THE SOCIAL REALITY OF PERSPECTIVES: ON G.H. MEAD'S POTENTIAL RELEVANCE FOR THE ANALYSIS OF CONTEMPORARY SOCIETIES

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Mead's rarely explored notion of an "objective reality of perspectives" serves as a point of departure for a discussion of the implications of his work for general sociological theory and the analysis of contemporary societies. The epistemological background is explored to the point where sociology can be viewed as pragmatist mode of response to the inevitable relativity of knowledge. Mead's well known theory of identity formation plays an essential role in this context. The concept of perspective may serve as bridge for a generalization of the notion of identity in order to demonstrate the genuine sociological character of Mead's work. Illustrations are provided of the potential inherent in Mead's thought for research and to the study of contemporary societies. Finally sociology itself is conceived as a special kind of perspective, concerned with the inevitable perspectivity of human behavior.

INTRODUCTION

In the social sciences Mead's concept of the "objective reality of perspectives" has not received sufficient attention up to now. In this article I try to show how the theory this concept represents is capable of overcoming the division between micro- and macrosociology and of highlighting the genuine sociological relevance of Mead's work. For this purpose I discuss first the epistemological basis of the concept of perspective and then its value for sociological theory as well as some of the implications for research. I then propose some admittedly speculative ideas concerning the ways in which Mead's theory of perspectivity can be applied to the analysis of contemporary societies. In particular, I have sought to

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illustrate how Mead's approach could be further developed both theoretically and empirically. I close the article with a few remarks concerning the relevance of the theory of perspectivity for an understanding of the tasks of sociology.

What follows is not a canonical exegesis of Mead, but rather an attempt to interpret Mead as a pragmatist in a pragmatistic mode. In order to enhance the relevance of his work for general societal analysis. I have also relied, to a great extent, on the response to Mead typical of German sociology (Habermas 1967; 1981; Joas 1985a—see also the different contributions to Joas 1985b).[1] In Germany this growing concern with Mead's theories is also connected with an increased interest in pragmatism.[2]

Here, Mead's work tends to be interpreted on the whole as a general theory of sociality involving the fundamental reciprocity between behavior and communication. His views on the constitution of personality and individuality are particularly interesting because of the emphasis he places on the interrelationship between personality development and societal structure. Thus, modern forms of individuality not only represent an opportunity for personal development but also require a concerted effort on the part of individuals. Also given the pragmatist bias of his writings, special attention is paid to the ethical and social reformist writings. Particularly relevant here are the societal role of the (social) sciences and the regulative idea of mankind as an "ideal community of speakers" (Apel 1982; Habermas 1981).

But even within the context of German sociology and philosophy his theory of perspectivity has seldom been dealt with explicitly. One reason for this oversight may be that Mead himself only recognized the significance of this insight relatively late in life and only after he had studied Einstein's theory of relativity. Mead's interest in relativity theory led him to explore the question of "how society is possible" from both an epistemological and a general sociological point of view. Like Simmely in his famous essay (1908/1968, pp. 21–30), Mead also takes his point of departure from the (dialectical) opposition between individual and society. And yet Mead's approach is more radical, for he is interested not only in how society is possible but also in the conditions under which man is able to ask this question, that is, how is it possible to gain knowledge (Erkenntnis)[3] and how to speak and write about it coherently. Mead anticipates in this way one of the questions of modern epistemology, but at the same time, and as a contemporary of Max Scheler, he also anticipates the modern sociology of knowledge by exploring in the practical implications of this dual question.

The achievements of Mead's lifelong concern with communication and the specific aspects of human language can be understood in these terms. They range from the observation of everyday interaction to the theoretical analysis of the development of language as a function of man's evolution. By attempting to connect different levels of discourse as well as psychological and sociological interests, Mead developed an unusual and for many a not easily understandable mode of argumentation. This is probably the main reason why the popular response to Mead has been so highly selective, neglecting some aspects while acknowledging others, particularly his model of the self.

The plausibility of this model not only gained Mead a secure place in sociological textbooks, it was also an open invitation to "operationalize" his ideas, unfortunately, often in a trivialized way (e.g. Kuhn 1960). This is apparently also one of the reasons why Mead has been stereotyped as a "social psychologist." On the other hand, sociologists have on the whole failed to recognize his theoretical and empirical value for general

sociology. The principle reason for this neglect seems to be that Mead never explicitly dealt with those areas that make up the main portion of systematic sociology, the intermediate structures between the individual and society: e.g. the family, organizations, social class, social mobility etc.

Today we are in a better position to realize why he did not rely on these concepts. His primary aim was a metatheory of the *dynamics* of social phenomena, not to classify them descriptively. This goal seems very relevant at the moment, particularly since everyday experience tends to confirm the rapid changes taking place in scientific knowledge. The general impression is one of increasing differentiation and dynamization. A substantial part of these developments are apparently connected with new forms and methods of human communication. A fundamental analysis of their implications leads, if not exclusively then at least in many cases, to basic questions concerning the specific nature of human communication, one of Mead's central concerns.

I would like to mention still another aspect although it may seem somewhat far fetched. As I already indicated, the logic of Mead's mode of reasoning itself has tended to hinder a more comprehensive response. It is neither inductive nor deductive. My suspicion is that Mead's mode of reasoning involves the combination of the two methods that Peirce called abduction.[4] According to Peirce abduction represents a means of making the process of logical reasoning more accessible. The recent debate on postmodernism has likewise facilitated an understanding of such modes of scientific discourse.[5]

Mead, finally, and here he is genuinely a pragmatist, points out the inescapable necessity of action. In so doing he also draws attention to the unavoidable connection between action and its justification, including the constant necessity of ethics, and be it only because ethical statements always anticipate a part of the future.

PERSPECTIVITY AND EPISTEMOLOGY

Ultimately, Mead made use of the concept of perspective in order to describe "the world in its relationship to the individual and the individual in his relationship to the world" (Mead 1938, p. 115). Here the term "world" as opposed to environment indicates a "reflexive" use of a social logic that enables us to include the individual as part of the world. Also significant is the emphasis Mead places on reciprocity, both quantitatively and qualititatively, and on a plurality of perspectives: ". . . perspectives have objective existence." Mead continues: "The obverse of this proposition is that the perspective is not subjective. In other words, there is always a perceptual world, that is itself a perspective within which the subjective arises. The subjective is that experience in the individual which takes the place of the object when the reality of the object, at least in some respects, lies in an uncertain future" (p. 114).

This quite reveals Mead's conception of epistemology, as well as the possible connections between his theory of knowledge and sociology. The assumption that perspectives are objective is a necessary requirement for knowledge, since there is a conceptually identifiable relationship between subject and world. With respect to the significance of this insight for an analysis of everyday experience, perspectives are embedded in temporal relations, in short, in the context of action. In this theory of perspectivity, then, it is possible to recognize his pragmatist presuppositions. In this respect he differs significantly from Durkheim, although there are interesting parallels between his "objective reality of

perspectives'' and Durkheim's belief in the existence of (social) facts of a special nature (see for example Wehrspaun 1985, pp. 74–90).

There is no reality before and beyond perception, but since man can gain knowledge of this process and reflect upon it, we do know that we cannot define reality arbitrarily; we do it on the basis of previous experience and its intersubjective expression in language. But this itself is also a perspective: ''It is true that, whatever arrangement appears upon investigation, it must fit into the structure of the world at an instant as it now lies in the experience, and as such will be also a part of the world at an instant, but here is a perspective (that of the individual in question) in which the actual arrangement belongs not to that instant of his problematic attitude but to a future instant'' (Mead 1938, p. 114).

Mead's view of the connection between time and perspective is significant in several respects. On the one hand, it involves the epistemological assumption that all knowledge is predetermined, that is, that there must exist the more fundamental idea of knowledge as such. *Concrete* modes like concrete experience, depend upon specific conceptions of time connected with particular perspectives. A plurality of perspectives thus necessarily involves a plurality of conceptions of time.

The epistemological assumption that perspective (i.e. the precondition for insight and knowledge acquisition) is connected with ''time'' led Mead to develop the concept of ''emergence.'' His highly abstract use of the term, however, makes difficult to grasp its precise meaning. Indeed, Mead's own definition (Mead 1938, pp. 640–643) is not exhaustive in this respect: ''When things get together, there then arises something that was not there before . . . It remains to be seen in what sense we can now characterize that which has emerged'' (p. 641). Thus, reality should be seen in the process of becoming, and not as preexistent or static. But Mead's use of the term is more complex and ambivalent. Emergence presupposes a reality that is recognized as such, for only such a conception of reality can become a topic of (scientific) discourse. Furthermore, this notion of emergence only makes sense within an evolutionary conception of life and consciousness. In a sense Mead anticipated some of the fundamental presuppositions of evolutionary epistemology. Here we can see how his view of the development of the self, insofar as it is a self-regulating, reflective system, seems to involve an evolutionary conception of reality.

At this point, however, Mead is no longer primarily interested in expanding or continuing the epistemological argument. In this respect he differs from Peirce who shares many of the same premises. Mead is much more fascinated by the implications of these views for an understanding of sociality. His argument here is two-fold. Knowledge acquisition is affected by the conditions determining sociality, and at the same time sociality is also inextricably bound up with a conception of reality as emergence.

The ''real world'' is the emergence that constitutes sociality and which involves two interlocking systems: that of reality and that of knowledge acquisition. Language is the medium that connects them. For Raiser (1971, p. 165). ''the concept (or principle) of sociality is the definite expression of Mead's pluralism and of his notion of natural evolution, in which a novelty (innovation) emerges which cannot be reduced to its causes, yet remains in a systematic interrelation to the known world.''

This mode of thinking inevitably leads to a theory of society and also determines it: Although we need a general concept of reality, this concept only becomes significant when we connect it with the process of communication. Only in this sense can reality, or a

specific mode of reality, be considered ''real.'' If we continue on this road of argumentation, but also simplify it, or express it in everyday language, we would end up with something very close to W.I. Thomas' (1928) theorem: ''If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences!''

The same situation applies in regard to the idea of time which also can be expressed only in specific conceptions of time. Acquiring knowledge about time is only possible in time; knowledge of reality only possible within a reality. Mead combined these two ideas in the famous opening proposition of his Paul Carus' Lectures (Mead 1932/1959, p. 1) that ''reality exists in a present.'' And because it exists in a present, knowledge acquisition is always relative, always dependent on the particular perspective in question. But how is Mead able to avoid the relativism latent in these epistemological views? The answer may be roughly stated as follows: He relies on ''sociology'' as a means of exploring pragmatically the consequences of the perspectival nature of knowledge and action.

SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

Indeed, Mead's use of the concept of perspective to describe social phenomena departs from everyday usage and predates, at least to some extent, his epistemological writings. Yet it is important to keep epistemological issues in mind if we wish to preserve the analytical potential inherent in the notion of perspective. In his unconventional history of philosophy he writes somewhat equivocally that: ''. . . the self as it arises in the human community is one which does definitely represent such an organization of perspectives. That is, the individual comes to realize himself just in so far as he can take the attitude of the group to which he belongs . . . The community as such is the organization of the perspectives of all. They all belong to the same consentient set. But it is an organization of the perspectives of real individuals'' (Mead 1936, p. 415).

In the ''Fragments on Whitehead'' in *The Philosophy of the Act* Mead connects the organization of perspectives with situational awareness: ''The social organization of perspectives involves the so-called consciousness of the situation. But this consciousness of the situation is but the indication of the meanings to the individual in so far as he indicates them to others'' (Mead 1938, p. 540).

The ideas expressed in both of these passages constitute the crux of Mead's sociological theory: perspectives make self-reflection possible and thus help to constitute identity. These processes occur within the context of sociality and are in turn inseparable from the possibilities inherent in the forms and in the evolutionary as well as historical development of human communication. As a result these processes become dynamic. Identities are not permanent or static entities but must be, insofar as they are acquired, constantly supported and confirmed in all manner of concrete activities.

Mead's model of the self, of course, already contains these conceptual elements. The use Mead puts perspectivity to, however, reveals that more is involved than a psychosocial model of personality, but a comprehensive sociological theory. The notion of perspective allows one to emphasize the fundamental significance of language far beyond immediate interaction. It takes up a point which, in Germany, Habermas has repeatedly stressed. Most recently in an analysis of the process of ''individuation through socialization'' (1988, pp. 187–241), where he writes how Mead's shift to linguistic pragmatism made it possible to give ''the language we use to constitute the world—as the medium of potential

understanding, societal cooperation and self-controlled learning processes—precedence over the subjectivity that creates the world'' (p. 191).

There is an additional potential inherent in the theory of perspectivity. If we accept the view that the self is an organization of perspectives, then it is possible to conceive of a perspective as an organization of different types of experience and knowledge. Knowledge, on the other hand, is, according to pragmatistic premises, always related to action. Thus, the concept of perspective refers on a theoretical level to the connections between those social topics approached with the three concepts: identity, knowledge, and action. Furthermore, the notion of perspective postulates that for this connection specific contexts (or systems) exist within sociality which structure this sociality and to which identity can be ascribed.

This approach implies, as mentioned above, a specific conception of time or temporality. It also is inherent in Mead's model of the self, where it has often been analysed. Mead conceives the experience the self makes, together with the behavior that forms its basis, as a dynamic activity. The component, the concept of ''I'' refers to and which stand as it were for the spontaneity of behavior, is connected with the conception of something already existing that refers to the concept of ''me.'' This ''me'', in the flow of action back to the already existent ''self,'' represents ''continuity.'' The result is thus a notion of time, such as has been developed in psychology (Fraisse 1967) as well as in sociology (Elias 1984), which refers to processes connecting ''continuity'' and ''event.'' Continuity stands for the framework within which events are sequentially ordered and set in relation to one another.

Two other conclusions are important and can be better examined by taking the theory of perspectivity into account. First, in social reality conceptions of time are connected with processes of ascription. Ascription in turn possesses the same temporal structure: a new experience is set in relation to what already exists, in this case verbal expressions. Second, for the same reason conceptions of time are connected with sociality and form its basis at the same time. This means in turn that an individual determines his own temporal reality, his own ''subjective'' sense of time, but he does and must do this within the context of sociality. And in doing so he must also coordinate his conception of time with that of others. The result is necessarily a need for comprehensive conceptions of time within social groups, communities, and society. Yet within these general conceptions of time there is also room for subjective notions or for interpretations by subgroups.

The best example is that of clock time. It represents a now practically universal convention, referring originally to the movement of the heavens, and most recently to the movement of atoms, both events that occur forever and can be observed everywhere. And yet in everyday practice how clock time is determined can be interpreted culturally, subculturally, even individually in different ways, a fact well documented in anthropology. Moreover, it is thoroughly possible that alternative conceptions of time within a particular society are based on commonly experienced events or historical traditions and serve as points of reference for common actions.

If we extend Mead's thoughts on the way conceptions of time are related to the constitution of the self, that is of personal identity, then we could postulate, theoretically, that these conceptions of time are also constitutive for collective identities. For empirical research, we could reverse the argumentation and we may postulate the thesis that different conceptions of time observable within social systems are an indication of specific collective identities.[6]

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

A variety of authors have treated aspects of the empirical value of the concept of perspective. Shibutani (1955), for example, suggested at a very early date how important it is to view perspectives in connection with reference groups. Callero (1986), among others, has established a clear connection between perspective and social role. Becker et al. (1961) distinguish between different types of perspectives within the organizational context of a medical school or within the process of professional socialization. Thoughts like these are particularly useful in opposing the often criticized simplifications in understanding the self and its development. Krappmann's essay on socialization (1985) is the most representative example of the recent German response to Mead in this area. Relying on Mead's model of socialization, Krappmann attempts to discover those conditions which influence and foster the development of identity, including the ability to control behavior self-reflexive. In this way he has been able to focus attention on the structural components in the process of socialization (Krappmann/Oswald 1983). This approach, according to Krappmann (1985, pp. 173–176) implies:

- A search for situations in everyday life which demand the cooperative solution of tasks and attention to the coordination of behaviors, hence the identification of the "social objects" that serve children as points of reference for their mutual actions. Particularly relevant here is the emergence or genesis of the self, and not merely the comparison of developments between arbitrarily defined points in time;
- "Play" and "game" may be viewed as ideal-types of context and not strictly as phase within the ontogenetic development of the child. I would add that play and game may even be conceived of as types of "contexts" between which the "socializee" oscillates, something that can also be observed in adult socialization;
- The concept of the self-reflective control of behavior (or action) is compatible with a notion of identity as dialogue. Hence language serves not only to negotiate but also to coordinate behaviors—a point also stressed by Habermas as mentioned above; and
- These and related considerations suggest research designs which make it possible to examine as many different contexts as possible for selected groups of children, e.g. both in the home and at school (in and out of classroom). These studies are then supplemented by interviews in which children themselves explain the observed behavior. Such research designs may be relevant for cross-cultural studies since they propose the extensive variation of contexts rather than a presupposed standardization.

Graumann, one of the few German social-psychologists who have paid ample attention to Mead, has developed another important aspect of perspectivity for research, interestingly enough, not only to his ideas on communication and interaction but also to his phenomenologically founded theory of perspectivity (Graumann, 1960). Using a film showing a dispute between a buyer and a seller of a second-hand car, Graumann attempted to identify experimentally the linguistic indicators for the perspectivistic structure of action (Graumann/Sommer 1986). In a sense he developed what one might call a *rhetoric of perspectivity*. Three groups of viewers were asked to give an account of the film. The members of the first were asked to identify with the buyer, the second group with the

seller, and the third to take a neutral stand. The analysis concentrated upon two categories of perspectives, the first related to the reflection of roles just mentioned and the second referring to the subject's previous experiences in such situations. Both categories of perspectives were shown to be relevant. Structural qualities as well as the means of communication may shape the perspective of action in a coherent and enduring way.

Meyrowitz (1985) has also made a noteworthy contribution toward such a perspective oriented interpretation of media communication. But although he relies primarily on Goffman's analysis of framed social interaction and McLuhan's (1964) notion the "medium is the message," it is nonetheless possible to recognize the hidden potential of Mead's theories at work. Basically, Meyrowitz' argument is the following: the main impact of media communication can be assessed by focusing not on content but instead on the way these media transform our approach to social situations. The media, for example, have lowered the relevance of physical presence for the perception of other people and of events. But in the way they display situations, they also alter the relationship between foreground and background. Finally, they blend different social situations across time and space. The result is an alteration of our own "sense of place," e.g. in the mode of social perception or in our understanding of social roles. Media, taken as realities in their own sake, do not just shape our notion of social reality, they also influence the way we construct social reality, thus stimulating in this way cultural change. Meyrowitz' main examples are gender, the social role of the child, and politcal authority. Although one would be justified in criticizing some of his empirical illustrations as well as the emphasis he places on the linearity of the developments, his analysis reveals a concerted application and advancement of the notion of perspectivity in a Meadian sense within the study of contemporary forms of communication. It also suggests links between the organization of private communication and its political institutionalization. And in this way it helps to illuminate the macrosociological meaning of perspectivity.

THE POTENTIAL OF MEAD'S THOUGHT FOR THE ANALYSIS OF CONTEMPORARY SOCIETIES

The examples I have cited up to now reveal the extent to which the sociological implictions of Mead's work are connected with his theory of perspectivity. Two aspects are particularly important. First of all, perspectivity according to Mead's premises is a universal and inevitable condition for human sociality, which can only be experienced and described in terms of perspectival modi. We are conscious of this, and historically speaking we are becoming more conscious of it all the time, yet we nevertheless have to act. Second, perspectives reveal the extent to which identities are never definitive, although we tend to view them as permanent and unchangeable. We have to cope with this aspect of our existence as well.

Mead himself undertook, only reluctantly, an analysis of society as a whole. Today these analyses seem harmonistic and universalistic, reflecting not only his own biography but also his appraisal of the dominant political goals of his time. Both are connected in turn with a fundamental ethical attitude characteristic of Mead's work as a whole, an attitude, moreover, that is particularly relevant for Mead's conception of sociology. Mead's two essays on international affairs (1914–1915, 1983 and 1929/1964) display quite clearly these orientations. Both essays involve a passionate rejection of war, which

"as an adjudicator is utterly discredited since, as I have said, if war is logically pursued it leaves nothing to be adjudicated, not even the enemy nations themselves" (1929/1964, p. 366).

These articles reveal Mead as a theoretician of civilization, whose arguments often shift between idealism and realism: "The rational attitude is to find what common values lie back of the divisions and competitions. Within our communities the process of civilization is the discovery of these common ends which are the bases of social organizations" (p. 365). At another point he even goes so far as to claim that "civilization is not an affair of reasonableness; it is an affair of social organization" (p. 369), thus implying that it is the discovery of such common ends that makes civilization possible. Indeed, their discovery is also the key to the elimination of warfare: "We will get rid of the mechanism of warfare only as our common life permits the individual to identify his own ends and purposes with those of the community of which he is a part and which has endowed him with a self" (p. 370). The implication, of course, is that individuals identify with what is good for the community as a whole: "The selfhood [sic.] of a community depends upon such an organization that common goods do become the ends of the individuals of a community" (p. 369). The fact that Mead sees the motor of international integration in commerce, in a universal religion based on a universal ethics, and in the sciences, may be interpreted as an expression of ambivalence between idealism and realism. In these writings on civilization, international relations, and societal structures, Mead remains ultimately true to fundamental presuppositions by viewing the emergence of the individual—with his own personal identity—within the context of sociality. This conception of the individual with respect to sociality reveals a logic and a rationality inherent in society itself.

But is there not a certain contradiction between Mead's theory of perspectivity and such an orientation? Is a broad perspective sufficient, such as is contained in the concept of the "generalized other?" Are not precisely those areas of societal organization excluded which lie between the poles "individual" and "society?" There are passages in the article quoted above and in other of Mead's writings which reveal differentiations. Thus in *Mind, Self and Society* he contrasts the processes of identity development in so-called primitive and differentiated societies. His argument (1934, p. 221f) is that in "primitive" societies an individual's thoughts and actions are controlled to a great degree by the general way in which activities are organized in specific groups to which he belongs. Thus persons become individuals on the whole when they adopt a predetermined social mode of behavior. In "civilized" society, on the other hand, "individuality is constituted rather by the individual's departure from, or modified realization of, any given social type" (p. 221). Nevertheless, "however original and creative he may be in his thinking and behavior, (the individual) always and necessarily assumes a definite relation to, and reflects in the structure of his self or personality, the general organized pattern of experience and activity exhibited in or characterizing the social life-process in which he is involved, and of which his self or personality is essentially a creative expression or embodiment" (p. 222). Also noteworthy is the utopian conception that stands at the beginning of this argument: "Until we have such a social structure in which an individual can express himself as the artist and the scientist does, we are thrown back on that sort of structure found in the mob . . ." (p. 221).

This is a illuminating passage in regard to the problems arising out of an analysis of contemporary societies. For Mead there is a correspondence between the structure of

personality and the structure of society, as said before, but this is a correspondence determined by the (potentially) creative process of self-reflexive identity construction. In this sense individuality can be viewed ''ex ante'' as a *task* and ''ex post'' as an *achievement*. The task is all the more challenging, the more complex and pluralistic the structure of society is. This logic means, moreover, that creative, individualistic solutions are correspondingly more highly valued. The reference to the artist that Mead makes here is indicative, although he also refers to an ideal society. At the same time he also reminds us of the danger of falling back into more primitive forms of sociality. His analyses express again the ambivalence between an ideal view and insight into the reality.

We can also approach these problems on a more abstract level. Does societal development involve constant differentiation and thus also the constant modification of individuality? One could assume this argument against the background of such a simple model of evolution. And yet is this argument also valid for the characterization of historical periods. Mead is inclined at may points to assume that such an ideal development is conceivable. But he also points out that human society is capable and forced of reflecting on and in a certain sense of controlling and shaping its own development. ''. . . the human society has reached an end which no other form has reached, that of actually determining within certain limits, what its inorganic environment will be'' (1934, p. 252).

At this point we are reminded of Mead's theory of perspectivity. The notion of an ''objective reality of perspectives'' serves Mead as an overarching principle as well as a conceptual tool for the analysis of the emergence and the constitution of human sociality and individuality. Perspective refers to the specific way in which thinking, be it through perception, experience or knowedge, is organized. This process is connected with the emergence of ''identity'' which in turn serves as a frame of reference for future action.[7]

Such a concept of identity, insofar as it is associated with the concept of perspective, can be applied to all kind of social systems. This is readily apparent in everyday usage where it is quite common to speak of groups, organizations or states which act. The reification implied in this wording has often been viewed with suspicion because of its closeness to an organic conception of the social world. But this must not necessarily be the case. In public discourse the reference to collective identities can focus attention on the activities of organizations or even legitimize them. In this sense the notion of identity implies loyalty to or subjection by institutions which in turn are influenced in their own conceptions of identity. We are close to Mead's concept of the ''generalized other'', and here I would like to move beyond traditional interpretations. If we examine the theory of perspectivity as well as many of the general references in his writings (some of which I have referred to in the preceding discussion), we may conceive of a pragmatistic differentiation of the ''generalized other'' in terms of the distinction between different social categories of perspectives. Thus we can speak of private, public or religious perspectives, referring, for example, to a family, a community, a corporation or a deity. Perspectives of this kind have at least three dimensions: they refer to the specific collective identity in question; they confirm a certain category of social entities (e.g. a type of social system); and they express a claim on the part of acting individuals. Such a claim is based upon more than membership in groups or institutions or upon role relationships. The pragmatic relevance of their perception extends beyond these connections because perspectives are part of all kind of social discourse, and in many instances belong to general communication.

If we attempt to illustrate this view of the relevance of Mead's theory of perspectivity for a general analysis of society, a number of additional differentiations are necessary. First, the more strongly articulated identities become, the more noticable they become in the "market place" of communication. The present popularity of the notion "corporate identity" would be an example. Also "liberalization," deregulation and the technological expansion of the media thus seem to reinforce these developments. Yet at the same time there is also a tendency to interpenetration and mutual instrumentalization. A good example of this shift is the increasing use of advertising for purposes such as "cultural sponsering." Meyrowitz (1985) also describes such modes of interpenetration between previously distinct spheres of life.

Second, with respect to social systems, modern societies have achieved a new level of complexity with the transformation of social structures and processes and a marked increase in the mutual dependency of different segments of society. For example the Tschernobyl catastrophe represents a new type of global risks resulting from increasing complexity of society. Also relevant is the awareness around the world that such global catastrophes can occur, as well as the general insecurity about the possible consequences, and the suspicion that such risks and related incidents could be (and indeed have been) hidden until they are uncovered by chance.

The situation arising in contemporary society thus resembles a type of "social aleatoric."[8] What I mean is that societal processes have come into existence as a result of conflict between the different claims identities make (and the perspectives based on them) as well as the enormous expansion of the communications media. These societal processes are to a great extent the result of accident. And yet the accidental nature of such processes cannot be viewed as simply natural or as fate. They are, in a paradoxical way, the consequence of new modes of societal organization and communication and of the struggle to institutionalize new forms.

As a result of this societal transformation individuals experience to a greater extent what I would like to call "subjective multiperspectivity."[9] This means that individuals are confronted with numerous perspectives that make different claims on their actions, their membership in different social systems and their loyalty to different collective identities. This concept of multiperspectivity has its roots in Mead's theory of sociality, in the notion of being several things at once. The point is that under present societal conditions, especially present-day forms of communication, this potential is a source of structurally induced stress. In the face of such powerful claims being made on identity, individuals experience a constant need to accentuate their own subjective identities. Here it is possible to see how structural changes in society as well as associated changes in the communications media shape individual behavior.

Recent work in sociology provides numerous examples of how such processes are currently being described and analyzed. And yet, despite the wide variety of different approaches, it is possible to identify certain patterns. The most prominent is the growing tendency toward extreme forms of individuality, for which there are a number of current terms: "radical individuality" (Bellah et al. 1985), "narcisstic personality" (Lasch 1978), "Individualisierungsschub" (shift to individualization, Beck 1986). Differences in terminology or interpretation are here of less significance than the insight that societal conditions can obviously be seen as relevant for certain forms of identity development. The premises of general sociology also support such a view. Mead's approach, however,

places particular emphasis on the organization of communication in society as well as on the increasing demands being made on the subjective constitution of identity in contemporary society.

If we rely on the potential inherent in Mead's approach and attempt to apply his insights into the perspectivity of action to an analysis of current societal change, then we should be better able to recognize the genuine sociological content of his theory. We could explore the question of which conditions favor a shift to radical individualism as a response to subjective mutiperspectivity and which induce individuals to seek refuge in collective identities such as nationalism or fundamentalism. Or we could explore to what extent the increasing multitude of perspectives and the tendency toward radical individualism are altering socialization processes in the family (see: Lüscher 1988). To summarize my arguments:

- The sociological relevance of Mead's theory of the self, in other words, the constitution of a personal identity rests—as has generally been recognized—on his conception of this process as directly connected with the specifities of human communication, and through this, with human sociality. The theory of perspectivity represents an essential component of this model. On the one hand, it postulates the preconditions for an individual being able to conceive of himself as a person, while on the other it makes possible the systematic framework for action in concrete social contexts. Perspectives thus have "objective reality" with respect to self-knowledge and the action based on it;

- If we consider the potential inherent in the concept of perspectivity in this way, then it can be extended to cover the concept of collective identity as a bridge to macro-sociology. In this way, the capacity for a differential view of social structures is closely connected with the concept of perspective. Here it is possible to distinguish between different categories of perspectives, depending on whether the frame of reference is the identity of a person, a private group or a public organization. Within these (or other) categories we can identify singular perspectives that reflect in communicative contexts a connection between identity, situation, and action. These views, moreover, lead toward a differentiation of Mead's concept of the "generalized other."

- In Mead's conception of sociology the individual person is the decisive actor who cannot be reduced to other "factors" or "variables." The impulses emanating from individuals are creative in the very special sense that they cannot be completely explained in other terms. This is only possible, by the way, because Mead consistently views individuality under the conditions of sociality, although within a process involving the evolutionary development of consciousness. This makes it in turn possible to establish frames of reference for analysing the dominant collective definitions of societal situations at a particular point in time and within a particular society. In this way we can describe historically and culturally specific modes of social consciousness and its emergence in personal as well as collective identities; and we can conceptualize a dominant feature of the current societal situation as follows: For many individuals it is the expanding multiperspectivity that determines one of the main factors influencing the development of Western industrial societies at present. This is the result of an extensive societal differentiation that is "doubled"

or multiplied by the potential inherent in modern forms of communications media. Under these circumstances the anthropologically determined possibilities for constituting personal identity become a demanding task. Achievement in turn depends on the way these tasks are performed and fulfilled.

Does the *general* awareness among most societal groups of having to "achieve" personal identity possibly represent a new historical shift in the way identity is constituted (and which may also affect our understanding of other categories of identity)? This question is at the heart of the contemporary debate on postmodernism.[10] Mead, of course, never wrote directly on this subject, and yet his writing lends itself to such a hypothesis because his theory of self is radically sociological and yet still admits the possibility of subjective personal development. The attempt to draw on Mead's ideas in this context, makes it possible to emphasize the eminent sociological character of his theory and—by making pragmatic use of a classical author—to consider the possibilities for the further development of his theory. This implies a perspectival understanding of sociology which I will touch on briefly.

SOCIOLOGY AS PERSPECTIVE—
THE PERSPECTIVITY OF SOCIOLOGY

Mead's theory of perspectivity can also be applied to the analysis of sociology as a discipline with its own or multiple identities. We can find the basis for such a view in Mead's "Perspective Theory of Perception: ". . . the scientist within one perspective, having determined the characters thereof in terms of its space and time, can simultaneously place himself in another perspective and translate these determinations into the space and time of this latter perspective and vice versa. One of the implications of such a theory is that it is possible to isolate an event in different perspectives as still identical, though its spatiotemporal and energy characters vary" (Mead 1938, pp. 118–119). In "The Objective Reality of Perspectives" (1927/1964, p. 331) Mead sums up his ideas on the role of the scientist in science as follows: "I am asking simply what is objective for the social scientist, what is the subject-matter of his science, and I wish to point out that the critical scientist [sic.] is only replacing the narrower social perspectives of other communities by that of a more highly organized and hence more universal community." The fundamental societal role he assigns to science here recalls his dicussion in *Mind, Self and Society* of the role of a universalistic community in furthering international understanding (1934, p. 284).

Let me emphasize at this point Mead's view of the social sciences. The social sciences attempt to formulate perspectives that capture the genuine perspectivity of human behavior. They help to develop what one could call "reflexive knowledge" (Wehrspaun 1987), relying in the process on "a transformulation formula" that allows one to "pass from one value field to another" (Mead 1927/1964, p. 311). But far from being overly idealistic, Mead adds a warning: "We are deluded, by the ease with which we can, by what may be fairly called transformation formulae, translate the experience of other communities into that of our own, into giving finality to the perspective of our own thought . . ." (p. 311).

From Mead's thoughts on the role of science and the scientist in modern society we can derive a novel program for the social sciences, and particularly for sociology: the analysis

of the perspectivity of human behavior, including the analysis of the consequences resulting from the insight into the unavoidability of such perspectivity. This insight, of course, is also valid for sociological analysis as such. Sociology cannot escape its own perspectivity and must, as a result, reflect on those factors determining the particular perspective. The necessity of such self-reflection in sociology is one reason for the special significance of the sociology of knowledge as a pragmatic approach to the sociological implications of epistemology.

In this connection, individual schools or approaches within sociology can be viewed as an expression of efforts to develop a collective identity as a frame of reference for the continual practice of science. Since perspectives are articulated, differentiated, supported, and changed in communicative contexts—this resembles Shibutani's (1955) conception—it is possible to see how "networks" develop within scientific disciplines that facilitate the articulation of group identities through the actual exchange of information. Since these identities in turn are significant for the personal identity of the participating scientist, it is also easy to see the often intensive—and personal—effort made at establishing a collective self-understanding within a particular method. It is also easy to see the efforts made to exclude external influences. "Symbolic interactionism" offers a wealth of illustrative material (see, for example, Fine and Kleinmann 1987 for a discussion of the literature).[11]

The more numerous the perspectives of behavior within society, the more pluralistic this society is and the more this pluralism is made a subject of analysis, the greater is the tendency to "multiperspectivity" within sociology. The demands made on the articulation of scientific identities increases, but also the need for such articulation. This is obviously connected with the great number of active scientists, but is also indicates the close connection between the practice of science and the constitution of identity that reveals itself in the possibility and in the need to recognize, formulate, and justify specific perspectives. As a result scientific behavior becomes even more self-referential: The relevance of findings is often reduced to their utility in justifying further research!

Another consequence is the awareness of the ethical dimension of scientific work. Ethics has many aspects, one of which involves the fact that ethical statements represent the attempt to formulate a perspective for relevant action. Here we can assume (or hope) that it can give this action a significance that can also be justified at some point in the future when that action proves to be "good" and "correct" for the evolution of human consciousness. In this context it is noteworthy that Mead at several points discusses questions of social ethics and ethical perspectives. Here too often overlooked sections of his writing can thus be viewed with respect to the general theory of perspectivity as an integral part of a comprehensive whole. The picture becomes even more complete once we take into account Mead's own social and political engagements, as is increasingly the case in the recent reception to his work (Shalin 1988).

Mead carefully did not attempt to formulate a theory of modernity. And yet the sensitivity with which he discusses theoretically the central topics of his times has given rise to a body of work that provides significant impulses for the analysis of a period in which the perspectivistic nature of modern thought it acknowledged and problematized in all of its breadth.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

NOTES

1. Haferkamp (1987) provides a fine account of present "Interaction Theory" in the Federal Republic of Germany. He describes the development of "Interaction Theory" from "a fringe position to a major school of thought" and quotes Joachim Matthes who estimates the advocates of "action-theoretical-interactionist-phenomenologically-oriented" approaches number as much as a quarter of all sociologists working in Western Germany. Yet it is important to point out that in Germany a single school like "Symbolic Interactionism" does not exist.

2. Grathoff (1987) presents a detailed account of Mead's reception within the broader context of his analysis of American pragmatism. A comprehensive overview of the many aspects of the current debate on pragmatism in Germany, supplemented by American contributions, can be found in the "Handbook of Pragmatic Thought," edited by Herbert Stachowiak, the first two volumes of which are already available (1986, 1987). Peirce's work has been prompted by collections of translations together with extended comments by Apel (Peirce 1976), and others including the edition of some works not yet available in English (Peirce 1986). This interest is strengthened by the recent interest in semiotics. Parallel developments in the United States may be found in the writings of Rochberg-Halton (1986) and Shalin (1986). However, in what follows I shall concentrate on the German literature, and I deliberately refrain from referring to the "realism vs. nominalism" debate initiated by Lewis and Smith (1981).

3. It is difficult to translate the precise meaning of the German term "Erkenntnis." In many cases it involves more than only knowledge. Perception may be appropriate if the psychological dimensions are of primary interest; from a sociological point of view (and hence in most places of this text), "knowledge acquisition" seems to be closest.

4. For some recent contributions on abduction and its relevance for sociology, see Eco and Sebeok 1983.

5. By now, the utility and the fertility of the concept of postmodernism is a rising issue in the debate on contemporary sociology in Germany. It promotes, at least, with its defendants as well as with its critics, a greater sensibility for alternative approaches to the philosophical foundations of the (social) sciences and the role of the scientist in society. See for example: Vester 1985; Koslowski 1987, Welsch 1987.—Another line of discussion is discussed by Levine's (1985, pp. 20–43) pledge of "Ambiguity as a Medium of Enlightenment." See also his study (pp. 73–141) on the reception of Simmel's essay on the stranger with noteworthy parallels to the reception of Mead's model of the self!

6. In the interrelations between identity and time see Luckmann 1984; Nowotny (1987) discusses the impact of modern technologies for modern time consciousness. Maines et al. (1983) provides an ample discussion of Mead's notion of time. Bergmann (1981) analyzes the connections with Mead's theory of action; in this context, he also pays attention to perspectivity.

7. Here the question arises how the concept of perspectives relates to the notion of values or norms. My suggestion is to consider perspectives as "dynamic values" which are pragmatically legitimized, namely in regard to the social reality of identities. These identities are at the same time to be acknowledged and to be developed. Since perspectives are "objective," they are relevant for the categories of social systems they belong to as well as for the individual system they refer to.

8. The term "aleatory" is borrowed from modern music where it denotes several types of instructions to the musician that provide him with the opportunity as well as requiring from him free play within given time and/or melodic constraints. See for instance Griffiths (1980), and especially the works like "Venitian Games" or "Chain II" by the Polish composer Witold Lutoslawski. The social-psychologist K.J. Gergen (1979) uses the term in connection with his analysis of identity.

9. Perspectivity is, of course, an important aspect of fiction which reveals many different modes of usage. Multi-perspectivity emphasizes the demands made upon an individual to orientate himself or herself simultaneously with regard to several perspectives. For a comparable use of the term in "German Literature" see Neuhaus (1971).

10. Again, I refrain here from exploring how Mead may become a reference in the debate on postmodernism mainly in regard to his concern with individuality and his approach to time. Of particular importance are Koslowski (1987) and Vester (1985).

11. My suspicion is that the sensitivity to the perspectival character of scientific behavior typical of Symbolic Interactionism favors such tendencies among its own proponents, that is, within Symbolic Interactionism.

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