

ABSTRACT

This article suggests that imprecise definition of the term self-conception has caused serious problems for the theorist interested in the formation of the self-conception. After redefining self-conception as the individual's definition of his relationships to the objects of his experience, the author provides a logical classification of the ways in which such a definition may be formed. This system should exhaust the possible ways in which an individual's self-conception may be formed or modified.

A THEORY OF SELF-CONCEPT FORMATION

There can be little doubt at this stage of sociology's development that symbolic interactionists have had a substantial and enduring impact on virtually every branch of the discipline. Concepts like the self, the centrality of interaction, the symbolic character of man's environment have become at the least a background part of the conceptual apparatus of most working sociologists. It would probably be fair to say that the largest contribution of interactionist theorists has been to increase the sensitivity of sociologists to the richness of the interaction process and to enhance their insight into the symbolic character of human affairs. When interactionists have been criticized, though, it has usually been for a lack of formal theoretical rigor, particularly with regard to the lack of systematically derived operationalizations of key concepts. (Kuhn, 1964: 61-79) This lack of formal theoretical rigor is reflected in an aura of uncertainty surrounding the central concept of self.

Unfortunately, the term self-conception remains unclearly defined in current interactionist theory. There has been a continuing debate over whether the self-conception should be considered a structure (Blumer and Bales, 1966: 535-548) or a process, whether it is stable or volatile, (Kuhn, 1964: 61-79), whether it consists of everything a person thinks about himself or merely some things. (Curtis, 1960: 208; Shibutani, 1961: 230)

Confusion about the nature of the self-conception has hindered the development of theory concerning self-conception formation. This ambiguity has resulted in two general kinds of statements about self-conception formation. The first are very highly general, such as "the self-conception is formed out of interaction with the social context." The second tend to be about specific situations which are formative of the self-conception; such as "one way in which the self-conception is formed is in play, or games, or in reference groups." The first kind of statement tends to be uninformative, particularly to the empirical scientist, since he is given no firm operational clues as to what elements of the social context he ought to observe. The second kind of statement, although often enormously insightful, is systematic. Negative empirical results can always be explained away simply by attributing unexplained variance to "other factors" which had not been anticipated by the theory but which do not necessarily disconfirm it. In this sense, to be "systematic" means to be conceptually closed; it means to tell the investigator not only what he must observe, but also what he may safely ignore.

The central argument of this paper is that the concept of self needs to be reformulated, not because current definitions are wrong, but because they do not lend themselves to systematic theory construction. Thus the first section of the paper attempts to develop a definition of the self consistent with the insights of earlier interactionists, but of a form which allows the deductive construction of other theoretical propositions, particularly propositions concerning the formation of the self. The second section attempts, based on that definition, to generate a systematic theory of self-conception formation.

Interactionists have assumed that the self-conception is the individual's sense of identity; his conception of who he is. While accepting this point, the question arises concerning what it is that gives a person a sense of identity. How does a person know who he is? What kinds of things do people say about themselves when they are trying to explain who they are?

Here empirical studies are relevant. Sanford Kuhn's simple instrument (the Twenty-Statements Test, or TST) assesses these kind of data. It asks people to write twenty statements about themselves beginning with "I am..." Kuhn classified the results of his administrations of this instrument into the following categories; (Kuhn, 1960: 39-57): (1) social groups and classifications; (2) ideological beliefs; (3) interests; (4) ambitions; (5) self-evaluations. Later he revised them to the following; (Schwartz, 1964: 51-52): (1) consensual (social position and role); (2) preferences; (3) beliefs (cosmic); (4) aspirations; (5) self-evaluations; (6) (added still later) statements about other social objects; e.g., "My father is a doctor."

Each of these categories can be seen as statements which the individual makes about his relationships to things other than himself. It is simple to see that social groups and classifications, interests, ambitions, social positions and roles, preferences, aspirations, and statements about social objects imply a relationship between an individual and "things other than himself." To see that this is the case as well for ideological beliefs and self evaluations requires a clarification of the term "things". If by "things" we refer to Mead's term "objects", and accept his definition

of objects as "anything which can be designated or referred to" (Blumen 1966: 539) then the point is easier to make. A "belief is a statement of the individual's perceived relationship to a concept, e.g., "justice", "morality", "democracy", etc. and self-evaluations are statements of the individual's perceived relationship to some technical or moral standard of behavior or qualities.

Conditions for Self-Knowledge

These conclusions are not difficult to justify. The process of knowing who one is involves a process of definition, and any term is defined by placing it in a proposition. Either the other term of the proposition provides reference to something other than the first term or it is a tautology. If the term to be defined is "I" then the predicate of the proposition must be something other than "I", (or else it provides no information). It follows that any statement an individual makes about himself cites a relationship of the individual to something other than himself, or else it does not serve to identify him, even to himself; it does not tell the observer (or ego) who he is. The process of self-definition, like any definition, consists of an individual differentiating himself from and associating himself with other objects. An individual identifies himself in terms of his conception of his relationship to the objects² of his experience. The self-conception is the totality of the individual's definitions of his relationships to objects.

Conditions for the Definition of Objects.

But if objects are terms in the definition of the self, it is clear that the individual must have a definition of those objects to which he

sees himself related, otherwise he defines one unknown in terms of another unknown and gains no information. These objects themselves must, as with the self, be defined in terms of their relationship to still other objects for the same reasons given above. There are two kinds of relationships between objects which have particular significance: those relationships which do not change with the context of the object and those which do. The first are non-situational, the second situational.

As suggested above, non-situational relationships between objects are those which persist regardless of the context in which the objects related are found. A piano is larger than a piano stool in one's home, at the concert hall, in a piano shop, in the park, etc., or anywhere the two may be found. A tiger is a beast with four legs, a mouth, stripes, etc., regardless of where and when it is seen.

But what can be said always about an object is not all that can be said about it. Any object, no matter what its non-situational definition may be, always exists in a situational context. Its relationships to the other objects in that situational context constitute its situational definition. Thus a piano is not only a piano, it is a piano next to the couch, a piano being played at a concert, a piano being played while one is trying to sleep, a piano falling from a building and so on. It is the combination of both situational and non-situational relationships which make up the definition of the object in terms of his relation to which the individual identifies himself in any given situation. Since behavior always takes place in a situational context, this definition is also of interest to sociologists. When an individual finds himself directly under a piano falling from a building, it is not his conception of his

his relationship to pianos in general which dominates the individual's behavior. It is his conception of his relationship to this piano about to fall on his head which will affect his behavior now. Similarly a tiger in an individual's living room constitutes a different object to him than the same tiger in a cage.

But if objects are defined in terms of their situational and non-situational relationships, it follows that the self, too, insofar as it is an object to be defined, is similarly known in terms of its situational and non-situational relationships. Non-situational relationships into which the self enters are, as with objects, those which can always be predicated of the individual regardless of his situational context. Such characteristics as sex, height, etc., are clearly examples of non-situational factors. What has often been called "personality" or "character" is probably another of these. But the total definition of self must include situational elements as well, and concepts such as personality, which fail to account for these factors, consequently lose much of their explanatory power. Thus there are elements of the self-conception which do not shift from situation to situation, and there are elements which do. The individual's conception of himself is to this extent situationally variable. This theory predicts, therefore, that studies attempting to related non-situational self definitions (e.g., "I am friendly,") to specific, situated behaviors would yield negative results, as they generally have. (See, for example, Strodbeck, et. al.)

A definition of the self-conception, therefore, must include the individual's conception of his situational and non-situational definitions of himself, his situational and non-situational definition of the object

in question, and the consequent relationship he conceives between the two.
This constitutes his definition of himself in that situation at that time.

The Formation of the Self-Concept

If the self-conception is defined as the individual's awareness of his relationship to the objects of his experience, it becomes apparent that all the ways in which an individual can come to have an awareness of these relationships, and only those ways, are the ways in which the self-conception is formed.'

The Nature and Function of Filter Categories

The concept designated by the term "filter category" is not new to sociologists. Categorization and recognition of objects are generally linked in the interactionist literature. Throughout this discussion "object" has been defined generally as "anything that can be designated or referred to ...". Symbolic interactionists would probably agree to a greater or lesser extent that it is this act of designation or referral which makes the object what it is. One could say, for example, that an object is a set of stimuli which an individual designates for some reason to be a unitary phenomenon. Through interaction with the organized social context, the individual learns to recognize the unity of a set of stimuli, and to differentiate these stimuli from other stimuli, past and present. But something cannot just be "similar" or "different"; it must be similar to something and different from something. Thus the process of defining an object is one of association and differentiation, or categorization. Once formed, these categories establish the basis for the definition of objects the individual confronts. These filter categories are conceptual

A person defines an object by placing it into a filter category, which serves to unite it in some sense with some other objects and differentiates it from others. Whatever relationship an individual holds to exist between himself and a filter category will color his conception of his relationship to any of its members. (This is why the categories are called filter categories.) (Broner, 1958) In everyday terms, if an individual defines the object "education" into the filter category "means to success", then his orientation toward "means to success" will influence his orientation to education.

Insofar as the self may be an object of one's attention (for it, too, may be "designated or referred to") it is also defined through this process of filter category formation. An individual identifies himself by placing himself into filter categories, such as "liberal", "dog lover", "drug addict", "mentally ill person", "husband", "father", etc. If the individual forms his self conception out of his definition of his relationship to the objects of his experience, and if all definition is carried on through filter categories, and their importance becomes quite obvious. The question of the origin of self is the same as the question of the formation of filter categories. Thus, within this system, an individual identifies objects by placing them into object filter categories, and he identifies himself by placing himself into self filter categories. His orientation towards any object (his attitude) is determined by his conception of the relationship of the self filter category to the object filter category. Attitude can thus be defined as an individual's conception of the relationship of the filter categories of which he thinks he

is a member to the filter categories of which he thinks the object is a member. The self-conception is defined as the totality of these attitudes.

Implicit in this notion of filter categories is a two-step model of self-conception formation. Influence may be exerted over the self-conception (1) by establishing the criteria on which a filter category is formed, and (2) by the actual inclusion and exclusion of objects into and from filter categories. We may legitimately investigate the basis for the individual's formation of the filter category "woman to respect" and secondly the basis of his inclusion of "education" into the category.

The Formation of Filter Categories

Any attitude consists of a definition of object, definition of self, and the consequent relationship between the two. Since object and self are defined by placing them in filter categories, to understand the formation of attitudes we must account for the formation of filter categories for object and for self. It is also fairly widely acknowledged that the individual has only two sources of the information requisite for forming definitions of objects and self--(1) his own observation or "self-reflexive acts", and (2) the testimony (whether verbal or not, or other persons' labeling). (Allbutani, p. 299.)

There are, then, two basic sources of influence on attitude (personal observation and the testimony of others); two basic components of attitude toward which that influence may be directed (definition of object and definition of self) and two basic modes of influence (through the establishment and modification of the bases for the filter category, or filtered,

These factors in attitude (or, on a grander scale, self-conception) formation can be schematized to provide Figure 1.

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Figure 1 About Man

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Figure 1 groups all sources of influence by personal observation into one row and all by the testimony of others in a second row. The scheme can be clarified by discussing each row separately:

The Self-Reflexive Act. Now one, the personal observation row, can be seen to correspond roughly to what Mead calls the Self-Reflexive Act. In its simplest form, the Self-Reflexive Act involves an individual behaving directly toward a specific object and taking note of that behavior. On the basis of this observation, the individual is able to infer the relationship which exists between himself and that object. This constitutes cell one of Figure 1. But there are variations of this process, other than simple, direct confrontation of individual with object that we can, perhaps doing only minor violence to Mead's original intention, fit within the confines of Self-Reflexive Act.

First, insofar as the individual sees several objects as members of the same category, whatever he infers about his relationship to one of them should also apply to the others. Information he gains as a result of an encounter with one should also apply to the others. This is not meant to be a "high-powered" concept; it simply means that the inference an individual makes about his relationship to, say, a big, ferocious dog will apply not only to that dog, but to other big, ferocious dogs as well.

Figure 3

A Classification of the Issues By Which

Agreement May Be Reached or Changed

No Filtering Object Filtered Self Filtered Both Filtered
Anywhere Self Direct Object Direct

1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8

Self-Reflective Act
(only as Agent)

Labelling
(Other as Agent)

insofar as he sees all big, ferocious dogs alike. In this sense, however, we can talk about a "filtered" encounter with an object. An individual can make an inference about his relationship to an object without encountering another object which he conceives to be in the same class as the first. As the term "filter category" implies, the category serves as a filter through which the object is perceived. This corresponds to cell two of Figure 1. The early sociological concept "stereotype" is an extreme case of this process. (Brown)

Second, an individual can see himself as a member of a category which is related to the object in a certain way. Here the reasoning is a little more complex, but still straightforward: if an individual identifies himself in terms of his relationship to objects, he differentiates himself from other individuals only by taking note of differential relationships that he and the other have toward the same set of objects. (X) is a student, I am not a student; (Y) is a dog hater, I am a dog lover, etc. If this is so, it follows that an individual who saw himself standing in the same relationship to the same object or set of objects as another could not differentiate himself from that other in terms of that object. (For example, (Y) is a student, I am a student; (X) is a dog lover, I am a dog lover.) Under these conditions it would seem necessary that ego would consider himself and alter functional equivalents with regard to that object or set of objects. Whatever ego sees as an appropriate relationship of alter to an object would be taken as appropriate for ego as well. Thus, alter's attitudes toward the objects included in the set of objects toward which ego feels he and alter are similarly related would be adopted by ego. Alter serves as a model for ego's attitudes toward the objects in that set. Note that it is not

important that ego be happy about that state of affairs--it is not necessary for ego to like alter or to want to be like alter or to try to please alter--it is sufficient simply for ego to feel similar to alter in regard to those objects. If the attitude formed is toward a single object, this corresponds to cell three of Figure 1; if toward a category of objects, cell four of Figure 1. This kind of inference has been noted frequently, and is probably the basis of the empirically observed effect of peer friends' plans in the educational and occupational aspirations of high school students. (Gallor and Lutterworth, Sewell, et. al., Dunsen, Haller, and Porter).

It is also important to note that attitudes will be transferred only toward the objects which originally constituted the similarity. If ego considers himself to stand in a similar relationship with alter toward dogs, only attitudes toward dogs will be transferred (and then only when ego, of course, is aware that alter has these attitudes) and not attitudes toward anything else. If an individual sees another person whom he considers to have the same relationship to a class of objects as he does perform an action toward one of the objects in that set, it should be functionally equivalent to ego's performing it himself. He should be able to make an inference about his own self-conception (his relationship to that particular object) from observing the behavior toward that category of someone he has previously defined as the same as he is in regard to objects like that. Filters can operate for the self as well as for the definition of objects, as the category into which ego assigns both himself and alter acts to filter his conception of himself. The extended Self-Reflexive includes those cases in which the individual makes an

inference about his relationship to an object either (a) by directly confronting that object and observing that confrontation (call 1), (b) by confronting another member of the category of objects to which he has assigned that object originally (call 2), (c) by observing someone with whom he has identified confronting the object directly (call 3), and (d) observing someone with whom he has identified confront another object from the category of objects into which the individual has assigned that object originally (call 4).¹¹

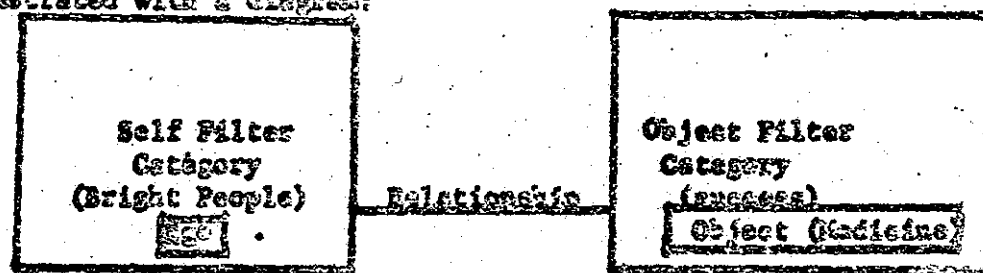
Labelling. The distinguishing characteristic of the Self-Reflexive Act is that the individual makes inferences about himself by himself. Inferences made about the individual by someone other than himself, and in some way communicated to the individual, also have an effect on his definition of himself. This process whereby inferences about the individual made by someone other than himself are communicated to him is very much like what is meant by the term "Labelling".¹²

On the broadest possible level, if an individual's attitudes are made up of his definitions of his relationship to the objects of his experience, then it follows that others can influence his attitudes insofar as they provide information to him about either himself, objects,¹³ or both.

Information provided to the individual by another person can be focused on either of the attitude's components or on both. While this is a very simple point, it is of considerable importance because it illustrates the proposition that another can influence (a) the individual's attitude toward an object without mentioning that object, simply by

focusing attention on the self, or (b) the individual's definition of self without mentioning the individual, simply by focusing attention on the object.

But these are not the only complicating factors that need to be considered. Just as was true in the case of the Self-Reflexive Act, objects (the self included) are defined by placing them into categories (association and differentiation of objects with other objects). It follows then that the concept filter category applies as well here. Others can define the new object into a previously existing filter category toward which ego already conceives a relationship, or they can define the category into which ego has previously placed the object in reference to ego's previously existing self-conception. This can be illustrated with a diagram:



Assume that the attitude in question is ego's attitude toward becoming a doctor. The smaller boxes represent ego and medicine (being a doctor). The larger boxes represent the filter categories of which ego considers himself and medicine to be members, i.e., ego is a member of the category "bright people", and medicine is a member of the category "success". Ego's attitude toward medicine can be influenced by others who provide him with information either about his relationship to medicine (call 5 of Figure 1), his relationship to success (call 6 of Figure 1), the relationship of bright people to medicine (call 7 of Figure 1), or the relationship

of bright people to success (cell 8 of Figure 1). The implications this theory has for the detection of significant others will be apparent when one notes that in all these instances another person has influenced ego's attitude toward being a doctor. Yet in cell six that other did not mention doctors, in cell seven he didn't mention ego, and in cell eight he mentioned neither. (Woelfel, 1967; Haller and Woelfel, 1962.)

The theory as so far presented possesses several substantial advantages. First, it has clear implications for the investigator of interpersonal influence. It argues, for example, that simply asking an individual who has influenced his attitude toward an object will seldom yield a complete list of "significant others", since it will exclude all those who have influenced only the filter categories on which the attitude depends. Rather, a two-step operation is implied: 1) the filter categories for the object must be identified. (Since the filter categories are those categories the individual uses to define the object, they are easily operationalized by asking the individual to define the object.) 2) The researcher may ask who, by word or example, has influenced the individual's definitions of the filter categories.

Secondly, the theory, due to its emphasis on the definition of self and object, provides a clear injunction against the kind of research which tries (and characteristically fails) to relate non-situational self-images (e.g., I am friendly; I am aggressive) to specific behaviors. On the other hand it avoids the empirical helplessness that arises out of the view that behavior is totally spontaneous, created wholly out of the situational context.

The critical value of the theory, however, is that the eight-fold classification of means of self-conception formation is not an intuitive one, but rather follows directly from the definition of self conception. Since this is the case, the discovery of a mode of influence not included in the eight cells, or the failure to locate influence corresponding to all the cells requires a modification or rejection of the definition of self-conception itself. Thus the definition of self-conception becomes subject to revision by empirical research.

Summary

This paper suggests that the individual identifies himself by recognizing his relationship to the objects of his experience. This is done basically through a process of classification of the individual and those objects into filter categories. Self-conception may thus be formed and altered by forming or altering filter categories, either by including the individual or object into a previously defined filter category, or by changing the definition of a filter category into which either the individual or an object has already been classified. The agency of this process may be either the individual himself through his own observation (Self-Reflexive Act) or the testimony (whether verbal or not) of other people (Labelling). Cross classifying yields eight distinct ways in which the self-conception can be formed through interaction with the social context.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Emile Durkheim saw this clearly: "On the one hand, all internal life draws its primary material from without. We cannot reflect our own consciousness in a purely undetermined state; in this shape it is inconceivable. Now consciousness becomes determined only when affected by something not itself." (Durkheim, 1957, p. 279.)

2. Here, as everywhere in this article, object is taken to mean "...anything which can be designated or referred to..."

3. Sometimes sociologists have been so conscious of the situational elements of an object's definition that non-situational elements have been ignored. It is the non-situational attributes of the piano (e.g., its massiveness) that render it dangerous when falling from a building - a different object (say a feather) in the same situation (falling from a building) will evoke a different response.

4. For a similar argument see C. Wright Mills, "Situated Actions and Vocabularies of Motive," American Sociological Review, V (1940), pp. 904-913.

5. One single definition of a self-object (or set of objects) relationship is what I mean when I say attitude. This conception has been used before, and is rendered by the German term Bezugsvorstellung, (idea of the relation between the self and the object to which the self is responding). (Green, 1951). See Gardner Lindzey, Handbook of Social Psychology, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, Inc.), p. 43.

6. Manford Kuhn has also referred to the self as a constellation of attitudes. (Kuhn, 1960, p.13) It could be argued that, since the self-conception is probably formed one or a few attitudes at a time, much of the

6. Cont. vagueness and generality involved in current formulations of self-formulation theories is due to a focus on the whole self-conception rather than on the formation of one attitude at a time. It follows from the definition above that the problem of self-conception formation is best dealt with one attitude at a time.

7. Of course this is something of an oversimplification. Education is a category too, and serves as a filter for its constituent objects, each of which in turn is a filter category for a lesser category. The last step in this reductionist chain would be that category of physical stimuli which ego thereby designates as a discrete, historically unique object.

8. Mead, as a philosopher, is concerned more with the fact that the individual can infer his subjectivity from that observation; he can infer that he is an agent. Mead is concerned with the individual's awareness of self, not with his awareness of himself as a specific kind of person. He is concerned with the inference of the relationship agent to that acted upon. I am concerned with that, of course, but my specific interest is in the fact that this inference is not only about one's agency itself, but with its specific expression; the individual infers not only that he acts toward the object, but that he acts toward it in a specific way.

9. As Cooley so gently put a similar point: "In so far as our self is identified with that of another it is, of course, unlikely that the aims of the latter should be obnoxious to us." (Cooley, p. 214)

10. As the objects on which the category is based grows more and more diffuse, more and more attitudes will be transferred, because the similarity will be seen as applying to more and more objects. In the case where the objects are extremely diffuse--when individuals in a category consider themselves similar with regard to almost every object they contact-- and when the reference category also comprises a membership group, attitudes will be interchanged about almost everything. Such a group would refer

15. A set of questionnaire instruments, as well as an interview protocol, both based on this theory and designed to detect significant others for educational and occupational aspirations, along with instruments to measure the expectations these significant others hold for the individual, have been described by Heller and Woelfel (1969).