Mead: *Mind, Self and Society*

Mead seeks to understand how the individual interacts with her environment based upon biological, psychological and sociological factors. He weaves together social psychology with behaviorism, and a little philosophy, in order to come to the understanding that the mind and society are mutually constitutive. We will first discuss Mead’s basic theory, and second, we will debate the various ideas we took away from the work.

First of all, Mead develops the concept of self. The self has an “I” and a “me” component. The “me” contains all the attitudes of others calling for a certain response, while the “I” (the ego), the actual response, allows for novel experience and creativity. The “I” response is unknown by either the responder or others in society until it happens.

The self is made possible through the social process of language – communication through significant symbols. Mead breaks down the development of the self into two phases. First, as children we engage in play, taking on the role of the other and in doing so building up a set of different imagined responses to various other responses. As we grow up we engage in the second phase of development, game. Game is the ability to take on several roles at once, to understand how the roles are logically organized (the rules), and to apply the attitude of the generalized other to different social activities. Only after leaning to engage in game does one understand how to anticipate the response of others to social problems, allowing one to regulate her conduct appropriately. The self
is like the “double” in primitive religions or the soul in Christianity.

After showing that it is the ability of men to take the role of the other as opposed to the insects or the herd Mead asserts that this distinction is the basis for social organization. Taking into account the responses of the other an individual can control his behavior and thus make co-operative activity possible. Such self-control is essentially a social control since it emanates from the individual's community. One learns the organized responses of ones community to social processes through education and forms his "me". Communicating with "me" an individual adapts his behavior that allows integration into one's group.

It is when the “whole community acts toward the individual under certain circumstances in an identical way” that these responses take on an institutional form (167). One can react against the community, but only by “setting a higher sort of community,” as the general voice of the community is the same one of the past and the future, it is organized custom representing “what we call morality” (168). We thought this sounded a lot like Durkheim’s collective consciousness. For both Mead and Durkheim there is strength in the community response, or collective conscious, but it allows room for deviance, as that is how crimes are committed, creative expression occurs, and how the individual and the community are constituted.

Mead accounts for social change through the communication of the "I" and "me" as well. When “I” answers back to “me,” the individual affects her own environment, just as she affects her community and society. He takes a post-Darwinian approach to evolution, arguing that the usual evolutionary account (that humans change in response to their environments) is too passive. It is true that the environment changes us, but we in
turn affect it as well. Some individuals are better at changing their environment than the rest of us (although we all have the potential), and we label them “genius” or “leader.” Social change happens because of such reactions of the individual, the “I” over against the response and attitudes of others, the “me.”

Communication with generalized other is termed by Mead as thinking and is his way of showing that mind and thinking are not there before the society but on the contrary society is necessary in order for thinking to develop. One could not think if there was no "me", which comes from the generalized other and this is social since it is an organized response of the community to social processes. Individual consciousness cannot exist outside of a social group. If one were born on a deserted island and grew up in isolation, she would not have a mind, and thus no self (as “the essence of the self …is cognitive” (173)). This is because mind, that distinctly human mental ability, is a social phenomenon. The mind, and in turn the self, requires a reflective process: “It is the social process of influencing others in a social act and then taking the attitude of the others aroused by the stimulus, and then reacting in turn to this response, which constitutes a self” (171). It is only when one is an object to oneself that self-consciousness is determined.

Persons can communicate only through universal symbols, which are basically shared meanings. "The significant symbol is nothing but the part of the act which serves as a gesture to call out the response of the other, in the experience of the form that makes the gesture" (p 268). Language is a system of symbols and is a prerequisite for effective communication and mental development.

Mead tries to provide a basis for a universal society, a world society and he even
refers to the League of Nations as the international body of his time that was supposedly marking this new era. This would require one of the highest degrees of universality since symbols that are to be comprehended should be shared by the all of the world communities, by the whole humanity. In religion and economic exchange Mead sees two such universal fields that allow for communication among all the people in the world. When addressing economic exchange, he said, “One cannot complete the process of bringing goods into a market except by developing means of communication. The language in which that is expressed is money. The economic process goes right on tending to bring people closer together by setting up more and more techniques and the language mechanism necessary to do these procedures” (302). In reference to religion, he continued on page 302, “The same is true…from the point of universal religions.”

On the other hand, Mead recognized that the language and communication does not always ensue in a smooth process. At times there are limits to integration on both the personal and community levels that gave rise to conflicts. When there are inhibitions to the identification of one person with another, communication is eroded or dissolved and antagonisms ensue. At the personal level, this may be due to jealousy, in the economic market place because of competition and on the larger community stage between larger organized groups because of hostilities.

Harmony in communities could be realized if the personality is reflected in the community. The social and the particular could simultaneously exist as Mead did not perceive any disjunction in this process. He believed that the individual personality is emboldened and can be fully expressed when it is reflected in the community but still allowed to cherish that which makes it particular to the ‘I.’ To him the ideal process to
effect this occurrence is the democratic form of government.

The question was raised in our group about the socialization of the individual to bring about the community that shares its consciousness with the person and how does this occur? Mead showed that these characteristics -- consciousness and socialization -- occurred over the lifetime of the individual with the assistance of biology. The individual is born into a family, which entails sexual reproduction and social interaction. There is a reciprocal relationship between social interaction in the family and the development of the brain, specifically the cortex, because intelligence and social interaction are advanced by the interaction of the two through the expansion of language and shared experiences. The biological and social development of the individual ensures the development of the ‘I.’ The familial structure is replicated in the community and governmental dynamic (particularly the democratic form of government) and allows the growth of the ‘me’ as well as the ‘I.’

One of the big things we take away from Mead is his concept that “[o]ur symbols are all universal” (146). This raised questions for us, as there is not a universal language or a universal value system. But Mead, we decided, asks us to stretch our minds. Symbols for him are not what we assume them to mean. For Mead it is more complex; a symbol is the stimulus whose response is given in advance. The meaning of a response becomes a symbol with another meaning. “The meaning itself has become a stimulus to another response” (181). It is the shared structure of the self that is universal and generalized, that structure being one derived from the “conversation of significant gestures,” not subjective experience or meaning.

Another point of interest is in Mead’s idea that since the self results from social
processes, then the unity and structure of the complete self reflects a complete social process. Things like personality dissociation would then seem to reflect discord and mayhem in the social process as a whole. After all, the unity of the social group parallels the unity of the individual self (144). This sounds to us a bit like Durkheim’s anomic; social discord result in psychological disturbance of the individual.

Lastly, Mead’s title says he is going to discuss mind, self and society from the standpoint of a social behaviorist. We come away with the idea that human development starts in its most basic, primitive form at birth, then as the individual grows, she becomes more civilized, first acquiring mind, then self, and finally possessing the ability to be an efficient member of a coordinated, cooperative society. This evolutionary view of her individual development parallels the evolutionary view of humankind from primitive child to civilized adult. In the post-Darwinian era of his writing, Mead makes a good case that humans and their social environments are mutually dependent, and that behavior of the individual is embedded in an ever-evolving relationship with her environment.