Symbolic Interaction Theory

A Critical Review and Reformulation

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Zur Theorie des symbolischen Interaktionismus

Abstract: The status of Symbolic Interaction Theory as an explanatory system has rightly been called into question in recent descriptions, since symbolic interactionists have tended to stress empirical generalizations rather than the more explanatory aspects of the theory. In the present paper the theory is presented in a manner which permits both more systematic derivation of implications and more rigorous tests. Role taking is the principal construct in this formulation; the central propositions relate to the individual's adaptive requirements and the adaptive consequences of role taking. Assuming that the present formulation is reasonably authentic, the writer argues that the theory has not been adequately developed and tested, leaving much of its promising potential untapped.

Inhalt: Der Status der Theorie des symbolischen Interaktionismus als eines explanatorischen Systems ist in jüngeren Veröffentlichungen insofern zu Recht in Frage gestellt worden, als die symbolischen Interaktionisten dazu neigen, empirische Verallgemeinerungen mehr zu betonen als die eher explanatorischen Aspekte der Theorie. Im vorliegenden Aufsatz wird die Theorie in einer Weise dargestellt, die beides zugleich erlaubt: systematische Ableitung von Implikationen und strengere Tests. „Rollenübernahme“ ist hierbei der leitende Begriff; die zentralen Aussagen beziehen sich einerseits auf die für das Individuum gegebenen Anpassungserfordernisse, andererseits auf die durch die Rollenübernahme selbst bedingten Anpassungsfolgen. Unter der Voraussetzung, daß die vorliegenden Darstellungen hinlänglich zutrifft, vertritt der Autor die These, daß die in Frage stehende Theorie bisher nur mangelhaft entwickelt und geprüft und ein beträchtlicher Teil ihres theoretischen Potentials ungenützt geblieben ist.

The term “symbolic interaction” seems to have arisen from GEORGE HERBERT MEAD’s discussion of “significant symbols”. For MEAD (1922), a gesture is a significant symbol when it produces the same response in the gesturer as in the other members of his species who are present. “Symbolic interaction” would then be a gestural exchange where reflexive responses occur. Presumably most non-human animals lack this capacity for sharing “meaning”; to use an example from MEAD, a dog supposedly cannot react submissively to his own aggressive gesture. For this reason the interaction of non-human animals is not among the phenomena to be explained by Symbolic Interaction Theory (SIT).

Later members of this school of thought have not necessarily neglected the symbolic interaction construct, their very raison d’être. Unfortunately, however, many have been so enamoured by the truly high importance of its introduction that they have failed to pay sufficient heed to the explanatory framework into which it fits. The most well-known suggestion of symbolic interactionists, for instance, is that we see ourselves as others see us. While simply identifying a “social” (BALDWIN 1895; JAMES 1892; MEAD 1934) or “looking-glass” (COOLEY 1902) self does not explain it, scores of SIT adherents (e.g., KUHN 1964; MCPARTLAND et al., 1961; VIDE-BECK 1960) appear to have elevated this empirical generalization to the status of an abstract explanatory proposition. It is therefore with good reason that critics have expressed doubts that SIT in fact constitutes a theory (e.g., see DEUTSCH & KRAUSS 1965; SHAW & COSTANZO 1970).

This state of affairs is doubly unfortunate because the founders of the school, or at least COOLEY and MEAD, proposed a fairly coherent theoretical framework, and because later adherents have occasionally pleaded for recognition of these principles (e.g., COTTRELL 1950; COTTRELL & DAMOND 1949; O’TOOLE & DUBIN 1968; SHIBUTANI 1961; STRYKER 1962; TURNER 1962). This writer agrees with STRYKER that it has not come about primarily because COOLEY’s and MEAD’s writings on the subject were vague, as KUHN (1964) has suggested. Perhaps, as COTTRELL and DAMOND suggest, the theoretical issues have come to be taken for granted and the empirical issues difficult to study. At any rate, the present paper is an attempt to clarify the theoretical structure of SIT and review empirical evidence for its validity. If the structure described
here is accepted as basically authentic, one must conclude that very little available research is actually relevant for such a test.

THE THEORY

Role Taking: The Principal Construct

When COOLEY and MEAD discussed the phenomena to be explained by their theory they were fairly explicit in locating the cause in the process of role taking. For COOLEY (1902: 136), “the growth of personal ideas ... implies a growing power of sympathy, of entering into and sharing the minds of other persons.”, and it is this process which is implied in his famous reference to the looking-glass self (1902: 183–184). While this sounds somewhat like a transplant of minds, MEAD’s descriptions (1922; 1934) are less mystical. As O’TOOLE and DUBIN (1968) summarize them, the person responds to his own or another’s behavior from the point of view of that other person. O’TOOLE and DUBIN have provided the clearest demonstrations of each of the two instances. To demonstrate taking the other’s role toward one’s own behavior, they observed that mothers opened their own mouths while feeding their babies. Since this often occurred before the baby opened its mouth and when it was looking away, it seems reasonable to assume that imitation or instruction alone cannot account for the phenomenon. To demonstrate taking the other’s role toward his behavior, O’TOOLE and DUBIN observed stationary subjects’ “body sway” as they watched an actor reach forward for an object from several different positions in a room. As one would expect if subjects were taking his role rather than their own, in a large number of cases subjects swayed forward rather than in other directions.

Although it was never stated explicitly in their writings, it appears that COOLEY and MEAD intended role taking to refer only to an experiential entertaining of the other’s point of view in order to distinguish it from other forms of thinking1. That is, the role taker has to expend more energy to put himself in the other’s place than he would in ordinary thinking, and the result is an image that he would not otherwise have had. To say that role taking is experiential, however, is not to imply that the experience must be based on motoric movement. Unlike some of their contemporaries (e.g., LANGFELD 1920), COOLEY and MEAD did not make this restriction. Nor did they go to the opposite extreme and claim that role taking is strictly covert (e.g., COOLEY 1902: 138), as some later symbolic interactionists argue (e.g., COUTU 1951). The resolution of the problem is most clearly stated by SARBIN (1954: 232), who describes overt behavior such as that observed by O’TOOLE and DUBIN as “spill over” from cognitive role taking activity.

The experiential nature of role taking has been an issue of dispute, however, even between COOLEY and MEAD. COOLEY, for instance, included “empathy”, or the taking of others’ emotions, as an instance of role taking (1902: 138), but MEAD strongly disagreed with him (1934: 148, 173, 298–299). MEAD’s reasons for the exclusion are not clear in his writings. His explicit reason is simply the factual claim that “We are not frightened by a tone which we may use to frighten somebody else.” (148) Since one can easily find evidence contradicting this claim, this writer’s own behavior being a case in point, one suspects that MEAD had other reasons in mind. One may have been in assumption that emotional gestures are usually expressive rather than instrumental, so that one would not need to consider the other’s point of view in order to communicate meaningfully; another is that role taking with one’s own emotional gestures is maladaptive. Both arguments presuppose role taking to be undertaken because it is adaptive, however, and since this assumption is central to the theory to be presented shortly, it is both unfair and bad logic to presume it away. For this reason the present writer feels that empathy should be considered an instance of role taking.

A second set of issues regarding the experiential nature of role taking is more difficult to resolve, e.g., "emotional ..." (STOTLAND 1969). An actual response which is “experienced” is the common implication of these terms. Since they do not share this characteristic, such terms as “insight”, “sensitivity”, “social perception”, and the like are deliberately excluded. “Identification” is sometimes meant to imply this characteristic, however (e.g., JONES & GERARD 1967, 112–117).

1 This criterion incorporates such terms as “as if behavior” (SARBIN 1954), “covert role playing” (MACCOBY 1959), “role taking” (FLAVELL 1967), “vicarious emotional response” (FESBACH & ROE 1968), and “reacting emotionally” to the perception “that another is experiencing or is about to experi-
however. These center on the relationship of role taking to several other social behavior patterns. That role taking is not simply imitation or conformity is aced to by many non symbolic interactionists (e.g., FLAPELL 1967; MACCOBY 1959), but symbolic interactionists themselves are vague on the relationship of role taking to projection. BALDWIN (1895: 338), for instance, claimed that awareness of other’s awarenesses of oneself follow an awareness of self, and on occasion COOLEY seems to have concurred with this assertion (e.g., 1926).

Attempts to distinguish the two processes have come largely from early non-school members. In elaborating work by SCHELER (1913), for instance, STEIN (1917) argued that even the most unathletic can thrill to the athlete’s feat, although they do not initially have the other’s experience to project. One could easily counter, however, that unless one had been in similar positions or attempted somewhat similar movements one could not simulate the athlete’s experience. Later proponents of role taking have contented themselves with creating experimental situations where the current situational viewpoints of role taker and other are initially dissimilar (e.g., FLAVELL 1967; STOTLAND 1969), but this does not settle the issue to this writer’s satisfaction, since it could still be argued that the role taker would need to have had similar past experiences in order to understand the other’s experience. One of these proponents (STOTLAND 1969), in fact, later builds this assumption into his theory of role taking. If one were to distinguish role taking activity, or attempts to put oneself in another’s place, from role taking accuracy, the situation where one’s own experience is very similar to another’s, as DYMOND et al (1952) and FLAVELL (1967) have done, one could argue that projection would be less necessary for activity than for accuracy. As will be seen shortly, however, much of SIT is concerned with role taking accuracy. Until such time as it can be shown that accurate role taking can take place when historical as well as cross-sectional viewpoints are completely different, it would appear impossible to exclude some form of projection from the role taking process.

Little more need be said here of other aspects of role taking, since questions of its origins and individual differences in role taking skill generally have little direct bearing on the validity or explanatory domain of the theory’s propositions 2. Two important exceptions to this rule should be noted, however. In the first place, the theory would be in serious trouble indeed should someone discover that role taking skills are acquired only after hypothesized consequences of role taking (e.g., one’s self-conception) have been acquired. Secondly, individuals who differ on variables hypothesized to be related to role taking should also differ in role taking activity and/or skill.

Postulated Antecedents of Role Taking

Unfortunately those symbolic interactionists who have dealt with role taking have stressed its consequences (STRYKER 1962) is an exception), perhaps leaving the impression that the occurrence of role taking is automatic and unconditional. COOLEY and MEAD no doubt contributed to this false emphasis, but their intent is clear. After an earlier reference to the ability to adapt one’s own behavior to that of another gained from role taking (1902: 138), for instance, COOLEY relates the occurrence of role taking to the “importance” of the other (206). While importance is not defined, one assumes that it pertains to the ability of the other to mediate interaction outcomes for the potential role taker. This is the interpretation STRYKER (1962) gives to MEAD’s writings, although MEAD does not seem to have explicitly said that a person takes another’s role in order to better adapt his own behavior to the other’s 3.

In fact we are dependent to some degree upon almost all of the people we meet; thus symbolic interactionists may have felt it unnecessary to elaborate on the antecedents of role taking. By not making these antecedents explicit, however, 2 There seems to be a great deal of agreement on origins, however. MEAD (1934, 99–100, 117, 254) mentioned three prerequisites: the human’s central nervous system, the ability to “time-bind”, or to withhold a response in spite of the presence of a relevant stimulus, and language, which MEAD saw as aiding the individual to time-bind. SARBIN (1954) and FLAVELL (1967) expand on this analysis. MACCOBY’S suggestions (1959) are particularly helpful: physical limitations, the absence of relevant stimuli, and negative reinforcement cause the child to covertly reframe imitated behavior.

3 Consider this typical statement, for instance: “... I can have things in much better shape than if I had not employed that conversation of gestures in my conduct.” (1934: 167; my italics)
they have both robbed the theory of some of its more interesting and unique implications, and at the same time rendered much of it untestable. To this writer’s knowledge the only symbolic interactionist who has ventured a suggestion in this area is STRYKER (1962). His suggestion, that females are more dependent upon other-controlled outcomes than males and hence should engage in more role taking, is to a large extent culturally and historically bound, but it is at least a start. Others have been made by such non symbolic interactionists as MACCOBY (1959), who relates dependence to the amount of interaction required with the other (e.g., workers at adjacent positions on an assembly line should take each other’s roles more often than workers farther apart), and to the magnitude of the consequences an other can mediate (e.g., a child will take the role of his mother more than the mother will take the role of the child). One would also expect the relevance of a given role (relevance being defined here as the cue-value for portending another’s subsequent behavior) to affect the frequency with which it will be taken. Children, for example, should reherse the roles of “father” and “mother” more than those of “husband” and “wife”, since knowledge of the former would presumably be more useful for adapting one’s behavior to one’s parents’.

If dependence and relevance are sufficient conditions for role taking activity, to use the distinction made earlier, they are not sufficient conditions for role taking accuracy, and it is here that it seems necessary to assume that some form of projection is at work. Some prior experience with the other’s experience would seem to be necessary, although the degree of similarity may need to be only very low. MEAD seems to have recognized this argument, for he placed considerable emphasis on what he called a common “universe of discourse” or “system of common or social meanings” (1934: 89–90). He took pains to point out, however, that commonality in discourse, as we shall refer to the variable state, is not to be regarded as attitudinal agreement. Rather, it refers to the sharing of cognitive dimensions or frames of reference. MEAD’s own example is most appropriate: the criminal and the policeman must share some commonality in discourse if they are to take each other’s role and successfully “out-fox” each other, but agreement on the value of each other’s roles would hardly increase their effectiveness.

**Postulated Consequences of Role Taking**

The **phenomenal self** is by far the most well-known consequence of role taking proposed by SIT. Dispite the attention this idea has received, however, it is a remarkably undeveloped aspect of the theory. At one time or another the theory has been used to attempt to explain the acquisition of self-consciousness, the acceptance and organization by the individual of other’s roles toward him, and the persistance of phenomenal selves over time. Each of these areas will now be taken up in turn.

When one tries to comprehend the acquisition of self-consciousness through role taking one is immediately struck by the important but problematic issue of projection. That is, if one does not have the experience in question in one’s repertoire, how does one produce it, but if one already has it, how can role taking be necessary for its acquisition? It appears that symbolic interactionists have attempted to get around this problem by implicitly assuming several additional processes to accompany role taking. One is imitation: other’s overt reactions to one’s own behavior are imitated (SULLIVAN 1953, is explicit on this point); another is associational learning: “the meaning of “I” and “mine” are learned . . . by having the feeling [of appropriateness], . . . and hearing the word [originally spoken by others] along with it.” (COOLEY 1902: 192) Although these additions lessen the credibility of the hypothesized uniqueness of and necessity for role taking, it seems reasonable to assume that role taking plays a crucial part in bridging the gap between one-trial imitation of overt behavior and the covert reproduction of the appropriate idea of the behavior. That much of this covert rehearsing would require at least denotative language capacities (e.g., “this is mine”) probably accounts for MEAD’s concern with the importance of language for the acquisition of self-consciousness (1934: 69, 135, 148, 172, 254). That children begin speaking without nouns and pronouns and then interchange them inappropriately before referring to themselves (BAIN 1935; COOLEY 1908) attests to its importance. The introduction of language and role taking is only a first step toward an adequate explanation of self-consciousness, of course, but any step toward understanding this elusive phenomenon is progress.

Of the organization of the phenomenal self SI
theorists have had little to say, except that “the unity and structure of the complete self reflects the unity and structure of the social process as a whole”. (MEAD 1934: 144) There are occasional references in the writings of COOLEY and MEAD to conflicts arising from the role taking process, however. COOLEY, for instance, suggests that an individual must have “... a principle of rejection as well as reception in sympathy [empathy] ...” (1902: 156), and in his numerous but vague references to the “I” and the “me” MEAD implies that an individual will in fact actively select and reject others' roles (e.g., 1934: 176).

Although the reason for the necessity of selectivity is not clear in their writings, one suspects, given the emphasis on the adaptability of role taking, that they felt that roles with conflicting behavioral implications would be incapacitating4. The child who finds himself roughly equally dependent upon his mother at home and upon his friends on the baseball field, for instance, may find that opposite qualities are relevant for the two interaction situations (e.g., submissiveness at home and dominance on the baseball field). As MEAD suggested (176), acceptance of one or the other viewpoint would place him “... in a false position with another group.” Such conflicts might well provide the motive force for the development of a “generalized other” and “generalized self”, concepts for which MEAD is well known (e.g., 138, 154, 186). As MEAD implied, play and team games would both provoke these conflicts and present a ready-made solution. There are undoubtedly other adaptive reactions to such conflicts, however. One might simply avoid one or the other interaction situation. Here the social structure, probably itself a collective adaptation to just such conflicts, aids the individual by its definition of relevant roles and its spatial and temporal segregation of those that are conflicting (GOFFMAN 1959). There will be times when these strategies are not adequate, however, and especially when one’s dependence upon others with conflicting roles toward oneself is unequal, one is likely to use COOLEY’S “principle of rejection” to dispense with the role whose consequences are of lesser importance.

An explanation for persistence and change in the phenomenal self flows naturally from the above discussion: when the social environment is stable, so too is the phenomenal self, since the same roles are rehersed over and over again; when dependencies and relevancies change, and hence the roles taken, so does the self. SI theorists are not guilty of neglecting the phenomenon of persistence and change in the self, but even some of the more critical adherents (e.g., COTTRELL 1950) seem to forget that SIT’s unique contribution has to do with the implications of role taking for the phenomenon5.

Of all of the consequences symbolic interactionists have postulated for role taking, none is more sorely neglected than the phenomenal other. While recent symbolic interactionists have on occasion laid claim to some of the phenomena of “social perception” (e.g., KUHN 1964), in their writings one finds reference only to the generalized other. COOLEY was less negligent. He pointed out that “the sharing of painful feeling may precede and cause compassion, ...”, but that one may also “... be moved not to pity but to disgust, contempt, or perhaps admiration” (1902: 137). (MEAD again seems to argue that empathy would interfere with the appropriateness of one’s reaction (1934: 298–299), but the criticisms of his stance on empathy made earlier apply here as well.) Once again one is confronted with the issue of projection: if one is to accurately empathize with another and use this experience to one’s advantage, be one’s motives benevolent or malevolent, one must have the experience and the response to it in one’s repertoire. Again imitation and learning must be “slipped in through the back door”, but again role taking would seem to make a substantial contribution to an explanation of the phenomenon.

The Rome to which all roads in SIT lead is personal effectiveness in dealing with others. Whether the behavior in question is relatively passive, as that necessary for simply acquiring rewards and avoiding punishments dispensed by others, or relatively active, as with communication (MEAD 1934: 254) and influence (COOLEY 1902: 138), the knowledge of the other’s role that follows

4 Others who have used this idea include JONES and GERARD (1967), GERGEN (1968), and JONES (1968), and I would like to acknowledge my debt to their clear thinking.

5 Others (e.g., SECORD & BACKMAN1961) prefer to replace role taking and its antecedents and consequences with theories based on a gestalt-type cognitive consistency motive.
role taking should help one choose appropriate behavior. This should not be construed to mean, however, as STRYKER (1957) points out, that the good role taker will necessarily be a happy one. In STRYKER's research, for instance, parents who accurately perceived disagreement with their children were less happy than those who inaccuracy perceived agreement. Nevertheless, it is difficult to conceive of "adjustment" to one's social situation without role taking (COOLEY 1902: 144; MEAD 1934: 143).

**Consequences of Consequences and Loops**

The structure of the theory is somewhat more complicated than the above description would suggest. Fig. 1 may help the reader keep things straight.

Arrows labeled "1" through "6" simply summarize the propositions described above and should need no further explication. Arrows from 7 on represent hitherto undiscussed propositions, however.

The effects of the phenomenal self on behavior (arrows 7 and 10) seems to have been an area of considerable confusion for symbolic interactionists. Some appear to assume that SIT has little to contribute to the problem, which has led them to add elements of such other theoretical approaches as the freudian (SULLIVAN 1953), gestalt (COTTRELL 1950), or reinforcement-learning (ZETTERBERG 1957). Others (e.g., KUHN 1964; MCPARTLAND et al. 1961) appear to assume that the self has some simple and direct effect upon behavior, such that, for instance, a person who considers himself to be bad will act imorally. This writer feels that these assumptions are both incorrect and unnecessary. In the first place, arrow 7 represents a proposition which is very much within the logic of the theory: knowledge of the other's view of oneself should greatly aid in the adaptation of one's own behavior to his. Secondly, the founders of SIT were careful to point out that the structure of the self has important effects on the incidence and accuracy of role taking (arrow 10). Although they were not very clear on the nature of this relationship, their conceptualization of the role taking process as the imagined comments of others on one's own behavior, thoughts, and feelings leads one to believe that inconsistencies in one's self-conception or preoccupation with one's own initial viewpoint to the detriment of others' would decrease both the occurrence and accuracy of role taking. Even after one had

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6 The preoccupation spoken of here is similar to PIAGET's notion of "egocentricity," which he saw as hindering role taking. As FLAVERELL (1967, 20) puts it, cognitions defining the other's perspective are "... in active competition with those which define one's own point of view, ...”, so that to take the other's role one must hold one's own in abeyance.
taken another’s role, furthermore, such conditions would make adaptation to his behavior difficult (arrow 7 again). This may have been what COOLEY meant when he said that some individuals “... lack the consistency and self-control necessary to make sympathy [empathy] effective if they had it” (1902: 217–218). Exactly analogous arguments can be made for the effects of the phenomenal other on personal effectiveness and role taking (arrows 8 and 11): inconsistent views of the same other or preoccupation with the views of particular others should be dilutating. The theory needs few ad hoc assumptions to explain the emergence of such inconsistences and preoccupations, as will be argued in the discussion of theorems.

Arrow 9 represents the consequences of personal for interpersonal or group effectiveness. It is simply assumed here that when individual members are personally effective, it will increase the effectiveness of the group. This does not necessarily mean, however (to anticipate some of the theorems) that a group will be most effective when all of its members are always taking each others’ roles, for inconsistences on the group level will be just as diluting for group action as those on the individual level are for individual action. As COOLEY put it, “... Universal [empathy] is impracticable, ...” (1902: 147). Here again the theory permits one to specify conditions under which such inconsistencies will arise and hence when universal role taking will and will not be practicable. These conditions will be taken up in the discussion of theorems.

Unlike the “feedback loops” represented by arrows 10 and 11, those represented by the dashed arrows 12 through 19 have a tenuous status in the structure of SIT. Their status arises from the fact that they presuppose learning processes which are not explicitly built into the theory. This problem has been encountered elsewhere in the structure of the theory, however, and as long as one is willing to assume that learning takes place, there seems to be no point in excluding these propositions. If one includes them, one would expect new information about another and/or his view of oneself to increase commonality in discourse (12 and 13). Similarly, implicit or explicit recognition that particular roles have furthered or hindered individual or group effectiveness should also increase the relevance of these particular roles (18 and 19) and increase commonality in discourse (14 and 15). Propositions 15 and 19 are particularly important because they bring social structure within the explanatory domain of the theory. One would expect, for instance, that the roles which become normative in the group are those that most aid group effectiveness. Finally, the recognition that one can be individually or collectively effective with a particular group of others should increase one’s dependence upon that group (16 and 17).

Theorems

The theorems one can derive from these propositions are too numerous and too complicated to be completely elaborated here. Since the logical model for making these derivations is simply the hypothetical syllogism, the reader can do so fairly easily if he desires. For present purposes a brief description of some of them must suffice.

A. Incidence of Role Taking

Just as better role takers should become still better role takers (Propositions 6, 14, and 3, and/or 6, 16, and 1, and/or 6, 18, and 2), so poor role takers should remain in a “vicious cycle” of personal ineffectiveness. Moving to the group level by adding Proposition 9, a similar theorem can be derived for groups: members of those which are more effective should be more likely to take other members’ roles, and, furthermore (add Proposition 5), more likely to sympathize with or revel in their plights, depending upon the history of interpersonal relationships in the group. Members of these same groups may also implicitly recognize that such high levels of role taking are dependent upon members’ commitment to the group and establish norms to ensure it. Paradoxically, however, particularly when the goals of the group are “task” rather than “socially-emotionally” oriented, group members may learn that such universal role taking is inefficient and legislate much of it out of existence by norms defining which roles should be relevant and direct pressures for conformity to these norms (STEINER 1955).

B. Self and Other

It follows from the theory (Propositions 1, 2 and 4 and/or 5) that relevant roles of others upon whom one is dependent will become part of one’s view of oneself and of these others. A
corollary of this theorem is that the more dependent an individual is upon others, assuming relevance to be constant, the more "insight" he will have into himself and others, insight being defined here by degree of elaboration and accuracy in concept of self or other. This also means that one should be better able to sympathize with or revel in another's plight the more dependent one is upon him. Another corollary is that when one is highly dependent upon another or equally dependent upon two different others, contradictory others' roles (i.e., mutually exclusive behaviors are equally but oppositely relevant) will produce inconsistent views of self and others. The other reactions to inconsistency mentioned earlier, such as the development of the generalized self and other and the rejection of the roles of others upon whom one is less dependent, also follow if one assumes that inconsistency hinders effectiveness. That persistence and change in self and others is dependent upon the pattern of change in dependencies and relevancies can also be derived as a corollary from the above theorem.

C. Personal and Interpersonal Effectiveness

Since dependence and relevance increase role taking (Propositions 1 and 2), and role taking increases personal and interpersonal effectiveness (6 and 9), individuals and groups should be more effective when they or their members are more dependent upon others, and with roles which are most relevant for the interaction. This means, in effect, that they will communicate with and influence others more effectively under these conditions, and generally be better able to adapt their own behavior to others'. When dependence is high and relevant roles are contradictory, however, effectiveness will be limited because inconsistencies in self and others will hamper role taking (1, 2, 4 and 10, and/or 1, 2, 5 and 11), or directly affect effectiveness (add 7 and 8). That groups begin ineffectively and gradually become more effective (BALES 1955) could be explained by assuming, as Propositions 14, 15, 18 and 19 imply, that over time they establish norms defining commonality in discourse and relevance which lessen inconsistencies. The stronger such problems are initially, furthermore, the more eager group members should be to establish such norms, the net gain in effectiveness perhaps being enough to surpass the absolute level of those groups unfortunate enough to have had an easy time of it.

While deriving theorems one is struck by the fact that so many of the characteristics of variables introduced "later" in the theory (i.e., towards the right of Fig. 1) can be determined from information about earlier variables. One aspect of Proposition 10, for instance, states that the more inconsistency in the self, the less frequent and accurate role taking will be. In this case the theory already has theorems which allow one to specify when inconsistencies in the self will occur. Specifically, it will occur when one is highly dependent upon another or equally dependent upon two different others and the others hold contradictory roles toward one. Similarly, if one assumes that preoccupation with oneself or "ego-centricity" is associated with very high and very low self-esteem, one can then predict which individuals will be deficient in role taking skills not only from knowledge of their current self-esteem, but also from childhood histories of the way others treated them. The existence of such inconsistencies and preoccupations in group situations can also be predicted internally by the theory: the more diverse the tasks of the group are, the more likely will there be conflicting roles which are equally relevant.

A second admirable characteristic of the theory is that it allows one to predict the unique and surprising as well as the commonplace and common sensical. One has difficulty imagining, for instance, a theory of role taking which would omit or deny that commonality in discourse would increase role taking and personal effectiveness. However, one is hard put to find another theory which would predict more self-insight for those more dependent upon others, or more sympathy for those upon whom one is most dependent. Similarly, the expectation that the most effective groups will also be those which have faced the greatest challenges is a novel and useful theorem.

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7 This conceptualization of accuracy is admittedly a tricky one, since the empirical criterion for accuracy would supposedly itself be a statistical profile based on others' roles. Given similar such profiles, however, two individuals differing in dependence should also differ in views of self and others.
THE EVIDENCE

Many of the theorems are now commonplace, however, because other theorists have derived them from their own relatively explicit theories and then systematically tested them. For instance, while almost everyone recognizes that symbolic interactionists were the first to suggest that we see ourselves as others see us, even self-proclaimed symbolic interactionists invoke processes other than role taking to explain the phenomenon. The introduction of some of these hypothesized processes may even have been stimulated by SIT. Festinger's theory of "social comparison processes" (1954), for instance, relies on the assumption that pressures toward communication and influence arise because members need a "social reality" for their beliefs and attitudes. That such pressures are assumed to increase with dependence and relevance suggests that social reality might be desired for its consequences for personal and group effectiveness. It would be unfair, however, for symbolic interactionists to claim that "we said it first". What was said was never said very explicitly. In fact, the present writer's narrowing down of the antecedents of role taking to those suggested here was aided by Festinger's conceptualization of these variables.

The above point is stressed at this time because it would seem to be crucial for a consideration of evidence supporting SIT; that is, few critics will be excited by findings that have been generated and can easily be explained by other theories, and rightly so. The solution for symbolic interactionists, therefore, is to stress evidence supporting unique aspects of the theory. For most phenomena these unique aspects are the reliance on role taking and the particular antecedents hypothesized for it. For this reason the best evidence for testing the theory is that which includes direct or convincing indirect evidence for the presence or absence of role taking and its antecedents. Such evidence will be labeled hereafter as "Type I"; evidence which is simply consistent or inconsistent with the theorems without demonstrating the presence or absence of role taking will be labeled "Type II".

Role taking is, in fact, in a fairly advantageous position when it comes to measurement. While it is perhaps not as easy to measure as imitation, it is certainly easier to measure than social reality. This is not say, however, that there is agreement on how it is best measured. For some time a controversy has been evident in the literature, the issue being whether measures of "predictive empathy", where subjects simply predict on a questionnaire how others view the subject, themselves, or a third object, are in fact measures of role taking. Most agree that such measures may indicate role taking, but that there are many other processes which could also result in accurate predictions (Cronbach 1955; Gage & Cronbach 1955; Flavell 1967; Stotland 1969). Chief among the alleged other processes are projection and "implicit personality theorizing" or stereotyping. As argued earlier, it is not clear that role taking can take place without some form of projection. On the other hand, the criticisms of measures of predictive empathy would seem to be sound, in that subjects' predictions could appear accurate because subjects were responding only to cues relating to their own current viewpoint, and not to those that would be available to the other. There have been attempts to remove contaminating factors from the predictive measures (e.g., Gage & Cronbach 1955; Hastorf & Bender 1952; Hobart & Fahlberg 1965; Lundy 1956), but even here there is no assurance that subjects use the cues available to others and actually experience what others do or would experience. For this reason studies where the situational viewpoints of subject and other are different are best. Certainly with the availability of the ingenious techniques of Piaget and his followers (see Flavell 1967) and others (e.g., Berger 1962; Dymond et al. 1952; Sarbin & Hardyck 1955; Stotland 1969), including some symbolic interactionists (e.g., O'Toole & Dubin 1968), there is little justification for preferring the usual measures of predictive empathy. The latter would seem to definitely constitute Type II evidence.

Given these considerations, we now proceed to a discussion of the evidence for SIT.

Incidence of Role Taking

One assumes that the mothers in O'Toole and Dubin's baby-feeding experiment had a stake in their babies' actions, in that they no doubt wanted to keep pabulum off themselves and their babies. The fact remains, however, that there is no Type I evidence relating dependence or rele-
vance to the incidence of role taking. If one makes the tenuous assumption that females are more dependent upon others than males, one finds that the Type I evidence is all negative (FESBACH & ROE 1968; FLAVELL 1967). The prediction fares little better with Type II evidence (see reviews by STRUNK 1957 and TAFT 1955). Tests of propositions relating commonality in discourse to role taking have also been indirect. One finds that children empathize more with others of the same than with others of the opposite sex (FESBACH & ROE 1968), but that only "later born" and not "first born" subjects empathize with similarly experienced others (STOTLAND 1969). On the Type II side, STRYKER (1962) has found that similarity in age, sex, occupation, and religion increases predictive empathy, and that this occurs even when there is attitudinal disagreement.

Evidence for the effects of self, other, and effectiveness on role taking is also sparse. There is good Type I evidence relating some forms of maladjustment to the occurrence of role taking (MILGRAM 1960; NEALE 1966), but the direction of the relationship cannot be determined from these studies. Type II studies are sometimes supportive (CLINE 1955; DYMOND 1950; HELFAND 1956; JACKSON & CARR 1955; MCCLELLAND 1951; WITTICK 1955), and sometimes not (BRIERI et al. 1955; DAVIDS 1955; ESTES 1938; GAGE 1952). Theorems relating group effectiveness to the predictive empathy ability of their members share a similar fate, with some studies supporting them (COTTRELL & DYMOND 1949; GREER et al. 1954), and others not (FIEDLER 1964). The interesting relationships predicted among group effectiveness, group norms, and the incidence of role taking have yet to be investigated empirically.

Self and Other

The best evidence pertaining to SIT concerns the origins of the phenomenal self, and comes, surprisingly, from researchers who do not associate themselves with the symbolic interaction school. Its superior relevance warrants close inspection. In one study STOTLAND et al (1957) led groups of four to six subjects to believe that they would be competing with other teams. Half believed that their individual performances would contribute to the worth of their group's performance (Relevant), while half were told that they would not (Irrelevant). Furthermore, half of the subjects were told that the members of their group held high expectations for individual performances (High), while half were told that such expectations were lower (Low). Half of the subjects were then led to succeed (Success) and half to fail (Failure). Since subjects expected to interact with the members of their group, and since they thought these others held expectations about subjects' performance, it seems highly reasonable to assume that they would anticipate group members' reactions to their performances, and more so when their performances were Relevant. In fact, subjects in the latter condition expressed more concern over what others thought. As one would expect from SIT, Failure subjects evaluated themselves more negatively under High than under Low conditions, but not when their performances were Irrelevant. That comparable results were not obtained with Success subjects may indicate a "ceiling effect", such that initial self-esteem was too high to be raised further.

In a second study by STOTLAND and ZANDER (1958) the experimenter made it known that he knew subjects had failed (Public), or made it appear that he did not know (Private). As one would expect, subjects in the Public condition evaluated themselves more negatively than subjects in the Private condition, although this was only the case when the experimenter had previously described himself as an expert. GERARD (1961) also obtained only partial support for the SIT position when the publicness of subjects' performances was manipulated by telling some that their scores would be posted: success subjects increased their evaluations of their ability more in the public than in the private condition, but failure subjects decreased their's less in public than in private. Finally, JONES (1968) led half of his subjects to believe that they would be interviewed by the experimenter after their performance, while the other half were given no such instructions. In this case performance feedback did not affect subjects' self-evaluations more when they expected to be interviewed.

The Type II evidence is more numerous but less relevant, since, even where predictive empathy is measured, the hypothesized antecedents of role taking are not taken into account. Data simply

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8 Two studies, both Type II, relate role taking abilities to self-insight (DYMOND 1950; GOODMAN 1953).
showing that the actual views of others are related to self-conception are contained in cross-sectional studies with college students (MIYAMOTO & BORNBUSCH 1956; MOORE 1963; NEWCOMB 1956; QUARENTELLI & COOPER 1966), grade school students (CARLSON 1958; TATUM 1957) and high school students (KOHN 1961), and various other groups (e.g., inhabitants of an isolated naval base: REEDER et al., 1960), including the family (COOPERSMITH 1967; KOHN 1961; MOORE 1963; SILVER 1958; TATUM 1957). Longitudinal-correlational studies have been conducted with college students in dormitories (MANIS 1955; NEWCOMB 1956) and business executives in human relations training groups (SHERWOOD 1965), and experimental studies with college students (BERGIN 1962; EVANS 1962; FONTANA 1964; HARVEY et al. 1957; HICKS 1962; JOHNSON 1966; JOHNSON & STEINER 1968; PAPAGEORGIS et al. 1964; PEPITONE & WILPIESKI 1960; VIDEBECK 1960; WALSTER et al. 1967), high school students (HANS & MAEHR 1965; MAEHR et al. 1962), and business executives in training groups (FRENCH et al. 1966). Of those that also measure predictive empathy, some are cross-sectional (MIYAMOTO & DORNBUSCH 1956; MOORE 1963; QUARENTELLI & COOPER 1966; REEDER et al. 1960; ROSENBERG 1965; SILVER 1958) and others longitudinal (MANNHEIM 1966; NEWCOMB 1956; SHERWOOD 1965).

Evidence pertaining to the organization of the self is spotty. There is some indirect Type II evidence that the self is inconsistent when others' views are inconsistent, in that individuals who are highly geographically and socially mobile rate themselves as being more inconsistent than do individuals not so mobile (GERGEN & MORSE 1967). To this writer's knowledge only one study is at all relevant to the phenomenon of the generalized self: in the previously mentioned study by JONES (1968), subjects who received inconsistent performance feedback and expected to be interviewed rated their ability lower than inconsistent subjects who did expect to be interviewed. Whether subjects who expected to use their inconsistent selves were simply more pessimistic about how they would act, or whether they were actually averaging information about themselves to establish a generalized self, these findings seem to indicate concern with inconsistency when one must interact with others. There is a suggestion that subjects who expect to have to interact with others prefer consistent information about themselves; under these conditions they dislike others whose evaluations of them are inconsistent with their self-evaluations (ARCHIBALD & COHEN 1971; JONES & PINES 1968). That high self-esteem subjects in the High-Failure condition in the experiment by STOTLAND et al. (see above) did not lower their self-evaluation as much as low self-esteem subjects is suggestive, but, strangely, this occurred only when their individual performances were Irrelevant. On the Type II side, BACKMAN et al. (1963) found that self-descriptions perceived to be agreed upon by many others were more resistant to change in the face of an influence attempt from a third party than those perceived to be agreed upon by only a few others.

Type II studies of changes in the self have already been referred to above. In one the time span was four months (NEWCOMB 1956); in another changes in reference groups were taken into account (MANNHEIM 1966).

As mentioned earlier, the phenomenal other has been grossly neglected by symbolic interactionists. There is not even any clear evidence linking role taking to knowledge about others and altruistic or malicious behavior toward them. STOTLAND (1969) refers to two sets of studies where he feels altruistic behavior could have occurred because subjects empathized with others, but in both sets empathy is simply one of many possible explanations, there being no measures of it in either case. The only evidence is found in a study by ADERMAN and BORKEWITZ (1970) which is not entirely satisfactory for present purposes, since the purpose there was to investigate the effects of different types of empathic responses on altruism rather than to determine whether or not empathy leads to altruism. In this study subjects were instructed to imagine how they themselves would feel in another's situation (Imagine-Self) or they were instructed to imagine how another would feel in his own situation (Imagine-Him). Half of each of these subjects were then asked to attend to a person in need of help for a paper (Attend-Need), while the other half were asked to attend to a potential helper (Attend-Helper). Finally, the potential helper on the tape recording did one of three things: he did not help the person in need (No Help), he helped him but was not thanked (Help), or he helped and was thanked (Help plus Reward). Disregarding the Imagine-Self and Imagine-Him distinction,
since there were no overall differences⁹, one finds that the amount of help subjects subsequently gave the experimenter in scoring tests was significantly higher in the Attend-Need/No Help and Attend-Helper/Help plus Reward than in the Attend-Helper/No Help condition, the other three conditions falling between these two extremes. Subjects own expressed feelings indicate significantly more sadness and aggression in the Attend-Need/No Help condition than in any of the other conditions. These two findings suggest that empathy is sufficient to produce altruism, that preoccupation with alternative others can hamper role taking, but that a rewarded altruistic model is also a sufficient condition for altruism¹⁰.

**Personal and Interpersonal Effectiveness**

If role taking and its antecedents increase personal effectiveness, there is little evidence one way or the other upon which to make an evaluation of SIT. In several Type II studies reviewed by GAGE (1958) pupil and teacher effectiveness was not related to predictive empathy skills. In a study by RUNKEL (1956) students who shared underlying cognitive attributes with their teachers got better grades in the course, but apparently this result is very difficult to replicate.

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⁹ The Imagine-Self instructions specifically ask the subject to project how he feels or would feel in the situation in question, while the Imagine-Him instructions do not. That the former do not elicit more empathy in this study and an earlier one by STOTLAND and SHERMAN (see STOTLAND 1969) suggests that projection may not be a necessary condition for role taking after all. However, the results of both studies suggest that it at least produces comparable results.

¹⁰ ADERMAN and BERKOWITZ's findings are interesting for another reason, since MEAD vehemently claimed (1934: 298–299) that we can only sympathize with another's relief and not his distress. Their findings indicate that we can sympathize with both. ADERMAN and BERKOWITZ go further and assume that subjects in the Attend-Helper/Help plus Reward empathized with the helper's elation at the rewarded relief of the needy. Their data are not convincing on this point, however. Subjects attending to the helper were as elated when he did not actually help as when he did and was rewarded, and in both of these cases elation was greater than when the attended to helper helped. Furthermore, elation was greater when the attended needy was helped, with or without thanks to the helper, than when the attended to helper helped, and even as much as when the helper helped and was rewarded.

(MCKEACHIE, personal communication). FLAVELL (1967) describes many communication experiments where role taking would seem to be a useful skill, but communication and role taking are never measured in the same experiment, and the only independent variables are age and sex. The same is true with social influence. Some studies of predictive empathy have found that leaders are better able than non-leaders to predict the opinions of other group members (BELL & HALL 1954; CHROWDRY & NEWCOMB 1952; VAN ZELST 1952). This is not always the case, however (STEWART & VERNON 1959), and TALLAND (1954), in a well-controlled experiment, found support for his suggestion that when leaders are more accurate in their predictions, they are so simply because they have influenced others toward their own position. Studies relating role taking to adjustment have already been described in the section on the incidence of role taking.

The problem of alternative interpretations is particularly acute with findings relating to group effectiveness, since role taking is less likely to have been measured here. Studies relating the predictive empathy skills of members to group effectiveness have already been described. Studies relating the interdependence of members to effectiveness are legion (see the review by KELLEY & THIBAUT 1969), but there is little justification for preferring role taking over other possible intervening processes. FEFFER and SUCHOTLIF (1966) found that groups constructed of individuals high in role taking ability took less time and fewer clues to have one member elicit test words from the other by using only related words as cues, but this seems to be the only study relating role taking to communication effectiveness. In one study (THIBAUT & STRICKLAND 1956) a reasonably strong case can be made for role taking having mediated the relationship between interdependence and group influence, in that subjects evaluated each other before undertaking the group task. In most, however, role taking is not a uniquely convincing explanation (e.g., BERKOWITZ 1957; DEUTSCH 1949; DEUTSCH & GERARD 1955; JONES et al.1958). A reasonable case could be made that the "bystander emergency" effect, where subjects help another in distress less when others are present than when they are not (e.g., LATANE & DARLEY 1968), occurs because subjects worry about what others will think. If these worries are justified, and if one is willing to consider the problem a case of collective maladjustment, we have evidence on the
group as well as the individual level that role taking is not always effective.

DISCUSSION

Before drawing conclusions about the empirical status of SIT it might be helpful to discuss the scope of the theory and evidence presented, since there will no doubt be many symbolic interactionists who will feel that the tradition has been short-changed on both. It is common practice, for instance, to equate “role theory” with SIT, and some symbolic interactionists (e.g., KUHN 1964) even include “reference group theory”, “social perception”, and “language and culture orientation” under the SIT rubric. This writer contends that such an uncritical grouping of so much of social psychology and sociology under SIT does little to further the search for useful explanations for anything. This does not mean, however, that many of the phenomena covered by these categories cannot be explained by SIT. Rather, variables other than those mentioned in the present description of the theory should be related to those so mentioned.

An example might clarify the point. One of the interesting phenomena associated with “reference groups” is the high degree of influence non-membership groups have upon individuals. Except in the case of short-term “anticipatory socialization” and/or where considerable interaction with non-membership groups is currently necessary, however, this phenomenon could be construed to contradict SIT, if one assumes that dependency is a necessary condition for role taking. It simply lies beyond the scope of the theory if one assumes that dependency is only a sufficient condition for role taking.

How does one evaluate Symbolic Interaction Theory in light of the evidence presented? Unless one is willing to claim that key elements of the theory or available evidence are not included in this paper, one cannot avoid remaining skeptical of the utility claimed for it. There is no convincing evidence linking role taking to the antecedents which SIT hypothesizes for it. On the question of the origins of and change in the phenomenal self, SIT’s tour de force, one finds much work, yet of the four best studies in the area, one supports the theory (STOTLAND et al. 1957), one does not (JONES 1968), one partially supports it (STOTLAND & ZANDER 1958), and one partially supports and partially contradicts it (GERARD 1961). In the area of the organization of the self the theory shows promise, but work here has only begun. The results of a single study (ADERMAN & BERKOWITZ 1970) suggest that role taking can lead to sympathy and altruistic behavior, but whether the likelihood of these outcomes will increase with the antecedents of role taking SIT proposes is a completely open question. The fate of SIT with regard to such aspects of personal and interpersonal effectiveness as communication and influence is similarly undetermined. Role taking does seem to be related to adjustment on the individual level, but the direction of the relationship cannot be determined from available information. SIT has some interesting things to predict for group structure, but they too have not been investigated.

In short, much of the interesting potential of Symbolic Interaction Theory has gone untapped. Not enough of the right things have been said; still less has been done. This is a wrong which deserves righting.

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