Autonomy And Otherness In The Social Psychology Of Mead

Ric Caric Northrup

Introduction

A variety of contemporary social theorists reject the possibility of individual autonomy because of the crucial role of external social entities in organizing individual psychological capacities. Foucault, Bourdieu, Baudrillard, and Kroker and Cook[1] all come to the conclusion that social entities directly impose behavioral dispositions, emotions, and cognitive capacities on individuals. As a result, they believe that society should be analyzed in terms of the logic, reproduction, or laws of social entities rather than the choices, decisions, or preferences of individuals. Foucault, for example, argues that institutions like schools, prisons, factories, and hospitals employ discursive practices to constitute the individual self as an object of control. Conceiving the self as an "effect" of social power, he does not view individuality as a significant factor in social decision-making.[2]

However, accepting a thesis of the "social constitution" of the self need not entail a rejection of individual autonomy. This paper examines the social-psychological theory of George Herbert Mead as an example of a strategy for conceiving individual identity as both socially constituted and autonomous. I argue that Mead succeeds in this task because he conceives the psychological conditions for the impact of social phenomena on identity in such a way that autonomy emerges from the process by which social conditions affect psychological organization. Specifically, I claim that Mead's conception of the formation of attitudes and process of thought makes it possible for him to portray individual autonomy as the result of the impact of the actions of others on an individual's central nervous system. Through his concept of taking the attitude of the other toward one-

self, Mead is able to treat social conditions as provoking the autonomy that contemporary social theorists deny.

In Parts I and II of *Mind, Self, and Society,*[3] Mead uses a behavioral approach to conceive the self as a process in which the impact of social phenomena creates a basis for autonomy in relation to the social world. The linchpin of this analysis is a biological concept of attitudes. According to Mead, attitudes are complete sequences of social behavior located in the central nervous system. Attitudes function as responses to either external or internal stimulus and contain all the necessary elements for executing social action, including language, tactile feel, a sense of space, and the timing needed to coordinate several actions.[4] For example, Mead claims that an experienced rider can mount a horse because all the actions required for mounting a horse are mapped into his central nervous system. When such a rider moves "to the proper side" of a horse and is "ready to swing himself into the saddle," he can do so because the presence of the horse "calls out" attitudes involving behavior toward mounting horses.[5] Mead emphasizes that the central nervous system contains an almost infinite variety of attitudes and that several attitudes are called out in response to a stimulus like the presence of a horse.[6] He further argues that attitudes have a complex structure in which the "last behavior" orders all the other behaviors in a sequence of action. Thus, the attitude of "swinging onto the horse" might order behaviors such as moving to the proper side and putting the proper foot in the stirrup.[7]

Mead believes that the role of social conditions in the acquisition of attitudes gives the self a social character. The acquisition of attitudes involves a double process of communication, a process in which "attitudes" are communicated from one individual to another and another process in which attitudes are communicated within the individual self. Mead connects each process with a specific form of the "attitude of the other." The acquisition of attitudes through communication from one person to another involves the attitude of the other in the sense of a person incorporating the attitude involved in another person or other persons' actions into their own central nervous system. In this context, Mead uses the term "attitude" to refer to both the other person's observable behavior and the idea or set of ideas incorporated into that behavior. If Mead's experienced rider was instructing a novice, his instructions on how to mount a horse would be an attitude because they include both a motor behavior and a set of ideas concerning proper mounting.[8] The novice would learn how to mount a horse by adopting the attitudes manifested in the instructor's actions. The attitude of the instructor would then become the attitude of the novice and when the novice approaches a horse in the future, her responses will represent the attitude of the other because they represent the attitude of the instructor.[9]

Because attitudes are formed by adapting the attitude of the other in the sense of incorporating another's attitudes, all the behavioral dispositions in the central nervous system are socially constituted. The attitudes in the central nervous system correspond to a person's family, religion, geography, nationality, and other social institutions. Individuals model their attitudes after particular others (namely, their individual parents, teachers, peers, or ethnic group) or the "generalized other" (namely, the attitudes corresponding to society as a whole). In the later part of *Mind, Self and Society*, Mead characterizes attitudes as a whole as a "me" which represents the influence of society on the self. Indeed, the formation of attitudes brings "the whole social process ... into the experience of the individuals involved in it."[10]

However, the social constitution of attitudes also gives attitudes an independence in relation to the social conditions involved in their formation. Rather than directly shape attitudes, the impact of social conditions is to stimulate individuals to adopt an intermediate, temporary "attitude" which functions to indicate social conditions to the

more permanent attitudes. For instance, a novice rider might respond to the directions of an instructor by thinking to herself, "hmm, he wants me to put my left foot in the stirrup." To Mead, such an internal communication involves the novice taking the attitude of the other toward herself because she is communicating the instructor's directions to her own central nervous system as she would to another person. Thus, the impact of the instructor's directions as a stimulus is to provoke the response of forming an attitude that has the independence required to communicate external social conditions to previously existing attitudes. In adopting the attitude of the other toward herself, the novice is both receiving communication from the instructor as an "other" and sending her interpretation of that communication to her attitudes as an "other." Such a position or structure of communication is temporary and dissolves upon the generation of a behavioral response. However, the independence that individuals assume when they adapt the attitude of the other toward themselves means that the interpretations that they make when they indicate the environment to themselves have an independence in relation to that environment. As a result, the attitudes that are ultimately formed in response to such indication have an autonomy in relation to social stimulus even when they seek to represent the attitude of the other.[11]

Returning to the example of the novice horsewoman, the attitudes ultimately formed in response to the instructor's directions are independent of the instructor's attitudes in giving the directions. The instructor's directions have an impact on the attitudes of the novice, but their impact is in terms of stimulating a process of interpretation that leads to a self-conditioning of attitudes. Thus, when the novice's indication of the instructor's direction stimulates the behavioral response of an attempt to mount a horse based on the instructor's directions, that response might be a poor imitation of proper mounting. It would only be with repeated efforts that the novice could ultimately condition her reflexes to respond with proper horsemounting technique when horsemounting is indicated. For Mead, this capacity for

conditioning one's own reflexes distinguishes human beings from animals. A dog "can respond to [stimulus] but he cannot himself take a hand, so to speak, in conditioning his own reflexes; his reflexes can be conditioned by another but he cannot do it himself."[12]

What is particularly interesting about Mead's concept of the self-conditioning involved in the formation of attitudes is the role of social conditions in establishing the independence of the self. In Mead's analysis of the formation of attitudes, the immediate impact of external social conditions on individuals is to precipitate the development of an independent psychological structure, that of taking the attitude of the other toward the self. It is only through that independent structure that social conditions have their impact on the formation of the more permanent attitudes. Thus Mead is able to conceive the significant role played by social conditions in the formation of the self as the basis for the real autonomy of the self in the social world.

The impact of social conditions also provokes the central nervous system to define a position of autonomy within the thought process. For Mead, thought is the process through which the central nervous system brings prospective behaviors into alignment with expected conditions of action. Social conditions have an important role in this process because of their influence on the formation of the attitudes which define behavioral options in advance. However, by conceiving thought in terms of an individual's taking the attitude of the other towards her own attitudes, Mead is able to treat thought as having an independence in relation to the social influences that define its content.

For Mead, thought is synonymous with "intelligence," "reasoning," and "reflection" and occurs in the context of the stimulation of the central nervous system by either external or internal conditions. When the central nervous system is stimulated by an individual's indicating an environmental situation to herself, it responds by generating several attitudes, in other words beginning several behaviors which had been formed in relation to previous social conditions. These

responses represent the attitude of the other in the sense of incorporating the attitudes of other agents, and embody the influence of social conditions in the thought process. For Mead, thought functions initially to inhibit the execution of these behaviors in action, thus making possible the deliberative operations which allow one sequence of action to be selected.[13] What Mead sees as the infinite complexity of the central nervous system makes some kind of selection process necessary. Because the human central nervous system contains a variety of behaviors that could apply to situations and because these behaviors respond to stimulus, it is impossible for humans to respond coherently in the reflex manner of dogs and other animals. There are too many reflexes pressing toward action. To act cohesively, human beings need a mechanism to delay action and select an appropriate line of behavior.[14]

For Mead, the ability to delay action and select a response opens up the possibility of exercising control over the environment and one's responses. Because human beings can "hold" their responses, they have the capacity of analyzing the environment and adjusting their responses in turn.

> Man is distinguished by that power of analysis of the field of stimulation which enables him to pick out one stimulus rather than another and so to hold on to the response that belongs to that stimulus, picking it out from others, and recombining it with others. You cannot get a lock to work. You notice certain elements, each of which brings out a certain sort of response; and what you are doing is holding on to these processes of response by giving attention to the object.[15]

To continue with the example, inhibiting whatever actions her central nervous system had prepared to undertake in response to the broken lock allows an individual to search out the situation and indicate elements that answer to certain of her previously-established

responses. For instance, someone could search their pockets for something that could serve as a "pick" and answer to the responses of "picking a lock" which develop in the wake of not getting the lock to work. By bringing the environmental stimulus (the pick) into an affinity with the available response (picking a lock), an individual ultimately can act on the response of "opening the lock" that was initially frustrated by the failure of the lock. Mead emphasizes that "[t]hinking is an elaborate process of ... presenting the world so that it will be favorable for conduct, so that the ends of the life of the form may be reached."[16]

Thought involves adopting the attitude of the other in the sense of taking the attitude of the other toward oneself. "The process [of intelligence] is made possible by the mechanism of the central nervous system, which permits the individual's taking of the attitude of the other toward himself, and thus becoming an object for himself."[17] Thus thought inhibits the movement of attitudes toward execution by taking the attitude of the other toward its own attitudes. It is by treating both its own attitudes and external conditions as objects, that thought is able to bring the organism's responses into affinity with the character of the environment. Like indication, thought is a temporary structure which is independent in relation to the more permanent attitudes and the social conditions involved in their formation. However, the independence of thought is bound up with its social character. The elaboration of thought as a separate structure is precipitated directly by the movement of attitudes and indirectly by the social agents represented by those attitudes. Likewise, in selecting a response to be executed as action, thought is deciding which attitudes, and hence which social influences, are predominate in the process of the self.

However, thought and action are also distinct from indication and the formation of attitudes. Where the adoption of the attitude of the other creates a process of communication in the formation of attitudes, adopting the attitude of the other toward oneself creates an

exercise of force in the generation of thought. In conceiving thought as an inhibition of behavior, Mead treats the movement of attitudes toward action as a force in the central nervous system and thought as a counter-force that takes the attitude of the other toward the attitudes. It is as a counter-force that thought gains its independence from the social conditions represented in the attitudes. Deliberation is the continued exercise of this counter-force until an individual creates an affinity between the environmental situation and the selected response, and acts on it, thereby dissolving the whole formation organized around the attitude of the other. In this sense, the exercise of thought as a counter-force to attitudes determines which social conditions have direct influence over action.

Conclusion

Many sociologists and anthropologists believe that reconciling individual autonomy with the social construction of the self is somewhat like social justice, desirable as a goal but unattainable in practice. However, Mead's success in conceiving the self as both autonomous and social indicates that the problem may not be the goal of reconciling autonomy and social contingency, but the intellectual resources used to pursue that goal. For more than seventy years, ever since the publication of George Lukacs' *History and Class Consciousness*, social theorists have attempted to synthesize Marx, Hegel, Nietzsche, Durkheim, and Freud in the hopes of developing a theory of the self that was both autonomous and social in character. However, neither Lukacs, the Frankfurt School, Habermas, Kristeva, or Giddens have had as much success with synthesizing these sources as Mead had using a behaviorism that is hostile to both individual autonomy and social analysis. Perhaps the combination of psychological and sociological analysis developed by some or all of these thinkers is just unusable for a social psychology that would reconcile individual autonomy and social contingency.

Unfortunately, however, Mead's social psychology has many weaknesses that make it impossible to use as a basis for a broadly acceptable approach to the problem of reconciling the autonomy and social character of individual identity. Mead has no analysis of emotion, no way of analyzing the ordering of attitudes in the central nervous system, and no concepts for analyzing the contradictions and conflicts between the attitudes seeking expression in behavior. Despite its usefulness in Mead's own analysis, his behaviorism is obsolete in relation to developments in cognitive psychology and the theory of perception. Mead also has no theories of gender differentiation or social power. At the same time, however, some of the conceptual strategies that Mead develops in *Mind, Self, and Society* ultimately may prove to be indispensable in reconciling individual autonomy and social contingency. Conceiving a plurality of dispositions for action and the mental process as selecting from those potentials is a good strategy for integrating social influence into a conception of identity without identifying identity with those influences. Postulating temporary psychological structures like Mead's thought and indication is a fruitful way to conceive identity as independent while integrating identity into social processes even if Mead's concept of the attitude of the other toward oneself could not sustain critical examination or empirical experiment. Perhaps Mead's overall strategy of viewing social influences as provoking individual autonomy will be adapted in a conceptual context other than behaviorism. In this sense, Mead's work in *Mind, Self, and Society* might best be seen as a source for a set of plausible strategies for conceiving individual identity as both autonomous and socially constituted.

Notes

1. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, vol 1*, New York: Vintage, 1980, 11, 17, 25-30; Jean Baudrillard, "Symbolic Exchange and Death," in Mark Poster, ed., *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writ-*

ings, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988, 119-147; Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984, esp. 101; Arthur Kroker and David Cook, *The Post-Modern Scene: Excremental Culture and Hyper-Aesthetics*, New York: St. Martin's 1986, 268-270.

2. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, ed. by Colin Gordon, New York: Vintage, 1980, 117, 122, 125.

3. I analyze Mead's distinction between the "me" and the "I" in "Toward a Democratic Concept of Social Individuality,": a paper presented to the Institute for Advanced Philosophical Research, August, 1993.

4. George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*, ed. by Charles W. Morris, Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1934, 5, 6, 11.

5. For Mead's analysis of the example of the horse, see Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*, 12.

6. For the possibility of several responses, see Ibid, 92, 98.

7. For the dominance of the last action, Ibid, 11, 86.

8. For involvement of idea in gesture, Ibid, 45.

9. For attitude of other as basis for one's own attitude, Ibid, 138.

10. For attitudes as representing others, Ibid, 175; for the "me," 175; for generalized other, 154; for the "whole social process is ... ," 134.

11. The analysis in this paragraph is drawn from; Ibid, 107-108.

12. Ibid, 108.

13. For thought as functioning to inhibit action and allow selection among alternatives, Ibid, 90.

14. For indefinite complexity of nervous system, Ibid, 86.

15. Ibid, 94.

16. Ibid, 93.

17. Ibid, 100.