

THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA
A STUDY OF SELF AND DEVIANCE FROM A SYMBOLIC
INTERACTIONISM PERSPECTIVE:
THE HOMOSEXUAL AND HIS SUBCULTURE

BY

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ABSTRACT

From the perspective of symbolic interaction, individuals act toward things on the basis of the meanings which these things have for them. Meanings, including meanings about the self, are acquired by the individual through interaction with others. While an individual's self-concept is dependent upon his perception of the evaluations of others toward him, others are of differential importance to the individual in terms of the degree to which they exert an influence over the meanings which he incorporates. A distinction can be made between those others whose evaluations of the individual are accepted by the individual and incorporated into his self-concept, thereby exerting an enduring, generalized influence over the individual (significant or orientational others), and those others whose evaluations of the individual are not incorporated into the individual's self-concept and who, therefore, do not exert an influence on the individual beyond the immediate social influence setting (role-specific others). The way an individual comes to perceive and evaluate himself, therefore, is dependent upon the way he perceives himself as evaluated by a particular "class" of others--those who are orientational to him.

The concept of the "orientational others" has important implications for the study of self-change since it suggests that one way in which enduring changes can occur is through

a displacement of orientational others. That is, when an individual is unable to meet needs for self-validation and acceptance from those who are orientational to him, he may, through interaction with others who accept and support his self-concept, establish new self-defining relationships and thereby incorporate new meanings of self.

A review of the literature on deviance provides some support for this conceptualization of self-change. Some forms of deviance are conducive to deviant group formation, and the interaction of like-deviants is thought to lead to a process of "normalization" whereby the unacceptable behaviour is redefined as "normal" and acceptable. Our formulation of self-change would suggest that the effects of in-group participation on the self-concept of an individual will be positive only to the extent that a displacement of orientational others, from those outside the in-group to those within, occurs.

This study attempts a preliminary test of these propositions within the homosexual context. Since the nature of homosexuality makes this form of deviance conducive to deviant group participation, and since the literature on homosexuality suggests that a homosexual status can only have debilitating consequences for the self-concepts of these individuals, the choice of a homosexual sample would appear to be particularly appropriate for a test of this conceptualization of

self-change. A "snowball" sample of homosexual subjects from the area of Winnipeg will be used in this study. In addition, for the purposes of comparison, a subsample of the homosexual subjects will be matched to a sample of heterosexual subjects. Self-concept will be operationalized using the technique of Semantic Differential. In general, the results support the hypotheses.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
<u>I</u>	THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK I: THE SELF.....	
	Introduction.....	1
	The Perspective.....	1
	Symbols and Meaning.....	2
	The Self as a Meaningful Object.....	4
	Self-Evaluation.....	8
<u>II</u>	THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK II: THE SELF, OTHERS AND SELF-CHANGE.....	
	Others.....	15
	The Self and Others.....	21
	Self-Change.....	22
	The Problem of Motivation.....	25
<u>III</u>	THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK III: THE SELF AND DEVIANCE.....	29
	Deviance as Process.....	30
	Homosexuality as Process.....	33
<u>IV</u>	STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM AND HYPOTHESES..	39
	The Problem.....	44
	Hypotheses.....	45
<u>V</u>	METHODOLOGY.....	48
	Sample.....	48
	Method of Data Collection.....	50
	Semantic Differential Scales.....	52
	Self-Concept.....	54

Table of Contents	- 2 -	PAGE
Perceived Self-Concept.....		54
Participation.....		55
Oriental Others.....		56
CHAPTER		
<u>VI</u>	ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA...	58
	Hypothesis I.....	58
	Hypothesis II.....	71
	Hypothesis III.....	74
<u>VII</u>	CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS.....	79
	SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	87
	APPENDIX I.....	95
	APPENDIX II.....	100
	APPENDIX III.....	103
	APPENDIX IV.....	105
	APPENDIX V.....	107
	APPENDIX VI.....	109
	APPENDIX VII.....	111

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE		PAGE
<u>I</u>	Comparable Mean Scores of Male Homosexual and Male Heterosexual Matched Samples on the Self-Concept Variable.....	60
<u>II</u>	Comparable Measures of Central Tendency and Dispersion for Male Homosexual and Male Heterosexual Matched Samples on the Self-Concept Variable.....	61
<u>III</u>	Comparable Mean Scores of Female Homosexual and Female Heterosexual Matched Samples on the Self-Concept Variable.....	63
<u>IV</u>	Comparable Measures of Central Tendency and Dispersion for Female Homosexual and Female Heterosexual Matched Samples on the Self-Concept Variable.....	64
<u>V</u>	Comparable Mean Scores Achieved by the Entire Homosexual and Heterosexual Samples on the Self-Concept Variable.....	66
<u>VI</u>	A Frequency Breakdown by Sex for the Entire Homosexual Sample on the Orientational Other Displacement Variable.....	70
<u>VII</u>	Correlations Between Participation and Orientational Other Displacement.....	73
<u>VIII</u>	Correlations Between Self-Concept and Perceived View of Self Held by Homosexual Orientational Others.....	75

CHAPTER I
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK I: THE SELF

Introduction

Using a symbolic interactionist framework, this study attempts an examination of the process through which meanings, particularly self-definitions, are acquired by the individual. Specifically, it was designed to examine the differential effects which different classes of "others" have on the self-concept of the individual, and hopefully it will contribute to a better understanding of the processes of self-change.

To test the hypotheses which we have drawn from interactionist theory, a sample of homosexual subjects made available to the researcher in the area of Winnipeg was used in this study. In addition, for the purposes of comparison, a sample of heterosexual respondents was matched to a subsample of the homosexual group of subjects. The study was conducted during the spring of 1973.

The Perspective

This study utilizes the perspective of symbolic interactionism, a perspective which derives largely from the social behaviorism of George Herbert Mead and his student and colleague, Herbert Blumer, who has done much to elabor-

ate and refine Mead's original formulations.

In the final analysis, three basic premises encompass the perspective of symbolic interactionism:

1. Human beings act toward things in accordance with the meanings these things have for them;
2. These meanings arise out of social interaction; and,
3. "These meanings are handled in and modified through an interpretive process used by the person in dealings with the things he encounters" (Blumer, 1969:2).

These premises point to the obvious centrality of the concept of "meaning" in symbolic interactionism, and therefore necessitate a closer look at the nature of this concept in relation to the perspective under study.

Symbols and Meaning

Mead's concepts of the "gesture" and the "symbol" are important to an understanding of how meaningful communication arises among individuals. Mead (1934:46) defines the gesture as "that phase of the individual act to which adjustment takes place on the part of other individuals in the social process of behavior", and notes that gestures may or may not be "significant" or meaningful.

In the case of animals other than man, a "conversation

of gestures" may occur; however, such a conversation cannot be considered meaningful. Mead's classic example of a dog-fight illustrates his point. In a dog-fight, the behavior of the dogs represents mechanical or spontaneous responses to immediate external stimuli; the action of one dog being the stimulus for the response of the other.

We have here a conversation of gestures. They are not, however, gestures in the sense that they are significant. We do not assume that the dog says to himself, "if the animal comes from this direction, he is going to spring at my throat and I will turn in such a way." What does take place is an actual change in his own position due to the direction of the approach of the other dog. (Mead, 1934:43).

Mead's example illustrates that for gestures to become significant symbols which provide the participants with meaning, it is necessary that given gestures arouse the same response in others as in the actor (Mead, 1934:47).

As stated by Peter Singelmann (1972:415):

. . . interaction between humans is "symbolic" in that individuals respond to the behavior of others not for some inherent quality in them, but for the significance imputed to them by others.

Mead recognizes language as the mechanism which transforms gestures into significant symbols, and the development of language, in turn, necessitates that the individual be able to "take the role of the other." This latter process will be discussed more fully in relation to the

development of self; here it is sufficient to note that taking the role of the other is necessary for mutually understood meanings to arise. Mead states this point explicitly:

. . . in all conversations of gestures within the social process, whether external (between different individuals) or internal (between a given individual and himself), the individual's consciousness of the content and flow of meaning involved depends on his thus taking the attitude of the other toward his own gestures. In this way every gesture comes within a given social group or community to stand for a particular act or response which it calls forth explicitly in the individual to whom it is addressed, and implicitly in the individual who makes it; and this particular act or response for which it stands is its meaning as a significant symbol. (1934:47).

Meanings shared in this way become the basis for human social organization, as Blumer aptly points out:

Meanings . . . can only be seen as social products, as creations that are formed in and through the defining activities of people as they interact. (1969:5).

The Self as a Meaningful Object

In terms of what things may have meaning for the individual, symbolic interaction takes the position that human beings exist in "worlds" or "environments" composed of "objects" whose existence and meaning arise through the interaction of these beings (Mead, 1934:128-130; Blumer, 1969:10). The nature of these objects is clearly implied

in Mead's discussion of the relationship between the human organism and his environment (Mead, 1934: 128-130), and explicitly stated by Blumer. The latter defines objects as "anything that can be indicated or referred to" (Blumer, 1969:11) and classifies these according to three categories: "physical objects", "social objects" and "abstract objects." As a class, for example, physical objects include such concrete entities as chairs, books or trees; social objects include "others" in their respective role relationships with the actor, such as mother, friend or student; and abstract objects encompass "moral principles, philosophical doctrines or ideas such as justice, exploitation or compassion" (Blumer, 1969:10-11).

The category of social objects is of particular relevance to this study and includes both the "self" and "others." The concept of self, as an object about which a person can acquire meaning, recognizes that an individual "can be an object of his own action . . . can recognize himself . . . acts toward himself and guides himself in his actions toward others on the basis of the kind of object he is to himself" (Blumer, 1969:12). Like other objects, the self-object "emerges from the process of social interaction in which other people are defining a person to himself" (Blumer, 1969:12). Role-taking is seen as a necessary

prerequisite for the development of the self-object.

The introduction of the concept of self into the realm of sociological theory can again be credited largely to Mead. As pointed out earlier, Mead's recognition of a dialectic interdependence between the human organism and its environment is crucial to symbolic interactionism (Singelmann, 1972:415). Mead's approach does not neglect the social context in which biological development occurs, but neither does it, nor can it according to Mead, neglect the contribution of the biological organism to this process (Mead, 1934:1-2).

For Mead, the individual act is part of the social act and, as such, the "inner experiences" of the individual in relation to his environment cannot be ignored. In reference to these "inner experiences" of the individual, Mead states as follows:

This is the beginning of the act; it is a part of the act. The external act which we do observe is a part of the process which has started within; the values which we say the (object) has are values through the relationship of the object to the person that has that sort of attitude. (1934:5).

Mead's emphasis on the "inner experiences" of the individual as well as on the ongoing social process in the emergence of meanings about objects, including the self-object, highlights the importance of self-reflexivity.

It is the characteristic of the self as an object to itself that I want to bring out. This characteristic is represented in the word "self", which is reflexive, and indicates that which can be both subject and object. (Mead, 1934:136-137).

For an individual to be an object to himself, to develop meanings about himself, he must be able to bring himself into the same "experiential field" as those others with whom he is interacting. Mead termed this process as "taking the role of the other."

The individual experiences himself . . . , 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 . . . he becomes an object to himself only by taking the attitudes of other individuals toward himself within a social environment or context of experience in which both he and they are involved. (Mead, 1934:138).

But the process of self-reflexivity has an even more important implication for the understanding of human behavior. Because an individual can be an object to himself, he can interact with himself. Blumer describes the nature of this interaction:

. . . the interaction is social--a form of communication, with the person addressing himself as a person and responding thereto . . . self-interaction exists fundamentally as a process of making indications to oneself. (1969:13).

It is this process of interacting with ourselves, of

making indications to ourselves, which Mead has termed "inner experience" and which gives a distinctive character to human behavior. The individual faces an environment which he must interpret before he can act. As such, "human behavior and action is not a mechanical response to external stimuli but a thing 'constructed' creatively and selectively" (Singelmann, 1972:415).

Self-Evaluation

Charles H. Cooley also made some important contributions toward the development of the concept of self. Cooley's description of the "looking-glass self" clearly illustrates the social nature of the self and particularly the evaluative overtones which the individual's interpretation of indications made to him by others may have. As Cooley notes, the individual's self-feelings may vary considerably depending on how he perceives himself to be as evaluated by others.

As we see our face, figure and dress in the glass, and are interested in them because they are ours, and pleased or otherwise with them according as they do or do not answer to what we should like them to be; so in imagination we perceive in another's mind some thought of our appearance, manners, aims, deeds, character, friends, and so on, and are variously affected by it.

A self-idea of this sort seems to have three principal elements: the imagination of our

appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgement of that appearance, and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification. (Cooley, 1902:184).

While Mead acknowledges that an individual's interaction with himself has an evaluative quality which affects his self-feeling (1934:200-209), this is not a point of emphasis in his analysis. Given, however, the premise that people act towards objects differentially in terms of the meanings those objects have for them, the notion of self-evaluation becomes critical to a discussion of self. One's perception of oneself or others as being positively or negatively evaluated in a given social situation should, according to this premise, variously affect the nature of the ongoing interaction.

Cooley's discussion of self-feeling, then, reflects another dimension of the nature of meaning as formulated by Mead. While Mead's foremost concern was with meanings as denotative (i.e., I am a baseball player), Cooley's contribution rests with his recognition that meanings may also be evaluative in nature (i.e., I am a good baseball player).

The Development of Self

To recapitulate, Mead recognizes that the gesture can only become significant or meaningful when it has the same effect on the individual making the gesture as it has on

the individual to whom it is addressed or who explicitly responds to it. Further, it is language which transforms the gesture into a significant symbol and allows the occurrence of mutually understood meaning. The development of language, and hence meanings about objects including the self-object, requires that the individual be able to place himself in the same experiential field as those others with whom he interacts, in order to see himself and other objects from the standpoint or perspective of these others. Mead referred to this process as "taking the role of the other."

The individual, for Mead, is thus conscious before he is self-conscious. The emergence of a self, however, is a process which begins with the individual's very first encounter with others. As language, and hence meanings about objects in the external world develop, meanings simultaneously develop about the self-object. By taking the attitudes of others toward his person, the individual acquires meanings about the self.

Mead stresses two stages in the development of the self: the "play" stage and the "game" stage. The distinction between these two stages rests with the nature of the "others" involved and with the individual's degree of self-development. Mead (1934:151) describes the "play" stage

as "the simplest form of being another to one's self."
It involves a temporal situation in which the child plays at being something or someone. The child assumes the roles of other persons who have somehow entered his life, such as an Indian, a teacher, a parent, and then acts out these roles in relation to himself. For example, to play "Indian" requires "that the child has a certain set of stimuli which call out in itself the responses that they would call out in others, and which answers to an Indian" (Mead, 1934:150). At this stage the child does not possess a fully developed self.

The child responds in a fairly intelligent fashion to the immediate stimuli that come to him, but they are not organized. He does not organize his life as we like to have him do, namely, as a whole. There is just a set of responses of the type of play. The child reacts to a certain stimulus, and the reaction is in himself that is called out in others, but he is not a whole self. (Mead, 1934:152).

The function of the play stage is, thus, to organize the child's responses to the different stimuli which he encounters.

The "game" stage, by contrast, requires that the child be able to assume the attitudes of everyone else involved in the common activity. Mead uses baseball as an example of an organized game. In order to successfully carry out his role as a player, the child must assume the roles of all others involved in the game.

In the game, then, there is a set of responses of such others so organized that the attitude of one calls out the appropriate attitudes of the other. (Mead, 1934:151).

It is the organization of the individual's responses in the game situation which allows the game to continue, for "it is that organization which controls the response of the individual" (Mead, 1934:154).

The emergence of a fully developed self, however, requires that the individual go beyond the game stage. As Mead notes:

. . . in the same way that he takes the attitudes of other individual toward himself and toward one another, he must take their attitudes towards 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. (1934:155).

The individual must then generalize these attitudes and guide his behavior in social activities accordingly. When an individual can assume the attitudes of the "generalized other", he is said to possess a fully developed self (Mead, 1934:155). The concept of the "generalized other", then, does not refer to specific persons but represents the interests of the group as an organized whole within the perspective of the individual (Kemper, 1966:325).

CHAPTER II
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK II:
THE SELF, OTHERS AND SELF-CHANGE

It was noted earlier in this paper that Mead showed an apparent "lack of concern" with the process of self-evaluation--a process which appears highly relevant to a discussion of self. The preceding discussion of self-development, in which Mead's references to the role of others in an individual's self-development are vague and obviously incomplete, manifests a further lack of concern since it has long been recognized that others are of differential importance to the individual's self-evaluation.

Part of the problem with Mead's thesis may rest with the well-known fact that what we know of Mead's thoughts comes to us in lectures and notes published by his students. Perhaps the rest of the answer must be sought in terms of why the self was so important to Mead. Mind, Self and Society illustrates that, for Mead, "self" had more "macro" implications than the term has come to suggest. The gaps in Meadian theory lie primarily with the fact that Mead's foremost concern was with individual selves as reflecting a "different aspect or perspective" of the "organized relational pattern" of the human social process (Mead, 1934:154). Only by using the concept of self could

Mead see an explanation for the existence of organized human behavior--for society. His concept of the "generalized other", a term which represents the interests of the group as a whole within the individual, clearly indicates this concern.

Cooley's recognition of the "primary group", then, represents a significant contribution in terms of self-development:

By primary groups I mean those characterized by face-to-face association and co-operation. They are primary in several senses, but chiefly that they are fundamental in forming the social nature and ideals of the individual. The results of intimate association, psychologically, is a certain fusion of individualities in a common whole, so that one's very self, for many purposes at least, is the common life and purpose of the group. Perhaps the simplest way of describing this wholeness is by saying that it is a "we"; it involves the sort of sympathy and mutual identification for which "we" is the natural expression. (Cooley, 1907:23).

However, incomplete and questionable certain aspects of Cooley's formulation appear--especially the significance of the "face-to-face" criterion--there can be no doubt that his ideas represent a step forward from Mead's explanation. Further, Cooley's impact on the development of sociological theory cannot be denied. As Parsons notes:

The connection of the primary group with socialization is patent: the ground work of social personality is in fact laid in intimate relations with a small number of

people; and the special character of mutual interest among primary group members, which Cooley emphasizes so strongly, has been amply proven to be an essential condition of successful internalization, particularly of values and norms. (1968:62-63).

Cooley's contribution to an elaboration of Mead's ideas is hence two-fold: Cooley recognizes that others are of differential importance to the individual in the development of meanings about the self-object, and he stipulates that "identification"¹ is the mechanism by which particular others assume greater importance. Cooley, however, fails to further elaborate his theoretical contributions.

It is not surprising, then, that when one comes to study the development of self in terms of particular others or under particular social conditions, "gaps" appear in the formulations of Mead and Cooley. At this point, it becomes necessary to supplement their approaches with those of more contemporary authors who are concerned with the process of self-development.

Others

While the concept of "other" occupies a central role

1. For a discussion of what motivates an individual to accept the imputations of others, see "The Problem of Motivation", Chapter II.

in the theoretical formulation of Mead, Mead's concern was with the way in which the individual participates in, and is affected by, the society as a whole. The individual's perception of the "generalized other", that is, of the organized attitudes of the group or community to which he belongs, requires that the individual be able to place himself in the same experiential field as those others with whom he interacts, and take the attitudes of these others toward himself and towards the ongoing social activity of which he is a part. The individual's actual membership groups, then, provide the particular standpoint from which the individual comes to experience and evaluate himself and others. Thus, while Mead's discussion of the "generalized other" is vague, he does suggest that particular others (i.e., other members of the groups to which the individual belongs) are significant to the individual in providing him with a perspective of the attitudes of the entire community against which to compare and evaluate himself and others.

Turner elaborates this aspect of Mead's work and notes that "reference group", in the broad sense of that term, and "generalized other" essentially amount to the same thing:

The reference group is a generalized other which is viewed as possessing member roles and attributes independently of the specific individuals who compose it. (1966:158-159).

Turner also recognizes that the generality of the term "reference group" has aroused much controversy among writers, and while he maintains that the different usages for the term are not separate, but merely definitions reflecting differential emphases on the effect and mechanism of the reference group,¹ he suggests that, in actuality, the term encompasses four concepts: identification groups; valuation groups; interaction groups; and, audience groups.

. . . the source of the individual's major perspectives and values might well be named the identification group . . . At the opposite extreme, the individual's behavior is affected by (interaction groups) whose members constitute merely conditions to his actions. The groups are neutrally toned to the actor; he must merely take them into account in order to accomplish his purposes. . . . In between are those (valuation) groups which acquire value to the individual because the standpoint of his identification groups designate them as points of reference . . . we should note a dichotomy cross-cutting the preceding distinctions. . . . These are the (audience) groups by whom the actor sees his role performance observed and evaluated, and he attends to the evaluations and expectations which members of the group hold toward him. (Turner, 1966:158).

In Turner's analysis, a particular constellation of others (i.e., those who comprise the individual's identification groups) provide the individual with his self-definit-

1. Turner cites the different usages for the term "reference group" as, the group against which the individual compares himself in making self-judgments, the group which serves as the source of an individual's values, and the group to which an individual seeks acceptance. (Turner, 1966:157).

ions and a perspective of all others against which he can compare and evaluate himself and others. Kemper makes the same type of distinction, but refers to the members of identification groups as "significant others":

Most individuals . . . are bounded by a relatively small number of others, and of these, even a smaller number are significant to the extent that they contribute in any broad or deep sense to the individual's self-concept . . . by whether of time, social structure or cultural prescription, each person acquires a particular constellation of others whose opinions and behavior are especially important to him and from whom he derives certain central notions about himself. (1966:325-326).

Kemper refers to an individual's configuration of significant others as constituting his "reference set", a term which bears much resemblance to "reference group" and "generalized other":

Reference set . . . is taken to mean the sum total of others, in or out of role sets, present or absent, real or imagined, individual or group normative, comparative or audience, institutionally legitimate or not, who exercise influence over the individual. The reference set constitutes the cast of characters--the significant others--whom the individual takes into account when he acts, or to use Weber's phrase, with respect to whom his "behavior is oriented in its course". (1966:327).

By definition, then, the "reference set" serves as the individual's major source of self-concept; however, Kemper emphasizes that:

. . . not all members of the reference set contribute equally to the individual's self. Some members' interests are specific, others are diffuse and opportunities for interaction with them, except in imagination, may vary considerably. (1966:327).

While Kemper makes a distinction between the degree of importance of significant others, his formulation goes no further. In contrast, Sullivan's formulation of the "significant other" is much more specific. As Denizen notes:

Sullivan coined the term "significant other" to refer to those others whose evaluations of his behavior and attitudes the individual held in high esteem. (1966:298)¹

Sullivan's formulation, however, makes no distinction between those others who are important to the individual only in a role-specific sense and those who are important to the individual in a trans-role, trans-situational sense. Recognizing this, Kuhn's (1964) exploration into the importance of others led him to develop the concept of the "orientational other." While Kuhn's "orientational other" has been operationalized in terms of Sullivan's "significant other" (Denizen, 1966), Kuhn assigns to the "orientational other" four defining attributes which imply that the

1. Denizen points out that there is some question as to whether the term was meant to refer to those individuals responsible for socializing the individual or to all those persons the individual holds in high esteem. Recent usage, however, tends to employ the latter interpretation. (1966:298).