Role-Taking, Role Standpoint, and Reference-Group Behavior

Author(s): Ralph H. Turner

Source: *American Journal of Sociology*, Jan., 1956, Vol. 61, No. 4 (Jan., 1956), pp. 316-328

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/2773533

ROLE-TAKING, ROLE STANDPOINT, AND REFERENCE-GROUP BEHAVIOR[1]

RALPH H. TURNER

ABSTRACT

In order to clarify the meaning and usefulness of the concept of "role-taking," some major types of role-taking behavior are differentiated and their relations to the concepts of "empathy" and "reference group" are explored. Role-taking may or may not include adoption of the standpoint of the other as one's own and may or may not be reflexive, these distinctions being related to its functions in the acquisition or implementation of values and to the element of self-consciousness in behavior. Coincidence of certain reference-group meanings with types of role-taking and possibilities for enhancing the usefulness of the reference-group concept are discussed.

For decades sociologists have made reference to "taking the role of the other" ("role-taking" for short) as a basic explanatory concept in relating the acts of the individual to the social contexts of his actions. In general, the term has been employed as a broadly "sensitizing concept"[2] rather than with precise denotations suitable to empirical research. Some years after these terms had become commonplace in sociological literature a new school of social relations appropriated the term "role-taking" to describe the particular procedures involved in the psychodrama and sociodrama.[3] On top of this earlier vagueness have been superimposed recent discussions of "role-taking capacity" and "empathic ability."[4] Finally, a new concept of "reference group," which has achieved meteoric prominence, quite obviously overlaps in some respects the earlier role-taking.

In this paper we shall consider the value of the concept "role-taking" in its more traditional senses by an examination of some of the special variations in meaning which can be assigned to it. We shall suggest some conceptual distinctions which, by differentiating types of role-taking activity, can render use of the concept more specific and more precise. Based on this discussion, we can then suggest boundaries to forestall tendencies which broaden the concept beyond all usefulness. Finally, we shall note the light which our analysis of role-taking may shed upon the idea of reference group and attempt to designate the specific scope of each concept.

THE MEANING OF ROLE-TAKING

Role-taking in its most general form is a process of looking at or anticipating another's behavior by viewing it in the context of a role imputed to that other. It is thus always more than simply a reaction to another's behavior in terms of an arbitrarily understood symbol or gesture.

By *role* we mean a collection of patterns of behavior which are thought to constitute a meaningful unit and deemed appropriate to a person occupying a particular status in society (e.g., doctor or father), occupying an informally defined position in interpersonal relations (e.g., leader or compromiser), or identified with a particular value in society (e.g., honest man or patriot).[5]

[1] The author is indebted to Helen P. Beem for a critical reading of the manuscript.

[2] Cf. Herbert Blumer, "What Is Wrong with Social Theory?" *American Sociological Review,* XIX (February, 1954), 3–9.

[3] Cf. J. L. Moreno, *Psychodrama* (New York: Beacon House, 1946).

[4] Cf. Leonard S. Cottrell, Jr., and Rosalind F. Dymond, "The Empathic Responses: A Neglected Field for Research," *Psychiatry,* XII (1949), 355–59; Rosalind F. Dymond, "A Scale for the Measurement of Empathic Ability," *Journal of Consulting Psychology,* XIII (1949), 127–33; Harrison G. Gough, "A Sociological Theory of Psychopathy," *American Journal of Sociology,* LIII (March, 1948), 359–66.

[5] Role is conceived more inclusively here than in Linton's famous definition (Ralph Linton, *The Study of Man* [New York: Appleton-Century Co., 1936], pp. 113 ff.). The term "appropriate"

We shall stress the point that a role consists of behaviors which are regarded as making up a meaningful unit. The linkage of behaviors within roles is the source of our expectations that certain kinds of action will be found together. When people speak of trying to "make sense" of someone's behavior or to understand its meaning, they are typically attempting to find the role of which the observed actions are a part.

Role will be consistently distinguished from status or position or value type as referring to the whole of the behavior which is felt to belong intrinsically to those subdivisions. Role refers to behavior rather than position, so that one may *enact* a role but cannot *occupy* a role. However, role is a normative concept. It refers to expected or appropriate behavior and is distinguished from the manner in which the role is actually enacted in a specific situation, which is *role behavior* or *role performance.*[6] While a norm is a directive to action, a role is a *set of norms,* with the additional normative element that the individual is expected to be consistent. The role is made up of all those norms which are thought to apply to a person occupying a given position. Thus, we return to our initial emphasis that the crucial feature of the concept of role is its reference to the assumption that certain different norms are meaningfully related or "go together."

With only unimportant qualifications, we shall accept the delimited meaning of role-taking proposed by Walter Coutu,[7] which distinguishes the imaginative construction of the other's role (role-taking) from the overt enactment of what one conceives to be one's own appropriate role in a given situation (role-playing) and from the overt enactment of a role as a form of pretense ("playing-at" a role). Role-taking may proceed from identifying a position to inferring its role and in this manner anticipating the behavior of an individual. Or it may proceed from observing a segment of behavior to identifying the feelings or motives behind the behavior or to anticipating subsequent behavior. In either case certain actions are interpreted or anticipated upon the basis of the entire role of which they are assumed to be a part.

In the present discussion the manner in which an individual conceives the role of another will not be examined as an isolated form of behavior. The self-other relationship will be viewed as an aspect of a total social act.[8] The actor takes the role of another in carrying out some behavior of his own; role-taking is an adjunct to the determination or application of one's own role in a given situation. Accordingly, for present purposes we shall disregard the usage of role-taking as the enactment of roles in the sociodramatic setting when the usage detaches the roles from their specific implications for the way in which the actor

in the definition is purposely left without a further referent, since the particular content of the role (i.e., that which is regarded as appropriate) will vary depending upon the vantage point of the person or persons formulating the role conception. Cf. also Theodore R. Sarbin, "Role Theory," in *Handbook of Social Psychology,* ed. Gardner Lindzey (Cambridge, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1954), I, 223–58.

[6] Cf. Theodore M. Newcomb, *Social Psychology* (New York: Dryden Press, 1950), p. 330.

[7] "Role-playing vs. Role-taking: An Appeal for Clarification," *American Sociological Review,* XVI (April, 1951), 180–87. Coutu's reference to role-taking as "imagining what the other person 'thinks he is supposed to do'" (p. 181) corresponds to our usage if the word "supposed" is used in a broad sense. However, the distinction between attitude and role that Coutu mentions (p. 181) is well taken but need not be applied in the manner he suggests. If an attitude is a tendency to act toward a particular category of objects, a role is made up of attitudes. When one seeks to identify a particular attitude of some other person, he does so by placing himself in that other person's position, imaginatively reviewing that other's role until the attitude in question is indicated. Thus, taking the attitude of the other is part of a role-taking process, and Mead's usage does not do violence to contemporary use of the concept of role.

[8] "Social act" is used in the sense indicated by Ellsworth Faris and George Herbert Mead. For a brief statement of this conception see Ellsworth Faris, *The Nature of Human Nature* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1937), pp. 144 ff.

will define his own role.[9] Furthermore, our purpose in understanding how the role-taking process shapes the actor's own behavior will determine the basis on which we shall distinguish types of role-taking activity. The critical differentiae for types of role-taking will revolve about the manner in which the self-other relationship affords a directive to the individual in the formulation of what his own behavior shall be.

ALTERNATIVE CLASSIFICATIONS OF ROLE-TAKING

It will help to convey the boundaries of the concept of role-taking as we are using it and clarify the major task of this paper if we first mention two alternative schemes for classifying role-taking behavior which we do not plan to emphasize, although we recognize their great importance. First, role-taking is frequently used to refer to an ability or capacity, and attention is accordingly centered about the accuracy with which the role of the other is inferred. Studies dealing with role-taking capacity or *empathic ability*[10] attempt to measure the degree to which the other-role as imaginatively constructed corresponds to the actual role as that other experiences it, and the individual is said to be taking the role of the other only when he accurately infers the other's feelings or anticipates his behavior.

From our standpoint, however, the process of role-taking is not inherently different when the inference is accurate from when it is inaccurate. Furthermore, once the actor formulates a conception of the role of the other, the manner in which that conception serves to shape his own behavior is unaffected by the accuracy or inaccuracy of the conception. Accordingly, we shall speak of the actor as taking the role of the other irrespective of whether his imputation is accurate or not.

[9] E.g., Theodore R. Sarbin, "The Concept of Role-taking," *Sociometry*, VI (August, 1943), 273–85.

[10] Cottrell and Dymond, *op. cit.*; Dymond *op. cit.*; Gough, *op. cit.*

Another important basis for classifying role-taking behavior which will not be elaborated here has to do with the criteria which are used to infer the role of the other. (*a*) As we have already noted, role-taking may be a matter of first observing some behavior of the other and then inferring the total role of which that behavior is assumed to be a part. In this sense one responds to the behavior of the other as a *gesture,* as an "incomplete act" which one completes in imagination by supplying the role of which it is an indication.[11] (*b*) Or role-taking may take place without any visible behavior on the part of the other, the role being inferred from a knowledge of the situation, from the supposed status or value. Role-taking of these two types undoubtedly calls upon somewhat different skills, so that the individual who has high facility in identifying the meanings of gestures may not be equally adept at supplying the role from a mere knowledge of the situation.

The criteria used to infer the role of the other may also be either projection or knowledge of the other. (*a*) In the case of projection, one constructs the other-role as he would if he himself were in the situation or had made the particular gesture. When role-taking proceeds in this manner, the particular identity of the other is immaterial to the role content, since the role conceptions of the actor are simply imputed to the other. (*b*) In contrast to projection one may interpret the other's gesture on the basis of prior experience with that individual or other individuals assumed to be like him. Or one infers the other's role from prior experience with that other's behavior in similar situations or from prior experience with the behavior of people like him in comparable situations.

Again, these distinctions are of considerable importance. But from our present standpoint the manner in which the role of the other is inferred must be distinguished from the manner in which the in-

[11] George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934), pp. 42 ff.

ferred other-role shapes the enactment of the self-role. In focusing upon the latter in this paper, we shall disregard the former. And we shall use the concept of role-taking to include these varied bases for inferring the other-role—whether from gesture or from situation and whether by projection or by knowledge of the other.

Distinctions which we shall discuss in greater detail have to do with the ways in which the imputed other-role is related to the choice or enactment of the self-role. We assume that two persons may identify and imaginatively construct the role of a relevant other in the same manner and yet themselves act in quite different ways. We shall emphasize two major axes for distinguishing types of other-determining-self relationships. The first of these is the *standpoint* which is adopted in the process of taking the role of the other.

STANDPOINT IN ROLE-TAKING

Taking the role of another may or may not include adopting the standpoint of the other as one's own. The role of the other may remain an object to the actor, so that he understands and interprets it without allowing its point of view to become his own, or the actor may allow the inferred attitudes of the other to become his own and to direct his behavior. Another way of stating the distinction is to note that an individual who is taking the role of another may identify with the role of that other, or else he may retain a clear separation of identity between the self-attitudes and the attitudes of the other. When role-taking includes adoption of the standpoint of the other, the role-taking process is an automatic determiner of behavior. One simply acts from the standpoint of the role. When the standpoint of the other is not adopted, some other factor must intervene to determine the kind of influence which the role imputed to the other will have on the actor.

An occasional confusion between taking the role of another and adopting the standpoint of another is partly responsible for the view that facility in role-taking necessarily results in altruistic or sympathetic behavior or eliminates divergence of purpose between opposing factions. Certain types of exploitation, for example, require elaborate role-taking behavior on the part of the exploiter. The "confidence man" frequently succeeds because of his ability to identify accurately the feelings and attitudes of the person with whom he is dealing while completely avoiding any involvement or identification with these feelings.

The standpoint is not, of course, something apart from the role. It is the core of the role. The difference to which we are referring concerns the ability to engage in an imaginative construction of the role of another while maintaining the separation of personal identities.

The early role-taking activity of the child does not make such a separation. To the degree to which he thinks or feels himself into a situation of another, he adopts as his own the attitudes appropriate to that situation. The more complex behavior in which the actor is able to see the other's role while maintaining a separation of identities appears to develop through two processes. First, the individual becomes concerned simultaneously with *multiple others*. As he takes the roles of two others simultaneously, he cannot simultaneously adopt the standpoints of each. Thus, in simultaneously taking the roles of his mother and his playmate, he cannot orient himself from each standpoint at the same time. Hence he may take the role of a playmate, but, in reacting to the imputed role, he may adopt the standpoint of his mother. The existence of conflicting standpoints in the varied roles which the individual has learned to take forces upon him a separation between taking the role and adopting its standpoint.

On the other hand, the presence of *stable purposes or needs* gradually leads the individual to engage in role-taking in an adaptive context. Such rudimentary understandings of the roles of others as the child may achieve are quite early put to use in the attempted pursuit of his own objectives. Role-taking makes possible both

the manipulation of others and adjustment to them, becoming a means to a pre-existing end of some sort. The attitude and skill of role-taking which were learned in a relationship of identification become divorced from that relationship as it is discovered to be useful in promoting the individual's own purposes.

These two ways in which role-taking is divested of identification remain as two somewhat different kinds of standpoint which can be adopted toward the imputed role of the other. (1) In the former instance the standpoint adopted is that of a third party. The third-party standpoint indicates what behavior is expected of the actor, depending upon the inferences made concerning the role of the other. The point of view of the mother, for example, may be that her child should be friends with a neighbor only if that neighbor conceives his role as being a decent and respectable child. The role of the other, when divorced from adoption of its standpoint, becomes a datum in carrying out the standpoint of the third party.

The third-party standpoint may be recognized as that of a specific person or group, or it may be depersonalized into a norm. Such a norm provides the individual with a directive to action which is contingent upon his placing some construction on the role of the relevant other. In a study of college students' reactions toward a friend who had committed a hypothetical breach of the mores, for example, the majority volunteered some estimate of the role context in which the friend had committed the disapproved act. Some respondents found it appropriate not to report their friend's theft to the authorities when it could be assumed that the general role of the friend was still that of an honest, law-abiding person whose inconsistent behavior reflected unusual stress. For these respondents the norms defining their own responsibility were more dependent upon the role of the other than on any specific behavior in which he had engaged.[12] Whether the third-party standpoint is personalized or not, the actor engages in role-taking in order to determine how he *ought* to act toward the other.

(2) When role-taking is in the adaptive context, however, the standpoint consists of a purpose or objective rather than a specific directive. The actor must examine the probable interaction between the self-role and the other-role in terms of the promotion of a purpose. He lacks a specific or detailed directive supplied by the standpoint of a third party and consequently must shape his own role behavior according to what he judges to be the probable *effect of interaction* between his own role and the inferred role of the other.

This latter kind of role-taking behavior may be clarified with George Herbert Mead's classic distinction between "play" and the "game," as illustrated in baseball.[13] The skilful player in a game such as baseball cannot act solely according to a set of rules. The first baseman can learn in general when he is to field the ball, when to run to first base, etc. But, in order to play intelligently and to be prepared for less clearly defined incidents in the game, he must adjust his role performance to the roles of all the other players. This adjustment is in terms of the effect of interaction among roles toward the end of minimizing the score of the opposing team. Whether the first baseman fields the ball, runs to first, throws to home, etc., will depend upon what he thinks each of the other players will do and how his action will combine most effectively with theirs to keep the score down.

Mead has pointed out that in the "game" the actor must have in mind the roles of all the other players. However, there is more which is distinctive about this kind of role-taking than merely the simultaneous attention to multiple other-roles. The manner in which the actor relates his own role to the others is in terms of their *interactive effect* rather than simply in terms of accepting their direction. It is not so much

[12] "Moral Judgment: A Study in Roles," *American Sociological Review*, XVII (January, 1954), 72–74.

[13] *Op. cit.*, pp. 149 ff.

what the pitcher wants him to do that determines the first baseman's action as what the first baseman judges will be the consequences if each acts in a particular way.[14]

This type of role-taking can be even more clearly illustrated in the case of exploitation or of salesmanship directed toward a reluctant buyer, in which cases the actor's purpose is not shared by the relevant other. In these instances the actor holds constantly in mind his imaginative construction of the role of the other and adjusts his own behavior so as to elicit and take advantage of behavior in the other which will enhance his own objectives. He sensitizes himself to the attitudes of the other while divesting himself of any identification with these attitudes. And these attitudes enter into determination of his own behavior through the criterion of effect in interaction with potential self-behavior.

Recapitulating this section, we have observed that an individual who in some sense puts himself in the position of another and imaginatively constructs that other's role may do so from one of three general standpoints. First, he may adopt the other's standpoint as his own, in which case he is identifying with the other-role and allowing it to become an automatic guide to his own behavior. Second, the role of the other may remain an object viewed from the standpoint of some personalized third party or depersonalized norm, in which case the role of the relevant other becomes a datum necessary in implementing the third-party directive. Third, the role of the relevant other may be viewed from the standpoint of its effect in interaction with potential self-behavior, as contributing toward some individual or shared purpose. The standpoint of the actor in role-taking may change in the course of a single act, or he may be plagued by alternative standpoints. But the manner in which the imagined other-role affects the actor's behavior will be different with each standpoint.

[14] The anticipation of approval or disapproval from others may operate simultaneously with the mechanism being described here. However, the determination of a specific course of action to be followed at a particular instant in the game requires a more precise indication. This indication is afforded by viewing the consequences of particular combinations of roles involving self and others against the criterion of winning the game.

REFLEXIVENESS IN ROLE-TAKING

Borrowing a term from George Herbert Mead, we shall suggest that a second major distinction be made between reflexive and nonreflexive role-taking.[15] Mead uses the term "reflexive" in referring to the "characteristic of the self as an object to itself." When the role of the other is employed as a mirror, reflecting the expectations or evaluations of the self as seen in the other-role,[16] we may speak of *reflexive role-taking*.

While role-taking is a process of placing specific behaviors of the other in the context of his total role, the attention of the actor is never equally focused upon all the attitudes implied by that role. Rather, one's orientation determines that only certain attitudes of the other-role will be especially relevant to the determination of his own behavior. Role-taking in abstraction is importantly different from role-taking in a situation which calls for a determination of how the actor's role should be played, for the demands of the actor's role determine the selection of aspects of the other-role for emphasis. In one context one particular set of attitudes may be relevant to the determination of the actor's behavior; in another context the same set of attitudes may be irrelevant.

One of the most important distinctions which can be made among the kinds of other-attitudes is between those which are expectations or evaluations or images directed toward the self and those which are not. When the attention of the role-taker

[15] *Op. cit.*, pp. 136 ff.

[16] The identity between reflexive role-taking and Cooley's "looking glass self" should be evident (Charles Horton Cooley, *Human Nature and the Social Order* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922], p. 184).

is focused upon the way in which he appears to the other, the role-taking is reflexive.

Reflexiveness is connected with what we popularly call "self-consciousness." When role-taking is reflexive, the individual is led not merely to consider the effects of his action or their compatibility with some standard or code but to picture himself specifically as an object of evaluation by someone else. An additional perspective is added to his conception of his own behavior.

The criteria of reflexiveness and standpoint placed in combination serve to delineate more sharply the different ways in which the self-other relationship can determine behavior. We shall examine role-taking from each of the three standpoints in order in its nonflexive and reflexive forms.

1. When the standpoint of the other-role is adopted, the other may serve as a model or standard which is accepted without self-consciousness either in the absence of alternative models or because of prestige or dependence in the relationship. Role-taking which is nonreflexive and identifying is probably the simplest and earliest form. The child's "playing-at" various roles shifts fairly imperceptibly into such role-taking in real-life situations. When confronted with situations like those in which he has seen a parent or older sibling enact a role, the child adopts as his own the attitudes of the role as he understands them. For example, a child of three or four who has been taught in a firm but kindly manner not to touch various objects will suddenly adopt as his own the entire role and standpoint of the parent when he finds himself in company with a younger and less responsible child. The behavior of the younger child calls up in the older the role which adults have taken toward him. Accordingly, he naïvely acts toward the younger child as he has learned to understand the role of the parent toward himself.

The same pattern of role-taking continues to be a major source of the values and attitudes of the individual. Whenever there is close attachment of one person to another, there is a tendency for the standpoint of the other to be adopted. Probably the attachment need not be positive in character. An attachment loaded with negative affect giving rise to intense rivalry leads each person to take the role of his rival and unwittingly adopt that rival's standpoint in many respects. Whenever prestige is accorded to someone, there is a tendency to take the role of the prestigeful person without disentangling that other's standpoint.

2. In contrast to this nonreflexive relationship a desire to conform to the other's expectations or to appear favorably in the other's eyes may shape the self-behavior into conformity with the other.

When role-taking involves identification and is reflexive, the self becomes specifically an object evaluated from the standpoint of the other. The attitudes of the other which are adopted as one's own are the attitudes toward one's self rather than toward external objects and values in the environment. At this stage a self-image is beginning to be formed, though it is not yet independent of the particular other whose role is being taken. From reflexive identifying role-taking the individual begins to develop an estimate of his own adequacy and worth. His own self-esteem is the adoption of the estimate of himself which he infers from the standpoint of the role of the other. The bonds of intimacy and prestige or the absence of alternative standpoints determine that the evaluations of relevant others will become the self-evaluations of the individual.

3. The distinction in self-consciousness is also important when the standpoint of a third party or norm is being adopted. Nonreflexive role-taking of this sort directs attention to attitudes in the role of the other whose recognition makes it possible to act according to a pre-existing directive. This pre-existing directive (incorporated in the third-party standpoint) may be of two sorts. It may, as already illustrated, make

the appropriate self-behavior conditional upon the role of the other. Or it may direct the actor to employ the roles of certain others as standards or models to compare with his own behavior. The third-party standpoint enables the actor to react discriminatingly toward the aspirations and attitudes of others in determining which shall be used as standards for his own aspirations and attitudes.

4. When role-taking from a third-party standpoint is reflexive, the standpoint enables the actor to react selectively to his audiences. His concern is not merely how he compares with the other but how he appears to the other. But his appearance to the other does not direct his own behavior in an automatic manner as in the case of identification. Instead, he can accept the evaluations of certain others as legitimate and reject the evaluations and expectations of different others as lacking legitimacy.[17]

As the third-party standpoint becomes stabilized and generalized so as to become a fairly consistent standpoint in the individual, it operates in reflexive role-taking as a fully evolved self-conception or self-image. Such a self-conception permits the actor to react selectively on two bases. First, it may tell the subject whose approval is worth seeking and whose is not. The parent tries to teach his child, for example, to seek the respect of his teachers and the children from "good" homes, while disregarding the opinions that children "without breeding" have of him. Second, it may designate the type of image one wishes to see reflected in the other's conception of one's self. The individual may wish to appear to all as an honest man, as an independent person, or as a good fellow. The self-conception directs the individual to behave in a manner which will evoke such an image of himself in the role of his audience. The two bases of selection may also operate together. Thus, the self-image (or third-party standpoint) may tell the actor that he should appear strong and distant to others in subordinate relations with himself, easy to get along with to others who are his peers and intimates, liked by others who are loyal citizens, and hated by others who are not loyal citizens.

5, 6. When role-taking occurs from the standpoint of interactive effect, it becomes reflexive when the reflected self-image is manipulated by the actor as a means of achieving his ends. The salesman who tries to create the impression that he would rather lose the sale than sell a person what he does not want, the propagandist attempting to appear "folksy," and the counselor responding nonevaluatively to his client are all trying to manipulate the image of themselves held by the other so as to foster their purposes. On the other hand, in baseball the role-taking is more concerned with the attitudes of the others toward the game than toward each other and is therefore nonflexive. The difference between reflexive and nonreflexive role-taking of this sort appears in two levels of playing a game such as poker. Each player will attempt to judge what other players are likely to do. But the superior player will also attempt by such techniques as bluffing, conspicuous misplay, randomized strategies, or the "poker face" to establish a false image of himself which will modify the play of others in anticipated directions.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TYPES

The types we have suggested are important because each finds the actor in a somewhat different relationship to the relevant other whose role he is attempting to infer. The types also differ in the complexity of the process and in the kind of discretion they permit the actor in shaping his own behavior. Though they are analytically distinguishable, however, the types are not characteristically found in complete empirical separation. They are importantly interrelated in the behavior of any individual in two ways: (*a*) hierarchically and (*b*) as alternative orientations to the other.

[17] "Legitimacy" in role-taking is discussed in Ralph H. Turner, "Self and Other in Moral Judgment," *American Sociological Review*, XIX (June, 1954), 254–55, 258.

a) The fundamental source of social values appears to be the *standpoint of the other*. Accordingly, we may speak of role-taking which involves identification as being *derivative* with respect to the values of the individual. The person derives his values through adopting others' standpoints. In contrast, the other types of role-taking are implementive or validative with respect to values. They serve as means through which the values already acquired may be validated by reference to some standard or implemented in practice. Hence, these types are dependent upon role-taking with identification in two ways. They are dependent upon some prior role-taking as the source of values they express. And they are dependent upon prior learning of the skills of role-taking before the role-taking can be detached from adoption of the role standpoint.

Validation has to do with determining the personal relevance of values which one already accepts. One may adopt a value without making it a demand upon one's self. Or one may adopt a value with varying levels of aspiration regarding its achievement. Such validation—setting degrees of personal relevance and levels of aspiration—takes place in part through the simple laws of effect in learning theory and in part through role-taking. To the extent that it occurs through role-taking, it does so either via the reflexive attention to what others expect of the individual or through the comparison of the self with designated standards.

Part of the particular significance of reflexive role-taking lies in its validative function. When one adopts the other's standpoint in reflexive role-taking, he does more than simply adopt certain values; he adopts a definition of what is expected of him regarding that value. The child, for example, who identifies with the parent and adopts his attitudes toward others often does not see the personal relevance of these attitudes except in limited situations. The child is typically "hypocritical" and is distressed when the parent directs attention to his own behavior. At other times the child attempts to make every value a directive to his own behavior and must learn that what he admires in others is not necessarily required of himself.

The values derived in identification role-taking also point to certain groups or persons who serve as standards of comparison in performing the validation function. The individual takes the role of those to whom his attention is thus directed in order to judge what their attitudes are toward the values they profess, what their aspirations are, what effort they put forth, so that he may use these estimates comparatively in setting his own levels.

The *implementive function* of role-taking is carried out, as we have already described, either as demanded by a norm which makes the actor's behavior conditional upon the role of the relevant other or through the consideration of probable effects of the interaction of roles in promoting a given objective. Such implementation is dependent upon both the derivative and the validative functions. The individual must have both adopted values and formed some conception of their personal relevance before he proceeds to carry them out.

b) The hierarchical relationship among types of role-taking is important from the point of view of socialization or the genetic backgrounds of current attitudes. But, from the point of view of the act in process, the important relationship among types of role-taking lies in the fact that they are *alternative relationships* which the individual can establish to the role of the other which will make the effect of that other's attitudes quite different. In order to predict the behavior of a person, it is not sufficient to know that he will take the role of another or to know how accurately he will take that role. A small cue may change his relationship toward the perceived other-role. The high-pressure salesman who is exploiting the attitudes in the other-role to the full may suddenly begin to identify with the attitudes of that other and be rendered incapable of continuing

his sales talk. Or an individual identifying with the role of another who is in misfortune may suddenly remember a social norm which leads him to detach himself and treat the other-role as an object.

The alternative relationships to the other-role may exist as recognized conflicts to the individual. The most frequently noted conflict between standpoints is between adopting the standpoint of the other and subjecting the role of the other to the scrutiny indicated by some norm. For example, a subject who inferred a set of attitudes in a friend which would account for his having committed a theft concluded that his obligation was to report the friend to the authorities. By adding that "he will probably hate me for it," he gave explicit recognition to the conflict.[18] Important also is the conflict between derivative and validative orientations, when the values adopted as part of a standpoint are not adequately supported in the indicated validating relationships. Conflicts also frequently exist between role-taking from the standpoint of interactive effect and the other types.

From the distinction among types of role-taking emerges a major theoretical problem for the study of role behavior. The problem is to isolate the variables which determine what kind of role-taking relationship the individual will assume with respect to any specific relevant other. We have already suggested that strong affect directed toward the other makes the more complex forms less likely to take place and that according prestige to the other has a similar effect. Another determinant is the degree to which the roles of different statuses receive normative sanction from the standpoint of a generalized other. For example, the tendency for a parent to identify with the role of his child when the latter has been hurt is reinforced by the fact that this is in keeping with the generalized standpoint in the society. Thus there is a more generalized imperative operating on the parent than the spontaneous identification arising out of affective involvement. There are also differences in the situational focus of attention which affect role-taking relationships.

[18] To conceptualize such a situation as merely a conflict between norms or roles would be an oversimplification. The third-party standpoint is experienced as a fully sanctioned norm conveying obligation. It is opposed by the discomfort of having to think of one's self in a bad light to the degree to which one identifies with the other-role. The latter does not carry a sense of obligation such as the former.

BOUNDARIES TO ROLE-TAKING

The coexistence of different relationships in role-taking leads us to the further question of whether the concept has been so broadened in application as to lose its analytic utility. If we say, as some writers have, that, whenever an individual experiences an attitude toward some object, he is taking the role of some relevant other toward that object, then every action has been made into role-taking. On the other hand, if we limit role-taking to instances in which the subject recognizes and can conceptualize what he is doing, we make a dividing line which is indefensible in light of modern psychological understanding. The criterion of consciousness, then, is too narrow and the criterion of attitude source is too broad.

The key to a useful delimitation of the term becomes clear when we distinguish between a genetic or socialization framework in which we look into past experiences for the explanation of present behavior and an action framework in which we examine the dynamic interrelations among the elements contemporarily operating to determine action. The concept of role-taking belongs in the latter framework, designating a kind of relationship which may be contemporarily assumed toward a relevant other in the context of an act in process. Within the action framework we may say that a person is engaged in role-taking whenever the individual's conception or performance of his own role is altered by modifying his construction of the other-role.[19]

[19] Merton and Kitt point out that "individuals

Even though we may suppose that all attitudes originate in some role-taking, the self-role can become autonomous; that is, it can become independent of the role-taking relationship which originally gave rise to it. Under the latter circumstance the self-role becomes stabilized so that the role-taking process is omitted or role-taking ceases to modify the self-role. One form of this autonomy is indicated when a person is said to have interiorized a social norm, meaning that an earlier process of role-taking has become truncated. The self-role may then persist unchanged even if the perceived attitudes of the relevant other change or if the affective relationship between self and other change.

A NOTE ON EMPATHY

Of the many senses in which *empathy* has been used, five can be particularly related to our current discussion. (1) By most traditional usage empathy refers to nonreflexive identifying role-taking, in which the individual unwittingly puts himself in the position of another and adopts his standpoint. (2) Sometimes empathy is presented as an ability that is desirable in personnel relations, in which case it designates the ability to understand the role of another while retaining one's personal detachment. According to this usage, empathy includes all role-taking except that in which the standpoint of the other is adopted as one's own. (3) Empathy is sometimes used to designate the process of seeing one's self as others see one, the ability to react to one's own behavior as others are reacting to it. This usage makes empathy identical with reflexive role-taking, regardless of standpoint. (4) Empathic capacity is sometimes used synonymously with role-taking capacity, to include all the forms of the process we have described. (5) When empathy is distinguished from projection, it refers to one criterion for inferring the other-role. In this usage all our types would be included so long as the role-taking is not based upon projection.

To make a choice among these usages by fiat would be an empty gesture. However, there are at least three implications of our present discussion for the current work dealing with empathy. First, the *tendency* to empathize, in whatever sense this is meant, is at least as important a variable as the *ability* to empathize. Under what circumstances will a person employ such empathic abilities as he has rather than merely enact a rigidly predetermined role or react to the other's gestures with standardized responses? Second, given the tendency and ability to empathize (using the term in its broader senses), what relationship to the inferred other-role will determine its effect on the individual's behavior? The tendency and ability in role-taking must be seen in combination with the tendency to assume certain kinds of relations with relevant others. Third, the standpoint in role-taking operates to focus attention selectively on the role being taken. Consequently, certain aspects of the other-role are seen more clearly or are more salient than others, depending upon the standpoint governing the empathic process. Since empathy or role-taking is not normally performed in a vacuum, the accuracy of empathic behavior will vary according to the focus of attention supplied by the governing standpoint. Consideration of empathic ability might profit from taking this observation into account. A quite tentative suggestion from one study of empathic ability that empathy is more accurate with respect to reflexive than nonreflexive aspects of the other-role may tell something about the focus of attention in the role-taking process within a clinical counseling situation.[20]

unwittingly respond to different frames of reference introduced by the experimenter" (Robert K. Merton and Alice Kitt, "Contributions to the Theory of Reference Group Behavior," in *Continuities in Social Research,* ed. Robert K. Merton and Paul F. Lazarsfeld [Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1950], p. 69).

[20] Thomas G. Macfarlane, "Empathic Understanding in an Interpersonal Interview Situation" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Psychology, University of California, Los Angeles, 1952), pp. 115–16.

REFERENCE-GROUP BEHAVIOR

Two commentaries have recently pointed out different usages of the term "reference group."[21] Both have noted that a reference group may mean a group with which one compares himself in making a self-judgment. This usage prevails in the original work of Hyman and the more recent discussion by Merton and Kitt.[22] Both commentaries have also noted an alternative usage of reference group to mean the source of an individual's values (Kelley) or perspectives (Shibutani). Sherif, Newcomb, and Hartley have employed the concept chiefly in this sense.[23] A third usage suggested by Shibutani refers to a group whose acceptance one seeks. In the literature, however, the desire to be accepted is depicted as the mechanism which leads to the adoption of the values and perspectives of the reference group.[24] These are not, therefore, separate usages of the term but merely definitions, on the one hand, in terms of the effect of the reference group and, on the other hand, in terms of the mechanism of the reference group.

[21] Harold H. Kelley, "Two Functions of Reference Groups," in *Readings in Social Psychology,* ed. Guy E. Swanson, Theodore M. Newcomb, and Eugene L. Hartley (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1952), pp. 410–14; Tamotsu Shibutani, "Reference Groups as Perspectives," *American Journal of Sociology,* LX (May, 1955), 562–69.

[22] Herbert Hyman, "The Psychology of Status," *Archives of Psychology,* No. 269, June, 1942; Merton and Kitt, *op. cit.*

[23] Muzafer Sherif, *An Outline of Social Psychology* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1948), pp. 105–6, 123, *et passim;* Sherif, "The Concept of Reference Groups in Human Relations," in *Group Relations at the Crossroads,* ed. Muzafer Sherif and M. O. Wilson (New York: Harper & Bros., 1953), pp. 203–31; Newcomb, *op. cit.,* pp. 220–32; Eugene Hartley, "Psychological Problems of Multiple Group Membership," in *Social Psychology at the Crossroads,* ed. John H. Rohrer and Muzafer Sherif (New York: Harper & Bros., 1951), pp. 371–86.

[24] "A fraternity or sorority to which you hope some day to belong is a reference group for you if your attitudes are in any way influenced by what you take to be its norms" (Newcomb, *op. cit.,* p. 226).

When a reference group is the source of values and perspectives, the identity of meaning with role-taking is apparent. One takes the role of a member of the group, which is synonymous with having "a psychologically functioning membership"[25] in the group, and one adopts the group's standpoint as one's own. Thus, except for emphasizing that the source of values need not be a group of which the individual is objectively a member, this use of reference group corresponds to one traditional usage of role-taking.

Reference group as a point of comparison corresponds partially to certain meanings of role-taking. The self-other relationship is essentially that which we have described as role-taking from a third-party standpoint. Merton and Kitt note the operation of a third-party standpoint in "the institutional definitions of the social structure which may focus the attention of members of a group or occupants of a social status upon certain *common* reference groups."[26] However, the actor may or may not take the role of a member of the reference group. So long as the actor is using the reference group only as a point of comparison in estimating his own social standing or in deciding whether to be satisfied or dissatisfied with his lot, external attributes of the other alone are involved. The role of the relevant other is not being taken. But when levels of aspiration, degrees of determination, and the like are being compared, the individual must necessarily take the role of the other in order to make a comparison.

In the preceding sense reference group as a point of comparison is a broader concept than role-taking from a third-party standpoint. However, in our discussion of role-taking we recognized that the standpoint of the third party might direct attention to the relevant other in more ways than simple comparison. Comparable rela-

[25] Newcomb, "Social Psychological Theory," in *Social Psychology at the Crossroads,* ed. Rohrer and Sherif, p. 48.

[26] Merton and Kitt, *op. cit.,* pp. 64–65.

tions of individual to group appear not to have been included in reference-group usages.

Dispute over the proper meaning of "reference group" seems to center about the acceptable generality of the concept. The limited usage which Sherif and Shibutani prefer, referring to the source of the individual's major perspectives and values, might well be named the *identification group*. The identification group is the source of values, since the individual takes the role of a member while adopting the member's standpoint as his own.

At the opposite extreme the individual's behavior is affected somewhat by groups whose members constitute merely conditions to his action. The groups are neutrally toned to the actor; he must merely take them into account in order to accomplish his purposes. The manner in which he takes them into account may or may not require role-taking, and they may or may not constitute his membership group. Such a group might well be designated by some such neutral term as *interaction group*.

In between are those groups which acquire value to the individual because the standpoint of his identification groups designates them as points of reference. Conforming to the standpoint of his identification group (or of an autonomous self-image which has become stabilized independently of the identification group from which it was derived), the individual compares himself with certain groups or notes the impression he is making on them or in some other way takes account of them. Again, whether this relationship does or does not involve role-taking will depend upon the directive supplied by the identification group or self-conception. These groups might be called *valuation groups*, since their effect upon the individual's behavior is determined by the valuation which his more basic orientations lead him to place upon them.

Finally, if reference-group theory is to encompass the ways in which individual-group relationships shape the roles and role behaviors of the individual, we should note a dichotomy cross-cutting the preceding distinctions. Certain reference groups within each of the preceding types might usefully be regarded as *audience groups* to the individual. These are the groups by whom the actor sees his role performance observed and evaluated, and he attends to the evaluations and expectations which members of the group hold toward him. The actor takes the role of his audience reflexively. An individual's relations with his identification groups may place the latter on some occasions as his audience and on other occasions not. The reaction to the audience may be that of uncritical acceptance of their evaluations and expectations toward him, or the responses of his audience may be interpreted in an interactive context or as directed by his identification group or self-conception.

In general, then, it appears that the concepts of reference group and role-taking are closely related. In the broadest sense reference-group behavior is somewhat more inclusive than role-taking, since one may take account of a reference group without taking the role of a member. The terms "reference group" and "relevant other" refer to essentially the same phenomena. The reference group is a *generalized other* which is viewed as possessing member roles and attributes independently of the specific individuals who compose it. The same general differentiations seem applicable on the bases of standpoint and reflexiveness (audience). Likewise, the same theoretical problems apply, and a similar principle regarding the boundaries of the concepts seems applicable.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES