

**Classical Sociology Theory**  
**Lecture - 52**  
**Mead on Society**

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## Mead on Society



Welcome back to the class, and today is the concluding session on Mead, G.H. Mead. And in the previous classes, we discussed Mead's argument about mind and self. And in today's class, we will discuss this argument about society. So, one of the most prominent points about Mead that we discussed throughout the previous classes is that he understands the self and the mind as the products of social interaction. So, for Mead, there is no possibility of the development of a mind or a self in the absence of a society.

So unlike quite a lot of other sociologists who took this social interaction for granted and then went on to understand social structure, social change, and other things, a host of sociologists including see it for G.H Mead and C.H. Cooley and others are focused on the micro spaces, on the micro spaces, microsites of sociological analysis and then try to understand how human beings evolved as a species, as an individual.

Both this ability to communicate with each other and then develop a complicated entity or process called us mind and something called as a self. We had elaborate discussion on that in the previous class. So, he understands self as comprising of both the I and the me. And the I is the

impulsive act, which can only be seen after the action is being commissioned. Or the me is the kind of a you know, reflective self which try to evaluate the action.

So that provided me with the possibility to bring in spontaneity to human action. Human beings do not really behave in a well-programmed, in a well-programmed manner. They could be quite unpredictable many times, they could be quite you know, spontaneous many times.

So, Mead was able to bring in this element of spontaneity by bringing in this element of I in his understanding of self. Now, let us understand how he defines his concept of society. Because I hope you remember in the previous class, he argued that the development of self takes place in stages through the play and the game and through the generalized other.

So, when and these three stages are in hierarchical manner in terms of its increasing complexity. So. in the third stage when we talk about the generalized other, an individual is able to understand a picture of a generalized other. I gave you a few of example, quite a few examples in the previous class. So that process, Mead argues, without the ability to understand, envision that generalized other, without that process, a person cannot simply have this idea of a self.

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#### The Behavioral Basis of Society

- Mead saw several ways in which self provides for the integration of behavior into society.
- First, the capacity to see oneself as an object in a field of objects allows individuals to see themselves in relation to other individuals.
- Second, the emergence of a unified and complete self, or stable self-conception, means that individuals consistently place into their perceptual field a view of themselves as a certain type of object, with more consistency.
- The consequence for society of these self related processes is that as people's actions take on consistency from situation to situation or from time to time in the same situation, their behaviors become predictable, thereby making it easier for individuals to adjust to, and cooperate with, one another.



So now, let us come to this point. Now, Mead emphasizes this behavioral basis of society; why that, how is that society has a very strong behavioral basis Mead saw several ways in which self provides the, for the integration of behavior into society. So here, it is very important when you are trying to understand how human behavior constitutes the basis of society.

When you talk about social society as nothing but it is a set of interaction or it is a set of action, Mead very strongly believe that this action needs to be understood as a set of behaviors. But again, not a behavior as in the case of a pack of animals, a pack of wild dogs, or a pack of lions; it is not like that, but rather human beings have been able to create society as an extremely complicated set of behavior.

So, it is an provides for the integration of behavior into society. First, the capacity to see oneself as an object in a field of objects, allow individuals to see themselves in relation to other individual. So, this we discussed earlier. We are able to identify, we are able to look at ourselves from a distance; the way we look at your friend A, B, or C, we are able to look at ourselves.

And we can actually visualize our self may be sitting in a meeting and then participating in a discussion and how we perform, how we act, how we speak, what did we speak, how did we react. Or in a particular situation of friction or how did we shout at somebody or in a scene of violence, how did we involve in violence or how did we try other people not involved in violence. So, we can visualize ourselves as well as we can visualize others simultaneously. And this is an extremely important point. So, objects allow individuals to see themselves in relation to other individuals.

Second, the emergence of a unified and complete self or a stable self-conception means that the individuals consistently placed on to their perpetual field a view of themselves as a certain type of object with more consistency. And this is extremely important.

When a group of people come into picture into a particular context with a particular place, and if all these people have a sense of a crystallized sense, a crystallized self that they know what kind

of people they are, how they are supposed to behave, what are their positions, what are their level of understanding, their maturity, how are they supposed to behave.

And then, when a group of such kind of people come into a place, then that place gets certain kind of a consistency. So, it gets certain kind of consistency because nobody behaves in a completely unpredictable way, especially if, more so, if all these people are coming from a similar socio-cultural milieu.

Why am I saying that all these people are coming from a similar socio-cultural milieu? Because this socio-cultural milieu is the one which actually provide them with the reference points, which actually tell them that how to expect, what to expect, how to behave, and how not to behave, what not to expect.

So, these people who come from a similar socio-cultural milieu would have internalized these norms, they would have developed this sense of a generalized other, they would have developed a more crystallized sense of self and once they come into a particular situation, it gets, it becomes more solid, it becomes more consistent. There is a sense of consistency and people will not people, we will note or people do not need to behave in completely erratic or completely unexpected manner, things are more ordered.

The consequence for society for these self-related processes is that as people's action take on consistency from situation to situation or from time to time in the same situation, their behaviors become predictable, thereby making it easier for individuals to adjust to and cooperate with one another.

So when, because we know that this expect is, want to expect. When you move to a particular place, you need to have some idea about what to expect, how to behave, otherwise, you will be completely nervous. You know, this happens, especially when you travel to some unknown place. When you travel alone to a completely different culture, you do not know how to behave; a completely alien culture. You are completely in a very difficult situation.

On the other hand, you go to a courtroom, you know how to behave; you go to a classroom, you know how to behave; you walk into hospital, you know how to behave; you walk into a public transport system, you know how to behave. And you know how to behave is also an expectations about how others will behave.

How? So that is all, you know it is all the complicated stories about the role-taking; what is expected, what is not expected. So that provides a sense of consistency, it offers like a sense of predictability. And in the absence of this predictability, everyday life can become extremely difficult.

You know, you are suddenly, one fine morning, you wake up and you do not know how to behave in a class. If that memory is completely gone. You walk into a class, when everybody else sits, you do not know how to behave. You do not know what is expected of a student. You do not know what are you supposed to do, what constitutes, what becomes a good student, or an ideal student, or a typical student, you have absolutely no clue about.

So, this idea that you can predict other's actions and you also know how you are supposed to behave are some of the most important points. So, the behaviors become predictable, thereby making it easier for individuals to adjust to and cooperate with one another. Especially in terms of cooperation, when you are striving for a common goal, it becomes extremely important.

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- Third, the process of role-taking allows individuals to see themselves not only in relation to specific others in particular situations but also in relation to varieties of generalized others. To the degree that all participants to an interaction role take with the same generalized other, they will approach and perceive situations within "common meanings," and they will be prepared to act in terms of the same perspective.
- Forth, in addition to providing behavioral 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—ensure that individual behaviors will, to some degree, alter the flow of the social process.
- Mead reaffirmed that patterns of social organization, whatever their form and profile, are mediated by human behavioral capacities for language, role-taking, mind, and self.



Now, third point is the process of role-taking allows individuals to see themselves not only in relation to specific others in particular situations but also in relation to various varieties of generalized others. We discussed the same point; there are varieties of generalized others. So, when I am walking into a classroom or when I am walking into my place of work, I myself is more attuned to the generalized other of my student community, the students whom I meet. Whereas, when I go back to my native place, my generalized other will be more focused towards my neighbors, my family friends, and my childhood friends, who will have a completely different understanding about me, I have a completely different set of understanding from them.

So how do you, so every person is expected to play a variety of such kind of things, such kind of roads. So that is what Mead said that, in this third level, when we talk about the generalized other, you know that how to behave not only with respect to one person but with respect to a generalized group of people. We talk about category, so we talk about places. Places of study, places of leisure place.

You go to a resort and you know, how to behave; you go to a beach site, you know how to behave; you go to a public swimming pool, you know what to behave, how to behave. To the degree that all participants are to an interaction, through interaction role-take with the same generalized other, they will approach and perceive situations within the common meanings, and they will be prepared to act in terms of the same perspective.

So, there is a common meaning emerges. Later, we will discuss a notion of intersubjectivity emerges. When you sit in the classroom, when the class teacher stands there and when the class goes on, there is a shared understanding among you, your teacher, and your classmates regarding what exactly is going on there.

What is going on there? It is supposed to be learning-teaching process. You can have different opinion about that, how far it is effective, whether it is boring, whether it is an exciting class about pedagogy, you can have difference of opinion but all of you are on the same plane that this is supposed to be a space of learning and teaching. And the person who is standing in front of you on that higher, on that elevated platform is supposed to be the person who is supposed to impart knowledge and you are supposed to be the recipients.

So, there is a common meaning, you share a common meaning. You share a common meaning, you share a common set of etiquettes, you share a common set of practices. When even if there is very, a very heated discussions in the class, you do not use certain words, you do not use abusive words in a classroom. There is certain kind of decorum; there is certain kind of you know, ethics; certain kind of practices are expected.

So forth, in addition to providing behavioral consistency and individual integration into extended networks of interaction, self also serves as a vehicle for social change. So, this will be interesting because unless Mead addresses this personal social change, otherwise it gives an impression that everybody does the same thing every day so there is no possibility for social change.

The face of self, the I and the me, as Mead termed them, ensure that individual behaviors will, to some degree, alter the flow of social process. So, if all of us are you know, completely are integrated with the society, we are all having a self which is in tune with the generalized idea, then you know that the society will be the same.

But Mead argues that that is not the case, because people are different and this is I, this uncontrollable impulse, the very unique character of individuals that comes into picture. That

comes into picture, then that alters the action of somebody. Others react to that, there could be different people who you know, interpret the whole thing differently. So, that leads to a kind of a flexibility that leads to some kind of a dynamism and that brings in better change.

So, Mead reaffirmed that patterns of social organization, whatever their form and profile, are mediated by human behavioral capacities for language, role-taking, mind, and self. So, his understanding, his argument about the social organization is that whatever be their form and profile, they are all influenced by behavioral capacities, your ability to use language, your ability for a role-taking, mind, and self.

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#### *The Process of Society*

- For Mead, the term *society* is simply a way of denoting that interactive processes can reveal stability and that humans act within a framework imposed by stabilized social relations. The key to understanding society lies in the use of language and the practice of role-taking by individuals with mind and self.
- Mead implicitly argued that society as presented to any given individual represents a series of perspectives, or "attitudes," which the individual assumes in regulating behavior. Different set of 'others'.
- Unlike Durkheim, who saw structural units such as "occupational groups" as necessary mediators between the "collective conscience" and the individual, Mead's formulation of mind and self implicitly argues that through the capacity to role-take with multiple and remote others, diversely located individuals can become integrated into a common social fabric.



Now, society; his third you know, how does Mead explain society? Again, it is a very interesting argument whether is society an entity out there, or is society a process, or is society both, or a society in between. These are very, very important questions. Very deeply philosophical questions, questions that have been discussed and debated from a long time.

So, for Mead, the term society is simply a way of denoting that interactive process can reveal a stability; no sorry. For Mead, the term society is simply a way of denoting that interactive processes can reveal stability and that humans act within a framework imposed by stabilizing



social occasions. The key to understanding society lies in the use of language and the practice of role-taking by the individual with mind and self.

So, Mead understand society as a process not as a given entity, unlike say, Durkheim. Unlike Durkheim, who looked at it as a given entity, Mead argues that the term society is simply a way of denoting that interactive process, denoting that interacting, interactive process can reveal stability and that humans act within a framework imposed by stabilized social relations.

So, there are stabilized forms, there are kind of broader frameworks under which you are supposed to you know behave, and I give you several examples. For example, you want to have a companion, you want to live with a woman or a man and how do you do that in a society? You want to fulfill your sexual urge, how do you fulfill that?

Because fulfilling a sexual urge is a biological, it is a biological need, how do you do that? Different cultures have different arrangements for that, either through marriage or through sex work or through casual sex or through so many different possibilities; different societies have different forms of fulfilling this particular social need.

And in every society, each of these options are being regulated, they are stabilized, they act within a framework. There are rules and regulations in every society about sexual mores or about you know, control; social control. Or about education, or about rearing of the children. So, each of these fundamental you know, obligations of human, fundamental needs of human beings have been regulated in a specific manner. So, the key to understanding society lies in the use of language and the practice of role-taking by individuals with mind that self.

Mead implicitly argue that society as presented to any given individual represents a series of perspectives or attitudes, which the individual assumes in regulating the behavior. Different set of others. A very important one, because for an individual, there is no single society there. There are different set of others with competing ideas, with competing demands.

When you go to college, your college mates, your gang, your very close set of friends, they would want you to join them and then you know, miss the class and then go for a movie. Whereas, that is not what exactly is expected from you by your teachers and by your parents.

Or your political party in which you are a member, they want you to come out on the road and then participate in the procession, but that is not what is expected from by your parents. Or your girlfriend or boyfriend who want you to behave in a particular way, but others expect you to behave different. Or son-in-law and father-in-law. You know, all these, well, starting with family into office space into every organizations, into bureaucracy and everywhere, you see that there are multitude of attitudes, generalized attitudes.

There are different set of others and you have always tried to make a, strike a balance between that. And you know, you do not succeed all the time, nobody succeeds all the time. That is why people have very difficult life sometimes; very, very, extremely problematic, very you know, extremely difficult life sometimes. So, an individual learns to live with this different set of others.

Unlike Durkheim, who so structural unit such as occupational groups as necessary mediators between the collective conscience and the individual, Mead's formulation of mind and self implicitly argues that through the capacity of role-take with multiple and remote others, diversely located individuals can become integrated into a common social fabric.

So here, you see how the question of social solidarity is brought in, how the question of social cohesion is brought in. So, Weber talks about how there are structural units like occupational groups and classes and other things were, which has very strong sense of social solidarity so that everybody thinks the same way. You bring in a sense of you know, commonality, or sense of a social cohesion.

But Mead does not think that. Mead says that even if you do not belong to a particular group, you have the ability, the unique ability to take the role of others, you have the ability to you

know, to connect with others through the significant symbols and that will lead to a kind of a integration at a common social fabric.

So unlike Durkheim, who saw structural units such as occupational groups as necessary mediators between the collective conscience and the individual, Mead formulated the mind and self implicitly argues that Mead's formulation, yeah, argues that through the capacity of role-take with the multiple and remote others, diversely located individuals can become integrated into a common social fabric.

So, even if you are located differently, your social experiences are different, your cultural experiences are different, if you have are exposed enough into a complex society, you have the ability to develop this multiple self and then that ability to move into that.

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- Mead's view of society is dominated by a concern with the social-psychological mechanisms by which social structures are integrated. For Mead, society is just 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 behavioral capacities of mind and self. By emphasizing the processes underlying social structures, Mead presented a highly dynamic view of society.



So, it is a kind of summary. Mead's view of society is dominated by a concern with the social-psychological mechanisms by which social structures are integrated. This is an extremely important point. You know, I have been telling you that this singular question, how is that society possible? How is that you know, thousands of people, tens of thousands of people are able to leave more or less peacefully in a society?

This is a fundamentally interesting question. A very, very extremely central question for sociologists. And different people have you know, argued is different. So, but Weber argues that, sorry, Mead's concern is that the view of society is dominated by a concern with social-psychological mechanisms by which social structures are integrated. So, Mead was heavily influenced by psychology, especially social psychology and a host of other things; behaviorism, you know, utilitarianism, pragmatism, and a host of other things.

So here, he looks at how these mechanisms have an important implication as well as they are products of social psychological processes, not a mere psychological process. Not something that originates and then ends within your own mind. Things that are shaped by interaction but it definitely has a psychological angle as well.

For Mead, society is just a term for the process of role-taking with varieties of specific and generalized others and the consequent coordination of action made possible by the behavioral capacities of mind and self. This is the definition of society; very, very interesting society. Sorry, very interesting definition.

Society is just a term for the process of role-taking with varieties of specific and generalized others and the consequent coordination of action made possible by the behavioral capacities of mind and self. By emphasizing the processes underlying social structures, Mead presented a highly dynamic view of society.

So, for Mead society is made possible only because human beings are able to do this role-taking with a set of generalized others and that really leads to a coordinated action made possible by the behavioral capacities of mind and self. So, mind these important, self is important, but they have developed or they do exist in every day only in tandem with this interaction with others.

So, these others and the ability to interact with them in a consistent intense manner, these two terms are important; we I hope, you remember, intensity and consistency. Your kind of interaction must be consistent, it must be regular, it also must be intense. In a very shallow interaction, you meet only some few people in a life that does not really help. So, he brings in

this element of consistency and intensity as some important factor for the development of mind and self. So that is what he kind of describes the society as; this ability, this this particular feature.

So this, as I told you, this is a very refreshing, a completely different way of understanding society and the relationship of individual. And this completely goes against the larger you know, conflict perspective or functional perspective, which do not really focus on the individual. They talk about the social structure, they talk about the functions, they talk about classes, they talk about you know, different organizations, but the individual was very, very badly missing. Or the focus did not you know, play sufficient attention to the whole course; now, what is happening to the individual. And that is where Mead comes in as an important scholar.

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### Critical Assessment of Mead



- The strength of Mead's analysis resides in his understanding of the relationship among ongoing patterns of social organization, or society, and the behavioral capacities that arise from human needs to adapt to these patterns and that, as a result, sustain society.
- Society always stands above the individual in the sense that it exists before a person is born and, consequently, is the environment to which individuals must adjust and adapt. Yet without learning conventional gestures and role-taking, and without acquiring the ability to engage in minded deliberations or self-reflection and appraisal from the perspective of society and its various generalized others, society would not be possible.



So, let us have some time, maybe one or two slides to have a critical assessment of Mead. How do we assess Mead as a sociologist, how do we evaluate him? The strength of Mead's analysis resides in his understanding of the relationship is an ongoing pattern of social organization or society and the behavioral capacities that arise from human needs to adapt to these patterns and that as a result sustain society.

So, this is the same point that we discussed just before this particular slide, how is society possible and why is that human beings are able to interact in a society more or less without much of it difficulty. Most of the time, we think that interaction in a society is easy. People who otherwise not have any serious issues, they find this interaction quite easy, but Mead argues that this is made possible only through these complicated processes and especially the behavioral capacities that arise from human need to adapt to these patterns. And that as a result sustained society.

So, society is sustained by that, by that set of expectations, that set of regulations, that set of you know, uniformity, that set of predictability. So, society always stands above the individual in the sense that it exists before a person is born. And consequently, it is the environment to which individuals must adjust and adapt.

This is something which very familiar with. You know, Durkheim says exactly this. You are born into society, there are social facts how to behave, what to believe, what not to believe, what to eat; a quite a lot of social are there. And these social are already there when you are born into society, and that Mead also agrees.

But the second part, without learning conventional gestures and role-taking and without acquiring the ability to engage minded deliberations or self-reflections and appraisal from the perspective of society and it is various generalized others, society would not be possible.

So, we know that we are quite familiar with the argument that okay society is there, but how is that society there? And how does an individual experience that society is the central question, the central theme that really Mead engages with very beautifully. So, when you say that a person is born into society, society is coercive, it is outside, it is external, everything is agreed.

But Mead brings in a more interesting question, a more substantial question about how this society is made possible; how an individual, a child begins to experience that. And this experience, which is otherwise can be termed as interaction, how this interaction helps in the development of mind as well as self, and at the same time, how it in an opposite way, how it also contributes for the development of society.

So, the individual and the society they are not you know, mutually separate entities. They co-constitute each other, they co-produce each other. And that is an extremely important; that dynamism is something that is extremely important in Mead's case. I do not think that Durkheim would have explained that how individuals contribute to the emergence of society.

Rather, his focus was the other way around, how individuals are kind of a pawns, or they are the puppets or the hands of society. Whereas Mead and a host of other scholars whom we call as interactionists, they talk about the people who actively create society, how society is constructed, how shared meanings are constructed, how inter-subjective planes that can be constructed, how social fields are constructed. So that way, Mead and his fellow interactions were extremely you know, important; they are extremely relevant.

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- One of the criticisms is that Mead never developed a very clear conception of society or culture. He saw "institutions" as ongoing patterns of cooperative behavior, and he viewed culture in terms of various generalized others.
- His lack of focus on emotions. One of the most critical aspects of interaction is its emotional content, and when individuals role-take, engage in minded deliberations, or make self-appraisals, they are being emotional.
- The foremost scholar who brought in micro-sociology and interactionist perspective to the fore



*Power*



And one of the criticisms is that Mead never deployed a very clear conceptual society or culture. He saw institutions as ongoing patterns of cooperative behavior and he viewed culture in terms of various generalized others. So, one of the criticisms is that he did not formulate a clear conception of what constitutes society or culture. Because, you know, later, theorists or other theorists have really defined it more significantly. Whereas, Mead's argument about society, rather than saying that it is a process, he has not really gone into that. And he viewed culture in terms of various generalized others.

And his lack of focus on the emotions, one of the most critical aspects of interaction is the emotional content, and when individuals are role-take engage in minded deliberation or make self-appraisals, they are being emotional. And yeah, this is something which he does not really focus on emotion.

Again, which is very closely connected with the very animal you know, characteristic, Need not be animal, yeah, I think need not be animal. You can have emotions of various kinds which are not directly connected with your sense of fear or love or lust or other; you can empathize with others, is not it. Is not by looking at some unknown people's tragedy, you feel so bad about it. Or you feel very strong sense of commitment for certain cause. There are all extremely emotionally charged; you feel so highly emotionally charged for the sake of certain ideals, yeah.



So, when he brings in this institution here, there is another thing. See, most of the scholars who, including this interactionist, they do not really adequately deal with the question of power. Unlike, say, Marx or Weber or somebody, they do not really look into how the structures of power; how the structures of power makes certain people behave in certain way.

And then, without that larger picture, if you keep on looking into these microsites, then you know, it does not give you the complete picture. The foremost scholar who brought in the micro-sociology and interactions perspective to the fore.

Yeah. That is the underlying or the most important point of description of Mead, the person who laid foundation or the person who significantly contributed for the emergence of a particular school of thought, what we call it as an interactionist school.

I will have, maybe one session about each of these schools in the next class or next week. Symbolic interactionism, functionalism, and conflict theory; a very brief overview so that those who are interested can read up further.

But Mead is credited with the, as a scholar who laid foundation for the emergence of this interactionist perspective, where it is a micro-sociological analysis, it looks at how individuals engage with each other, and how meaning is produced, the kind of a connection between individual psychology, social psychology, behaviorism, and the construction of society.

So with this, we are winding up Mead. And we will meet you in the next class with a couple of more lectures. I think we are in the 11th week now; one more week to go. So, we will have two more classes in this week, and then we are left with one week of class. Thank you.