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Understanding Ourselves with and through Others

We can feel isolated, alone and seemingly unable to reach out. Yet we do not stand in simple isolation from one another. We can resent being constrained by circumstances over which we feel we have no control and also assert our freedom by refusing to conform to the expectations of others. We may express frustration at the absence of instantaneous entertainment on our mobile devices, or use time to read, digest, discuss, and reflect. We need the recognition of others, but if not forthcoming or offered in a manner expected, disappointment and resentment may result. Possessing conflicting feelings or exhibiting different actions depending on the circumstances is a common part of our experiences. The human condition appears to give rise to confusing states that lead to frustration, as well as imagination and creativity.

How our actions are seen, by us and others, are constituted in these relations. Actions, self, and social identities and understandings are intimately related. These factors are informed by prevailing ideas on what it is to be human. We are, for example, free to choose and act on those choices in order to reach our goals. You can get up now and make a cup of coffee, or get a glass of water, before continuing to read this chapter. You can also choose to abandon the project of thinking sociologically and embark upon another course of study, or abandon the idea of study altogether. For you to continue to read on is a choice among the alternative courses of action that are currently available to you. Your ability to make conscious decisions in this way is said to be an exercise of your freedom.

Freedom in Living with Others

We are surrounded by particular ideas of individuals and, from there, their actions, choices, and degrees of responsibility. Adverts of all types are targeted at aspirations linked to what one wants to be in the world linked to the possession of goods. Surrounded by these techniques of persuasion into which are poured enormous resources, can we say our choices are the product of conscious decisions that we formulate in a clear, rational manner, prior to the determination of any action? Many of our actions are *habitual* and not subject to deliberate and open choice. Despite that, we may be reminded that our decisions leave us

responsible for their consequences. You can hear it now: “No one forced you to do so, you have only yourself to blame!” If we break rules that are meant to guide people’s conduct we may be punished and those punishments can range from informal to formal sanctions: for example, breaking the norms of a group may lead to us being ridiculed or temporarily excluded, to having our liberty removed through incarceration in prison due to law-breaking. The act of punishment is one confirmation that we are held responsible for our actions. Rules, in this sense, orientate not only our actions, but coordinate interactions with others enabling an anticipation of how we and they are likely to act. Without this orientation in place, communication and understanding in everyday life would seem inconceivable.

If we are the authors of our destinies we have the power to act in controlling our lives. We have both the ability to monitor our actions *and* the capability to determine their outcomes. Nevertheless, is this really how life works for most people? It might be claimed, for example, that being unemployed is entirely the fault of the individual concerned who, if they tried hard enough and acquired suitable knowledge and skills, could earn a living. People might retrain themselves and look for work, but the area in which they live has high unemployment and they cannot afford to move, or have relatives and friends for whom they care and so, despite actively seeking employment, there is none on offer or they have limited mobility due to dependents. There are many circumstances in which our freedom to act is limited by circumstances over which we have little or no control. It is one thing to have the ability to change or modify our skills and quite another to possess the capability to reach our goals. Let us consider this in more detail.

Take conditions of scarcity. These, as well as how we are judged by others, limit our capabilities. People might seek the same goals, but not all reach them because access to what they seek is limited. In this case we might compete with each other and the outcome may be only partially dependent on our efforts. We might seek a college place, only to find out that there are 20 candidates for every place available and that most of them have the qualifications required. In addition, the college may tend to favor candidates from certain social backgrounds and those with connections to those who have attended before. Our actions are dependent upon the judgments of others over whom we may exercise limited control, but also related to our social networks and how those enable and constrain our aspirations. Others set the rules of the game and act as the referees. They are *positioned* by their institutions to exercise discretion and, in so doing, draw a boundary around the freedoms of others. Factors such as these heavily influence the outcome of our efforts. In this case we become dependent on others because they evaluate whether our efforts are good enough and consider whether we exhibit the right characteristics and background to justify our admission.

Material factors inform our capability to reach our goals. Whilst self-determination is important, what if we lack the means? We might be able to move to seek work in places where more jobs are available, only to discover that the cost of houses or of rents is far beyond our means. Similarly, we might wish to escape overcrowded and polluted conditions in order to move to a healthier location. However, we find those with more money have already

done so and therefore it is not affordable, or they have created enclosures or live in high-rise buildings to secure environments separate from their surroundings. In the process house prices increase, rents go up, and the job does not pay enough to obtain somewhere to live. We can say the same thing about education and health. Some areas have better equipped schools and hospitals, yet are too far away, whilst our society does not have a public, universal health-care system and private health insurance is beyond our income. Thus, freedom of choice does not guarantee freedom to act on those choices, nor does it secure the freedom to attain our desired ends. To be able to act freely, we need more than an idea of *free will*.

Most commonly we think of being limited by the amount of money at our disposal, but we have also mentioned symbolic resources. In this case our freedom may not depend on what we do, but on who we are in terms of how others view and value us. We have used the example of a college, but we may also be refused entry to a club, or employment, because of the manner in which our qualities are judged: for example, on the grounds of class, race, sexual orientation, age, ethnicity, or disability. Alternatively, access to the club may depend on past achievements – acquired skills, qualifications, length of service, the people who we know and will sponsor us, or the manner in which we have been brought up to speak and address people. These are the lasting consequences of past choices which, when they become sedimented in more durable social structures over time, have an effect on individual actions. Freedom to act in the present is thus informed by past circumstances, accumulated experiences, and the value accorded to those by others.

How we are positioned in these ways interacts with how we feel about and act in the social situations into which we enter. Let us return to our college example. We may find that a mode of speaking and particular accent is expected during the interview, but it is one with which we are unfamiliar. Coming from a working-class background, we may feel uneasy among middle-class students, or our sexual orientation is not judged to be “normal” and so we experience a sense of isolation and an absence of others seeing our choices as valid. Perhaps, being a Catholic who follows orthodoxy, we cannot accept divorce and abortion as the choices that others have a right to make.

Here we come to a possibility: those groups with whom we feel most at ease may actually limit our freedom by restricting the range of opinions we can hold. Informal and formal groups are often constituted by the expectations that they place upon their members and in so doing exclude those who are presumed not to live up to those requirements or ways of life. When these gaps in understanding occur between groups, they are frequently filled by stereotypical assumptions which are prejudicial and inaccurate, but enable a separation between “us” and “them.” The very fact that we may be adjusted to the conditions of action inside our group circumscribes our freedom by preventing us from engaging with experiences beyond the confines of that group. Having been trained in the ways of our groups, we practice a freedom whose price is to limit engagement with other ideas and practices.

We are both enabled and constrained in the everyday practices of freedom. At one level we are taught that there are types of desires that are acceptable and achievable within a group. Appropriate ways to act, talk, dress, and conduct

ourselves provide an orientation to get us through life within the groups to which we belong. We judge ourselves according to those expectations and our self-esteem is directly informed in these ways. Groups enable boundaries that orientate us through common interests and/or by proximity and these advantages may become problems as we traverse from one group to another and find ourselves in environments where different ways of being and forms of evaluation are promoted. Alternative ways of conducting ourselves may be seen as appropriate and the connections between other people's conduct and their intentions are not familiar to us and appear alien. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu referred to this gap as the "Don Quixote" effect: that is, between our dispositions and the social contexts in which we find ourselves.

One way in which we can gain a sense of the appropriateness of conduct is through our physical presence with others and hearing what they say and seeing how they act. However, if one is exposed to the reactions of online communities, there may be no way to see the actions of others over time and their utterances may be anonymous. As a result, their actions are not constrained by the consequences of being judged by those who are in physical proximity. As we move from one setting to another, whether in virtual or real space, the background understanding that allowed us to navigate and belong in one group can appear as a limitation. Where a disjuncture occurs between our expectations, experiences, and actions, it may be because of the unintended consequences of intentional actions. In other words, despite intentionally seeking one outcome, another arises because circumstances unfolded in a way we did not anticipate, or there were factors we did not know about and over which we had no control.

When it comes to the factors that inform our dispositions, or ways of being in the world, the reference groups to which we belong are not ones we have opted for out of free choice. Quite simply, we can be members of a group because we are born into it. The group that defines us and orients our actions may not be one that we have consciously chosen. When we first joined it or were seen by others to be a part of it, it was not an act of freedom, but a manifestation of dependence. We do not decide to be French, Caribbean, white, or working or middle class. Such apparent fate can be accepted with equanimity or resignation, or it can be transformed into our destiny through an enthusiastic embrace with the identity of the group and what it stands for – being proud of what we are and the expectations placed upon us as a result. If we want to transform ourselves, however, it will require a great deal of effort against the taken-for-granted expectations of those who surround us. Self-sacrifice, determination, and endurance will take the place of conformity to the values and norms of the group. The contrast is one between swimming with the tide, or against the current. This is how, despite not always being conscious of it, we are dependent upon others: even though we may swim against the current, we still do so in a direction that is oriented or informed by the expectations or actions of those who lie both inside and outside of the familiar group. How we act and see ourselves is informed by the expectations of the groups to which we belong. This is manifested in several ways.

First, there are the *ends* or goals that we assign with particular significance and so consider worth pursuing. These vary according to such factors as class, ethnicity, age, and gender. The work of caring for others is often, but not

exclusively, provided by women and so there is a clear tendency to gravitate to particular occupations in which caring for others is rewarded: for example, teaching, nursing, and social work. This is based on assumptions about divisions of labor in terms of the types of characteristics that men and women are expected to exhibit. These are tendencies, not simple determinations, which have cultural variations. Yet they are ones that circumscribe not only what is seen to be acceptable, but the recognition and rewards offered to different occupations and to those within them.

Second, how we are expected to achieve these ends is influenced by another manifestation of group expectations: the accepted *means* employed in the pursuit of ends. We are concerned here with the forms of conduct that are taken to be appropriate in everyday life. How we dress, use our bodies, our forms of talk, display our enthusiasm and even how we eat, are just part of the ways in which groups inform our conduct in the pursuit of ends. What are acceptable and unacceptable means for the attainment of ends may saturate individual concerns with the consequences of actions in situations where people wish to belong or fear the consequences of acting against the prevailing order. Indeed, persons deploying unacceptable means may not be positively sanctioned, but ignored as long as they are succeeding in the attainment of ends. These forms of justification can normalize actions and were certainly believed to be apparent in the culture of the banking sector that led to the global financial crisis of 2007–2008.

Third, groups also seek to identify themselves through acts that distinguish them from those outside of their formal and informal networks of relations. The resulting phenomenon is called the *criteria of relevance*. Here we are taught to distinguish between those objects or people who are relevant and irrelevant to the life-projects we embark upon. Inscriptions on objects may have different meanings between groups depending upon how those objects are accorded significance and relevance in a culture. Identifying allies, enemies, rivals, what to wear, who to listen to and who to disregard is part of this process. Thus, we owe the ends which we pursue, the means employed in their pursuit, and how to distinguish between those who may and may not assist us in the process to the groups to which we belong.

Sociological Lenses: Viewing Ourselves with Others

An enormous amount of practical knowledge is gained through our belonging to groups without which we would be unable to conduct our daily activities and orient ourselves and impute significance and value to our actions. In most cases this knowledge is “tacit”: that is, knowledge that orients our conduct by establishing meaning and connections between things, persons, and places without us being able to express it, or how and why it operates in particular ways. If asked, for example, the form of codes we use to communicate with others, how we decipher the actions of others and attribute meaning to objects, we may not even understand the question. How do we explain the rules of speech that enable communication, when we necessarily take them for granted in our communicative competency? Yet that knowledge is required to perform our tasks and practical

skills. A branch of sociology – ethnomethodology – is concerned with studying the minutiae of everyday interactions and provides for fascinating insights into those things that we take for granted: for example, taking turns in conversations, how we begin and end sentences and attribute characteristics to people on the basis of their mode of dress and bodily deportment in everyday, routine gestures.

We may begin sociological understanding of the relations between the individual and society with the background knowledge that informs practical reasoning and actions. The resulting studies become those areas of social life where we might feel secure in our actions and which inform the reproduction of the social order whose routines we rely upon for navigating our way through the world. That very reproduction can rely upon our forgetting, or simply taking for granted, the origins of the ways that can exert a powerful grip upon us. It comes in the form of a *natural attitude* that micro-sociologists turn into the objects of their investigation. Resulting studies on social knowledge and everyday life enable us to know more about our interactions with each other and the bases of our understandings in time and place.

One of the central figures who provided much insight into the formation of our self and social identities was George Herbert Mead. Who we are, our “selves,” is not an attribute that we are born with, but one acquired over time through interaction with others. In order to understand how this occurs, our sense of self can be seen in two parts: the “I” and the “Me.” Mead held that our minds seek an “adjustive relationship” with the world in which we find ourselves. However, that does not mean we simply reflect the expectations of groups because we have a reflexive capacity to act on the world and learn in new social contexts. For this purpose we come to know ourselves through others via symbolic communication. Language is the medium through which we speak, but also how we hear ourselves and evaluate our actions and utterances according to the responses of others. Communication is a generator of our subjectivity – it does not simply describe a world that is external to us, but constitutes the meaning and understanding of that world. The “I” is an “internal” conversation where language acts as a medium that enables us to conceive of ourselves as a “whole.” The “Me,” on the other hand, is the organization of the expectations of others within our actions. We respond to others in terms of how we see ourselves and that is constantly modified according to the different social settings we inhabit and act within.

The above takes place in three stages of development. First, there is a *preparatory stage*. Here our sense of self is passive in that it is made up of the actions and utterances which others display towards us. Awareness is built up and we respond to others with the symbols of the group, enabling us to define our conduct in terms that are appropriate to the setting. In this way, a growing awareness of ourselves is derived via the responses of others. At this stage we cannot experience ourselves directly, only through others, but this commences the process of being able to judge our performances in our interaction with others.

We then, as children, enter the *play stage* by acting out different “others” in roles. However, these are not connected and lack an overall organization. We should also note that some children may be placed in contexts where “play” itself is not possible or even seen as desirable. Learning language and attaching feelings to particular roles are central at this stage and so responses to

performance are important for understanding what is seen as “appropriate” play. Through a third, *game stage*, the organization of the attitudes of the group begins to be consolidated. Roles are learnt along with their relations to one another. Although a variety of “parts” are played, the rules that govern the game become more apparent. Our reflexive character is then built up by treating ourselves as objects of our own actions as they are understood through the responses of others to our utterances and actions.

The formation of the social self is not a passive process. Activity and initiative mark both sides of the interaction. After all, one of the first skills that a child learns is to discriminate and select, which cannot be acquired unless supported by the ability to resist and withstand pressure; in other words, to take a stand and act against external forces. Because of the contradictory signals from various significant others, the “I” must stand aside, at a distance, looking at the external pressures *internalized* in the “Me.” The stronger the “I,” the more autonomous becomes the character of the child. The strength of the “I” expresses itself in the person’s ability and readiness to put the social pressures internalized in the “Me” to the test, checking their true powers and their limits and so challenging them and bearing the consequences. In the course of this acquisition, we ask questions of ourselves and the first reflexive question of selfhood is, as the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur put it, “Who am I?” Here we experience the contradiction between freedom and dependence as an inner conflict between what we desire and what we feel obliged to do because of the presence of significant others and the expectations placed upon us. Images and meanings of acceptable behavior become part of our “internal” conversations as we reflexively consider our “being” and “doing.”

At this point we meet the interactions between the biological and the social. A great deal of money is being spent on trying to determine the genetic bases of different aspects of human behavior and neuroscience can easily lapse into seeking the basis of the social in the structure and function of the brain. Interpretations among those influenced, for example, by Darwin’s theory of evolution differ on whether we are competitive or cooperative by nature. Equally, we know that actions and how they are evaluated differ between cultures. As the geneticist Steve Jones put it, the most problematic word in genetics is “for” – as if finding a gene meant that it then stood *for* a particular form of behavior. Whilst vast sums of money are being poured into genetic research that produce potential gains in the treatment of diseases, the control of that knowledge and for what reasons remains a vital issue for us all.

When it comes to explanations for society according to biological drives or instinct, Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, suggested that the whole process of self-development and the social organization of human groups may be interpreted in the light of the need and the practical effort to contain sexual and aggressive instincts. Freud suggested that these instincts are never tamed, but “repressed” and driven into our subconscious. Thus, they are kept in limbo by the “superego” as the internalization of the perceived demands and pressures of the group. It is for this reason that Freud described the superego as a “garrison left in a conquered city.” The ego itself is then suspended between two powers: the instincts that have been driven into the subconscious yet remain potent and rebellious and the superego which presses the ego to keep the drives subconscious to prevent their escape from confinement.

Nancy Chodorow, the American feminist sociologist and psychoanalyst, modified such insights utilizing object relations theory. Examining gendered differences in emotional attachment, she argues that a son exhibits a “primary love” for his mother, but that desire is then repressed. As a result, he moves out of the relationship into a realm in which a tie with the mother is severed and that love then repressed. The son becomes the “other” and his autonomy is achieved via a repression of desire. A daughter, on the other hand, tends to experience more of an alignment resulting in her sense of self being formed not through a process of distinction from her mother, but a relational attachment. A gendered emphasis upon empathy and less of a concern among women to differentiate themselves from the world of which they are a part is characterized by the American psychologist, Carole Gilligan, as an “ethic of care.”

Other sociologists have followed up Freud’s hypotheses. Norbert Elias, who fused these insights with comprehensive historical research, suggested that the experience of the self we possess arises from a double pressure to which we are all exposed. Our attitude towards our selves is the result of the ambivalent position in which the pressures of instinct and conformity act in opposite directions. The fact that all societies inform the predispositions of their members is beyond question. There is, however, no conclusive evidence that human beings are naturally aggressive and so must be tamed by overt control. What tends to be interpreted as outbursts of natural aggression is more often than not an outcome of callousness or hatred. To deploy Ernesto Laclau’s terminology, we can see these as born of situations in which the logics of equivalence (we share broad similarities) and difference (our group affiliations emphasize differences) tilt to extreme points of view: we are identical and we are fundamentally different. Both of these are traceable to their social, rather than genetic, origin. Thus, whilst groups undoubtedly inform the conduct of their members, it does not follow that they make such conduct more humane and moral. It means only that the conduct better conforms to the patterns recognized as acceptable within a group.

If we take the struggle between autonomy and conformity into the realm of what is termed the “imaginary” – the meanings that inform particular social structures – psychoanalysis can be deployed in the service of heightened self-criticism as a condition for our autonomy to emerge in situations where consciousness (“ego”) increasingly takes the place of instinctual drives (“Id”). Cornelius Castoriadis examined imaginary institutions of society in this way. However, he was not suggesting these were fictions; on the contrary, they are rationalizations for the ways in which societies work. These forms of significations enable the reproduction of society and inform the psyche of their individuals, but there is never complete formation between individual socialization and society. To understand this further, let us turn to the process of socialization.

Socialization, Significance, and Action

How our selves are formed and how instincts may or may not be suppressed is often given the name *socialization*. We are socialized to become capable of living in society through the internalization of norms and values from society in

general and significant others in particular. Who are those significant people with whom we interact and who socialize us in this way? We have seen that the force that operates in the development of the self is the child's image of the intentions and expectations of significant others. A freedom to select from these expectations is not complete, for some may force their views into the child's perception more effectively than others within their worlds, but there is no avoidance of choice, even if the demands themselves are contradictory. After all, some of them must be paid more attention than others and so assigned greater significance in our lives.

The need to assign differential significance to the expectations of others is not restricted to children. We experience this as a matter of routine in our daily lives from families, friends, and work colleagues. We risk the displeasure of some in order to placate others. Whenever we express political views, there will be those who care about what we say and listen and others who say that issues of politics, religion, or money, for example, should not be subject for discussion. Assigning significance whether through our utterances or actions means, unavoidably, assigning less importance and even irrelevance to other views. The risks of this process grow to the degree that the environments we inhabit are heterogeneous, that is, characterized by different views, values, and interests, or homogenous, where expectations of conformity via an unquestioning individual allegiance are strictly enforced through group surveillance and pressure.

Here, *reference groups* play a significant role in our lives. This is a group, expressed through common interests, values, and activities that enables us to assign significance to our actions and provides the standards by which we judge ourselves. How we dress, talk, feel, and act in different circumstances are informed in these ways. The Canadian-born American sociologist, Erving Goffman, a wonderful observer of everyday life whose books provide a fascinating insight into our actions, wrote of the importance of "face work." Face is defined as the value that a person attaches to their action in terms of the attributes they display. In turn, those they seek to identify themselves with value those attributes. A good professional performance is one instance in which a person's self-esteem and standing among their group may be enhanced by what Axel Honneth has characterized as our "struggle for recognition."

As we have said in respect to communication, what we intend and what actually occurs may not be aligned and this leads to frustration and misunderstanding. Groups may be unaware of our efforts to imitate their modes of conduct and even mock those who attempt to do so. Some of the groups are normative reference groups in that they set the norms for our conduct without being present at each and every interaction, or are not in physical presence, as in the case, for example, of online communities. Particularly prominent among these are family, friends, teachers, and employers and managers at work. Yet even when these people are in a position to respond to our actions, it does not follow that they become reference groups. They do so only when we assign them with significance. Disobedience at work may occur when we disregard the normative pressures placed upon us by our managers and choose to follow other standards. We might also "play it cool" when the group is actually calling for a strength of involvement and passion.

A further influence beyond the immediate contexts of our actions is comparative reference groups. These are groups to which we do not belong, because either we are beyond their reach or they are beyond our reach. We “see” the group without being seen by them, and closely follow their activities. Assigning significance in this case is one-sided. Because of the distance between us and them, they are incapable of evaluating our actions and so can neither correct deviations nor lavish praise upon us. In recent times we have increasingly moved towards situations in which we gain increasing amounts of knowledge through description rather than acquaintance with others through various forms of media. Groups seeking influence spend a great deal of time and resources and deploy a variety of means to influence our frames of reference, spending patterns, and beliefs. As a result, the role of these forces in shaping our sense of self becomes more pronounced.

Summary

Socialization never ends. It brings with it changing and complex forms of interaction between ideas of freedom and dependence. We move across spaces and places and bring with us our histories: for example, those brought up in small rural communities may find themselves lost in a strange city in which the indifference of strangers leads to feelings of helplessness; all of which is exacerbated by the volumes of traffic, rushing crowds, and forms of architecture. Equally, there are those at home in the city whose anonymity may provide for ease of movement across cultures as a source of their cosmopolitan identities. Our feelings of risk and trust then mix in differing degrees. There are also those situations over which we may have no control. Sudden economic depression, the onset of mass unemployment, floods, famine, and the outbreak of war, are just some examples. These changes have the potential to place in doubt our patterns of socialization and require a radical restructuring of what we have taken for granted.

In the absence of such major upheavals, each of us confronts problems on a daily basis that call for reflexive examination and perhaps question our modes of being or expectations: changing schools or jobs, entering and graduating from university, starting a new relationship, acquiring a place to live, becoming parents, and experiencing the death of those close to us. Relations between experiences of freedom and dependence do not then reach a final destination, but are part of processes of change, learning, resistance, and negotiation that start at birth and end only with death. Our freedom is never complete, but a struggle in which we are routinely engaged and which defines us. Present actions are informed by past actions and each has an embryonic sense of the future in our performance.

Freedom for some may be bought at the cost of greater dependence for others. We have spoken of the role that material and symbolic resources play in making choices viable, realistic propositions and that not all people enjoy access to these

in order to realize their ends. While people are free and bound to take responsibility for what they do, some have more degrees of freedom than others. A consequence of this can be to restrict the horizon of opportunity for others. We can say that the ratio between freedom and dependence is an indicator of the relative position a person, or a whole category of persons, occupies in a society. What we call privilege appears, under closer scrutiny, to be a higher degree of freedom and a lesser degree of dependence. Societies and groups then seek orders of justification that legitimize these outcomes. How we see others in these processes is the subject of the next chapter.

