

## George Herbert Mead

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*“... his mind was deeply original – in my contacts and my judgment the most original mind in philosophy in the America of the last generation ... I dislike to think what my own thinking might have been were it not for the seminal ideas which I derived from him”* John Dewey (1931: 310-311)

These words were spoken by John Dewey at the funeral of his close colleague and friend of more than 40 years, George Herbert Mead. Dewey mourned Mead’s “untimely death” as the loss to American philosophy of “a seminal mind of the very first order” (Dewey, 1932: 34), a sentiment shared by Alfred North Whitehead who regarded “the publication of the volumes containing the late Professor George Herbert Mead’s researches as of the highest importance for philosophy” (Miller, 1973: ix). Despite these glowing testimonials however, Mead’s influence on contemporary thought, especially in organization studies, remains muted. There are several threads of explanation that may be drawn to account for this. Firstly, although Mead published more than a hundred critical commentaries, reports, and original articles during his lifetime, the only books attributed to him were all published posthumously (1932; 1934; 1936; 1938) under the dedicated editorial guidance of his disciples. For example the most frequently cited of these books, ‘Mind, Self and Society’, comprises notes and fragments extracted from his unpublished work, supplemented by stenographic records of his lectures. Thus Mead never had the opportunity to articulate his philosophical position in a thoroughly systematic way, leaving his ideas vulnerable to misinterpretation.

Hans Joas (1997) argues that Mead’s most central ideas about the social nature of the self were only ever taken up in a rather trivial way by Dewey, while the appropriation of Mead’s thinking by the symbolic interactionist movement is, at best, partial. Herbert Blumer (1969), the founder of symbolic interactionism, was an enthusiastic follower of Mead, but he claimed it was necessary to break away from some of the more radically processual aspects of Mead’s ideas. In so doing, he lost touch with Mead’s conception of intersubjectivity as a pre-condition for, rather than an outcome of, communication and the social processes of meaning making. It is undoubtedly true that symbolic interactionism has been a significant intellectual force, especially in sociological developments, but also in organization studies where it deeply informs much of the contemporary writing on organizational practice. Indeed, Karl Weick has declared it “the unofficial theory of sensemaking” (1995: 41). However, symbolic interactionism should not be taken as the final word on Mead’s contribution; there is still much more to be mined.

A second potential problematic that threads throughout Mead’s work is the extraordinary disciplinary breadth of sources that informed his thinking. Following his graduation from Oberlin College, which was both progressive and deeply orthodox in its theological teaching, in 1887 Mead took up a graduate position at Harvard University, where he studied philosophy with the neo-Hegelian, Josiah Royce. Although he held Royce in the highest esteem, by 1888 he had turned his attention away from philosophy and towards the more empirically accessible field of psychology. This new interest took him to Germany where he encountered Wundt’s metaphysics, which offered

a point of entry into voluntaristic psychology. He was also exposed to the growing controversy between the explanatory form of psychology expounded by Ebbinghaus, and a more interpretive psychology as presented by Dilthey, who became a key influence in Mead's early career. At the same time, Mead was intensely aware of European trends in social thought such as Tarde's (1903) influential theory of imitation-suggestion, in which selves arise mimetically in their relationships to other selves, and cannot be reached other than through their relational contexts (Leys, 1993). Although Mead's own theory development pursued this notion of selves as fundamentally social, he emphatically rejected imitation as an explanatory mechanism as it cannot account for the emergence of anything that is different.

Upon his return to the USA in 1891, he met John Dewey, who recalled at that time Mead was reading deeply into biology as he attempted to draw links between the evolutionary theory of Darwin and his own abiding interest in mind and self (Dewey, 1931). For him, the survival imperative that explains adaptation in Darwin's theory provides a basis for an evolutionary epistemology that approaches all knowledge in terms of behaviour. However, he took issue with what he saw as the overly mechanistic teleology of the Darwinian argument, turning instead to Bergson's ideas about creative evolution, which were highly influential in the subsequent development of Mead's thinking (Mead, 1907; 1936: Chapter 14). Like Bergson, and also Whitehead, Mead later engaged with Einstein's theory of relativity, which constituted a paradigmatic shift in thinking every bit as radical as Darwin's theory of biological evolution. According to Dan Huebner (personal communication, 19 April 2013), Mead attended Einstein's series of evening lectures on relativity, delivered in German at the University of Chicago in May 1921, and then interpreted each lecture for his own students on the following day. The original insights that he extracted from relativity theory critically informed the development of his ideas about the temporality of creative action. According to Reck, Mead's temporalism "continues to furnish a singular alternative [to Whitehead's cosmology]" that has yet "to be adequately probed and exploited" (1964: lxi).

Over the forty years between his return from Europe and his death, his close friendship with John Dewey was also very important in shaping Mead's intellectual journey. Morris opines that Mead and Dewey were intellectual equals sharing

"in a mutual give-and-take according to their own particular genius ... If Dewey is at once the rolling rim and many of the spokes of the contemporary pragmatic wheel, Mead is the hub" (1934: xi).

Like Dewey, Mead was intensely interested and practically involved in social, educational and political reform movements, which undoubtedly influenced the shape and direction of his thinking (Joas, 1997). A veritable polymath who moved with ease between disciplines as diverse as biology, psychology, theology, philosophy, and physics, Mead also had an intense love of poetry, which apparently he could recite tirelessly (Dewey, 1931). The scope of Mead's talents and interests is difficult to grasp in the climate of intense disciplinary specialisation that has prevailed in academe over recent decades. However, there is today a mounting awareness of the benefits of cross-disciplinary thinking as we are increasingly challenged by problems of ever greater complexity. Perhaps now is the time then, when we can return to Mead with fresh eyes to see what he may have to offer to present-day thinking.

As a result of the ongoing work of writers in the domain of symbolic interactionism, Mead is currently best known as a theorist of the interacting or dialogical self. The central theme to which he returned repeatedly throughout his working life was the problem of consciousness and mind, and how these arise in human conduct. Whereas William James and Henri Bergson drew on existentialist and introspective understandings of human activities, Mead sought a more objectivist approach that would be amenable to empirical investigation. Locating thinking persons in their naturalistic situations, he argued that mind both shapes and is shaped by the social phenomena that evolve continuously in conversation. What is less well known, but is of particular relevance in this handbook, is the “veritable mountain of fragments and writings” (Joas, 1997: 167) on the topic of temporality that were discovered after Mead’s death (e.g. Mead, 1932; 1938). In this chapter, I begin by treating temporality and intersubjectivity separately in order to explore their implications for Mead’s theorization of mind and self. But these two dimensions should not, indeed cannot, be separated in practice. I go on to suggest that Mead’s notion of sociality provides a way of integrating temporality and intersubjectivity as interpenetrating processes, and further, that it offers a means of engaging empirically with the movements and flows of processes as they unfold in organizational contexts.

### **Temporality**

Darwin’s theory of evolution was a source of inspiration for many of the original Pragmatist philosophers in their pursuit of practical theories that could engage with the ongoingness of human experience. However, their interest was not in the ‘survival-of-the-fittest’ determinism of social Darwinism, but rather, the temporal dynamics of unfolding emergence in our world(s). Mead in particular sought to understand how emergent variations in social interactions might constitute the continuously evolving consciousness from which human practice arises. To capture such temporal experience, however, Mead recognised that conventional notions of time (i.e. Newtonian time) are inadequate.

Arguably, time as we know it today is an invention of the Enlightenment. Advances in astronomy in the 17<sup>th</sup> century led Sir Isaac Newton to understand time as a universal property of Nature that exists quite independently of human consciousness. He deduced laws of motion for the planets in our solar system that are based on the assumption of uniformly passing time, the quantum of which was originally determined empirically from astronomical observations, but today is defined in terms of the vibration frequency of caesium atoms. Newton concluded:

“Absolute, true, and mathematical time, of itself, and from its own nature, flows equably without relation to anything external” (Newton quoted by Barbour, 2008: 2).

The resilience of this view of time as a quality of the natural world that flows independently of human intervention is reflected in Bertrand Russell’s comment more than 200 years later that:

“... time is an unimportant and superficial characteristic of reality. Past and future must be acknowledged to be as real as the present” (Russell, 1917: 21).

In this view then, time is an infinite sequence of instants that has neither a beginning nor an end. This succession of ceaseless instants is homogeneous, and devoid of physical or human content. Any given instant is infinitely divisible because, no matter how fine the interval between instants, each is always positioned in relation to its predecessors and successors. Thus the present moment is understood as a “knife-edge” (Mead, 1932: 194), a shifting boundary separating an infinity of

discrete past moments from an equally infinite stream of discrete future moments (Capek, 1961). This approach to time is abundantly evident in the organization studies literature, where its influence may be traced back to the industrial revolution and the deliberate management of time to maximise production. Bergson's cinematographic metaphor, which suggests reality may be understood as a rapid succession of fixed frame images, aptly captures the implications of this Newtonian perspective for understanding human action (Bergson, 1919).

There are two fundamental problems with this approach to time. Firstly, it does not address the human experience of temporal continuity. As William James observed

"If the constitution of consciousness were that of a string of bead-like sensations and images, all separate, "we never could have any knowledge except that of the present instant. The moment each of our sensations ceased it would be gone for ever; and we should be as if we had never been. . . . We should be wholly incapable of acquiring experience. . . . Even if our ideas were associated in trains, but only as they are in imagination, we should still be without the capacity of acquiring knowledge. One idea, upon this supposition, would follow another. But that would be all. Each of our successive states of consciousness, the moment it ceased, would be gone forever. Each of those momentary states would be our whole being." (James, 1890 [1952]: 396 quoting James Mill, 1829).

Bergson's solution to this problem was the notion of *durée*, which emphasizes introspection as the constituent continuity of temporal experience. Whilst Mead agreed that experience and temporality are co-constituting dynamics in the flow of becoming, he rejected Bergson's metaphysical turn towards *élan vital*, understood as a force of nature independent of human intelligence. "When [Bergson] looks for an instance of what he calls pure "duration", as distinct from mere motion in a fixed space, he goes to the inner experience of the individual" (Mead, 1936: 297). Mead considered this explanation philosophically quite unsatisfactory because it neglects the function of intellectual reasoning. Instead he sought a more objective, dare I say more 'scientific', expression of temporal experience that is "not necessarily limited to the interpenetration of experiences in the inner flow of consciousness" (Mead, 1936: 325). In this undertaking, he did nevertheless derive considerable inspiration from Bergson's critique of spatialised (or clock) time. In a

"world which is geometrized, there is no real duration; on the contrary we find there only reversible series which may symbolize that which arises in consciousness but can never be that change" (Mead, 1907: 382).

Mead argued that the creation of something absolutely new is dependent upon the irreversibility and irreducibility of duration; "where everything is conceivably reversible nothing can assume a new form" (Mead, 1907: 380-1). Thus we see that his central concern with novelty and creativity in the flow of experience leads to a distinctive conceptualization of duration in terms of continuity and change rather than the mere elapsing of time.

Sitting between the extremes of spatialised, knife-edge time and introspective *durée*, the idea of a specious present responds to the psychological observation that there is a minimum temporal extension required for perception to occur and conscious awareness to arise (Joas, 1997). This psychological time span was originally referred to as the 'specious present' to indicate a spurious sort of pseudo-now not to be confused with true, or universal time. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup>

centuries however, this term morphed into exactly the opposite meaning; so for James and Whitehead the 'specious present' became the true present of conscious experience, suggesting a temporal extension that spreads the present across time. These specious presents may have varying lengths, and indeed Whitehead (1926) argued that they may be stretched indefinitely into both the past and the future. In Mead's (1963-4) view however, this notion of a specious present does not settle the problem of continuity because the possibilities for emergent novelty are inevitably denied when a future is inextricably bound to a past within the same specious present.

Mead's response to these issues begins with the assertion that ontological reality resides only in the present, which he sees as the locus of conscious action. In so saying, he is rejecting the existence of a 'real' past and a 'real' future, seeing past and future instead as epistemological resources that are continuously reconstructed to inform the actions of the passing present.

"If we spread a specious present so that it covers more events, as Whitehead suggests, taking in some of the past and conceivably some of the future, the events so included would belong not to the past and the future, but to the present. It is true that in this present there is something going on. There is passage within the duration, but that is a present passage" (Mead, 1929a: 345).

In his view, the defining characteristic of the present is that it is emergent, a turning point in the unfolding of action; for new presents to arise, it is necessary to rewrite the past so that "from every new rise the landscape that stretches behind us becomes a different landscape" (Mead, 1932: 42). At the same time, each new past opens up new possibilities for futures, and these in turn condition, but do not fully determine, the actions of the present. Thus there is a continuous interplay between pasts and futures that is manifest in the emergent present as ongoing and evolving consciousness. It is this passage of conscious action that brings continuity to temporal experience (Simpson, 2009). Other process scholars, most notably Whitehead, Heidegger, and Ricoeur, have also explicated the inter-weaving of present, past and future, but Mead's particular contribution is found in the way he relates presents, or events, to continuity and emergence in the passage of time.

Whereas Newtonian time is structured by an infinite succession of instants that are entirely independent of human experience, for Mead temporal passage is structured by events that thrust themselves into the otherwise undifferentiated flow of time, providing a mechanism for ordering and making sense of experience. In other words, without the interruption of passage by events, temporal experience would not be possible. Mead defines an event as a turning point when something new arises, a becoming that ushers in change. An event occurs in a present that "is not a piece cut out anywhere from the temporal dimension of uniformly passing reality. Its chief reference is to the emergent event, that is, to the occurrence of something which is more than the processes that have lead up to it and which by its change, continuance, or disappearance, adds to later passages a content they would not otherwise have possessed" (Mead, 1932: 52).

Passage then, is the passing of distinguishable events each of which arises in a present as the past is reconstructed to support an anticipated future. By contrast with the notion of the specious present as the span of time required for a person to be herself, Mead's concept of the present may be understood as the occurrence of a unique event. Of course 'the event' as a unit of analysis in process studies is by no means limited to Mead. Whitehead developed this concept extensively as a spatio-temporal nexus that marks the difference between 'before' and 'after', while Bakhtin emphasised

the living quality of events as unique occurrences. Mead's originality in relation to this important concept lies in his acknowledgement of the inherent changefulness of human experience, which offers us a new empirical focus in the form of events as turning points in the flow of action.

The second fundamental problem with the Newtonian conception of time is its inability to engage with simultaneity, or the apparent coincidence in time of events occurring in distant locations. This problem was comprehensively tackled in the physical sciences by Einstein's theory of relativity. Mead was greatly stimulated by the extent to which relativity theory recognises that time cannot be treated as distinct from actors, or agents, and their separate situations. Thus he came to understand that "any scientific statement about the world of moving bodies also had to take into consideration, in an objectivating manner, the corporeality of the observer" (Joas, 1997: 173). For more than a decade before his death, Mead's efforts were directed towards formulating a dynamic understanding that links temporal experience to the physical world. During this time he engaged with the writing of Whitehead who was pursuing a similar goal, although more from a cosmological perspective than from any desire to explore movements in human consciousness. Cook (1993: Chapter 9) has undertaken a meticulous analysis that compares the thinking of Mead and Whitehead through this period. It appears that they agreed on much, but for the purposes of my argument here, it is also important to point to their divergences. In particular, each was motivated by a different objective; whereas Whitehead's goal was to explain how order arises in an open universe (see chapter by Hernes in this volume), Mead was interested in the emergence of order-disrupting novelty in human practice. He criticized Whitehead for overlooking both the social and emergent dimensions of temporal experience. It is in these two areas that Mead arguably makes his greatest contributions to the re-theorization of temporal experience.

In Mead's view, an adequate explanation of simultaneity is a necessary pre-requisite for understanding the emergence of novelty in events. As we have seen, an event is a turning point that moves within the ongoing interplay between pasts and futures. These pasts and futures are constructed as separate temporalities belonging to different frames of reference that coincide in the present experience of a given actor. The simultaneous occurrence of multiple temporalities affords the actor a multi-faceted perspective that offers a repertoire of alternative choices for reconstructive action in the present moment. Thus the creative potential of a turning point exists whenever two or more different temporalities coincide. Mead coined the term 'sociality' for the past-to-future movement that occurs in any event. For him, sociality is

"the situation in which the novel event is in both the old order and the new which its advent heralds" (Mead, 1932: 75). It is the movement "betwixt and between the old system and the new" wherein "[t]here is an adjustment to this new situation ... [as] ... new objects enter into relationship with the old" (Mead, 1932: 73). Furthermore "there is sociality in nature in so far as the emergence of novelty requires that objects be at once both in the old system and in that which arises in the new" (Mead, 1932: 86).

Thus sociality is a defining quality of presents, as every event simultaneously juxtaposes more than one temporality. I suggest then, that the notion of sociality offers a means of empirical engagement with process that is genuinely grounded in a processual ontology. Together with Mead's idea of events as movements, or turning points, in the otherwise undifferentiated flux of passage, sociality invites us to rethink the methodological assumptions that are built into empirical approaches to process research.

## Intersubjectivity

In all of his work, Mead was motivated by a desire to understand “life as a process and not a series of static physicochemical situations” (Mead, 1925: 275). He firmly rejected metaphysical explanations of this life process, calling instead for a focus on conduct that is made sensible by its objective presence in the world, rather than its subjective prehension in consciousness. This notion of existence in nature led him to an understanding of the self, not as an isolated individual who brings innate qualities to her/his social interactions, but as the continuous emergence of what he called the “social act” (Mead, 1938). In Mead’s view “selves exist only in relation to other selves” (Mead, 1925: 278); or more particularly, selves develop by adopting the attitudes of others in order to see themselves reflexively as objects in their own conversational contexts. Thus a self cannot come into existence without a community of others whose attitudes enter into the experience of its individual members. Mead referred to this community as “the generalized other” (1934: 154), in which form “the social process ... enters as a determining factor into the individual’s thinking” (1934: 155); “only thus can thinking ... occur” at all (1934: 156). Crucial for Mead’s argument then is his assumption that the social, in the form of the generalized other, precedes the development of the individual self, which in turn implies the mind is intersubjectively constituted.

Before I proceed further, there is an important clarification to make regarding Mead’s use of ‘intersubjectivity’, which is an ambiguous term in the literature. If we take seriously Mead’s assertion that the self is socially constituted and that the social precedes the individual, then intersubjectivity must necessarily occur within the self. This view contrasts with the perhaps more familiar idea that intersubjectivity occurs between subjects that are independently constituted. It is the latter perspective that is evident, for instance, in symbolic interactionism where “social interaction is a process that *forms* human conduct instead of being merely a means or a setting for the expression or release of human conduct” (Blumer, 1969: 8, emphasis in the original). We see here the extent to which Blumer diverged from Mead’s original thinking by restricting the meaning of intersubjectivity to the outcomes or products of social interactions. Recognising the potential here for terminological confusion, Dewey and Bentley (1949[1991]) differentiated between ‘interactions’, which occur between distinct entities, and ‘transactions’, which subsume entities into the ongoing processes of lived change. Following the same pattern of language, I might suggest that ‘trans-subjectivity’ better captures the essence of Mead’s argument, where he very definitely saw conversation as a transaction in which conversants both shape, and are shaped by their social engagements. However, ‘trans-subjectivity’ is an ugly word that may itself introduce further confusion, so I will continue to use the term ‘intersubjectivity’, but with the clear caveat that I intend this to refer to transactional, rather than merely interactional processes.

Conversation is the medium for intersubjective engagements, but Mead understood conversation as something much broader than a mere exchange of vocal gestures. It encapsulates all forms of gestural meaning-making including the physical actions and emotional expressions of socially constituted selves. Each gesture in a conversation is a way of probing the meanings of the situation; it is less an expression of what is, and more a tentative testing-the-water for what may become. To the extent that a given gesture does elicit an anticipated response, it constitutes what Mead referred to as a “significant symbol” (1925: 288); that is, the gesture acts as a symbol that arouses a similar response in both the gesturer and the respondents in a conversation. We develop repertoires

of significant symbols by inferring the attitudes of the generalized other in our conversational processes. As we take on the implied rules and conventions of the generalized other, our selves continue to emerge in an ongoing social process of becoming. Here Mead's argument resonates with Peirce's 'semiotic mediation' and with Bakhtin's work on dialogue (see chapters by Lorino and by Cunliffe et al. in this volume), but in my view Mead goes further by locating symbolically mediated conversation within the flow of temporality. I will return to this point later.

Mead associated the objective, reconstructive aspect of the self with a "me", which he defined as the organised set of others' attitudes that are adopted as significant symbols. This "me" exists as an empirically accessible object that represents how the self perceives itself through the eyes (and other sensory organs) of others. Mead (1913) argued, however, that an objective "me" is inconceivable without a subjective "I". It is the "I" that acts by gesturing, while the "me" is a continuously reconstructed repository of experience. In any passing moment, both the constructed "me" and the performative "I" are present as complementary phases of the self, but the actions of the "I" cannot be objectively perceived until their consequences have become reflexively incorporated into the "me". Thus the "I" is the agent of self-construction; it is the active principle that introduces the possibilities of emergent novelty into the ongoing accomplishment of the self. Without the reconstructive potential of this agentic dimension, the self could be nothing more than an uncritical accumulation of acquired dispositions and socially determined behavioural conventions.

"The self is essentially a social process going on with these two distinguishable phases. If it did not have these two phases there could not be conscious responsibility, and there would be nothing novel in experience" (Mead, 1934: 178).

Mead argued that selves are social "insofar as we ourselves take the attitude that others take towards us" (1925: 284). In his view then, this intra-personal "I"/"me" dynamic is positioned within the social context of conversation by taking the attitudes, or roles, of others. What this means is not that we literally slip into another role, but that we develop the capacity to anticipate the others' responses to the conversational gestures that we might make. By taking the attitude of another, we are trying to see the world through their eyes, and in so doing, we also see ourselves as others might. This ability not only allows us to draw the actions of others into our own conduct, which then admits the possibilities of mutual adjustment towards common collective actions, but also the concurrence of own and others' attitudes towards the self is a necessary prerequisite for the development of self-reflexivity. Having personal access to different attitudes offers a variety of perspectives to inform and resource an actor's ongoing gestural communications. Mead illustrated his argument with an example of buying and selling. Buying food, for instance, is an act of exchange

"in which a man excites himself to give by making an offer. An offer is what it is because the presentation is a stimulus to give. One cannot exchange otherwise than by putting one's self in the attitude of the other party to the bargain ... [thus] ... Buying and selling are involved in each other. Something that can be exchanged can exist in the experience of the individual only insofar as he has in his own makeup the tendency to sell when he has also the tendency to buy. And he becomes a self in this experience only insofar as one attitude on his own part calls out the corresponding attitude in the social undertaking" (Mead, 1925: 283-4).

Without this capacity for responding to the “generalized other”, Mead argued, sophisticated and abstract thinking would simply not be possible. It is the simultaneous awareness of contrasting perspectives that invites reconstructive action without which, in Mead’s view, life would be reduced to a mere mirror of nature, lacking any agentic dimension capable of surfacing emergent novelty. On this point, he differentiated his position from what he saw as “dark hints of a theory of this common world in Professor Whitehead’s publications” (Mead, 1929b: 340), which reflect Whitehead’s primary concern with order ahead of the reconstructive potential of human conduct. In Mead’s notion of intersubjective process we see a second expression of sociality, which he also defined as “the capacity for being several things at once” (1932: 75). In essence, he is saying that for any event to be social, it must exist simultaneously in at least two different frames of reference – for instance, the different frames of gesturer and respondents in a conversation. On first appearance, this spatial definition of sociality seems to be at odds with that given earlier, where it was defined in temporal terms as a movement “betwixt and between the old system and the new” (Mead, 1932: 73). However, if we recall that the selves who are conversing are themselves dynamic reconstructive processes each within its own temporality, and that the conversation in which they are engaged is a continuous movement of gesture and response, then we can see how Mead linked his notions of intersubjectivity and temporality together. Sociality is the linchpin that locates social selves as emergent events in temporal passage.

### **Implications for organizational process research**

In today’s organizational literature it has become deeply unfashionable to admire objectivity or to emulate scientism. How then, are we to interpret, and make useful, Mead’s ideas, which he repeatedly couched in terms of a need for greater objectivity and better science? He was, of course, writing for an early 20<sup>th</sup> century audience who would have been very familiar with the vitalistic concepts often found in the field of psychology, both then and now. Vitalism proposes that there is some unknowable, perhaps mystical principle of life that can neither be measured nor falsified. Mead’s counter-argument is that attempting to explain behaviour in terms of hidden traits and inferred mental states is no explanation at all. Instead of attributing people’s conduct to such subjective states, he simply focussed on that which can be objectively perceived, namely the actions that people take. His entire theorization of human practice is thus based on the observable gesture and response of intersubjective conversations as they unfold in time. Furthermore, his call for better science does not equate to the extreme manifestations of scientism, which cast the world as a gigantic mechanism wherein all outcomes may be reduced to some sort of summation of isolated parts. His interest is more in improving the craft and rigour of scientific inquiry than in sharpening the accuracy of measurement.

The temporality in Mead’s conception of practice draws the researcher’s attention away from stable and discrete elements, inviting us instead to engage with the complexities of a perpetually unfolding world. To facilitate his argument, Mead has developed a number of key concepts that need to be understood in his terms if we are to benefit from his theoretical insights. Reprising the discussion above, these concepts include:

- emergence, reflecting the essential changefulness, rather than the ordered stabilities, of all human practice;
- the social self as a continuously emergent process of self-construction;

- the “generalized other”, the constructed “me”, and the performative “I” as complementary and interpenetrating aspects of social selves;
- gestural conversations as the site for reflexive role-taking and self-construction, where gestures may be vocal, physical, emotional, or otherwise communicative;
- symbols, and especially significant symbols, as mediators of conversational meaning-making, which are themselves mutable and subject to continuous reconstruction;
- passage as the perpetual and undifferentiated flux of experience;
- ephemeral events as movements or turning points that give meaning to passage by thrusting themselves forward into the flow, punctuating it, bringing order, and making it sensible;
- and sociality, which is both a movement from past to future temporalities, and the capacity for being simultaneously in more than one temporal flow. It is sociality, I argue, that draws together the intersubjective and temporal dimensions of Mead’s theory of practice.

Every one of these concepts is some sort of movement that is continuously renegotiated in conversational engagements whilst at the same time influencing ongoing practice. It is this dynamic quality that distinguishes Mead’s theorization as processual ‘all the way down’. This expression refers to a tale that has numerous different expressions, but here I use the version recorded by Geertz (1973: 28-9):

“There is an Indian story -- at least I heard it as an Indian story -- about an Englishman who, having been told that the world rested on a platform which rested on the back of an elephant which rested in turn on the back of a turtle, asked (perhaps he was an ethnographer; it is the way they behave), what did the turtle rest on? Another turtle. And that turtle? 'Ah, Sahib, after that it is turtles all the way down'”.

So often, we process researchers find ourselves trapped by entitative constructs (e.g. elephants and turtles), which imply reductionist assumptions that ultimately limit our capacity to see process as it unfolds. Instead of focussing on entitative foundations, Mead invites us to jump on board and go with the flow, giving us a language and a set of very useful concepts that suggest ways of escaping the categorical style of thinking that has dominated Western thought at least since Aristotle. This is not to say that fixed objects are irrelevant in process research, but rather, by deliberately focussing our empirical gaze on the dynamic and emergent, we afford ourselves a different research perspective.

This intellectual commitment to process has very specific implications for empirical work. Firstly, the fundamental level of analysis is neither individual actors nor the organizational or social context, but rather it is the conversational dynamic of gesture and response, which flows across the dualistic boundaries that constrain more entitative approaches to research. This relational orientation has strong parallels in the hermeneutic and phenomenological traditions (e.g. Bakhtin, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Ricoeur), but as yet has made relatively little impact in the area of organization studies (see for instance Cunliffe, 2002; Gergen, 2009; Hosking, 2011; Shotter, 2006; Simpson, 2009). This is surprising given the importance of practice in organizational life, and the increasing emphasis in the literature on making transparent the interplay between theory and practice. In my view, the approach developed in this chapter has great, but as yet largely untapped, potential for shedding new light on all manner of organizational practices including leading, innovating, learning, decision-making, strategizing, and socializing. Furthermore, Mead’s holistic approach to the social self invites a view of actors as emergent and socially constituted beings who not only think, but also feel,

and act. This then opens up inquiry into more subtle practices such as identity-work and emotion-work (e.g. Simpson and Carroll, 2008; Simpson and Marshall, 2010).

Secondly, the explicit temporality of this approach demands that the temporal dimensions of empirical studies need to be taken seriously, not as the mere ticking of a universal clock that measures temporal extension, but as a multiplicity of events that punctuate the passage of experience, dynamically weaving into and permeating throughout organizational practice. Capturing such movements is a real challenge for which there is no easy answer. Brigid Carroll and I have responded by attending to sociality in the online conversations of a group of managers engaged in a leadership development programme (Carroll and Simpson, 2012). We found that the flow of their conversation was structured around a variety of significant symbols as the managers struggled with the sociality movements of their collective leadership practice. More generally, processual research of this type is concerned with the generativity of ordinary, everyday talk (Boden, 1994), where the unit of analysis is the event, or turning points in the conversation. The researcher's attention is thus directed to anywhere that talk happens, whether this be in formal meetings or casual 'water cooler' encounters. The researcher's job is to follow the action, wherever it may lead. Whilst observational methods are clearly appropriate for this style of research, it is also useful if the researcher can find a way of probing the situation to gain a deeper understanding of the conversational dynamics. Czarniawska (2008) has argued compellingly that shadowing is a method well suited to this sort of inquiry as it produces rich narrative accounts from the researcher's direct and informed experience of events as they unfold in real time (see also McDonald, 2005). This close and engaged form of observation offers the possibilities of exciting new insights into practice and the emergent processes of organizational and managerial experience.

To conclude, I have proposed in this chapter that it is timely to re-visit the wealth of potential in Mead's thinking as a way of better informing our contemporary understandings of dynamic practices in organizations. Whilst his ideas about intersubjectivity have been broadcast, albeit in a limited way, through developments in symbolic interactionism, it is his radical approach to temporality that holds real treasure for process theorizing. Using sociality as an explicit link between intersubjectivity and temporality, Mead offers us a comprehensive theorization of practice that is both relational and dynamically emergent. Thus practice is more than the mere habits of action, or the routines that appear in every organization; it is also where change takes place under the influence of subtle forces that become evident only to a careful observer. Mead helps us in this observational task as well, by drawing our attention to empirically accessible aspects of the day-to-day actions taken by ordinary people in organizations, where these aspects are profoundly grounded in process philosophy. I acknowledge that to work in this way is difficult, but my resolve is strengthened by the potential that this approach offers for genuinely fresh perspectives on organizational practice.

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