**SOC 3120: Social Psychology**

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**Lecture 6: Basic Concepts of Symbolic Interactionism II:**

**Self, Roles and the Definitions of Situations**

Today we will conclude our discussion of the basic concepts underlying symbolic interactionism (S.I.) by examining the following key concepts:

1. Self

2. Roles and Definitions of Situations

**1. Self:**

As suggested last class, the human capacity to exert control over our conduct - to coordinate our behavior with others, create complex social acts and objects - is linked to our possession of self. S.I. uses this term both in relation to (1) the self as a social object; and (2) the self as a process through which that object is created.

**(i) Self as Object:**

The essence of the S.I. concept of self is that humans can be objects to themselves. Each of us can be an object in our own experience - something we can name, imagine, visualize, talk about, and act toward. One can like or dislike oneself, feel pride and shame at real or imagined activity, and generally act toward oneself within the same range of motives and emotions that shape one’s actions toward others.

How is this possible? The answer lies in the special nature of the symbolically organized act. Immediate response to situations is inhibited until an act can be constructed to “fit” the situation (e.g. in the “wink” example last class the young prof. Didn’t act until he could decide what to do, after considering several alternatives). Such inhibition of responses evolved in social situations, since our ancestors had to consider the possible alternative results of their acts in group situations and environmental situations to function effectively (e.g. hunting).

But how could individuals anticipate their own acts? Individual organisms generally see the world as outside themselves, something they react to. But this does not set an impossible requirement, since the symbolic designation of others and self provides a means for seeing one’s own acts in relation to one’s fellows. Members of a species that can name objects can name one another, use their own names, designate themselves as objects, and thereby alter their relationship to the social world.

However this first came about, the person who first used the group’s name for him/herself managed to internalize their whole social group. By naming self as well as others, this individual could internally represent not only others but also his/her own responses and their responses in turn. Without a symbol for self, s/he can represent others and their acts; with a symbol, a name, the individual can represent self as implicated in their acts, and thus imagine an depict the activities of the group as a whole.

This process of naming others and ourselves injects the social process within the individual’s mind. As people participate in group life, each can represent the activities of all within their own minds and act according to how they think the others will act. This not only enables consideration of various scenarios, one also interacts with oneself as a result (a social object designated with a name).

The evolutionary significance of naming the self was in enabling more precise and flexible coordination of group activities. By taking self into account as a factor, the individual is better able to control his/her own acts and anticipate the outcomes of alternative ones - thereby increasing the competitive advantage of the group.

However self-designation and interaction arose, we see these processes in our everyday lives (e.g. talking to oneself, thinking, etc.). If we view thought as an internalized conversation, we see that this is not possible unless individuals can treat themselves as social objects with whom they can converse. In short, the “mind” or “consciousness” is really the incorporation of the social process within the organism. Mind exists because people are able to act toward themselves, and is simply a form of behavior like any other - for it is inherently a social behavior that depends on human symbolic capacity.

When people mind themselves, they constitute the self as an object. Each time we imagine ourselves doing something, we are acting towards ourselves as objects. Even though it may be transformed, modified or revised as I interact with different people in different situations, my self is always an object that figures in my conduct.

It is important to recognize that the self as object does not simply refer to the body. It also includes many intangible attributes and characteristics (e.g. roles, character traits, emotional types). The self includes whatever kinds of objects actions indicate them to be, not simply the material body. The self is not a structure in the mind, but an intangible object we create and recreate as we act toward it.

**(ii) Self as Process:**

The processes in which the self is objectified are rooted in Mead’s distinction between the “I” and the “Me.” These are two phases of the process whereby the self-created and recreated. “I” designates the subject phase of the process where people respond as acting subjects to objects or others in their situations. “Me” labels the object phase of the process where people imagine themselves as objects in their situation.

We can better understand what this means by incorporating these terms into the framework of the act. As we recall, an act begins when a person’s adjustment to a situation is disturbed, releasing an initial impulsive tendency to respond somehow to the new stimuli (e.g. the phone rings and interrupts our watching TV). In this scenario, the “I” represents this immediate, spontaneous and impulsive aspect. This initial aspect involves an acting subject who is *becoming* aware of the environment and its objects toward which action must be directed. Action is always initially unorganized in this way, for the person cannot designate an object and begin an act toward it until s/he has become aware of this initial, impulsive response to the stimulus.

The person’s awareness of his or her own initial response signals the beginning of the “Me” phase of the self. Here, for example, we see an initial impulse to act (as in a child about to protest punishment) being checked by an imagination of the other’s response (her mother likely punishing her further), and a decision to act (keeping quiet to avoid further difficulty). Here we see the emergence of the “Me,” or the influence of imagined attitudes of others in the social process. By imagining the attitudes of others towards our own impulsive/prospective behaviors, we take ourselves into account as social objects and formulate our best response to the situation. In taking the view of her mother, the child becomes a “Me.”

According to Mead, both the “I” and the “Me” continually alternate in ongoing conduct. At one moment the individual responds as an “I” to the particular situation and the objects it contains; in the next that response becomes part of the past and incorporated into the “Me” as an object of reflection. Then the person responds as an “I” to this image of the self - and these states of consciousness continue to alternate as conduct continues. This constant alternation of “I” and “Me” is the way in which humans achieve control over their conduct. While the “I” as impulse is not under the person’s control - since we do not really know what we are going to do until we begin to act, and many social and physiological factors affect our selective response to stimuli - as the person begins to respond his or her conduct usually be brought under control (e.g. one cannot really begin to control one’s temper until one has started to lose it). As such, we can think of the alternations between the “I” and the “Me” as successive approximations to an act desired by the individual and the others present.

This process of self-formation is also at work in the internal conversation that takes place when we are caught between what we want to do and what others want us to do (e.g. to date or not to date someone we’re attracted to when others strongly disapprove). This is the essence of the self as process. There is an impulse to act, imagined responses to such an act, imagined alternative actions, and some eventual resolution of the inner dialogue into some overt course of action. Sometimes this takes the form of an actual internal conversation, sometimes a series of fleeting images, sensations and emotions that might be associated with various possibilities. The “Me” is constituted by emotional as well as cognitive processes.

Successive “Me’s” enable an individual to gain a measure of control over conduct because they enable the person to imagine the alternate perspective/responses of another and direct the act in response to those imagined outcomes. On the one hand this may be taken to show how the person responds and conforms to social expectations. Yet, on the other, this process may be very useful for individuals capable of novelty and creativity in the manipulation of sheer self-interest. There is tension as well as cooperation between the “I” and the “Me.”

That this is so is evidenced, first, in the somewhat imperfect capacity of the person to inhibit their initial, impulsive response to a situation (e.g. not letting feelings of anger result in violence). While not always possible (as some people become overwhelmed by powerful impulses and lose their temper), in many cases people are able to check their impulsive behavior before it gets out of hand and causes them further grief. Moreover, people make mistakes in their efforts to control their acts - such as by misperceiving the situation, the expectations of others and of society at large. Since each “Me” is the result of an effort to imagine how we appear from the perspective of others, we can be wrong about this. Finally, we can make misperceptions in our physical estimations, miss cues, etc. All of these things could inhibit the formation of the appropriate “Me.”

Finally, the capacity to control conduct confers an ability to choose an act that is not socially expected and approved. Because people can inhibit their responses, form images of themselves, and then choose to act, they can act in self-interested ways and choose alternative, even socially disapproved behaviors.

**(2) Roles and Definitions of Situations:**

So far, our discussion has not fully fleshed out how it is possible for acts to be socially coordinated. Yet, since social coordination rests on the capacity of self-control and our ability to become objects to ourselves, we can begin our examination of social coordination by looking more closely at self-objectification. It has already been suggested that the person, by having a name for self and others, can “get outside” the self and include it in calculations about the group and its activities. Yet this is too vague. How does one acquire such a vantage point? Essentially, this rests on the capacity to imagine some other perspective other than our own with which to view ourselves in the situation at hand. We can grasp the situation at hand by temporarily adopting the perspectives of others.

How do we do this? Part of the answer is that we have often had similar experiences in the past with the same people, and have learned how they respond to particular actions and strategies. Yet, when we are not dealing with people we already know well, or those whom we know in new situations, we need a more general explanation. In such cases, people are more or less successfully able to anticipate one another’s actions for two main reasons:

(i) We know the situation of which we are a part, what is expected and forbidden, typical and atypical, what others are doing, and what we are doing with them because we have a *definition of the situation;*

(ii) We know who the others are, what is happening, and who is making it happen because of the *roles* contained in the situation: we know which role is ours and which are those of others.

**(i) Situations:**

Conduct doesn’t occur in a vacuum, but in specific, concrete and usually well-known situations that present us with a familiar configuration of acts and objects. This is usually known as the *definition of the situation:* an overall grasp of the nature of a particular setting, the activities taking place, the objects to be sought, and the others present. More formally, this is an organization of perception in which people assemble objects, meanings and others and act toward them in a coherent, organized way.

People act on the basis of their definitions of situations. When familiar, they organize their conduct/expectations of others in relation to its definition (e.g. what goes on in a classroom; interactions with salespeople, etc.). When the situation is unfamiliar or there is no existing definition, people must focus on establishing a definition (e.g. maybe this explains “rubbernecking” when passing a group of people standing around stopped cars by the highway: deciding whether to stop/help or not).

The concept of the definition of the situation stresses that acts do not occur in an abstract, rootless or mechanical way, but are always situated. Our acts, and the expectations and interpretations underlying them, are rooted in our cognition of the situations we inhabit. Gestures such as waves, for example, have different connotations depending on who is waving, how, and where. People know that they can tell dirty jokes or engage in intimate personal conversations in some settings and social circles, but that these behaviors would offend people in others. We know the kinds of activities and relationships that are typical at parties, at work, with family, etc., and are thus able to make more or less correct interpretations of others’ acts and to construct acts that they will find acceptable.

The definition of the situation not only allows us to anticipate or understand the actions of others, it provides an important tool in our capacity to view ourselves. Given a definition, we can see ourselves as part of it. We know what is going on, who is making it happen, who others are, who we are and what we are supposed to be doing. The “Me” that arises in guiding our behavior is situated in this specific situation. When we see ourselves in these situations, we are basically using the definition of the situation as a framework through which to view ourselves. It is like a map, an abstract representation of the world used to locate our position in it.

Situations contain a great many elements, and their definitions convey much knowledge about them and ourselves. Most important is what is conveyed about the roles the situation contains. These help us to grasp how the situation is socially organized, define who is responsible for doing what, and tell us who can and cannot do certain things (e.g. rank in the army). We approach each situation with a sense of how it will be organized, and this is expressed in terms of *roles*. This concept provides a second key link between the perspective and behaviors of individuals and the social situations in which they find themselves.

**(ii) Role:**

Role is a common concept in social science, but its use by other sociologists differs from how S.I. uses it. In conventional usage, it is defined as a cluster of duties, rights and obligations associated with a particular social position. The emphasis is on the reciprocal normative requirements of complementary roles (e.g. husband-wife; teacher-student). This conventional usage sees the normative requirements of roles as providing guidance to individuals as they engage in conduct. People know what to do because the role provides them with a script to play - and to live up to.

S.I. considers this conventional sociological usage of role a very misleading portrayal of the way people actually form their conduct, and of the term itself. This is because, first, it exaggerates the importance efforts to conform to norms, and our attention to obligations or rights. Instead, our attention is ordinarily focused on objects and to our individual and collective efforts to reach them. We only explicitly focus on norms in uncertain or challenging situations, and this may be as often after the fact as before. Finally, this normative approach to role is unrealistic because even the simplest roles humans enact are difficult to describe or summarize with any given list of rights, duties and responsibilities.

The S.I. approach to role hence doesn’t emphasize positions to which a fixed list of duties is attached. Instead, interactionists emphasize three related ideas stressing human pragmatic and creative capacities instead of tendencies to adhere to rigid schedules of conduct.

First, S.I. emphasizes that participants in any given social situation have a sense of its structure: when the situation is defined they can cognitively structure the situation in terms of roles (e.g. salesclerk and customer).

Secondly, individuals configure the situation not in terms of a list of duties, but rather an organized set of ideas or principles that they employ in order to know how to behave. This implies a general, fluid sense of possible patterns of interaction (e.g. the catcher in baseball knows the role structure of the game, but also of his or her position in that structure and its implications for what s/he will be expected to do, and the locations and operating principles of others).

Third, a role may be seen as a resource that participants employ in order to carry on their activities. People *use* roles, and their knowledge of others’ roles, in order to achieve their individual and joint goals (e.g. strategy in team sports). People use situations in order to bring roles to life, but roles, in this fashion, are also the property of those who use them (e.g. sports stars are said to embody the role as “legendary” defensemen, etc.).

We may sum up the S.I. conception of role by suggesting that a role may be defined as a perspective from which conduct is constructed. It isn’t a concrete list of behavior, but an abstract perspective from which the individual participates in a social situation and contributes to its social acts and objects. The individual thus uses roles as perspectives from which to view his/her own behavior and imagine/anticipate that of others.

This approach to role recognizes that roles constrain conduct but also enable us to actively cognitively structure situations. Our attitude toward social situations helps us organize or structure them in our minds: in looking for meaning and order we act to create it. If a situation is unclear, we turn our attention to figuring out who occupies what position and enacts which role (e.g. authority: who’s in charge). Newly formed groups don’t fail to have a structure for long.

For S.I., the fact that our knowledge of roles provides us with a grasp of structure and organization is most significant, not the specific structures themselves. People will see and act within their roles, but may improvise or ad lib more than actors simply playing out a fixed script.

Thus, while roles provide a sense of structure, people are capable of altering it when necessary or desirable.

Both definitions of situations and their associated role structures provide humans with two important capacities:

1. The capacity to anticipate or predict the actions of others with whom we interact (e.g. in a doctor’s office);

2. The capacity to make sense of the actions of others, even when we don’t anticipate them (e.g. an unexpected physical examination by the doctor being retrospectively defined as related to his/her role - and having to get quite far “out of bounds” before we’d define it as otherwise).

These predictive and sense-making capacities roles give us are crucially important when it comes to our grasp of our own behavior in the situation. The same sense of organization and structure that enables us to predict and make sense of what others do also enables us to do the same with regard to our own behavior. We can put ourselves imaginatively in the shoes of others and interpret our own behavior in light of the definition of the situation and its roles (e.g. will my fear of needles be defined as silly? Will I embarrass myself? How can I avoid the doctor’s disapproval?) Such an organization of the situation into roles leads to a person’s imagined view of events and an imagined response to them. This enables the patient to get control of his/her own conduct by imagining standing in the role of the doctor and viewing his/her own conduct from that vantage point. Only then can an appropriate (and face saving) response be formulated.

Moreover, people sometimes act within or in relation to more than one role per situation (e.g. gender roles could come in if a male patient thought showing fear of needles to a female doctor was “unmanly”). Potential problems may come up, for example, when a role is enacted that is not typical (or traditional) to the person’s gender (e.g. female doctors still face problems in this regard, often being mistaken by patients as nurses; female corporate executives in our patriarchal society have to deal with the “glass ceiling”).

**(iii) Role Making and Role Taking:**

Two important concepts capture the essence of social interaction and conduct formation as shaped by social roles:

1. *Role making*: the process wherein the individual constructs activity in situations to fit the definition of the situation, their role, and meshes with the activity of others;

2. *Role taking*: the process wherein the person imaginatively occupies the role of another, looks at self and situation from that vantage point in order to engage in role making.

Clearly, these processes are linked. There can be no role making without at some point occupying the perspective of the other and viewing self and situation from that vantage point. Conversely, one cannot take a role without continually documenting the various roles that are being made as an interaction proceeds.

S.I. thus speaks of role making rather than role playing or enactment in order to stress two important aspects of the process: First, behavior in role is not just like enacting a predetermined script where each situation is known in advance and we have little latitude. Instead, roles are perspectives or organizing frameworks from which people actively construct lines of action that fit the situation and others’ lines of conduct. They are made up or tailored to meet particular conditions (e.g. doctor-patient roles may suddenly arise outside the office, such as when someone is choking on an airplane). No single script provides all the required directions for action, so role-making must become a creative, self-conscious activity that helps jointly construct an appropriate role performance.

Second, role making is self-conscious activity. In order to make an adequate role performance - one interpreted as acceptable to others and the actor - there must be consciousness of self. The actor must be aware of his/her role performance so that it can be adjusted to meet personal, situational and social goals. This is where role-taking enters. To be conscious of one’s own performance, one must have a way of conceiving it. This is attained by imagining the perspective of others in the situation (e.g. in baseball, for the catcher to know where the second baseman expects the ball to be thrown to prevent a run). Role taking always involves cognitively grasping, even identifying with the perspective of the other whose role is taken (e.g. misbehaving children realizing parents will be pleased with an apology, and acting in an effort to rebuild and maintain a favorable conception of themselves as someone the parent will like). Identification and affect are added to simply making factual predictions here. This constitutes role taking just as much as the more neutral, factual conduct of the catcher in relation to the second baseman.

**(iv) Role Taking as a Generalized Skill:**

The central idea of role taking lies in the ability of the person to imagine a situation from another position than that of his/her own role in the situation. However, beyond specific situations, such an ability is a generalized skill: human beings not only see things from the vantage points of others’ roles, but also from perspectives provided by the situation itself, by specific acts in the situation, and by what Mead called the *generalized other*.

The definition of the situation itself offers us a framework from which to view the situation as a whole, a sense of how roles structure its activities. If we encounter an unfamiliar situation, and then assign a label to it, we then bring in a role structure to guide our behavior (e.g. coming upon a car accident, thinking of injured people, and helping).

Moreover, specific social acts or sequences thereof also provide us with a platform from which to view and assess what is taking place (e.g. two kids planning how to act to prevent their mother from giving away a destructive kitten: tearfulness and building a scratching post). Here, there is taking the role of the mother, a listing of various acts, and who does what, in order for the sequence and ultimate goal to be carried out successfully.

Finally, we are afforded a place to stand and a perspective on our own and others’ conduct by the generalized perspectives of the groups to which we belong (or aspire to). Situations and roles are anchored in a larger context of organized group life (e.g. baseball games are fleeting examples of larger structures, such as leagues; family dinners are eaten in a more enduring social context known as the family, etc.) Indeed, examples such as these exist within the still larger context of communities and societies. Given this, we have to be aware that it is not only situations, roles and social acts that provide us with perspectives, but larger entities such as groups, organizations, communities and societies (e.g. how will my work be accepted not only by my colleagues, but by the larger academic community?) Moreover, sometimes we adjust our behavior in order to meet specific others’ expectations; in others we apply broader community or societal expectations and values (e.g. telling the truth).This is termed by Mead taking the role of the *generalized other*.

The generalized other is, like a role, a perspective that the person must imaginatively adopt in order to take it into account in forming his/her conduct. It is made up of standards, expectations, principles, norms and ideas that are held in common by the members of a particular social group. In a complex, multicultural society, of course, there are likely several generalized others at work (e.g. among different religions, ethnic groups, social classes and regions) - although there may be some very general ideas about conduct held in common by most everybody.

The generalized other whose perspective the individual assumes need not be confined to groups of which one is a member. *Reference groups,* those social groups that provide generalized others to whom people refer their conduct and against whose standards that conduct is evaluated, may include groups of which one is not an actual member as well as those to whom one belongs (e.g. higher status groups, classes, etc.).

**(v) The Place of Emotions:**

Up to this point, I’ve emphasized the cognitive aspects of the self, defining the situation, role-making and role-taking. But people also calculate and coordinate their conduct by considering their emotions. Social life creates feelings of many kinds and these play a significant part in shaping self and conduct.

What is an emotion? People in everyday life use the term to refer to a number of feelings that they think of as being naturally or spontaneously aroused under particular conditions (e.g. loving, hating, or fearing certain people or situations). This common sense view often assumes that emotions are irrational, lead us astray, and need to be brought under control (e.g. “conquer your fear”; “get over your grief”). There are other times when it may be seen as appropriate and natural to give vent to one’s feelings.

The sociological view of emotions differs from these common sense viewpoints. Emotions do not simply stand in opposition to more “rational” conduct, they typically accompany and support cognition. People do not simply make roles or define situations, they do so with accompanying feelings, such as passion or dedication, that may well enhance the effectiveness of their actions. Similarly, when people engage in role taking and thus form attitudes towards themselves, their attitudes carry an emotional component. The self is as much an experience of feelings aroused by this object as it is a mere image of the object (e.g. people love or hate themselves). Indeed, emotions are not mere individual responses to particular situations or individuals, but embedded in the fabric of social life. They are meaningful experiences as much as any other form of behavior, and their origins and effects are likewise social and not merely individual.

In the sociological view, emotions have two major components:

1. Physical sensations (e.g. fear is accompanied by increased respiration and pulse);

2. Names or labels (shaping or determining them).

One may have the physical sensation associated with a particular emotion without naming it, but in so doing one experiences only a fragment of the emotion. Emotional experience requires self-objectification as much as any other form of human experience (e.g. we need to call fear “fear” in a self-conscious way to see oneself as afraid. We must imaginatively take the role of, say, a person following one - and of the generalized other in order to recognize fear as an appropriate response/label for what one feels).

The fact that emotions are both physiological and meaningful responses to situations has led to some controversy about the relative importance of each component. Some argue that there is an identifiable physiological state that corresponds to each named emotion; others argue that the same physiological states underlie all emotions and that the label/implied expectations for behavior are the distinguishing elements. The former ignores similarities in physical sensations between differing emotions and cultures; the latter tends to ignore differences in sensations between emotions.

Theodore Kemper has advocated a compromise position. He identifies four primary emotions with (i) evolutionary significance; each of which are (ii) grounded in different and identifiable physiological states; (iii) appear relatively early in the development of the individual; and (iv) appear in every culture. These include fear, anger, depression and satisfaction. In contrast, Kemper says there are numerous and varied secondary emotions that are grounded in the former, but depend on a variable set of shared social expectations rooted in specific cultures.

Whatever the value of this scheme - or the actual number of primary emotions - we are seen as experiencing emotion because of our participation in social interaction. The physiological states associated with various emotions can be induced by chemical means, but they are also and more significantly induced by our involvement in social situations. And just as emotions originate in social interaction, they are regulated as people interact, and by the same general processes that regulate our conduct in general. Three facts are important here:

First, emotions naturally arise in our efforts to complete individual and social acts. Successful acts tend to engender satisfaction (e.g. getting an A). When individual and social acts are blocked by obstacles, people are frustrated, angry or sad.

Secondly, our experience of emotions are simultaneously experiences of self. While bodily sensations are important, it is our attribution of meaning to them that permits emotional experience. In doing so, we must objectify self through role taking and thus see ourselves as happy, sad, afraid or angry, for example. We have to imagine how others see us in the social situation (e.g. that getting an A merits feelings of elation).

Finally, emotions are a regular part of the role making process. When people construct performances that they think will make sense to others, mesh with the others’ roles and meet the requirements of the situation, they clearly take emotional expectations into account (e.g. realizing they should be happy at weddings and somber at funerals).