perspective taking and societal emphasis ultimately supported Mead in his research regarding the "I" and "Me" as phases of human evolution, which was only possible when humans passed from the conversation of the gestures to the internalization of the other (Geniusas, 2006, p. 247).

Applications

The I & The Me

Mead's interest in human consciousness and the private and personal aspects of consciousness led him to study the biological nature of an organism and the social nature of self, thereby equipping him with the resources to account for the "development of mind and self-consciousness" (Geniusas, 2006, p. 243). "I" and "Me" can best be identified as "phases of the self," which was Mead's attempt at narrowing his philosophies to the discipline of psychology (Cook, 2007, p. 170). "The two are separated in the process, but they belong together in the sense of being parts of a whole" (Mead, 1962, p. 178).

Internalization & the Object Self

The internalization process can best be recognized as "me" or the "self we are aware of" and the way in which humans internalize an organized set of attitudes of others. In contrast, the "I" of the self is the response to the attitudes that the organism offers. For further clarity, the "I" phase is the side of freedom of initiative, while the "me" phase refers to "attitudes, roles, meanings, pressure, and values of others which are organized into one's self through the agency of role-taking" (Geniusas, 2006, p. 247). The "I" phase refers to the part of the self which can be identified with impulse, freedom, and creativity; everything which is unique, idiosyncratic, and uncertain. Essentially, Mead (1962) wrote that the "I" and "me" revealed the distinguishing feature of the self, which was that as self is to be in object to oneself." Mead posed the question, "How can an individual get outside of himself (experientially) in such a way as to become an object to himself? This is the essential psychological problem of selfhood" (p. 138). Mead further wrote, "The individual is not a self in the reflexive sense unless he is an object to himself" (p. 142). Lastly, Mead stated, "The individual enters as such into his own experience only as an object, not as a subject" (p. 225).

Important to the understanding of "I" and "me" is that the model provides an understanding of the dual nature of our own selfhood while also providing humans with a perceptible of how "the two poles of our own selves are given in experience." However, in most cases, Mead "identifies the 'me' with the 'object self' of experience (Geniusas, 2006, p. 248).

Mead distinguishes "I" as a response that originates from our bodily organisms and claims that this response is "spontaneous and subjective" (Geniusas, 2006, p. 249). He stated, "If one answered to a social situation immediately without reflection, there would be no personality...any more that there is personality in the nature of the dog or the horse" (1962, p. 182). He further suggested that "an inner response to what we may be doing, saying, or thinking" supplements "a large part of our conscious experience, indeed all that we call self-consciousness" (1964, p. 145). In this way of thinking, meaning arises only through communication. Meaning is implicit wherever there is present, "a triadic relation of a gesture of one individual, a response to that gesture by a second individual, and completion of the given social act initiated by the gesture of the first individual" (Mead, 1934, p. 81). Mead further wrote that animals live in a world of events; man lives in a world of common meanings – and meaning for Mead is socially generated and sustained (1938, p. ix – x).

The Meaning of Selfhood

The fundamental nature of "I" and "me" seems to be the transcendental aspect of selfhood. Mead does not openly speak of the transcendental, but arguably metaphysical resonances can be evidenced in his philosophies of the "I" and "me" relationship: "I do not want to discuss metaphysical problems, but I want to insist that the self has a sort of structure that arises in social conduct that is entirely distinguishable from this so-called subjective experience" (1962, p. 166). His methodology immediately places the self in a reciprocal structure with otherness, and repeatedly insists that self can itself only as a "me," and never as an "I." Moreover, to overcome the shortcomings of the metaphysical notions of the subject amounts to "bracketing metaphysical questions and in their stead accounting for the self in terms of behavior" (Geniusas, 2006, p. 259). Indeed, the self must safeguard the self as subjectivity; one needs to "sacrifice the possibility of its immediate givenness to consciousness: the "I" cannot be known simply because the "I" is a subject, and not an object of experience" (p. 260). According to Mead, each self is not only a "me," but also an "I" because every self has a unique and peculiar individuality, which manifests itself in free and creative responses back against the society. "There is a demand, a constant demand, to realize one's self" (Mead, 1962, p. 205). From a sociological perspective, the self is a model of social control. It is also the primary source of social control whose origin "lies in the experience of a rudimentary demand to which one is obliged to respond – a debt, which one must, although never can, fully repay" (Geniusas, 2006, p. 263).

Perspective-Taking

The most important aspect of Mead's theory is his notion of the social role. A key system is the formation of mind in the individual's capacity to mentally adopt the standpoint of others. This notion of interpersonal perspective taking and intrapersonal perspective taking is the stronghold for Mead's theories and plays a vital role in the development of language, and is present in other

areas of conduct as well. Mead (1934) notes that children display this kind of interaction when they adopt parental attitudes, such as when playing with dolls, and these attitudes are both cognitive and emotional (p. 365 – 366). This attitude is the same as the “generalized other,” which attitude the “member must take if he is to act in a socially coordinated way (Mead, 1934, pp. 164 – 222). Most importantly in terms of sociology and science, Mead did not diverge from the dominant views now held in sociology (Fallding, 2001, p. 735).

Mead was a colleague and friend of John Dewey, who was considered the father of education. Together they worked at the universities of Michigan and Chicago in the 1890s and early 1900s. Their sociological constructs were pivotal in a philosophical movement known as pragmatism. The pragmatists stressed the experimental and purposive nature of cognition. Mead’s work was defined as “not psychology.” Mead’s social psychology stands juxtaposed with orthodox cognitive social psychology, meaning that the individual is not a social atom, but is instead a “product of society.” The person in this sense is a social construction.

Theory of Mind

In this sense, there is no “essential core or self to the person,” and each person could have been constructed differently. Once constructed by society, individuals themselves then shape societies. Berger and Luckmann (1967) described this relationship as a dialectic operation. The cornerstone of this philosophy is that “people are not born with what we think of as a self, but develop it in their interaction with others.” The unit of analysis in this interaction is the social act. When humans begin the process of developing self-consciousness and are able to take on perspectives of others, this role taking is known as “theory of mind” (Butt, 2008, p. 105 – 106). Mead (1982) labeled this ability “emergent property.” He wrote:

We are conscious of our attitudes because they are responsible for the changes in conduct of other individuals. A man’s reaction towards weather conditions has no influence upon the weather itself. It is important for the success of his conduct that he should be conscious not of his own attitudes, of his own habits of response, but of the signs of rain or fair weather which a consciousness of one’s own attitudes helps toward the control of the conduct of others (p. 348).

After reading and analyzing this text, we may conclude that George Mead’s central influence lies in two areas. First, Mead’s work is central to the theoretical discipline of sociology. This sociological construct influences both the disciplines of philosophy and education. These concepts are formative in structure of how human organisms come to know themselves and their interactions. Undergraduate students studying sociology will become familiar with G. H. Mead and his beliefs regarding human development and human interactions. Enthusiastic sociology students can consider applying Mead’s work as a primary underpinning for other disciplines, and as a way of viewing societal constructs.

Issues

One of the central issues regarding Mead’s work could relate back to the limitations of the theoretical construct upon which Mead based his work. Puddephatt (2005) wrote: “Mead’s contributions have a great deal to offer the understanding of technological development, and the use of the technology by human communities” (p. 358). In further analysis, Puddephatt indicated that Mead’s contributions to math and science were overlooked, because of the “intellectual divide of the Atlantic” (p. 358). Most scientific contributions to math and science originated in Europe, and Mead was considered an American pragmatist. A central issue attributed to this philosophy is that Mead seemed to tie most of his viewpoints to perspective taking through the “generative dialogue with the material world.” By engaging in interaction, humans could “take the role” of objects, “objectify their own actions, and generate meaning through this ongoing dialectical relationship” (p. 372). This opportunity seems to invite a solid theoretical foundation for studying the development of technology. Sociologists could utilize these theories as underpinnings into further study regarding technology, the meaning of technology, and human interaction with technology.

However, the main issue is that Mead in his day, time, and era seemed to omit key implications, because of a lack of communication with other scholars located on other continents (which ironically would have been aided through more advanced technology). It is up to young scholars and students of cultural and societal constructs to further elaborate and build upon Mead’s work: “If Mead’s work is to be saved from becoming irrelevant in sociology and is to remain an invaluable intellectual resource for this field in the 21st century, then now is the crucial time to revise his theory” (Denzin, 1996, pp. 63 – 64, 74).

Conclusion

G. H. Mead (1862 – 1931) “made the most ambitious and comprehensive attempt of the pragmatists to set forth a [Darwinian] theory of mind and behavior” (Thayer, 1973; also Mead, 1934, 1936, 1938, 1956, 1964; Joas, 1985). Mead proposes that humans construe the distinction between subjective and objective elements of experience as a functional, rather metaphysical experience (Mead, 1964). Famous for many theories, one of Mead’s most well known theories and terms were identified as “I” and “me” and the principles of self. In speaking of these terms, Mead sought to make the point that the human individual or self could enter in two distinguishable senses. The “me” in this case functioned as an object, which holds a mediating role within an ongoing process of experience or action and the “I” functioning as the “self in the disintegration and reconstruction of its universe, the self functioning, the point of immediacy that must exist within a mediate process” (Mead, 1964). For sociology students, or any academician interested in further understanding Mead’s contribution to sociology, philosophy, psychology, and education, further research should be done to facilitate deeper and more comprehensive learning, because many researchers provide a solid argument for Mead’s historical and lasting impact.

Terms & Concepts

"I": "I" is a subject, and not an object of experience. The "I" phase refers to the part of the self which can be identified with impulse, freedom, and creativity; everything which is unique, idiosyncratic, and uncertain.

Internalization: The internalization process can best be recognized as "me" or the "self we are aware of" and the way in which humans internalize, or adopt a set of beliefs, which are an organized set of attitudes of others.

"Me": "Me" can be identified with the 'object self' of experience. It can also be described as the "self we are aware of."

Perspective Taking: A central issue attributed to this philosophy is that Mead seemed to tie most of his viewpoints to perspective taking through the "generative dialogue with the material world." By engaging in interaction, humans could "take the role" of objects, "objectify their own actions, and generate meaning through this ongoing dialectical relationship.

Theory of Mind: When humans begin the process of developing self-consciousness and are able to take on perspectives of others, this role taking is known as "theory of mind"

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Essay by Sharon Link, Ph.D.

Dr. Sharon Link is an educator, presenter, and mother of a child with autism. She has worked extensively in public education and has researched education and its relationship to autism disorders and other disabilities for the last ten years. Dr. Link currently is the Executive Director for Autism Disorders Leadership Center, a non-profit research center and is co-founder of Asperger Interventions & Support, Inc. a professional development center. Both organizations are education and research centers seeking to improve education by creating a system of diversity and inclusion in America's schools. To learn more, visit: Asperger Help at <http://aspergerhelp.net>.

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