

8 GEORGE HERBERT MEAD (1863–1931)

Key Concepts

- "I"
- "Me"
- Generalized Other
- Meaning
- Significant Symbols
- Taking the Attitude of the Other
- Play Stage
- Game Stage
- Mind
- Self



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The individual experiences himself as such, not directly, but only indirectly, from the particular standpoints of other individual members of the same social group, or from the generalized standpoint of the social group as a whole to which he belongs. . . and he becomes an object to himself only by taking the attitudes of other individuals toward himself.

—George Herbert Mead

It's time to get ready for tonight's date and you're trying on different clothes. As you put them on, what are you doing? More than likely, you're looking in a mirror and *thinking*—"How do I look in this? What impression about myself am I giving?" That is, in deciding what to wear, you're talking to yourself. But this conversation involves someone other than you. It's a dialogue between you and an *imagined* other, your date. Through the use of language, you are able to answer your own questions as if you were another person looking at yourself. Through language, you are able to see yourself as an object, just as your date does, and react to your appearance as she or he does. In an important sense, then, you experience your "self" socially, through taking the presumed attitudes of others toward you on the basis of these attitudes, what are you doing? What is the role does an individual's thinking play in the evolution of the self?

George Herbert Mead, the pragmatist philosopher, is known for his theory of symbolic interactionism, one of the most influential theories in sociology.

define society as a system of interrelated parts that promote consensus and stability or conflict and domination, Mead defined society as “generalized social attitudes” that continually *emerge* through coordinated interaction between individuals and groups. In this chapter, we examine Mead’s perspective on the relationship between the individual and society, and the importance of language in mediating this relationship, through selections from his posthumously published book, *Mind, Self, and Society* (Mead [1934] 1962). Before turning to the primary texts, however, we first provide a brief sketch of Mead’s biography and then an overview of the intellectual currents that informed his philosophy.

A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH ■■

Mead was born in 1863 in South Hadley, Massachusetts. At the age of seven, Mead moved to Ohio when his father, a Congregationalist minister, accepted a position at Oberlin Theological Seminary. After graduating from Oberlin College in 1883, Mead left for the Northwest, where he worked for three years as a tutor and as a railroad surveyor. Undecided on his career options, Mead’s next move took him to Harvard University, where he pursued graduate studies in philosophy and psychology. During this period, Mead encountered some of the thinkers who would prove pivotal in formulating his own philosophy of the mind and self—perhaps most important, the American pragmatist William James and the German philosopher Wilhelm Wundt.

Upon completing his master’s degree at Harvard in 1888, Mead was hired as a philosophy instructor at the University of Michigan. Here, Mead kindled important intellectual relationships with eminent American scholars John Dewey and Charles Horton Cooley. Mead’s stay at Michigan was short-lived, however. Two years after arriving, Mead left for the recently founded University of Chicago, where Dewey had been appointed to head the department of philosophy. Mead remained at Chicago until his death in 1931.

Mead’s influence on sociology stemmed largely from his graduate course in social psychology. A dynamic speaker, Mead’s lectures attracted students from an array of disciplines including, of course, sociology. Recognizing the significance of the ideas Mead presented in the classroom, some of his students had his lectures transcribed. Shortly after Mead’s death, the transcriptions were edited and published in *Mind, Self, and Society* ([1934] 1962), a text that has since earned a central position in social theory literature.

Mead complemented his academic career with an active involvement in the Progressive Movement of the early twentieth century—a movement whose aims included eliminating government corruption, reforming exploitative business and labor practices, and establishing women’s suffrage. He worked closely with Jane Addams (1860–1935), the pioneer activist and architect of professional social work, in support of educational reforms and feminist causes. Rejecting a social gospel based on religious doctrine in favor of an optimistic faith in science and reason, Mead envisioned, not unlike Marx, the creation of a social utopia. Mead’s adherence to liberal ideals (e.g., individualism, volunteerism), however, inspired him to advocate reform over revolution as the means for realizing a more just, egalitarian society. For Mead, such a society would be based on expanding universal rights that enabled individuals to pursue their own interests, while at the same time creating a more cooperative, fully fledged democratic order. At the root of this evolutionary process stood individuals coordinating their actions with one another through sympathetic understanding and the self-inhibition of behaviors detrimental to social cohesion.¹

¹Lewis Coser’s (1977) *Masters of Sociological Thought* and David Ashley and Michael Orenstein’s (1998) *Social and Psychological Statements* were particularly useful for preparing this brief biography.

■ INTELLECTUAL INFLUENCES AND CORE IDEAS

Mead's philosophy was informed by a number of intellectual currents. In this section, we briefly discuss three of the most significant theoretical influences on his work: pragmatism, behaviorism, and evolutionism.

Pragmatism

Pragmatism is a uniquely American philosophical doctrine developed primarily through the work of Charles S. Peirce (1839–1914), William James (1842–1910), and John Dewey (1859–1952). Unlike most European philosophical schools, pragmatism was not oriented toward uncovering universal truths or formal principles of human behaviors or desires. Instead, it was offered as a method or instrument for studying the meaning of behavior. More specifically, the early pragmatists argued that the meaning of objects and actions lie in their practical aspects, that is, how they allow individuals to adapt to and solve the problems they confront. “Truth,” or meaning, is thus found in what “works.” It arises as a result of particular circumstances, and not from a fixed ideal or an intrinsic feature of a given object, event, or situation.

For instance, consider something as ordinary as water. What *is* water? Is it fundamentally only a combination of hydrogen and oxygen? From the point of view of pragmatism, what water is—its meaning—depends on the situation in which it is encountered and thus how it will be used. For the chemist, water *is* a solvent used to dissolve substances. For the athlete, water *is* a liquid used for hydration or as a means for exercise or sport. For the firefighter, water *is* a tool used for extinguishing fires, or *is* a potential danger, depending on the type of fire. For the gardener, water *is* a necessary ingredient that must be used in order to grow healthy plants. The point is that the meaning of objects or social interaction is rooted in action, in everyday practical conduct, that is, the uses that are made of them as individuals go about the business of constructing their behavior.

Although such a position may not appear to be particularly controversial, it is based on a host of assumptions regarding the nature of the individual and his relationship to the external world. Particularly important in this regard is the indebtedness of Mead (and pragmatists more generally) to German idealism and the philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) and Georg Hegel (1770–1831). It was Kant who proposed the existence of a “twofold self or “double I”: in being conscious of one’s self, the individual “splits” into “the I as subject and the I as object” (Wrong 1994:61, 62). Indeed, for Kant and many other philosophers, it is this capacity for “reflexivity,” or the ability to experience one’s self simultaneously as a thinking, perceiving subject *and* as a perceived object, that separates humans from all other animal forms. The influence of these ideas on Mead is most apparent in his conversion of Kant’s twofold self into a distinction between the “I” and the “me” (see the following discussion of Mead’s distinction).

Equally important, from a Kantian view, is the claim that there is no independent reality separable from the perceiving subject. Instead, the external world of objects and events exists only through the conscious apprehension of them. The world is thus not something “out there” to be experienced by the subject, but rather is “a task to be accomplished” as we navigate our way through life’s daily encounters (Coser 1977:350). Moreover, consciousness itself cannot be said to exist unless there is some object in the external world that one notes or becomes aware of. The act of knowing (subject) and the known (object) are thus intimately connected.²

Behaviorism

The pragmatist view of consciousness and the role it plays in guiding our actions is not without its detractors. Of particular relevance here is the behaviorist branch of psychology, in response to which

²Although Mead borrowed from Kant’s philosophy of knowledge, he did not adopt some of its fundamental principles. Perhaps most important is that Mead, unlike Kant, did not maintain that the mental categories (e.g., our experience of time, space, or beauty) through which our perceptions are organized and given meaning exist independently of the knowing subject. Instead, Mead argued that such categories are learned and emerge through the process of interaction with others.

Mead fashioned his own theoretical framework that he labeled "social behaviorism." Psychological behaviorism is a resolutely empirical branch of psychology that focuses solely on observable actions. Its proponents argue that because states of mind, feelings, desires, and thinking cannot be observed, they cannot be studied scientifically. From this it follows that only overt behaviors are open to scientific investigation. As a result, psychological behaviorism is confined to studying the links between visible stimuli and the learned responses that are connected to them. As you will read, some of Mead's most significant contributions stem from his counterargument that thinking is indeed a behavior and thus amenable to scientific analysis.

During Mead's time, the leading figure in behaviorism was the psychologist John B. Watson (1878–1958). Watson argued that human behavior differed little in principle from animal behavior—both could be explained and predicted on the basis of laws that govern the association of behavioral responses with external stimuli. Thus, as a conditioned response to a specific stimulus, a rabbit's retreat from the path of a snake is no different in kind from a person's efforts to perform well in her job. Watson's conviction regarding the power of behaviorism to unlock the secrets of human development and action is perhaps nowhere more plainly asserted than in his claim:

Give me a dozen healthy infants, well-formed, and my own specified world to bring them up in and I'll guarantee to take any one at random and train him to become any type of specialist I might select—doctor, lawyer, artist, merchant-chief, and yes, even beggarman and thief, regardless of his talents, penchants, tendencies, abilities, vocations, and race of his ancestors. (Watson [1924] 1966:104)

It is against this picture of passive, nonreflexive individuals that Mead fashioned his social behaviorism. For Mead, the mind is not an ephemeral "black box" that is inaccessible to investigation. Instead, Mead viewed the mind as a *behavioral process* that entails a "conversation of significant gestures." In this internal conversation, an individual **takes the attitude of the other**, arousing in his own mind the same responses to his potential action that are aroused in the other person's.³ Individuals, then, shape their actions on the basis of the imagined responses they attribute to others. Self-control of what we say and do is thus in actuality a form of social control as we check our behaviors—discarding some options while pursuing others—against the responses that we anticipate will be elicited from others. ↗ Not based on deterministic view of action

It is important to note that Mead's view of the relationship between self-control and social control is not based on a deterministic understanding of individual action. A deterministic view contends that social structures, divisions within society, or preexisting cultural frameworks determine behaviors or attitudes, leaving little possibility for individuals to shape their life courses and counteract the destinies supposedly derived from broad social forces. Instead, Mead emphasized that the individual and the society to which she belongs are mutually dependent; each requires the other for its progressive evolution. Thus, for Mead, "social control, so far from tending to crush out the human individual or to obliterate his self-conscious individuality, is, on the contrary, actually constitutive of and inextricably associated with that individuality" (Mead [1934] 1962:255).

This view of the mind as a process of thinking that entails both self- and social control can be illustrated through any number of commonplace examples, for it is something we all continually experience. Consider, for instance, the internal conversation you engage in before asking someone out for a date, going on a job interview, determining how you will resolve an argument with a friend, or deciding whether to ask a question in class. In each case, you take the attitude of the other, viewing yourself as

³Depending on the situation, "others" might be a specific person (a sibling or neighbor), an identifiable group (classmates), or the community at large, which Mead referred to as the "generalized other" (e.g., Southerners,

Charles Horton Cooley (1864–1929): The “Looking-Glass Self”

Born in Ann Arbor, Michigan, Charles Cooley spent most of his life revolved around that city's hub, the University of Michigan. It was here that his father served on the faculty of the Michigan Law School and where he would attend school, earning a degree in engineering and later a PhD in political economy and sociology. While pursuing his graduate degree, Cooley began teaching at the University of Michigan, where he remained on the faculty for his entire career. Mead's notion of “taking the attitude of the other” and the internal conversation that it entails shares much with Cooley's discussion of the “looking-glass self.” Cooley argues that an individual's sense of self is developed through interaction with others. More specifically, there are three facets to the looking-glass self: “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” (Cooley [1902] 1964:184). His underscoring of the role of imaginations in the construction of self-identity likewise informed his general perspective on society and sociology. Indeed, Cooley maintained that the “imaginations which people have of one another are the *solid* facts of society, and . . . to observe and interpret these must be the chief aim of sociology” (ibid.:121, emphasis in the original). It is this overly “mentalistic” understanding of society and of the task of sociology that has been the primary cause of the marginalization of Cooley's ideas in the discipline. Perhaps, in some ways, his focus on mental processes stemmed from his personal disposition. Cooley was a shy, semi-invalid whose list of ailments included a speech impediment. As a result, he led a quiet social life, preferring books and his own imaginative introspections to the company of others.

SOURCE: Coser (1977:314–18).

an object as other individuals do during interaction. So, you may ask yourself, “What type of movie should I take him or her to?” or “What music should we listen to when we're driving in the car?” Similarly, before raising your hand, you may think, “Will I seem stupid if I ask the professor this question? Will it seem like I'm trying to score ‘brownie’ points?” The answers to such questions, and thus the behavior you ultimately undertake, are shaped by the responses evoked in your mind. The responses are not entirely your own, however; instead, they reflect the assumed attitude that others take toward your behavior.

Evolutionism

A third major stream in Mead's framework is found in Darwinian evolutionism. The impact of evolutionism on Mead's thought comes in two forms. First, Mead, like Darwin, saw humans as the most advanced species. Humankind's superiority lies in the capacity to communicate symbolically. Through the use of symbols—that is, language—we are able to take the attitude of the other and respond to our behavior in the same way as those to whom it is directed. Language thus allows us to see ourselves as objects. Symbolically casting off one's self as an object is the essence of self-consciousness, something other animals do not possess. Instead, other animals react to each other and their environment on the basis of instinct without anticipating the possible effects of their behavior.

The human capacity for self-consciousness, then, allows us to temporarily suspend our behaviors as we symbolically test different solutions to the situations we face. The ability to interact symbolically with

others, ourselves, and the environment not only provides for an individual's adjustment to problems that may arise; it also creates the mechanism for social evolution. The second evolutionary theme in Mead's work is thus found in his view of social progress. Mead outlined both a practical and a utopian version of progress. His practical view highlighted the role of science as an instrument for addressing the problems that we confront in the natural and social environments. For Mead, science is "the evolutionary process to enable a species of plant or animal to adapt better to its environment, science is a conscious endeavor to identify and solve problems. Whether it is the problem of crime, pollution, or illness, the scientific method generates alternative solutions that can then be tested. When the problem has been fixed (a vaccine is invented), evolution is furthered. Science thus allows for an orderly adaptation to and increasing advantage over our environment.

Mead's utopian view of social progress rests with his emphasis on language and the eventual creation of a democratic "universal society." For Mead (and other early social theorists), the problem to be solved in modern, differentiated societies lies in fashioning an orderly coordination of social activities. Yet, how can such coordination be achieved without stifling innovation and adjustment to a changing environment? How can social stability be maintained without diminishing individual expression and freedom? In short, how can a "true" democracy be attained in light of the opposing interests and unequal access to resources that make up a highly diverse society?

Social progress thus requires accommodating the need for both individual creativity and social control. The key to creating the ideal society lies in how these twin processes evolve. In modern, heterogeneous societies characterized by functional interdependence, individuals, as well as nations, rely on expanding networks of increasingly distant others who perform specialized or differentiated tasks. The proper balance between the needs of the individual and the needs of society emerges when an individual or group asserts its "functional superiority" without seeking to dominate others. In doing so, the individual or group is able to exercise its superior skills and develop its distinctive sense of self while recognizing that one's unique contribution is made possible only through collaborative relations with others who in turn are able to benefit from such superior contributions.

The democratic expression of functional superiority is effected through taking the attitude of the other and the cooperative, self-conscious control of action it fosters. The ever-widening circle of social relations characteristic of modern societies expands the vocabulary of significant symbols (shared meanings) allowing individuals and groups to take the attitude of a broader range of others. A more highly evolved empathetic understanding would then breed a "universal discourse" of shared meanings and with it an ideal democracy based on cooperation and a full recognition of the rights and duties to be freely and equally exercised by all. Mead notes the connection between universal discourse and the ideal society thus:

The ideal of human society is one which brings people so closely together in their interrelationships, so fully develops the necessary system of communication [i.e., significant symbols], that the individuals who exercise their peculiar functions can take the attitude of those whom they affect. . . . If that system of communication could be made theoretically perfect, the individual would affect himself as he affects others in every way. That would be the ideal of communication. . . . The meaning of that which is said is here the same to one as it is to everybody else. Universal discourse is then the formal ideal of communication. If communication can be carried through and made perfect, then there would exist the kind of democracy . . . in which each individual would carry just the response in himself that he knows he calls out in the community. (Mead [1934] 1962:327)

Such a process can occur not only on an individual level within societies, but on a collective level as whole societies become increasingly interdependent on each other for their continued development. Indeed, this more highly developed "global" ability to take the attitude of the other found expression in

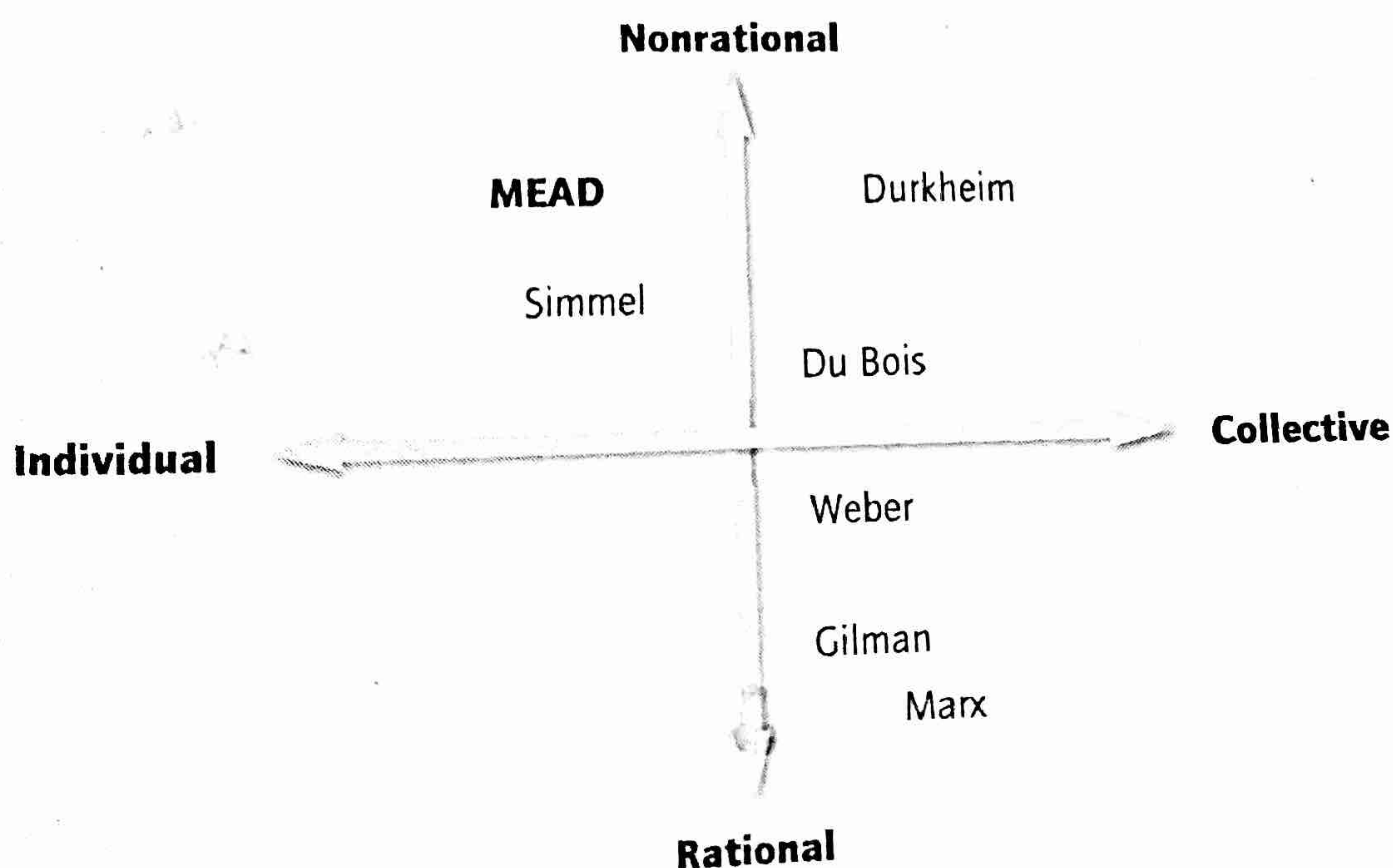
For James, consciousness does not exist as a sort of substance or entity that is brought to experiences; rather, it is a continuous series of changing relations within experiences that perform the "function of knowing." Life flows along an ongoing "stream of consciousness" that selectively attends to and emphasizes some features of our outer world while ignoring most of what transpires around us. "Now we are seeing, now hearing; now reasoning, now willing; now recollecting, now expecting; now loving, now hating. . . . Like a bird's life, [consciousness] seems to be an alternation of flights and perchings" in which our every thought, our every state of mind, is always unique (James [1892] 2001:27). Out of the indistinguishable, chaotic swirl of movements that make up our environment, our attention is focused only on those things that happen to be of interest to us and that, having singled out their independent existence, we thus name.

Of all the things that flow through our stream of consciousness, one holds our interest unlike any other: the "Empirical Self" or "me"—that "empirical aggregate of things objectively known" (James [1890] 2007:215) by the individual. James divides the self or "me" into three parts: its "constituents" (which he further divides into the "material Self," the "social Self," the "spiritual Self," and the "pure Ego"), the feelings and emotions aroused by the various constituents of the self ("Self-feelings"), and the actions prompted by the self ("Self-seeking" and "Self-preservation"). Taken together, "*a man's Self is the sum total of all that he CAN call his*" (ibid.:291; emphasis in original). Thus, the self is composed of one's physical body and mental powers, material possessions and social relationships, reputation and deeds, and all the feelings and actions to which they give rise. These "*MUST be the supremely interesting OBJECTS for each human mind*" (ibid.:324; emphasis in original).

MEAD'S THEORETICAL ORIENTATION ■■

With regard to our metatheoretical framework, Mead's work is predominantly individualistic and nonrationalist in orientation. (See Figures 8.1 and 8.2.) His vision is one in which the social order is continually emerging through the ongoing activities of individuals (individualistic) who are attempting to navigate or make sense of the situations in which they find themselves (nonrationalist).

Figure 8.1 Mead's Basic Theoretical Orientation



To explicate this understanding of Mead's perspective, consider first the individualistic dimension of his theory. As we discussed previously, Mead saw society as the product of coordinated activities undertaken by *individuals* reflexively taking the attitude of the other(s) with whom they are interacting. Society is neither a "thing," an overarching system of preexisting structures, nor a form of relationship that connects individuals with one another. Instead, Mead envisioned society as ordered through shared attitudes that shape individuals' consciously directed behaviors. Institutions, such as legal, educational, or kinship systems, were defined by Mead as "social habits" or a "common response on the part of all members of the community to a particular situation" (Mead [1934] 1962:261), not as social structures that determine individuals' behaviors. Courts, schools, and marriage are viewed here as continuously emerging patterns of behavior that persist only insofar as individuals choose to reenact them. The creation and pursuit of alternative lines of actions are thus always possible even within the most habituated settings.

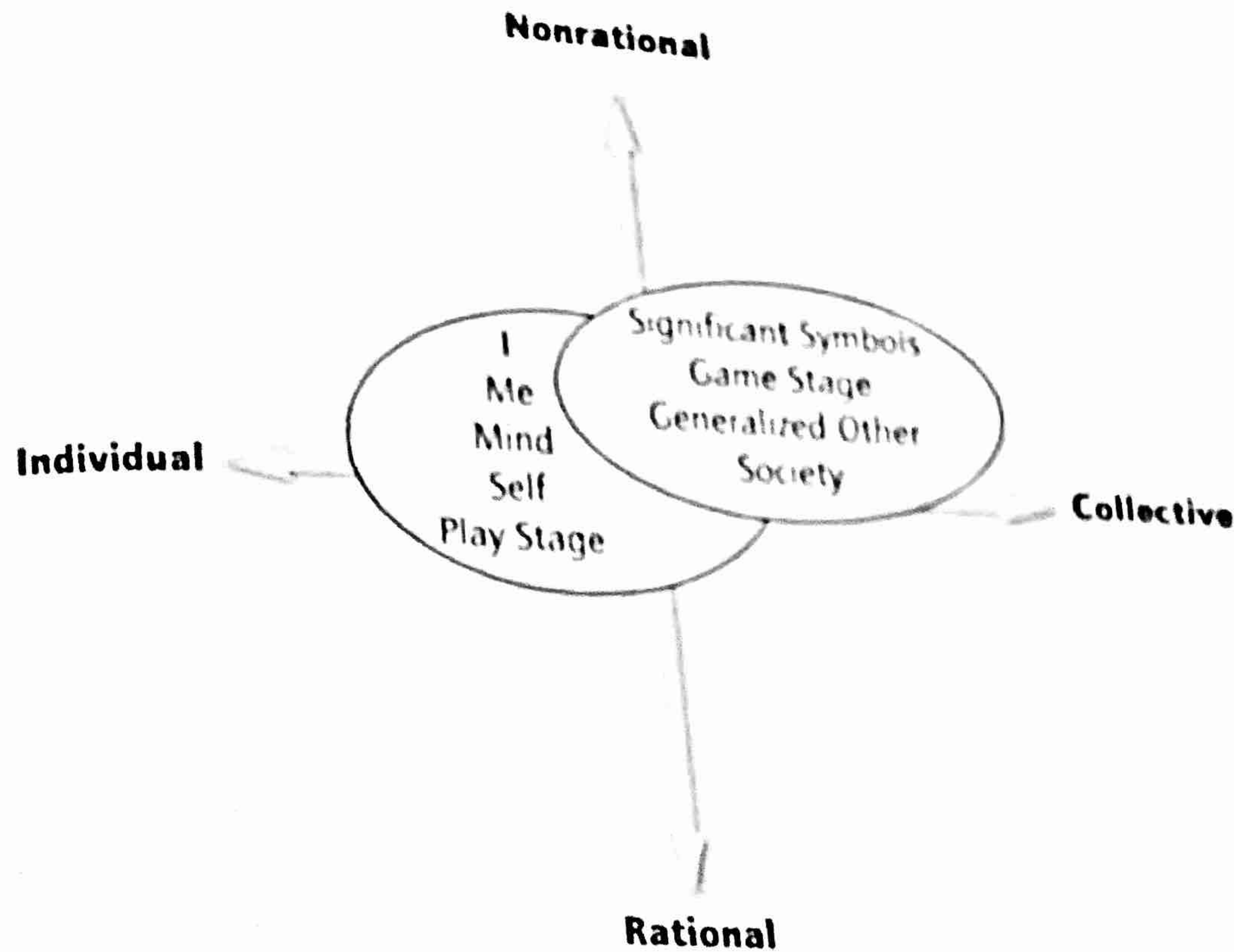
Unlike Marx or Weber, then, Mead granted little attention to institutions (in the structural sense of the term) or class and status dynamics because he did not believe that these collectivist forces determined one's consciousness or behavior. However, he did not deny society a role in shaping an individual's self or his attitudes and behaviors. Indeed, our self is essentially a social construct, given its basis in perceptions of how others will respond to our behaviors. In important aspects, then, Mead viewed the individual and society as dialectically intertwined—each one shapes and cannot exist without the other. Nevertheless, for Mead, the central elements of social interaction take place in one's imagination. In turn, he emphasized the individualistic aspects of the "I," "me," "generalized other," and the role of thinking and language in social life. Importantly, Mead viewed language as a neutral means for symbolically communicating with others and with oneself. Language, in other words, was not seen as reflecting relations of domination and subordination based, for example, on class or gender.⁴ One's mind or thinking, which for Mead is intimately tied to language, is therefore not a product of one's station in society. Compare this view with that expressed by Marx, who argued that an individual's consciousness and view of the world are determined by her class position.

But what of the nonrationalist presuppositions underlying Mead's theory? Here, his position is perhaps more difficult to glean. Dennis Wrong points to the source of this difficulty when he remarks that Mead was "only casually and tangentially interested in the self as a source of motivational energy, or as an object of affective attachment" (1994:65). Because our distinction between rationalist and nonrationalist refers precisely to a theorist's view of the motivational foundations of action, Mead's "casual interest" on this issue leaves us with less to work with than we may like. Nevertheless, we can point out the general tendencies in Mead's perspective.

First, Mead's account of the self and interaction posits individuals as essentially cognitive. He offers much insight into the mental behaviors that we undertake in preparing to act with others and in assigning meaning to conduct and events. Hence, Mead details the role of language and self-objectification in *thinking*. This focus should not, however, be confused with a rationalist orientation to motivation. As we discussed in chapter 1, rationalist presuppositions portray actors and groups as *motivated* by their self-interested maximization of rewards or pleasures and minimizing of costs. Nowhere does Mead make such claims regarding the motivational source of behavior.

Based on our definition of rationalism, we are left with Mead as a theorist given to a nonrationalist orientation. However, such a description is based on more than a simple process of elimination. For instance, in describing institutions as "social habits," Mead suggests that actions are motivated out of just that—habit. Also, in arguing that we approach situations pragmatically, Mead suggests

⁴Mead's assumptions regarding language are by no means unchallenged. For instance, many observers argue that the use of "he" as a universal pronoun renders women invisible. In nullifying women's experiences, the reality of patriarchal relations is obscured and thus further reinforced. Similarly, some argue that the wording of SATs reflects class, race, and gender biases. To the extent that occupation and wage are tied to educational attainment, the ostensibly "objective" test therefore perpetuates structurally based patterns of economic inequality.



that our actions are guided by an attempt to solve problems. Thus, we pursue behaviors that work and are less preoccupied with fashioning the optimal line of action with regard to any particular payoff. Last, Mead occasionally notes the role of disapproval in shaping our behaviors. Here, he argues that in taking the attitude of the other and responding to our gestures as the other might, we suppress actions that would elicit disapproval from others. To the extent that experiencing the disapproval of others arouses negative emotions or affects, we can say it is a nonrationalist motivating force.⁵ As central points of debate, it is, of course, up to the reader to determine where Mead's work falls in the metatheoretical framework.

pragmatic
sensible
realistic
practical

Introduction to "Self"

In the selections taken from the chapters on the self, Mead presents a number of concepts central to his theory. Here, we present an overview of Mead's notion of the "I," "me," and "generalized other" and their realization through the "play" and "game" stages of the development of self-consciousness. Moreover, in his discussion of the self, you will again encounter two themes that form the core of Mead's program: (1) the interconnectedness between the self and social experiences and (2) language as the tool that mediates this relationship.

For Mead, the self does not exist as a singular personality or identity that answers the question, "Who am I?" Instead, the self exists as self-consciousness, a capacity to be both subject and object to one's self that is made possible solely through interaction and its basis in language. As we anticipate the possible implications of courses of action in order to elicit the desired responses from others, we become an "object" to ourselves. However, an individual is aware of his self as an object, "not directly, but only indirectly, from the particular standpoints of other individual [s] . . . or from the generalized standpoint of the social group as a whole to which he belongs" (Mead [1934] 1962:138). In turn, the experience of our self as an object becomes possible only by taking the attitudes of others toward our self.

Viewing ourselves as an object is the phase of the self Mead termed the "**me.**"¹ This phase represents a sense of who we are that is created, sustained, and modified through our interaction with others. (In the opening to this chapter, "me" is who you see in the mirror.) It is the "organized set of attitudes of others which one himself assumes" (ibid.:175); the self one is aware of when thinking, or taking the attitude of the other. Thus, the self is a social product that is rooted in our perceptions of how others interpret our behaviors.

That we see ourselves and respond to our conduct as others would is not the only way in which the self is a reflection of social interaction. According to Mead, "We divide ourselves up in all sorts of different selves with reference to our acquaintances" (ibid.:142). In other words, it is interaction and the context within which it takes place that determines who we are for the moment—the side of our self that we show to others. The self you experience as a sibling is different from the one you experience as a coworker or a student. We all have, in a sense, multiple social selves or personalities, as assuming the attitudes of a particular other or community shapes our behavior.

While the "me" is involved in thinking or reflexive role taking, the self enters into another phase during moments of interaction when the "I" is in the foreground. The "I" reacts or answers to the "me," the phase of the self that one is conscious of. (The "I" is the phase of the self that *looks* in the mirror in our opening example.) It is "the response of the [individual] to the attitudes of the others" (ibid.:175). The individual is aware of the "I" of the present moment only as it passes into memory, into the "me." It

¹In developing his view of the self, Mead borrowed much from William James, including the latter's idea of the "me" and the notion of possessing multiple social selves. See the Significant Others box (page 318) that briefly summarizes James's work.

represents the here-and-now, creative aspect of one's self, for no matter how much you rehearse your behaviors or try to anticipate the reactions of others, interaction may take an unplanned course. You never know for certain what you will say or how others will interpret your behaviors until after you have spoken and a response has been made. For Mead, it is this spontaneous, unpredictable aspect of the self and social interaction that sparks personal and cultural innovation. Without the "I," social life would be static and relentlessly conformist.

According to Mead, the self (i.e., self-consciousness) develops through two cognitive stages: "play" and the "game."² The **play stage** is marked by the ability to assume the attitude of only one particular individual at a time. This is the stage of self-consciousness that we find in children until around the age of eight. Here, children perhaps are pretending to be parents, superheroes, or princesses, moving from one role to the next in an unconnected fashion. In play, the child is able only to switch successively between discrete roles while taking the attitude of the specific other toward her self.

The next phase of development is the **game stage**. Here, the child is able to move beyond simply taking the role of particular others and assume the roles of multiple others simultaneously. Moreover, the child has the



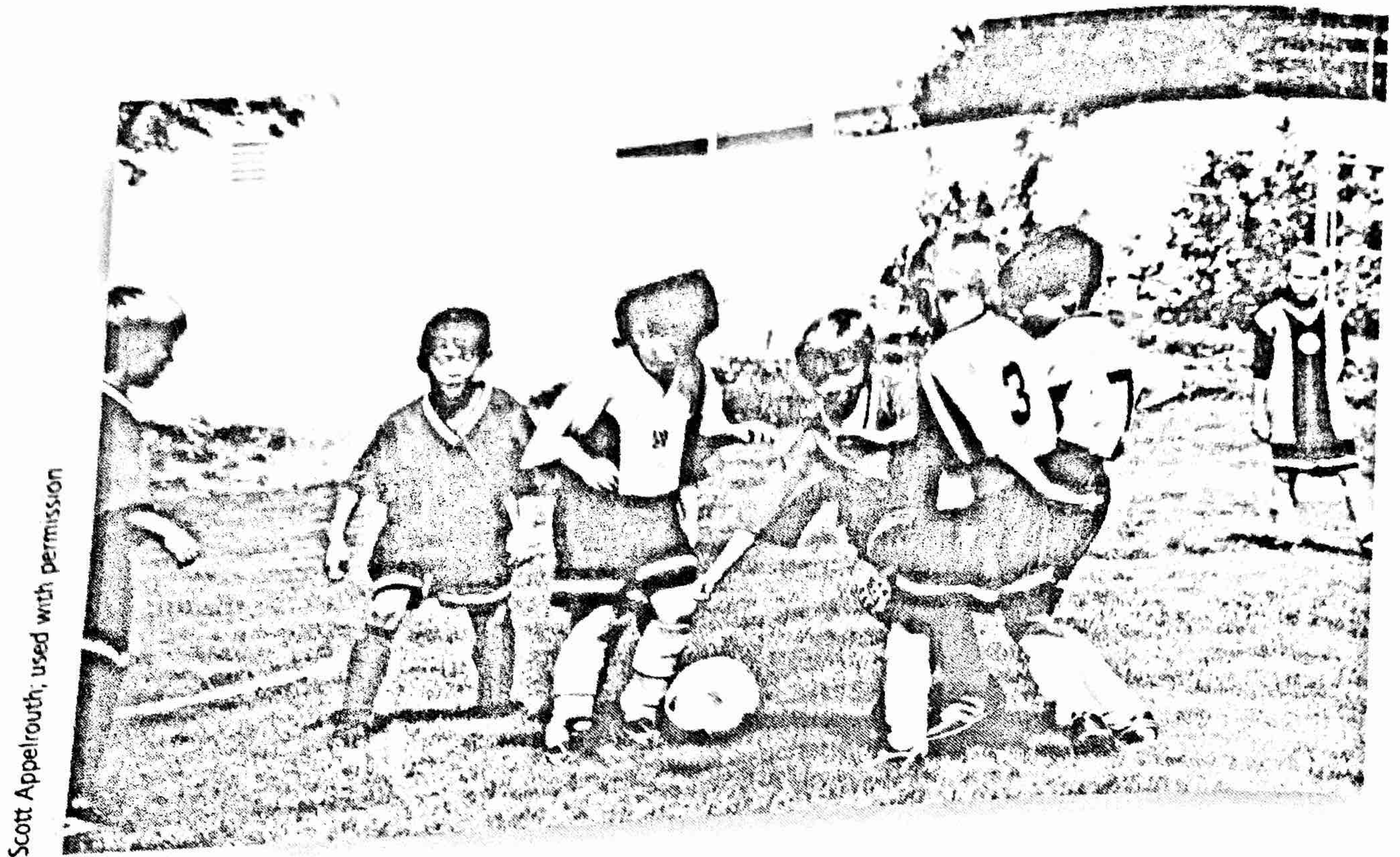
Photo 8.2 The Play Stage: A "Mommy" Feeding Her "Baby"

ability to control his actions on the basis of abstract "rules of the game." (Think of a game of kickball played during recess.) This configuration of "roles organized according to rules" brings the attitudes of all participants together in an abstract unity called the "generalized other." The **generalized other** is the organized community or group to which an individual belongs. When taking the attitude of the generalized other toward one's self, one assumes the attitudes that are common to the whole group. (It is the vantage point from which one sees, and thus gives meaning to, the "who" reflected in the mirror at the opening to this chapter.) Responding to ourselves from the point of view of the whole community is the mechanism through which that community controls the behaviors of its members, making possible the coordination of diverse activities in large groups or institutions. Moreover, by assuming the attitude of the generalized other, we are able to orient our behavior according to abstract ideals and principles such as freedom, individual rights, and fairness, the applicability of which are not limited to particular situations.

The notion of the generalized other clearly illustrates Mead's view of the dialectical relationship between self and society (a theme echoed in the work of Georg Simmel). As the generalized other develops from its rudimentary form found in the games children play to ever-widening, increasingly abstract social circles, self-consciousness likewise develops more fully as the individual begins to take the imagined attitudes of others toward himself that he does not—and never will—know. As Mead remarks, "We cannot be ourselves unless we are also members in whom there is a community of attitudes which control the attitudes of all. . . . The individual possesses a self only in relation to the selves of the other members of his social group; and the structure of his self expresses or reflects the general behavior

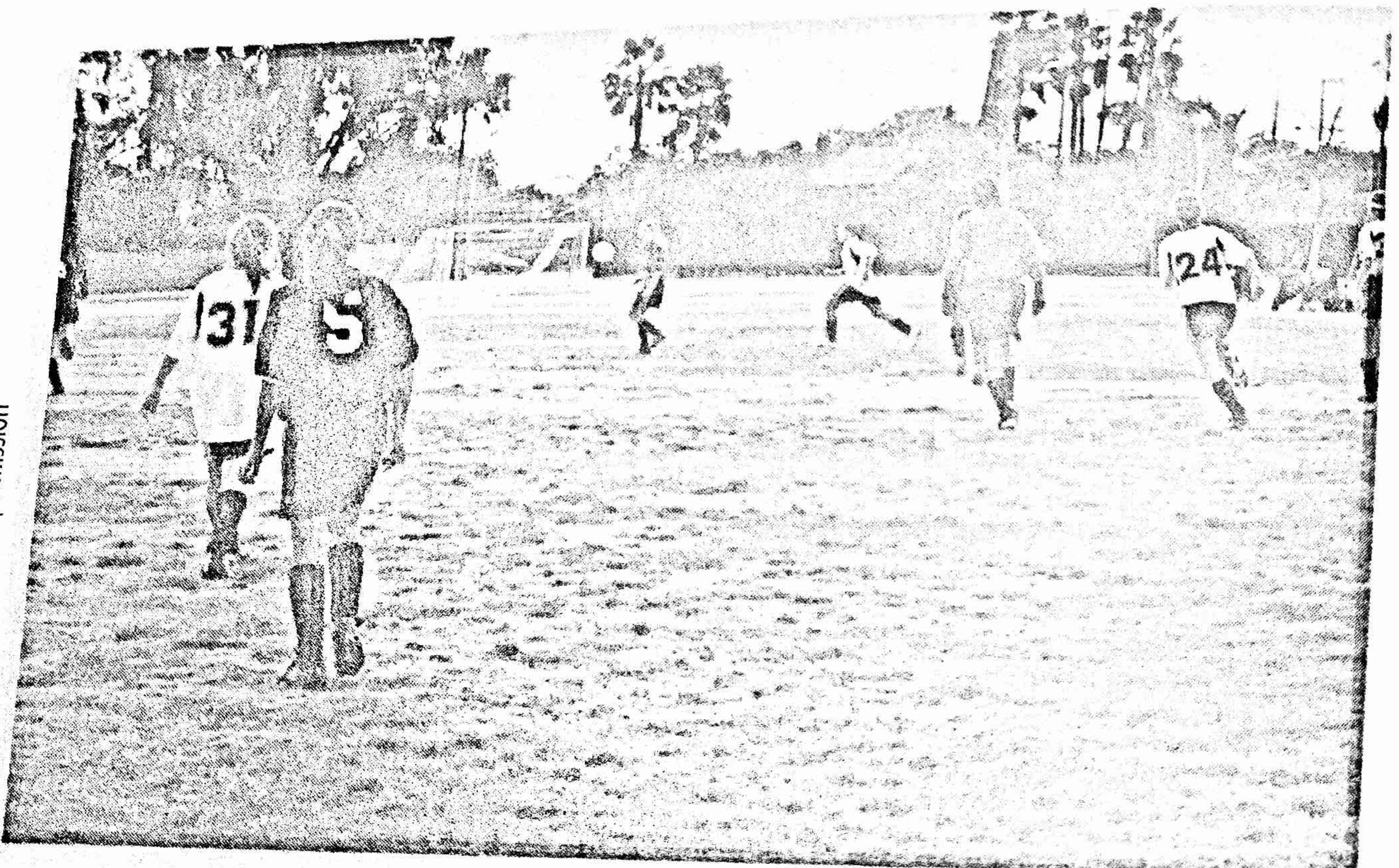
²Contemporary theorists are not in agreement as to how many stages of self-development Mead proposes. Some identify three distinct stages (play, game, and generalized other), while others read Mead as outlining four stages (preplay, play, game, and generalized other). We present a two-stage model, conceiving of the generalized other not as a distinct phase in the development of the self, but as a "community attitude" that is assumed in the game stage. We believe this is a more accurate reading of Mead's ideas.

pattern of this social group to which he belongs" ([1934] 1962:164).³ Yet, organized group processes and activities—that is, society itself—are made possible “only in so far as every individual involved in them or belonging to that society can take the general attitudes of all such other individuals with reference to these processes and activities” (ibid.:155).



Scott Appellrouth; used with permission

Photo 8.3a Six-Year-Old Children Playing Soccer



Laura Desfor Edles; used with permission

Photo 8.3b Fifteen-Year-Old Children Playing Soccer. Among other things, notice the difference in the spacing of players between the age groups.

³Again, our self is realized only in relation to a wider community of others. One is a teacher only if one has students, or an artist or actor only if one has an audience.

Early in the game stage, children are preoccupied with rules, often becoming quite literal and rigid in following them. For instance, a basketball player may not conceive of momentarily moving out of her assigned position even if doing so might prevent the other team from scoring. At this point, children are still unable to abstract themselves from the game as such; they are unable to understand the constructed nature, and thus flexibility, of the rules that organize interaction. With the development of the ability to take the attitude of the generalized other, however, the player is not simply following the rules; instead, she has become conscious of her part in the realization of the rules. No longer is she merely "in" the game; now the player is "above" it, as the rules become subject to self-conscious interpretation and, possibly, to change.

Similarly, consider how a six-year-old might decide whether or not to steal. The child's internal conversation or thinking would entail taking the attitude of a particular other toward his potential lines of conduct. His decision is then based on the imagined response of that other, a parent perhaps, to the action in question. Internally responding to the contemplated action as his parent might, the child's decision to not steal is based on his reaction to the anticipated disapproval of that other. In contrast, an adult's decision would be based also on the imagined response of the generalized other. Here, the same decision is not derived solely from a reaction to the anticipated disapproval of a specific other, but also from an internal response to the community's shared *principle* that it is wrong to steal.

The difference between the play and the game stages is readily apparent if we look at how a soccer game is played by 6-year-olds as opposed to a game played by 15-year-olds. In the former, children play as if they are all magnetically attracted to the ball. They have no sense of positioning or organized, structured participation. There is little if any passing or cooperation between the players. The game consists mainly in a flock of children running wildly after the ball (though it is not uncommon for some players to lose interest in the game completely—e.g., to stop to pick dandelions, wave at their parents, gaze into space, or examine their socks).

Compare this scenario to a game of soccer played by 15-year-olds. Here, there is a sense of positioning and an understanding of when to pass the ball and to whom to pass it. Teenagers do not selfishly follow the ball, because *it* no longer is the object of their attention. Instead, the *game* is now the focus of the players. The ability to cooperate as a team produces a kind of rudimentary society where each player is able to take the attitude of all the other players simultaneously, anticipate their reactions, and adjust her own line of action accordingly, all while creatively adhering to the rules of the game.

In taking the attitude of the other (whether a particular individual or generalized other), we, of course, are not capable of getting inside another person's head, nor do we experience our self as a physical, tangible object. Instead, when determining what path of behavior we should pursue we think and develop ourselves in terms of language. Language is thus the essential medium for the genesis of the mind and self. Moreover, as the medium through which we control our actions and coordinate them with those of others, language makes society itself possible.

"Self" (1934)

George Herbert Mead

THE SELF AND THE ORGANISM

In our statement of the development of intelligence we have already suggested that the language process is essential for the development of the self. The self has a

character which is different from that of the physical organism proper. The self is something which develops; it is not initially there, at birth, but in the process of social experience and activity, it develops in the given individual as a result of his

SOURCE: From *Mind, Self, and Society*, by George Herbert Mead, edited by Charles W. Morris (1962). Copyright © The University of Chicago. Renewal copyright 1962 by Charles W. Morris. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process. The intelligence of the lower forms of animal life, like a great deal of human intelligence, does not involve a self. In our habitual actions, for example, in our moving about in a world that is simply there and to which we are so adjusted that no thinking is involved, there is a certain amount of sensuous experience such as persons have when they are just waking up, a bare thereness of the world. Such characters about us may exist in experience without taking their place in relationship to the self. One must, of course, under those conditions, distinguish between the experience that immediately takes place and our own organization of it into the experience of the self. One says upon analysis that a certain item had its place in his experience, in the experience of his self. We do inevitably tend at a certain level of sophistication to organize all experience into that of a self. We do so intimately identify our experiences, especially our affective experiences, with the self that it takes a moment's abstraction to realize that pain and pleasure can be there without being the experience of the self. Similarly, we normally organize our memories upon the string of our self. If we date things we always date them from the point of view of our past experiences. We frequently have memories that we cannot date, that we cannot place. A picture comes before us suddenly and we are at a loss to explain when that experience originally took place. We remember perfectly distinctly the picture, but we do not have it definitely placed, and until we can place it in terms of our past experience we are not satisfied. Nevertheless, I think it is obvious when one comes to consider it that the self is not necessarily involved in the life of the organism, nor involved in what we term our sensuous experience, that is, experience in a world about us for which we have habitual reactions.

We can distinguish very definitely between the self and the body. The body can be there and can operate in a very intelligent fashion without there being a self involved in the experience. The self has the characteristic that it is an object to itself, and that characteristic distinguishes it from other objects and from the body. It is perfectly true that the eye can see the foot, but it does not see the body as a whole. We cannot see our backs;

we can feel certain portions of them, if we are agile, but we cannot get an experience of our whole body. There are, of course, experiences which are somewhat vague and difficult of location, but the bodily experiences are for us organized about a self. The foot and hand belong to the self. We can see our feet, especially if we look at them from the wrong end of an opera glass, as strange things which we have difficulty in recognizing as our own. The parts of the body are quite distinguishable from the self. We can lose parts of the body without any serious invasion of the self. The mere ability to experience different parts of the body is not different from the experience of a table. The table presents a different feel from what the hand does when one hand feels another, but it is an experience of something with which we come definitely into contact. The body does not experience itself as a whole, in the sense in which the self in some way enters into the experience of the self.

It is the characteristic of the self as an object to itself that I want to bring out. This characteristic is represented in the word "self," which is a reflexive, and indicates that which can be both subject and object. This type of object is essentially different from other objects, and in the past it has been distinguished as conscious, a term which indicates an experience with, an experience of, one's self. It was assumed that consciousness in some way carried this capacity of being an object to itself. In giving a behavioristic statement of consciousness we have to look for some sort of experience in which the physical organism can become an object to itself.¹

When one is running to get away from someone who is chasing him, he is entirely occupied in this action and his experience may be swallowed up in the object about him, so that he has, at the time being, no consciousness of self at all. We must be, of course, very completely occupied to have that take place, but we can, I think, recognize that sort of a possible experience in which the self does not enter. . . . In such instances there is a contrast between an experience that is absolutely wound up in outside activity in which the self as an object does not enter, and an activity of memory or imagination in which the self is the principal object. The self is then entirely distinguishable from an organism.

¹Man's behavior is such in his social group that he is able to become an object to himself, a fact which constitutes him an advanced product of evolutionary development than are the lower animals. Fundamentally it is this social fact—and the alleged possession of a soul or mind with which he, as an individual, has been mysteriously and supernaturally endowed with which the lower animals have not been endowed—that differentiates him from them.

the relations among its three basic individual components: namely, in the 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. And the fact that the nature of meaning is thus found to be implicit in the

structure of the social act provides additional emphasis upon the necessity, in social psychology, of starting off with the initial assumption of an ongoing social process of experience and behavior in which any given group of human individuals is involved, and upon which the existence and development of their minds, selves, and self-consciousness depend.

Introduction to "Self"

In the selections taken from the chapters on the self, Mead presents a number of concepts central to his theory. Here, we present an overview of Mead's notion of the "I," "me," and "generalized other" and their realization through the "play" and "game" stages of the development of self-consciousness. Moreover, in his discussion of the self, you will again encounter two themes that form the core of Mead's program: (1) the interconnectedness between the self and social experiences and (2) language as the tool that mediates this relationship.

For Mead, the self does not exist as a singular personality or identity that answers the question, "Who am I?" Instead, the self exists as self-consciousness, a capacity to be both subject and object to one's self that is made possible solely through interaction and its basis in language. As we anticipate the possible implications of courses of action in order to elicit the desired responses from others, we become an "object" to ourselves. However, an individual is aware of his self as an object, "not directly, but only indirectly, from the particular standpoints of other individual [s] . . . or from the generalized standpoint of the social group as a whole to which he belongs" (Mead [1934] 1962:138). In turn, the experience of our self as an object becomes possible only by taking the attitudes of others toward our self.

Viewing ourselves as an object is the phase of the self Mead termed the "me."¹ This phase represents a sense of who we are that is created, sustained, and modified through our interaction with others. (In the opening to this chapter, "me" is who you see in the mirror.) It is the "organized set of attitudes of others which one himself assumes" (ibid.:175); the self one is aware of when thinking, or taking the attitude of the other. Thus, the self is a social product that is rooted in our perceptions of how others interpret our behaviors.

That we see ourselves and respond to our conduct as others would is not the only way in which the self is a reflection of social interaction. According to Mead, "We divide ourselves up in all sorts of different selves with reference to our acquaintances" (ibid.:142). In other words, it is interaction and the context within which it takes place that determines who we are for the moment—the side of our self that we show to others. The self you experience as a sibling is different from the one you experience as a coworker or a student. We all have, in a sense, multiple social selves or personalities, as assuming the attitudes of a particular other or community shapes our behavior.

While the "me" is involved in thinking or reflexive role taking, the self enters into another phase during moments of interaction when the "I" is in the foreground. The "I" reacts or answers to the "me," the phase of the self that one is conscious of. (The "I" is the phase of the self that *looks* in the mirror in our opening example.) It is "the response of the [individual] to the attitudes of the others" (ibid.:175). The individual is aware of the "I" of the present moment only as it passes into memory, into the "me." It

¹In developing his view of the self, Mead borrowed much from William James, including the latter's idea of the "me" and the notion of possessing multiple social selves. See the Significant Others box (page 318) that briefly summarizes James's work.

that is surrounded by things and acts with reference to things, including parts of its own body. These latter may be objects like other objects, but they are just objects out there in the field, and they do not involve a self that is an object to the organism. This is, I think, frequently overlooked. It is that fact which makes our anthropomorphic reconstructions of animal life so fallacious. How can an individual get outside himself (experientially) in such a way as to become an object to himself? This is the essential psychological problem of selfhood or of self-consciousness; and its solution is to be found by referring to the process of social conduct or activity in which the given person or individual is implicated. The apparatus of reason would not be complete unless it swept itself into its own analysis of the field of experience; or unless the individual brought himself into the same experiential field as that of the other individual selves in relation to whom he acts in any given social situation. Reason cannot become impersonal unless it takes an objective, non-affective attitude toward itself; otherwise we have just consciousness, not *self-consciousness*. And it is necessary to rational conduct that the individual should thus take an objective, impersonal attitude toward himself, that he should become an object to himself. For the individual organism is obviously an essential and important fact or constituent element of the empirical situation in which it acts; and without taking objective account of itself as such, it cannot act intelligently, or rationally.

The individual experiences himself as such, not directly, but only indirectly, from the particular standpoints of other individual members of the same social group, or from the generalized standpoint of the social group as a whole to which he belongs. For he enters his own experience as a self or individual, not directly or immediately, not by becoming a subject to himself, but only in so far as he first becomes an object to himself just as other individuals are objects to him or in his experience; and he becomes an object to himself only by taking the attitudes of other individuals toward himself within a social environment or context of experience and behavior in which both he and they are involved.

The importance of what we term "communication" lies in the fact that it provides a form of behavior in which the organism or the individual may become an object to himself. It is that sort of communication which we have been discussing—not communication in the sense of the cluck of the hen to the chickens, or the bark of a wolf to the pack, or the lowing of a cow, but communication in the sense of significant symbols,

communication which is directed not only to others but also to the individual himself. So far as that type of communication is a part of behavior it at least introduces a self. Of course, one may hear without listening; one may see things that he does not realize; do things that he is not really aware of. But it is where one does respond to that which he addresses to another and where that response of his own becomes a part of his conduct, where he not only hears himself but responds to himself, talks and replies to himself as truly as the other person replies to him, that we have behavior in which the individuals become objects to themselves. . . .

The self, as that which can be an object to itself, is essentially a social structure, and it arises in social experience. After a self has arisen, it in a certain sense provides for itself its social experiences, and so we can conceive of an absolutely solitary self. But it is impossible to conceive of a self arising outside of social experience. When it has arisen we can think of a person in solitary confinement for the rest of his life, but who still has himself as a companion, and is able to think and to converse with himself as he had communicated with others. That process to which I have just referred, of responding to one's self as another responds to it, taking part in one's own conversation with others, being aware of what one is saying and using that awareness of what one is saying to determine what one is going to say thereafter—that is a process with which we are all familiar. We are continually following up our own address to other persons by an understanding of what we are saying, and using that understanding in the direction of our continued speech. We are finding out what we are going to say, what we are going to do, by saying and doing, and in the process we are continually controlling the process itself. In the conversation of gestures what we say calls out a certain response in another and that in turn changes our own action, so that we shift from what we started to do because of the reply the other makes. The conversation of gestures is the beginning of communication. The individual comes to carry on a conversation of gestures with himself. He says something, and that calls out a certain reply in himself which makes him change what he was going to say. One starts to say something, we will presume an unpleasant something, but when he starts to say it he realizes it is cruel. The effect on himself of what he is saying checks him; there is here a conversation of gestures between the individual and himself. We mean by significant speech that the action is one that affects the individual himself, and that the effect upon the

individual himself is part of the intelligent carrying-out of the conversation with others. Now we, so to speak, amputate that social phase and dispense with it for the time being, so that one is talking to one's self as one would talk to another person."

This process of abstraction cannot be carried on indefinitely. One inevitably seeks an audience, has to pour himself out to somebody. In reflective intelligence one thinks to act, and to act solely so that this action remains a part of a social process. Thinking becomes preparatory to social action. The very process of thinking is, of course, simply an inner conversation that goes on, but it is a conversation of gestures which in its completion implies the expression of that which one thinks to an audience. One separates the significance of what he is saying to others from the actual speech and gets it ready before saying it. He thinks it out, and perhaps writes it in the form of a book; but it is still a part of social intercourse in which one is addressing other persons and at the same time addressing one's self, and in which one controls the address to other persons by the response made to one's own gesture. That the person should be responding to himself is necessary to the self, and it is this sort of social conduct which provides behavior within which that self appears. I know of no other form of behavior than the linguistic in which the individual is an object to himself, and, so far as I can see, the individual is not a self in the reflexive sense unless he is an object to himself. It is this fact that gives a critical importance to communication, since this is a type of behavior in which the individual does so respond to himself.

We realize in everyday conduct and experience that an individual does not mean a great deal of what he is doing and saying. We frequently say that such an individual is not himself. We come away from an interview with a realization that we have left out important things, that there are parts of the self that did not get into what

was said. What determines the amount of the self that gets into communication is the social experience. Of course, a good deal of the self does not need to be expressed. We carry on a whole series of different relationships to different people. We are one thing to one man and another thing to another. There are parts of the self which exist only for the self in relationship to others. We divide ourselves up in all sorts of different ways with reference to our acquaintances. We discuss politics with one and religion with another. There are all sorts of different selves answering to all sorts of different social reactions. It is the social process itself that is responsible for the appearance of the self; it is not the self as a self apart from this type of experience. . . .

The unity and structure of the complete self reflect the unity and structure of the social process as a whole, and each of the elementary selves of which it is composed reflects the unity and structure of one of the various aspects of that process in which the individual is implicated. In other words, the various elementary selves which constitute, or are organized into, a complete self are the various aspects of the structure of the social process as a whole; the structure of the complete self is thus a reflection of the structure of the social process. The organization and unification of a social group is identical with the organization and unification of any one of the selves arising within the social process in which that group is engaged, or which it is carrying on. . . .ⁱⁱⁱ

THE BACKGROUND OF THE GENESIS OF THE SELF

The problem now presents itself as to how, in detail, the self arises. We have to note something of the background of its genesis. First of all there is the conversation of

ⁱⁱIt is generally recognized that the specifically social expressions of intelligence, or the exercise of what is often called "social intelligence," depend upon the given individual's ability to take the rôles of, or "put himself in the place of," the other individuals implicated with him in given social situations; and upon his consequent sensitivity to their attitudes toward himself and toward one another. These specifically social expressions of intelligence, of course, acquire unique significance in terms of the view that the whole nature of intelligence is social to the very core—that this putting of one's self in the places of others, in taking by one's self of their rôles or attitudes, is not merely one of the various aspects or expressions of intelligence or of intelligent behavior, but is the very essence of its character. . . .

ⁱⁱⁱThe unity of the mind is not identical with the unity of the self. The unity of the self is constituted by the unity of the entire relational pattern of social behavior and experience in which the individual is implicated, and which is reflected in the structure of the self; but many of the aspects or features of this entire pattern do not enter into consciousness, so that the unity of the mind is in a sense an abstraction from the more inclusive unity of the self.

gestures between animals involving some sort of co-operative activity. There the beginning of the act of one is a stimulus to the other to respond in a certain way, while the beginning of this response becomes again a stimulus to the first to adjust his action to the oncoming response. Such is the preparation for the completed act, and ultimately it leads up to the conduct which is the outcome of this preparation. The conversation of gestures, however, does not carry with it the reference of the individual, the animal, the organism, to itself. It is not acting in a fashion which calls for a response from the form itself, although it is conduct with reference to the conduct of others. We have seen, however, that there are certain gestures that do affect the organism as they affect other organisms and may, therefore, arouse in the organism responses of the same character as aroused in the other. Here, then, we have a situation in which the individual may at least arouse responses in himself and reply to these responses, the condition being that the social stimuli have an effect on the individual which is like that which they have on the other. That, for example, is what is implied in language; otherwise language as significant symbol would disappear, since the individual would not get the meaning of that which he says.

The peculiar character possessed by our human social environment belongs to it by virtue of the peculiar character of human social activity; and that character, as we have seen, is to be found in the process of communication, and more particularly in the triadic relation on which the existence of meaning is based: the relation of the gesture of one organism to the adjustive response made to it by another organism, in its indicative capacity as pointing to the completion or resultant of the act it initiates (the meaning of the gesture being, thus the response of the second organism to it as such, or as a gesture). What, as it were, takes the gesture out of the social act and isolates it as such—what makes it something more than just an early phase of an individual act—is the response of another organism, or of other organisms, to it. Such a response is its meaning, or gives it its meaning. The social situation and process of

behavior are here presupposed by the acts of the individual organisms implicated therein. The gesture arises as a separable element in the social act, by virtue of the fact that it is selected out by the sensitivities of other organisms to it; it does not exist as a gesture merely in the experience of the single individual. The meaning of a gesture by one organism, to repeat, is found in the response of another organism to what would be the completion of the act of the first organism which that gesture initiates and indicates.

We sometimes speak as if a person could build up an entire argument in his mind, and then put it into words to convey it to someone else. Actually, our thinking always takes place by means of some sort of symbols. It is possible that one could have the meaning of "chair" in his experience without there being a symbol, but we would not be thinking about it in that case. We may sit down in a chair without thinking about what we are doing, that is, the approach to the chair is presumably already aroused in our experience, so that the meaning is there. But if one is thinking about the chair he must have some sort of a symbol for it. It may be the form of the chair, it may be the attitude that somebody else takes in sitting down, but it is more apt to be some language symbol that arouses this response. In a thought process there has to be some sort of a symbol that can refer to this meaning, that is, tend to call out this response, and also serve this purpose for other persons as well. It would not be a thought process if that were not the case.

Our symbols are all universal.^{iv} You cannot say anything that is absolutely particular; anything you say that has any meaning at all is universal. You are saying something that calls out a specific response in anybody else provided that the symbol exists for him in this experience as it does for you. There is the language of speech and the language of hands, and there may be the language of the expression of the countenance. One can register grief or joy and call out certain responses. There are primitive people who can carry on elaborate conversations just by expressions of the countenance. Even in these cases the person who communicates is affected by

^{iv}Thinking proceeds in terms of or by means of universals. A universal may be interpreted behavioristically as simply the social act as a whole, involving the organization and interrelation of the attitudes of all the individuals implicated in the act, as controlling their overt responses. This organization of the different individual attitudes and interactions in a given social act, with reference to their interrelations as realized by the individuals themselves, is what we mean by a universal; and it determines what the actual overt responses of the individuals involved in the given social act will be, whether that act be concerned with a concrete project of some sort (such as the relation of physical and social means to ends desired) or with some purely abstract discussion, say the theory of relativity or the Platonic ideas.

that expression just as he expects somebody else to be affected. Thinking always implies a symbol which will call out the same response in another that it calls out in the thinker. Such a symbol is a universal of discourse; it is universal in its character. We always assume that the symbol we use is one which will call out in the other person the same response, provided it is a part of his mechanism of conduct. A person who is saying something is saying to himself what he says to others; otherwise he does not know what he is talking about.

There is, of course, a great deal in one's conversation with others that does not arouse in one's self the same response it arouses in others. That is particularly true in the case of emotional attitudes. One tries to bully somebody else; he is not trying to bully himself. There is, further, a whole set of values given in speech which are not of a symbolic character. The actor is conscious of these values; that is, if he assumes a certain attitude he is, as we say, aware that this attitude represents grief. If it does he is able to respond to his own gesture in some sense as his audience does. It is not a natural situation; one is not an actor all of the time. We do at times act and consider just what the effect of our attitude is going to be, and we may deliberately use a certain tone of voice to bring about a certain result. Such a tone arouses the same response in ourselves that we want to arouse in somebody else. But a very large part of what goes on in speech has not this symbolic status. . . .

We do not normally use language stimuli to call out in ourselves the emotional response which we are calling out in others. One does, of course, have sympathy in emotional situations; but what one is seeking for there is something which is, after all, that in the other which supports the individual in his own experience. In the case of the poet and actor, the stimulus calls out in the artist that which it calls out in the other, but this is not the natural function of language; we do not assume that the person who is angry is calling out the fear in himself that he is calling out in someone else. The emotional part of our act does not directly call out in us the response it calls out in the other. If a person is hostile the attitude of the other that he is interested in, an attitude which flows naturally from his angered tones, is not one that he definitely recognizes in himself. We are not frightened by a tone which we may use to frighten somebody else. On the emotional side, which is a very large part of the vocal gesture, we do not call out in ourselves in any such degree the response we call out in others as we do in the case of significant speech. Here we should call out in ourselves the type of response we are calling out in others; we must know what we are

saying, and the attitude of the other which we arouse in ourselves should control what we do say. Rationality means that the type of the response which we call out in others should be so called out in ourselves, and that this response should in turn take its place in determining what further thing we are going to say and do.

What is essential to communication is that the symbol should arouse in one's self what it arouses in the other individual. It must have that sort of universality to any person who finds himself in the same situation. There is a possibility of language whenever a stimulus can affect the individual as it affects the other. With a blind person such as Helen Keller, it is a contact experience that could be given to another as it is given to herself. It is out of that sort of language that the mind of Helen Keller was built up. As she has recognized, it was not until she could get into communication with other persons through symbols which could arouse in herself the responses they arouse in other people that she could get what we term a mental content, or a self.

Another set of background factors in the genesis of the self is represented in the activities of play and the game.

Among primitive people, as I have said, the necessity of distinguishing the self and the organism was recognized in what we term the "double": the individual has a thing-like self that is affected by the individual as it affects other people and which is distinguished from the immediate organism in that it can leave the body and come back to it. This is the basis for the concept of the soul as a separate entity.

We find in children something that answers to this double, namely, the invisible, imaginary companions which a good many children produce in their own experience. They organize in this way the responses which they call out in other persons and call out also in themselves. Of course, this playing with an imaginary companion is only a peculiarly interesting phase of ordinary play. Play in this sense, especially the stage which precedes the organized games, is a play at something. A child plays at being a mother, at being a teacher, at being a policeman; that is, it is taking different rôles, as we say. We have something that suggests this in what we call the play of animals: a cat will play with her kittens, and dogs play with each other. Two dogs playing with each other will attack and defend, in a process which if carried through would amount to an actual fight. There is a combination of responses which checks the depth of the bite. But we do not have in such a situation the dogs taking a definite rôle in the sense that a child deliberately takes the rôle of another. This tendency on the part of the children is what we are working with in the kindergarten

where the rôles which the children assume are made the basis for training. When a child does assume a rôle he has in himself the stimuli which call out that particular response or group of responses. He may, of course, run away when he is chased, as the dog does, or he may turn around and strike back just as the dog does in his play. But that is not the same as playing at something. Children get together to "play Indian." This means that the child has a certain set of stimuli which call out in itself the responses that they would call out in others, and which answer to an Indian. In the play period the child utilizes his own responses to these stimuli which he makes use of in building a self. The response which he has a tendency to make to these stimuli organizes them. He plays that he is, for instance, offering himself something, and he buys it; he gives a letter to himself and takes it away; he addresses himself as a parent, as a teacher; he arrests himself as a policeman. He has a set of stimuli which call out in himself the sort of responses they call out in others. He takes this group of responses and organizes them into a certain whole. Such is the simplest form of being another to one's self. It involves a temporal situation. The child says something in one character and responds in another character, and then his responding in another character is a stimulus to himself in the first character, and so the conversation goes on. A certain organized structure arises in him and in his other which replies to it, and these carry on the conversation of gestures between themselves.

If we contrast play with the situation in an organized game, we note the essential difference that the child who plays in a game must be ready to take the attitude of everyone else involved in that game, and that these different rôles must have a definite relationship to each other. Taking a very simple game such as hide-and-seek, everyone with the exception of the one who is hiding is a person who is hunting. A child does not require more than the person who is hunted and the one who is hunting. If a child is playing in the first sense he just goes on playing, but there is no basic organization

gained. In that early stage he passes from one rôle to another just as a whim takes him. But in a game where a number of individuals are involved, then the child taking one rôle must be ready to take the rôle of everyone else. If he gets in a ball nine he must have the responses of each position involved in his own position. He must know what everyone else is going to do in order to carry out his own play. He has to take all of these rôles. They do not all have to be present in consciousness at the same time, but at some moments he has to have three or four individuals present in his own attitude, such as the one who is going to throw the ball, the one who is going to catch it, and so on. These responses must be, in some degree, present in his own make-up. In the game, then, there is a set of responses of such others so organized that the attitude of one calls out the appropriate attitudes of the other. . . .

PLAY, THE GAME, AND THE GENERALIZED OTHER

The fundamental difference between the game and play is that in the latter the child must have the attitude of all the others involved in that game. The attitudes of the other players which the participant assumes organize into a sort of unit, and it is that organization which controls the response of the individual. The illustration used was of a person playing baseball. Each one of his own acts is determined by his assumption of the action of the others who are playing the game. What he does is controlled by his being everyone else on that team, at least in so far as those attitudes affect his own particular response. We get then an "other" which is an organization of the attitudes of those involved in the same process.

The organized community or social group which gives to the individual his unity of self may be called "the generalized other." The attitude of the generalized other is the attitude of the whole community.⁹ Thus, for

⁹It is possible for inanimate objects, no less than for other human organisms, to form parts of the generalized and organized—the completely socialized—other for any given human individual, in so far as he responds to such objects socially or in a social fashion (by means of the mechanism of thought, the internalized conversation of gestures). Any thing—any object or set of objects, whether animate or inanimate, human or animal, or merely physical—toward which he acts, or to which he responds, socially, is an element in what for him is the generalized other; by taking the attitudes of which toward himself he becomes conscious of himself as an object or individual, and thus develops a self or personality. Thus, for example, the cult, in its primitive form, is merely the social embodiment of the relation between the given social group or community and its physical environment—an organized social means, adopted by the individual members of that group or community, of entering into social relations with that environment, or (in a sense) of carrying on conversations with it; and in this way that environment becomes part of the total generalized other for each of the individual members of the given social group or community.

example, in the case of such a social group as a ball team, the team is the generalized other in so far as it enters—as an organized process or social activity—into the experience of any one of the individual members of it.

If the given human individual is to develop a self in the fullest sense, it is not sufficient for him merely to take the attitudes of other human individuals toward himself and toward one another within the human social process, and to bring that social process as a whole into his individual experience merely in these terms: he must also, in the same way that he takes the attitudes of other individuals toward himself and toward one another, take their attitudes toward the various phases or aspects of the common social activity or set of social undertakings in which, as members of an organized society or social group, they are all engaged; and he must then, by generalizing these individual attitudes of that organized society or social group itself, as a whole, act toward different social projects which at any given time it is carrying out, or toward the various larger phases of the general social process which constitutes its life and of which these projects are specific manifestations. This getting of the broad activities of any given social whole or organized society as such within the experiential field of any one of the individuals involved or included in that whole is, in other words, the essential basis and prerequisite of the fullest development of that individual's self: only in so far as he takes the attitudes of the organized social group to which he belongs toward the organized, co-operative social activity or set of such activities in which that group as such is engaged, does he develop a complete self or possess the sort of complete self he has developed. And on the other hand, the complex co-operative processes and activities and institutional functionings of organized human society are also possible only in so far as every individual involved in them or belonging to that society can take the general attitudes of all other such individuals with reference to these processes and activities and institutional functionings, and to the organized social whole

of experiential relations and interactions thereby constituted—and can direct his own behavior accordingly.

It is in the form of the generalized other that the social process influences the behavior of the individuals involved in it and carrying it on, i.e., that the community exercises control over the conduct of its individual members; for it is in this form that the social process or community enters as a determining factor into the individual's thinking. In abstract thought the individual takes the attitude of the generalized other^{vi} toward himself, without reference to its expression in any particular other individuals; and in concrete thought he takes that attitude in so far as it is expressed in the attitudes toward his behavior of those other individuals with whom he is involved in the given social situation or act. But only by taking the attitude of the generalized other toward himself, in one or another of these ways, can he think at all; for only thus can thinking—or the internalized conversation of gestures which constitutes thinking—occur. And only through the taking by individuals of the attitude or attitudes of the generalized other toward themselves is the existence of a universe of discourse, as that system of common or social meanings which thinking presupposes at its context, rendered possible.

The self-conscious human individual, then, takes or assumes the organized social attitudes of the given social group or community (or of some one section thereof) to which he belongs, toward the social problems of various kinds which confront that group or community at any given time, and which arise in connection with the correspondingly different social projects or organized co-operative enterprises in which that group or community as such is engaged; and as an individual participant in these social projects or co-operative enterprises, he governs his own conduct accordingly. In politics, for example, the individual identifies himself with an entire political party and takes the organized attitudes of that entire party toward the rest of the given social community and toward the problems which confront the party within the given

^{vi}We have said that the internal conversation of the individual with himself in terms of words or significant gestures—the conversation which constitutes the process or activity of thinking—is carried on by the individual from the standpoint of the “generalized other.” And the more abstract that conversation is, the more abstract thinking happens to be, the further removed is the generalized other from any connection with particular individuals. It is especially in abstract thinking, that is to say, that the conversation involved is carried on by the individual with the generalized other, rather than with any particular individuals. Thus it is, for example, that abstract concepts are concepts stated in terms of the attitudes of the entire social group or community; they are stated on the basis of the individual's consciousness of the attitudes of the generalized other toward them, as a result of his taking these attitudes of the generalized other and then responding to them. And thus it is also that abstract propositions are stated in a form which anyone—any other intelligent individual—will accept.

social situation; and he consequently reacts or responds in terms of the organized attitudes of the party as a whole. He thus enters into a special set of social relations with all the other individuals who belong to that political party; and in the same way he enters into various other special sets of social relations, with various other classes of individuals respectively, the individuals of each of these classes being the other members of some one of the particular organized subgroups (determined in socially functional terms) of which he himself is a member within the entire given society or social community. In the most highly developed, organized, and complicated human social communities—those evolved by civilized man—these various socially functional classes or subgroups of individuals to which any given individual belongs (and with the other individual members of which he thus enters into a special set of social relations) are of two kinds. Some of them are concrete social classes or subgroups, such as political parties, clubs, corporations, which are all actually functional social units, in terms of which their individual members are directly related to one another. The others are abstract social classes or subgroups, such as the class of debtors and the class of creditors, in terms of which their individual members are related to one another only more or less indirectly, and which only more or less indirectly function as social units, but which afford or represent unlimited possibilities for the widening and ramifying and enriching of the social relations among all the individual members of the given society as an organized and unified whole. The given individual's membership in several of these abstract social classes or subgroups makes possible his entrance into definite social relations (however indirect) with an almost infinite number of other individuals who also belong to or are included within one or another of these abstract social classes or subgroups cutting across functional lines of demarcation which divide different human social communities from one another, and including individual members from several (in some cases from all) such communities. Of these abstract social classes or subgroups of human individuals the one which is most inclusive and extensive is, of course, the one defined by the logical universe of discourse (or system of universally significant symbols) determined by the participation and communicative interaction of individuals; for of all such classes or subgroups, it is the one which claims the largest number of individual members, and which enables the largest conceivable number of human individuals to enter into some sort of

social relation, however indirect or abstract it may be, with one another—a relation arising from the universal functioning of gestures as significant symbols in the general human social process of communication. . . .

The game has a logic, so that such an organization of the self is rendered possible: there is a definite end to be obtained; the actions of the different individuals are all related to each other with reference to that end so that they do not conflict; one is not in conflict with himself in the attitude of another man on the team. If one has the attitude of the person throwing the ball he can also have the response of catching the ball. The two are related so that they further the purpose of the game itself. They are interrelated in a unitary, organic fashion. There is a definite unity, then, which is introduced into the organization of other selves when we reach such a stage as that of the game, as over against the situation of play where there is a simple succession of one rôle after another, a situation which is, of course, characteristic of the child's own personality. The child is one thing at one time and another at another, and what he is at one moment does not determine what he is at another. That is both the charm of childhood as well as its inadequacy. You cannot count on the child; you cannot assume that all the things he does are going to determine what he will do at any moment. He is not organized into a whole. The child has no definite character, no definite personality.

The game is then an illustration of the situation out of which an organized personality arises. In so far as the child does take the attitude of the other and allows that attitude of the other to determine the thing he is going to do with reference to a common end, he is becoming an organic member of society. He is taking over the morale of that society and is becoming an essential member of it. He belongs to it in so far as he does allow the attitude of the other that he takes to control his own immediate expression. What is involved here is some sort of an organized process. That which is expressed in terms of the game is, of course, being continually expressed in the social life of the child, but this wider process goes beyond the immediate experience of the child himself. The importance of the game is that it lies entirely inside of the child's own experience, and the importance of our modern type of education is that it is brought as far as possible within this realm. The different attitudes that a child assumes are so organized that they exercise a definite control over his response, as the attitudes in a game control his own immediate response. In the game we get an organized other, a generalized other, which is found in the nature of the child itself,

and finds its expression in the immediate experience of the child. And it is that organized activity in the child's own nature controlling the particular response which gives unity, and which builds up his own self. . . .

We may illustrate our basic concept by a reference to the notion of property. If we say "This is my property, I shall control it," that affirmation calls out a certain set of responses which must be the same in any community in which property exists. It involves an organized attitude with reference to property which is common to all the members of the community. One must have a definite attitude of control of his own property and respect for the property of others. Those attitudes (as organized sets of responses) must be there on the part of all, so that when one says such a thing he calls out in himself the response of the others. He is calling out the response of what I have called a generalized other. That which makes society possible is such common responses, such organized attitudes, with reference to what we term property, the cults of religion, the process of education, and the relations of the family. Of course, the wider the society the more definitely universal these objects must be. In any case there must be a definite set of responses, which we may speak of as abstract, and which can belong to a very large group. Property is in itself a very abstract concept. It is that which the individual himself can control and nobody else can control. The attitude is different from that of a dog toward a bone. A dog will fight any other dog trying to take the bone. The dog is not taking the attitude of the other dog. A man who says "This is my property" is taking an attitude of the other person. The man is appealing to his rights because he is able to take the attitude which everybody else in the group has with reference to property, thus arousing in himself the attitude of others.

What goes to make up the organized self is the organization of the attitudes which are common to the group. A person is a personality because he belongs to a community, because he takes over the institutions of that community into his own conduct. He takes its language as a medium by which he gets his personality, and then through a process of taking the different rôles that all the others furnish he comes to get the attitude of the members of the community. Such, in a certain sense, is the structure of a man's personality. There are certain common responses which each individual has toward certain common things, and in so far as those common responses are awakened in the individual when he is affecting other persons he arouses his own self. The structure, then, on which the self is built is this response

which is common to all, for one has to be a member of a community to be a self. Such responses are abstract attitudes, but they constitute just what we term a man's character. They give him what we term his principles, the acknowledged attitudes of all members of the community toward what are the values of that community. He is putting himself in the place of the generalized other, which represents the organized responses of all the members of the group. It is that which guides conduct controlled by principles, and a person who has such an organized group of responses is a man whom we say has character, in the moral sense. . . .

I have so far emphasized what I have called the structures upon which the self is constructed, the framework of the self, as it were. Of course we are not only what is common to all; each one of the selves is different from everyone else; but there has to be such a common structure as I have sketched in order that we may be members of a community at all. We cannot be ourselves unless we are also members in whom there is a community of attitudes which control the attitudes of all. We cannot have rights unless we have common attitudes. That which we have acquired as self-conscious persons makes us such members of society and gives us selves. Selves can only exist in definite relationships to other selves. No hard-and-fast line can be drawn between our own selves and the selves of others, since our own selves exist and enter as such into our experience only in so far as the selves of others exist and enter as such into our experience also. The individual possesses a self only in relation to the selves of the other members of his social group; and the structure of his self expresses or reflects the general behavior pattern of this social group to which he belongs, just as does the structure of the self of every other individual belonging to this social group. . . .

THE SELF AND THE SUBJECTIVE

There is one other matter which I wish briefly to refer to now. The only way in which we can react against the disapproval of the entire community is by setting up a higher sort of community which in a certain sense outvotes the one we find. A person may reach a point of going against the whole world about him; he may stand out by himself over against it. But to do that he has to speak with the voice of reason to himself. He has to comprehend the voices of the past and of the future. That is the only way in which the self can get a voice which

is more than the voice of the community. As a rule we assume that this general voice of the community is identical with the larger community of the past and the future; we assume that an organized custom represents what we call morality. The things one cannot do are those which everybody would condemn. If we take the attitude of the community over against our own responses, that is a true statement, but we must not forget this other capacity, that of replying to the community and insisting on the gesture of the community changing. We can reform the order of things; we can insist on making the community standards better standards. We are not simply bound by the community. We are engaged in a conversation in which what we say is listened to by the community and its response is one which is affected by what we have to say. This is especially true in critical situations. A man rises up and defends himself for what he does; he has his "day in court"; he can present his views. He can perhaps change the attitude of the community toward himself. The process of conversation is one in which the individual has not only the right but the duty of talking to the community of which he is a part, and bringing about those changes which take place through the interaction of individuals. That is the way, of course, in which society gets ahead, by just such interactions as those in which some person thinks a thing out. We are continually changing our social system in some respects, and we are able to do that intelligently because we can think. . . .

THE "I" AND THE "ME"

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." I now wish to examine these concepts in greater detail.

There is neither "I" nor "me" in the conversation of gestures; the whole act is not yet carried out, but the preparation takes place in this field of gesture. Now, in so far as the individual arouses in himself the attitudes of the others, there arises an organized group of responses. And it is due to the individual's ability to take the attitudes of these others in so far as they can be organized that he gets self-consciousness. The taking of all of those organized sets of attitudes gives him his "me"; that is the self he is aware of. He can throw the ball to some other member because of the demand made

upon him from other members of the team. That is the self that immediately exists for him in his consciousness. He has their attitudes, knows what they want and what the consequence of any act of his will be, and he has assumed responsibility for the situation. Now, it is the presence of those organized sets of attitudes that constitutes that "me" to which he as an "I" is responding. But what that response will be he does not know and nobody else knows. Perhaps he will make a brilliant play or an error. The response to that situation as it appears in his immediate experience is uncertain, and it is that which constitutes the "I."

The "I" is his action over against that social situation within his own conduct, and it gets into his experience only after he has carried out the act. Then he is aware of it. He had to do such a thing and he did it. He fulfills his duty and he may look with pride at the throw which he made. The "me" arises to do that duty—that is the way in which it arises in his experience. He had in him all the attitudes of others, calling for a certain response; that was the "me" of that situation, and his response is the "I."

I want to call attention particularly to the fact that this response of the "I" is something that is more or less uncertain. The attitudes of others which one assumes as affecting his own conduct constitute the "me," and that is something that is there, but the response to it is as yet not given. When one sits down to think anything out, he has certain data that are there. Suppose that it is a social situation which he has to straighten out. He sees himself from the point of view of one individual or another in the group. These individuals, related all together, give him a certain self. Well, what is he going to do? He does not know and nobody else knows. He can get the situation into his experience because he can assume the attitudes of the various individuals involved in it. He knows how they feel about it by the assumption of their attitudes. He says, in effect, "I have done certain things that seem to commit me to a certain course of conduct." Perhaps if he does so act it will place him in a false position with another group. The "I" as a response to this situation, in contrast to the "me" which is involved in the attitudes which he takes, is uncertain. And when the response takes place, then it appears in the field of experience largely as a memory image. . . .

The "I," then, in this relation of the "I" and the "me," is something that is, so to speak, responding to a social situation which is within the experience of the individual. It is the answer which the individual makes to the attitude which others take toward him when he assumes

an attitude toward them. Now, the attitudes he is taking toward them are present in his own experience, but his response to them will contain a novel element. The "I" gives the sense of freedom, of initiative. The situation is there for us to act in a self-conscious fashion. We are aware of ourselves, and of what the situation is, but exactly how we will act never gets into experience until after the action takes place.

Such is the basis for the fact that the "I" does not appear in the same sense in experience as does the "me." The "me" represents a definite organization of the community there in our own attitudes, and calling for a response, but the response that takes place is something that just happens. There is no certainty in regard to it. There is a moral necessity but no mechanical necessity for the act. When it does take place then we find what has been done. The above account gives us, I think, the relative position of the "I" and "me" in

the situation, and the grounds for the separation of the two in behavior. The two are separated in the process but they belong together in the sense of being parts of a whole. They are separated and yet they belong together. The separation of the "I" and the "me" is not fictitious. They are not identical, for, as I have said, the "I" is something that is never entirely calculable. The "me" does call for a certain sort of an "I" in so far as we meet the obligations that are given in conduct itself, but the "I" is always something different from what the situation itself calls for. So there is always that distinction, if you like, between the "I" and the "me." The "I" both calls out the "me" and responds to it. Taken together they constitute a personality as it appears in social experience. The self is essentially a social process going on with these two distinguishable phases. If it did not have these two phases there could not be conscious responsibility, and there would be nothing novel in experience.

Discussion Questions

1. How does Mead define self-consciousness? What role does language play in the development of self-consciousness? What role does self-consciousness play in social interaction?

2. Compare and contrast Mead's concept of the "I," the "me," and the "generalized other" with Simmel's views on the relationship between the self and group affiliations. How might Simmel's concept of the "stranger" be used to critique Mead's understanding of the "generalized other"?

3. Can television, and mass media more generally, affect the development of the self? If so, how?

4. Mead focuses on the self, language, thinking, and meaning, and how they are connected to social interaction. What other factors might be involved in creating and sustaining social interaction? Use concrete examples to explain.

5. Explain Mead's theory of "taking the attitude of the other," paying particular attention to how it might be related to issues of race, class, and gender. Discuss the relevance of Mead's theory of taking the attitude of the other to Du Bois's discussion of the color line and Gilman's discussion of gender.

6. Discuss the theoretical merits of Mead's conceptualization of institutions as "social habits" or a "common response on the part of all members of the community to a particular situation" (Mead 1934/1962:261). Use concrete examples to both support and critique this conceptualization. How does Mead's conceptualization of institutions compare with Weber's image of contemporary society as an "iron cage"?