**SOC 3120: Social Psychology**

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**Lecture 8: Self and Its Social Setting II: The Nature of the Person, Identity & Self-Esteem:**

Symbolic interactionists see the self as a primarily social experience. Today we will begin by exploring the self as a social object, issues of identity and self-esteem to extend Mead’s analysis of the self to illustrate the complex relationship between the person and the social world:

In looking at these matters, it is always important to keep in mind the following two matters:

1. *The self is a social object:* The self is not simply an object created in the mind of the individual person, but also a social object created in the eyes of others. Since it is created by role taking, it is not something created solely by the individual, but a joint creation. The locus of the self is therefore not merely in the person, but in the social space s/he occupies with others.

2. *The self is both a situated object and a biographical object:* As people engage in role taking and role making, they become objects to themselves and others in particular, immediate situations that enable them to know what is going on and what to do (e.g. as a child/teacher, doctor/patient, father/kids, friend/friend, etc.) Yet, beyond such situated identities in particular situations where one establishes and maintains a situational relation between self, roles, and location (e.g. the “patient” self in a doctor’s office), the self is also a biographical social object spanning many situations and encounters during life, and, as such, is an object shaped by one’s experiences as a whole with a variety of other people.

**Identity:**

We begin by focusing on how people locate themselves in social life. Humans are role-taking and role-making creatures who typically see themselves as members of one or another social group - deriving a sense of what they should do and the energy for doing it from either their sense of likeness and participation, or from their perceived differences from others. The concept of identity is at play in either dynamic.

When people come together to interact in a situation, they generally establish situated identities without much difficulty. In fact, they usually don’t think too much about it. In social interaction, people take the roles of others towards themselves, and, as such, become objects to themselves and others. In teaching this class I take the role of you students as I prepare the class, consider what to say, respond to possible questions, anticipate concerns, etc. As such, I become an object in my own eyes by adopting the imagined viewpoints of others. But you are also acting toward me, constituting me as an object either by listening intently and writing notes, shaking your heads in agreement or disagreement, or wishing you were able to go home early and didn’t have to listen to me lecture this afternoon. In fact, in this respect, I’m in some ways multiple objects - one for each of you that’s present here. In each of your eyes, I’m a different object to be taken into account (you’ll be doing much more of this when preparing papers, asking for extensions, etc).

Indeed, as Greg Stone notes, people regularly make announcements of their own situated identities and the placement of others therein to simplify this process for each other (e.g. walking into a showroom announces one’s role as a customer, wearing a gold ring on your third finger announces you are married, etc.) Generally there is a correspondence of such announcements and placements that smooth and simplify interaction. Of course, when these do not line up (e.g. when someone comes on to you despite wearing a wedding ring), the interactions can rather quickly become problematic. But, in most instances, there is a joint focus on congruent announcements and placements, mutually acknowledgment of presence, and mutual acceptance of each other’s right to be in the situation and make certain requests. If one is ignored, say, by a store clerk having a phone conversation, however, one violates the principle of mutual recognition and makes it impossible to establish the expected situated identity - hence irritation on the customer’s part.

Situated Identity can be defined as “a coincidence of placements and announcements.” When a person has a situated identity, s/he is cast in the shape of a social object by the acknowledgment of his or her membership in social relations. This can be voluntary, as in the examples above, or unwitting (e.g. approaching a police officer to report a personal assault is an obvious announcement of the crime victim role; skin color, in contrast, announces a racial identity whether or not the person wants to).

**The Experience of Situated Identity**

The experience of situated identity is paradoxical. Most participants in social situations generally coordinate their conduct well enough that more or less stable situated selves develop. When announcements and placements coincide, a situated identity is like clothing that warms and protects one even though one is scarcely aware of wearing it. Once situated identities are established, they provide the taken for granted context within which people act. Indeed, when things are “clicking” (as in a successful sports team) they organize, even energize conduct over time. This is because the definition of the situation establishes a shared framework of roles for constructing one’s conduct and interpreting that of others. Even in more difficult situations this can work (e.g. even if either or both are feeling “off” that day, it is still possible to cooperatively interpret each other’s behavior as that of students and professors).

Yet there are also situations that make situated identities more problematic. To “have” a situated identity requires that others certify our announcements of that identity by “placing” us in terms of it (e.g. the bureaucrat who ignores the new client’s presence at the wicket and keeps talking on the phone about his golf game). In such a case, where there is no mutually acknowledged attention, there is no coincidence of placements and announcements to ratify the client identity. There is such no *integration* of elements here enabling the parties to concentrate the mind, keep distractions at bay, and fully engage with the matter at hand. Indeed, all kinds of things can keep us from concentrating on our situated identities (e.g. interruptions, distractions, stresses, things we forget). The fact is, people make mistakes, misjudge responses, or sometimes are unable to respond as expected.

Similarly, others may act towards us on the basis of placements we don’t immediately recognize, and the full impact of the identity doesn’t occur until we recognize, and either certify or reject their placements. For example, people may be insulted or patronized by others and not immediately realize it. Individuals may be treated as ostensible equals in an interaction (e.g. the “nouveau riche”), provided with many back-handed compliments and referred to with double-entendres, and only later realize that others were making fun of them. When that realization occurs, the person either finds some alternative way of announcing their desired identity (e.g. as cultured, important, etc.), or express disgust with the others and go elsewhere.

Announcements and placements thus do not always coincide, and when they do not, the potential for disrupted or paralyzed social interaction is considerable. Often in such situations people comment in such a way that they name the situated identity they seek to recover (e.g. “I’ve got to get this done”), reaffirming attachment to and embracement of the role. Indeed, somewhat paradoxically, they remind one that at other times and places one if firmly attached to other situated identities. As such, situated identities create a feeling of continuity. Unifying the person’s thoughts, feelings, and actions for a limited period of time enables a sense of events and actions to flow logically and meaningfully from one point to another.

Yet, by and large, in everyday life enough of a match occurs between the person’s claiming an identity and others granting it that social interaction can proceed. Each person can be a social object to self and others and coordinate social interaction. Identities are important because they organize and energize conduct in the situation. A role in itself is a lifeless, unplayed part: the individual is the one who claims it for his own and breathes life into it through identification. To identify with a role is not only to see oneself in that role, but also, for the duration of the relevant situation, to appropriate that role as one’s property and virtually to equate it with oneself. In a sense, to make a particular role is to be that role for a period of time and to exclude from one’s sense of self all those other roles that one claims at other times. To have an identity, then, is to have a sense of how one is located relative to others in a situation, as well as to gain energy and direction in one’s conduct by adopting the perspective and purposes of the situation and of one’s role in it as one’s own.

**Social and Personal Identity**

Identity isn’t just a simple product of situated roles in immediate situations. Our sense of social location is anchored in a variety of situations and roles that links us to (and differentiates us from) various wider groups and collectivities. Thus, in addition to our *situated identity*, we must introduce two additional concepts that can expand our understanding of other, more enduring forms of identity.

The first of these, *identification*, refers not to the immediate situation and its role, but rather a community, the set of real or imaginary others with whom the person feels a sense of similarity, identification, attachment, and common purpose. These include people for whom one feels an affinity, in whose company one feels comfortable, and whose ideas and beliefs are similar to one’s own (e.g. one’s neighborhood, religious or ethnic group). Of course, in contemporary society a great many groups may have the same function of providing feelings of similarity and common purpose on which feelings of social identity rest. Whatever the basis for identification, however, the real or imaginary community locates the purpose in society. One has location within the larger society because of one’s membership in that community - and also has a place within the community itself.

This identification is best seen as a by-product of social interaction, of shared definitions of the situation, of similarity and common purpose. It is both an emotional and a cognitive experience. The presence or even the thought of the object (community) in question creates a positive feeling (e.g. a conversation or just the thought of a dear friend).

In addition, there is also the process of *differentiation*. This entails an individual perspective, a feeling that the person has a particular part to play in interaction with others, that s/he is in some ways distinctive, and that there are individual goals worth pursuing. This is also associated with positive feelings.

Both processes are part of a healthy social bond. The former cements people together through their commonality, the latter through their sense of separateness and complementarity. These stand in healthy tension when one can maintain a sense of individuality in relation to the other, enjoying the pleasures of identification without being overwhelmed.

Situated identities feed into all of this (e.g. playing a successful part in a game enables positive identification with the team and one’s specific role within it). Yet one cannot take this too far. Games end and other situations arise requiring new situated identities. Some situations are more suited for identification than differentiation (e.g. falling in love), and vice versa (e.g. buyers and sellers). Ultimately, people develop a sense of themselves as whole beings (integration) acting purposefully and effectively in their social world (continuity) by developing forms of identity that transcend a particular situation. These are termed social and personal identity. People identify with others in immediate and short lived situations and also with others that they interact with over longer periods (e.g. parents, friends and family, co-workers, communities, religions, etc.) All provide for a sense of individual similarity and difference.

This brings us to the first form of conceiving the person beyond the immediate situation: *social identity*. This locates the person in a social space larger and more enduring than any particular situation (e.g. a particular basketball game). To be an athlete or Jewish or a born-again Christian, one must identify with an enduring social category, with others who are seen as like oneself and whose real or imagined presence evokes positive feelings. This presumes that the group shares beliefs, values, and purposes with oneself (e.g. fellow athletes want to excel in their sport; members of religions are expected to agree on basic elements of their faith).

Identification also transmutes social categories into functional (if not necessarily functioning) communities. While not necessarily a group of people living in close proximity to one another over a prolonged period, with similar purposes and ready familiarity with one another (e.g. a small village), there is at least the sense, a feeling that they know each other even if such knowledge of other members is indirect, impersonal, and when those others are “present” only in imagination. While this may not be a functional community in the classic sense, from the individual’s perspective in can function in much the same way, providing a set of beliefs, values, and purposes that the individual can hold to, even if only in the mind.

Social identity also enables the differentiation of self from others, even while identifying with them (e.g. a star athlete may outshine the team; a skilled “expert” or “fixer” can work wonders within a company). Similarly, identification with a given community serves as a means to differentiate oneself from people who are not members (e.g. members of clubs, associations, activist groups, etc.). Today many groups stigmatized in the past have developed strong social identities along with a sense of legitimate and valued difference from others.

Social identity, like situated identity, also relies on the announcement/placement process. It is more than a private, subjective experience, indeed does not exist until others place him/her in it. Other people must take it into account and use it as a basis for acting toward the person. As such, social identity is accomplished when announcements and placements coincide. Individuals may announce, claim, or present themselves in some fashion (e.g. as a singer), but this must be ratified in action. If others respond with praise or agreement with one’s claim, then the social identity is established. If, however, treated with rejection or hostility, the claim to a particular social identity can be undermined.

While announcements typically precede placements, the reverse can also be true (e.g. calls for better behavior on the part of star athletes can confer upon them to be better “role models”).

Finally, there is an important exception to the rule that social identities depend on the coincidence of placements and announcements. Sometimes a particular social identity is intensely desired, but the person knows it cannot be revealed without potentially severe consequences (e.g. LGBTQ individuals in the closet). Today people can access a wide variety of ideas, facts, opinions, and ideologies via the media and internet, can read others’ accounts and narratives, and. As such, social identity can emerge without specific placements and announcements - as society exists in the mind and the imagination, not just in concrete interactions between people face to face. Indeed, increased public acceptance can eventually make that more possible as well.

**Personal Identity**

By stressing the individual’s life story, *personal identity* locates the person in a social space that is larger and more enduring than any particular situation. While the social identity of “professor” entails identification and similarity, the personal identity of a particular faculty member rests on distinctive accomplishments and characteristics. It stresses both uniqueness and difference, the person’s construction and maintenance of an autobiography - a life story that is built, told to (and by) others in various contexts, and from time to time revised to fit changing experiences or preferences.

This personal identity typically has several main themes that give meaning to a person’s actions (e.g. strong work ethic, a religious or philosophical seeker, fame or recognition in one’s field, autonomy, being a rebel, etc). A personal identity is considered more than something the person creates, owns, and is entitled to modify as s/he sees fit (e.g. avoiding change can be seen as a source of pride, stubbornness, or even being a reactionary, depending on the viewer). But generally, personal identity involves a sense of ownership of ‘the self,” a belief that one owns the right to one’s body and mind and should not cede these rights to others.

Yet personal identity also rests at some point on the person’s participation in a cultural world shared with others. A person must have achieved something in interaction with others over a period of time (e.g. professors have a long series of accomplishments they must achieve, and a long list of ongoing administrative assessments over a period of time before they receive tenure and promotion). Various careers are culturally and socially standardized and people can achieve a personal identity by meeting expectations in distinctive ways. Even those seeking as much autonomy as possible must do so against a backdrop of cultural definitions and social arrangements against which they must define themselves. Rebels can only define themselves as such against what they rebel against.

Personal identity thus depends on announcements and placements just like situated and social identity (e.g. teenagers seeking to be more independent testing the boundaries, with parents variously responding).

The 3 forms of identity we have discussed - situated, social, and personal - are not mutually exclusive. Each individual acquires and exercises a variety of situated identities throughout daily life. But they also develop a personal identity and one or more social identities. Sometimes personal identity is strong enough to dominate and diminish one’s social identities. Some rely on few mainstay social identities, others manage more. Some cultures favor strong personal identities, making attachment and commitment to others difficult; others discourage people from developing any personal identities, by always defining the person in relation to others. In all cultures and group settings, however, these 3 forms of identity are an inevitable product of the social organization of personal life.

**Self-Image: Knowing the Self:**

How is identity related to self-knowledge? Well, a situated identity means that the person knows where s/he stands in relation to others (e.g. parent/child). But one or more social identities tell the person where s/he is placed in the social world (e.g. a conservative in a predominantly liberal society). Personal identity provides a basis for knowing oneself as a person with a life story and who has goals or qualities for distinguishing one from others. They use abstract ways of defining people - as introverted/extroverted, assertive or meek, progressive or conservative, etc - that culture provides to characterize them. People use the generalizations they learn or create as a basis for understanding themselves.

Psychologically oriented social psychologists use the concept of self-schema to study self-knowledge - how people know themselves, what they know, and how they use this knowledge. Schema refers to a “cognitive generalization about the self, derived from past experience, that organizes and guides the processing of self-related information contained in the individual’s social experiences.” Individuals who see themselves as possessing a particular trait are said to be “schematic” for that trait (e.g. artistic). Those for whom a particular trait is unimportant are conversely termed nonschematic.

A self-schema contains information about an object (the self), ideas about how the object is put together and functions, and examples of the object (e.g. intelligent, stubborn, unconventional, compassionate, rebellious, etc). The same person can have ideas about how these things do or do not fit together (e.g. “sometimes my stubbornness gets in the way of my compassion”). A self-schema may also contain images of an ideal self, perhaps also images of others whom the person idealizes.

Self-schemas “theorize” the self just as schemas in general theorize the external world. They combine categories, abstract ideas, and propositions about how things relate to one another for practical reasons. Self-schemas reduce the incoming flow of information to manageable dimensions, helping people make sense of themselves so that they can decide how to act. They focus memory on relevant information and help the person process it and shape how they see the others with whom they interact.

In effect, being schematic on a particular trait is like being an expert in a field (e.g. gardeners, doctors, mechanics, and others can quickly zero in on specific matters that others may have difficulty seeing as important to the problem at hand). A schematic individual develops expertise in an area (e.g. a person who sees themselves as impatient and short tempered may recognize the subtle signs of an impending outburst and seek anger management training). S/he may be better placed to recognize this from past experience and relate this to the present. Contextual clues (e.g. tiredness, deadlines) may enable them to get a good picture of the impending episode, then act.

The sociological significance of self-schemata is in how they influence perceptions. Others that share and use an existing set of categories, ideas, and proposition surround people, in all societies, from birth. Today, people also encounter others with whom they do not directly interact, but via multiple media. The possibility of being schematic regarding a trait is now more detailed and nuanced than at any other time in history. Yet the result is the same: people learn what images of self are possible and their schemas reflect what culture makes available.

**Self-Esteem:**

The various forms of identity are rooted in the person’s cognitive and emotional grasp of his/her relationships with others. People’s relationships with others engender feelings towards the self as object as well as toward their situation: love and hate, satisfaction vs. frustration, pride and shame, etc. One is likely to feel proud at a job well done or the praise of others; ashamed when one acts in ways that important others condemn. This affective dimension of self-objectification is known as self-esteem: that class of sentiments whose object is the self. These feelings are aroused in us as we attend to ourselves and see ourselves as we imagine others see us.

While we might feel that self-esteem is primarily a property of the individual, self-esteem is also a complex product of coordinated social activity. It is both a product of the situation and something brought to it. It is not exclusively the property of the person, but exists within a social framework of role making and role taking.

C.H. Cooley used the well-known metaphor of the looking glass to depict the nature and sources of the images of themselves people see reflected in others. He said that the self-idea has 3 principal elements: the imagination of our appearance to another person, the imagination of his judgement of that appearance, and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or shame (an imputed sentiment with reference to the other’s perspective). As people interact, guided by their respective identities, they develop images of one another. If they have a history of interaction, it is likely that they will bring images of one another to the situation. As these images (e.g. of intelligence) are established, people imagine their own appearance to the other in terms of them. Thus, the person forms an image of the other, imagines his or her appearance to the other from that standpoint, and feels good or bad accordingly.

This approach to self-esteem emphasizes the appraisals of others as they are perceived by the individual in the situation. In some cases, of course, people directly tell us their opinions of us, and words of praise or condemnation encourage us to have specific images of ourselves. Most of the time, however, we rely on role-taking. In either situation, the result is an emotional response to ourselves: self-esteem.

There is more to self-esteem, however, than our responses to the appraisals of immediate interactants. Some people may be more important to us, and we thus take their appraisals more seriously than others (e.g. one’s parents, intimate partner, colleagues vs. low-status strangers). The self-sentiments that arise in each situation seem to be filtered through our existing conceptions of self before they add or subtract from our overall self-esteem.

Moreover, we add to or subtract from our overall self-esteem not just by responding to others’ appraisals, but by comparing ourselves to them. Part of the process of self-objectification, especially in our culture, entails comparing our own activities and accomplishments with those of others (e.g. those with more property/ better relationships at our age make us feel worse unless we can explain it; those worse off may make us feel more self-satisfied).

Self-esteem is also influenced by our own appraisals of our performances. William James, for example, said that self-esteem is influenced by the ratio of our successes to our aspirations. One may triumph over an opponent in a contest, but if your goal is to be a world champion and you have defeated a third-rate contender, one’s sense of victory is tempered considerably.

Self-esteem is thus not simply the product of particular situations, but also of a continual process of reflection in which the person decides what standards and what others are significant. At any point in the person’s life s/he has some organized sense of what is important and what is not, of whose appraisals should be taken seriously and whose should be disregarded. Some identities may be more psychologically central than others, and these may change - be upgraded or downgraded with changing circumstances (e.g. some adults may give up on their earlier goals of having the perfect marriage, and emphasize their demonstrated ability to achieve success and recognition in their career instead).

Both identity and self-esteem have important implications for the way in which human conduct is energized and directed. Hence, in the next class, we will turn to the concept of self and motivation.