

G.H. Mead

P-I T-4

Sociology

Civil Services (Main) Examination

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George Herbert Mead (1863 – 1931)

In the early decades of 20th century, sociological theorists understood very little about the micro processes of interaction that connect individuals to the macro structural dimensions of society. How are society and the individual related? How do individual acts and social structure influence each other? How do societies reproduce themselves through the acts and interactions of individuals? How does society shape people's thoughts and behaviours? These and many related questions remained poorly conceptualized, as can be seen by examining Max Weber's crude categories of action or Emile Durkheim's imprecise attempts to link society, consciousness, ritual and solidarity. In North America, these questions were given their first definitive answer by a quiet and unassuming philosopher, George Herbert Mead, who made the critical conceptual breakthrough.

G.H. Mead was an American philosopher, sociologist and psychologist, primarily affiliated with the University of Chicago, where he was one of several distinguished pragmatists. Mead is regarded as one of the founders of social psychology and of what has come to be referred to as the Chicago sociological tradition.

G.H. Mead

- born in South Hadley, Massachusetts, in 1863
- enrolled in Harvard, in 1887, pursued further studies in Philosophy.
- went abroad in his second year of graduate study to Leipzig, Germany. Here he became familiar with the laboratory work of Wilhelm Wundt, whose psychological experiments and more general theorizing further moved Mead's philosophical interests toward social psychology.
- 1891 – became an instructor of Philosophy at University of Michigan.
- later, moved to University of Chicago, where he taught social psychology, until his death in 1931.

Dear Candidate, much of Mead's sociology is only a part of a much broader philosophical view. According to Mead, all human activity represents an adjustment and adaptation to the world. Mead traced the development of social thought from its early, pre-scientific phases to the contemporary, scientific stage. In a way reminiscent of Comte's law of three stages, he saw the great ideas of history as moving toward an ever more rational or scientific, profile, because with the emergence of scientific thought, a better level of adaptation and adjustment to the world could be achieved.

Mead emphasized that what was uniquely human was nothing but a series of particular behavioural capacities that had evolved from adaptations to the ongoing life process.

For sociologists, Mead's general philosophy is not of great importance, except that it led him to develop a conception of the relation between the individual and society. His contribution resides in his capacity to isolate the basic properties of the relation between the individual and society. And so his works embody theoretical perspective that marks a major contribution to sociological analysis. Most of this perspective is in his posthumously published lectures on mind, self and society.

Because Mead wrote relatively little in his lifetime, his major works are found in the published lecture notes of his students. The four posthumous books that constitute the core of his thought are:

- The Philosophy of the Present (1932)
- **Mind, Self and Society (1934)**
- Movements of Thought in the Nineteenth Century (1936)
- The Philosophy of the Act (1938)

Please note that with the exception of Mind, Self and Society, his ideas are distinctly philosophical rather than sociological in tone. Hence, our goal, therefore, is to pull from his philosophical works key sociological insights, while devoting most of our analysis to the explicitly social-psychological work, Mind, Self and Society. Mead's book "Mind, Self and Society" represents verbatim transcripts from his famous course on social psychology at the University of Chicago.

At the time Mead was addressing his students, behaviourists like **John B. Watson** had simply abandoned any serious effort to understand consciousness and other variables of human cognition. Mead's notion of mind, self and society was primarily a rejection of the basic assumptions of radical behaviourism which was the dominant tradition in psychology in America that time.

Basic assumptions of Radical Behaviourism (John B. Watson)

- Please note that the early behaviourist approach developed in the study of animal psychology
- Various psychologists such as Pavlov, Thorndike and Watson, on the basis of their experiments on animals concluded that animal behaviour can be explained and understood in terms of stimulus – response mechanism.
- This implies that animal behaviour can be understood as a response (R) to a given stimulus (S).
- Further, it was asserted that animals would retain those response patterns for which they were rewarded.
- That is, stimulus is given – response follows – if rewarded – then, this response pattern is reinforced.
- Thus, looking at animal behaviour purely in terms of ‘**stimulus – response mechanism**’ rejects the possibility of any kind of ‘thinking’ or ‘introspection’ on the part of the animal guiding its behaviour – hence rejects the role of the ‘consciousness’ – overemphasizes the instinctive response to the stimulus.

Given these assumptions, Watson thus became the advocate of the extreme behaviourism against which Mead so vehemently reacted. For Watson, psychology is the study of stimulus – response relations, and the only admissible evidence is overt behaviour. Psychologists are to stay out of the “mystery box” of human consciousness and to study only observable behaviours as they are connected to observable stimuli.

Mead rejected this assertion and argued that just because an activity such as thinking was not directly observable did not mean that it was not behaviour. For as Mead was to argue, covert thinking and the capacity to view oneself in situations are nonetheless behaviours and hence subject to the same laws as overt behaviours.

Mead thus rejected extreme behaviourism but accepted its general principle: behaviours are learned as a result of gratifications associated with them. The gratifications of humans typically involve adjustment to a social environment. And most important, some of the most distinctive behaviours of humans are covert, including thinking, reflection and self-awareness.

In contrast to Watson's behaviourism, Mead was to postulate what some have called a **social behaviourism**. From this perspective, covert and overt behaviours are to be understood in terms of their capacity to produce adjustment to society. Thus, the unique attributes of humans, such as their capacity to use language, their ability to view themselves as objects, and their capacity to reason, must all be viewed as emerging out of the life processes of adaptation and adjustment. Mind and self cannot be ignored, as behaviourists often sought to do, nor can they be seen as a kind of mystical and spiritual force that elevated humans out of the basic life processes influencing all species.

Humans as a species evolved like other life forms, and hence their most distinctive attributes – mind, self and society – must be viewed as emerging out of the basic process of adaptation. Further, each individual member of the human species is like the individuals of other species: what they are is the result of the common biological heritage of their species as well as their adjustment to the particulars of a given environment.

In simpler words, according to Mead, human behaviour is fundamentally different from animal behaviour. Unlike Watson, Mead argued that humans are not genetically programmed to react automatically to particular stimuli. For Mead, humans possess a mind and hence their inner experiences have to be taken into account. Thus, in case of humans, a stimulus must not be seen as a compulsion for humans to respond in a standardized manner. Rather, humans have the ability to think and introspect, exercise discretion and make choices, and respond differently in different situations, and respond differently to the same stimulus situation at different points of time. In other words, human response to the stimulus cannot be divorced from their inner experience. Humans may respond to the stimulus in various ways on the basis of their feelings and inner experiences.

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Mead's Social Behaviourism

Dear Candidate, please note that Mead himself did not define his work as social behaviourism, but subsequent commentators have used this term to distinguish his work from Watsonian behaviourism.

In contrast to Watson, who simply derived the distinctiveness of subjective consciousness, Mead felt that it was possible to use the broad behaviouristic principles to understand “subjective behaviour”. In other words, if subjective experiences in humans are viewed as behaviours, it is possible to understand them in behaviouristic terms. Of particular importance for understanding the attributes of humans, then, is the reinforcement that comes from adaptation and adjustment to environmental conditions.

At some point in the distant past, the unique mental capacities of humans, and the creation of society employing these capacities, emerged out of the process of natural selection under environmental conditions. But once the unique patterns of human organization are created, the “environment” of any individual is social; that is, it is an environment of other people to whom an individual must adapt and adjust. Thus, social behaviourism stresses the processes by which individuals come to acquire a certain behavioural pattern by virtue of their adjustments to ongoing patterns of social organization.

This analysis must begin with the observable fact that organized activity occurs and then attempt to understand the particular actions of individuals in terms of their adjustments to such organized activity. The behaviour of individuals – not just their observable actions but also their internal behaviours of thinking, assessing, and evaluating – must be analyzed within social context. For what is distinctively human emerges out of adjustment to ongoing social activity or “society”.

Thus, Mead's social behaviourism must be distinguished from the behaviouristic approach of Watson in two ways:

- First, the existence of inner subjective experiences is not denied or viewed as methodologically irrelevant; rather, these experiences are viewed as behaviour.
- Second, the behaviours of humans, including those distinctly human behaviours of mind and self, arise out of adaptation and adjustment to ongoing and organized social activity. Reinforcement is thus equated with the degree of adjustment and adaptation to society.

According to Mead, any attempt to understand human behaviour should be based on the premise that the social whole (society) precedes the individual mind. In other words, a thinking self-conscious individual is an impossibility without a proper social group experience. Further, the inner subjective experiences of an individual, that is, his thinking process (taking place in his mind) can also be viewed as behaviour. Thus, mind can also be explained and understood behaviouristically.

Mead's behaviouristic view of mind

For any given individual, "mind" is a type of behavioural response that emerges out of interaction with others in a social context. Without interaction, mind could not exist. We must regard mind, then, arising and developing within the social process, within the empirical matrix of social interactions.

The social process in which mind emerges is one of communication with **gestures**. Mead gave the German psychologist Wilhelm Wundt credit for understanding the central significance of the gestures to communication and interaction. Wundt recognized gesture as that part of the ongoing behaviour of one organism that stimulates the behaviour of another organism. In other words, gestures are the movements of the first organism which become a stimulus for the second organism, thus, calling for an appropriate response.

Mead took this basic idea and extended it in ways that became the basis not only for the emergence of mind and self but also for the creation, maintenance, and change of society. Mead formulated the concept of the "conversation of gestures" to describe the simplest form of interaction. One organism emits gestures that stimulate a response from a second organism. In turn, the second organism emits gestures that stimulate an "adjusted response" from the first organism. Then, if interaction continues, the adjusted response of the first organism involves emitting gestures that result in yet another adjustment of behaviour by the second organism, and so on, as long as the two organisms continue to interact.

Mead frequently termed this conversation of gestures '**the triadic matrix**', because it involves three interrelated elements:

- i. gestural emission by one organism as it acts on its environment
- ii. a response by another organism that becomes a gestural stimulus to the acting organism
- iii. an adjusted response by the acting organism that takes into account the gestural stimuli of the responding organism.

This 'triadic matrix' constitutes the simplest form of communication and interaction among organisms. This form of interaction, Mead felt, typifies "lower animals" and human infants. For example, if one dog growls, indicating to another dog that it is about to attack, the other will react, perhaps by running away, requiring the growling dog to adjust its response by chasing the fleeing dog or by turning elsewhere to vent its aggressive impulses. Or, to take another example, a hungry infant cries, which in turn arouses a response in its mother (for instance, the mother feeds the infant), which in turn results in an adjusted response by the infant.

Much of the significance of Mead's discussion of the triadic matrix is that the mentalistic concept of "meaning" is lodged in the interaction process rather than in "ideas" or other mentalistic notions that might reside outside interaction. If a gesture "indicates to another organism the subsequent behaviour of a given organism, then it has meaning". Thus, if a dog growls and another dog uses this gesture to predict an attack, this gesture of growling has meaning. Meaning is thus given a behaviouristic definition: it is a kind of behaviour – a gesture – of one organism, that signals to another, subsequent behaviour of this organism.

Meaning, therefore, need not involve complex cognitive activity. A dog that runs away from another growling dog, Mead would assert, is reacting without "ideas" or "elaborate deliberation"; yet the growl has meaning to the dog, because it uses the growl as an early indicator of what will follow.

The significance of the conversation of gestures for ongoing activity resides in the fact that triadic matrix, and associated meanings, allows organisms to adjust their responses to one another. Thus, as organisms use one another's gestures as a means for adjusting their respective responses, they become increasingly capable of organized and concerted conduct. Yet such gestural conversations limit the capacity of organisms to organize themselves and to cooperate.

But among humans, Mead asserted, a qualitatively different form of communication evolved. This is communication involving significant symbols. Mead felt that the development of the capacity to use significant symbols distinguished the human from other species. And it is from the development of the capacity to use significant symbols in a maturing human infant that mind arises. Further, the existence of mind assures the development of self and the perpetuation and change of society.

The gestures of “lower animals”, Mead felt, do not call out the same response in the organism emitting a gesture and the one interpreting the gesture. As he observed, the roar of the lion does not mean the same thing to the lion and its potential victim. When organisms become capable of using gestures that evoke the **same response** in each other, then they are employing what he termed significant, or conventional, gestures. As he illustrated, if a person shouts “fire” in a movie theatre, this gesture evokes the same response tendency (escape, fleeing, and so on) in the person emitting the gesture and in those receiving it. Such gestures, he felt, are unique to humans and make possible their capacities for mind, self and society.

In simpler words, Mead is suggesting that interaction and communication among organisms is primarily through gestures. Gestures involve meaning. These meanings (inner subjective experiences / thinking) can be understood in behaviouristic terms. In other words, Mead is suggesting that it is by observation of the behaviour of the organism that we can interpret the meaning attributed by the organism to the stimulus-situation. Further, Mead argues, that humans have the unique ability to employ a special category of gestures in social interaction situations, which he calls as ‘significant symbols’. Significant symbols are special category of gestures because they are socially created and thus, their meanings are socially shared.

Mead argued that significant symbols are the basis for language. All languages are nothing but the use of significant symbols. Thus, human’s capacity for language – that is, communication by significant symbols – makes for the emergence of their unique capacities for mind and self. And not until an infant of the species acquires the rudimentary capacity for language can it have a mind.

In what way, then, does language make mind possible? For Mead, mind involves several behavioural capacities:

- i. the capacity to denote objects in the environment with significant symbols
- ii. the capacity to use these symbols as a stimulus to one’s own response
- iii. the capacity to read and interpret the gestures of others and use these as a stimulus for one’s response
- iv. the capacity to temporarily suspend or inhibit overt behavioural responses to one’s own gestural denotations or those of others
- v. the capacity to “imaginatively rehearse” alternative lines of conduct, visualize their consequences, and select the response that will facilitate adjustment to the environment

For Mead, then, 'mind' is a behaviour, not a substance or entity. It is a behaviour that involves using significant symbols to stimulate responses but, at the same time, to inhibit or delay overt behaviour so that potential responses can be covertly rehearsed and assessed. Mind is thus an "internal conversation of gestures" using significant symbols because an individual with mind talks to itself. It uses significant symbols to stimulate a line of response; it visualizes the consequences of this response; if necessary, it inhibits the response and uses another set of symbols to stimulate alternative responses; and it persists until it is satisfied with its response and overtly pursues a given line of conduct.

This capacity for mind, Mead stressed, is not inborn. It depends on a certain level of biological maturation in the central nervous system and cerebral cortex; but most important, it depends on interaction with others and the acquisition of the ability to interpret and use their significant symbols. As Mead noted, feral children who are raised without significant symbols do not seem "human" because they have not had to adjust to an environment mediated by significant symbols and hence have not acquired the behavioural capacities for mind.

Summary

In Mead's view, human thought, experience and conduct are essentially social. Human beings interact in terms of symbols, the most important of which are contained in language, that is, significant symbols. Significant symbols are the basis of language.

A symbol does not simply stand for an object or event: it defines them in a particular way and indicates a response to them. Thus the symbol 'chair' not only represents a class of objects and defines them as similar, it also indicates a line of action, that is the action of sitting. Symbols impose particular meanings on objects and events and in doing so largely exclude other possible meanings. Symbols provide the means whereby man can interact meaningfully with his natural and social environment. They are man-made and refer not to the intrinsic nature of objects and events but to the ways in which men perceive them.

Hence, without symbols there would be no human interaction and no human society. Thus, any attempt to understand human behaviour must begin with a careful understanding of the symbols that individuals use during social interaction. That is why, Mead's approach is popularly called as "**Symbolic Interactionism**".

According to Mead, symbolic interaction is necessary since man has no instincts to direct his behaviour. He is not genetically programmed to react automatically to particular stimuli. In order to survive he must therefore construct

and live within a world of meaning. For example, he must classify the natural environment into categories of food and non-food in order to meet basic nutritional requirements. In this way men both define stimuli and their response to them. Thus when hunters on the African savannah categorize antelope as a source of food, they define what is significant in the natural environment and their response to it. Via symbols, meaning is imposed on the world of nature and human interaction with that world is thereby made possible.

Mead argues that it is from the development of the capacity to use significant symbols in a maturing human infant that mind arises. Mind emerges in an individual because human infants, if they are to survive, must adjust and adapt to a social environment – that is, to a world of organized activity. At first, an infant is like a “lower animal” in that it responds reflexively to the gestures of others and emits gestures that do not evoke similar responses in it and those in the environment. But such a level of adjustment, Mead implied, is neither efficient nor adaptive.

A baby's cry does not indicate what it wants, whether food, water, warmth, or whatever, and by not reading accurately the vocal and other gestures emitted by others in their environment, the young can frequently create adjustment problems for themselves. Hence, Mead argues that there is “selective pressure” for acquiring the ability to use and interpret significant gestures. Hence, those gestures that bring reinforcement – that is, adjustment to the environment – are likely to be retained in the response pattern of the infant.

Mind and role-taking

Social life can only proceed if the meanings of symbols are largely shared by members of society. If this were not the case meaningful communication would be impossible. However, common symbols provide only the means by which human interaction can be accomplished. In order for interaction to proceed each person involved must interpret the meanings and intentions of others. This is made possible by the existence of common symbols, but actually accomplished by means of a process which Mead terms ‘**role-taking**’.

The process of role-taking involves the individual taking on the role of another by imaginatively placing himself in the position of the person with whom he is interacting. For example, if he observes another smiling, crying, waving his hand or shaking his fist, he will put himself in that person's position in order to interpret his intention and meaning. On the basis of this interpretation, he will make his response to the action of the other.

Thus if he observes someone shaking his fist, he may interpret this gesture as an indication of aggression but his interpretation will not automatically lead to a particular response. He may ignore the gesture, respond in kind, attempt to diffuse the situation with a joke and so on. The person with whom he is interacting will then take his role, interpret his response and either continue or close the interaction on the basis of this interpretation. In this respect human interaction can be seen as a continuous process of interpretation with each taking the role of the other.

Mead argues that role-taking is critical to the emergence of mind, for unless the gestures of others, and the disposition to act that these gestures reveal, can become a part of the stimuli used to covertly rehearse alternative lines of conduct, overt behaviour will often produce maladjustment to the environment. For without the ability to assume the perspective of others with whom one must deal, it is difficult to adjust to, and coordinate responses with, these others.

Thus, to conclude, Mead argues that there is nothing mysterious or mystical about the human mind. It is a behaviour acquired like other behavioural tendencies as a human organism attempts to adapt to its surroundings. And it is a behavioural capacity acquired in stages, with each stage setting the conditions for the next.

According to Mead, the distinctive characteristic of the mind is the ability of the individual to call out in himself not only the response of the other individual (with whom one is interacting) but the response of the community as a whole. In other words, an individual is able to anticipate the response of the collectivity towards his 'act' and hence the individual is able to "imaginatively rehearse" alternative lines of conduct, visualize their consequences, and select the response that will facilitate adjustment to the environment.

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Mead's behaviouristic view of self

As mind emerges, so does self-awareness. **In many respects the emergence of mind is a precondition for the genesis of self.** Yet the rudiments of self begin with an organism's ability to role-take, for it can then derive self-images or see itself, as an object.

As a social behaviourist, Mead emphasized that the capacity to view oneself as an object in the field of experience was a type of learned behaviour. The self is something which has a development; it is not initially there, at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process.

Self emerges out of the capacity to use language and to take the role of the other. Thus, like mind, self arises out of the triadic matrix of people interacting and adjusting their responses to one another. Mead argued that through the process of role-taking the individual develops a concept of 'self'. By placing himself in the position of others he is able to look back upon himself.

Mead claims that the idea of a self can only develop if the individual can 'get outside himself (experientially) in such a way as to become an object to himself.' To do this he must observe himself from the standpoint of others. Therefore, the origin and development of a concept of self lies in the ability to take the role of another.

The notion of self is not inborn, it is learned during childhood. Mead sees two main stages in its development:

Stage 1: Play Stage

It involves the child playing roles which are not his own. In this stage, child learns by imitation – that is, by imitatively acting out the role of others – for example, the child may play at being mother or father, a doctor or a nurse. In doing so he becomes aware that there is a difference between himself and the role that he is playing. Thus the idea of a self is developed as the child takes the role of a make-believe other.

Please note that the 'other' is chosen **particularistically** since the child lacks the ability to generalize or think in abstract terms – thus, child may start by imitating his father, mother, doctor or some similarly related individual.

Stage 2: Game Stage

The 'game stage' is the second stage in the development of self. In playing a game, the child comes to see himself from the perspective of the various participants. In order to play a game such as football or cricket, the child must become aware of his relationship to the other players. He must place himself in their roles in order to appreciate his particular role in the game. In doing so he sees himself in terms of the collective viewpoint of the other players. In Mead's terminology, he sees himself from the perspective of 'the generalized other'.

In other words, rather than simply imitating the role of the other, the child can imaginatively place themselves in other's position and look back at themselves from the point of view of others. Hence, Mead argues, that humans have the unique ability to be both, subject as well as the object, at the same time.

Thus, an individual acts and then evaluates his act from the point of view of the 'generalized other' or society, and accordingly makes adjustments in his behaviour. In Mead's view, the development of a consciousness of self is an essential part of the process of becoming a human being. It provides the basis for thought and action and the foundation for human society.

Without an awareness of self, the individual could not direct action or respond to the actions of others. Only by acquiring a concept of self can the individual take the role of self. In this way, thought is possible since in Mead's view the process of thinking is simply an 'inner conversation'. Thus unless the individual is aware of a self, he would be unable to converse with himself and thought would be impossible. By becoming 'self-conscious', he can direct his own action by thought and deliberation. He can set goals for himself, plan future action and consider the consequences of alternative courses of action.

With an awareness of self, the individual is able to see himself as others see him. When he takes the role of others, he observes himself from that standpoint and becomes aware of the views of himself that others hold. This provides the basis for cooperative action in society. The individual will become aware of what is expected of him and will tend to modify his actions accordingly. He will be conscious of the general attitudes of the community and judge and evaluate himself in terms of this generalized other.

From this perspective thought becomes 'an inner conversation going on between this generalized other and the individual'. Thus a person is constantly asking what will people think and expect when he reflects upon himself. In this way conduct is regulated in terms of the expectations and attitudes of others. Mead

argues that, 'It is in the form of the generalized other that the social process influences the behaviour of the individuals involved in it....that the community exercises control over the conduct of its individual members.'

Mead's view of human interaction sees man as both actively creating the social environment and being shaped by it. The individual initiates and directs his own action while at the same time being influenced by the attitudes and expectations of others in the form of the generalized other. The individual and society are regarded as inseparable for the individual can only become a human being in a social context.

In this context he develops a sense of self which is a pre-requisite for thought. He learns to take the roles of others which is essential both for the development of self and for cooperative action. Without communication in terms of symbols whose meanings are shared, these processes would not be possible. Man therefore lives in a world of symbols which give meaning and significance to life and provide the basis for human interaction.

Phases of the Self

Mead argues that although a unified self-conception lends considerable stability and predictability to overt behaviours, there is always an element of spontaneity and unpredictability to action. This fact is inherent in the "phases of self", which were conceptualized by Mead in terms of the **I** and **me**.

The image of a person's behaviour is what Mead termed the 'me'. That is, how one should behave in a given interaction situation. As such, the "me" represents the attitudes of others and the broader community as these influence an individual's retrospective interpretation of behaviour. For example, if we talk too loudly in a crowd of strangers, we see the startled looks of strangers and become cognizant about general norms of voice levels and inflections when among strangers. These are the "me" gestures that are received by reading the gestures of specific others in a situation and by role-taking, or assuming the attitude, of the broader community.

In contrast to the "me" is the "I", which is the actual emission of behaviour. If a person speaks too loudly, this is "I"; and when this person reacts to his or her loudness, the "me" phase of action is initiated.

Mead emphasized that the “I” can only be known in experience, because we must wait for “me” images to know just what the “I” did. People cannot know until after they have acted (“I”) just how the expectations of others (“me”) are actually carried out.

Mead’s conceptualization of the “I” and “me” allowed him to conceptualize the self as a constant process of behaviour and self-image. People act; they view themselves as objects; they assess the consequences of their action; they interpret other’s reaction to their action; and they resolve how to act next. Then, they act again, calling forth new self-images of their actions.

This conceptualization of the phases of self enabled Mead to accomplish several conceptual tasks:

First, he left room for spontaneity in human action; if the “I” can be known only in experience or through the “me”, one’s actions are never completely circumscribed.

Second, it gave Mead a way of visualizing the process of self-control. Humans are, in his view, cybernetic organisms who respond, receive feedback and make adjustment, and then respond again. In this way, he could emphasize, self, like mind, is a process of adaptation; it is a behaviour in which an organism successively responds to itself as an object as it adjusts to its environment.

Third, the “I” and “me” phases of self gave Mead a way to conceptualize variations in the extent to which the expectations of others and the broader community constrain action.

Mead argued that the more involved are the individuals in a group, the greater the values of “me” images and the greater the control of “I” impulses. Conversely, the less the involvement of a person in a situation, the less salient are “me” images, and hence the greater the variation is in that person’s overt behaviour. In other words, “me” part of the self is the **‘conformist self’**, which is shaped according to the expectations of the generalized other (society). Through role-taking, an individual identifies the expectations that the society has from himself and accordingly develops his pattern of behaviour. “I” part of the self is the **‘savage self’**, which is not guided by societal norms and expectations. It accounts for the uniqueness of the individuals, and adds spontaneity and unpredictability to human action. [Dear Candidate, you can compare and contrast this argument with that of Merton in his theory of deviance.]

In addition to providing behavioural consistency and individual integration into extended networks of interaction, 'self' also serves as a vehicle of social change. The phases of self – the "I" and "me", as Mead termed them – assure that individual behaviours will, to some degree, alter the flow of the social process. For even if "me" images reflect perfectly the expectations in a situation and even if one's view of oneself as a certain type of object is totally congruent with these expectations, actual behaviour – that is, the "I" – can deviate from what is anticipated in "me" images.

This deviation, however small or great, forces others in the situation to adjust their behaviours, providing new "me" images to guide subsequent behaviours ("I") – and so on, in the course of interaction that moves in and out of "I" and "me" phases. Mead went to great lengths to emphasize that 'self' not only provides a source of continuity and integration for human behaviour, but also is a source of change in society.

Thus, in his analysis of "society" or patterns of social organization, then, Mead attempted to visualize how society was created, maintained, and changed through the processes of interaction among organisms with mind and selves. In emphasizing this connection between personality and society, Mead provided a valuable supplement to the more macro-structural analyses of European Sociology. For example, while Durkheim tended to view integration in terms of cultural and social structures, Mead saw integration in terms of the behavioural capacities of mind and self.

In sum, then, Mead's view of society is dominated by a concern with social-psychological mechanisms by which social structures are integrated. For Mead, society is a term for the processes of role-taking with varieties of specific and generalized others and the consequent coordination of action made possible by the behavioural capacities of mind and self.

By emphasizing the processes underlying social structures, he presented a highly dynamic view of society. For not only is society created by role-taking, it can be changed by these same processes. Thus we get little feeling in Mead's work for the majesty of social structure. His conceptualization can perhaps be seen as a demystification of society, because society is nothing more than a process of role-taking by individuals who possess mind and self, and who seek to make adjustments to one another.

Herbert Blumer, a student of George Herbert Mead, took over Mead's social psychology class upon the latter's death and considered himself the heir to the Meadian legacy. Blumer systematically developed the ideas of his mentor, and became a dominant figure in midcentury sociology, developing a school of thought that he termed "symbolic interactionism."

In Blumer's view, symbolic interactionism rests on three basic premises:

Firstly, human beings act on the basis of meanings which they give to objects and events rather than simply reacting either to external stimuli such as social forces or internal stimuli such as organic drives. Symbolic interactionism therefore rejects both societal and biological determinism.

Secondly, meanings arise from the process of interaction rather than simply being present at the outset and shaping future action. To some degree meanings are created, modified, developed and changed within interaction situations rather than being fixed and preformed.

Thirdly, meanings are the result of interpretive procedures employed by actors within interaction contexts. By taking the role of the other, actors interpret the meanings and intentions of others. By means of 'the mechanism of self-interaction', individuals modify or change their definition of the situation, rehearse alternative courses of action and consider their possible consequences. Thus the meanings that guide action arise in the context of interaction via a series of complex interpretive procedures.

Blumer argues that the interactionist perspective contrasts sharply with the view of the social action presented by mainstream sociology. He maintains that society must be seen as an ongoing process of interaction involving actors which are constantly adjusting to one another and continuously interpreting the situation. By contrast, mainstream sociology and functionalism in particular have tended to portray action as a mechanical response to the constraints of social systems.

Although Blumer is critical of those who see action as a predictable and standardized response to external constraints, he accepts that action is to some degree structured and routinized. Blumer recognizes the existence of social institutions and admits that they place limits on human conduct, but even in situations where rules prevail, there is still considerable room for human initiative and creativity.

Much of Blumer's work has been concerned with developing an appropriate methodology for his view of human interaction. He rejects what he regards as the simplistic attempts to establish causal relationships, which characterize positivist methodology. As an example, Blumer refers to the proposition that industrialization causes the replacement of extended families with nuclear families. He objects to the procedure of isolating variables and assuming one causes the other with little or no reference to the actor's view of the situation. He argues that data on the meanings and interpretations, which actors give to the various facets of industrialization and family life are essential before a relationship can be established between the two factors.

Blumer argues that the sociologist must attempt to grasp the actor's view of social reality. This involves 'feeling one's way inside the experience of the actor'. Since action is directed by actor's meanings, the sociologist must 'catch the process of interpretation through which they construct their action.' This means he 'must take the role of the acting unit whose behaviour he is studying'.

Symbolic Interactionism – a critique

Interactionists have often been accused of examining human interaction in a vacuum. They have tended to focus on small-scale face to face interaction with little concern for its historical or social setting. They have concentrated on particular situations and encounters with little reference to the historical events, which led up to them or the wider social framework in which they occur.

While symbolic interactionism provides a corrective to the excesses of societal determinism, many critics have argued that it has gone too far in this direction. Though they claim that action is not determined by structural norms, interactionists do admit the presence of such norms. However, they tend to take them as given rather than explaining their origin.

As **William Skidmore** comments, the interactionists largely fail to explain 'why people consistently choose to act in given ways in certain situations, instead of in all the other ways they might possible have acted.' In other words, symbolic interactionism fails to adequately explain how standardized normative behaviour comes about and why members of society are motivated to act in terms of social norms.

Similar criticisms have been made with reference to what many see as the failure of interactionists to explain the source of the meanings to which they attach such importance. As earlier discussions on education and deviance have shown,

interactionism provides little indication of the origins of the meanings in terms of which individuals are labelled by teachers, police, etc. Critics argue that such meanings are not spontaneously created in interaction situations. Instead they are systematically generated by the social structure. Thus Marxists have argued that the meanings which, operates in face to face interaction situations are largely the product of class relationships. From this view point, interactionists have failed to explain the most significant thing about meanings: the source of their origin.

In other words, symbolic interactionism has been largely criticized for its failure to take into account the role of macro structures in shaping the human behaviour.

The Philosophy of the Act

Mead left numerous unpublished papers, many of which were published in the *The Philosophy of Act*. For Mead, the basic unit of behaviour is “the act”. He visualized the act as composed of four “stages”, although he emphasized that humans could simultaneously be involved in different stages of different acts.

Mead saw acts as consisting of four stages:

1. **Impulse** - For Mead, an impulse represents a state of disequilibrium, or tension, between an organism and its environment. The source of disequilibrium for an organism can vary. Some impulses come from organic needs that are unfulfilled, whereas others come from interpersonal maladjustments. The key point is that impulses initiate efforts at their consummation, while giving the behaviour of an organism a general direction. For example, if an individual is hungry, he starts looking for food.
2. **Perception** - While an impulse initiates behaviour and give it only a general direction, for Mead, perception will determine what aspects of the environment are relevant for discriminating the impulse. What humans see in their environment, Mead argued, is highly selective. One basis for selective perception is the impulse: people become attuned to those objects in their environment perceived relevant to the elimination of an impulse.

For Mead, then, perception is simply the arousal of potential responses to stimuli: that is, as the organism becomes aware of relevant objects, it also is prepared to act in certain ways. Humans thus approach objects with a series of hypotheses or notions, about how certain responses

toward objects can eliminate their state of disequilibrium. For example, a hungry individual may start looking around for the potential food objects. He will not see a cow as a relevant object of food but rather will become sensitized to other potential food objects.

3. **Manipulation** - The testing of the hypotheses, that is, the emission of behaviours towards objects – is termed manipulation. Because humans have mind and self, they can engage in covert as well as overt manipulation. A human can often covertly imagine the consequences of action toward objects for eliminating an impulse. For example, an individual may think about the price of the food item, whether it is hygienic or not, and so on.
4. **Consummation** - The consummation stage of the act simply denotes the act's completion through the elimination of the disequilibrium between an organism and its environment. As a behaviourist, Mead emphasized that successful consummation of acts by the emission of behaviours in relation to certain objects led to the development of stable behaviour patterns.

Sociology is Simple
Sociology is Scoring
provided that you
Study Sociology Systematically

**UPSC: Previous Years' Questions
Paper I**

4. Sociological Thinkers

G.H. Mead

- Q. According to Mead, "We play a key role in our own socialization." Explain. (2019/20)
- Q. Do you think 'I' and 'Me' are central terms in Mead's work? (2018/10)
- Q. "Self and Society are twin-born." Examine the statement of Mead. (2015/10)
- Q. Using Mead's theory of symbolic interactionism, discuss the stages in the formation of gender identity. (2014/10)
- Q. Critically analyse the contributions of G. H. Mead to 'symbolic interactionism'. (2013/20)
- Q. Critically analyse the contributions of G. H. Mead to 'symbolic interactionism'. (2010/30)
- Q. Write short note: Mead's notion of self (2008/20)