

CHAPTER 4

The Individual in Modern Society

George Herbert Mead (1863–1931)

Georg Simmel (1858–1918)

Seeing Further: The Individual in Society

Thus far we have considered the impact of capitalism, rationalization, and cultural diversity on society. While Marx, Weber, and Durkheim have implicit theories concerning the person, we have yet to directly consider the individual in society. For example, how does society influence you? How do you affect society? Who are you? More importantly, what are you? These are deceptively simple questions and ones that we usually don't think much about, especially the last question. Yet these questions become increasingly important as we move into contemporary social theory. We begin our consideration of self in society with George Herbert Mead and Georg Simmel.

Mead gives us a very clear theory about the mechanism or process through which the individual becomes a social being. Sociologists usually call this *socialization*: the way in which socially formed norms, beliefs, and values come to exist within the individual to the degree that these things appear natural. You've probably come across the idea of socialization in many of your classes. For example, if you've taken a sociology class on gender, one of the things that you've undoubtedly learned is that men and women are socialized differently. But have you ever wondered about precisely *how* socialization takes place? In other words, if society is outside and the person is inside, what exactly is the bridge that connects the two? What's the mechanism or conduit? Mead gives us answers to such questions, and they provide us with an interesting perspective about what you are as well.

However, while Mead gives us the foundation for the sociological understanding of the self, he does not give us a very good perspective concerning the contours of the social environment of the self. This is where Simmel comes in. Let me ask you a question: Where are you from? I have a friend from Germany and another from Russia, and I'm from Southern California. Some of our most notable differences and interesting conversations come from our diverse social backgrounds. But this isn't surprising; I think it's commonly held that where a person is from will influence who he or she is. But let me ask you another question: *When* are you from? You and I and the two friends I mentioned grew up during modern times, and that is a significant and unique force in making us who we are.

We were introduced to this idea in the chapter on Weber. As Weber argues, we and our relationships are more rational and calculative as a result of living in a bureaucratized society; we also tend to value symbolic goods such as credentials and status more in modern societies; and working in a bureaucracy, especially in middle management, can result in a bureaucratic personality. Simmel is going to add to this beginning outline of the person in modernity and show us that there is a great deal of personal freedom in modern society, but that there are some negative psychological effects as well. In this chapter, then, Mead will give us a theory about the self—what it is, how it is formed, and how it works—and Simmel will put the self in the context of modernity and show us that the context wherein the self is formed significantly impacts how the individual experiences him- or herself.

George Herbert Mead

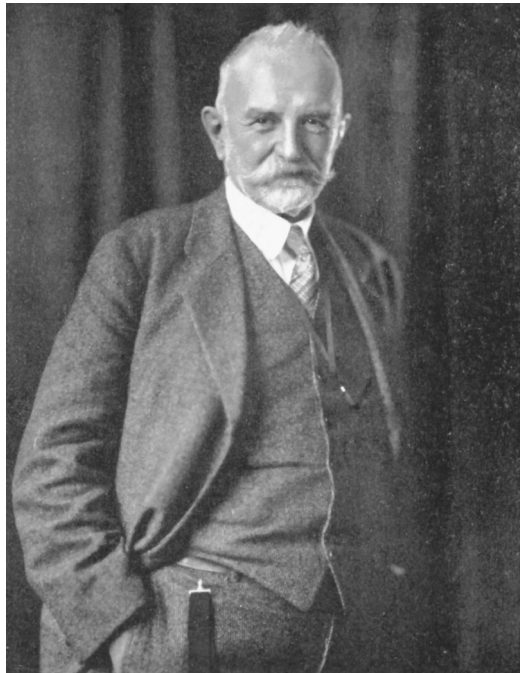


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The Essential Mead

Biography

George Herbert Mead was born on February 27, 1863, in South Hadley, Massachusetts. Mead began his college education at Oberlin College when he was 16 years old and graduated in 1883. After short stints as a school teacher and surveyor, Mead did his graduate studies in philosophy at Harvard. In 1893, John Dewey asked Mead to join him to form the Department of Philosophy at the University of Chicago, the site of the first department of sociology in the United States. Mead's major influence on sociologists came through his graduate course in social psychology, which he started teaching in 1900. Among his students was Herbert Blumer (Chapter 9). Those lectures formed the basis for Mead's most famous work, *Mind, Self, and Society*, published posthumously by his students. Mead died on April 26, 1931.

Passionate Curiosity

Mead is intensely interested in the social basis of meaning, self, and action. What is the self? Why are humans the only animal to have a self? Where is meaning and how is it created? How are people able to act rather than react?

Keys to Knowing

Pragmatism, action, meaning, social objects, interaction, mind, self, generalized other, institutions

Mead's Perspective: American Pragmatism and Action

Pragmatism

There were many influences on Mead's thinking. In fact, his work is an early example of theoretical synthesis, bringing together several different strands of

thought to create something new (for Mead's influences, see Morris, 1962). But for our purposes, we will concentrate on Mead's debt to the philosophy of pragmatism.

Pragmatism is the only indigenous and distinctively American form of philosophy, and its birth is linked to the American Civil War (Menand, 2001). The Civil War was costly in the extreme: The number of dead and wounded exceeds that of any other war that the United States has fought, and the dead on both sides were family members and fellow Americans. This extreme cost left people disillusioned and doubtful about the ideas and beliefs that provoked the war. It wasn't so much the content of the ideas that was the problem, but, rather, the fact that ideas that appeared so right, moral, and legitimate could cause such devastation. It took the United States almost 50 years to culturally recover and find a way of thinking and seeing the world that it could embrace. That philosophy was pragmatism.

Pragmatism rejects the notion that there are any fundamental truths and instead proposes that truth is relative to time, place, and purpose. In other words, the "truth" of any idea or moral is not found in what people believe or in any ultimate reality. Truth can only be found in the actions of people; specifically, people find ideas to be true if they result in practical benefits. Pragmatism is thus "an idea about ideas" and a way of relativizing ideology (Menand, 2001, p. xi), but this relativizing doesn't result in relativism. Pragmatism is based on common sense and the belief that the search for "truth and knowledge shifts to the social and communal circumstances under which persons can communicate and cooperate in the process of acquiring knowledge" (West, 1999, p. 151).

Understanding pragmatism helps us see the basis of Mead's concern for meaning, self, and society. As we will see, Mead argues that the self is a social entity that is a practical necessity of every interaction. We need a self to act deliberately and to interact socially; it allows us to consider alternative lines of behavior and thus enables us to act rather than react. In pragmatism, human action and decisions aren't determined or forced by society, ideology, or preexisting truths. Rather, decisions and ethics emerge out of a consensus that develops through interaction—a consensus that is based on a free and knowing subject: the self.

Pragmatism also helps us understand another important idea of Mead's: **emergence**. In general, the word "emergence" refers to the process through which new entities are created from different particulars. For Mead, then, meaning emerges out of different elements of interaction coming together. Let's take a hammer as an example. People create social objects such as hammers in order to survive, and hammers only exist as such for humans (hammers don't exist for tigers, though they might sense the physical object). But the meaning of objects isn't set in stone, once and for all. While the hammer exists in its tool context, its meaning can vary by its use, and its use is determined in specific interactions. It can be an instrument of construction or destruction depending upon how it is used. It can also symbolize an individual's occupation or hobby. Or it could be used as a weapon to kill, and it could be an instrument of murder or mercy, depending upon the circumstances under which the killing takes place. Thus, the "true" meaning of an object cannot be unconditionally known; it is negotiated in interaction. The meaning pragmatically emerges.

Human Action

Humans act—they don't react. As Mead characterizes it, the distinctly human *act* contains four distinct elements: impulse, perception, manipulation, and consumption. For most animals, the route from impulse to behavior is rather direct—they react to a stimulus using instincts or behavioristically imprinted patterns. But for humans, it is a circuitous route.

After we feel the initial impulse to act, we perceive our environment. This perception entails the recognition of the pertinent symbolic elements—other people, absent reference groups (what Mead calls generalized others), and so on—as well as alternatives to satisfying the impulse. After we symbolically take in our environment, we manipulate the different elements in our imagination. This is the all-important pause before action; *this is where society becomes possible*. This manipulation takes place in the mind and considers the possible ramifications of using different behaviors to satisfy the impulse. We think about how others would judge our behaviors, and we consider the elements available to complete the task. After we manipulate the situation symbolically in our minds, we are in a position to consummate the act. I want you to notice something about human, social behavior: *action requires the presence of a mind capable of symbolic, abstract thought and a self able to be the object of thought and action*. Both the mind and self, then, are intrinsically linked to society. Before considering Mead's theory of mind and self, we have to place it within the more general context of symbolic meaning.

Concepts and Theory: Symbolic Meaning

No longer can man confront reality immediately; he cannot see it, as it were, face to face. Physical reality seems to recede in proportion as man's symbolic activity advances. Instead of dealing with the things themselves man is in a sense constantly conversing with himself. (Cassirer, 1944, p. 42)

Symbols and Social Objects

As the above quote indicates, Ernst Cassirer argues that human beings created a new way of existing in the environment through the use of signs and meaning. While this sounds a bit like what Marx might say, it is distinctly different. Marx argues that humans survive because of creative production, the work of our hands. This externalization of human nature then stands as a mirror through which ideas and consciousness come. Thus, ideas for Marx have a material base. Cassirer argues in the opposite direction: it is through ideas that we manipulate the environment.

Mead actually anticipated Cassirer's argument. According to Mead, language came about as the chief survival mechanism for humans. We use it to pragmatically control our environment, and this sign system comes to stand in the place of physical reality. As we've seen, animals relate directly to the environment; they receive sensory input and react. Humans, on the other hand, generally need to decide what

the input *means* before acting. Distinctly human action, then, is based on the world existing symbolically rather than physically. In order to talk about this issue, Mead uses the ideas of natural signs and significant gestures.

A sign is something that stands for something else, such as your GPA that can represent your cumulative work at the university. It appears that many animals can use signs as well. My dog Gypsy, for example, gets very excited and begins to salivate at the sound of her treat box being opened or the tone of my voice when I ask, "Wanna trrrreeeeet?" But the ability of animals to use signs varies. For instance, a dog and a chicken will respond differently to the presence of a feed bowl on the other side of a fence. The chicken will simply pace back and forth in front of the fence in aggravation, but the dog will seek a break in the fence, go through the break, and run back to the bowl and eat. The chicken appears to only be able to respond directly to one stimulus, where the dog is able to hold her response to the food at bay while seeking an alternative. This ability to hold responses at bay is important for higher-level thinking animals.

These signs that we've been talking about may be called *natural signs*. They are private and learned through the individual experience of each animal. So, if your dog also gets excited at the sound of the treat box, it is because of its individual experience with it—Gypsy didn't tell your dog about the treat box. There also tends to be a natural relationship between the sign and its object (sound/treat), and these signs occur apart from the agency of the animal. In other words, Gypsy did not make the association between the sound of the box and her treats; I did. So, in the absolute sense, the relationship between the sound and the treat isn't a true natural sign. Natural signs come out of the natural experiences of the animal, and the meaning of these signs is determined by a structured relationship between the sign and its object, like smoke and fire.

Humans, on the other hand, have the ability to use what Mead calls *significant gestures* or symbols. According to Mead, other animals besides humans have gestures but none have *significant* gestures. A gesture becomes significant when the idea behind the gesture arouses the same response (same idea or emotional attitude) in the self as in others. For example, if I asked about your weekend, you would use a variety of significant gestures (language) to tell me about it. So, even though I wasn't with you over the weekend, I could experience and know about your weekend because the words call out the same response in me as in you. Thus, human language is intrinsically reflexive: the meaning of any significant gesture always calls back to the individual making the gesture.

In contrast to natural signs, symbols are abstract and arbitrary. With signs, the relationship between the sign and its referent is natural (as with smoke and fire). But the meaning of symbols can be quite abstract and completely arbitrary (in terms of naturally given relations). For example, "Sunday" is completely arbitrary and is an abstract human creation. What day of the week it is depends upon what calendar is used, and the different calendars are associated with political and religious power issues, not nature. Because symbolic meaning is not tied to any object, the meaning can change over time. For example, in the United States there have been several meanings associated with the category of "people with dark skin."

According to Mead (1934), the meaning of a significant gesture, or symbol, is its “set of organized sets of responses” (p. 71)—notice the influence of pragmatism. Symbolic meaning is not the image of a thing seen at a distance, nor does it exactly correspond to the dictionary definition; rather, the meaning of a word is the action that it calls out or elicits. For example, the meaning of a chair is the different kinds of things we can do with it. Picture a wooden object with four legs, a seat, and a slatted back. If I sit down on this object, then the meaning of it is “chair.” On the other hand, if I take that same object and break it into small pieces and use it to start a fire, it’s no longer a chair—it’s firewood. So the meaning of an object is defined in terms of its uses, or legitimated lines of behavior.

Because the meaning—legitimated actions—and objective availability (they are objects because we can point them out as foci for interaction) of symbols are produced in social interactions, they are **social objects**. Any idea or thing can be a social object. A piece of string can be a social object, as can the self or the idea of equality. There is nothing about the thing itself that makes it a social object; an entity becomes an object to us through our interactions around it. Through interaction, we call attention to it, name it, and attach legitimate lines of behavior to it.

For example, because of certain kinds of interactions, a Coke bottle here in the United States is a specific kind of social object. But to Xi, a bushman from the Kalahari Desert (in the film *The Gods Must Be Crazy*), the Coke bottle becomes something utterly different as a result of his interactions around it. For Xi, the Coke bottle dropped from the sky—an obvious gift from the gods. But when he brought it to his village, this playful gift from the gods became a curse, because there was only one and everybody wanted it. It became a scarce resource that brought conflict. Eventually, Xi had to go on a religious quest because of this gift from the gods (to us, a Coke bottle).

Interaction and Meaning

Notice in this illustration that the meaning of the Coke bottle changed as different kinds of interactions took place. In this sense, meaning *emerges* out of interaction. As Mead (1934) says, “the logical structure of meaning . . . is to be found in the threefold relationship of gesture to adjustive response and to the resultant of the given social act” (p. 80). **Interaction** is defined as the ongoing negotiation and melding together of individual actions and meanings through three distinct steps. First, there is an initial cue given. Notice that the cue itself doesn’t carry any specific meaning. Let’s say you see a friend crying in the halls at school. What does it mean? It could mean lots of things. In order to determine (or more properly, create or achieve) the meaning, you have to respond to that cue: “Is everything alright?” But we still don’t have meaning yet. There must be a response to your response. After the three phases (cue–response–response to response), a meaning emerges: “Nothing’s wrong,” your friend responds, “my boyfriend just asked me to marry him.”

But we probably still aren’t done, because her response will become yet another cue. Imagine walking away from your friend without saying a word after she tells

you she's getting married. That would be impolite (which would actually be a response to her statement). So, what does her second cue mean? We can't tell until you respond to her cue and she responds to your response.

Notice that interactions are rarely terminal or closed off. Let's suppose you told your friend who was crying in the hall that marrying this guy was a bad idea. You saw him out with another woman last Friday night. At this point, the social object—marriage—which was a cue that caused her to cry in happiness, has become an object of anger. So the meaning that emerges is now betrayal and anger. She then takes that meaning and interacts with her fiancé. In that interaction, she presents a cue (maybe she's crying again, but it has a different meaning), and he responds, and she responds to his response, and so on. Maybe she finds out that you misread the cues that Friday night and the "other woman" was just a friend. So she comes back to you and presents a cue, ad infinitum. Keep this idea of emergent meaning in mind as we see what Mead says about the self (it, too, emerges).

Concepts and Theory: Living Outside the Moment

Have you ever watched someone doing something? Of course you have. Maybe you watched a worker planting a tree on campus, or maybe you watched a band play last Friday night. And while you watched, you understood people and their behaviors in terms of the identity they claimed and the roles they played. In short, when you watch someone, you understand the person as a social object. After watching someone, have you ever called someone else's attention to that actor? Of course you have, and it's easy to do. All you have to say is something like, "Whoa, check him/her/it out." And the other person will look and usually understand immediately what it is you are pointing out, because we understand one another in terms of being social objects.

People-watching is a pretty common experience and we all do it. We can do it because we understand the other in terms of being a social object. But let me ask you something. Have you ever watched yourself? Have you ever felt embarrassed or laughed at yourself? How is that different from watching other people? Actually, it isn't. But there is something decidedly odd about this idea of watching our self. It's easy to watch someone else, and it is easy to understand *how* we watch someone else. If I am watching a band play, I can watch the band because they are on stage and I am in the audience. We can observe the other because we are standing outside of them. We can point to them because they are *there* in the world around us. But how can we point to our self, call our own attention to our self, and understand our self as a social object? Do you see the problem? We must somehow *divorce our self from our self* so that we can call attention to our self, so that we can understand our self as meaningfully relevant as a social object. So, how is that done? "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" (Mead, 1934, p. 138).

Creating a Self

Role-taking is the key mechanism through which people develop a self and the capacity to be social, and it has a very specific definition: *Role-taking* is the process through which we place our self in the position (or role) of another in order to see our own self. Students often confuse role-taking with what might be called *role-making*. In every social situation, we make a role for ourselves. Erving Goffman wrote at length about this process and called it impression management (see Chapter 9). Role-taking is a precursor to effective role-making—we put ourselves in the position of the other in order to see how they want us to act. For example, when going to a job interview, you put yourself in the position or role of the interviewer in order to see how she or he will view you—you then dress or act in the “appropriate” manner. But role-taking is distinct from impression management, and it is the major mechanism through which we are able to form a perspective outside of ourselves.

A perspective is always a meaning-creating position. We stand in a particular point of view and attribute meaning to something. Let’s take the flag of the United States, for example. To some, it means freedom and pride; to others, oppression and shame; and to still others, it signifies the devil incarnate (as for some fundamentalist sects). I want you to notice something very important here: The flag itself has no meaning. Its meaning comes from the perspective an individual takes when he or she views it. That’s why something like the flag (or gender or skin color or ethnic heritage) can mean so many different things. Meaning isn’t in the object; *meaning arises from the perspective we take and from our interactions*.

Here’s the important point: The self is just such a perspective. It is a viewpoint from which to consider our behaviors and give them meaning, and by definition, a perspective is something other than the object. In this case, the self is the perspective and the object is our actions, feelings, or thoughts. Taking this perspective, the self is how all these personal qualities and behaviors become meaningful social objects. Precisely how we can get outside ourselves in this way is Mead’s driving question.

The Mind

Before the self begins to form, there is a preparatory stage. While Mead does not explicitly name this stage, he implies it in several writings and talks about it more generally in this theory of the mind. For Mead, the *mind* is not something that resides in the physical brain or in the nervous system, nor is it something that is unavailable for sociological investigation. The mind is a kind of behavior, according to Mead, that involves at least five different abilities. It has the ability

- to use symbols to denote objects
- to use symbols as its own stimulus (it can talk to itself)
- to read and interpret another’s gestures and use them as further stimuli
- to suspend response (not act out of impulse)
- to imaginatively rehearse one’s own behaviors before actually behaving

Let me give you an example that encompasses all these behaviors. A few years ago, our school paper ran a cartoon. In it was a picture of three people: a man and a woman arm-in-arm, and another man. The woman was introducing the men to one another. Both men were reaching out to shake one another's hands. But above the single man was a balloon of his thoughts. In it he was picturing himself violently punching the other man. He wanted to hit the man, but he shook his hand instead and said, "Glad to meet you."

There are a lot of things we can pull out of this cartoon, but the issue we want to focus on is the disparity between what the man felt and what the man did. He had an impulse to hit the other man, perhaps because he was jealous. But he didn't. Why didn't he? Actually, that isn't as good a question as, *how* didn't he? He was able to not hit the other man because of his mind. His mind was able to block his initial impulse, to understand the situation symbolically, to point out to his self the symbols and possible meanings, to entertain alternative lines of behavior, and choose the behavior that best fit the situation. The man used symbols to stimulate his own behavior rather than going with his impulse or the actual world.

Mead (1934) argues that the "mind arises in the social process only when that process as a whole enters into, or is present in, the experience of any one of the given individuals involved in that process" (p. 134). Notice that Mead is arguing that the mind evolves as the social process—or, more precisely, the social interaction—comes to live inside the individual. The mind, then, is a social entity that begins to form because of infant dependency and forced interaction.

When babies are hungry or tired or wet, they can't take care of themselves. Instead, they send out what Mead would call "unconventional gestures," gestures that do not mean the same to the sender and hearer. In other words, they cry. The caregivers must figure out what the baby needs. When they do, parents tend to vocalize their behaviors ("Oh, did Susie need a ba-ba?"). Babies eventually discover that if they mimic the parents and send out a significant gesture ("ba-ba"), they will get their needs met sooner. This is the beginning of language acquisition; babies begin to understand that their environment is symbolic—the object that satisfies hunger is "ba-ba" and the object that brings it is "da-da." Eventually, a baby will understand that she has a symbol as well: "Susie." Thus, language acquisition allows the child to symbolize and eventually to symbolically manipulate her environment, including self and others. The use of reflexive language also allows the child to begin to role-take, which is the primary mechanism through which the mind and self are formed.

The Play Stage

The second stage in the process of self-formation is the *play stage*. During this stage, the child can take the role, or assume the perspective, of certain significant others. Significant others are those upon whom we depend for emotional and often material support. These are the people with whom we have long-term relations and intimate (self-revealing) ties. Mead calls this stage the play stage because children must literally play at being some significant other in order to see themselves. At this

point, they haven't progressed much in terms of being able to think abstractly, so they must act out the role to get the perspective. This is important: *a child literally gets outside of him- or herself in order to see the self.*

Children play at being Mommy or being Teacher. The child will hold a doll or stuffed bear and talk to it as if she were the parent. Ask any parent; it's a frightening experience because what you are faced with is an almost exact imitation of your own behaviors, words, and even tone of voice. But remember the purpose of role-taking (notice this isn't *role-playing*): it is to see one's own self. So, as the child is playing Mommy or Daddy with a teddy bear, who is the bear? The child herself. She is seeing herself from the point of view of the parent, literally. This is the genesis of the self perspective: being able to get outside of the self so that we can watch the self as if on stage. As the child acts toward herself as others act, the child begins to understand self as a set of organized responses and becomes a social object to herself.

The Game Stage

The next stage in the development of self is the *game stage*. During this stage, the child can take the perspective of several others and can take into account the rules (sets of responses that different attitudes bring out) of society. But the role-taking at this stage is still not very abstract. In the play stage, the child could only take the perspective of a single significant other; in the game stage, the child can take on the role of several others, but they all remain individuals. Mead's example is that of a baseball game. The batter can role-take with each individual player in the field and determine how to bat based on their behaviors. The batter is also aware of all the rules of the game. Children at this stage can role-take with several people and are very concerned with social rules. But they still don't have a fully formed self. That doesn't happen until they can take the perspective of the generalized other: "it is this generalized other in his experience which provides him with a self" (Mead, 1925, p. 269).

The Generalized Other Stage

The **generalized other** refers to sets of attitudes that an individual may take toward him- or herself—it is the general attitude or perspective of a community. The generalized other allows the individual to have a less segmented self as the perspectives of many others are generalized into a single view. It is through the generalized other that the community exercises control over the conduct of its individual members.

Up until this point, the child has only been able to role-take with specific others. As the individual progresses in the ability to use abstract language and concepts, she or he is also able to think about general or abstract others. So, for example, a woman may look in the mirror and judge the reflection by the general image that has been given to her by the media about how a woman should look.

Another insightful example of how the generalized other works is given to us by George Orwell in his account of "Shooting an Elephant." Orwell was at the time

a police officer in Burma. He was at odds with the job and felt that imperialism was an evil thing. At the same time, the local populace despised him precisely because he represented imperialistic control; he tells tales of being tripped and ridiculed by people in the town. One day an elephant was reported stomping through a village. Orwell was called to attend to it. On the way there, he obtained a rifle, only for scaring the animal or defending himself if need be. When he found the animal, he knew immediately that there was no longer any danger. The elephant was calmly eating grass in a field, and Orwell knew that the right thing to do was to wait until the elephant simply wandered off—but at the same time, he knew he had to shoot the animal.

As Orwell (1946) relates, “I realized that I should have to shoot the elephant after all. The people expected it of me and I had got to do it; I could feel their two thousand wills press me forward, irresistibly” (p. 152). He felt the expectations of a generalized other. Though contrary to his own will, and after much personal anguish, he shot the elephant. As Orwell puts it, at that time and in that place, the white man “wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it. . . . A sahib has got to act like a sahib” (pp. 152–153). Not shooting was impossible, for “the crowd would laugh at me. And my whole life, every white man’s life in the East, was one long struggle not to be laughed at” (p. 153). We may criticize Orwell for his decision (it’s always easy from a distance); still, each one of us has felt the pressure of a generalized other.

Society and the Self

For Mead (1934), there could be no society without individual selves: “Human society as we know it could not exist without minds and selves, since all its most characteristic features presuppose the possession of minds and selves by its individual members” (p. 227). We don’t have a self because there is a psychological drive or need for one. We have a self because society demands it. To emphasize this point, Mead (1934) says that “the self is not something that exists first and then enters into relationship with others, but it is, so to speak, an eddy in the social current and so still a part of the current” (p. 26). Eddies are currents of air or water that run contrary to the stream. It isn’t so much the contrariness that Mead wants us to see, but the fact that an eddy only exists in and because of its surrounding current. The same is true for selves: they only exist in and because of social interaction. The self doesn’t have a continuous existence; it isn’t something that we carry around inside of us. It’s a mechanism that allows conversations to happen, whether that conversation occurs in the interaction or within the individual.

So, the self isn’t something that has an essential existence or meaning. Like all social objects, it must be symbolically denoted and then given meaning within interactions. And like all social-symbolic objects, the meaning of the self is flexible and emergent. As an example, let me tell you about a conversation I had not too long ago. My brother-in-law (Jim) and my sister (Susan) both told me about an

incident in back-to-back telephone conversations. Jim is a distance runner and was training for the Pike's Peak run. During one of his training sessions at the Peak, he experienced heart fibrillation on the way down. He didn't tell Susan at that time, and he ran the race a week later without a problem.

After the race, he told Susan about the training incident over dinner and margaritas. Susan got upset. She then told me about it. She said that Jim is too much into machismo posturing and doesn't deal with reality (her definition of Jim's self). The "reality" that Susan referred to is that he is 65 years old and had previously experienced a five-hour fibrillation problem at the doctor's office. In this interaction with me, Susan referred to herself as a "caregiver and an organizer." That's her self as she sees it vis-à-vis Jim. Jim told the same story, as far as the actual events are concerned. But the meaning of all the events changed, as did the definitions of the selves involved. Jim defined the "condition" as not life threatening, as one that is normal for athletes, and he said that lots of doctors say it's okay for an athlete in his condition to continue training. Jim defined himself as a "competitor and an optimist" and Susan as a "worrier that mothers too much."

The important thing to see in this example is not that every individual has an interpretation of an event—that would be more psychological than sociological. What's important to note is what is happening socially: these two people are negotiating with a third party over the meaning of an event as well as the kinds of selves that that event indicates they have. Out of this interaction and negotiation emerge a definition and a sense of self for each of the participants. The process through which that occurs is the focus of a Meadian way of perceiving the social world.

This emphasis of Mead's (1934) leads him to see society and social institutions as "nothing but an organization of attitudes which we all carry in us"; they are "organized forms of group or social activity—forms so organized that the individual members of society can act adequately and socially by taking the attitudes of others toward these activities" (pp. 211, 261–262). Society, then, doesn't exist objectively outside the concrete interactions of people, as Durkheim or Marx would have it. Rather, society exists only as sets of attitudes, symbols, and imaginations that people may or may not use and modify in an interaction. In other words, society exists only as sets of potential generalized others with which we can role-take.

The I and the Me

Thus far it would appear that the self is to be conceived of as a simple reflection of the society around it. But for Mead, the self isn't merely this social robot; the self is an *active process*. Part of what we mean by the self is an internalized conversation, and by necessity interactions require more than one person. Mead thus postulates the existence of two interactive facets of the self: the "I" and the "Me." The Me is the self that results from the progressive stages of role-taking and is the perspective that we assume to view and analyze our own behaviors. The "I" is that part of the self

that is unsocialized and spontaneous: “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” (Mead, 1934, p. 178).

We have all experienced the internal conversation between the I and the Me. We may want to jump for joy or shout in anger or punch someone we’re angry at or kiss a stranger or run naked. But the Me opposes such behavior and points out the social ramifications of these actions. The I presents our impulses and drives; the Me presents to us the perspectives of society, the meanings and repercussions of our actions. These two elements of our self converse until we decide on a course of action. But here is the important part: The I can always act before the conversation begins or even in the middle of it. The I can thus take action that the Me would never think of; it can act differently from the community.

Mead Summary

- There are basic elements, or tools, that go into making us human. Among the most important of these are symbolic meaning and the mind. We use symbols and social objects to denote and manipulate the environment. Each symbol or social object is understood in terms of legitimated behaviors and pragmatic motives. The mind uses symbolic-social objects in order to block initial responses and consider alternative lines of behavior. It is thus necessary in order for society to exist. The mind is formed in childhood through necessary social interaction.
- The self is a perspective from which to view our own behaviors. This perspective is formed through successive stages of role-taking and becomes a social object for our own thoughts. The self has a dynamic quality as well—it is the internalized conversation between the I and the Me. The Me is the social object, and the I is the seat of the impulses. When the self is able to role-take with generalized others, society can exist as well as an integrated self. Role-taking with generalized others also allows us to think in abstract terms.
- Society emerges through social interaction; it is not a determinative structure. In general, humans act more than react. Action is predicated on the ability of the mind to delay response and consider alternative lines of behavior with respect to the social environment and a pertinent self. Thus, mind, self, and society mutually constitute one another. Interaction is the process of knitting together different lines of action. Meaning is produced in interaction through the triadic relation of cue, response, and response to response. What we mean by society emerges from this negotiated meaning as interactants role-take within specific definitions of the situation and organized attitudes (institutions).

Georg Simmel



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The Essential Simmel

Simmel's Perspective: The Individual and Social Forms

Concepts and Theory: Subjective and Objective Cultures

Concepts and Theory: The Self in Modernity

Urbanization

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Simmel Summary

The Essential Simmel

Biography

Georg Simmel was born in the heart of Berlin on March 1, 1858, the youngest of seven children. His father was a Jewish businessman who had converted to Catholicism before Georg was born. In 1876, Simmel began his studies (history, philosophy, psychology) at the University of Berlin, taking some of the same courses and professors as Max Weber would a few years later. In 1885, Simmel became an unpaid lecturer at the University of Berlin, where he was dependent upon student fees. At Berlin, he taught philosophy and ethics, as well as some

of the first courses ever offered in sociology. In all probability, George Herbert Mead was one of the foreign students in attendance. Though Simmel wrote many sociological essays and articles, his most important work of sociology was published in 1900, *The Philosophy of Money*. All together, Simmel published 31 books and several hundred essays and articles. In 1910, he, along with Max Weber and Ferdinand Tönnies, founded the German Society for Sociology. In 1914, Simmel was offered a full-time academic position at the University of Strasbourg. However, as WWI broke out, the school buildings were given over to military uses and Simmel had little lecturing to do. On September 28, 1918, Simmel died of liver cancer.

Passionate Curiosity

Many of Simmel's writings and public lectures addressed what were then considered nonacademic issues, such as love, flirtation, scent, and women. His diverse subject matter was due not only to his position as an outsider but also to his intellectual bent—he was extremely interested in cultural trends and new intellectual movements. He was little involved in politics, and quite involved in the avant-garde philosophies of the day. Overall, Simmel was intensely interested in the ways in which modern, objective culture impacts the individual's subjective experiences.

Keys to Knowing

Social forms, subjective and objective cultures, urbanization, division of labor, web of group affiliations, money, organic motivation, rational motivation, role conflict, blasé attitude

Simmel is particularly significant for what he adds to Mead's theory of the self. As we've seen, Mead's theory sees the self as a perspective that comes out of interactions, and he sees the meanings of symbols, social objects, and the self as emerging from negotiated interactions. In general, Simmel would not take issue with Mead's analysis; but he does add a caveat. For Simmel, cultural entities—such as social forms, symbols, and selves—can exist subjectively and under the influence of people in interaction, just as Mead says. However, Simmel also entertains the possibility that culture can exist objectively and independent of the person and interaction. It's the influence of this objective culture on the person that interests Simmel.

Simmel's Perspective: The Individual and Social Forms

At the core of Simmel's thought is the individual. In contrast to Mead, Simmel assumes there is something called human nature with which we are born. For example, Simmel feels that we naturally have a religious impulse and that gender differences are intrinsic. He also assumes that in back of most of our social

interactions are individual motivations. This emphasis sets up an interesting problem and perspective for Simmel. If the individual and his or her motivations and actions are paramount, then how is society possible?

In formulating his answer, Simmel follows one of his favorite philosophers, Immanuel Kant. Kant did not ask about the possibility of society. Instead, he wondered how nature could exist as the *object* “nature” to science. Basically, Kant argued that the universe could exist as “nature” to scientists only because of the *category* of nature. Objects in the universe can only *exist* as objects because the human mind orders sense perception in a particular way. But Kant didn’t argue that it is all in our heads; rather, he argued for a kind of synthesis: the human mind organizes our perceptions of the world to form objects of experience. So, nature can only exist as the object “nature” because scientists are observing the world through the a priori (existing before) category of nature. In other words, a scientist can see weather as a natural phenomenon, produced through processes that we can discover, only because she assumes beforehand (a priori) that weather does *not* exist as a result of the whim of a god.

Simmel wants to discover the a priori conditions for society. This was a new way of trying to understand society. During Simmel’s time, there were two main theories about society: mechanical-atomistic and organic. The mechanical-atomistic approach argues that individuals are the only reality: individuals are self-sustaining and independent and society is simply the summation of their activities. This approach is like Mead and very similar to many exchange or rational choice theories today (see Chapter 10). The organismic approach sees society as an independent entity, distinct from and sometimes subjugating of the individual. Marx and Durkheim are two examples of theorists with this perspective.

Simmel, however, wants to maintain the integrity of the individual but at the same time recognize society as a true force. What Simmel argues is that society exists as **social forms** that come about through human interaction, and society continues to exist and to exert influence over the individual through these forms of interaction: “All the various ways in which man lives by his actions, knowledge, feelings, and creativity might be regarded as types or categories that are *imposed on existence*” (Simmel, 1997, p. 139, emphasis added). These forms or categories of behavior, Simmel argues, are the a priori conditions of society.

Because of the focus of this chapter, we aren’t going to look at any specific social forms. We will, however, review two of Simmel’s social forms later in the book. In Chapter 7 we will explore Simmel’s influence on contemporary conflict theory, and in Chapter 10 we’ll talk about his impact on exchange theory; both conflict and exchange are two of Simmel’s social forms. For now, what we want to see is that the existence of social forms implies a problem: social forms may come to exist apart from the individual; they may take on an objective existence.

Now, think about this: If Simmel is primarily concerned about the individual, what are the implications for the person if social forms take on objective existence? There is a sense in which Mead doesn’t see symbols as objective. If the meaning of symbols emerges through social interaction, then they are always subjective, at least to some degree. What Simmel wants us to consider is the possibility that signs, symbols, ideas, social forms, and so forth can exist independently of the person and

exert independent effects. The question then becomes, how does objective culture impact the subjectivity of the person? Guy Oakes (1984) wrote concerning Simmel, “the discovery of objectivity—the independence of things from the conditions of their subjective or psychological genesis—was the greatest achievement in the cultural history of the West” (p. 3).

Concepts and Theory: Subjective and Objective Cultures

Simmel was the first social thinker to make the distinction between subjective and objective culture the focus of his research. Individual or *subjective culture* refers to the ability to embrace, use, and feel culture. Collectives can form group-specific cultures, such as the spiked Mohawk haircut of early punk culture. To wear such an item of culture immediately links the individual to certain social forms and types, and a group member would subjectively feel those links. Individuals and dyads are able to produce such culture as well. An individual could have special incense that she or he blends just for extraordinary, ritual occasions; or a couple could create a picture that would symbolize their relationship. This culture is very close to the individual and her or his psychological experience of the world.

Objective culture is made up of elements that become separated from the individual or group’s control and reified as separate objects. Think about tie-dye T-shirts, for example. You can now go to any department store and buy such a shirt. You do not have to be a hippie to wear it, nor are you necessarily identified as a hippie, nor do you necessarily feel the connection to the values and norms of the hippie culture. It exists as an object separate from the individuals who produced it in the first place. Once formed, objective culture can take on a life of its own and it can exert a coercive force over individuals. For example, many of us growing up in the United States believe in the ideology and morality of democracy, though in truth we are far removed from its crucial issues, ideals, and practices.

The following diagram (Figure 4.1) pictures the relationship between subjective and objective culture. What we see on the far left is probably what Simmel has in mind under ideal conditions. People need culture to interact with others, and in small, traditional communities the culture can be kept graspable and thus subjective. The double-headed arrows indicate reciprocal relations—subjective culture influences and is affected by people and interactions. Objective culture, on the other hand, stands apart from the individual psychology. Notice that culture becomes more objective as interactions are extended to distant others and as certain features of modernity become more prominent. When this happens, a lag is produced between the individual and objective cultures. As the size and complexity of the objective culture increases, it becomes more and more difficult for individuals to embrace it as a whole. Individuals come to experience culture sporadically and in fragments. How individuals respond to this tension between subjective experience and culture is of utmost concern to Simmel.

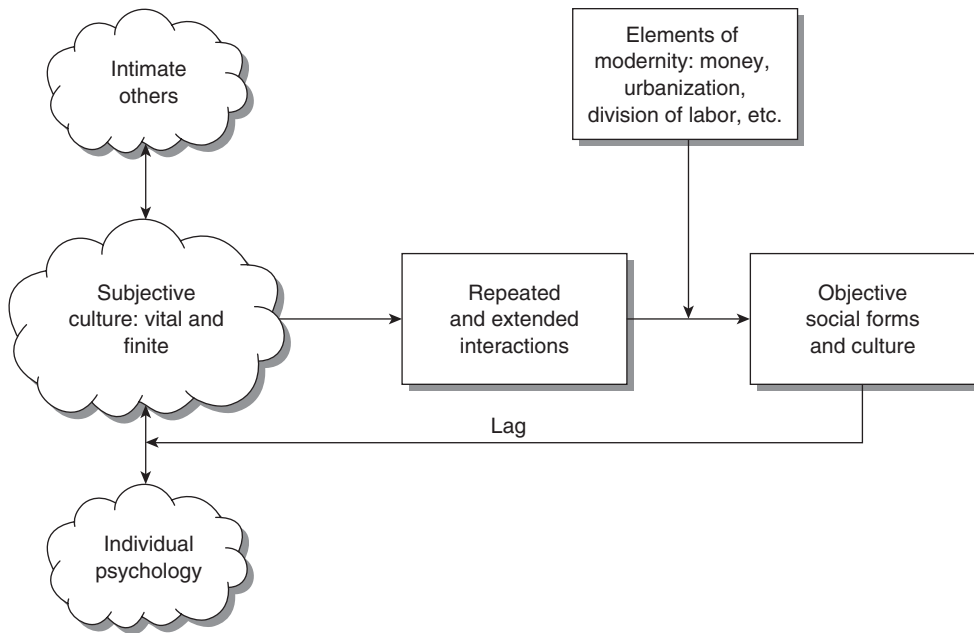


Figure 4.1 Subjective and Objective Culture

Simmel identifies three general variables of objective culture. As any of these variables increases, culture becomes more objective and less subjectively available to the individual. First, culture can vary in its *absolute size*. The pure bulk of cultural material can increase or decrease. In modernity, the amount of objective culture increases continuously. For example, in the year 2000, the world produced approximately 1,200 terabytes of scanned printed material. A terabyte contains over 1 trillion bytes. If we were to make a single book that contained just 1 billion characters, it would be almost 32 miles thick. A trillion is 1,000 billion. It has been estimated that to count to 1 trillion would take over 190,000 years, if we counted 24/7/365. The human race created over 1,200 *trillion* bytes of printed information in 2000. That's not counting the Internet. And that figure increases by 2 to 10% each year.

Culture can also vary by its *diversity of components*. Let's take fashion, for example. Not only are there simply more fashion items available (absolute size), there are also more fashion types or styles available—there are fashions for hip-hop, grunge, skater, hardcore, preppy, glam, raver, piercer, and so on, ad infinitum. Finally, culture can vary by its *complexity*. Different cultural elements can either be linked or unlinked. If different elements become linked, then the overall complexity of the objective culture increases. For example, when this nation first started, there were only a few different kinds of religions (a couple of different Protestant denominations and Catholicism). Due to various social factors, the objective culture of religion has increased in its size and diversity, resulting in any number of

different kinds of religion in America today. The culture of religion has also become more complex, especially in the last few years. Today we find people who are joining together in what was previously thought to be antithetical forms of religion. So, for example, we can find Christian-Pagans in North Carolina. As these different forms become linked together, the religious culture becomes increasingly more complex.

For Simmel, cultural forms are necessary to achieve goals in a social setting. However, if these forms become detached from the lived life of the individual, they present a potential problem for the subjective experience of that individual. In an ideal world, there is an intimate connection between the personal experience of the individual and the culture that he or she uses. However, as the gap between the individual and culture increases, and as culture becomes more objective, culture begins to attain an autonomy that is set against the creative forces of the individual.

Concepts and Theory: The Self in Modernity

There are three interrelated forces in modernity that tend to increase objective culture in all three of its areas—urbanization, money, and the configuration of one's social network. Urbanization appears to be the principal dynamic. It increases the level of the division of labor and the extent that money and markets are used, and it changes one's web of affiliations from a dense, primary network to a loose, secondary one. As is typical with Simmel, we will find that these social processes bring some conflicting effects.

Urbanization

Simmel's (1950) concern with objective culture is nowhere clearer than in his short paper, "The Metropolis and Mental Life": "The most profound reason . . . why the metropolis conduces to the urge of the most individual personal existence . . . appears to me to be the following: the development of modern culture is characterized by the preponderance of what one may call the 'objective spirit' over the 'subjective spirit'" (p. 421). This increase in objective spirit happens principally because of two interrelated dynamics: the division of labor and the use of money, both of which are spurred on through **urbanization**—the process that moves people from country to city living.

Historically, people generally moved from the country to the city because of industrialization. As a result of the Industrial Revolution, the economic base of society changed and with it the means through which people made a living. As populations became increasingly concentrated in one place, more efficient means of providing for the necessities of life and for organizing labor were needed. This increase in the division of labor happened so that products could be made more quickly and the workforce could be more readily controlled. Simmel (1950) argues

that the division of labor also increases because of worker-entrepreneur innovation: “The concentration of individuals and their struggle for customers compel the individual to specialize in a function from which he cannot be readily displaced by another” (p. 420).

The division of labor demands an “ever more one-sided accomplishment,” and we thus become specialized and concerned with smaller and smaller elements of the production process. This one-sidedness creates objective culture: we are unable to grasp the whole of the product and the production process because we are only working on a small part. The worker in a highly specialized division of labor becomes “a mere cog in an enormous organization of things and powers which tear from his hands all progress, spirituality, and value in order to transform them from their subjective form into the form of purely objective life” (Simmel, 1950, p. 422).

Simmel claims that the consumption of products thus produced has an individuating and trivializing effect. It isn’t difficult for us to see that we perform and create self out of things. I just recently bought a house and have spent a good bit of time decorating it. When I have friends over to see the new place, I glow when they say, “this place just fits you.” In the same way, we are all particular about the clothes we wear, the car we drive, the CDs we possess, the sound system we own, the perfume we use, and so on. Notice a difference here between Simmel and Marx: for Simmel, there isn’t anything intrinsically wrong with using commodities to create our self-concept and self-image.

On the other hand, Simmel also sees that the products we are using in modernity to produce and express the self are changing. They are becoming more and more divorced from subjectivity due to the division of labor and market economy: there are too many of them and they are too easily replaced (it is thus difficult to get attached to them); they have become trivialized in order to meet the demands of mass markets (they thus have very little meaning in the first place); and products are subject to the dynamics of fashion and diversification of markets, which leads to inappropriate sign use (for example, dressing like a rapper or a member of the upper class when you aren’t a member of those groups).

Urbanization also increases the level of exchange in a society and thus the use of money-facilitated markets. The use of money increases the level of objective culture due to increasing demands for rational calculations. It also facilitates the processes we’ve just been talking about: the division of labor and trivialization of culture. In addition, we will see that money also has positive effects for the individual and society.

Money

As we saw in Chapter 1, money creates a universal value system wherein every commodity can be understood. Of necessity, this value system is abstract; that is, it has no intrinsic worth. In order for it to stand for everything, it must have no value in itself. The universal and abstract nature of money frees it from constraint and facilitates exchanges. But it also has other effects; we will talk about four. These effects increase the more money (or even more abstract systems such as credit) is used.

One effect of money is that it increases individual freedom by allowing people to pursue diverse activities (paying to join a dance club or a pyramid sales organization) and by increasing the options for self-expression (we can buy the clothes and makeup to pass as a raver this week and a business professional the next; we can even buy hormones and surgery to become a different sex). Second, even though we are able to buy more things with which to express and experience our self, we are less attached to those things because of money. We tend to understand and experience our possessions less in terms of their intrinsic qualities and more in terms of their objective and abstract worth. So, I understand the value of my guitar amplifier in terms of the money it cost me and how difficult it would be to replace (in terms of money). The more money I have, the less valuable my Sunn amplifier will be, because I could afford a hand-wired, boutique amp. Thus, our connection to things becomes more tenuous and objective (rather than emotional) due to the use of money.

Third, money also discourages intimate ties with people. Part of this is due to the universal nature of money. Because of its all-inclusive character, money comes to stand in the place of almost everything, and this effect spreads. When money was first introduced, only certain goods and services were seen as equivalent to it. Today in the United States, we would be hard pressed to think of many things that cannot be purchased with or made equivalent to money, and that includes relationships. Much of this outcome is due to indirect consequences of money: the relationships we have are in large part determined by the school or neighborhood we can afford. Some of money's consequences are more direct: we buy our way into country clubs and exclusive organizations.

Money further discourages intimate ties by encouraging a culture of calculation. The increasing presence of calculative and objectifying culture, even though spawned in economic exchange, tends to make us calculating and objectifying in our relationships. All exchanges require a degree of calculation, even barter, but the use of money increases the number and speed of exchanges. As we participate in an increasing number of exchanges, we calculate more and we begin to understand the world more in terms of numbers and rational calculations. Money is the universal value system in modernity, and as it is used more and more to assess the world, the world becomes increasingly quantified ("time is money" and we shouldn't "waste time just 'hanging out'").

Fourth, money also decreases moral constraints and increases anomie. Money is an amoral value system. What that means is that there are no morals implied in money. Money is simply a means of exchange, a way of making exchanges go easier. Money knows no good or evil: it can be equally used to buy a gun to kill school children as to buy food to feed the poor. So, as more and more of our lives are understood in terms of money, less and less of our lives have a moral basis. In addition, because moral constraints are produced only through group interactions, when money is used to facilitate group membership, it decreases the true social nature of the group and thus its ability to produce morality.

Thus, money has both positive and negative consequences for the individual. Money increases our options for self-expression and allows us to pursue diverse

activities, but it also distances us from objects and people and it increases the possibility of anomie. In the same way, there are both positive and negative consequences for society. However, while it may seem that the negative consequences outweigh the positive for the individual, the consequences for society are mostly positive. We will look at a total of four social effects of the use of money.

The use of money actually creates exchange relationships that cover greater distances and last longer periods of time than would otherwise be possible. Let's think of the employment relationship as an illustration. If a person holds a regular job, she or he has entered a kind of contract. The worker agrees to work for the employer a given number of hours per week at a certain pay rate. This agreement covers an extended period of time, which should only be terminated by a two-week notice or severance pay. This relationship may cover a great deal of geographic space, as when the workplace is located on the West Coast of the United States and the corporate headquarters is on the East Coast.

This kind of relationship was extremely difficult before the use of money as a generalized medium of exchange, which is why many long-term work relationships were conceptualized in terms of familial obligations, such as the serf or apprentice. And, with more generalized forms of the money principle, as with credit and credit cards, social relations can span even larger geographic expanses and longer periods of time (for example, I am obligated to my mortgage company for the next 25 years, and I just completed an eBay transaction with a man living in Japan). What this extension of relations through space and time means is that the number of social ties increases. While we may not be connected as deeply or emotionally today, we are connected to more diverse people more often. Think of society as a fabric: the greater the number and diversity of ties, the stronger is the weave.

Second, money also increases continuity among groups. Money flattens, or generalizes, the value system by making everything equivalent to itself. It also creates more objective culture, which overshadows or colonizes subjective culture. Together these forces tend to make group-specific culture more alike than different. What differences exist are trivial and based on shifting styles. Thus, while the weave of society is more dense due to the effects of money, it is also less colorful, which tends to mitigate group conflicts.

Third, money strengthens the level of trust in a society. What is money, really? In the United States, it is nothing but green ink and nice paper. Yet we would do and give almost anything in exchange for enough of these green pieces of paper. This exchange for relatively worthless paper occurs every day without anyone so much as blinking an eye. How can this be? The answer is that in back of money is the U.S. government, and we have a certain level of trust in its stability. Without that trust, the money would be worthless. A barter system requires some level of trust, but generally speaking, you know the person you are trading with and you can inspect the goods. Money, on the other hand, demands a trust in a very abstract social form—the state—and that trust helps bind us together as a collective.

Lastly, in back of this trust is the existence of a centralized state. In order for us to trust in money, we must trust in the authority of a single nation. When money was first introduced in Greek culture, its use was rather precarious. Different

wealthy landowners or city-states would imprint their image on lumps or rods of metal. Because there was no central governing authority, deceit and counterfeiting were rampant. The images were easily mimicked and weights easily manipulated. Even though money helped facilitate exchanges, the lack of oversight dampened the effect. It wasn't until there was a centralized government that people could completely trust money. Thus, when markets started using money for exchanges, they were inadvertently pushing for the existence of a strong nation-state. Centralized authority is the structural component to a society's trust and it binds us together.

Social Networks

As a further result of urbanization, Simmel argues that social networks (what he calls the **web of group affiliations**) have changed. When we talk about social networks today, what we have in mind are the number and type of people with whom we associate, and the connections among and between those people. Network theory is an established part of contemporary sociology, and Simmel was one of the first to think in such terms. For his part, Simmel is mostly concerned with why people join groups. While this issue may seem minor, there are in fact important ramifications.

In small rural settings, there are relatively few groups for people to join, and most of those memberships are strongly influenced by family. We tend to join the same groups as members of our family do. In these social settings, the family is a primary structure for social organization, and families tend not to move around much. So there are likely to be multiple generations present. As a result, the associations of the family become the associations of the child. A child reared in such surroundings will generally attend the same church, school, and work as his or her parents, grandparents, cousins, and so on. Further, most of these groups will overlap. For example, it would be very likely that a worker and her or his boss attend the same church and that they will have gone to the same school.

Simmel notes that people in these settings tend to join groups because of *organic motivations*—because they are naturally or organically connected to the group. Many of the groups with which a person affiliates in this setting are primary groups. **Primary groups** are noteworthy because they are based on ties of affection and personal loyalty, endure over long periods of time, and involve multiple aspects of a person's life. Under organic conditions, a person will usually be involved with mostly primary groups, and these groups have some association with one another. This kind of community will thus contain people who are very much alike. They will draw from the same basic group influences and culture, and the groups will possess a compelling ability to sanction behavior and bring about conformity.

On the other hand, people join groups in modern, urban settings out of *rational motivations*—group membership due to freedom of choice. The interesting thing to note about this freedom is that it is forced on the individual—in other words, there are few organic connections. In large cities, people usually do not have much family around and the personal connections tend to be rather tenuous. In Southern

California, for example, people move on average every five to seven years. Most only know their neighbors by sight, and the majority of interactions are work related (and people change jobs about as often as they change houses). What this means is that people join social groups out of choice (rational reasons) rather than out of some emotional and organic connectedness. These kinds of groups tend to have the characteristics of **secondary groups** (goal and utilitarian oriented, with a narrow range of activities, over limited time spans).

As a result of rational group affiliations, it is far more likely that individuals will develop unique personalities. A person in a more complex or rational web of group affiliations has multiple and diverse influences and groups' capacity to sanction is diminished. From Simmel's point of view, the group's ability to sanction is based on the individual's dependency upon the group. If there are few groups from which to choose, then individuals in a collective are more dependent upon those groups and the groups will be able to demand conformity. This power is crystal clear in traditional societies where being ostracized meant death. Of course, the inverse is also true: the greater the number of groups from which to choose and the more diverse the groups, the less the moral boundaries and **normative specificity** (the level of behaviors that are guided by norms). In turn, this decrease in sanctioning power leads to greater individual freedom of expression.

Many students, for example, are able to express themselves more freely after moving away from home to the university. This is especially true of students who move from rural to urban settings. Not only is the influence of the student's childhood groups diminished (family, peers, church), but there are also many, many more groups from which to choose. These groups often have little to do with one another. Thus, if one group becomes too demanding of time or emotion or behavior, you can simply switch groups. So, it may be the case that you experience yourself as a unique individual having choices, but it has little to do with you per se: it is a function of the structure of your network.

While decreased moral boundaries and normative specificity lead to greater freedom of expression, they can also produce anomie—also a concern of Durkheim's. For the individual, it speaks of a condition of confusion and meaninglessness. Unlike animals, humans are not instinctually driven or regulated. We can choose our behaviors. That also means that our emotions, thoughts, and behaviors must be ordered by group culture and social structure or they will be in chaos and will have little meaning. When group regulation is diminished or gone, it is easy for people to become confused and chaotic in their thoughts and emotions. Things in our life and life itself can become meaningless. So while we may think that personal freedom is a great idea, too much freedom can be disastrous.

Complex webs of group affiliations can have two more consequences: they can increase the level of role conflict a person experiences, and they contribute to the blasé attitude. **Role conflict** describes a situation in which the demands of two or more of the roles a person occupies clash with one another (such as when your friends want to go out on Thursday night but you have a test the next morning). The greater the number of groups with which one affiliates, the greater is the number of divergent roles and the possibility of role conflict. However, the

tendency to keep groups spatially and temporally separate mitigates this potential. In other words, modern groups tend not to have the same members and they tend to gather at different times and locations. So we see the roles as separate and thus not in conflict.

Complex group structures also contribute to the **blasé attitude**, an attitude of absolute boredom and lack of concern. Every social group we belong to demands emotional work or commitment, but we only have limited emotional resources, and we can only give so much and care so much. There is, then, a kind of inverse relationship between our capacity to emotionally invest in our groups and the number of different groups of which we are members. As the number and diversity of social groups in our lives goes up, our ability to emotionally invest goes down. This contributes to a blasé attitude, but it also makes conflict among groups less likely because the members care less about the groups' goals and standards.

This blasé attitude is also produced by all that we have talked about so far, as well as overstimulation and rapid change. The city itself provides for multiple stimuli. As we walk down the street, we are faced with diverse people and circumstances that we must take in and evaluate and react to. In our pursuit of individuality, we also increase the level of stimulation in our lives. As we go from one group to another, from one concert or movie to another, from one mall to another, from one style of dress to another, or as we simply watch TV or listen to music, we are bombarding ourselves with emotional and intellectual stimulation. In the final analysis, all this stimulation proves to be too much for us and we emotionally withdraw.

Further, this stimulation is in constant flux. Knowledge and culture are constantly changing. We could point to a variety of changes in medicine or style or "common knowledge" over the past few years, but I think that one of the most poignant examples of this constant change is the MTV show, *So 5 Minutes Ago*. It is a show that looks at the changing culture of youth. The very existence of the show acknowledges and chronicles what Simmel is talking about for a specific segment of the culture. (I would invite you to check it out, but by the time you read this, the show itself will probably be "5 minutes ago.")

All that we have talked about in this section so far creates an interesting social-psychological need. Drowning in a sea of blasé and objectified culture, people feel they must exaggerate any differences that do exist in order to stand out and experience our personal selves. Thus, modernity increases our freedom of expression, but it also forces us to express it more dramatically with trivialized culture:

On the one hand, life is made infinitely easy for the personality in that stimulations, interests, uses of time and consciousness are offered to it from all sides. . . . On the other hand, however, life is composed more and more of these impersonal contents and offerings that tend to displace the genuine personal colorations and incomparabilities. This results in the individual's summoning the utmost in uniqueness and particularization, in order to preserve his most personal cores. He has to exaggerate this personal element in order to remain audible even to himself. (Simmel, 1950, p. 422)

We have covered a great deal of conceptual ground in this section. It's been made all the more complicated because each of the things we have talked about brings both functional and dysfunctional effects, and the effects overlap and mutually reinforce one another. Normally, I would be tempted to draw all this out in a theoretical model; however, it would be way too complex for our purposes. Instead, I will finish this section with a list of the different effects (see Table 4.1). This list doesn't explain the theoretical dynamics, but it will provide you with a general and clear idea about how urbanization is influencing our lives. If in going over this list you find that you can't recall the theoretical explanation about why the effect is occurring, please go back and reread the text.

In general, then, modernity is characterized by a high level of urbanization. Urbanization brings with it three primary outcomes: increases in the division of labor, the use of money and markets, and rational group membership. Each of these has the following effects (note that ↑ denotes an increasing and ↓ a decreasing tendency):

Table 4.1 Effects of Urbanization

The Division of Labor	↑ specialized culture
	↑ production of trivialized products
Money Effects—Individual	↑ individual freedom
	↓ attachment to products
	↓ intimate ties with people
	↑ anomie
	↑ goal displacement
Money Effects—Societal	↑ number of social relationships
	↑ continuity between groups
	↑ social trust
	↑ centralization of power
Rational Social Networks	↑ unique personality
	↑ anomie
	↑ role conflict
	↑ blasé attitude

Simmel Summary

- There are two central ideas that form Simmel's perspective: social forms and the relationship between the subjective experience of the individual and objective culture. Simmel always begins and ends with the individual. He assumes that the individual is born with certain ways of thinking and feeling, and most social interactions are motivated by individual needs and desires. Encounters with others are molded to social forms in order to facilitate reciprocal exchanges. These forms constitute society for Simmel. Objective culture is one that is universal yet not entirely available to the individual's subjective experience. Thus, the person is unable to fully grasp, comprehend, or intimately know objective culture. The tension between the individual on the one hand and social forms and objective culture on the other is Simmel's focus of study.
- Urbanization increases the division of labor and the use of money, and it changes the configuration of social networks. All of these have both direct and indirect influence on the level of objective culture and its effects on the individual. The use of money increases personal freedom for the individual, yet at the same time it intensifies the possibility of anomie, diminishes the individual's attachment to objects, and increases goal displacement. People join groups based on either rational or organic motivations. Rational motivations are prevalent in urban settings and imply greater personal freedom coupled with less emotional investment and possible anomie and role conflict; organic motivations imply less personal freedom and greater social conformity coupled with increased personal and social certainty.

Looking Ahead

In this section, I want us to look both back and ahead. We will first look ahead and briefly examine Mead's and Simmel's influence on contemporary theory. After that, we will look back and bring elements of their theories together. There are two reasons for doing this.

First, I want to give you a hint of what theoretical synthesis looks like. There are a number of ways that we can create new theories. One of the most powerful and well-worn paths is through *synthesis*: taking elements from different theories and bringing them together to form a new, hopefully more powerful theory. In synthesis, we open up a theoretical space by simply contrasting and comparing ideas. Once this space has been opened, we can fill it through synthesizing theories. In it, we form a new theory by arranging elements from different theories in a creative way.

The second reason for doing this is that, together, Mead and Simmel give us a substantive question that in some ways far outstrips their direct influence on sociological theory. In other words, Mead's work forms the basis of symbolic interactionism (Chapter 9) and Simmel's work informs contemporary conflict and exchange theories (Chapters 7 and 10), but together they introduce us to an important question that has become a significant focus of contemporary social

theory—especially for postmodernism (Chapter 14) and Anthony Giddens's theory of late-modernity (Chapter 11). It's a question that I think you will be most interested in: How does living in modern times influence the way you subjectively experience yourself?

Mead's and Simmel's Theoretical Impact

Mead's ideas form the base of the Chicago School of Symbolic Interaction. The Chicago School approaches human life as something that emerges through interaction. As a result, the interactionist approach, and thus Mead, has been the chief way through which we have become aware of the inner workings and experiences of diverse social worlds, such as Norm Denzin's (1993) work on alcoholics and Gary Alan Fine's (1987) analysis of Little League baseball. Symbolic interaction is also used as the principal perspective any time culture and the individual meet. For example, Arlie Hochschild (1983) used an interactionist approach to understand how emotions are socially scripted through "feeling rules." John Hewitt (1998) has recently used Mead's approach to understand how self-esteem is culturally and socially created and then internalized by the individual. In addition, Edwin Lemert (1951, 1967) and Howard Becker (1963) used Mead's ideas to understand deviance as an outcome of interaction and labeling.

Simmel has directly influenced contemporary theory in many ways. His ideas concerning culture are becoming increasingly important in the work of some postmodernists (see Weinstein & Weinstein, 1993). Simmel is also considered the father of formal sociology (see Ray, 1991). Formal sociology is concerned with social forms rather than content. The content of social action would be concerned with specific instances of social life, as in the actual actions and battles in a war or the specific causes and demonstrations of a social movement. As we've seen, forms are general categories of social action that must fit into a specific mold in order to occur. The general form of both the war and the social movement is conflict.

In this book, we will see Simmel's influence on exchange and conflict theory. Simmel was one of the first to explicate the implications of exchange on social encounters. Rather than theorizing about the structure of the economy per se, like Marx and Weber, Simmel is instead fascinated by the influence of the social form of exchange on human experience. As we'll see when we get to Chapter 10, Simmel is specifically concerned with how value is established and how it affects the use of power in social encounters.

Simmel has also had direct influence on contemporary conflict theory through Lewis Coser (Chapter 7). Before Simmel, conflict had been understood as a source of social change and disintegration. Simmel was the first to acknowledge that conflict is a natural and necessary part of society. Coser brought Simmel's idea to mainstream sociology, at least in America. From that point on, sociologists have had to acknowledge that "groups require disharmony as well as harmony" and that "a certain degree of conflict is an essential element in group formation and the persistence of group life" (Coser, 1956, p. 31).

The Self in Modernity: Bringing Mead and Simmel Together

Collectively, Mead and Simmel give us an insightful theory of how the self is created within the context of modernity. The specific point where they come together is Mead's idea of the Me and Simmel's notions of increasing objective culture and rationally based group affiliations. Recall that Mead argues that the self (Me) becomes integrated through role-taking with a generalized other. When role-taking with only significant others, the self will seem segmented, divided as it is among the different points of view. The generalized other is able to link all those individual perspectives into one abstract whole, thus giving the self a sense of integration. But what would happen if the generalized other was itself fragmented or constructed from vacuous images? This is where Simmel's theory comes in.

Simmel's theory implies three issues for the process of role-taking and self formation. First, Simmel says that an individual's relationship to groups is changing due to modern urbanization. As a result, people can pick and choose groups pretty much at will, and group "membership" is more and more mediated by money rather than by existing social relationships. Second, the groups themselves have changed in the sense that there is very little overlap or connection among groups, and group membership tends to lack consistency over time. Third, the general culture surrounding people and groups is becoming increasingly objective. That is, culture is becoming progressively more difficult for individuals to grasp, understand, and emotionally invest in.

Think for a moment about what these two theories imply about the self. Taken together, Simmel's three issues suggest that Mead's generalized others will tend to be fragmented, emotionally flat, and may lack the ability to guide behavior through role-taking in any significant way. The person's "Me" and his or her internal conversation is thus impacted: "Normally, within the sort of community as a whole to which we belong, there is a unified self, but that may be broken up. . . . Two separate 'me's' and 'I's,' two different selves, result, and that is the condition under which there is a tendency to break up the personality" (Mead, 1934, pp. 142–143). This possibility of a fragmented self is a central feature of postmodern theory (Chapter 14).

Building Your Theory Toolbox

Knowing Mead and Simmel

After reading and understanding this chapter, you should be able to define the following terms theoretically and explain their importance:

Pragmatism, emergence, mind, self, generalized other, symbols, natural signs, significant gestures, I and Me, role-taking, preparatory stage, play stage, game stage, generalized other stage, the act, interaction, institutions, a priori, social form, subjective and objective cultures, urbanization, division of labor, trivialization, money, web of group affiliations, organic

motivation, rational motivation, primary groups, secondary groups, normative specificity, anomie, role conflict, blasé attitude

After reading and understanding this chapter, you should be able to

- Define pragmatism and apply the idea to meaning, truth, and self
- Explain how the mind and self are effects of social interaction
- Demonstrate how the mind and self are necessary for the existence of society
- Give the definition and functions of social forms and define and explicate a new social form
- Define objective culture and be able to explain how urbanization and the use of money increase the level of objective culture
- Identify and describe the effects of urbanization and rational group formation on the individual

Learning More: Primary Sources

George Herbert Mead: The chief source of Mead's theory is found in a compilation of student notes:

Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, self, and society: From the standpoint of a social behaviorist* (C. W. Morris, Ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Georg Simmel: Unlike Mead, Simmel published quite a bit. I suggest that you start off with the first two readers, and then move to his substantial work on money:

Simmel, G. (1959). *Essays on sociology, philosophy, and aesthetics [by] Georg Simmel [and others]: Georg Simmel, 1858–1918* (K. H. Wolfe, Ed.). New York: Harper & Row.

Simmel, G. (1971). *Georg Simmel: On individuality and social forms* (D. N. Levine, Ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Simmel, G. (1978). *The philosophy of money* (T. Bottomore & D. Frisby, Trans.). London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Learning More: Secondary Sources

To read more about Mead, I would recommend the following:

Baldwin, J. D. (1986). *George Herbert Mead: A unifying theory for sociology*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and method*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Blumer, H. (2004). *George Herbert Mead and human conduct* (T. J. Morrione, Ed.). Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

Cook, G. A. (1993). *George Herbert Mead: The making of a social pragmatist*. Urbana, IL: University of Chicago Press.

For Simmel, the following are excellent resources:

Featherstone, M. (Ed.). (1991). A special issue on George Simmel. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 8(3).

Frisby, D. (1984). *Georg Simmel*. New York: Tavistock.

Theory You Can Use (Seeing Your World Differently)

- More and more people are going to counselors or psychotherapists. Most counseling is done from a psychological point of view. Knowing what you know now about how the self is constructed, how do you think sociological counseling would be different? What things might a clinical sociologist emphasize?
- Using Google or your favorite search engine, enter “clinical sociology.” What is clinical sociology? What is the current state of clinical sociology?
- Mead very clearly claims that our self is dependent upon the social groups with which we affiliate. Using Mead’s theory, explain how the self of a person in a disenfranchised group might be different from one associated with a majority position. Think about the different kinds of generalized others and the relationship between interactions with generalized others and internalized Me’s. (Remember, Mead himself doesn’t talk about how we feel about the self.)
- How would Mead talk about and understand race and gender? According to Mead’s theory, where does racial or gender inequality exist? From a Meadian point of view, where does responsibility lie for inequality? How could we understand class using Mead’s theory? From Mead’s perspective, how and why are things like race, class, gender, and heterosexism perpetuated (contrast Mead’s point of view with that of a structuralist)?
- Remembering Simmel’s definition and variables of objective culture, do you think we have been experiencing more or less objective culture in the last 25 years? In what ways? In other words, which of Simmel’s concepts have higher or lower rates of variation? If there has been change, how do you think it is affecting you? Theoretically explain what the proportion of subjective to objective culture will be like for your children. Theoretically explain the effects you would expect.
- Perform a kind of network analysis on your web of group affiliations. How many of the groups of which you are a member are based on organic and rational motivations? In what kinds of groups do you spend most of your time? Over the next five years, how do you see your web of affiliations changing? Based on Simmel’s theory, what effects can you expect from these changes?

Further Explorations—Web Links

Mead:

http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/projects/centcat/centcats/fac/facch12_01.html

<http://www.iep.utm.edu/m/mead.htm>

<http://spartan.ac.brocku.ca/%7Elward>

<http://www.cla.sc.edu/phil/faculty/burket/g-h-mead.html>

Simmel:

http://www.malaspina.com/site/person_1056.asp

<http://socserv2.socsci.mcmaster.ca/~econ/ugcm/3113/simmel/society>

<http://www2.fmg.uva.nl/sociosite/topics/sociologists.html#simmel>