



G.H. MEAD'S ORIGINAL ROLE-CONCEPT AND ITS LATER DISTORTIONS¹

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ABSTRACT In the social psychology of the '60s the notion of role probably enjoyed the greatest popularity besides that of attitude. Although this popularity has markedly decreased by the '90s, role theories still have a substantial influence on the thinking of social science. When pondering the viability of the scientific notion, one does well to recount the history of how it was spread and transferred with special regard to the original role concept of G. H. Mead, the father of symbolic interactionism. As the author's historical and theoretical analysis reveals, just in the period when the popularity of the role concept was at its peak, the context in which role phenomena were examined, were significantly more superficial than Mead's original attempts at its interpretation. This enabled deepening of the relation between role and action. Neglecting this has meant that social psychology and sociology have practically severed themselves from the one possibility of better understanding of changes of roles and the emergence of new roles.

KEYWORDS G. H. Mead, role, role theories, symbolic interactionism, action

In the social psychology of the '60s, the notion of 'role' probably enjoyed the greatest popularity, besides that of attitude. Although popularity had markedly decreased by the '80s, role theories still have a substantial influence on social science thinking. When pondering the viability of the scientific notion, one does well to recount the history of its spread, with special regard to the original role concept of H.G. Mead, the father of symbolic interactionism. The present author's aim is not so much to describe the spiritual topography of the role concept as an attempt to verify the impression that the concept of

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role and the context in which role phenomena were examined are poorer and more superficial than Mead's original attempts at its interpretation.

THE CAREER OF A CONCEPT – A HISTORICAL REVIEW

The triumph of the role concept in social science thought which occurred around the middle of the last century is not merely to be attributed to Mead's impact of changing intensity. According to Katz and Kahn: "Perhaps Linton (1936) was the first who attributed a central place to the notion within any social science... Newcomb (1951) took it over from anthropology into social psychology making it central as a key to his theoretical approach. Parsons (1951) and Merton (1957) regarded this notion as being substantial to the understanding of social action and social structure" (Katz and Kahn 1964:5).

What led researchers to accept role as a comprehensive, abstract metaphor suitable for a mental representation of the way how the individual is confronted with an organized social existence and individuals and groups in various positions was its complex, holistic and integrative character. It is indeed the comprehensiveness of the role concept – through incorporating various behavioral acts – that is at the root of its success, but which is also a danger to the notion. Because, just as a role produced on the stage can have several layers depending on the actor's performance and the spectator's empathy and interpretation, in the same way the concept of role adopted by scientific thought can be of varying complexity, interpreted more deeply or just in a skin-deep context.

The role metaphor in literature and philosophy is not new at all. The Shakespearean thought: "All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players..." is the crystallization of age-old experience and time-tested wisdom. In literature and philosophy, however, with few exceptions role had had negative overtones, denoting insincerity, pretended or histrionic behaviours. The few exceptions include the Scottish moral philosophers (Smith, Ferguson, and Hume). Although the profound scientific theory of the role took its origin from cultural anthropology (Linton 1936) and German sociology (Simmel 1908; Weber 1921, 1924), it bloomed via the *structural theory of role* (Parsons 1951) in American sociology and the trend of *symbolic interactionism* initiated by G.H. Mead. Several schools evolved within the broad currents outlined above, which itself demonstrates that the concept is at risk of being too loose, ambivalent and "umbrella"-like. Most regrettably, reviewers of role theories rarely took the trouble to show up the essential differences between various role theories, so their analyses are often ahistorical. The use of the role concept was too often reduced to sociological role theory (Stryker 1985:311).

Yet it is highly instructive to see at which points the sociological and psychological role theories mushrooming in our century differ, and where they match. What is common to all is an attempt to clarify the interrelation between individual and society, individual and social structure, using the metaphor of role and stage to this end, and describing the mechanism of role-taking and internalization. Logically enough, the concept is always used in the plural for complementary and contradictory roles. Schiller has already remarked that there must be “hare roles”, if there are powerfully rich people (Schiller 1781) – (here ‘hare roles’ refers to the passive and shy behavior of people who are afraid to defend their own interests or justice).

Beyond this point, however, divergences begin to prevail. The overriding view of sociological role theory is a role definition along the positional – hierarchical or status – differences between, and within social structures, groups and institutions. On the other side, symbolic interactionism tries to define and analyze roles through interpersonal communicational networks.

The first exponent of structuralist role theory was the cultural anthropologist Ralph Linton (1936). Forerunners also include Durkheim and M. Weber, as well as Park and Moreno in virtue of their views on the positional differentiation of group membership and different relations to group norms. It was, however, T. Parsons (1951) who elaborated a structuralist theory of role in depth, while its most sensitive and circumspect application is associated with Robert K. Merton (Linton 1936; Parsons 1951).

Linton and Parsons conceived of society as a functionalist unit to which individuals must adapt themselves through constant training and certain patterns. Every culture has an ideal model for this process of adaptation, creating and sharing out the rights and obligations in a reciprocal way. All social systems tend to keep the parts in equilibrium and harmony, which guarantees historical continuity. According to the functionalist approach, role patterns belonging to the given social position (status) are those which steadily influence individual behavior and form the link to society as a whole.

In Linton's definition, role is “the dynamic side of status”, “a mode of behavior adjusted to status in the dimensions of possibility and obligation” (Linton 1936:113-112). Later, many social psychologists (including Daval in the first place), expressed their dissatisfaction with Linton's role concept, as in their view it ascribed too large a significance to the normative sphere of society and laid the emphasis one-sidedly on adjustment to what exists: “The connections between me and the others are not only compulsions but also communications” (involving the potentiality of negotiation, initiative, modification) (Daval 1971:89).

Role theory within sociology came to be dominated by a static interpretation of roles. Though its structuralist and interactionist variants can be distinguished, this differentiation is highly suppositional. It was chiefly characteristic of the post-war years, but the nearer we come to the present day, the more these trends become interlarded. Much rather, there is a shift in emphasis between the two approaches: one highlights how the individual is integrated into larger social structures with the help of role(s), while the other studies interactions related to role taking and role playing in conjunction with status. It is no exaggeration to say that the structuralist variant was predominant – as the most noted functionalist sociologists contributed to it (Parsons 1951; Parson and Shils 1954; Merton 1957).

The common idea of structuralist role theories is that, in interactions, actors play the roles they are cast into by the scripts prescribed by the given culture, and the repeated performance of these parts is liable to guarantee social stability and order. Thus interactions must always be evaluated in terms, and in the context, of the wider social structure to which they belong, with special regard to group expectations and norms. As differentiation within macro-social structures results in statuses between and within different groups, there exists a stable set of contradictory or complementary rights, privileges and obligations which belong to each status, and normative role expectations govern their behavioral realization. They coerce individuals – since society rewards or sanctions those who act in accordance with them – or deviate from them. The theory introduces *status* as a twin notion of role to denote the results of intra-group differentiation; that is, the various positions within an organized group. Role expectations root in the broader culture or society but become moral imperatives internalized in the individuals. Parsons stresses that the most significant unit of a social structure is not the person but the role.

“For most purposes *the conceptual unit of the social system is the role*. The role is a sector of the individual actor’s total system of action. It is the point of contact between the system of action and the social system. The individual then becomes a unity in the sense that he is a composite of various action units which in turn are roles in the relationships in which he is involved. But this composite of roles is *not* the same abstraction as personality as a system” (Parsons and Shils 1954:190).

These distinctions – that is, the differentiation of the individual actor as system, the unit of activity, the appropriate role and the social system – are prerequisites for any fruitful empirical analysis of social order and change, and also of personality adjustment and cultural change.

“The primary ingredient of the role is the role expectation. Role expectations are evaluative patterns: their primary constituents are analytically derivable from the pattern-variable combinations and from derivatives of the pattern variables when these are combined with the specific types of situations (Parsons and Shils 1954:190).

It is a significant idea of Parsons that the different units of a social structure operate by rewarding individual behavior which complies with role expectations and punishes those which deviate from them. The connection between role and sanctioning is an essential constituent of the maintenance of societal equilibrium and of reproduction of the status quo.

It is exactly this concentration of the theory on harmony and order that critics of the role theory oppose, since it is incapable of explaining the emergence and functioning of social and interpersonal discord and conflict.

Actually, static structuralist role theory can only explain a few essential features of the stable, patterned behavior of actors in the social process and of the relationship between individual and macro-society. It is insufficient to illumine and interpret the active and innovative attitudes of the individual towards the whole of the social structure or its particular roles and statuses. It cannot explain satisfactorily the gap, or gulf, between normative role requirements and actual behavior. Finally, another problem is that this theory deals with the individual as one whose only task is to adapt to a given social structure or set of cultural compulsions. To sum up, the structuralist role theory is incapable of giving a realistic and functional interpretation of the human agency, the human ability to act and change which may lead to new status configurations and to new roles.

The very starting point of the theory – the claim that role is equal with adaptation to normative expectations – leaves unexplained *how and why new roles and role-incongruent behaviours arise*. This question is also related to the question of the formation of practical morals (new life situations may upset the old norms and render the role-like insistence on them downright amoral).

Some interactionists seem to have found the answer to the above question with the concept of “role-making”, the result of negotiations in interactions (the symbolic interactionist variant of sociological role theory). But it remains an open question why definite roles are renegotiated in certain situations. Is it only a matter of individual taste, or is there a more of a general necessity which underlies this phenomenon?

This question leads us over to social psychology, precisely to *symbolic interactionism*, which examines in more depth the encounters between the individual and the group from a more historical aspect. Viewed from this angle,

society is the generic expression of all symbolic interactions. The participants of interactions mutually shape each other and always keep in mind the Other's characteristics, expectations, etc. while performing action. The interactions are symbolic inasmuch as they are realized and interpreted in the terms formed by the actors of former and current interactions. In this way, the physical and social environment is also symbolically interpreted. The last main proposition of symbolic interactionism is related to the latter statement: ontologically, neither society nor the individual can be regarded as primary. Both only exist in interactions, forming as it were "two sides of a coin", to use Cooley's phrase.

Symbolic interactionism is divided into two main strands with differing emphases: the Chicago school, hallmarked by the name of Blumer, and the Iowa school – represented by Kuhn. The spiritual initiator of the trend was undoubtedly G.H. Mead but this role was continued and distinctly formulated in opposition to conventional sociology by Blumer.

Blumer professed to be the immediate successor of Mead, and indeed he was a faithful pupil in several regards. For instance, he emphasized, in line with Mead, the process and not the structure, the sympathetic interaction in the Cooleyan sense (tuning in to the Other's standpoint and the ability to adopt it) and not attitudes measurable by attitude scales, the emergence of some new elements and not only strict determination of behavior in social interactions.

It is therefore quite understandable that he criticized contemporary functionalist sociology because it postulated strict determinism between the existing social structures and roles as well as the individuals newly entering the society, thus turning the individual into an "oversocialized", over-conforming subject. This view led both sociology and psychology into a blind alley. For Blumer, society's "mere" role in the behavior of the individual is to structure social situations and produce – well before their occurrence – symbols indispensable to the interpretation of situations. The contents and manner of interpretation, however, are not fully governed by society. There is room for individual interpretation; consequently, the individual is no mere passive actor but also the co-author of his or her role. It is significant whether, in a situation, the person merely acts out their role or also modifies it, thereby influencing further changes in the role, of the corresponding norms and duties and the underlying structure (Blumer 1962; 1969).

Yet despite all his best intentions Blumer did delimit Mead's role concept in that he failed to assign appropriate importance to the fact that Mead's conception is profoundly *action-centric* and in its role is embedded deeply in collective action. As a consequence, interaction is constrained to communication not only in view of the later representatives of symbolic interactionism but in Blumer's view as well.

The author who provides the most thorough Mead analysis of which I am aware of, is the German social psychologist: Hans Joas (Joas 1985). According to Joas: “the critique of Blumer as regards all “factorial” theories that regard the individual as a mere “shuttle-box” (Ed: one who always takes the same route, and lacks variability and activity) and his main conception of the collective problem-solving ability of individuals having socially constructed Selves – reflects Mead’s spirit. Yet Blumer’s Mead interpretation cannot be regarded as authentic. *Blumer reduces Mead’s concept of action to the concept of interaction*, and attenuates his concept of meaning to a linguistic concept. All Mead’s ideas concerning evolution and history are missing. All these are *enormous deviations from Mead’s position*” (Joas 1985:8-9) (author’s italics).

Even further did Kuhn’s (the leader of the Iowa school) conception deviate from Mead’s original position (Kuhn 1964). For Kuhn, too, of paramount importance was social interaction, the immediate interpersonal encounter, and in it the person’s confrontation with socially elaborated roles, norms, etc., but the way he interprets and examines interactional events is substantially closer to conventional sociological theories. He adopted the concept of social structure designed by sociological role theorists (declaring that it was a network of social statuses, positions and corresponding roles) and tried to develop in this light of the empirical research of role playing using conventional sociological and social psychological tools (by contrast, the position of Blumer and his colleagues required case studies and other non-formalized, non-statistical investigations). Kuhn agreed that social structure is formed and stabilized by social interactions but he added that what had once been created would exert a coercive influence on the individual. Consequently, research must center around role taking, and especially on how it is inbuilt within the Self. In conjunction with this he developed his well-known “Twenty Statements Test” which is widely used in investigating self-image and identity. He believed that the person’s subjective definitions of himself and his self-identity would provide enough grounds for understanding his self-identity and also predict future behavior (Kuhn and McPartland 1954:68-76).

It is to the credit of Kuhn and his colleagues that the role concept did not remain a theoretical construct but came to be used by researchers to empirically examine the peculiarities of internalization of roles and their specificities emerging within formal and informal group relations. The Iowa school, however, did not eliminate the objection to functional sociology formulated by Blumer (who accused it of seeing the individual as being too adaptable in the process of role taking).

THE MEANING AND FUNCTION OF THE ROLE CONCEPT FOR MEAD

It generally holds for all role theories that the real meaning of their role concepts can only be conceived in the full context of the theory concerned and together with other fundamental notions. This is particularly true of Mead's conception, his role-concept.

Let us keep in mind that while in structuralist role theories the most important notion added to the role was that of *status*, the interactionist schools assigned this function to *interaction*, immediate interpersonal contact and role requirements. The nets of concepts associated with role did not stretch wide enough to include social activity and action as well, in either case.

Mead's role concept and theory are deeply embedded in *human action* not only because Mead was, as it were, the "philosopher" of social psychology, pursuing social psychological endeavors as a philosopher. Much rather, because Mead did not in the least wish to reduce human ontogenesis and interpersonal relations to immediate interpersonal contact, to communication, thereby tearing them away from the process of collective human activity. In his view, the emphasis should be placed on *practical intersubjectivity* and *collective participation* in the settings and situations of everyday life. What interested Mead was to find out how the individual becomes capable of becoming an actor and creator or co-author of this active human-social process.

Mead's role concept must be confronted with the notions of action, meaning, self-development, communicative action, practical intersubjectivity and collective participation in order to be able to explore its true meaning. (Mead 1934; Mead 1938; Strauss 1964)

What Mead understood by role-taking was not a behavioral pattern attached to a certain status or a particular set of rules but the essential human ability of comprehending another person's gestures as meaningful symbols, mutually elaborating them and giving a sort of adaptive answer. This ability, to tune in to the "other" person, to adopt his standpoint or perspective is not equal to empathy – which means first of all an emotional adaptation (but does contain it as a component). Mead speaks of intellectual-emotional adjustment and adoption of the other's attitude without which no social interaction or communication can take place and nor can the self develop. The evolution of the ability to role-play is a precondition and mediator for the emergence of cognitive schemes (e.g. attitudes, values, etc.) today called "shared knowledge". Role intrinsically implies taking part in something, be it the perception or comprehension of a situation or the environment, or a common action.

Thus in Mead's conceptual system role is a notion describing the *mediating* grades or behavioral units of self-development and communication which are deeply *embedded in human activity*, instead of merely being a part of immediate interpersonal contact or communicative relation.

This is what the following passage by Mead attests:

“If the given human individual is to develop a self in the fullest sense, it is not sufficient for him merely to take the attitude of other human individuals toward himself and toward one another within the human social process and to bring that social process as a whole into his individual experience merely in these terms. *He must also, in the same way that he takes the attitudes of other individuals toward himself and toward one another, take their attitudes toward the various phases or aspects of the common social activity or set of social undertakings in which, as members of an organized society or social group, they are all engaged.* (author's italics) He must then, by generalizing these individual attitudes of that organized society or social group itself as a whole, *act toward different social projects which at any given time it is carrying out,* (author's italics), or toward the various larger phases of the general social process which constitutes the group's life and of which these projects are specific manifestations. Getting *these broad activities* of any given social whole or organized society within the experiential field of anyone of the individuals involved or included in that whole is, in other words, *the essential basis and prerequisite of the fullest development of that individual's self* (author's italics) – only insofar as he takes the attitudes of the organized social group to which he belongs toward the organized, co-operative social activity or set of such activities in which that group as such is engaged, does he develop a complete self or possess the sort of complete self he has developed.” (Strauss 1964:219)

According to my view Strauss's edition of Mead's writings and lectures is the most comprehensive one. This (intentionally) long quotation shows convincingly that Mead's reference to social action was not secondary but of central importance as he thought it imperative to interpret all the mental phenomena he deemed essential in relation to social activity. That is why *practical intersubjectivity* assumed such great importance in his theory, which Mead tried to connect to the notion of interaction (this attempt was unsuccessful for several reasons, and in this regard Mead's spiritual legacy is inconsistent and easy to misinterpret. Elaboration of this subject would, however, need the scope of another paper). The reason why the introduction of

the notion of practical intersubjectivity was mentioned here is that it confirms the key role of the sphere of social action and activity in Mead's thinking.

Pataki also regards seeing the role as embedded in activity as a fundamental feature of Mead's conception.

“The most important feature of Mead's novel orientation is seeing the social act as something that is ‘internalized’ in its own dynamic *structure* (sometimes he calls it ‘internalization’), and on this basis does the mind develop. In short: the *mind* is none other than the symbolic interiorization of the *social act*”... “the individual also internalizes the parts (role relations) of the social act that are not carried out by him.”... “the most important mechanism of ‘symbolic internalization’ are comprised by “role-likeness”, role-taking ability, role playing and the language.” (Pataki 1973:483)

Thus, role-taking is a tool and mechanism of socialization together with the acquisition of verbal symbols. As such, it is indispensable for elaborating common meanings and it enables the person to understand and interpret his social and physical environment at a certain common wave-length. In other words, language and role-taking together ensure the *identity of meanings* for the individuals of any society.

At the same time, this specific human form of learning is also indispensable, so that on the other hand the Self might emerge and strengthen, and gradually become the object of the mind. To put it in another way, it facilitates the emergence of self-reflection and reflexivity of consciousness.

Role-taking is a link and interpreter between social and individual meanings, and also between the regulation of individual behavior and the development of the Self. In Mead's conception there is such a close interrelation between role-taking and the self. The clarification of this relation also answers the question as to how the self can become the object of the mind.

Mead's line of argumentation was born in opposition to introspectionist and individualist approaches to the self. Contemporary psychology of the time kept stressing that only what was specific in the development of individual character was unique, as if common features did not count at all. Mead, on the contrary, declared that:

“The individual experiences himself as such, not directly, but only indirectly, from the particular standpoints 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. For he enters his own experience as a self or individual, not directly or immediately, but only in so far as

he first becomes an object to himself just as other individuals are object to him or are in his experience; and he becomes an object to himself only by taking the attitudes of other individuals toward himself within a social environment or context of experience and behavior in which both he and they are involved.” (Mead 1934:138; Strauss 1964:202-203) “What makes the organized self is the organization of the attitudes which are common to the group. A person is a personality because he belongs to a community, because he takes over the institutions of that community into his own conduct. He takes its language as a medium by which he gets his personality, and then through a process of taking the different roles that all the others furnish he comes to get the attitude of the members of the community. Such, in a certain sense, is the structure of a man’s personality.” (Strauss 1964:226)

For Mead, then role-taking – or perspective-taking – means far more than merely lending certain peculiarities to perceptible behavior, making it (the given behavior) durably patterned and different from others’ behavior in time and space.

It follows from what is presented above that role-taking is also related to the *formation* and *use of symbols* as its tools are verbal and non-verbal symbols and its settings are the interactions which in the course of a person’s life become permanent in various social areas. For Mead, interactions are not mere direct encounters or contacts in which communicative action – the exchange and coordination of views – takes place but indirect confrontations and mutual impacts that are eventually being formed on the basis of common efforts and deeds in the face of nature (more precisely, on the basis of attitudes associated with these actions) and motivated by them.

Mead clearly specified what new qualities interaction based on the use of symbols (or ‘symbolic interaction’ as later his pupil Blumer termed it) become enriched with compared to the language and “conversation” of gestures. In symbolic interactions ‘*the symbols constitute a new system of tools* not only to preserve, in abstract form, rows of situations, events or actions both previously experienced or projected into the future in the mind and memory and not only to represent reality as shared knowledge of a certain group as a new form of social mental imagery. Symbols are also a system of tools to anticipate, interpret and evaluate the Other’s actions (seriousness, intention, etc.) with their help and be able to respond to them in the same symbolic way, freed from the pressure of direct response. Of the aspects mentioned, Blumer stresses the ability to interpret the action and position of Others in possession of symbols, and to control our own deeds. The fact that we use

the symbols to interpret our own situations and acts – in fact, without them we would be unable to do so – means that the individual enters a completely new relationship “*with his own existence*” because he can acquire the ability to control his own deeds with its help (Blumer 1969).

Mead goes even further in describing the possibilities of individual activity: this symbolic capacity (the ability to use the symbols) promotes the organism (that is, the acting subject) to a part of his own environment to the effect that he depends on his own standpoint and that of his group in his environment.

The social nature of symbols and roles is an axiom for all interactionists, yet “*role-action-relation*” is not considered a part of it by several of its chief representatives.

The authors of most studies who survey role theories regard role-taking as a mechanism of socialization (Cicourel 1973; Kahn et al. 1964; Kon 1970). Some of them devote specific attention to the “*role-action*” relation (Joas 1983; Pataki 1973), while others completely ignore it when reviewing (otherwise correctly) the literature of role (László 1976).

True, the close relationship between social action and role-taking outlined by Mead is not explained in depth; it is rather sketchy and relegated into the background in both interactionist schools following Mead – first of all in Kuhn’s Iowa school. It has to be noted, however, that Kuhn and his colleagues were the first to try to apply Mead’s conception in empirical social psychology in the ‘30s. Theirs was practically the only empirical-experimental research base in the ‘30s that was inspired by Mead’s ideas. In his own days Mead was only known to a narrow circle, though it is true it was the citadel of American sociological thinking, the University of Chicago, which recognized and acknowledged him. It is indeed most regrettable that his coherent theories were published only by his pupils, inevitably in interpretation.

Strauss writes that Mead is frequently referred to both in sociological and social psychological works:

“Although his words are reproduced accurately enough, their sense is most often misconstrued because they have been interpreted from viewpoints other than his own. Mead’s position was radically different from that of most social psychologists and sociologists who have quoted him or incorporated his thinking into their own systems of thought.” Strauss adds that it is not enough to acknowledge one or another of Mead’s ideas, but the *whole* system of his thought must be comprehended. (Strauss 1964:vii).

What happened instead? Mead is used by sociologists in ‘bits and pieces’ (Strauss 1991:423). In social psychology the situation is very similar.

The concept of role and the conceptual network around it which articulated in a more differentiated way the diverse forms of roles and their manifestations had become a household word in sociology and social psychology by the mid-20th century. This interpretation, however, similarly to the sociological role concept of the structuralists, was reduced to a sort of passive role concept particularly in the way the Iowa school understood it. To a lesser degree did Blumer and the Chicago school simplify Mead's role concept as Blumer followed Mead in stressing the individual's active attitude toward role expectations and saw some chance for modification in the role-taking process. That is the reason why he called it role-making. Yet what he made explicit in his writings also contributed to the ascendancy of the interpretation which proposed that role-making could only take place in direct contacts, in interactions, at the stage of the verbal and non-verbal coordination of opinions, expectations and behaviors. Although they do refer to the activity sometimes, they do so at a point with final validity where true explanation should begin and they fail to add anything to the picture outlined above, contended one of the contemporary critics of role theory, A. Schwalbe (Schwalbe 1987:115).

Kon also alludes to this situation when he writes:

“...the notion of social role has a central place in the description and analysis of the immediate interaction of individuals. Nevertheless, the concept needs to be complemented. First: the role-related behavior of the personality can only be understood within the framework of the general social system... Secondly: interindividual analysis must be supplemented with the intraindividual approach which enables the analysts to pass on from the structure of a person's interrelations with others to the internal psychological structure.” (Kon 1970:24)

The attempt of symbolic interactionism to reduce the entire field of the role concept to the social and individual interpretation of immediate opinion-exchange and communicative behavior in interactions narrows down the position adopted by Mead concerning role-taking and its roots in social action.

No doubt Mead is also partly to blame for the misunderstanding of his thoughts, for example, for the subsequent blurring of the derivation from action of the role concept and the other phenomena he conceptualized (i.e. the functional relation linking role-taking and role-playing to human action has become obscured). It has frequently been argued that the key notions of symbolic interactionism are vague and inaccurate, and it is hard to adapt them to empirical research and make them operational (Stryker 1985:328). Stryker's criticism must have been leveled at Mead as well – at least he did

not make a distinction between the sources, the founder and the followers in this regard.

The recognition is spreading in our days that it is worth consulting Mead's original texts and studies instead of the Mead volumes edited from lecture notes by his students, because however rich they may be in ideas, their texts are ambivalent. Certainly one cannot expect to see a new theory or scientific discipline freed from all ambivalence at a stroke and all its basic notions perfectly clarified, but a more authentic reading might give a clue to how to eliminate some ambivalence.

This is proved convincingly in the monograph by *Hans Joas* and a similar message is conveyed by the interesting study of *Schwalbe* which regards Mead as a forerunner of social psychology and is relevant to our subject. *Schwalbe's* work represents the critical trend which has been gaining in ascendancy over the past decade against the structuralist role theory. The author's critical remarks include the charge that the theory is ill-suited for explaining the real "human agency" (human initiative, adaptive capacity and enterprising spirit) in role-taking process, ill-suited for interpreting the deviations and changes in the relations between normative role requirements and the actual activity or behavior, and so on. In the exposition of his positive thoughts, *Schwalbe* – who is inclined to take the side of the representatives of symbolic interactionism though he sharply criticizes their arguments concerning the functional relation between role and activity – starts from a reinterpretation of Mead's conception of action. The axiomatic point of the Meadean theory is the anti-Watsonian interpretation of action and a consequent rethinking of the relationship between man and his environment. In *Schwalbe's* view, Mead's self-interpretation (Mead 1934) shedding light on the role of the self in social behavior and bringing him renown, already anticipated Mead's philosophy of activity (*Schwalbe* 1987:117).

"For Mead all human social behavior is built up out of a continual succession of acts, each act comprising four phases: impulse, perception, manipulation and consummation" (*Schwalbe* 1987:117-118) and each act as an entity can be imprinted and stored in memory symbolically. What essentially differentiates *Mead's concept of action* and of action from Watson's is that he derives an act not from the stimulus but from the impulse by which Mead meant a biologically or socially conditioned disposition to execute a definite act toward a definite object.

Instead of probing deeply into Mead's philosophy of action (which was the focus of another article by the author – see *Vari-Szilagy* 1991), let us see what *Schwalbe* gained by recounting this idea of Mead's on the relationship between role and action. Following Mead's train of thoughts, *Schwalbe*

succeeded in proving that:

1) the “birth” or differentiation of roles is related to the repetition and habituation of acts and to the requirement that people’s social behavior must be foreseeable and predictable. As a result, the repetition and habituation of acts alone make social behavior “patterned” (the habituation of successful acts has a vital importance in the “man-environment” relationship). As for the acts being foreseeable and predictable, this is a specifically human feature, but both Mead and Schwalbe failed to stress that it is not significant unless acts can be planned and lived through consciously.

Schwalbe, however, got quite close to this question by introducing in his paper the notion of “meta-act” (not used by Mead) to signify that the smaller units – operations – of activity are arranged into larger units of social activity. He contended that several others have also realized the need for a concept to express long-term goal-oriented social behavior. Schank and Abelson (1977), e.g., use the more pedestrian terms of ‘plans’ and ‘goals’ to discuss these matters. The “meta-act” was introduced because it was deductible from, and consistent with the Meadian idea of complex social behavior being comprised of simple acts in the given time. This complex social behavior may be construed with reference to consummation somewhere in the remote future, though this is not inevitable. In this sense, life can be regarded as a project itself, consisting of several shorter or longer projects that partly overlap, each composed of simple acts (operations) (Schwalbe 1987:121).

2) Schwalbe has shown that social interactions can also be described and analyzed in terms of Mead’s segmentation and characterization of acts, and that a description such as this reveals that internal needs and impulses are far more essential in role-taking than the structuralist role theory assumed.

3) These structuralist role-theoretic accounts “tend to make much of this supposed conflict between creativity and conformity in role-playing. From a Meadean perspective this is a false problem” (Schwalbe 1987:120).

It is indeed a false problem as the individual is never confronted with a single behavioral pattern or expectation but with a complex configuration of stimuli in the impulse and perception phases of action which equally comprise external factors and the acting subject’s individual abilities, emotions, drives and wishes. So, just as the individual can reproduce or innovate in single acts, likewise he can either be passively adaptive in major units of activity, in role-taking, and he can also modify or “rewrite” the actual role (at this point Schwalbe’s position partly overlaps Blumer’s, with the difference that he can more authentically support this position with Mead’s statements on act).

“The idea of individualization cannot have been alien to Mead whose

lesser known works (The Psychology of the Present, 1932; The Psychology of the Act, 1938) attest that he always viewed the working of social institutes and institutions in their genesis and process, attributing great importance in this to both the informal and the formal negotiating mechanisms and describing their outcome as “negotiated order” (Vári-Szilágyi 1991:104-105).

It follows from the aforesaid that an evaluation of role-taking and role-playing in the light of Mead’s philosophy of action can easily reveal that the ignorance or belittling of the latter may cause several misunderstandings. One such misunderstanding is the accusation (formulated, among others, by Moreno) that Mead’s role concept severely limits the scope of individual specificities, spontaneity and creativity, and overemphasizes uniformization (Moreno 1959). According to Moreno, role-expectations are culture-determined ‘behavioral boxes’ and he emphasized instead the theatrical role-metaphor which he thinks better reflects an individual actor’s spontaneity. Many still advocate this mistaken position; there are some who adopt Moreno’s criticism without checking its truthfulness and seek the way to *subsequently* incorporate individualization, the possibility of individual differences and peculiarities in Mead’s role theory. However, it is unnecessary to correct Mead retrospectively, as he originally provided for the variety of individual forms of role-taking. Excessive and one-sided role-taking is typical not of Mead but of the structuralist version of role theory (but to do them justice, we have to add that sociology’s approach to individual specificities has always been different).

Cicourel, Strauss and Joas were among those few scientists who not only noticed this unwarranted ‘qualification’ of Mead’s understanding of role, but argued against it on the basis of Mead’s original thoughts. Cicourel emphasized that the same critical feature of role which was later on pointed out by Goffman, namely its construction by the actor over the course of interaction (which means not only reproduction but modification and innovation in role-playing), can be found in Mead as well.

“The critical feature of role, as stressed by Goffman among others, lies in its construction by the actor over the course of interaction. This construction makes status-emitting stimuli problematic for the actor because of situational constraints. This notion of construction, despite a lack of conceptual clarity, can be seen in the following quotation from Mead” (here Cicourel cites a paragraph from Mead’s *Philosophy of Act*, 1938:192; Cicourel 1973:25-26).

Strauss and Joas connected the indefinite nature of roles and their necessary

modification by the individual actor with the very nature of social action and with situational constraints. Mead would say that the modification of roles (or indefinite nature of roles) “necessarily must be from the very nature of action which brings in its train the reconstruction of past experience and the arising of new objects” (Strauss 1959:25). Joas pointed out that the favorite form of action for Mead was *the cooperative act* which has an adaptive evolutionary value for all individuals but requires constant accommodation and spontaneous modification from individual actors, especially in the case of frequently experienced obstacles. In sum, spontaneity and creativity in the course of role-taking and role-playing cannot be regarded as alien or new features when compared with Mead’s original reasoning. Another question was that Mead’s view on human creativity in the course of action was hindered by a shortcoming in his conception of action (over-oriented on the model of adaptive commerce with nature and “too little to the objectification of human activity”, Joas 1985:235) but this has nothing to do with his understanding of individuals as agents in the course of role-playing and interactions.

The other was the case with the theatrical metaphor favored by Moreno with respect to role. As Joas wrote:

“Mead explicitly rejected such implications: ‘It is this perfecting of the self by the gesture which mediates the social activities that gives rise to the process of taking the role of the other. The latter phrase is a little unfortunate because it suggests an actor’s attitude which is actually more sophisticated than that which is involved in our own experience. To this degree it does not correctly describe that which I have in mind’ (Mind, Self and Society, p.161). (Joas 1985:230).

There are indeed several points on which one may complement and rectify Mead’s ideas but they do not include the correct formulation of interrelation between action and role.

What most obviously requires complementation and correction is first of all Mead’s atomistic and sporadic treatment of motivation as well as the vague and inaccurate definition of the Generalized Other. Symbolic interactionism, borrowing some relevant viewpoints from sociological role theory, has greatly contributed to the concept of the Generalized Other, to its multiple and variable categorical and manifestational possibilities, and consequently, to outlining the scopes of choice and identification (including the choice of the reference group), as well as to the clarification of its relation to the formation of self-identity (the notion of the Generalized Other also requires positional analysis in the group stratification of society).

Ignoring the problem of motivation is, however, a lasting flaw of Mead’s

legacy. Perhaps it is better to say that not the whole problem of motivation but the detailed elaboration of its relevant questions and mechanisms was missing as he approached this problem from the global perspective of a philosopher and not of an educational or personality psychologist. When he attributed such a central importance to relationships between action and role and practical intersubjectivity and role, he probably picked out the most general motivational basis for the modification and reinterpretation of roles in the course of interactions. However, this part of his reasoning has not been as explicitly elaborated as some other ideas of his. This defect was somewhat offset again by Schwalbe's recognition that by virtue of his role theory and ideas on imagination *Mead might well be regarded the forerunner of modern cognitive social psychology*, anticipating much of its conception of schemes. Under this assumption, the imagery created of the role refers to future acts or appearance and behavior, being their prototypes and functioning in three ways: organizing our perception, giving stimuli to act and guiding the action to its consummation, to realization. Once they have been formed and internalized in the person's mind, they become a relatively independent motivating force (author's addition). Schwalbe fails to make it explicit that the problem is actually that of motivation. But it is: the role is "performance imagery" of behavior. The imagery is created by experience and is coded symbolically. All we know of it so far clearly alludes to a motivational role similar to that which stereotyped cognitive schemes determined culturally, ethnically or microsocially and borrowed in different ways.

It is important to note, however, that the role as performance imagery expressly refers to cognitive schemes related to activity and asserted in interactions, and as such, it is far removed from the conception overtly represented by Mead, or first of all by his phenomenological reception headed by Martin Buber who tends to emphasize first and foremost the contemplative element, meditation and encounter in interactions to the detriment of all other possible components.

Hopefully this short and probably incomplete review and analysis of Mead's original reasoning on role, of his understanding of role concept and of its later career shows the disadvantageous impoverishment of Mead's theoretical position (in spite of the progress made in elaboration of some important aspects of role, like role-set, role constraint, role distance) and inspires us to reorganize our knowledge on this problem.

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