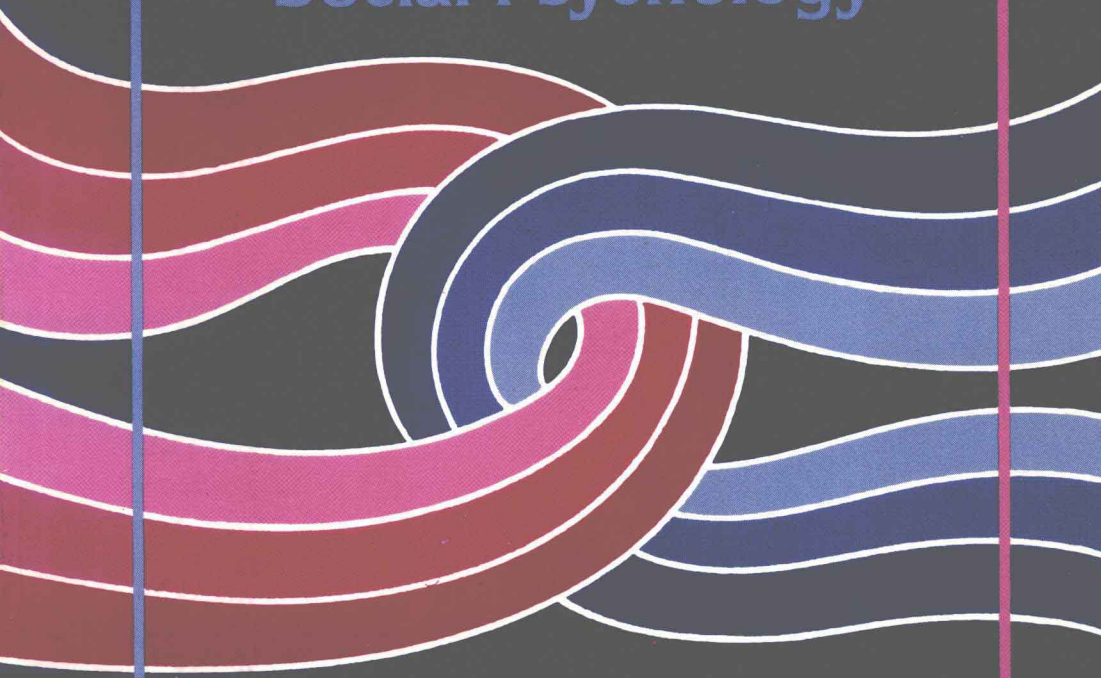
THE MEANING OF SOCIAL INTERACTION

An Introduction to Social Psychology



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Preface

To us as ordinary, everyday citizens of the world, perhaps the least obvious fact of society (of social life) is that we are in it. Most of us go about our daily lives without ever thinking about where we live, how we came to be who we are, or just what makes up the mechanics and dynamics of our lives. And this is a good thing; for although we might find some agreement with Socrates, that life without reflection is not worth living, we must also admit that a society of individuals continuously caught up in self-reflection might well accomplish very little of what must be done to carry on with life. So it is, then, rather natural that most persons are born into worlds about which they are taught and in which they learn to play roles and act out parts without ever paying much attention to the hows and whys of it all. Peoples' societies and the roles they play become, as it were, "second nature" to them, so seldom do they notice even their own presence.

On the other hand, it is the "job" of social psychology to analyze and discuss social life, the relationship between society and the individual, and the mechanisms by which new members of a society come to learn about who and where they are and how they can sustain membership in the groups of which they are a part. These and the many other related issues of social psychology make up the basis of this text. And an Appendix is included to present briefly the methods used to study them.

Now ours is but one version of how to study social interaction. But there is no need to detail here the various approaches to social psychology. Suffice it to say that many are more psychologically oriented, perhaps placing great importance on instinct as a motivator for human behavior. Others are more sociological, emphasizing the role of institutions, like school and the family, in shaping development.

In the present work we place ourselves firmly within the perspective of what is known as "symbolic interactionism." Here we detail some of the intricacies of this school of thought; and while we do not wish to debate its relative merits over other versions of social psychology, we can note that it seems the most natural to us. We demonstrate this by calling up its major tenet, namely, that human beings interact through the use of symbols. The fact that you are reading this text itself embodies this principle, for written language is perhaps the most sophisticated system of symbolic communication. But reading-and-writing is only one form of symbolic interaction. Rather, it is the spoken language which plays a greater role in most of our lives, whether this involves making our way into

selfhood as children or becoming members of groups once we have already learned to interact.

It is by introducing our readers to symbolic interactionism, then, that we hope also to equip them with the tools to reflect upon themselves, their worlds, and the ways they use to negotiate their way through everyday life. To be sure, the world in which we now live seems to be changing more rapidly than ever. Today, to be able to understand one's world from a well-founded social psychological perspective is a critical skill, for it is only from such a foundation that the reasonable decisions which will affect one's future can be made.

All of us know best that which is most familiar to us, but we know that we understand what we have learned only when we can successfully apply it to the unfamiliar. The following pages result from the application of a set of principles to the ordinary, everyday behavior of people mostly outside our readers' lives. If our readers can learn from this how to apply those principles in such a way as to better understand the meaningfulness of their own lives, we will have been successful at our task.

In conclusion, we would like to acknowledge those who helped us get started. First, Larry Reynolds interested us in beginning with *Social Psychology: Self and Society* and working toward a new text more interactionist in perspective; and Clark Baxter, of West Publishing Company, allowed us to do this. Finally, of course, we are indebted to Euphemia and Patti, who provide perspectives of a different kind.

Contents

Chapter 1

Sociological Social Psychology

"What is the relationship between the 'individual' and 'society'?" This is perhaps the primary question of social psychology. We answer it from our conviction that societies and the individuals who constitute them are inseparable phenomena. One implies the other; so when we explore deeply the experiences of individuals, whether those experiences are attitudes they espouse, political protests they participate in, or simply their conduct in everyday life, we discover collective or social phenomena. Likewise, when we investigate collective phenomena, say, the pro-life movement, we come face to face with individuals, their emotions, motives and skills in dealing with other people. As Charles H. Cooley expressed it, individual and society are "twin born," two sides of the same coin. We want to discover what the coin itself is like.

The rich and far-reaching literature we rely on teaches that the best approach to appreciating the nature of the "coin" involves viewing the lives of individuals in a pragmatic way, starting with what we find when we consciously attend to the world immediately around us. In describing how people do things with one another, how they interact and learn to accomplish tasks as simple as greeting one another or as complex as falling in love, we engage the social world. In that world, people are agents; they learn to do and re-do social things. Moreover, they understand that what they are doing *means* something; and it is in the complex matrix of what we commonly call "meanings" that we discover the relationship between individual and society, between agents and the products of their agency. The "coin" we are after, then, is social meanings.

How many times have you heard or used some form of the expression "Do you know what I mean?"

"The dude come up on me, so I jus' dipped 'im right there. Y' unnerstan' what I'm sayin'."

"So I said, like, 'Why don't we go to the mall now, and then go to the beach.' Y'know."

"I said 11 o'clock at night, not one o'clock in the morning. Do you know what I mean, young lady?"

"O.K. listen up! We're gonna run a two-one-two zone and we're gonna sag on the big man in the paint. Y'got that?"

"Just let me say one thing. I am the President, and I am not a crook. Do I make myself perfectly clear?"

"Now, I got to admit it. The man played a mean piano. But when it come to the composition, he couldn't polish the keys for the Monk. You dig?"

Each of these six expressions comes from a different world of social meaning and seeks to establish a different kind of understanding, for to know what is meant by each requires a unique knowledge. In the first expression, the speaker might be describing a killing or at least some act of violence and is evoking what he believes are commonly accepted grounds that justify such acts. The "dude come up" or threatened or somehow encroached on the speaker's sense of territory and was therefore "dipped" or repelled, shot or struck down with a fist or weapon. While the details of the occurrence might be pertinent to a trial, they are not so for the speaker's appeal for understanding. In this expression, the speaker wants his listener to know that the action he took was perfectly normal as "street life." To "unnerstan'" him is to think like he does, to know that "comin' up" on someone is a threat and "dippin'" is retaliation.

The frequent use of "y'know" so parodied as Valley Girl talk is a plea for mutuality of values, for affirmation of action, and most important for validation of one's own thinking. For the young lady to understand what her parents mean by "eleven o'clock" forces her to recognize their authority over her; and the coded talk about a basketball play depicts the specific movements of players of the game. A public figure under extreme criticism, as was former President Richard Nixon when he reaffirmed who he was, may attempt to impart truth to his statements by simple association with his social position. Finally, in the argot of the jazz musician, "you dig" elicits agreement with a stated opinion.

Even proficient English speakers might not fully understand what all these expressions mean, since each is dependent on an at least slightly different context. Even within different social contexts in the same society, meanings are not always clear. With an increasingly diverse, multiethnic nation such as the United States, and especially given the now tumultuous international changes affecting all of us, understanding just what people mean has become critical.

Regardless of the social setting, then, people are not always sure about each other's intentions. All of us spend time trying to understand one another and just what is happening as we and those around us build and maintain our social worlds. And even though making sense of each other's words and actions may be problematic, we all eventually learn to guess what other people mean. What is most important, we come to know how to act on the basis of those guesses. The conditions under which we act, think, and feel are therefore social. Thus the subject matter of this book is what everybody knows, the commonsense world of everyday experiences, and so our task is to understand the complex and profound process of being social.

Social Psychology As Perspective

From the moment of birth, human beings live out their lives under social influences. Society pervades our lives, affecting even those parts not ordinarily thought of as social. For example, how we sleep, the decor of our bedroom, and even the content of our dreams may be influenced by a magazine we have read, a relationship just ended, or the last interactive video game we played. In whatever we do, it is impossible to escape our bonds with others. The uninformed Japanese soldier who hid in the Philippine jungles for twenty-five years waiting for the end of World War II long after it was over, still lived under the constraint of the distant society to which he belonged. His refusal to surrender made perfect sense to him in terms of his understanding of the social values of the Japanese society.

Sometimes the other people who affect our interaction may not even exist, as was true with this solider and is the case when we think about what our deceased parents might think about our actions or decisions. Inevitably, ours is a social existence, one created and shared through interaction with other people. Hence, to understand a person is to understand people, to know the individual is to know society. We reiterate, in our work, social and psychological meanings are inseparable in the task of human understanding.

Social psychologists seek to understand human experiences through the web of social influences surrounding every human being. In doing so, they ask many questions: Who are we? What is it about the species that people everywhere, in normal conditions, seem to need their own kind? What is society? Of what is it composed? What are social pressures and how do individuals deal with them? What are the differences between the social lives of males and females? How do children learn the ways of their social worlds? Why are people so interested in communicating with one another? What are the purposes and forms of aggression, submission and passion? These and a host of other questions guide social psychologists in their study of social and psychological phenomena.

Another fundamental question in social psychology asks about method: "How shall we study human social experience?" The answer to this question has been debated throughout the history of the discipline, and differences of opinion continue today. Among the diverse answers, two are especially important for our purposes.

On the one hand, many investigators insist that social psychological investigations follow as closely as possible the canons of rigorous scientific analysis. They seek to make objective, detached observations about social life. Their ideal is to gather data under carefully controlled laboratory or field conditions. For the purposes of research, human beings and their social situations are treated as equivalent to the objects and creatures studied by the natural sciences. The goal of this kind of social psychology is to identify the causes of social interaction and,

ultimately, to make accurate predictions of the behaviors of individuals in groups.

Other students of human behavior maintain that although the techniques of the natural sciences provide significant information about some aspects of people living with people, these techniques taken alone fall short of providing an adequate understanding of the social dimensions of human existence. This is the course we choose to follow, for we believe the experimental approach may miss some essential social phenomena, namely, the intersubjective intentions and motives of individuals. Humans have intentions, wishes, reasons, motives, and meanings that affect social interaction or make up the social context of practical action. Social phenomena, and individuals themselves, are not mere objective entities. Instead, they also represent the results of relationships made from subjective meanings. The essence of any human group is the set of realities created by group members themselves, including people whose primary preoccupation seems to be figuring out what everybody else thinks is real.

For our purposes, then, social psychology is the understanding of the complicated ways in which social life is accomplished. Like many aspects of life, the principles that underlie a phenomenon may seem simple. Indeed, as we shall learn, often a simple rule will underlie the organization of a conversation, such as the understanding that one person speaks at a time. The practice of that rule, however, gives us an appreciation of the sophisticated skills of our species.

For the most part, we do not give the rules and regulations we follow in our daily lives much thought. They have become "second nature" to us, and we behave according to them without realizing it. But, of course, we were not born knowing the rules. We adopted them as our own, and now they act as guides to what we do with other people. Finally, and this is important, the rules are social, that is, shared with others around us, so when we want to initiate interaction, we know how to do it.

That people act purposefully, with initiative, is a chief assumption of sociological social psychology, one that suggests humans have a unique quality distinguishing them from other animals and from the physical world. As we have intimated, people do not merely respond, they initiate action, and they react in different ways depending on how they interpret their environments. People have purposes to carry out, plans to organize their actions, and methods they employ to join in the building and even the destruction of social worlds. Although most people never think about it, in a very real sense all persons act as if they were scientists planning and carrying out experiments. Thus, everyday life is purposeful, full of thoughtful intention, actions, results and reactions; as such, it is "accomplished."

To understand social life in a way that fully accepts a "human coefficient," we begin with the conviction that our society is composed of subjective meanings, the socially constructed realities people live by. This belief requires

that we preserve the points of view of the people we study both in terms of their beliefs, feelings and actions and in the idioms we select to communicate our findings. In this, we will learn how to use experimental observations, survey data, and information gathered in a variety of sometimes ingenious ways. Throughout, our target is to comprehend the relativity of social life while searching for the principles that make such relativity possible.

Basic Elements of Social Phenomena

Social Phenomena Involve Subjective Meanings In order to understand the six expressions at the start of this chapter (the "dude on the street," the "Valley Girl," the "parent," the "president," the "basketball player," and the "musician"), we must recognize that all are built out of the subjective experiences of those involved in each setting. Another way of stating this is to say that each expression has a location in some context within a social world; and for us to understand an expression, we must know its location, who speaks, who knows what, who is trying to get something done, what that something is, and so forth.

The observable events in our examples, the six expressions given earlier, are the starting points for an interpretation of meanings. We can view the utterances from the outside or the inside. Objectively, we can depict the speakers as belonging to categories of people we take as making up the social world—street gang members, teenagers, parents, basketball players, public officials, and jazz musicians. But knowing the speakers as types of people in society tells only part of their meanings. We must also examine the ways they construct utterances, the ways they form their talk so that it is received or understood by their audiences as they intended to be understood. To take up this task as social psychology, we need to know just what subjective meanings are.

Subjective Meanings are Arbitrary By "arbitrary" we do not mean you can call what someone does or says anything you like and still understand their motives. No, when we say meanings are arbitrary, we do so in full awareness that human beings are restricted, in the same way that all life forms are, by laws of biology and psychology. For example, all people must eat, all persons must perceive and recognize food, but the matter and customs of eating are arbitrarily defined by the culture to which one belongs. We can be specific about what we mean by arbitrary: the meaning of a social action is said to be arbitrary whenever that action has a significance that, in some sense, was put there by people. By implication, arbitrary meanings vary from person to person and group to group.

On this point, social psychology aligns its perspective with those of many other disciplines. Anthropologists regard culture as arbitrary. Linguists write of languages, with their rules and content, as arbitrary. The great sociologist Emile Durkheim wrote that there is nothing intrinsic in any act that makes it have one

meaning over another. For example, nothing in the nature of a person striking another human being demands that we understand it as a hostile or even an aggressive act. A football player strikes a teammate on the buttocks with a resounding blow as they start to run on the field together. What does this act mean? A young man strikes his friend on the shoulder with his fist. A father asks his young son to hit him in the stomach as hard as he can, as the father flexes his abdominal muscles. Two youths attack an old man, hitting on his chest with their fists. A policeman strikes a woman repeatedly on the chest as she lies on the ground. Do all these similar actions mean the same thing? All are social acts, but their meanings vary. More important, each of these actions can have numerous meanings depending on the circumstances in which they occur. In the language of social psychology, we say that meanings are situated; they can be understood only by knowing the situation in which they occur.

In human societies anything imaginable can take on subjective meanings and become part of the social process. A slight movement of one eyelid or a tiny movement of the head may be assigned an arbitrary meaning. A person stands among a group of friends motionlessly and in silence; the absence of action in this instance may be quite meaningful. A young man runs along a city street, and the meaning of his behavior changes with the time of day, whether late afternoon, early evening, or three in the morning. And what his behavior means varies from the observer to the actor and from one observer to another.

The arbitrary meanings that make up social life take on even greater importance when we look at societies other than our own. It is easy to see that the sounds of languages have different meanings, but we might overlook such subtlety of behavior as how close people stand when they talk. In Latin American societies the physical distance between people in normal conversations is much less than in our own society. This subjective meaning assigned to "talking distance," so called by the anthropologist Edward Hall (1966), is largely outside awareness; still we "know" when someone is standing too close. Hall observed two businessmen, a Latin and a North American, talking. The former would move a bit closer to feel comfortable with the conversation. The subjective meanings assigned by the American businessman to this new proximity raised feelings in him that the other man was pushy, and he began to feel ill at ease. He stepped back. In a few moments, as the conversation continued at full clip, the Latin businessman stepped forward; the American retreated. And so the pair marched down a long corridor, unaware of their own rules, but acting on them nonetheless. Each had learned an arbitrary meaning for how close to stand when talking. Social psychology takes as its first task the understanding of such subjective meanings as they function to make up the very fabric of social life.

Social Phenomena are Intersubjective In some of the examples we have given, individuals do not share the same meanings for a particular event. A

policeman pounding on a woman's chest might be attempting to restart her heart after an accident or might be engaged in some heinous act of brutality. Obviously, since acts are open to many interpretations and people bring to any social encounter their histories of what they think people are like and what they might do, misunderstanding is always possible. Indeed, in today's complex societies, those in which many, if not most, of the people we deal with in our everyday lives are strangers, the misreading of intentions and purposes is a very real occurrence and may lead to the disruption of social interaction. But in all societies, the subjective meanings that constitute social phenomena are, to some extent, shared, or intersubjective.

Let us add detail here to an earlier example, with two white police officers speeding in their squad car toward a neighborhood in which mostly Hispanic people live. As the driver of the car increases speed, the other interprets his action as reasonable, given the urgency of a citizen's report. They share similar definitions of "appropriate speed." One says, "It's a cardiac arrest"; the other nods his head. Somehow they share in the subjective meanings of a complex condition they have not actually seen. "Let's go," says one officer as the car comes to a screeching halt and he opens the door. Both know what is meant by this short utterance. Both view the woman lying on the ground in much the same way and begin their joint efforts to administer firstaid. In some strange way that we try to uncover and analyze in this book, these two officers have achieved a form of mutual consciousness. They have come to share the subjective meanings of the situation, or at least they think they share them. In like manner, the crowd of mostly Hispanics that gathers to witness the event also shares meanings of it intersubjectively. But given previous experiences with the police in their neighborhood, to them the officers appear to be assaulting the woman.

If we merely assume the stance of an outsider, it is easy to miss the significance of the intersubjective element in social life. The police officers, for example appear to share the same physical space, the squad car; they have similar clothes; they look about the same age and size; both are white. But these are external characteristics the observer thinks they share. From the participants' vantage these commonalties may be totally irrelevant to this specific happening. They select, as it were, from a host of characteristics the ones they can use in order to accomplish a practical act. The sense of sharing they achieve for the moment is a relative thing. Many subjective meanings function as a sufficient reason to act, with some so thoroughly shared by members of a society that they are rarely talked about.

These are the hidden assumptions we all have learned about the nature of life and the grand purposes of existence. Other meanings are quite specific to a certain setting, like the idea of "this is a woman who has just had a heart attack." Some meanings are easily accomplished and rarely result in problems for those who seek to use them. Greetings are good examples of these. Other meanings

may be elusive but still are regarded with such importance that interactions based on them are almost always highly problematic. In our society, love is a good example of this.

Social Phenomena Consist of Socially Constructed Realities For some social psychologists, human beings are like complex computers, carefully programmed with social attributes and knowledge, reacting to situations as they were programmed to act. Although few would defend this analogy to the last detail, whole schools of thought, depending on where they start, argue that people are not especially distinctive among forms of life or that it is not a wild pipe dream to envision computers with human capabilities. This analogy seriously distorts both the nature of computers and the character of human social life.

When people interact, they do so on the basis of their intersubjective understandings of a particular situation. To be sure, they do follow rules somewhat like computers do, but the understandings on which the social world is built are never static. Each situation requires a creative solution, a working-out process, or, in the idiom of social psychology, a negotiation or definition of the situation. We can imagine that the Hispanics who saw the police officers hammering on the chest of a woman lying on the street did not automatically react to the policemen, nor did they merely follow a rule about how to act around white cops. Instead, they made judgments about what was happening. They weighed possible interpretations of the event taking place before them. Communications flitted back and forth among the people watching, by gesture, word of mouth, posture, facial expressions, and bodily movement. A social context was constructed, shared by some but not all, and action flowed out of this subjective assessment of the situation. To the police officers, a life was being saved. But to the spectators, those who happened to see the squad car skid to a stop and the officers rush the woman and begin pounding on her chest, an act of police brutality could have been taking place. In such situations, versions of what is happening quickly spread among the spectators and they arrive at a version of the occurrence that results in their praise or condemnation of the actors they are observing. Obviously, the simple acts of watching the police officers or intervening to stop them depend at least in part on the meanings given to "what is happening." But this example represents one small instance of human social life, all of which consists of constructing meanings that people find sufficient for taking action, that is, for doing something or doing nothing. Our approach to sociological social psychology takes as its primary task the careful description and analysis of these meanings and the contexts that derive from them.

While we shall eventually drop the cumbersome phrase sociological social psychology, we use it to distinguish our approach from others. Psychological social psychology is typically a specialization within the discipline of scientific psychology and generally follows the model of experimentation to test theories