The Self and Other in Society

According to Garfinkel (1997), "the earmark of practical sociological reasoning…is that it seeks to remedy the indexical properties of members' talk and conduct" (244). These indexical properties can be defined as any thing that helps sociologists examine the human social experience between and within individuals. Because sociology is the social science, which focuses on determining the development, structure, and meanings of social interactions, it plays a significant role in attempting to explain how the self develops. For decades, many sociologists have taken various approaches to exploring how individuals conceive of themselves, others, and the social world around them. I will discuss the theoretical contributions of three scholars and how their conceptions of the self within society provide a framework for understanding the larger social order. The sociological sub area of symbolic interactionism, the paradigm, which focuses on how humans assign social meanings to various symbols in society, has significantly informed the works of Herbert Mead, Erving Goffman, and Harold Garfinkel. After discussing the general tenets of these three theoretical contributions, I will argue that these works were limited in scope and cannot be used to explain the self-development of all individuals within 21st century U.S. and global societies.

In "The Self as Social Structure", Herbert Mead (1997) contends that the individual self is a social structure, shaped and transformed through interactions with other social actors. Further, the self has the unique quality of being an object and a subject (214). The part of the self that is objective can only develop in relation to others: "The individual experiences himself as such…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" (214). Because the self develops only in

relation to others, an individual cannot conceive of herself as an object unless she has had interactions with other people: "…it is impossible to conceive of a self arising outside of social experience" (215). Within those interactions, the self of the individual can recognize similarities or differences from others, which further develop the subjective part of the self. By subjective, I mean the part of the self that is more internalized, which develops within the individual aside from, but not separate from other social actors.

Mead further discusses these two aspects of the self by separating them into "I" and "me" categories. Mead defines the "I" as the portion of the self that "reacts to the self, which arises through taking the attitudes of others" (215). This process is also called "taking on the role of the generalized other," where consideration of external social forces (i.e. attitudes, roles of other social actors) affects internal self-development and recognition processes.* The "I" may also be considered the subjective part of the self. While the "I" is more internally imposed, the "me" is the part of the self that interacts more with the external social world and recognizes itself as an object within that world. According to Mead, "the adjustment to that organized world which is present in our own nature is one that represents the "me" and is constantly there" (215).

The two parts of the self develop in conjunction with each other as social clues from the external social environment shape the "I" and "me." It is through the "me" that the "I" interprets the social world. However, the "I" informs the "me" of its simultaneous separation and connectedness with the external world. Thus, the external environment plays an important part in the development of the self. Mead argues that the self develops in relation to a particular community of which an individual belongs (218). Within such communities,

* Mead defines the generalized other as "the organized community or social group which gives to the individual his unity of self" (219).

symbols (i.e. language, object identification) become a way for individuals to develop shared meanings of the social world. As a result, individuals rely on their communities to develop a sense of self; at times, this self becomes conjoined with the community: "No hard-and-fast line can be drawn between our own selves and the selves of others, since our own selves exist and enter as such into our experience only insofar as the selves of others exist and enter as such into our experience also" (219). Additionally, Mead addresses how different selves or personalities can develop within different social contexts, especially if an individual may identify with various communities (i.e. race, gender, sexuality). This aspect of the self with regard to identity will be important when I discuss Goffman's dramaturgical approach.

Whereas Mead addresses the intricacies of self-development, Goffman discusses how the self is presented or portrayed during social interactions with others. Goffman's *Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (1960) outlines his dramaturgical approach to theorizing the ways individuals behave in and out of the presence of others. The dramaturgical approach has also been interpreted as related to Shakespeare's quote "All the world is a stage...and one man in his time plays many parts" (http://www.artofeurope.com/shakespeare/sha9.htm). Goffman asserts that individuals consistently go through the process of preparing for and having social interactions with others; he considers these interactions to be performances, which he defines as "…the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants" (15). During these performances, individuals must learn about each other and disclose information to help define social situations; the individual gives and gives off expressions. The expressions given are verbal symbols (i.e. verbal

communication) used to relay information. The expressions given off are the impressions verbal symbols leave with others in the interaction; these are considered more non-verbal: "…when an individual appears in the presence of others, there will usually be some reason for him to mobilize his activity so that it will convey an impression to others which it is in his interests to convey" (4).

The individual is in control of the impression he wants to leave upon others within a social interaction. Therefore, he may choose to present aspects of himself that will be considered more favorable to the group and ensure a well-defined social situation. In this case, the individual gives certain verbal expressions to give off favorable expressions to his group. It is the individual's given expressions that define the basis for how the group will interact with the individual (Goffman, 1960). Although the individual may attempt to ensure a solid social interaction, it is possible that "events may occur within the interaction which contradict, discredit, or otherwise throw doubt upon this [the individual's] projection" (12). Whenever this occurs, the individual will try to re-establish equilibrium within the interaction by using defensive or protective practices. Whereas protective practices are used to avoid embarrassment, defensive practices are used to "save definitions of the situation" (13).

While Goffman explains the role of expressions in impression management and self -presentation, he also posits that individuals prepare for and have social interactions in different "regions." The back region is where the performance is prepared. Here, the individual may decide which impression she wants the group to have of her and what ways are best to give off such an impression. The impression she chooses to portray in the performance may or may not be true to her personality. The front region is the area where

the performance occurs, and the social actor puts a certain aspect of her self on display. Because the individual has control over the impression she wants others to have of her, she has a power that can be used to persuade her audience. However, to be effective, the power "must be clothed in effective means of displaying it and will have different effects depending upon how it is dramatized" (241). Thus, the individual's power cannot be recognized unless it is demonstrated in its ability to affect audience members.

The ways individuals encounter social interactions are based on the existence of social establishments, which Goffman defines as any places surrounded by fixed barriers to perception in which a particular kind of activity regularly takes place with a team of performers, audience, and ethos, which are maintained by shared rules. In order for social interactions to occur, the individuals involved must all agree on the definition of the situation, which contains shared conceptions of the interaction. Such a working consensus is necessary and all individuals involved must take part in this process. Goffman argues that these social establishments may be political, cultural, or structural. As a result, social aspects of the larger society can affect the way an individual presents herself before others.

The existence of various social establishments is essential to understanding Mead's concept of self-development because social establishments create the different social contexts in which different selves are formed. Although Mead focuses on the formation of the self ("I" and "me") and Goffman addresses self-presentation, these two theories come together in recognizing the importance of the social world in self development and presentation. The political, cultural and structural establishments that shape the social world influence larger social interactions and therefore, the self, as an individual attempts to be incorporated in the social world. Membership in certain communities (based on different

identities) affects how an individual will present himself to members of those groups. For example, as a middle class educated heterosexual black woman, I may claim membership to various groups on the basis of my social class, educational attainment, sexual orientation, race, and gender. When only with people of one social group, their behavior may influence the self-impression I want to give. Likewise, due to my overlapping identities and structural inequalities, I may not always receive acceptance in all of these groups. Although I am black, my other social identities intersect with my race to shape my daily-lived experiences within multiple groups. These identities not only influence my self-conception, but also the expressions I give and give off to other social actors.

While Goffman and Mead focus more specifically on the self, Garfinkel examines the existence of everyday social practices. In "What Is Ethnomethodology?", Garfinkel (1967) argues that individuals should see everyday practices as phenomena. The normality and regularity of commonplace social practices has caused social actors to take them for granted and made it difficult for social actors to recognize the unique social characteristics of such practices. Such commonplace social practices develop from having multiple accounts, which build over time. An account is used to analyze and make reference to a given situation: "Like conversations, reputations, and careers, the particulars of accounts are built up step by step over the actual uses of and references to them" (239). Thus, the social aspect of accounts and their daily uses are socially organized: "There is a feature of members' accounts that for them is of such singular and prevailing relevance that it controls other features in their specific character as recognizable, rational features of practical sociological inquiries" (242). The repetitiveness of accounts provides a way for individuals to organize their lives and make sense of their social settings. As individuals work to

maintain "accountable" settings in their everyday lives, it becomes hard for individuals to recognize the importance of non-accountable practices.* As social interactions consist of verbal and non-verbal components, they are often difficult to observe and report.

The non-accountable settings are considered indexical expressions, which are a way for social actors to incorporate themselves into the social world using their social practices. Garfinkel distinguishes indexical expressions from objective expressions because objective expressions use the scientific approach to examine the social order. As a result, Garfinkel proposes the use of ethnomethodology to incorporate some aspects of scientific methodology into the social of indexical social expressions and interactions: "I use the term 'ethnomethodology' to refer to the investigation of the rational properties of indexical expressions and other practical actions as contingent ongoing accomplishments of organized artful practices of everyday life" (244).

Within ethnomethodology, reflexivity of the individual is important in examining accounts: "Members know, require, count on, and make use of this reflexivity to produce, accomplish, recognize, or demonstrate …their procedures and findings"(242). Here, Garfinkel acknowledges that the reflexivity of the individual self plays a role in establishing everyday practices, which in turn influence the social order. This idea reinforces Mead's notion of the self as a social entity, which is not only influenced by the social world, but also plays a role in shaping the social world. From this perspective, the self and social world cannot exist without one another. While the self develops in relation to the social world, the social world is likewise constructed and developed by the multiple selves of the individuals within that world.

* Garfinkel (1967) defines "accountable" as things, which can be observed and reported.

Now that the ideals of Mead, Goffman, and Garfinkel have been established, I will critique their relevance and application to today's contemporary society. While these works provide solid frameworks for examining the self and other in society, there are three ways these theories should be expanded to include the experiences of more individuals: 1) lack of individual agency, 2) the role of power, and 3) cultural differences between groups of people.

When considering Mead's theory on self formation and how social groups influence individual self-development, one particular quote of Mead's suggests a lack of agency on the part of the individual in constructing the self: "The individual possesses a self only in relation to the selves of the other members of his social group; and the structure of his self expresses or reflects the general behavior pattern of this social group to which he belongs; just as does the structure of the self of every other individual belonging to this social group" (219). While group membership provides the social capacity necessary for the self to develop, this quote implies that too much of the self is tied to other individuals. The composition of social groups is related to the unequal distribution of societal power, in which some groups are more valued than others. The development of social structures to distinguish groups on bases such as race, class, and gender are directly tied to this power relationship. These social categories were designed to differentiate individuals on the basis of physical, genetic, and some would argue social characteristics with which individuals are born. Race, for example, has been the predominant social marker in U.S. society, ascribed to individuals with certain skin tones, hair textures, and physical markers (i.e. nose and lip shape). Race, like sex and class, are categories into which individuals are born. Therefore, being born into a certain social group may affect an individual's access to societal power

and resources, depending on one's membership or exclusion from the dominant social group. Because social structures are such a trenchant part of our social reality and can influence self-development, Mead's emphasis on the importance of an individual's group membership would suggest that people are automatically placed in social groups based on existing social structures, derive their selves from those groups and must exist within the confines of those social structures. Such an emphasis also implies that individuals are a function of society, not of themselves. Furthermore, the focus on the relationship between social structures and the individual appears to be an excuse for condoning social inequality within the social order.

Another component of symbolic interactionism states that individuals have roles to play in the social order, which "emerge as individuals participate in society through their roles" (Lecture 2/7/05). Incorporating power dynamics into the discussion of roles that are often based on social structures, the lack of individual agency in society can be demonstrated further as everyone has a role to play, whether that role is dominant or subordinate. Individuals in dominant and subordinate positions may consider their roles within a defined social order and feel powerless to attempt to modify their roles and the existence of an unequal social order.

With regard to individual agency, Goffman and Garfinkel's theories appear to allow more flexibility. In Goffman's dramaturgical approach, the individual has some control in her self-presentation as she has the ability to determine which impression she will portray to her audience. Within ethnomethodology, Garfinkel acknowledges that the individual plays an important role in shaping society. These are two ways individual agency may be expressed within those paradigms. However, the issue of power is still an important one,

which must be addressed. Regardless of how much a social actor tries to persuade the audience during a performance or affect the larger social world, her ability to exercise this agency is related to the amount of power she bestows. A person with societal power, traditionally wealthy white heterosexual men, has more resources and wherewithal to persuade and control the powerless. A dominant role player's position in the social hierarchy provides more flexibility in self-presentation and society influence than an individual in a subordinate position.

Finally, Mead, Goffman, and Garfinkel's theories do not account for a more socially diverse society with regard to race, culture, religion, etc. These works were written in and before the mid-twentieth century, when access to knowledge and scholarship was allowed to a few middle class white men. With the Civil Rights, Women's Rights, and Anti-Vietnam Movements of the 1960s and 1970s, more access and resources have been granted to other groups (i.e. women, people of color). Because Mead, Goffman, and Garfinkel's scholarship reflect a more homogeneous academic community, it did not consider the relevance of marginalized peoples. These works reflected the Eurocentricity and Anglo-Americanicity of Sociology and the larger social order, which predominantly recognized white male voices. While these contributions are important for understanding the self and society, these contributions must be expanded to discuss the ways race, nationality, religion, etc. affect self-development and self-presentation within the larger society.

Symbolic interactionism has been a key component of sociological social psychology, used to explain the self and the other within society. Mead conceived of the self as existing in two entities, the "I" and the "me," which are both influenced by social interactions with others. Goffman's work expanded upon this notion by examining the ways

the self is presented in front of others. Garfinkel explored how the individual and society both affect and develop one another. While their contributions are valid and have advanced the study of the self and other in society, these works were written in times that only validated the presence of white individuals, especially men. In today's society, where multiple peoples fight for recognition and struggle to find their identities in a more diverse world, these influential texts must be reexamined to determine how existing social structures and power dynamics influence self-development and self-presentation. Furthermore, the role of the individual must also be explored in conjunction with social structures and power dynamics to allow for the development of individual agency within the social order. After all, the self and the other play as much a role in constructing the society as the society does in constructing the self and the other.

## SOURCES

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