

Thorstein Veblen (1857–1929)

A Biographical Vignette

Veblen was, to put it mildly, an unusual man. For example, he could often sit for hours and contribute little or nothing to a conversation going on around him. His friends and admirers made it possible for him to become president of the American Economic Association, but he declined the offer. The following vignette offered by a bookseller gives us a bit more sense of this complex man:

A man used to appear every six or eight weeks quite regularly, an ascetic, mysterious person with a gentle air. He wore his hair long. . . . I used to try to interest him in economics. . . . I even once tried to get him to begin with *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. I explained to him what a brilliant port of entry it is to social consciousness. He listened attentively to all I said and melted like a snow drop through the door. One day he ordered a volume of Latin hymns. "I shall have to take your name because we will order this expressly for you," I told him. "We shall not have an audience for such a book as this again in a long time, I am afraid." "My name is Thorstein Veblen," he breathed rather than said.

obstruct, retard, and sabotage the operation of the industrial system. Without such obstructions, the extraordinary productivity of the industrial system would drive prices and profits progressively lower.

The increasingly tightly interlocking industrial system not only lends itself to cooperative undertakings, but this characteristic makes it increasingly vulnerable to the efforts of business and national leaders to sabotage it. This may be done consciously or as a result of the business leader's increasing ignorance of industrial operations. In either case, it results in hardship to the community in the form of unemployment, idle factories, and wasted resources. Veblen even went so far as to imply that business leaders are consciously responsible for depressions: They reduce production because under certain market conditions they feel they cannot derive what they emotionally consider a reasonable profit from their goods. To Veblen, there is no such thing, from the point of view of the larger community, as overproduction. However, even with the activities of the business leaders, including the creation of depressions, the industrial system is still so effective and efficient that it allows business leaders and their investors to earn huge profits.

The modern industrial system is so productive that it yields returns far beyond that required to cover costs and to give reasonable returns to owners and investors. These additional returns are the source of what Veblen calls free income. And that free income goes to the business leaders and their investors, not to the workers (this is reminiscent of Marx's theory of exploitation). Overall, the captains of industry and the leisure class of which they are an important part, and their pecuniary orientation, are associated with waste. In encouraging such things, the leisure class tends to stand in opposition to the needs of modern, industrial society.

GEORGE HERBERT MEAD: SOCIAL BEHAVIORISM

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

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

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

The Act

Mead comes closest to psychological behaviorism in discussing the most basic element in his theoretical system—the act—but he does not see people as engaging in automatic, unthinking responses. He recognizes four separable stages in the act, but each is related to all of the others and the act does not necessarily occur in the following sequence.

1. **Impulse.** The actor reacts to some external stimulus (hunger, a dangerous animal) and feels the need to do something about it (find food, run away).
2. **Perception.** The actor searches for and reacts to stimuli (through hearing, smell, taste, etc.) that relate to the impulse and to the ways of dealing with

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

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

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

it. People do not simply react to stimuli; they think about them, they select among them, deciding what is important (the animal is growling) and what is unimportant (the animal has pretty eyes).

3. **Manipulation.** This involves manipulating the object once it has been perceived. This is an important phase before a response is emitted and involves two major distinctive characteristics of humans: their minds and their opposable thumbs. Thus, a hungry person can pick up a mushroom from the forest floor, examine it by rolling it around in her fingers, and think about whether it has the characteristics of a poisonous mushroom. In contrast, a hungry animal is likely to grab for the mushroom and eat it unthinkingly and without examining it.
4. **Consummation.** This involves taking action that satisfies the original impulse (eating the mushroom rather than simply manipulating and examining it, shooting the animal). The human is more likely to be successful in consummation because of his or her ability to think through the act, while the lower animal must rely on the far less efficient and effective trial and error.

Gestures

An act involves only one person or lower animal, but both people and animals interact with others. The most primitive form of interaction involves gestures—movements by one party that serve as stimuli to another party. People and animals make gestures and also engage in a **conversation of gestures**: Gestures by one mindlessly elicit responding gestures from the other. In a dog fight, for example, the bared teeth of one dog might automatically cause the other dog to bare its teeth. The same thing could happen in a boxing match: The cocked fist of one fighter could lead the other to raise an arm in defense. In the case of both types of fight, the reaction is instinctive and the gestures are nonsignificant because neither party thinks about its response. Although both people and animals employ nonsignificant gestures, only people employ **significant gestures**, or those that involve thought before a response is made.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Significant Symbols and Language

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

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

Language also makes possible the critically important ability of people to think, to engage in mental processes. Thinking, as well as the **mind**, is simply defined as conversation that people have with themselves using language; this activity is like having a conversation with other people. Similarly, Mead believed that social processes precede mental processes; significant symbols and a language must exist for the mind to exist. The mind allows us to call out in ourselves

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

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

not only the reactions of a single person (who, for example, shouts the word *fire* in a theater), but also the reactions of the entire community. Thus, if yelling *fire* is likely to save lives, we might think about the public recognition we would receive for doing so. On the other hand, if we contemplate yelling *fire* falsely, the anticipated reaction of the community (disapproval, imprisonment) might prevent us from taking such action. Furthermore, thinking of the reactions of the entire community leads us to come up with more organized responses than if we were to think about the reactions of a number of separate individuals.

The Self

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

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

Mead believes that the self emerges in two key stages in childhood. The first is the *play stage* in which the child plays at being someone else. The child might play at being Barney, or Sponge Bob, or Mommy. In so doing, the child learns to become both subject (who the child is) and object (who Barney is) and begins to be able to build a self. However, that self is very limited because the child can only take the role of distinct and separate others (Barney, mother). In playing at being Barney or mother, the child is able to see and evaluate herself as she imagines Barney or her mother might see and evaluate her. However, the child lacks a more general and organized sense of self.

In the next stage, the *game stage*, the child begins to develop a self in the full sense of the term. Although the child takes the role of discrete others in the play stage, in the game stage she takes the role of everyone involved in the

George Herbert Mead (1863–1931)

A Biographical Vignette

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

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

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

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

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

Another famous concept created by Mead is the *generalized other*. The generalized other is the attitude of the entire community or, in the example of the baseball game, the attitude of the entire team. A complete self is possible

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

self The ability to take oneself as an object.

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

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

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

Key Concept
Definition of the Situation

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

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

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

I and Me

The fact that there is both conformity and individuality in the self is manifest in Mead's distinction between two phases of the self—the *I* and the *me*. Although

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

Contemporary Applications
Have We Become Obsessed with the Self?

George Herbert Mead offered great insight into the nature of the self, but he might have been surprised to see the degree to which the self has been transformed, and come to be the center of attention, even an obsession, in the contemporary world. We live today in a world in which we are increasingly likely to reflect on a greater number of things. The Internet and globalization, among other things, have put us in touch with many more things and we are increasingly able (because of such developments) to reflect on them. Indeed, we need to reflect on them because so many of them (e.g., global economic changes or health threats) are likely to have a profound effect on us. And among the things that we reflect on more these days is ourselves (Mead was very interested in the relationship between the self and reflexivity).

While self-reflection occurred in the past, people were less able and likely to do so than people (at least in developed countries) are today. For one thing, people were often too busy trying to survive and provide for their daily needs to engage in all that much self-reflection. Furthermore, they lived in a culture that stressed material accomplishments and de-emphasized self-reflection and self-absorption, viewing them as excessive and not furthering the material needs of people and the larger society. However, as Anthony Giddens, a contemporary theorist, who we will discuss at several points later in this book, points out, today the self has become a project, perhaps even *the* project, for many people. For one thing, the self no longer simply emerges; it is something that we actively create. Who we are, who we think we are, are not given characteristics, or even set in childhood, but are things that we consciously and actively create throughout the course of our lives. Thus, the self is not created once and for all, but continually molded, altered, and even changed dramatically over time, and even from one time to another.

Thus, the self becomes something that we all need to watch over, monitor, and alter as needed. This makes us in many ways more flexible and adaptable. However, in many ways it is also a fearsome and difficult process. That is, a century or two ago people did not worry much about the self, but today it has become a constant source of a concern. We have become preoccupied with the self and adapting it to the changing society, our changing position in that society, and even from one situation to the next. This is not an easy task and it is one that is fraught with difficulties and tensions. There are many advantages to being in tune with the self, but there are also many costs.

these phases sound like things or structures of the self, in reality they are viewed by Mead as processes that are part of the larger process that is the self.

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

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

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

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

Summary

1. Georg Simmel was interested in association, or interaction.
2. In order to deal with the bewildering array of interactions, sociologists and lay-people develop forms of interaction.
3. In order to deal with the bewildering array of interactants, sociologists and lay-people develop types of interactants.
4. In terms of the issue of size, there is a great difference between dyads (two-person groups) and triads (three-person groups). The existence of a third person in a triad makes possible the emergence of an independent group structure. No further additions in group size are as important as the addition of one person to a dyad.
5. The larger the group structure, the freer the individual.
6. Simmel was interested in the issue of distance. This interest was manifested in his discussion of a social type, the stranger, who is neither too close to nor too far from the group. Distance is related to a social form, strangeness, which means that a peculiar form of strangeness and distance enters all social relationships.
7. Distance is also related to Simmel's thinking on value. Those things that are valuable are neither too close nor too far.
8. Simmel's grand theory is concerned with the tragedy of culture.
9. The tragedy of culture involves the growth of objective culture and its increasing predominance over subjective culture.
10. Veblen's grand theory deals with the increasing control of business over industry and the negative effects of the former on the latter.

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

11. Mead was a social behaviorist interested not only in stimulus-response behavior, but in the human mind that intervenes between stimulus and response; people think before they act.
12. The four stages in the act are impulse, perception, manipulation, and consummation.
13. Although people and lower animals use gestures and engage in conversations of gestures, only people use significant gestures, significant symbols, and language.
14. The generalized other is the attitude of the entire community.
15. The self has two phases that are in constant tension: *I* (the immediate, unpredictable, creative aspect) and the *me* (the adoption of the generalized other leading to conformism).

Suggested Readings

- DAVID FRISBY and MIKE FEATHERSTONE, eds. *Simmel on Culture*. London: Sage, 1997. A collection of Simmel's writings that is notable for its inclusion of Simmel's less well-known, but important, work on space.
- DAVID FRISBY *Georg Simmel*. Chichester, England: Ellis Horwood, 1984. Nice, concise overview of Simmel's life and work.
- DONALD LEVINE, ed. *Georg Simmel: Individuality and Social Forms*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971. Excellent collection of Simmel's most important essays and excerpts from other works.
- LARRY SCAFF "Georg Simmel." In George Ritzer, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Major Social Theorists*. Malden, MA, and Oxford, England: Blackwell, 2000, pp. 251–278. Insightful essay concentrating on Simmel's work.
- JOHN PATRICK DIGGINS *Thorstein Veblen: Theorist of the Leisure Class*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999. Excellent biography of Veblen with a heavy emphasis on his writings.
- LOUIS PATSOURAS *Thorstein Veblen and the American Way of Life*. Montreal: Black Rose Books, 2004. Recent examination of Veblen that looks not only at his sociology and economics, but also emphasizes his politics.
- GARY COOK *George Herbert Mead: The Makings of a Social Pragmatist*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993. Treatment of Mead's life and work within the context of the philosophical school of thought, pragmatism, with which he is most often associated.
- J. DAVID LEWIS and RICHARD L. SMITH *American Sociology and Pragmatism: Mead, Chicago School, and Symbolic Interactionism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980. Controversial study of Mead's work as it relates not only to pragmatism, but also the Chicago School of sociology and symbolic interactionism.
- DMITRI SHALIN "George Herbert Mead." In George Ritzer, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Major Social Theorists*. Malden, MA, and Oxford, England: Blackwell, 2000, pp. 302–344. Rich analysis of Mead and his work.