Social Feedback and Self-Appraisals: Current Status of the Mead-Cooley Hypothesis

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Mead and Cooley propose that feedback from significant others provides the basis for individuals' self-appraisals. I review research regarding (a) associations between others' judgments and individuals' self-appraisals; (b) when others express or withhold feedback; and (c) when individuals accept or reject feedback. Research shows that others' judgments and self-appraisals are moderately associated, though self-ratings correspond more to perceived than to actual views by others and influences are multidirectional. Others' expressions of feedback vary across situations, depending in part on closeness of relationships and the sender's emotions. Peoples' tendencies to accept or reject feedback also vary by closeness, emotional reactions, and feedback valence. I conclude by evaluating the current status of the Mead-Cooley perspective.

Cooley's (1902) and Mead's (1934) hypothesis regarding the social basis of selfhood—the contention that individuals' self-conceptions result from assimilating the judgments of significant others—is commonly treated as a truism in the sociological literature. While research supports basic aspects of Cooley and Mead's arguments, available findings also clearly show that the phenomena in question are much more complex than typical discussions recognize. Conventional treatments overemphasize conformity, presume one-way influence from others to self, and fail to acknowledge the active role of the individual in negotiating a conception of self. My aim in this review is to provide an up-to-date, empirically grounded perspective on the social self, based on Cooley and Mead, yet also incorporating a more sophisticated body of knowledge available from current research literature.

Cooley's (1902) metaphor of the looking-glass self centered on the processes by which experiences of self are formed and changed in social transactions. Just as we see our physical appearance reflected in a mirror, Cooley observed that the reactions of others provide the viewpoint from which we come to define our performances and attributes. Cooley identified three distinguishable components in this

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process: "the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance; and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification" (p. 184).

Whereas Cooley emphasized affect, Mead (1934) analyzed links between symbolic interaction and self-cognition. According to Mead, symbolic communication enables individuals to assess their activity in terms of expectations and anticipated reactions of others. Mead addressed both the content of self-awareness and the reflexive activities through which individuals construct views of self, that is, the self as object and the self as process (Gecas 1982). Mead (1934:141) regarded language as an essential precondition for role-taking: "I know of no other form of behavior than the linguistic in which the individual is an object to himself." Through role-taking, individuals can regulate their own activity in terms of social expectations and consequences.

In Mead's (1934:69) view, individuals define themselves by taking the responses of others into account: "We are . . . continually arousing in ourselves those responses which we call out in other persons, so that we are taking the attitudes of the other persons into our own conduct." In brief, the actor transforms the reactions of others into anticipatory capacities for self-regulation. From an individual standpoint, these processes provide the basis for self-conscious awareness and goal-directed social behavior. From the standpoint of society, individuals' capacities to control their own acts in line with internalized social norms provide the basic mechanism underlying conformity and maintenance of the social order. Thus Mead (1934:255) argued that "behavior controlled by self-criticism is essentially behavior controlled socially." Contemporary theorists often treat this emphasis on the development of self-awareness through communication with significant others under the label "social feedback" (Larson 1984).

Mead identified levels in the role-taking process by distinguishing between play and the game. Using children's play as an example, Mead proposed that the elementary processes of role-taking involve imagining the responses of a concrete other individual to one's own behaviors. The game stage, in contrast, involves a more complex level of social functioning, in that individuals view themselves from the standpoint of an organized and abstract group, adopting the perspective of the generalized other. The associated capacities of the individual to define herself or himself from the perspective of the generalized other provide the basis for the individual's performing roles in complex social systems. A further consequence is that the individual becomes able to assess herself or himself autonomously in terms of abstract social norms and may, in fact, maintain views of self, rooted in normative expectations or prior social relationships, that are contradictory to feedback from particular others in specific social encounters.

A key aspect of the Mead-Cooley argument, then, concerns hypothesized linkages between reactions by others and self-assessments. Terminology in the self-theory literature, even among symbolic interactionists, varies considerably (e.g., self-appraisal, self-awareness, self-concept, self-esteem). Because many of the studies I reviewed examine positive and negative self-judgments on evaluative dimensions, I use the

term *self-appraisal* (rather than self-concept or self-image) to refer to the cognitive and evaluative components of self-reference that are presumed to occur reflexively through a process of role-taking. In my present usage, self-appraisal refers to cognitive and evaluative references regarding an individual's performances, states, or attributes (e.g., Mary is speaking honestly; Mary is an honest person). Individuals may publicly express appraisals to other parties or keep their reactions private. Appraisals by others and by self differ in their source. Appraisals by others refer to assessments of a given individual made publicly or privately by one or more other parties, whereas self-appraisal refers to judgments that the individual makes regarding self. When others overtly convey cognitive and evaluative responses to the individual concerning him or her, the term *feedback* is applicable. Following Mead, Gecas (1982) distinguished between the self as process and the self as object. "Self-concept" refers to the latter, "the totality of an individual's thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object" (Rosenberg 1979:7), whereas "the self as process" refers to the personal and interactional dynamics through which the self-concept is constructed, maintained, and changed. Turner (1976:990) points out the transsituational character of the self-concept: "Self-conception refers to the continuity—however imperfect—of an individual's experience of himself in a variety of situations."

In focusing on feedback and self-appraisal, I address only part of Mead and Cooley's discussions. Mead (1934) distinguished between the individual's assimilating the reactions of specific other persons in contrast to assessing oneself more independently and abstractly in terms of societal norms. In contrast to a concern for more autonomous forms of role-taking, I am concerned here mainly with individuals' reactions to feedback from specific other persons.

Early researchers examined associations between peer appraisals and self-appraisals (Manis 1955) or measured the impact of evaluative feedback on self-ratings (Videbeck 1960). Many researchers have documented that significant others may influence individuals' self-appraisals through conveying feedback, but evidence to date also shows that these processes are complicated and vary depending on many different aspects of the situation (Banaji and Prentice 1994; Shrauger and Schoeneman 1979). Further, socialized individuals clearly play an active role in shaping their own responses to feedback and may maintain substantial independence from the views of others in given contexts (Franks and Gecas 1992).

Because my research has centered on exploring the implications of Mead and Cooley's ideas, I use this body of work to illustrate and organize selected results in the social self area. This investigator-centered approach has the advantage of linking a number of related studies from a single, integrated research program. In doing so, however, I also draw extensively on work from other investigators in an effort to identify a series of empirically based generalizations regarding social feedback and self-appraisals that have resulted from research in the area. I should note that there is an extensive body of qualitative research on narrative bases of the self that is beyond the scope of the present review (see Howard 2000; McAdams, Josselson, and Lieblich 2001; Rosenwald and Ochberg 1992). Here I address only empirical studies

that follow a quantitative, hypothesis-testing tradition, recognizing that these findings reflect a limited class of methodologies that may exclude certain questions and certain kinds of knowledge. Because Cooley and Mead's ideas have had an important impact in both sociological and psychological social psychology, I also attempt to bring together contributions from these two traditions.

Many authors have developed theoretical frameworks drawing on Mead and Cooley's seminal ideas (e.g., Denzin 1972; Johnson 1992; Matsueda 1992; McCall and Simmons 1978; Rosenberg 1979; Stryker 1980). Kinch's (1963) model, for example, hypothesized positive associations between (1) person P's behavior; (2) the actual responses of Os (other persons) to P's behavior; (3) P's perception of those responses by Os; and (4) P's conception of self.

There is considerable evidence that "individuals come to see themselves as they think others see them." Thus the professor or politician whose remarks are met with enthusiastic applause is more likely to be pleased with his or her performance than if the audience responds with catcalls and disdain. However, I should also note at the outset that the links between others' evaluations and self-appraisals are neither simple nor automatic. As Cooley (1902:236) observed, "the self-respecting man ... discriminates and selects, considers all suggestions with a view to his character, and will not submit to influences not in line of his development." I address such complications as I delve more deeply into the empirical literature.

WHAT ARE THE RELATIONS BETWEEN OTHERS' REACTIONS AND SELF-APPRAISAL?

Mead and Cooley suggested that the self is formed and changed through assimilating the reactions of significant others in various contexts. In Mead's (1934:138) words, "the individual experiences himself as such, not directly, but only indirectly, from the particular standpoint of other individual members of the same social group, or from the generalized standpoint of the social group as a whole to which he belongs." Although there have been a number of qualifications, this basic proposition has received substantial support (Banaji and Prentice 1994; Harter 1996). I divide the quantitative research into two categories: correlational studies that examine associations between others' ratings and self-ratings; and experimental studies in which researchers systematically vary evaluative feedback from others and assess consequences for self-evaluation.

Appraisals by Others and by Self Are Positively Correlated

What are the connections between parents' positive or negative attitudes toward their child, the child's perceptions of those attitudes, and the child's views of self? In correlational studies researchers typically gather rating scale judgments regarding how group members evaluate given individuals, how those individuals perceive other members to evaluate them, and how those same individuals rate themselves.

A representative example is a study that I conducted with colleagues Virginia Jergens and Jay Gibson on 165 married couples (Lundgren, Jergens, and Gibson 1980). Using questionnaires mailed to wives and husbands, we gathered data on evaluations of one's spouse (e.g., wife's ratings of husband), perceived evaluations by one's spouse (e.g., husband's estimate of his wife's ratings of him), and self-evaluations (e.g., husband's self-ratings). As predicted, we found significant correlations for both wives and husbands between spouse's actual ratings, one's perceptions of spouse's ratings, and self-ratings. Both spouses, however, tended to see themselves more similarly to perceived than to actual appraisals by partner.

Many correlational studies in a variety of settings (e.g., family, school, work, military) have obtained similar findings (see reviews by Brown 1998; Kaplan 1986; Shrauger and Schoeneman 1979; Wylie 1979). Schoolchildren's self-assessments show similarity to their teachers' evaluations; work employees', to their supervisors'. In addition, researchers have consistently found that individuals maintain conceptions of self that correspond closely to the views they perceive significant others hold of them, but individuals' views of self correspond less closely to others' actual appraisals (Cast, Stets, and Burke 1999; Felson 1993; Ichiyama 1993; O'Connor and Dyce 1993). In line with Cooley's looking-glass self discussion, these findings suggest that perceived appraisals of others (rather than their actual judgments) provide the direct basis for forming or altering self-appraisals. Or, in other words, actual judgments by others only influence us as we perceive and interpret them.

One finding that helps to explain self–other discrepancies is the tendency for people's self-judgments to be more positive than judgments by peers. By and large, we strive to think as positively of self as the circumstances allow. Daniel Miller and I (Lundgren and Miller 1965) found that individuals' ratings of self in training groups (T groups) were most favorable, their estimates of other members' views were somewhat less favorable, and other members' actual views of them were the least favorable of the three sets of ratings. We suggested that members, on average, tended to respond in biased and self-enhancing ways, which resulted in higher self-esteem than public esteem. This pattern has been well documented in the social cognition literature (Suls, Lemos, and Lockett 2002). In addition, I would note that individuals develop global self-evaluations through transactions over time with many different sources, and their seemingly inflated views of self in more public contexts may be due to their holding positive appraisals of self rooted in primary groups. Lundgren and Schwab (1974), for example, found that students perceived more distant peers and authorities as viewing them less favorably than they rated themselves, but, simultaneously, they saw close peers and authorities (e.g., parents) as viewing them more favorably than they saw themselves. Thus self-evaluations fell midway between more favorable perceived appraisals from intimates and less favorable perceived appraisals from impersonal others.

The Mead-Cooley hypothesis suggests that discrepancies between views by self and by significant others are likely to lead to interpersonal conflict. When wife and husband, for example, hold discordant views of self and other, they effectively are

operating in different realities. Thus Mead (1934:306–7) wrote: "But in those social situations in which he cannot, for the time being, integrate his social relations with other individual selves into a common, unitary pattern . . . there ensues . . . an attitude of hostility, of 'latent opposition,' on his part toward the . . . social community of which he is a member." Lundgren (1978) tested the hypothesis that individuals are likely to undergo stress when they confront discrepancies between peer evaluations, their perceptions of peers' responses, and their evaluations of self. I gathered data at several time points in two-week human relations training groups, and group facilitators (trainers) identified participants who were undergoing high stress. Their reactions were compared with members matched for age and sex who were not judged as experiencing high stress. As expected, high stress participants showed significantly greater discrepancies between peer and self-evaluations.

Similarly, Lundgren and Schwab (1977) anticipated that individuals who perceived negative appraisals from others, held negative self-evaluations, had discrepancies in which perceived evaluations by others were more negative than self-evaluations, and had absolute discrepancies between evaluations by others and self-evaluations would experience high anxiety levels. We found that individuals experiencing negative self-evaluations and absolute discrepancies between perceived evaluations by others and self-evaluations displayed higher levels of anxiety than those who did not.

All these findings, of course, result from correlational studies that hinder inferences about the causal direction of these associations. When P excels in her calculus class, she is likely to receive praise from the teacher, win respect from classmates, anticipate positive reactions from others, and view herself more favorably. These various judgments are positively correlated, however, at least in part because they all involve assessment of the same object, P's performance. Further, investigators, using longitudinal data, have demonstrated projection phenomena, that is, that individuals use previously existing conceptions of self in judging how others evaluate them and vice versa (Felson 1993; Ichiyama 1993). To more adequately assess how people respond to feedback in viewing themselves, experimental methods offer a sturdier basis than correlational studies for establishing the directions of influence (Babbie 2001).

Evaluative Social Feedback Affects Self-Evaluations

Another category of studies experimentally manipulates positive and negative feedback and examines resulting changes in self-assessments. Kevin De Laere, Steven Howe, and I (1998) experimentally examined how task performance feedback conveyed through humanlike and machinelike computer language styles affected self-appraisals. Participants received experimentally manipulated positive or negative feedback on a computerized "psychic ability" task, then were asked to rate the computer's assessment of their ability as well as rate themselves. Participants responded clearly to both positive and negative feedback. They became more

favorable in their self-ratings after receiving positive feedback; more negative with negative feedback.

Experimental studies consistently demonstrate that social feedback influences self-appraisals, whether on trivial or on central and well-established aspects of self (Jussim et al. 1992; Wylie 1979). Positive feedback enhances self-appraisals; negative feedback leads to less favorable self-evaluations. Kernis and Johnson (1990) found that such reactions occurred more strongly for current self-appraisals than for typical self-appraisals, though both types of ratings were responsive to evaluative feedback.

Experimentation has its limitations. Many studies deal with minor aspects of self-evaluation; situations are artificial (e.g., feedback followed by questionnaire self-ratings on identical dimensions); researchers focus on one-way influences; and no opportunities exist for reflection, discussion with feedback sources, or consultation with others. In addition, in contrast to laboratory situations, significant others in everyday settings often refrain from conveying their evaluations to the individual altogether. Consequently, it is important to explore when significant others do and do not convey feedback to an individual with whom they are interacting.

WHEN DO SIGNIFICANT OTHERS CONVEY OR WITHHOLD FEEDBACK?

On some occasions friends or acquaintances may be forthright in their evaluative responses, but in other instances they remain silent, give subtle and ambiguous hints, or even lie. Many researchers have examined how feedback influences self-evaluation; few have addressed what facilitates or inhibits feedback transmission in the first place (Larson 1984). Here I draw on the distinctions among context, source, receiver, and message that derive from work on social influence (Petty and Weggener 1998). First, I consider research exploring what influences feedback expression and address context, source, message, and receiver. Second, I review recipients' acceptance or rejection of feedback in connection with the same classes of elements

Feedback Expression Varies by Social Context

All features of social interaction are affected by the broader context in which they occur. People on first dates presumably monitor their responses more cautiously than those who have developed deeper and more trusting relationships. Mead (1934:142) observed, "What determines the amount of the self that gets into communication is the social experience itself." I consider two important characteristics of the social context of feedback exchanges: closeness of the relationship and developmental stage of the interpersonal relationship or group.

Closeness

Feedback expression differs in close and distant relationships. Close friends typically exchange more feedback than do students in neighboring seats in a classroom.

Donald Rudawsky and I (Lundgren and Rudawsky 2000) asked students to describe real-life encounters when either a male or a female peer had angered them. We were primarily concerned with expression and withholding of feedback to these peers. Though we examined numerous aspects of the situation, closeness of the relationship was the most powerful correlate of feedback expression. This finding is congruent with a broader literature on links between intimacy and self-disclosure (Reis and Patrick 1996).

Stages of Group Development

Close relationships take time and effort to develop, and research shows that feedback processes change across the life history of dyads and groups. David Knight and I (Lundgren and Knight 1978) content analyzed discussion in twenty two-week T groups. We found temporal changes in both feedback and self-disclosure. In an "initial encounter" stage, feedback and disclosure were both relatively low. During a middle phase labeled "interpersonal confrontation," both feedback and self-disclosure were high, negative in tone, and focused on self–other relationships (in contrast to identities of separate individuals). A final "mutual acceptance" phase was characterized by increased positivity and decreased feedback and disclosure. Extensive research documents similar patterns across a range of group contexts (Wheelan 1994).

Feedback Expression Varies by Source

Differences in feedback expression can be analyzed in terms of source, message, and receiver. The source characteristics I examine here include the communicator's status in the relationship, gender, and affective arousal by the communicator.

Status

Assessments of self and others vary depending on interactants' positions within a group's status hierarchy. Bosses and subordinates see things differently, and they differ in their inclinations to tell others what they think. Research in group and organizational situations shows that position in formal status hierarchies is an important element of feedback transmission. Georgesen and Harris (1998), in a meta-analysis of studies examining power and performance appraisals, found that as power levels increase, evaluations of others become increasingly negative while evaluations of self become increasingly positive.

Similar patterns are evident in leader–member exchanges in T groups. Catherine Schaeffer and I (Lundgren and Schaeffer 1976) studied characteristics of feedback and responses to feedback at early and late points in two-week T groups. During early sessions, trainer feedback (compared with intermember feedback) was more negative and confrontational, less expressive, less focused on self–other relationships,

less here and now, more abstract, and more interpretive. These differences diminished by later sessions, suggesting that trainers played a more dominant role in setting norms in early group meetings. The findings are consistent with other small-group research that indicates that high-status group members participate more frequently, make more suggestions to others, and exert more influence on individuals and the group as a whole (Davies 1994).

Gender Composition

Gender, of course, is highly significant for giving and receiving feedback. In the study of feedback expression mentioned earlier, Lundgren and Rudawsky (2000) examined whether male or female undergraduates would be more likely to convey feedback to male and female peers toward whom they felt angry. There were no simple gender patterns. Rather, gender composition of the dyad had important implications for feedback expression, with feedback transmission higher in mixed-sex than same-sex dyads. Further, it appeared that women and men differed in their feedback styles. Women were more likely to express feedback in closer relationships, when they had stronger feelings, and when they regarded issues as more important. Men, in contrast, tended to convey feedback to female partners regardless of closeness or importance of issues, a pattern that we interpreted as reflecting status differences between males and females.

Affect

Everyday experience suggests that emotional arousal, positive or negative, is critical to feedback exchanges, and our work supports that contention. Lundgren and Rudawsky (2000) found that senders were more likely to convey feedback to both male and female peers when they had experienced strong negative affect. Using a similar self-report method, Rudawsky, Lundgren, and Grasha (1999) found that individuals who experienced greater negative affect tended to adopt competitive conflict resolution strategies in which they strove to triumph over the other party. Though not completely parallel, these results are similar to the well-established finding that emotionally aroused individuals display more aggressive responses to aversive events (Tedeschi and Felson 1994).

Feedback Expression Varies by Potential Message

Importance and Expected Consequences of Feedback

Mead's (1934) analysis suggests that actors develop the capacity to imagine the reactions of significant others to projected lines of behavior and inhibit or alter their subsequent behaviors accordingly. With respect to feedback transmission, one would expect communicators to express or withhold given reactions, depending on

anticipated consequences for self and others. We have found that the more important the topic area of feedback, the greater the tendency of individuals to convey feedback (Lundgren and Rudawsky 2000). We also found that individuals expressed or withheld feedback depending on expected positive and negative consequences. Angered individuals were more likely to convey feedback to both female and male peers when they expected positive outcomes. However, when anticipating negative consequences, individuals withheld feedback only to women. Both male and female senders appeared more concerned about potential harm to women. Related work suggests that individuals are generally more likely to withhold negative feedback when they expect conflict or aggressive reactions (Cloven and Roloff 1993) and that individuals are less prone to express negative than positive feedback (Blumberg 1972; Felson 1980; Waung 1997).

Feedback Expression Varies by Recipient

Gender

Considerable research indicates that gender is a crucial aspect of personal identity (Howard 2000), and we might anticipate women and men to differ in their styles of giving and receiving feedback. Lundgren and Rudawsky (1998) found that female college students reported receiving more strongly negative feedback and feedback on more important issues than did male students. Rudawsky, Lundgren, and Grasha (1999) obtained similar findings in a study that also examined reports by recipients of negative feedback. However, this finding was not replicated in a subsequent study (Lundgren and Rudawsky 2000) that differed methodologically in that male and female college students reported whether they expressed or withheld feedback from male and female peers. As reported earlier, individuals in mixed-gender dyads expressed most feedback, and we found no overall differences for male and female receivers.

Summary: Feedback Expression

Discussions of the social self often assume that participants routinely and pervasively exchange feedback in interpersonal transactions. Clearly, however, this assumption is oversimplified. In some contexts, for example, greater closeness and more important issues, individuals can be very open in conveying feedback; but in other circumstances, interactants may be very closed. Individuals may express or withhold feedback, depending on the characteristics of the source, receiver, and potential message consequence. These varied patterns, of course, have major implications for the impact of others' reactions on self-assessments. It is hard to adopt the perspective of the other when we have no basis for imagining what that perspective may be. Thus withheld or indirectly conveyed feedback helps to account for the sometimes weak relationships between actual appraisals, perceived appraisals, and self-evaluations.

WHEN DO INDIVIDUALS ACCEPT OR REJECT FEEDBACK FROM OTHERS?

While self-conceptions are often influenced by feedback, Mead and Cooley agree that social actors can carry out self-evaluation independently of or in opposition to reactions of particular others. People think about themselves while alone in their surroundings, and their conclusions may diverge sharply from previously received feedback. Further, motivational states can complicate the link between feedback and self-evaluation. Considerable research (Blaine and Crocker 1993) suggests that individuals are motivated to maintain high self-esteem, as well as to gain positive regard from others. Thus a key question is, when do individuals accept and when do they reject evaluative feedback from others? Again, I approach this issue in terms of context, source, message, and recipient distinctions.

Reactions to Feedback Vary by Social Context

Experiences of self are embedded in particular social contexts, and reactions to feedback vary by context. We are likely to encounter different aspects of ourselves in church or synagogue than on a soccer field or in a neighborhood bar. In considering social context, I concentrate on how peoples' reactions to feedback are shaped by the closeness of the social relationships in which transactions occur. In addition, I consider several other dimensions of the sender–receiver relationship in reviewing results regarding feedback sources.

Closeness

Peoples' expression of feedback varies depending on the closeness of relationships, and we might anticipate that closeness is equally important for acceptance of feedback from others. Lundgren and Rudawsky (1998) asked college students to describe episodes when they had received negative feedback from each of four parties—father, mother, male and female peers—and rate various aspects of the situations, including the degree to which they accepted or rejected the feedback. Individuals accepted feedback most fully in close relationships and when they interacted frequently with the other party. Using similar measures, Rudawsky, Lundren, and Grasha (1999) found that in circumstances in which students had received negative feedback from peers, the closer the relationship, the greater their tendency to use more collaborative strategies of conflict resolution. These findings are congruent with a broader small-group literature that finds that individuals accept influence from other group members most extensively in close or cohesiveness relationships (Forsyth 1999).

Reactions to Feedback Vary by Source

In discussing the impact of others on self-appraisals, Rosenberg (1979:83) noted that "not all significant others are equally significant, and those who are more significant

have greater influence on our self-concepts." Parents presumably have more impact than neighbors, lovers than enemies. This theme is evident throughout the following review of source characteristics, which examines parent and peer comparisons, status and intimacy, dimensions of marital relationships, and proximity and frequency of interaction.

Parents and Peers

Many studies suggest that peoples' acceptance or rejection of feedback varies with different sources or communicators (Harter 1996; Kaplan 1986). Comparing reactions to negative feedback from parents and from peers, Lundgren and Rudawsky (1998) found that college students were more likely to accept negative feedback when it originated in their parents (particularly fathers) than in peers. These findings are surprising, given the increased importance of peer appraisals in the college years (Harter 1996). However, further analysis indicated that students in this sample, a majority of whom lived at home, reported greater frequency of interaction with both parents and closer relationships with mothers than with male or female peers.

Status and Intimacy

In their questionnaire study with college students, Lundgren and Schwab (1974) examined relationships between perceived appraisals and self-evaluations in relationships varying in status and intimacy. Respondents judged how four specific persons—a close authority (e.g., parent), a distant authority (e.g., boss), a close peer, and a distant peer—would rate them on eight evaluative trait rating scales. The status dimension appeared to be most important for men, their variation in self-evaluations being primarily associated with perceived peer appraisals (whether in close or distant relationships). For women, on the other hand, the intimacy dimension appeared to be most important, their self-evaluations being most in line with perceived appraisals by close others, both authorities and peers. In a later birth order study, Schwab and Lundgren (1978) similarly found that firstborn men were especially responsive to perceived evaluations by peers, while firstborn women's self-assessments appeared to be most strongly influenced by parents.

The relevance of social status for feedback processes is also apparent in the T-group context. Lundgren (1974), in a study of trainer-member influence in seven weekend T groups, found that members accurately perceived trainers' attitudes toward the group, and members' own attitudes corresponded closely with their perceptions of trainer attitudes. In contrast, trainers were less accurate in perceiving member attitudes toward themselves, and their self-attitudes were unrelated to members' views of them. These findings coincide with a broader literature that suggests that lower power group members are more likely to take the role of others and be more accurate in their interpersonal judgments (Forte 1998).

Dimensions of Marital Relationships

Links between appraisals by self and other may also vary by structural features of the relationship in question. Marriage is a prime example. Lundgren, Jergens, and Gibson (1982) gathered data on evaluations by spouse, perceived evaluations from spouse, and self-evaluations from a sample of 165 married couples. The authors predicted that partners would see themselves more like their spouse saw them and that evaluations of self and other would be more favorable when marital power was relatively equal, household role responsibilities were shared, and marital solidarity was high. We obtained strong support for the solidarity hypothesis but only partial support for a positive association between shared marital power and roles and appraisals of self and other. The high importance of solidarity is consistent with other research demonstrating that approval, emotional support, and unconditional positive regard are central bases of self-esteem (Harter 1996).

Proximity and Frequency of Interaction

We spend a lot more time with some associates than with others, and physical proximity and frequency of social interaction may have important consequences for feedback and self-appraisal. Lundgren and Schwab (1979) studied college students living at home with their families and students living in campus dormitories. Students living at home reported more interactional problems and conflicts with parents and with fellow students than did campus residents. In particular, commuter students reported too much inclusion and control by parents, too little control and affection from friends. Students living at home reported less favorable perceived appraisals from both parents and peers, and lower self-esteem.

Reactions to Feedback Vary by Message Characteristics

Valence

The evaluative dimension (good–bad, positive–negative, right–wrong) comes to mind as soon as we think of interpersonal feedback. And research shows clearly that whether individuals accept or reject feedback depends on its positive or negative valence (Wylie 1979). Lundgren, Sampson, and Cahoon (1998) obtained information regarding male and female college students' acceptance or rejection of feedback in the form of high and low academic course grades. Both genders were similar in tending to assimilate positive feedback and to reject negative feedback. Women with higher global self-esteem showed more positive affective responses to and acceptance of positive feedback than did women with lower global self-esteem, though men's responses showed no apparent connection to self-esteem. In further analysis, Lundgren, Cahoon, and Sampson (2000) found that both male and female college students showed strong tendencies to attribute positive outcomes to internal characteristics (high effort, high ability) and negative outcomes (low grades) to

external causes (task difficulty, low instructor ability). Other investigators have found these patterns of attributions for academic outcomes as well (e.g., Davis and Stephan 1980). These findings are consistent with those of other researchers who have found that individuals are more resistant to and more dissatisfied with negative feedback compared to positive feedback (Banaji and Prentice 1994; Jussim, Yen, and Aiello 1995; Sedikides 1993).

Importance

Some social feedback may be earthshaking, some of it trivial. Individuals' acceptance or rejection of feedback depends in part on its importance. Lundgren and Rudawsky (1998) found that individuals were more likely to accept negative feedback from parents and peers when it was conveyed directly and was judged high in importance. Rudawsky, Lundgren, and Grasha (1999) found that male and female college students adopted more collaborative strategies of conflict resolution in response to negative feedback from others on more important issues.

Reactions to Feedback Vary by Recipient Characteristics

Gender

Cooley (1902:202) speculated about potential gender differences in reflected appraisals: "Sex-difference in the development of the social self is apparent from the first. Girls have, as a rule, a more impressible social sensibility; they care more obviously for the social image, study it, reflect upon it more." However, like the topic of feedback expression, surprisingly little research has explored how men and women respond to feedback. We have entertained alternative hypotheses in our work, based on a consideration of status and intimacy dimensions of gender roles (Deaux and LaFrance 1998; Wiley 1995). A status hypothesis would predict that because of their lower status in the larger society, women would tend to more generally accept feedback from others; men, enjoying higher status, should be more resistant. Status considerations would also suggest that feedback acceptance might interact with valence, such that men would be more likely to accept positive feedback and women to accept negative feedback.

Different hypotheses result if we consider gender roles in terms of intimacy. In intimate relationships, people are likely to engage in greater disclosure, exchange feedback more directly, and show greater receptivity to the other's viewpoint. From this perspective, we would anticipate women to engage in more exchange of feedback, both on the sending and receiving side, and to show greater receptivity to feedback from others, whether positive or negative. This would be congruent with work indicating that, compared to men, women tend to show more empathy (Mehrabian, Young, and Sato 1988) and self-disclosure (Dindia and Allen 1992) and attach more importance to reflected appraisals (Schwalbe and Staples 1991).

Frankly, gender findings are puzzling. We have obtained mixed and complicated results with respect to these alternate hypotheses. Lundgren and Rudawsky (1998) found that women, by virtue of receiving more strongly negative feedback and responding with stronger negative affect, rejected negative feedback from parents and peers to a greater degree than did men. Similarly, Rudawsky, Lundgren, and Grasha (1999) found that women responded with both more competitive and more collaborative conflict resolution strategies in reacting to negative feedback from peers. The authors speculated that women may adopt more active and assertive strategies in responding to negative feedback, whereas men may rely on more avoidant strategies. Overall, these gender findings are not easily subsumed under either a status or an intimacy interpretation, and I suggest that feedback-related gender phenomena are a particularly rich area for future investigation.

Affective Responses

Cooley (1902:225) observed that "every productive mind must have intense self-feeling," and one would anticipate that how individuals respond to perceived appraisals from others would be strongly influenced by their emotional reactions. In general, evaluative feedback generates emotional arousal in the receiver, and acceptance or rejection of feedback is typically influenced by these reactions. Lundgren and Rudawsky (1998) found that the stronger the negative affect aroused by feedback, the greater individuals' tendencies to reject that feedback. Similarly, Rudawsky, Lundgren, and Grasha (1999) found, for both men and women, the more individuals experienced negative affect from feedback from peers, the more they tended to rely on competitive conflict resolution strategies in subsequent interaction. Other researchers likewise conclude that strong negative emotions lead to rejection of feedback (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon 1986; Steele 1988). Thus affective responses, like a range of source, message, and other receiver characteristics, have important consequences for our tendencies to accept and reject social feedback from significant others.

CONCLUSION

Sociologists and social psychologists commonly treat Mead and Cooley's contention that the self is a social product as a virtual truism. I hope the reader will recognize the oversimplified nature of that conclusion. While supporting the basic Mead-Cooley propositions, this review indicates that the phenomena in question vary considerably and are subject to numerous moderating influences. Here I offer a statement of thirteen empirical generalizations that help to elucidate these complexities, then consider the continuing relevance of Mead and Cooley's theoretical perspectives to work in this domain.

Most research in the area has concentrated on the impact of significant others' reactions on self-appraisals. General trends are quite consistent. (1) Most correlational

studies find positive relationships among actual views held by others, individuals' perceptions of those views, and self-appraisals. (2) Our self-appraisals are more closely associated with our perceptions than with actual appraisals by others. (3) Generally, our self-appraisals tend to be more positive than our perceptions of others' views or actual views held by others, a finding usually interpreted in terms of self-enhancement tendencies. (4) Experimental studies consistently demonstrate that positive and negative feedback from others elicits corresponding changes in our self-evaluations.

Individuals' failure to convey direct feedback to one another appears to help to account for the typically modest relationships between actual appraisals by others and perceived appraisals, as well as between actual appraisals and self-appraisals. Many studies find that feedback expression varies depending on the social situation. (5) Solidarity or closeness stands out as critical—the closer the relationship, the more openly we express feedback. (6) From a temporal standpoint, we tend to be relatively guarded in conveying feedback during initial stages of relationship formation, more open during "mature" stages of interpersonal relationships.

(7) With respect to source characteristics, high-status individuals tend to give more feedback and more negative feedback. (8) Gender per se appears to be less important to feedback expression than gender composition (i.e., more feedback exchanged in mixed-gender than same-gender relationships). (9) The stronger a sender's emotional arousal, the greater the likelihood of feedback expression.

Message-related characteristics are equally relevant. (10) We are prone to express feedback when issues are important to us and when we anticipate positive outcomes. We tend to withhold feedback when we expect negative consequences, particularly when women are potential recipients.

(11) With regard to acceptance or rejection of feedback, we respond very differently depending on solidarity or closeness of relationships, whether assessed in terms of reported closeness, family ties (parents compared to peers), or marital cohesion. The closer the relationship, the more others' reactions influence our views of self.

(12) Our reactions to feedback vary by the valence of feedback. We are more receptive to positive than negative feedback, though this may occur either because positive feedback is more rewarding or because it is more consistent with our preexisting self-conception. (13) Our emotional responses also prove to be important—when we experience strong negative affect from receiving negative feedback, we frequently respond by rejecting that feedback.

Mead and Cooley formulated their ideas at the beginning of the twentieth century, some fifty years before their hypotheses regarding the self began to receive careful empirical attention. Since the 1950s, the topic has been a mainstream focus of research in sociology, psychology, and related fields. As we have found, while this body of work provides substantial support for Cooley and Mead's basic insights, it also testifies to the complexity of self-related phenomena and the importance of continued exploration. The current review points to the need to refine and extend assumptions regarding the Mead-Cooley hypothesis. Much of the quantitative

research centers on simply demonstrating a positive link between others' reactions and self-appraisals, frequently as these are manifested in questionnaire rating scale judgments. Further, as many of the studies reviewed here were based on data from college students, a category of persons whose views of self may be particularly malleable and responsive to social influences, the need for work on broader samples, particularly more mature adults, is evident.

An emphasis on feedback transactions points to the need for researchers to observe more directly the dynamics of the interchanges through which parties exchange evaluative reactions and assimilate or reject those potential influences on self-conceptions. This review, moreover, has found marked situational variation in the extent to which interacting individuals directly convey feedback to one another. The congruence of self-appraisals with perceived and actual reactions by others likewise varies across situations, types of relationships, and recipient characteristics. Overall, individuals clearly perform as active agents in their transactions with others, receiving but also exerting influence (Gecas 2001). The continued identification of the circumstances accounting for these varied reactions remains an important part of the research agenda dealing with social bases of the self-conception.

The present review signals the need for renewed interactionist theorizing and research on the social self topic. In many ways, the field is still struggling to fully incorporate and develop the insights generated by Mead and Cooley regarding a reciprocal relationship between individual and society. Mead and Cooley's analyses, which highlight the role of self-awareness in the organization and change of collective activity, offer a groundbreaking sociological approach to topics that many authors have traditionally treated as intrapsychic, namely, phenomena of mind, social cognition, and self-perception. Mead and Cooley emphasize that mental phenomena are intrinsically social, are always embedded in ongoing social relationships, and have primary consequence for the dynamics of structured collective activity. Feedback, role-taking, and reflexive self-appraisal enable us to take into account the anticipated reactions of other group members and regulate our own behavior accordingly. Still more critically, these processes, as they occur reciprocally among interactants, make up the very foundation of the social order, making possible joint, consciously regulated, cooperative activity. Thus the symbolic interactionist approach to the self offers an optimal avenue for integrating treatments of society and individual and, through emphasizing processes of social interaction, synthesizing what are often regarded as separate "collective" and "psychological" levels of analysis. Without question, Mead and Cooley's analyses of the social self remain highly fertile sources for generating new leads for thinking and research on issues at the very heart of sociology and social psychology.

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