

Lectures on Mead

- A Mead's microinteractionism is very similar to Adam Smith's theory in the Theory of Moral Sentiments. (Note that Mead studied Smith.)
1. According to Smith, human nature is not completely selfish; it involves sympathy. But this leads to comparison and, by implication, envy. So despite sympathy, man is dangerous to man "like wild beasts."
  2. Sympathy comes from our imagination, e.g., dread of death.
  3. Approval and disapproval take place in a social setting: we put ourselves in others' place. Society provides a "mirror" for the self.
  4. We begin by judging others; we imagine others judging ourselves. The self is thus divided in two.
  5. The Impartial Spectator, the Man within the Breast, stems from this. It leads to the formation of general rules of morality.
- B Mead proposes a similar, reflexive theory that is divided into three parts, Mind, Self, and Society.
- C Mead views Mind in a behavioristic fashion.
1. Behaviorism conceives of behavior in terms of stimulus and response.
    - a. For higher animals, like humans, stimuli include gestures.
  2. Two organisms meet and coordinate their activities by means of gestures. Mead calls this the "conversation of gestures."
    - a. Gestures include language and symbols.
    - b. The more language and symbols are used, the more complex the interaction can be. This can develop into very long chains of possible conduct and response.
  3. "Mind" (and thinking) develops in a social setting, it is not simply a physical organism.
    - a. Thinking is internalized communication.

- b. As children, we learn to respond to our parents and other people in our environment.
    - c. As children, we continue this responsive behavior with role-playing games, including games we play alone (that is, children talk to themselves).
  4. In this way, the human mind evolves from social communication.
    - a. This theory is pragmatist because it describes goal-oriented behavior.
- D The Self is the organizing center of the individual's experiences, thoughts, motives, and plans. It is the mediating unit between the human organism and its social environment.
  1. Whereas the human organism is present from birth, the Self needs time to develop.
  2. The Self evolves out of the (behavioristic) interactions between an individual and other people.
  3. The Self develops when we realize that other people respond consistently to us, and we learn to view ourselves as objects of other peoples' perception, not just subjects of our own desires.
    - a. The more consistently we interact with others, the more consistent our Self will become.
    - b. Likewise, the wider the range of interaction we have, the broader our Self will become. (The different spheres in which we interact creates the different roles we play.)
  4. The Self is a reflexive entity because a person can be both a subject and also an object for himself/herself: an "I" and a "Me"
    - a. As children, we begin by imaginary role playing, and eventually acquire an idea of rules for games and rules for life
    - b. We apply these rules to others and to ourselves. In this sense, we both enforce and internalize the rules
  5. As we grow older, we realize that these rules are created socially, interactively, by what Mead calls "the Generalized Other"

- a. The Generalized Other is the repository of social standards: rules, norms, values - but also language, signs and symbols.
  - b. The Generalized Other is also society, but it is not external to us because we are a component part of it
  - c. Thus, we both internalize social standards, and we can also influence social standards.
  - d. The Generalized Other is very similar to Smith's Impartial Spectator, or the Man within the Breast.
6. The self is not completely determined from outside, but it has an element of freedom and initiative.
- a. The more an individual outgrows dependency on a small set of significant others and learns the underlying unity and ideas of conduct and games of ever wider groups and communities, the more autonomous he or she becomes.
  - b. This dynamic and balance between individual and society determines how much power society has over the individual and, contrariwise, how much autonomy or freedom the individual has from society.
- E In this respect, Society is a looking-glass world. We regard ourselves according to the standards of the Generalized Other, and we judge others according to these standards, which we internalize, but can also influence.
1. Since we exist in different social situations (as child, parent, spouse, friend, employee, etc.), our Self is also divided into different roles, each of which may correspond to a somewhat different Generalized Other - i.e., into different sets of norms.
  2. However, Mead's conception of Society is fairly undifferentiated.
    - a. It is a democratic conception because it describes the interaction of autonomous individuals.
    - b. It is not well adapted to describe sociological phenomena like power, dominance, class, conflict, alienation or anomie.

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