

# George Herbert Mead's Social Psychology and Sociology of Knowledge

Zhen Huang\*

College of Humanities, Tongji University, Shanghai, China

\*Corresponding author: Zhen Huang, [huangzhen\\_jen@163.com](mailto:huangzhen_jen@163.com)

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**Abstract:** The existence of the spiritual self is a prerequisite for the occurrence of social process. Without soul and self, human society cannot exist. However, if the mind and self are not produced in the social process, the individual organism cannot have the semiotic self. George Herbert Mead's general method of macro social evolution is combined with some micro themes about biology and social psychology, which brings together many schools of thought, such as cognitive theory, structuralism, conflict theory, social change and system theory, as well as develops a philosophy of science and a comprehensive social theory.

**Keywords:** Embodied mind; Linguistic pragmatics; Semiotic self; Knowledge society

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## 1. Introduction

In George Herbert Mead's works, man is a specific species, and most people's behavior is based on a clear definition of the empirical world, the relationship between subjects and individual self. Mead found that thought or consciousness is dynamic in practice and accidental in a sense. Thought or consciousness does not always seem to be related to the problems people face and change accordingly. Therefore, Mead's preliminary exploration of the essence of consciousness gradually evolved into the exploration of subjectivity and soul, and finally into the exploration of intersubjectivity, self and society.

## 2. Methodology of time realism and social behaviorism

According to Mead, the main basis for the creation of reflective intelligence is social existence (or social process). In some ways, any given social form reflects the requirement of some cooperative efforts in the face of abrupt crises in history. The most crucial issue, according to Mead, is that "sociality" cannot be regarded as a process that totally integrates the separated person with the other in order to promote collective behavior. On the contrary, it should be read as the individual's realization is dependent on a constant and participatory social process. In natural evolution, the term of sociality has two aspects: on one hand, organisms' private viewpoints are not singular, and sociality refers to the objective reality of many perspectives with simultaneous membership. The private viewpoint of an organism, on the other hand, is linked to the provided "present," which entails projections from "present" to "past" and "future." As a result, sociality also entails the "emergence" of the present, i.e., "reality existing in the present." Mead maintained that perspective is the true "natural slate," which emerges from activities and continues to complicate the form of activities. Therefore, perspective is not only a subjective psychological phenomenon, nor an arbitrary point of view freely held, but the product of continuous activities<sup>[1]</sup>. In other words, all phenomena

occur in the relationship between organisms and their environment. The environment is composed of all events in a given perspective, and events are them because they unify themselves through a variety of relationships, thus denying the existence of independent entities and isolated events.

In addition, Mead shifted the focus of his understanding of “reality” from the understanding of the nature to the awareness of the activities in the current events. The reality, always in the present tense, represents the activities of entities in the world and activities related to “past” and “future” activities. The determined “past” is the place where the “present” comes into being. It shows that the “present” must meet the determined conditions. However, the “past” is not a simple decision, because it is reinterpreted and constructed by the individual subject at present <sup>[1]</sup>. Similar things also happen in the “future,” which provides a purpose field to be realized, endows the “present” with the purpose, and explains the contingency of arranging the current relationship for the future. Therefore, through the relationship with the “present,” the “past” and “future” provide a coherent point between decision and emergence, which combines the irreversible feeling of the “past,” the current reconstruction of the “present” and the expectation of the “future” <sup>[1]</sup>. In short, the subjective experience of individual subjects on time and events is reflected in the passage of nature, which provides conditions for the development of human social forms.

### **3. Conscious context and symbolic interaction**

Mead pointed out that, on one hand, psychic mechanism is a kind of emergent ability, that is, it is understood as a function related to the life of species. Thinking as a symbolic substance has emerged, allowing human organisms to express themselves in a more complicated society and industrial process. Self-consciousness, on the other hand, is generated by the internalization of objective meaning in the interaction mode (or social context) into which each infant is born.

Human organisms may communicate via symbolic information, which allows them to have self-consciousness or a mind. Gestures, according to Mead, evolved from immediate responses to stimuli to the foundation of language, ideographic gestures (or meaningful symbols). The original emotions of all languages begin with groans or grunts caused by sudden changes in breathing, accompanied by an indicator. At first, the sound didn't even function. It was just the disturbance of rhythmic breathing caused by the change of social situation <sup>[2]</sup>. When the voice gestures evolve into ideographic gestures, it becomes the real source of language itself and all derivative forms of symbol. Due to the use of language, human beings do not have to wait for the actual emergence of stimulation like lower creatures before responding to it in a conscious way. Before the emergence of stimulation, people are aware of the nature of stimulation and the subsequent and future stage of behavior. This means that human beings have a unique ability to isolate their responses to environmental stimuli and control these responses in isolation behavior. He can find meaning from his responses and point out these meanings to himself and others.

Similarly, Mead also pointed out that it is through language that human beings begin to realize themselves and their common relationship with the natural environment. The basic structure of human language lies in the tendency of unconscious behavior, which is the product of natural selection. Therefore, language is a practical consciousness existing for the other <sup>[3]</sup>. Mead opposes the view that language plays the role of a conceptual framework through which organisms inevitably perceive and understand the world at any time. In Mead's statement, individuals understand the world not through a conceptual framework, but through sharing standard behavior with others. Behavior is the unity in an organism-environment complex. According to Mead's analysis, different from other body movements, in any social interaction, language gestures can make individuals respond to their own gestures and the gestures of others at the same time, that is the way individuals hear and respond to their own voice is similar to that of others. Therefore, language gestures allow the individual to become an object of himself, that is, it gives the individual the ability to carry out internal dialogue in his own mind, so as to constitute the mechanism of thinking. Inner

dialogue is carried out with the same ideographic symbols as in social interaction, and language structure, as a symbol and symbol system, makes it possible to confirm the field of meaning between subjects. Therefore, it is the reflexivity of the self that makes it different from any object. Reflective behavior itself makes the self an object, so as to transform it from direct experience to indirect objectivity. It is also this reflexivity that enables individuals to regard the self as conscious <sup>[3]</sup>. In this context, Mead believes that in the social experience of organisms, when an individual breaks through the “present” and becomes his own object, the mind will arise. Obviously, this is not just called “consciousness,” but “self-consciousness.” In this way, not only others and other things are the object of the organism, but also “the organism itself is also the object, so it is also the subject <sup>[3]</sup>.”

The term self (or self-consciousness) is widely used here to refer to a special attribute of the human mind, that is, the ability to create and maintain a symbol system, combine and save symbol information among members of a group. In the children’s “play” stage, he just plays the role of others continuously, such as parents, doctors, teachers, animals and etc. When playing the role of the other, children rehearse the expected behavior of the other in their own imagination, but they cannot organize various roles into a complete social behavior. However, children obtain the inner dialogue of the mind through symbolic interaction with the other. As Mead said, “when an individual is aroused to play the role of the other, he begins to play the role of the other. In this way, he obtains the mechanism of thinking, that is, the mechanism of inner dialogue, which is the last step in the development of communication <sup>[1]</sup>.” Then children enter the stage of “game”. The game between individuals requires cooperation in time, place and competition rules. For example, in a football game, every behavior of a participant is determined by his assumptions about the behavior of other participants. As an organized process or social activity, a team like a team integrates into the experience of any participant. In itself, the team is the generalized other and the organization of the attitudes of those individuals participating in the same process. After childhood, in the social experience of real life beyond “play” and “game,” individuals look at themselves with the attitude of a wider social group, “It is this development that makes the life process of a society with communication as the medium possible. Spiritual life is produced here - through this process of continuous transition from one system to another, through the process and system structure contained in each system. This is an emerging field <sup>[1]</sup>.” Therefore, an organized group or social group that gives individuals self-unity can be called “generalized others,” and the attitude of generalized others is the attitude of the whole society <sup>[3]</sup>. Only after individuals successfully internalize the attitude and symbolic meaning of generalized others, “self” as he enters his own experience as an object. Therefore, according to Mead, the mechanism of human thinking is an inner dialogue in terms of the symbols of social communication used by thinking. The introduction of this communication process within the individual fundamentally changes the individual’s position on the surrounding world and gives the individual “the formation of action.” A new feature is that the composition of human behavior is not only limited to the biological structure of physical individuals, but also includes the social and cultural structure of historical individuals.

#### **4. “I” and “Me”: social conflict and integration**

In the social self, the individual is also the “I” and “Me” related to the “self.” Through the two key concepts of “I” and “Me,” Mead determines the different stages of social behavior, because the dynamic relationship between “I” and “Me” is always formed in the social environment in which the behavior occurs. “Me” is the other’s organized attitude <sup>[3]</sup>, which always exists in the individual and potentially shapes every behavior; “I” is the individual’s active response in the actual situation <sup>[3]</sup>, which is formed in the present. Specifically, as a series of attitudes adopted by individuals, “Me” is rooted in the expectations obtained from the interaction between self and others in the “past.” With the expansion of the scope of individual social experience, these expectations increasingly represent not only the attitudes of specific individuals, but the

attitudes of the whole social group, which Mead describes as “generalized others”. If “Me” involves the hidden and explanatory stage of social behavior, then “I” is the individual’s actual response to this explanatory process, that is, the open stage of behavior. As Mead said, “the ‘Me’ in the above situation must be composed of social relations. If this situation opens the door to the expression of impulse, you will get a special sense of satisfaction, high or low. The source of this satisfaction is the value attached to the expression of the ‘I’ in the social process <sup>[3]</sup>.” Therefore, the “I” is given in the social situation as an individual’s response to the other’s attitude, “I” is a constantly emerging, spontaneous, impulsive and unpredictable part of the self. This novelty of “I” is due to the sociality of all individual interactions.

Mead went on to say that in society, as long as each individual is fully integrated into the whole society, he has rights and obligations <sup>[3]</sup>. An individual who is aware of his own rights and obligations is not only aware of the rights and obligations of others, but also aware of the social unity between himself and others. The unity, stability and order of society come from the common sharing of some basic things, such as norms, emotions and values. People tend to regard common values as a force to maintain social stability. On the contrary, people believe that the conflict or disintegration of values will cause disunity, chaos and instability, which reflects the tension between the internalized content of attitude and the emerging ability of reflection. Mead found that the social structure in the historical context is often repressive, because it hinders the full expression of human self and limits the opportunity for individuals to integrate various expectations of self into a unified whole. In other words, when the creative behavior of “I” exerts and opposes the control influence of social “Me,” the conflict potentially exists in individual subjectivity and social activities <sup>[3]</sup>. In a conflicting social behavior, the estrangement or hostile attitude between participants directly reflects their dissatisfaction with the expected role in the subsequent construction process. Then Mead put forward that for individuals and society, a common normative order is not incompatible with the conflict reflecting their own interests or the interests of specific groups. Since the emergence of human society, various conflicting social behaviors have also been the driving force to promote the progress and change of human society. This conflict is solved through the reconstruction of specific social situations and the modification of specific social relationship frameworks. This process also expands the awareness of shared groups and the potential for further creative response and change <sup>[3]</sup>. The change of individual self-consciousness and the change of broader social structure are inextricably linked in social behavior, so social reconstruction and self (or personality) reconstruction are interrelated. “Since the trajectory of human dignity and value only exists in the individual, not in the abstract society, the function and purpose of moral behavior is to help each participant develop themselves in the process of social communication, or help them realize their self-value and personal achievement in the process of assistance <sup>[4]</sup>.” Therefore, Mead believes that individuals should develop themselves freely and to the greatest extent, but we should also have a sense of social responsibility and try to make social changes to improve social functions.

## **5. Conclusions**

In a word, Mead tends to believe that whenever there is a problem in the relationship between human needs and the real world, social form or physical environment, the individual and society will make some adjustments through continuous public dialogue, which includes the mutual penetration of self and others, which will shape the development of self-consciousness and a more reasonable social environment. In short, this free behavior can promote “people’s all-round development,” because all objective social values, aesthetic, moral, economic and logical, are contained in this self. At the same time, Mead’s attention to the interaction between self-consciousness and meaning, mind and social action prompted him to actively use the perspective of critical social psychology to study the significance of the social practice, in order to promote the development of human social organizations towards greater unity and complexity of relations.

## **Disclosure statement**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

## **References**

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